

STUDY REPORT

**India's Neighborhood Policy towards
the Southeast Asian Region: A Study
on Act East Policy**

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	
Credentials of Research Team Members	
Abbreviations	
Executive Summary	1-6
Chapter I: Introduction	7-13
Chapter II: India - Southeast Asia Relations: A Historical Perspective	14-22
Chapter III: India-ASEAN Economic Ties	23-35
Chapter IV: Physical and Digital Connectivity	36-45
Chapter V: India-ASEAN Security Cooperation	46-52
Chapter VI: India-Southeast Asia Maritime Relations and Cooperation	53-59
Chapter VII: People-to-People Ties	60-68
Chapter VIII: India-Southeast Asia Cooperation for Sustainable Development	69-77
Chapter IX: Northeast in Act East Policy	78-83
Chapter X: India-Southeast Asia in Indo-Pacific	84 -94
Chapter XI: Analysis and Conclusion	95-99
Observations and Findings	100-104
References	105-127

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ABBREVIATIONS

AEM+I: ASEAN Economic Ministers-India

AEP: Act East Policy

AIBC: ASEAN-India Business Council

AIFTA: ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement

AMS: ASEAN member states

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BIMSTEC: Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation

CECA: Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreements

CMLV: Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam

EU: European Union

FTA: Free Trade Agreement

ICT: Information and Communication Technology

IFC-IOR: Indian Fusion Centre- Indian Ocean Region

IMF: International Monetary Fund

IMT: India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral

IONS: Indian Ocean Naval Symposium

IORA: Indian Ocean Rim Association

IPR: Intellectual Property Rights

ITU: International Telecom Union

KMMP: Kaladan Multi-Modal Project

LEP: Look East Policy

MERCOSUR: The Southern Common Market

MGC: Mekong-Ganga Cooperation

MoDNER: Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region

MSME: Medium, Small, and Micro Enterprise

MSS: Maritime Safety and Security

NER: North Eastern Region

NAFTA: North American Free Trade Agreement

OECD: Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development

RCEP: Regional Comprehensive Economic Project

SAARC: South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

SME: Small and Medium Enterprise

TEPC: Telecom Equipment and Services Export Promotion Council

UNCLOS: United Nations Convention on the law of the Sea

WTO: World Trade Organisation

ZOPFAN: Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Historically, and before the establishment of contemporary nation-states, Southeast Asia and India shared strong cultural and commercial ties that go back to the first century. The trade led to extensive cultural and philosophical ties, which have had an impact on society and language up to the current day.
- Early Indian connections to Southeast Asia are evidence that their interactions were primarily focused on trade and culture. As Indian traders entered Southeast Asia, they carried with them their traditions, language, and culture, which mingled with those of the region.
- As colonialism spread throughout Asia, Indian and Southeast Asian cultural and civilizational ties decreased as European interest in the area grew stronger. Although focused on European interests and regulations, the colonial expansion created commercial ports in the area that allowed business to thrive there. This promoted the mass movement of Indian laborers to British territories in Southeast Asia, especially to the plantations in Malaysia.
- Southeast Asia acquired a strategic component as a result of the existence of rival European countries in the area and the requirement to safeguard maritime trade. While the colonial powers shattered the connections between cultures and civilizations, India under British rule came to regard Southeast Asia as strategically important.
- Indian nationalists prioritized Southeast and East Asia throughout the post-colonial era. Early Indian policies toward Asia were intended to foster Asian unity and mobilize support for international and development concerns that affected the newly independent nations. India viewed itself as the leader of Asia during this time, and in all international fora, it vehemently argued for the decolonization and development of Asian nations. Though the newly independent Southeast Asian governments had distinct interests and harboured a dread of India's dominant attitude, the idea of pan-Asian solidarity quickly lost its effectiveness.
- India kept its distance from Southeast Asia for most of the Cold War era. New Delhi had a poor opinion of ASEAN's participation in SEATO and its expanding relations to

Pakistan and China. Southeast Asian nations, on the other hand, were wary of Indo-Soviet relations because they perceived them as Moscow's attempts to push its interests in South and Southeast Asia.

- At the 12th ASEAN-India Summit in 2014, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi upgraded India's Look East Policy to the Act East Policy, stressing the importance of the relationship's evolution from an economic to a strategic alliance. This indicated the region's increasing significance in the context of recent geopolitical changes brought about by China's assertive behaviour in the area, particularly as a result of disputes in the South China Sea and a shift in geopolitical priorities towards the Indo-Pacific.
- India-ASEAN commercial ties have steadily improved since 1991. India's fourth-largest commercial partner today is ASEAN. India has stepped up efforts to interact bilaterally and multilaterally with ASEAN countries. Both engage in a considerable amount of bilateral trade. Even though commerce with ASEAN has greatly increased, it still pales in comparison to that with the US, China, Japan, and the EU. There is still a lot of room to grow connectivity and trade.
- India's Act East Policy is founded on a crucial pillar called connectivity. India's shared border with Myanmar makes it necessary for it to develop physical infrastructure that improves border trade and inter-personal connections. Additionally, it gives India the prospects to connect to continental ASEAN by rail and road lines, fostering stronger cultural and commercial ties. By enabling the seamless movement of products and services, the upgraded connectivity infrastructure between India and ASEAN is anticipated to produce greater economic results.
- With the 3Cs—culture, connectivity, and commerce—declared as the primary pillars of engagement with ASEAN, connectivity has taken new emphasis in India's renamed Act East Policy. In order to promote closer cooperation, the plan of action to implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress, and Shared Prosperity (2021–2015) identifies connectivity as one of the key areas. To this end, it calls for improving transportation linkages via air, sea, land, and rail in order to boost economic and tourism connectivity.
- Economic integration and digital connection are two key areas for improving collaboration between India and ASEAN. India and ASEAN established a digital work

plan for 2022 to collaborate on the digital ecosystem at the 2nd ASEAN Digital Minister Meeting, which is an annual gathering of telecom ministers from ASEAN members and its dialogue partners. A "system for preventing the use of stolen and counterfeit mobile phones, WiFi Access network interface for nationwide public internet, the capacity building and knowledge sharing in emerging areas in the field of Information and Communication Technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), 5G, Advanced Satellite Communication, Cyber Forensics, etc." are all included in the work plan.

- The security exchanges between India and Southeast Asia are a recent development. Till the early 1990s, India had scant or no extensive security connections with ASEAN members. Amid growing concerns about India's ambitions and political position in the region, the expansion of the Indian Navy in the middle of the 1980s prompted New Delhi to make contact with its eastern neighbors. However, this outreach did not result in any meaningful security exchanges.
- India's security diplomacy with ASEAN countries has grown as a result of the country's expanding maritime presence and interests. India takes part in a number of consultative gatherings with ASEAN, such as the Shangri-La Dialogue and PMC 10+1 and Senior Official level meetings (AISOM). It also actively participates in a number of "ASEAN-led frameworks," such as the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) [4]. In addition, there are still ongoing bilateral conversations with Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand about a number of defense-related topics.
- The growing geopolitical and strategic importance of India and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific, the shared pursuit of energy resources in the South China Sea, the security dynamics in light of China's expanding footprints in the region, and the undercurrents of US-China strategic contestations have all shaped India-security engagement with ASEAN.
- The Look/Act East Policy's key tactic has been to project its soft power in Southeast Asian nations. A crucial component of foreign policy, soft power works to promote a nation's good reputation overseas through a variety of cultural channels. Through Buddha to Bollywood, India has tried to use its soft-power potential in Southeast Asia.

Through its support for Southeast Asian nations' temple renovation projects, films, cultural events, and tourism, India has promoted soft power in the area.

- While India has often emphasized the cultural similarities and historical linkages between Southeast Asia and India, it is now beginning to concentrate on religious tourism. India is constructing Buddhist and Ramayana tourist circuits to encourage religious travel. Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are all heavily influenced by Southeast Asian societies. India wants to use its cultural heritage to maximize its soft power potential by concentrating on Buddhist and Ramayana sites. Additionally, increased religious travel will create job possibilities for the local community and enhance connectivity between Southeast Asian countries and India.
- India benefits from having a substantial diaspora in every region of the world by promoting its charm and soft power abroad. In the Southeast Asian countries, there is a sizable presence of the Indian Diaspora.
- The Indian diaspora's presence in Southeast Asia is not without issues, though. Southeast Asia's ethnic Indian population is linguistically and economically diverse. The bulk of ethnic Indians are vulnerable populations, however a small portion of them have grown wealthy. Despite the Indian Diaspora's sizable presence in Southeast Asia, New Delhi has not made the most of its potential. Even though members of the Diaspora have attained significant positions in politics and business, their influence on foreign policy is still relatively small. India has also avoided talking about issues related to the diaspora on a bilateral level out of concern that it might harm those relations.
- The education sector is another area with the potential to strengthen inter-human ties. Reputable institutions in India can provide doors for cooperation through academic and intellectual exchange. One method of fostering intercultural relations is through joint university engagement between India and ASEAN and student exchange programs.
- The paradigm of New Delhi's policy toward the area has shifted over time from one of security to one of development. Aiming to connect NER with Southeast Asia through connectivity projects and consequently increase economic opportunities between the region, New Delhi placed NER in its Look East and Act East policy agenda. Southeast Asia is a key area for New Delhi's connection ambitions due to its geographic proximity to NER. In order to encourage greater mobility of products and people between the

regions, India has placed an emphasis on both sea and land connectivity. India has started a number of connectivity projects to strengthen the infrastructure around the borders of Southeast Asian nations as well as the NER.

- There are difficulties and paradoxes with the LEP/AEP with NER as a significant actor. While the strategy aims to promote border trade, cross-border connectivity, mobility, and investments in the area, domestic rhetoric and policy run counter to these goals, reflecting a lack of trust between the state and society, residents' fear of immigrant movement, resource exploitation, etc.
- The Act East Policy, which envisions an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, is the foundation of India's Indo-Pacific policy. Southeast Asia, which is at the center of the Indo-Pacific, has responded carefully to the big countries' articulated Indo-Pacific strategy. The Indo-Pacific narratives, which try to restrict China and divide the area as a theater of major power struggle, have caused anxiety within ASEAN. The attempt to securitize the area and undermine ASEAN's dominance over the region and its multilateral institutions has also been seen in this. Because of this, the ASEAN nations have come together, with Indonesia serving as the group's de facto leader, to offer their respective perspectives on the Indo-Pacific.
- Responses to the Quad's rebirth in Southeast Asia have been conflicted. While there is no common stance among ASEAN member states; different nations have varied perspectives on it. The ambivalence around Quad appears to stem partially from the perception of Quad as a security cooperation to contain China and partly from worries that ASEAN significance will be diminished and that its multilateral institutions will be undermined. Similar division exists in ASEAN's reaction to the creation of AUKUS. In contrast, ASEAN nations have a positive response to the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum, primarily because, unlike the Quad and the AUKUS, it allows ASEAN states to maintain their centrality and allows them to take a flexible approach without being seen as undermining ASEAN centrality or attempting to securitize the region, among other things.
- According to the UN Sustainable Development Report 2022, neither India nor ASEAN have made particularly noteworthy progress in achieving their goals, and both are falling behind. Both regions share some overlapping areas that need

significant improvement. Achieving the SDGs should be a feasible area of cooperation and a priority in the region as India and ASEAN celebrate their 30 years of diplomatic relations.

- According to the 17th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), trade barriers will be eliminated by allowing open and equal access to markets, foreign investments, knowledge sharing, technological assistance, and development assistance. Through information exchange, technological support, and development aid, India and ASEAN may improve their cooperation in two different ways to meet the SDGs' objectives. They might cooperate in areas where they both lag and exchange knowledge and best practices in areas where they have excelled to meet the challenges of achieving SDGs together.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

India- Southeast Asia ties go back centuries, maritime Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent were linked for centuries by trade and people movement across the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, which supported intricate networks based on commerce, culture, and community. As a result, Indian culture had a major impact on broad swaths of Southeast Asia. These ties were bolstered by the trade and commerce that the British Empire encouraged by colonizing the areas to the east of the Indian subcontinent (Yong and Mun, 2009). Due to its strategic importance, the ASEAN region has been linked to several Indian rulers and colonial empires throughout history. India's early ties to, and impact on, Southeast Asian cultures, traditions, and languages are attested by historical structures such as the Angkor Temple Complex in Siem Reap in Cambodia, the ancient candis in Kedah in Malaysia, and the Borobudur and Prambanan temples near Yogyakarta in Indonesia.

After India gained its independence, Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, held the First Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in 1947 and the First Asian African Conference in Bandung in 1955 to revitalize the country's ties to Southeast Asia. These gatherings served as watershed moments in the history of post-independence India's ties with Southeast Asia's Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. India's foreign policy shifted its emphasis to Indonesia during the NAM era. Examples include India's involvement in the Indochina conflict of the 1960s and its public backing of the Indonesian independence movement in the 1950s. Signing friendship treaties with Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines helped India gradually consolidate its bilateral and diplomatic connections with the regional littorals.

However, despite these, ties between India and Southeast Asia began to deteriorate in the 1960s as newly independent Southeast Asian governments drifted away from India in terms of foreign policy priorities due to the influence of the Cold War. Some of the countries joined the newly established Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), an alliance with the United States to meet their security concerns. In contrast, India broke away from treaties negotiated with the United States and established strong ties with the Soviet Union.

Since India's foreign reserves were depleted by fiscal imbalances and the consequent economic crisis, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union compelled New Delhi to rethink its foreign policy goals (Bajpaee, 2022). India's economic policy toward ASEAN shifted after Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao adopted the New Economic Policy in 1991. This policy prioritized liberalization, globalization, and privatization. One of the declared goals was to better connect the Indian economy with the thriving economies of Southeast Asia. While the "Look East" policy was mostly attributed to former Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, the geopolitics of the period also had a role in bringing about a gradual convergence of interests between India and ASEAN, both economically and strategically.

India's commercial ties with ASEAN were revitalized in part thanks to the country's Look East Policy (LEP). It was decided that it would be beneficial to introduce the new "Look East" Policy in the 1990s because of the region's extensive Indian diaspora and the close historical ties between the two countries. India's political links with ASEAN member nations were renewed under the Narasimha Rao government's Look East strategy, which also sought to increase economic interaction, trade, and investments as well as forge science, technology, and institutional linkages with it (Grare, 2017). The Indian government saw the ASEAN region as their best option in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the economic woes plaguing European nations, and the unrest in West Asia. As a result, it was decided that establishing deeper ties with ASEAN would be prudent, as doing so would provide for more access to its rapidly expanding market.

The relationship between India and ASEAN evolved from a purely commercial one into a strategic alliance, with India participating in more than 30 discussion mechanisms and yearly summits. For this reason, at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, in 2014, the Indian government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who came to office in 2014, renamed India's Look East Policy to "Act East Policy" (AEP). A new age of economic development, industrialization, and trade has begun in India, as promised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In its foreign policy, India has renamed its "Look East Policy" to "Act East Policy."

In this context, the political-security, economic, and socio-cultural realms were chosen as three priority areas for collaboration in the ASEAN-India Plan of Action for the years 2016-

2020. With the dynamic ASEAN region as its fourth largest trading partner, India hopes to enhance its ties to the region through increased trade, investment, education, and cultural exchange as part of the AEP (MEA). The growth of bilateral trade between India and ASEAN has also been remarkable, from \$12 billion in 2003/47 to over US\$79 billion (S\$110 billion) in 2020-21. The field of investment is also a significant area of activity. There has been an increase in Indian FDI in ASEAN. From \$85 million in 2015, it increased to \$2.12 billion (S\$2.9 billion) in 2020 (ASEAN 2021). Investment from ASEAN (mostly from Singapore) has also increased. With an outlay of US\$15.9 bn (S\$22.1 bn) in 2021-22, Singapore ranked second only to Mauritius among countries investing in India. Nearly 9,000 Indian firms have set up shop in Singapore, and they're actively looking into doing business in other Southeast Asian countries.

India and the ASEAN work closely together on political and security problems at both the bilateral and global levels. India has signed 'strategic alliances' with Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam on a bilateral basis. The East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting are all ASEAN-led international forums in which India participates. Security relations between the two sides are predicated in large part on their ability to work together in the maritime domain. Since the 1990s, several ASEAN states have participated in India's flagship MILAN naval exercise. With numerous ASEAN countries, India conducts bilateral coordinated patrols and drills like the Singapore-India Maritime Exercise, which just celebrated its 28th anniversary in 2021. A new minilateral exercise with Singapore and Thailand was also undertaken in 2019. There are also military pacts between the Indian and Singaporean governments.

Looking at the region as a whole, the AEP has served as a connecting link between the Indo-Pacific framework and ASEAN. In its pursuit of global preeminence, India is actively courting alliances with other regional countries to broaden the scope of its potential impact. India and the ASEAN have also much in common, and they can be proud of the ways in which their shared cultural traditions have facilitated mutual understanding and friendship at the regional and international levels. However, there is still a long way to go in terms of fostering mutual understanding and familiarity with one another's cultures.

To sum up, despite having different strategic interests at different times, relations between ASEAN and India have come a long way from the Cold War era up till the present

day. Indian foreign policy, geopolitical concerns, and economic interests all converge on ASEAN. Further, across ASEAN, awareness of India's strategic capabilities has led to the belief that New Delhi can, over time, play a stabilizing role in the region in the face of an increasingly aggressive China. As a result, there is extensive cooperation between the two on many fronts, including politics, security, defense, strategy, economy, and culture. In light of recent events, India's involvement in Southeast Asia and East Asia has increased dramatically over the past several years. This is because India places a premium on the region, both strategically and economically, and because of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India's potential as a regional powerhouse has been fully realized thanks to the advent of an assertive China and its economic and strategic influence in the region (Tellis, 2016).

Despite the policy's obvious efficacy, it has introduced an air of uncertainty as the concept is not specified in any White paper or other official document issued by the Indian government (Jaishankar, 2019). India must recognize the positive role its Act East strategy can play in the area and work to make it a more open, status quo-focused force that shapes the regional order in accordance with Indian national interests. The Mekong-Ganga cooperation and the Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean, Myanmar, and Thailand Cooperation (BIMSTEC) have both been bolstered by India's increased involvement with its eastern neighbors. Because of this, India's Act East policy is well-founded from both an economic and strategic perspective.

Methodology

Anticipating India's policy canvas, its plans and goals for Southeast Asia can be broken down into the following categories of collaboration and partnership: Capacity building, environmental, climate change, and socio-cultural cooperation are just a few examples of the many areas in which nations and organizations can work together to ensure peace and prosperity across the globe. New debates and conversations on India's eastern policies are necessary for deep comprehension of the Act East policy in light of these developing patterns of interaction. This report takes a fresh look at India's approach to Southeast Asia, exploring the country's policies, possibilities, and challenges in the region. The research also highlights potential areas of focus for the Indian government and provides new information on the country's foreign policy as it relates to Southeast Asia, with a focus on the Act East Policy and

its effects on India's northeast. The political, economic, and strategic alliances in this area are also utilized in this research.

The report uses a diagnostic and non-experimental scope of analysis in its descriptive-analytic method. Considering the breadth of the topic at hand, this research classifies the various types of primary and secondary materials on India's foreign policy and its connections with Southeast Asia. These sources include government papers, books, articles, monographs, book reviews, and reports. It also utilizes semi-structured interviews with the most influential Indian policymakers and Southeast Asian foreign policy experts as integral part of the data collection procedures, while they contribute significantly to the study's overall analysis. Future policy goals in India are likely to be informed by the analysis and consequences arising from these. They are essential for gaining a complete picture of India's interactions, possibilities, and difficulties with its Eastern neighbors.

The Report at Hand

The first part of the report gives a high-level overview of the development of ties between India and Southeast Asia. It covers the connections between Indian and Southeast Asian countries, the spread of Hindu epics, and the exchange of not just goods but also ideas, culture, and social mores. It moves on to the relations between India and Southeast Asia before and throughout the Look East Policy, laying the groundwork for expanding the scope of cooperation beyond economics to encompass security and connectivity. The report concludes by discussing the Act East Policy, emphasizing the significance of the now-strategic collaboration.

Following this, the paper delves into the topic of economic ties between India and ASEAN, tracing the history of these ties from the Cold War era to the present day. It explains how business links between India and ASEAN have become stronger and stronger since 1991. Today, ASEAN is India's fourth-largest trading partner. India has increased both its bilateral and international efforts to engage the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). They do a lot of business with one other. Although trade with ASEAN has expanded significantly, it still lags far behind that with the United States, China, Japan, and the European Union. Further expansion of communication and commerce is though possible.

A key component of India's Act East Policy, the paper goes on to analyze the connectivity between India and ASEAN. It discusses how India's proximity to Myanmar's border necessitates the creation of physical infrastructure that facilitates cross-border commerce and human ties. It also provides India with a chance to establish rail and road links to mainland ASEAN, opening the door to deeper cultural and economic exchanges between the two regions. The improved connectivity infrastructure between India and ASEAN is expected to increase economic output by facilitating the frictionless exchange of goods and services.

Relations between India and the ASEAN in the fields of security and the seas are also examined in this report. This shows how the sharing of security information between India and Southeast Asia is a relatively new phenomenon. Before the early 1990s, India's security ties with the ASEAN were limited, at best. New Delhi reached out to its eastern neighbors in the 1980s as concerns grew about India's ambitions and political standing in the region due to the expansion of the Indian Navy. Unfortunately, no significant security exchanges materialized as a result of this approach. However, post this, Indian maritime presence and interests increased, and with them, the country's security diplomacy with the ASEAN members also enhanced. India's and ASEAN's rising geopolitical and strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific, their shared pursuit of energy resources in the South China Sea, the security dynamics in light of China's expanding footprints in the region, and the undercurrents of US-China strategic contestations all shaped India's security engagement with ASEAN.

Important information about people-to-people connections is included in the report. While India has long touted the many ways in which Southeast Asia and India are culturally and historically connected, the country is shifting its focus to attract more religious tourists. India is building Buddhist and Ramayana pilgrimage routes to boost tourism in these areas. Southeast Asian cultures have had a profound impact on the development of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. India's diaspora communities in every part of the globe help the country project its charisma and soft power to the rest of the world. There is a substantial diaspora of Indians living in the countries of Southeast Asia.

The report notes that New Delhi's policy paradigm has altered over time from one of security to one of development as it relates to the Northeast and India's Act East Policy. New Delhi included NER in its Look East and Act East policy agenda with the goal of connecting

NER with Southeast Asia through connectivity projects and, by extension, expanding economic prospects between the area. The LEP/AEP involving NER, though, is fraught with complications and contradictions. In spite of the strategy's stated objective—to increase border trade, cross-border connectivity, mobility, and investment in the region—domestic rhetoric and policy work against these objectives, reflecting a lack of trust between the state and society as well as locals' fear of immigrant movement, resource exploitation, etc.

The Indo-Pacific connections between India and Southeast Asia are the final topic of discussion in the report. India's Indo-Pacific policy is based on its Act East Policy, which promotes a free and open Indo-Pacific. As the heart of the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia has carefully responded to the large countries' Indo-Pacific strategy. Concern has been raised within ASEAN due to the prevalence of Indo-Pacific narratives that seek to contain China and partition the region as a stage for a big geopolitical struggle. One can also observe the move to securitize the region and weaken ASEAN's control over the region and its multilateral institutions. For this reason, ASEAN member states have banded together under Indonesia's de facto leadership to share their viewpoints on issues affecting the Indo-Pacific region. Accordingly, people in Southeast Asia have had mixed reactions to the Quad's revival. The stance of ASEAN to the establishment of AUKUS is also somewhat split. On the other hand, the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum has been met with approval by ASEAN member states because, unlike the Quad and the AUKUS, it allows ASEAN states to maintain their centrality and take a flexible approach without being seen as undermining ASEAN centrality or trying to securitize the region.

CHAPTER II

INDIA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

1.1 Civilisational Ties

Historically, and prior to the formation of modern nation-states, the geographical region of present-day India and Southeast Asia shared extensive civilisational and commercial linkages that date back to the first century (Muni, 2011). The trade between the two regions produced extensive cultural and philosophical contacts, whose influence continues even in the present times, especially in the language and social customs. This is also India's biggest contribution to Southeast Asia, endowing it with a cultural identity and history that links them together (Mishra, 2021). Former Ambassador Shyam Saran points out that the historical linkages between India and Southeast Asia are very deep with imprints of Indian culture, language and scripts in many Southeast Asian countries (S. Saran, personal communication, August 18, 2022). Further attesting to India's overwhelming influence on Southeast Asia, Lee Kuan Yew the former Prime Minister of Singapore, has remarked "Historically, India has had an enormous influence on Southeast Asia; economically and culturally too. The Ramayana story is present all over Southeast Asia in different versions. The civilisations in the region were really Indian in origin" (Cited in Malone, 2011, p. 199).

The Indian civilisation spread to Southeast Asia through seamen, traders, migrants, and later through the Indianized elites who formed Indianized kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Indianization included the adoption of Hindu-Buddhist religious beliefs, the mythology of the Puranas, its administrative and legal system, the Indian concept of royalty and the incorporation of Sanskrit (Coedes, 1975). Extensive maritime trade, stretching from West Asia to Indonesia, also linked Indian and Southeast Asian kingdoms. There was a booming maritime trade between the Javanese State of Ho-ling and India's eastern coast. The expansion of the Chola Empire in the tenth century also witnessed a surge of maritime voyages and trade with Southeast Asia. The spice trade route from West Asia and the Persian Gulf stretched over to Indonesia and even beyond, bringing in traders and travellers from one part of Asia to the other.

Various archaeological findings provide evidence of interaction between South Indian and South East Asian kingdoms. The Tamil inscriptions found at Phu Khao Thong in Thailand

bearing the word '*turavon*', meaning ascetic, is considered the oldest Tamil inscription in Southeast Asia (Mayilvaganan, 2021, p. 3). There is also evidence that the Palas of Bengal and the Andhra and Odisha coast kingdoms had close links with the Hindu rulers of the Malaya Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago. It is believed that the Sailendra dynasty, which became Malaysia's dominant maritime and land power by the eighth century, originated from the Indian state of Odisha (Malone, 2011, p. 199).

The interaction between India and Southeast Asia was not only limited to the export of goods but also of ideas, culture and social customs. The religious doctrines of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam all travelled from India to Southeast Asia. Hinduism and Islam spread into the region through the activities of traders and missionaries. Buddhism travelled from India to Central Asia, Tibet and China, finding its way to Japan and Vietnam (Tharoor, 2013, p. 130). With the rise of the kingdom of Malacca, from the fifteenth century onwards, Islam made its way into the region. The traders of Gujarat, Malabar, Tamil Nadu and Bengal were influential in spreading the message of Islam to the natives. The imprint of Indian culture is also visible in the languages. Pali and Sanskrit provide the texture and base for many Southeast Asian languages. The Srivijaya Kingdom of Sumatra, from the seventh to the thirteenth century, was a centre of Buddhist studies and Sanskrit learning.

The popularity of Hindu epics – the *Ramayana and Mahabharata*-, worship of Hindu Gods – *Ganesha, Shiva, Rama and Sita*- and the presence of historical sites such as Angkor Wat Temple in Cambodia, Borobudur and Prambanan Temple in Indonesia attest to the export of cultural markers to Southeast Asia in the ancient period (Mayilvaganan, 2021, p. 3). The transformation of Hindu epics according to the local culture of the Southeast Asian countries further shows that the penetration of Indian culture was not imperialistic but a 'product of cultural synthesis' (Coedes, 1975).

The early Indian links to Southeast Asia attest that the interaction between them centred on commerce and culture. As Indian traders made their way into Southeast Asia, they also brought their customs, language, and culture, which intermixed with the local traditions. The adoption of Indianized culture by the Southeast Asian elites and natives shows that the interaction was not imperialistic or through military power to dominate but rather a product of a synthesis between Indian and local cultures.

1.2. Prelude to Look East

With the advent of colonialism in Asia, European interest in the region reigned supreme, and the cultural and civilisational links between India and Southeast Asia weakened. The colonial expansion established trading ports in the region that allowed commerce to flourish in the region albeit based on European interests and rules. This also encouraged the large-scale migration of Indian labourers to British colonies in Southeast Asia, particularly to the Malayan plantations (Malone, 2011, p. 200). The presence of rival European powers - France and Dutch- in the region and the need to protect maritime trade gave Southeast Asia a strategic dimension. During the Second World War, the Southeast Asian theatre became extremely important to the British Raj, as the Japanese advanced into Myanmar (Burma) highlighting India's Strategic 'vulnerability' to attacks from the Southeast Asian frontier (Acharya, 2015, p. 644). Hence, while the colonial powers disrupted the cultural and civilisational links, Southeast Asia acquired a geo-strategic significance for India under British Raj (Grare, 2017, p. 71).

The Nineteenth and Twentieth century was also a period of the political and intellectual awakening of Asia against foreign domination. The interaction between the native Asians during this period centred on the themes of nationalism and decolonisation. The Indian nationalist leaders, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru, desired pan-Asian solidarity based on common values and interests against the imperialist 'West' (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 36). India emphasised its cultural affinity with Asia to foster a common struggle for decolonisation and saw itself as the leader of Asia in the new world order. To promote Asian unity and pan-Asianess, in March 1947, India organised the Asian Relations Conference to highlight the commitment and significance of Asia in the new decolonised world order. Underlining the geographical proximity of India to Western, Southern and Southeast Asia, Indian Prime Minister Nehru advocated a 'closer union' based on historical experiences and shared interests for promoting a just world order (Muni, 2011, p. 5). In 1949, India organised a conference on Indonesia to support the demand for Indonesian independence. In 1955, the Bandung conference was held to discuss and develop a common policy to solve the problems of newly decolonised states (Haokip, 2011, p. 241). These early post-colonial interactions show that India looked east to develop an Asian identity and unity in the post-colonial world in opposition to the western dominated world order.

During the post-colonial period, Indian nationalists gave importance to Southeast and East Asia. India's early eastward policy aimed at building Asian solidarity, and mobilising support on international and development issues that affected the newly independent countries.

During this period, India saw itself as the leader of Asia and articulated the cause of decolonisation and the development of Asian countries in all international forums (Muni, 2011). However, the idea of pan-Asian solidarity quickly lost efficacy as the newly independent Southeast Asian states had different interests and harboured a fear of India's overbearing attitude. The bilateral conflict between India and China and their rivalry for Asian leadership further jeopardised any idea of a common Asian grouping (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 43). Southeast Asian states and India began to drift apart, as the latter became members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), allying with the US. In 1967, Southeast Asian states formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) without India, which India saw as a pro-Western organisation. The period of decolonisation and Asian resurgence could not manifest into an Asian unity and the Asian states found themselves entangled in the worldviews of Cold War politics.

During the cold war, as India opted for a non-aligned strategy and ASEAN allied with the U.S., both of them could not find mutual incentives to form a close relationship but viewed each other with mutual suspicion, which grew stronger as India and the Soviet Union signed a friendship agreement in 1971. However, the impressive economic growth of the Southeast Asian countries in the 1980s began to change India's approach towards the region. In May 1980, India and ASEAN agreed on a framework for economy, trade, industrial cooperation and science and technology (Muni, 2011, p. 7). However, India's recognition of the Hang Samrin regime in Kampuchea, which was in opposition to the collective position of ASEAN, again brought them at odds and the agreed framework could not progress further. The difference in the political position acted as a barrier between India and ASEAN to form close cooperation with each other. In October 1981, Indian Foreign Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao visited Malaysia and the Indian Prime Minister visited the Philippines and Indonesia to mend ties with the ASEAN states and emphasised the need for close cooperation between them in the "interest of world peace and stability" (Mayilvaganan, 2021, p. 5).

Rajiv Gandhi, during his tenure, picked up the threads and started re-engaging with the region driven by strategic and economic concerns. He initiated economic reforms and introduced one window clearance for a hassle-free investment process, and had shown interest in joining ASEAN to boost his economic liberalisation policies. The interaction with Southeast Asian states during this period focused on the issues of trade and commerce, avoiding double taxation, and cooperation in science and technology (Muni, 2011, p. 9). ASEAN, however,

remained sceptical about letting India join fearing that Pakistan too would follow suit and their intractable rivalry could destabilise the organisation (Grare, 2017, p. 47). Therefore, without any shared ideas of cooperation and interests, until the end of the cold war, the relationship between India and Southeast Asia waxed and waned. It was only after the end of the cold war, India enunciated its Look East Policy, to strengthen its ties with Southeast Asian countries.

1.3. Look East Policy (1992-2014)

For much of the Cold War period, India remained aloof from Southeast Asia. New Delhi negatively viewed ASEAN's membership with SEATO and its growing ties with Pakistan and China. On the other hand, Southeast Asian states were apprehensive of India-Soviet ties, which they saw as Moscow's attempts to advance its interest in South and Southeast Asia. The worldviews of Delhi and ASEAN states differed under the logic of the Cold War with different strategic interests and visions for the region. Therefore, without any sense of shared interests and incentives, the interactions between them remained limited.

The end of the Cold War opened up the strategic space for both India and Southeast Asia to engage with each other without any mutual suspicions. The new geopolitical shifts with the emergence of a unipolar system raised concerns over the rise of China, and US security guarantees and the subsequent power vacuum in the region gradually brought the convergence of interest between India and ASEAN (Grare, 2017, p. 72).

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union also coincided with India's domestic economic crisis. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, India was deprived of a valuable and strategic partner compelling it to rethink its foreign policy parameters. Facing an economic crisis, Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao initiated economic reforms liberalising trade policies. Moreover, to take advantage of the globalisation and regionalism projects to boost economic reforms, the Rao government announced the Look East Policy to improve its relations with Southeast Asian countries and make India a favourable destination for their investments.

Other changes in the strategic environment of Southeast Asia also favoured closer political and security ties between India and the Southeast Asian states. The dilution of ASEAN's policy of Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), which aimed at minimising the involvement of outside powers in the region, created space for India to seek broader engagement in the region (Acharya, 2015, p. 648). Moreover, with the possibility of a

reduction of the US military presence and the emergence of China's growing economic and military presence, ASEAN found India as an ideal regional balancer in the region(Muni, 2011, p. 11).

In the 1994 Singapore lecture, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao officially defined India's Look East Policy. Acknowledging the historical and cultural ties, he emphasised building a strong economic and security relationship(Muni, 2011, p. 12). The immediate driver for the Look East Policy was the search for economic investments and markets after the Rao government initiated economic reforms. Since 1991, India's Look East Policy has evolved gradually through three phases and along three dimensions: institutional, economic (see chapter 2) and strategic (see chapter 3).

During the first phase, from 1991-2002, India primarily focussed on trade and investment, strengthening bilateral relationships and institutionalizing itself into the ASEAN regional architecture. In 1992, India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, enjoying rights in restricted areas concerning trade, investment, tourism and science and technology. In 1995, it became the Full Dialogue Partner making it eligible to participate in a wider range of sectors, including infrastructure, civil aviation, and computer software. In 1996, it also became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a security forum allowing India to participate in strategic and security consultations.

Moreover, India also initiated sub-regional initiatives with Southeast Asian states. In 1997, India along with Thailand formed BISTEC (Bangladesh-India- Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation), which is now renamed as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) to promote cooperation in trade, investment, tourism, fisheries, transport and infrastructure. In 2000, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Project was set up along with five ASEAN countries, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand to promote tourism, culture and education, and transportation links between India and ASEAN members. By the end of the twentieth century, India had reinvigorated its links with Southeast Asian states, both bilaterally and multilaterally, and the trade and investment ties had improved.

While the first phase centred on ASEAN and focussed primarily on trade and investment, the second phase, from 2003-2014, expanded the definition of 'East' to include East Asia and Australia and the areas of cooperation from economics to security issues,

including protection of sea lanes and counter-terrorism exercises(Sinha, 2003). The upgrading of its relationship with ASEAN in the security domain and signing free trade agreement showed its newfound confidence to play a more active role in the region. In 2002, the first ASEAN-India Summit was held in Phom Penh making India the summit-level partner. In the second ASEAN-India Summit in Bali, India signed a Framework for creating an ASEAN-India free trade agreement (FTA) in a decade, a joint declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism and acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Further, India's participation in the inaugural meeting of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 despite not being an East Asian country underscored its importance as an important geopolitical actor in the Southeast Asian regional order. In 2010, India also became a member of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMMP), a platform for strategic dialogue and security cooperation focussing on humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, maritime cooperation and peacekeeping(Grare, 2017, p. 191). In 2012, India and ASEAN upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership highlighting the evolution of the relationship from economics to strategic issues.

The Look East Policy evolved through building economic ties and later transitioning towards the areas of cooperation in security and connectivity. Its participation in all the ASEAN regional architecture shows its growing economic and military importance in the region. With the rise of China and the emerging US-China rivalry, ASEAN member states have also realised the importance of India as a regional balancer. This has led to various security and defence cooperation frameworks and joint military and naval exercises with the Southeast Asian states. The conclusion of the free trade agreement with the ASEAN signals India's economic influence and maturity. Its cooperation now extends beyond trade and investment issues, including science and technology, maritime cooperation and humanitarian assistance.

1.4. Act East Policy (2014- present)

In 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi upgraded India's Look East Policy to Act East Policy at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit, highlighting the significance of the relationship that has grown from an economic to a strategic partnership. This signaled the growing importance of the region amid the new geopolitical shifts stemming from assertive Chinese activities in

the region, particularly from the disputes arising in the South China Sea and shifting geopolitical priorities towards the Indo-Pacific.

The 'Act East Policy' marks the third phase of the Look East Policy, projecting an action-oriented approach towards the region with a "priority on security, connectivity and regional integration"(Bajpae, 2017, p. 358). India reflected the desire for deeper engagement by establishing a separate 'Mission for ASEAN' in Jakarta. In 2015, ASEAN-India FTA in services and investment came into effect. In 2017, the first ASEAN-India Connectivity Summit was conducted on the theme "Powering Digital and Physical Linkages for Asia in the 21st Century", emphasising the importance of connectivity and technology for India-ASEAN relations in the new act east policy (Firstpost, 2017). To mark the 25 years of the ASEAN-India Dialogue Partnership, a commemorative ceremony was held in January 2018 in New Delhi on the theme 'Shared Values, Common Destiny' and all ten ASEAN member states were invited as chief guests to its 69th Republic Day. At the 18th ASEAN-India summit, a joint statement on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability and Prosperity in the Region was released, indicating the convergence of interests between India and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific.

The Act East Asia Policy (AEP) aims to expand the previous Look East Policy along the three dimensions of space while deepening its interaction with the ASEAN member states. First, it expands the LEP beyond Southeast Asia to include Asia-Pacific. Act East Policy intends to intensify its engagement with Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands as a broader strategy for engaging Asia-Pacific. Second, India aims to expand its strategic depth in the region that hitherto had been limited. India aspires to play a more active role in the region by extending its operations from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to maritime cooperation and joint naval drills(Palit, 2016, p. 84). Third, it places India's Northeast at the centre of the development and connectivity projects, including road and railways, enhancing trade and commerce, and people-to-people exchanges with the Southeast Asian states.

While the Look East Policy emerged in the geo-political context of the end of the Cold War with concerns over the power vacuum in Asia, and the need to take advantage of the globalisation and regionalism projects. In the same vein, ‘Act East Policy’ was articulated under the shifting geopolitics towards the Indo-Pacific, the centrality of Asia in the 21st century, and concerns over aggressive China. Scholars and Policymakers believe that Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific are concurrent and do not have much difference (S. Menon, personal communication, August 18, 2022). In present times, instead of AEP, Indo-Pacific is more frequently used (Bhatia, 2021). Similar to LEP, Act East Policy is not a well-structured policy but is evolving with time. The Covid-19, Russia-Ukraine war, and protectionist policies amid the crisis have shown the fragility of the post-war world order and the urgency to replace it with a more inclusive and open system. Within this context, India-ASEAN needs to step up its process of strengthening supply chains, building resilient regional architecture based on inclusivity and shared rules, enhancing free trade and labour mobility, and seeking cooperation on newer avenues made possible by the fourth industrial revolution.

CHAPTER III

INDIA-ASEAN ECONOMIC TIES

The end of the cold war coincided with India's economic crises leading to a rethink in its economic policy. These policies undertaken in the 1990s had a long-lasting impact on India's domestic and external policies. Opening up the economy not only became imperative to recover the economy but also provided India to rethink its foreign policy strategy in the post-cold war period. The end of the cold war, economic reforms, and the advent of regionalism and globalization acted as immediate drivers for India's rethinking of its foreign policy. It is against this backdrop that India formulated its 'Look East Policy' and increased political and economic engagement with Southeast Asia.

By 1990-91, the internal debt of the country had grown to 53 per cent of its GDP and external debt to 23 per cent. There was also a growing current account deficit due to imports exceeding exports. The Gulf war in 1990-1991 further complicated India's problem as oil prices grew exponentially and remittances from the workers declined, leading to the dwindling of foreign exchange reserves. By the mid-1990s, India only had \$1.2 billion dollars in foreign exchange which would only cover its two weeks' worth of imports (Alamgir, 2008). Facing the possibility of default, India not only went to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) but also started restructuring its economic policy.

The New Economic Policy announced by the Narasimha Rao government introduced an economic dimension to the foreign policy strategy, which was hitherto limited until the end of the Cold War. The reforms aimed to integrate domestic markets with the international economy by lowering trade barriers, and liberalizing trade and investment processes. Before the 1991-reforms, restrictive market access and slow growth of the Indian economy did not attract Southeast Asian economies and instead they saw China and Japan as attractive markets. The new economic policy, however, with its willingness to lower trade barriers and provide deeper market access, found a favorable response from the Southeast Asian states, which saw this as an opportunity to diversify their markets and investments.

In the post-Cold War period, regionalism also acquired a new significance with the emergence of regional groupings in the form of free trade agreements (FTAs) and customs unions, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), European Union (EU)

and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). India, already frustrated by the snail's pace of SAARC's work due to its inability to overcome internal problems among the South Asian states to cooperate at the regional level, looked towards ASEAN to forge deeper economic integration regionally. The rapid economic growth of the Asian tigers, the need for markets and investments, reaping the benefits of globalization and regionalism projects and diversification of energy resources acted as key drivers for the formulation of the Look East Policy.

Since 1991, India's economic relations with ASEAN have expanded steadily and today it is India's third-largest trading partner. India has accelerated its efforts to engage ASEAN members bilaterally and multilaterally. It has concluded bilateral Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreements (CECA) with many Southeast Asian countries and a free trade agreement with ASEAN. Today, both share a significant amount of two-way trade between them. While the trade between them has improved significantly, India's trade with ASEAN is paltry as compared with the US, China, Japan, and European Union. There is a significant space to expand trade and improve connectivity between them.

India became a sectoral partner of ASEAN in 1992, a full dialogue partner in 1995 and a summit-level partner in 2002. At the second India-ASEAN summit in Bali, a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) was signed to liberalize trade in goods, services and investment, minimize tariff and non-tariff barriers to eventually establish a free trade agreement (AIFTA)(Gupta, 2021, p. 186). New Delhi's decision to embark on the free trade negotiations showed its newfound confidence in interacting with the global economy and its maturing relations with the ASEAN. The negotiations over the FTA, however, ran into several problems, as India feared that the reduction in tariffs would increase the trade deficit and adversely affect its domestic agricultural sector. After lengthy negotiations, India finally signed the FTA in goods covering 90 per cent of products of goods traded between the two regions in 2009, which became operational on 1 January 2010 (Bhogal, 2018). In 2015, the FTA was extended to also include services and investments.

While interacting at the multilateral forums, India and ASEAN have also constituted specialized bodies to discuss and deepen the economic linkages between the two regions. ASEAN Economic Ministers-India (AEM+I), is one such important body that is attended by commerce ministers to review and discuss trade agreements. Another body, ASEAN-India Business Council (AIBC), involves the private sector to get recommendations and reviews of

the existing trade policies. Both these bodies aim to engage the government level and private sector in providing feedback and recommendations to enhance the state of ties between India and ASEAN.

2.1 Multilateral and Bilateral Trade with ASEAN

The last two decades have witnessed Southeast Asia emerging as an important economic center with the ASEAN economy growing at an average annual growth of 5 per cent (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021a, p. 36). Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the region has experienced the fastest growth in the world (Shambaugh, 2022). In 2020, ASEAN member states (AMS) collectively constituted the fifth largest economy in the world, with an aggregate nominal GDP of US\$3.0 trillion. Within ASEAN, Indonesia accounts for the largest share of GDP with 35.3 per cent followed by Thailand (16.7 per cent), the Philippines (12.1 per cent) and Singapore (11.3per cent)(ASEAN Secretariat, 2021a, p. 34). In 2020, ASEAN's total merchandise trade was US\$2.6 trillion, with China as the largest market for its export accounting for 15.7 per cent of total exports, followed by the USA (15.2 per cent), European Union-27 (9.4 per cent) and Japan (7.2 per cent). In terms of imports to ASEAN markets, China remains the most important partner with a share of 23.5 per cent followed by Japan at 7.8 per cent, the US and the Republic of Korea at 7.7 per cent and the European Union at 7.5 per cent. India's share in the ASEAN trade remains limited to 2.8 per cent (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021b).

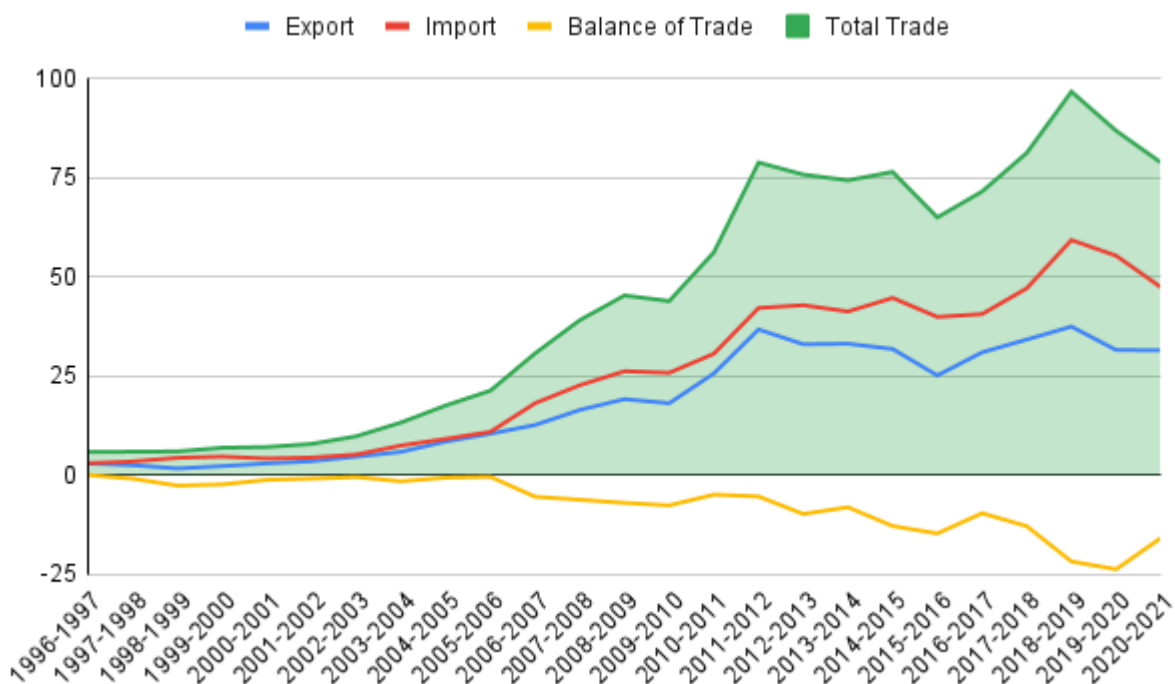


Figure 1: India-ASEAN Trade (Source: Export Import Data Bank, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India)

In 30 years, India – ASEAN trade has increased rapidly, from US\$2.3 billion in 1991-92 to US\$ 78.91 billion in 2021-22 (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2022). In the three phases of the Look East Policy, trade has shown an upward trend. In the first phase, from 1991-92 to 2001-02, it increased at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.79 per cent, from US\$2.3 billion to US\$7.84 billion. From 2002-03 to 2013-2014, the CAGR increase was 18 per cent, from US\$ 9.77 billion to US\$ 74.41 billion. The third phase, from 2014-15 to 2019-2020, which was rechristened as Act East Policy, has seen the slowest growth of a mere 6 per cent CAGR increase, from US\$ 76.53 billion to US\$ 86.92 billion. Notwithstanding the global pandemic that has slowed down trade and investments, the trade from 2014-15 to 2020-21, does not show a unified increasing trend that the earlier phases had shown. From 1996-97 to 2013-14, the trade had always shown an upward trend, except in the 2009-10 period due to the 2008 financial crisis. However, from 2014 onwards, it decreased from US\$76.53bn in 2014-15 to US\$65.04bn in 2015-16, thereby increasing to US\$96.8bn in 2018-19, and again decreasing in subsequent years to US\$86.92bn in 2019-20 and US\$78.91bn in 2020-21.



Figure 2: India's top five trading partners (Source: Export Import Data Bank, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India)



Figure 3: ASEAN's top five trading countries in goods (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021b, p. 58)

Currently, ASEAN is India's third largest trading partner with a trading volume of US\$78.91 billion accounting for India's 11 per cent of total trade. India's export to ASEAN accounts for 10 per cent of its total exports with a value of US\$31.48 billion and 12 per cent of the total imports with a value of US\$47.42 billion, leaving the balance of trade in ASEAN's favour. Whereas for ASEAN, Indian imports account for only 2.1 per cent of its total imports and its exports to India account for 2.8 per cent of its total exports (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021b, p. 96). The top five Indian exports to ASEAN are Mineral fuels and mineral oils, Iron and Steel, Nuclear reactors and Boilers, Aluminium articles and Organic chemicals. The top five Indian imports from ASEAN are Electrical machinery, Mineral fuels and mineral oils, Animal or vegetable fats and oil, Nuclear Reactors and boilers, and Plastic articles.

While the first decade of the twenty first century saw a six-fold increase in trade, in the second decade the trade has not even doubled. In 2015, the target for bilateral trade was set up at US\$100 billion; however, it has only reached US\$ 78.91 billion, with the highest trade at US\$96 billion in 2018-19. A decade after signing FTA India is looking to renegotiate the terms of trade to ensure a more level playing field for its exports and has called for a review of the trade agreement (PIB, 2020). New Delhi's concerns regarding the FTA arise from the lack of a level playing field, weak rules of origin benefitting China and tariff discrimination. First, there is a concern in New Delhi that it faces tariff discrimination when compared to other regional actors. There is a 5 per cent duty for Japanese car imports in Indonesia and Thailand whereas

Indian automobile faces 35 per cent tariffs. Similarly, Indian rice exports also face tariff discrimination when compared to intra-ASEAN traders. Second, the higher trade barriers have denied a level playing field for Indian exports. While India has offered Indonesia lower custom duty on nearly 75 per cent of its product, Indonesia has lowered the duty on only 50 per cent of Indian exports. Third, the weak rules of origin in the current FTA have indirectly benefited Chinese manufacturers. According to the rules of origin in the current FTA, ASEAN states should contribute a minimum of 35 per cent of value addition in the goods to qualify for tariff relaxation. To take advantage of the lower duties, many Chinese firms have shifted to ASEAN to benefit from the FTAs. This has not only increased imports from ASEAN resulting in an increase in the trade deficit but the surge of Chinese goods has also affected domestic manufacturers (Sidhartha, 2020).

Besides regional agreements with the ASEAN, India has also signed several bilateral trade agreements with the ASEAN member states. It signed the Early Harvest Scheme (EHS) under the India-Thailand FTA in 2004, India- Singapore CECA came into being in 2005 and India-Malaysia CECA was inked in 2011. Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam are its largest trading partners within ASEAN. Singapore is the largest trading partner within ASEAN and the sixth largest trading partner overall. Since the conclusion of CECA in 2005, the bilateral trade has expanded from US\$ 6.7 billion to US\$21.98 billion in 2020-21 with US\$8.6 billion in Indian exports and US\$13.30 billion in imports from Singapore. Indonesia is India's ninth largest trading partner with US\$ 17.49 billion in bilateral trade between them, followed by Malaysia at US\$14.43 billion and US\$11.12 billion in bilateral trade with Vietnam. A quick look at the overall trade with ASEAN shows that India has a trade deficit with all its important trading partners within the region. This indicates that India has not been able to take advantage of the bilateral and regional FTAs. India's exports to the ASEAN consist of primary and intermediate products, whereas ASEAN imports to India technologically sophisticated products that have higher values. The trade deficit between India and ASEAN has increased widely after the signing of the AIFTA indicating a rise in ASEAN imports. The relocation of Chinese firms to Southeast Asian countries has also accounted for the rise in imports from Thailand and Vietnam, which are benefitting from the AIFTA (Nag et al., 2021).

Since India has not been able to take advantage of the free trade agreement, there is a wide consensus that New Delhi needs to strengthen its economic pillar. Former Ambassador Shivshankar Menon remarks that New Delhi's economic engagement "is nowhere where it

should be " and this would make it difficult to have robust political-economic-military engagements (S. Menon, personal communication, August 18, 2022). New Delhi needs to re-look at the FTAs, as the current agreements are decade old and do not have the capacity to include new drivers of regional and global trade such as e-commerce, investment dispute resolution and environmental issues (Palit, 2021). Second, the trade agreement needs to be implemented properly as presently both sides indulge in imposing non-tariff barriers (Singh, 2021). Third, the current trade agreements are of "low quality and moderate ambitions" and therefore, newer trade agreements with broader scope and content that includes more market access provisions in trade and services, investments, digital trade, competition policy and intellectual property are required (A. Palit, personal communication, August 2022). Fourth, until now private sector has played a minimal role and there is a need to encourage private investment in Southeast Asia (N. Ravi, personal communication, September 16, 2022)

ASEAN has also become a favourable destination for Foreign Direct investments. From 2000-2019, the FDI inflows have seen an upward trend. In 2019, it received a total FDI inward flow of US\$182 billion, with the US as the largest source of FDI with US\$34 billion accounting for 19 per cent of the total inward FDI flows, followed by Japan (13.1 per cent), EU (9.7 per cent) and Hong Kong (7.1 per cent) (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021b, p. 143). In 2019, India's FDI investment in ASEAN was US\$1.5 billion accounting for 0.82 per cent of the total investment (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021b, p. 149). In terms of sector, ASEAN member states attract the largest FDI in Financial and Insurance activities (36.6pc), followed by wholesale and retail trade (19.6 pc), manufacturing (14.5 pc), and professional scientific and technical activities (8.2 pc) and real estate (6.1 pc) (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021a, p. 51).

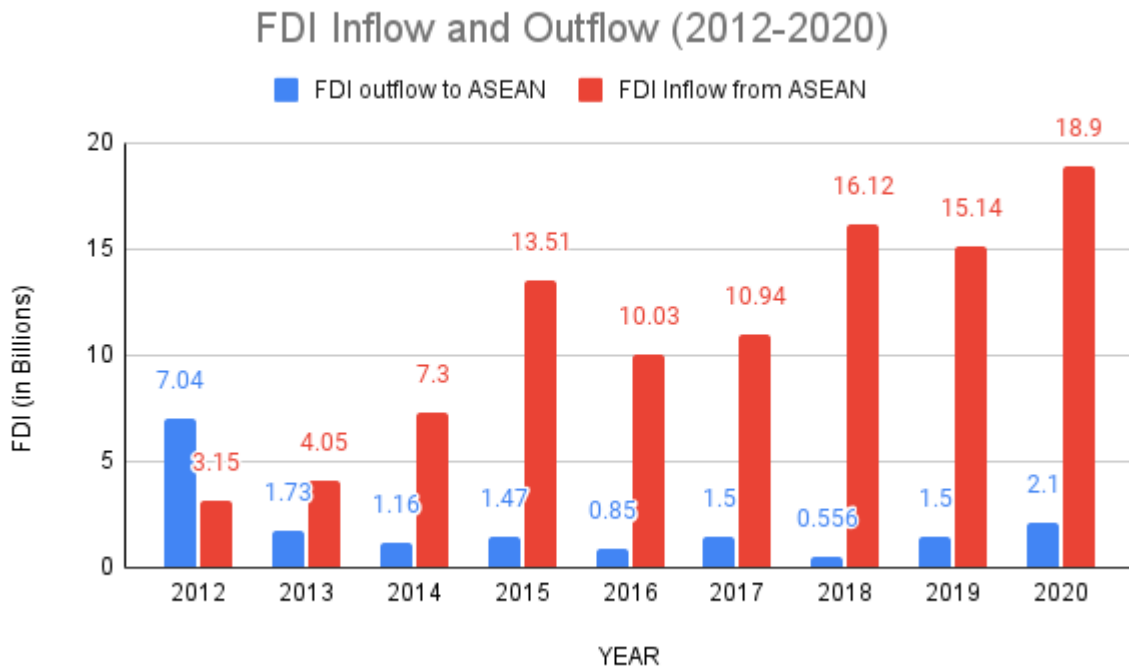


Figure 4: FDI Flows between India and ASEAN (Source: Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India)

From January 2000 to December 2020, India received US\$ 522.13 billion in cumulative FDI equity inflows from all countries. The total FDI cumulative flow in the same period from ASEAN countries remains at US\$116.10 billion accounting for a 22.24 per cent share (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2020). The top sectors that have attracted maximum equity inflows from ASEAN are the service sector (19 per cent), computer software and hardware (15 per cent), trading (13 per cent), construction and infrastructure activities (9 per cent) and telecommunications (7 per cent).

Country	Total Cumulative FDI from Jan'00 to Dec'20(US\$ millions)
Singapore	113,387.38
Malaysia	1,095.97
Indonesia	638.57
Thailand	581
Philippines	335.40
Cambodia	50.17
Myanmar	8.99
Vietnam	5.28
Brunei	0.45

Table 1: FDI inflows from ASEAN (Source: Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India)

Within ASEAN, the share of Singapore remains the highest, it is also India's second-largest source of FDI inflows. Out of the total US\$116.10 billion FDI inflows from ASEAN, Singapore has invested US\$113.39 billion accounting for more than 97 per cent, followed by Malaysia, and Indonesia.

In thirty years, the economic relations between India and Southeast Asian states have increased significantly. There has been a rise in trade in goods as well as investments. India's increasing economy in the first decade of the twenty first century gave it an important boost to

conduct free trade agreements. Along with bilateral agreements with Southeast Asian states and free trade agreements with ASEAN, India also engaged with ASEAN and other neighbouring states to form a regional free trade agreement whose negotiations were conducted under Regional Comprehensive Economic Project (RCEP).

2.2 Regional Comprehensive Economic Project (RCEP)

Regional Comprehensive Economic Project (RCEP) is an expansive free trade agreement both geographically and the issues that it aims to cover within its proposal. Geographically, RCEP covers half of the global population, accounting for 28 per cent of world trade and contributing US\$22.5 trillion in GDP. It includes all the ten ASEAN states and its six free trade partners – India, South Korea, China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. In terms of the issue areas covered in the agreement, it goes beyond the conventional free trade agreement that gives the market access to goods and services. Besides that, RCEP also includes “rules for the protection of foreign investment and intellectual property rights (IPRs), competition policy, and e-commerce” (Dhar, 2019).

The RCEP negotiations started in 2013 intending to integrate all existing ASEAN-centric FTAs. The slow progress of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations manifested in Doha and Cancun rounds raised skepticism about reaching early conclusions on a series of issues shared by developing and developed countries. This made regional trade agreements (RTA) more attractive and easier to conclude with a limited number of states. Between WTO’s slow pace and disagreements between Global North and Global South, New Delhi viewed regional trade agreements as a viable policy measure for export promotion and deeper market access. In addition, it also saw the utility of RTAs as an instrument of bargaining in putting up a common front in multilateral negotiations. While India participated in the RCEP negotiations, it quit the negotiations in November 2019 citing that the trade would have negative effects on the farmers, MSME and dairy sectors. Addressing the issue, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi stated that it does not “satisfactorily address India’s outstanding issues and concerns.” The outstanding issues, according to the government note included trade deficit with RCEP countries, lack of assurance on market access and the base year 2014 for tariff reductions (Haidar & Raghavan, 2019). Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal remarked that it was “due to concerns expressed by the stakeholders within the Medium, Small, Micro enterprises (MSME) and dairy sector” (Hindustan Times, 2022). The External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar pointed out that, “it is not in our interest to enter this agreement [RCEP]

as it would have fairly immediate negative consequences for our own country” (Hindustan Times, 2020).

India’s concerns with RCEP relate to tariff liberalization, protecting the agricultural and dairy sector, exposure to Chinese imports, and contradictions of RCEP norms with its national policy. First, RCEP had an ambitious tariff liberalization target to eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers on all trade in goods (Dhar, 2019, pp. 59–60). For India, this was a major challenge because it not only has the highest tariff among RCEP members and therefore has to embrace deeper cuts but it also continues to use tariffs for earnings and protection of domestic industries. The tariff liberalization would have had a serious impact on the agricultural industry. The average tariffs on agricultural products have never decreased below 30 per cent and to reduce tariffs in this sector would mean disrupting the rural livelihood. As a result, India initially offered country-specific tariff reforms; however, it was rejected, forcing it to submit a single tariff reform.

Second, is the concern over the surge of Chinese imports. India already has a high trade deficit with China, which amounts to US\$44 billion in 2020-21. India does not have any FTA with China and opening up Indian markets to Chinese goods under the RCEP would have increased Chinese imports and disrupted the domestic industries. Geo-political tensions and border disputes with China, add another layer to India’s apprehensions about Chinese businesses. From a security perspective, India wanted to have counter-protection measures against Chinese imports and investments, however, these sentiments could not be resolved during the negotiations (Raghavan, 2020).

Third, RCEP rules on e-commerce contradicted the Indian government’s domestic policy. One, the RCEP rules mandated the free flow of data and information across borders. Two, the rules prevented any country from insisting on the location of servers to be placed in their territories. These provisions ran counter to the Draft National E-commerce policy circulated by the Government of India in February 2019, which emphasized restricting data flow across the border and insisting on servers located in India to take advantage of the emerging digital economy (Dhar, 2019, p. 62).

Fourth, the provision for the protection of foreign investors also ran contrary to domestic policy. In 2015, India terminated several Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) and introduced a model framework that limited the freedom of foreign investors to use the Investor-

State dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanism. The RCEP members introduced provisions to provide a high level of protection to foreign investors that allowed them to challenge any public policy of the host countries if it limited their functioning. They could also initiate dispute settlements in private international tribunals established under the rules of the Convention on the Settlement of Investment Disputes between States and nationals of other states (ICSID) or the United Nation Commission on International Trade Law. Accepting these provisions would have rendered the model framework for BITs redundant (Dhar, 2019, p. 61).

Fifth, India and RCEP members could not agree on issues on the liberalization of trade in services. India has a comparative advantage in service products and it aspired for a liberal trade regime in services, especially, in the easing of visa procedures for the movement of skilled professionals for short-term work (Nag et al., 2021). RCEP members, however, were not eager to open their markets in services due to political sensitivity. This limited India's incentives to be part of the trade agreement.

Sixth, India had concerns with the intellectual property rights (IPR) related discussions in the RCEP negotiations. Japan and South Korea had asked members to accede to various IP-related agreements that go well beyond WTO IP rules, making RCEP IPR, TRIPS-plus. Some of the rules called for restricting the rights of farmers in saving seeds and using them for commercial production and gave primacy to the corporate plant breeders. India's domestic laws are contrary to the proposed rules; it grants economic rights to both farmers and industry innovators (Bhutani, 2017). Such stringent IPR also can affect India's generic pharmaceuticals export making India uncomfortable in acceding to the proposed IPR rules in the RCEP negotiations.

Finally, India runs a huge trade deficit with both ASEAN and RCEP member states. Its trade deficit has increased after the FTA with ASEAN, indicating that it has not been able to take advantage of market access opportunities. The Domestic Value Addition (DVA) content of Indian exports has declined since India began participating in the regional trade agreements from 2010 onwards (Chaudhuri & Chakraborty, 2021). The continuous trade deficit and rising imports from ASEAN, China, and South Korea show that India has not only been able to take the advantage of FTAs, but its exports are not competitive in the foreign markets and domestic firms struggle to compete with the imports. India's inability to benefit from the FTAs with ASEAN, South Korea and Japan acted as an institutional learning prompting it to eventually quit the negotiations.

New Delhi's policy to stay out of the RCEP has produced divided opinions among the policymakers. On one hand, New Delhi's position is seen as its acceptance of low-output productivity goods which could not have competed with the countries in RCEP (N. Ravi, personal communication, September 16, 2022). Others point out that withdrawing from RCEP will create problems for economic integration (S. Menon, personal communication, August 18, 2022). However, both agree that India's output potential is low and it needs to enhance its economic productivity across sectors (N. Ravi, personal communication, September 16, 2022).

2.3 Conclusion

India-ASEAN trade has grown significantly in the last thirty years, however, there is an apprehension that New Delhi is less focussed on the economic relationship than it was in the past (S. Saran, personal communication, August 18, 2022). While India's trade volume has grown with ASEAN, the phase of Act East Policy, from 2014 onwards has been the slowest growth. India - ASEAN trade leans in favour of the latter and New Delhi runs a trade deficit. India has not been able to leverage the potential of the free trade agreement. In terms of ASEAN's overall trade, India's contribution remains abysmally low. There is a need for New Delhi to focus on its domestic production and capabilities and improve its economic engagements with ASEAN. AIFTA also needs to reflect the newer realities that take account of e-commerce, digital services, and intellectual property rights. India has also refused to sign the RCEP which can impact its overall trade in the region. As the strategic importance of Southeast Asia grows, India's economic engagement with the region should not diminish. In the modern world, security and economics are interlinked, as the capacity to generate economic growth, protect supply chains and enhance trade and investments promotes prosperous and secure regions (Xavier, 2021). Therefore, New Delhi needs to invest in building a strong economy and become an attractive economic region as well as needs to put economic relations at par with strategic dimensions.

CHAPTER IV

PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

India shares land and maritime border with Southeast Asian countries. This makes the connectivity between the two regions imperative for their foreign policy engagement to enhance regional integration through border trade, mobility, and people-to-people linkages. Thus, connectivity has emerged as an essential pillar for India's Act East Policy. It provides India with an opportunity to connect to continental ASEAN through rail and road links facilitating better cultural and commerce ties. The improvement in the connectivity infrastructure between India and ASEAN is expected to yield better economic dividends by facilitating the seamless movement of goods and services. According to the study by the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), the potential benefits from closer connectivity will yield cumulative gains of over 5 per cent of GDP for Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, and over 2.5 per cent of GDP for India (De, 2016). The improvement of transportation networks will also provide India's North Eastern Region (NER) with alternative routes to mainland India, enhancing its economic potential as well as cultural connection with Southeast Asia.

India and ASEAN see connectivity as an important dimension of their relations and have initiated various connectivity projects. In 2012, India supported the implementation of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity and ASEAN ICT Master Plan 2015 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). After Japan and China, it became the third country to initiate a dedicated meeting with the ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee. In India's rechristened Act East Policy, connectivity has gained new prominence with '3Cs- culture, connectivity and commerce', stated as the main pillars of engagement with ASEAN. The plan of action to implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021-2015) highlights connectivity as one of the key areas to foster closer cooperation by enhancing transportation linkages through air, maritime, and road and rail to improve tourism connectivity and economic ties (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

In its Act East Policy, India, a leading IT service provider has also given impetus to digital connectivity to leverage the benefits of the digital economy and cooperate with states from the threats arising from cyberspace. In 2017, India hosted the ASEAN-India Connectivity Summit (AICS) with the theme of "Powering Digital and Physical Linkages for Asia in the 21st

Century”, highlighting digital connectivity as the new element in their partnership. In the backdrop of the pandemic, the adoption of digital technology and services, for businesses, governments and citizens alike, has become more urgent than ever. This has made it imperative for states to invest and cooperate in cyberspace to leverage the benefits of the digital economy and enhance cooperation on the issues of cybersecurity. Today, connectivity, in India-ASEAN relations, refers to the broader aspect that is not limited to creating transportation networks but also includes collaboration in digital connectivity and infrastructure.

3.1 India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway

In 2002, at the trilateral ministerial meeting in Yangon, Myanmar, India, and Thailand agreed to build a highway connecting the three countries. The IMT highway aims to connect Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand through Bagan and Mandalay in Myanmar. The project was visualized as the “highway of opportunity and friendship” facilitating the movement of goods, services, people, and ideas (Ministry of External Affairs, 2012). At the 14th India-ASEAN summit in 2016, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed setting up the Joint Task Force on connectivity to work on extending the IMT highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam (Business Standard, 2016).

The agreed route of the IMT highway goes along Moreh, Tamu, Kalewa, Yargi, Monywa, Mandalay, Meiktila, Kawkaik, Myawaddy and Mae Sot. The road from Moreh-Tamu to Kalewa was built with Indian assistance in 2001 under the India-Myanmar Friendship Road project (ADB, 2015). Myanmar was responsible for repairing and upgrading the bridges along the friendship road but could not do so (Bana & Yhome, 2017). In 2012, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visiting Myanmar agreed to undertake the upgradation of the bridges. In 2015, the Government of India launched the bus service but it had to be called off due to the 70-odd weak bridges between Moreh-Tamu and Kalewa (Business Line, 2018). During the visit of Myanmar’s President Htin Kyaw to India, in 2016, both sides signed the agreement for the construction of 69 bridges and approach roads in the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa and Kalewa-Yargyi sectors (Ramachandran, 2016). In 2017, at the India-Myanmar Joint Summit, both sides noted that the work on the reconstruction of bridges and approach roads had yet to begin (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). In August 2018, the work on the bridges was suspended and the contractor was terminated due to unsatisfactory performance. Manipur high court, in August 2020, upheld the termination and dismissed the contractor’s appeal (Anand, 2020). The

originally conceived 1360 km highway was initially scheduled to be completed by 2015, which was later extended to 2020 due to delays, however, the project remains to be completed.

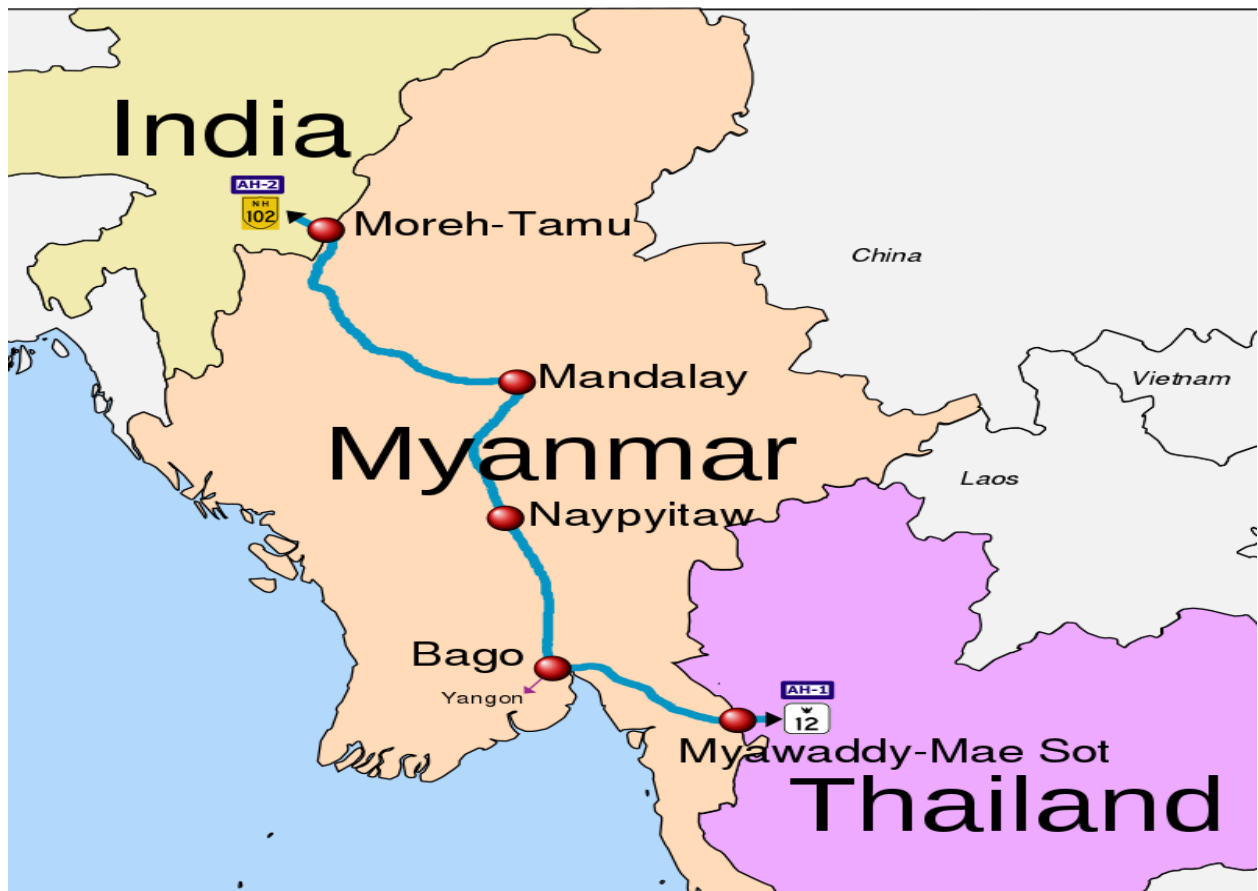


Figure 1: India-Myanmar-Trilateral Highway (Sourced from Wikimedia Commons (RaviC, 2019))

For the next stretch, Kalewa to Monywa, India has offered assistance for upgrading the Kalewa-Yargyi segment into a standard highway and Myanmar has taken responsibility to build the 65km Yargyi-Monywa segment. The road from Monywa to Mandalay and from Mandalay to Hpa-An has already been developed. The final segment of the road from Karaweik to Myawadd-Moe Sot became functional in 2015 (Bana & Yhome, 2017).

India, Myanmar and Thailand are also working on the motor vehicle agreement (MVA), which will allow the free movement of vehicles along the roads linking these three countries(Desai, 2017).

With increased geopolitical competition among major powers in the Indo-Pacific, the strategic salience of Southeast Asia has grown exponentially. China has not only become the

most important trading partner of Southeast Asia but is also investing heavily in connectivity and infrastructure projects through its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The increased Chinese presence lends the IMT project a strategic significance, which can allow India to enhance trade and cultural relations with the CMLV (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam) countries through better connectivity. The slow and delayed progress of the project has also shown that India has failed to complete the project on schedule. Over the years the implementation of the project has run into many difficulties due to a lack of coordination among implementing agencies, poor monitoring, and financial constraints. The ethnic conflict in Myanmar has also hindered the smooth implementation of the project (Ramachandran, 2016).

3.2 Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP)

In 2008, India and Myanmar reached an agreement for the construction of the Kaladan Multimodal Transit project connecting two countries along the Kaladan River. The project aims to connect Kolkata in India to Sittwe and Paletwa in Myanmar through sea and river respectively, and then through road to Lawangtlai in India.

Initially, the project planned to construct the port at Sittwe and an inland water terminal 225 km upstream of the river at Kaletwa. However, later it was realised that the river navigation beyond Paletwa, at 158 km upstream is unviable. This led to changes in the project, meaning the construction road to be longer, from Paletwa to Lawangtlai.



Figure 1: Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (Dutta, 2021)

The port between Kolkata and Sittwe will facilitate the movement of cargo vessels through the Bay of Bengal, and then the floating barges over the Kaladan River will provide connectivity to Paletwa. From Paletwa, a road along the India-Myanmar border will connect to Zorinpui, Mizoram in India. This road will further extend to Lawngtlai in Mizoram and will provide connectivity to Aizawal, the capital of Mizoram (Dutta, 2021). The maritime and road connectivity will provide an alternate transit to the landlocked states of NER through Myanmar. This will make the transportation of goods between northeast and mainland India easier. By acting as a transit between NER and mainland India, Myanmar will also earn revenue through transit fees. A natural gas pipeline is also envisaged from Myanmar via the Northeast to mainland India (Das, 2016).

The 110 km stretch from Paletwa to Zorinpui remains to be completed. The road from Zorinpui and Lawangtlai is also incomplete (Dutta, 2021). The project began in 2010 with an initial deadline of 2014. However, a lack of coordination among the agencies, underestimation of road lengths, and insurgent activities in the region, have delayed the project. The revised deadline for the completion of the project is set to be 2023.

3.3 Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC)

Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) connects four Mekong countries, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, with India. The economic corridor connects Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam) with Dawei (Myanmar) via Bangkok (Thailand), Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Chennai (India). MIEC is a step towards the integration of South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is expected that this corridor will reduce the travel distance between India and Mekong countries and will boost trade and investment linkages (De, 2016). This will reduce the travel distance from India to Mekong countries from 700 kms to 2000kms (ADB, 2015). The emphasis of the corridor is to expand manufacturing bases in the Mekong countries and connect it with the rest of the world, especially India. This corridor is expected to remove the supply-side bottleneck and augment trade between Indian and Mekong countries (ERIA, 2009, p. 7). Through this corridor, the Mekong countries and India aims to create a “strong economic base and promote human resource development through the provision of world-class infrastructure and facilitation of trade” (ERIA, 2009, p. 84). The initiative of the MIEC corridor comprises building a comprehensive development zone, transport infrastructure with rail, road and air connectivity, and the development of social infrastructure such as health and education that could serve as the engine of growth.

3.4 Digital Connectivity

The global pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and Southeast Asia is one of the world’s fastest-growing regions for internet users. With everything shifting online, there is an increased demand for online education, health, and retail services. On the other hand, the shift to digital technologies has also exposed the glaring inequality in terms of accessibility to these technologies. According to the ESCAP report, Asia-Pacific has the greatest digital divide in any region of the world (ESCAP, 2022). As per the International Telecom Union (ITU) statistics, only 15 per cent of people in Asia-Pacific have fixed broadband connections. The increasing reliance on digital technologies has also exposed the states and citizens to vulnerabilities and security threats in the forms of cyber attacks, digital fraud and online insecure environments (Curtis et al., 2022, p. 3). Digital technologies and connectivity have emerged as the major disruptor that is realigning society and the economy. To take advantage of digital solutions, it becomes imperative for countries to reduce the digital divide and cooperate in strengthening digital connectivity, and infrastructure and form rules for international and regional cooperation on cyber issues and cross-border data flows.

ASEAN, which is one of the fastest growing markets for internet users, having recognised the transformative potential for digital technologies in powering Industrial Revolution 4.0 and crucial for economic recovery has started initiatives such as ASEAN Digital Ministers Meeting with dialogue partners to create avenues for cooperation in digital technology and infrastructure. It has also unveiled ASEAN digital master plan 2025 to boost the economy and build an inclusive digital society.

India, which is an established actor in IT services, is also pushing towards creating a massive digital infrastructure. India's push towards digitisation started early in the first decade of the 21st century, with the formulation of the National e-Governance Plan (2006), the National Optical Fibre Network (2011) and the National Digital ID (2009), which are now revamped and relabelled under the 'Digital India' initiative. BharatNet, the optical fibre network, which was set up in 2011 forms the backbone of the Digital India initiative and aims to connect all local government administrations. India can leverage its experience by collaborating in building digital infrastructure, providing expertise on digital connectivity and cooperating in creating frameworks for the flow of data between ASEAN and India.

India has entered into various bilateral agreements with CMLV countries, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand to foster Information and Communication Technology (ICT) adoption and technological collaboration under its Act East Policy. In 2015, at the India-ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur, India offered a US\$1 billion credit line for digital and physical connectivity to the ASEAN states. However, with few takers even after 40 months, the Indian government offered grants of US\$40 million for pilot projects in CMLV countries to "kick-start" the credit line. From the Indian side, the Department of Telecom (DoT), and the Telecom Equipment and Services Export Promotion Council (TEPC) are the lead agencies for the connectivity project (Singh, 2018). In 2016, India offered to set up a "regional high-capacity optical fibre network, national rural broadband, digital villages in rural and remote areas and capacity building programs"(The ASEAN Post, 2018). At the ASEAN-India Connectivity Summit 2017, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar sought India's cooperation in ICT, cyber security, e-governance, big data and cloud computing center solutions.

India under its "Digital Village" initiative has offered to create digital villages in CMLV countries. Digital village envisages setting ICT centres in districts that act as nodal points for people to access digital services. The pilot project will be implemented in the Traing district in Takeo, Cambodia. These centres aim to provide low-cost internet access, promoting

digital literacy and rural entrepreneurship. India has also initiated pilot projects in these countries to increase broadband penetration using Gigabit Passive Optical Network technology and has set up software development and training centres (The ASEAN Post, 2018).

The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Plan of Action 2019-22 also highlighted the importance of digital connectivity with regulations in ICT, e-governance, e-education and enhancing connectivity and cross-border ICT services as the important areas for cooperation among the partners (Kundu, 2022a). Looking at digital transformation as a measure of economic recovery in the post-pandemic world, the Philippines has also sought India's assistance in improving its broadband network and technical assistance in its national ID system (Miranda, 2021).

Today India and ASEAN see economic integration and digital connectivity as the two important sectors for enhancing cooperation. In the second ASEAN Digital Minister Meeting, which is an annual meeting of telecom ministers of ASEAN states with its dialogue partners, India and ASEAN approved a Digital work plan for 2022 to cooperate on the digital ecosystem. The work plan includes a “system for combating the use of stolen and counterfeit mobile handsets, WiFi Access network interface for nationwide public internet, the capacity building and knowledge sharing in emerging areas in the field of Information and Communication Technologies such as Internet of Things (IoT), 5G, Advanced Satellite Communication, Cyber Forensics etc”(PIB, 2022).

The Special ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers Meeting held on 16th June 2022, in New Delhi, proposed a Government-to-Government cyber dialogue in addition to the Track 1.5 Dialogue on cyber issues held between them since 2019, to strengthen the cooperation on cyber issues. The meeting noted the importance of the digital connectivity ecosystem for improved access in areas of healthcare, education and finance (MoFA, 2022c). Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan noted that India with its strength in financial technology, digital finance, digital inclusion and digital payments can help facilitate similar infrastructure in Southeast Asia. He has also mooted the idea of digital integrating, linking payment and financial systems to “facilitate payments and expand opportunities for small businesses across the subcontinent and into Southeast Asia”(MoFA, 2022a). Singapore has agreed to link its payment interface PayNow system with India's UPI – Unified Payment Interface System, which will allow low-cost digital transactions across the border (MoFA, 2022b).

While India has started offering cooperation in digital connectivity and infrastructure, its contribution is small compared to China. Beijing has extensive engagement with ASEAN in digital connectivity and financial integration. They have signed several MoUs on cooperation on ICT and the year 2020, was declared as the year of ASEAN-China Digital Economy Development Cooperation (Kundu, 2022b). To compete with China and reduce ASEAN dependence on China, New Delhi needs to intensify its engagement in the digital domain through attractive credit lines and more investments in the region. China offers better terms for credit lines, with a guarantee of modern technology transfer, which makes Indian credit lines unattractive (Singh, 2018).

India could help Southeast Asia in its move towards embracing digital technologies by addressing the region's shortage of digital skills, improving cyber resilience and contributing to digital public infrastructure. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Report, the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) of Southeast Asian states lack financial and technical expertise in integrating their business with digital technologies (Dung & Nair, 2022). India can share its expertise and experience to provide digital literacy and business skills to the Southeast Asian workforce. Another area of cooperation between India and ASEAN is to collaborate with national cyber security agencies and the national Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) to share resources, expertise, experiences and best practices in dealing with the issues of cyber crimes. Both India and Southeast Asia have a common agenda for strengthening and adopting digital technologies that ensure resilient digital infrastructures and supplement the digital economy.

3.5 Conclusion

Physical and Digital connectivity has emerged as important areas of cooperation between India and Southeast Asia. There is a growing understanding that road, rail, maritime and air connectivity between the regions enhance regional and economic cooperation between them. While the connectivity projects are commendable initiatives, New Delhi lags behind in completing them. India needs to improve its record in delivering projects that continuously remain mired with a lack of coordination among different agencies. With regards to India's connectivity pillar, there are two aspects that need to be taken care of: improve the connectivity and broaden the aspect of connectivity. First, to improve connectivity, New Delhi needs to improve its delivery mechanism and complete the existing projects. Ambassador Shyam Saran suggests the formation of a cooperation agency that has financial autonomy and the ability to

address institutional bottlenecks to manage India's cooperation projects with other countries (S. Saran, personal communication, August 18, 2022). Such autonomous agencies will efficiently manage cooperation projects and reduce the time period in completing the projects. Second, New Delhi needs to expand its connectivity from physical infrastructure to shipping, air, and digital services. India's linkages with the Southeast Asian states are asymmetrical and it needs to improve in this vertical especially by connecting more flights to Southeast Asia. Third, apart from physical infrastructure, New Delhi also needs to pay attention to the 'software' of connectivity that allows smooth and speedy movement of people and goods without much paperwork and bottlenecks at the crossing points (S. Saran, personal communication, August 18, 2022). New Delhi needs to leverage the use of available technology in creating hassle-free connectivity linkages. Fourth, India and Southeast Asian states have already expanded their cooperation in the digital infrastructure, however, the former's engagement and contribution are small as compared to Beijing. While India cannot match China's financial investment, it could engage with Southeast Asian states in creating a rules-based system for digital infrastructure and services. There is an enormous area of cooperation between India and Southeast Asia to collaborate on digital services with regard to financial integration, cyber-security, and sharing its experiences in creating digital infrastructure.

CHAPTER V

INDIA-ASEAN SECURITY COOPERATION

The security exchanges between India and Southeast Asia are a recent development. Till the early 1990s, India had scant or no extensive security connections with ASEAN members. In retrospect, India was viewed as a potential threat until the mid-1980s, particularly due to its regional stature as a dominant South Asian power with extensive naval capabilities, along with a prominent incline towards the Soviet Union. Amid growing concerns about India's ambitions and political position in the region, the expansion of the Indian Navy in the middle of the 1980s prompted New Delhi to make contact with its eastern neighbors (Bajpae, 2022; Singh, 2022). However, this outreach did not result in any meaningful security exchanges (Singh, 2021).

Nonetheless, since the 1990s, India has been bolstering military assets in the Andaman and Nicobar islands to support the maintenance of its Eastern Fleet. Maintaining control of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was crucial to India's ability to project might across the Malacca Strait and into the South China Sea, which is why the country had so much sway in the northern Indian Ocean. In light of the increasing security threats posed by China, New Delhi made navy modernization a top priority, focusing on strengthening its positions in the Northeast to better protect India's Eastern Waters. India's vicinity to strategic points like the Strait of Malacca, which links the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific via the South China Sea, the ASEAN appeared to be critical to the security of India (Grare, 2017).

For its part, India took steps to bolster regional security by hosting regional military attachés at its Port Blair facility and launching bilateral naval drills with Southeast Asian nations including Indonesia, Singapore, Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Considering that "the trade routes that pass through the heart of Southeast Asia also pass through the Indian Ocean," and that ASEAN includes countries like Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia that are also located on the Indian Ocean and have interests there, India demonstrated its strategic importance to ASEAN. Such an initiative by India was a major step in eliminating possible flashpoints between the ASEAN countries and New Delhi by the 1990s, even though several geopolitical cleavages still existed (ASEAN, 2012).

In light of this, India and ASEAN proclaimed that their partnership “stands elevated to a strategic partnership,” and pledged to increase their cooperation in addressing traditional and non-traditional challenges in 2012 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of ASEAN-India dialogue relations through regular and high-level security dialogues, collaboration in fighting transnational crimes, and strengthening the effective implementation of the ASEAN-India Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism (ASEAN, 2012). Further, they pledged to strengthen cooperation to ensure maritime security and freedom of navigation, and safety of sea lanes of communication for unfettered movement of trade in accordance with international law, including UNCLOS. Lastly, they agreed to promote maritime cooperation, including through engagement in the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) and its expanded format, to address common challenges on maritime issues, including sea piracy, search and rescue at sea, maritime environment, maritime security, maritime connectivity, freedom of navigation, fisheries, and other areas of cooperation (Rajamohan, 2012).

Thus, the security relationship between India and ASEAN was accurately described as a “multi-directional engagement” with the great powers of Asia, integration with regional institutions, expanded security cooperation with key actors in the region, and a progressive improvement in India's geo-political standing in the region (MEA, 2022). In the purview of current times, India’s burgeoning maritime presence and interests have expanded its security diplomacy with ASEAN states. In this regard, India participates in a series of consultative meetings with ASEAN, which include the Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10 +1 and Senior Official Level meetings (AISOM), and Shangri-La Dialogue. It also actively participates in various ‘ASEAN-led frameworks’, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) [7]8. Additionally, several Defense-related bilateral discussions continue with Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Additionally, India’s concentration on maritime security has improved security ties with ASEAN. In the context of discussions on the South China Sea, India has often said that it considers the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) to be significant (MEA, 2022). Furthermore, New Delhi has underlined the importance of finalizing a South China Sea Code of Conduct (CoC) and has urged claimant parties in SCS disputes to refer to and adhere to UNCLOS laws and rulings (Scott, 2019).

Further, India and the ASEAN are working to build a peaceful and secure Asia by emphasizing a "long-term cooperative collaboration" in the domain of national security. However, security is currently being plagued with uncertainty due to competition among great powers, territorial disputes, and non-traditional security challenges. Conventional concerns, such as the distribution of power and the struggle for political and economic dominance, have taken a back seat in recent years to a number of non-traditional dangers. India and ASEAN have been in a dialogue partnership since 1995, and in that time they have discussed many topics that have a significant impact on regional security. Measures to combat transnational organized crime (such as maritime piracy, money laundering, and trafficking in arms, drugs, and humans), international terrorism, and the illegal trade in chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons (CBRMs) are all part of this broader set of security concerns. When it comes to solving these issues, India has been seeking to collaborate closely with Southeast Asian nations.

5.1 Terrorism

Terrorism is an area where ASEAN and India have found common ground in terms of their security concerns, particularly in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. An ASEAN-India declaration was signed and the directive of the First India-ASEAN Summit in November 2002 at Phnom Penh was considered at the India-ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) in May 2003. Since then, India and ASEAN have been working together to combat transnational illicit activities including money laundering and drug trafficking by strengthening transportation, border, and immigration regulations. Signing the Declaration during the Second India-ASEAN Summit in Bali in October 2003 was also seen as a positive step toward fostering bilateral and regional cooperation. The gathering also applauded the opening of The Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) in Kuala Lumpur as a regional center for fighting terrorism in Southeast Asia (Raman, 2010; Indian Navy). Subsequently, on July 20, 2022 a virtual meeting of senior officials from ASEAN and India discussed transnational crimes. Indian and ASEAN officials issued a joint statement condemning terrorism and reiterating the need to increase international collaboration in the fight against transnational crimes (ASEAN 2002). Since then, India and ASEAN have increased joint efforts for combating terrorism through close cooperation by disrupting and countering terrorists, terrorist groups and networks, including cross-border

movement of terrorists and foreign terrorist fighters and misuse of the internet, including social media, by terror entities. There is still a need to work towards an extradition treaty between India and the ASEAN countries, despite the fact that the talks and joint declaration have addressed certain core concerns pertaining to the battle against terrorism. Such an arrangement would substantially aid both regions in their pursuits to increase law enforcement and fortify the judicial system.

5.2 Countering Piracy

For India, countering piracy is a key to secure its own maritime security and economic well-being (Kouk, 2019). It is, for this reason, the parliamentary standing committee on external affairs approved the “Anti-Maritime Piracy Bill 2019” emphasising on the urgent need for counter-piracy efforts owing to a major spurt in piracy attacks in the Indian Ocean region post 2008. In retrospect, India does not have a separate domestic legislation on piracy and prosecution for piracy as a crime has not been included in the Indian Penal Code or the Code of Criminal Procedure. However, it is hoped that the proposed legislation will enable India to play a greater role in anti-piracy operations and contribute to the security of the region.

On similar lines, Southeast Asia has been one of the world's "hot regions" for pirate assaults on commercial ships and fishing boats since the late 1980s. The cruciality of the issue for ASEAN stems from the fact that the adoption of the ASEAN Plan of Action to Combat Transnational Crime in 2002 came amid rising worries about piracy (Ibid). It was an important step which saw ARF issuing a statement supporting regional cooperation against piracy (ASEAN 2003). Subsequently, in 2009, during the first-ever ARF Inter-Sessional Meeting on Maritime Security, participants voiced even more alarm about the risks posed by piracy (UN). The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) was established around the same time, including participation from various ASEAN governments (ASEAN 2019)

The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) is an efficient vehicle for anti-piracy cooperation, and there are established patterns of cooperation between India and ASEAN in this area. This intergovernmental agreement entered into force in September 2006 and requires signatory governments to increase operational collaboration in the wake of piracy occurrences and to take preventative

steps. The deal also established the ReCAAP data hub. For the RECAAP programme, India has also posted a senior naval official in Singapore, and India has set up an Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram, where Singapore has also posted a Liaison Officer (Raman 2010). The number of pirate attacks has decreased thanks to ReCAAP, and cooperation between nations has been strengthened. A couple of the agreement's strongest points are its emphasis on capacity-building efforts and its acknowledgement of the need for engagement from international organizations and the corporate sector. Since Indonesia and Malaysia, two of the region's most prominent players, are not signatories to ReCAAP, its scope has been limited (AIR 2022).

5.3 Human, Narcotics, and Arms Trafficking

Human trafficking is a pressing issue in the region and could serve as a catalyst for closer ties between India and ASEAN. The United States Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (2022) estimates that annually between 200,000 and 250,000 women and children are trafficked from Southeast Asia. At a rate of 3 for every 1,000 people, human trafficking is a major problem in this area. While most of the drug activity in Asia takes place on land, there are still active trafficking routes that connect Pakistan and India to other parts of the region. Thus, in 2002, a regional forum called the Bali Process was established to tackle the problem of trafficking. In the current times, it has become a regional forum for policy dialogue, information sharing and practical cooperation in Asia and Pacific. Here, the Bali Process can act as a mutual platform for both India and the ASEAN countries to enhance their collaboration to counter Human, Narcotics and Arms Trafficking.

5.4 Issue of Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Since the first Pokhran test in 1974, India has actively pursued becoming a nuclear power. India officially became a nuclear power after its government allowed two nuclear tests in May 1998. India has what is known as a "no-first-use" or "retaliation only" nuclear doctrine, the primary goal of this doctrine is to protect India's military and civilians from potential nuclear attacks from outside of the country. As ASEAN-India relations blossomed, however, tensions arose due to the perception that India's nuclear arsenal ran counter to ASEAN's stance on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. In March 1997, the Treaty of Bangkok, also known as

the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Free-Zone Treaty, was ratified by all ten of ASEAN's member states. The ASEAN Declaration on Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality inspired the creation of this pact (ZOPFAN). To realize the NPT's goals of general and comprehensive disarmament, ASEAN has once again urged all governments in possession of nuclear weapons to fulfil their obligations and commitments as outlined in the NPT (ASEAN, 1998). However, ASEAN has concerns about India's nuclear operations, such as testing and proliferation, because it is not a party to the stated treaty. Despite the fact that India's nuclear arsenal runs against ASEAN's historic stance, this may not be enough to destabilize the organization, especially as ASEAN has managed to maintain regional security despite the presence of nearby nuclear powers like China. India's worry that the NPT just broadens the disparity between the nuclear states and the non-nuclear states and creates more opportunities for terrible dispute becomes rather evident when traditional security issues like the conflicting territorial claims over the Kashmir region and the problem on the Korean Peninsula are taken into account. This leaves ASEAN with no choice in this context.

5.5 Energy Security

Prior to and throughout the implementation of its Look East strategy in the early 1990s, India actively pursued energy cooperation with its ASEAN partners. Both regional organizations like ASEAN, BIMSTEC, the MGC, etc. and bilateral levels have seen renewed energy thanks to the Act East initiative announced in 2014. The results of this partnership have consistently fallen short of what was hoped for and anticipated. This is due to a number of factors, including a lack of political determination, different energy demands and competencies to leverage the capability, different levels of required infrastructure, and so on. Still, India and its neighbors are all persuaded of the benefits of cooperation in the energy sector, so they are likely to working to address these problems. Perhaps by 2035-2030, India will have become the world's top energy consumer and it would need to work with countries, like the ASEAN states, to sustain its energy demands.

Additionally, India's Act East policy for energy cooperation faces two more hurdles in the context of the ASEAN. One is that internal connectivity in India and the exploitation of the country's energy potential are still works in progress, and this is especially true in the country's Northeastern region, which is crucial to energy cooperation with the neighboring countries. Meghalaya has significant resources of coal and uranium, and a big portion of the territory can

be invested with solar energy; similarly, Assam and Tripura are highly wealthy in petroleum; Arunachal Pradesh in hydropower; and so on. Energy trade with ASEAN countries stands to benefit greatly from realizing this potential. Progress is being made to improve connectivity throughout the Northeast, but it is likely to take some time before the improvements are fully realized.

Another difficulty is China's rivalry and competition in the energy sector, concerns have been made by China about India's energy development in Vietnamese waters. Vietnam has offered oil and gas tracts to India for exploration against China's reservations (Cook et. al, 2019). Energy in Myanmar is dominated by China, which has on occasion beaten out Indian bids for exploration contracts. The answer to this difficulty rests in mutual cooperation and collaboration between India and China. While it can be interpreted as an ambitious endeavor considering the strategic and geopolitical competition between the Asian giants, it is hoped that the pressures of the demand might push India and China towards energy cooperation. The current state of India-ASEAN security ties goes beyond the Act East Policy and is instead heavily affected by the Indo-Pacific region. They are working together on a developing regional architecture in order to find peaceful solutions to conventional and nonconventional security issues. Furthermore, India and ASEAN's shared vision for the Indo-Pacific area is complemented with their mutual respect for international norms, the rule of law, and numerous institutions. However, ASEAN and India are yet to fully converge on a joint vision for the maritime domains of Asia and the world at large.

CHAPTER VI

INDIA-SOUTHEAST ASIA MARITIME RELATIONS AND COOPERATION

India's relations with Southeast Asia has grown gradually and expanded from economic to strategic and political domains. After becoming a full dialogue partner in 1995, India secured a membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996 that discusses issues related to security, became a member of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) in 2010 and is also a member of Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). In 2003, at the second India-ASEAN summit, India became the first non-Southeast Asian state to accede to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, committing to upholding the provisions of ASEAN's 1967 charter, adhering to the principles of non-aggression and non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN states.

India's increasing economic engagement with Southeast and East Asia has shifted its strategic view towards the Indian Ocean. New Delhi has a growing understanding that the maritime domain is significant for India's economic growth, and any threats to the trade routes will harm the Indian economy. India has started investing significantly in modernizing its port and naval capabilities. The Sagarmala project aims to expand the capacity of existing ports and create new ports. In 2016, India hosted the first Global Maritime Summit as part of the Sagarmala project to revive the maritime industry. Strengthening the blue economy has become a central pillar of India-ASEAN relations (Paul, 2021). The security dimension has also regained a new vigor with a focus on enhancing naval capabilities in the region. In its first-ever maritime Doctrine released in 2004, India described its maritime areas from the arc of the Persian gulf to the straits of Malacca. Over the years, India has revised its maritime doctrine. In the 2007 edition, it defined the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and their littoral reaches, as well as the checkpoints to and from the Indian Ocean – Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, and Cape of Good Hope- as its primary areas of interests. The maritime areas, including Southern Indian Ocean Region, Red Sea, South China Sea, and West Pacific Region, were defined as secondary areas of interest. The 2009 edition of maritime doctrine defined four key roles of the Indian Navy, emphasizing the development of capabilities to project force, build trust and interoperability, enhance India's relations with neighbors and countries of strategic importance, enforce the law of land or implement

international mandate and to partake in humanitarian assistance during calamities and rescue operations (Indian Navy, 2015). The expansion of India's security and economic interests in the Indian Ocean has led to maritime cooperation as an important aspect of its foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. The maritime cooperation with Southeast Asia includes interactions at maritime regional organizations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), joint naval exercises and patrols, cooperation in maritime domain awareness, protection of sea lanes, anti-piracy and counter-terrorism operations, and building maritime connectivity (K. Singh, personal communication, September 15, 2022).

India's participation in the ASEAN's regional security architecture and its adherence to ASEAN centrality has bolstered India-ASEAN security cooperation (Ladwig III, 2009). Along with the improvements in political and economic relations, India has also signed security and defence cooperation agreements with the ASEAN member states. With China's assertive approach in the region, ASEAN has begun to view India as a counterweight to the Chinese presence and a balancer to any future potential threats. Within the security cooperation, India has focussed on strengthening maritime cooperation with the ASEAN states, through multilateral and bilateral forums.

While in the 1980s, ASEAN viewed India's naval build-up with suspicion, with the strengthening of ties between the two, India has been able to allay those fears. The primary objective of India's naval cooperation with ASEAN states is to project its naval capabilities and promote its soft power naval diplomacy by participating in humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) operations. For example, during the 2004 tsunami incident, the Indian navy's relief operation displayed India's maritime capabilities and willingness to undertake HADR operations and raised India's profile as a responsible state willing to cooperate on public goods. Following the 2004 Tsunami, India has become the first responder to natural disasters in Southeast Asia. Ambassador Gurjit Singh points out that while India is notionally seen as a balancer to China, in reality, Southeast Asian states see it as the first respondent in the event of a natural or maritime crisis (G. Singh, 2021).

The naval interactions between India and ASEAN states have increased since the 1990s through maritime patrols and domain awareness. India conducts a multilateral naval exercise MILAN with ASEAN member states. MILAN began in 1995 in the Bay of Bengal, with Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Sri Lanka as the participating countries. Since then, MILAN has grown to include ASEAN states and like-minded partners. This exercise allows

the Indian navy to display its naval capabilities as well as to enhance interoperability with regional navies. In 2022, MILAN saw the participation of 42 countries, including Quad members as well as Russia (CNBC, 2022). India has also begun the overseas deployment of its navy to Southeast Asia, the South China Sea, and the Western Pacific, intending to enhance coordination with friendly navies and ensure order in the maritime domain (PIB, 2021). These regular deployments and port calls by the Indian navy signal strong maritime interests and growing convergence between the navies and shared interests in the maritime domain.

India and Southeast Asian states also participate in the regional maritime governance architecture to interact with each other on substantive maritime issues. Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia are members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). IORA, established in 1997 to enhance economic cooperation and regionalism has expanded to put greater emphasis on maritime security, blue economy, renewable energy, mineral exploration and coastal tourism (Bateman, 2016, p. 8). Currently, it focuses on six priority and two focus areas: maritime security and safety, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, tourism and cultural exchanges, academic, science, and technology cooperation, blue economy and women's economic empowerment (IORA, 2022). Under its priority area, Maritime Security and Safety (MSS) aims to address the traditional and non-traditional security issues in the Indian Ocean, pertaining to armed robbery, piracy, irregular movement of people, drug trafficking and unregulated fishing. India has also established an Indian Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) that aims at strengthening maritime security by acting as a conduit of maritime information sharing hub by monitoring various maritime security issues in the region. According to the IFC-IOR's 2021 Annual Report, a total of 3,411 incidents occurred in the Indian Ocean and adjoining areas pertaining to various maritime security challenges like piracy and armed robbery, contraband smuggling, illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing (IUU), irregular human migration (Dhiman et al., 2022, p. 1). It reports that 54 per cent of maritime incidents occurred in Southeast Asia due to the prevalence of small vessels and high maritime traffic. The traffic separation scheme (TSS) in the Singapore strait is a hotspot of armed robbery accounting for 61 per cent of incidents recorded in Southeast Asia (Dhiman et al., 2022, p. 14). The report also notes that Malacca Strait is regularly used as the sea route for irregular migration largely by unauthorized workers. Singapore and Myanmar station their liaison officers at the IFC-IOR. The maritime crime in the Indian Ocean calls for India and Southeast Asia to work together to curb these activities through information sharing as well as through cooperative and collaborative port calls. India

and Southeast Asian states also are part of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) which is modelled on the West Pacific Naval Symposium. Its main objective is to strengthen the capability of member states through the cooperative maritime mechanism and improve interoperability in HADR in the Indian Ocean. This forum provides a key for naval diplomacy and naval interoperability (Lidarev & Pant, 2022, pp. 273–274). The combination of IORA, IONS and IFC-IOR provides a substantial ground for India and Southeast Asian states to interact on the maritime issues pertaining to traditional and non-traditional security as well as on the issues of climate change and maritime environment. Apart from multilateral exercise, and regional maritime architecture, India and Southeast Asian states are also evolving their maritime cooperation at the bilateral level through increased naval diplomacy, joint patrols and exercises, and white shipping agreements.

5.1 India and Southeast Asia Bilateral Maritime Cooperation

At the bilateral level, India and Southeast Asian states have also increased their engagement in the maritime domain. Singapore is India's most important economic and security partner. Since 1993, the Royal Singapore Navy and the Indian Navy have had regular naval exercises called SIMBEX. In 2003, India and Singapore signed a defence cooperation agreement (DCA), and a revised DCA in 2015 agreed to have annual Defence Ministers' Dialogue (DMD) and emphasised strengthening maritime security cooperation and maritime domain awareness (Saint-Mézard, 2016). At the second Defence Ministers' Dialogue in 2017, both sides signed a naval cooperation agreement that would enable increased cooperation in maritime security, joint exercises, temporary deployments of each other's naval facilities and mutual logistics support, making Singapore the first Southeast Asian country to have naval logistics agreement with India (Bhaskar, 2017). The agreement also provides India with greater access to the Changi Naval base (Parameswaran, 2017b). In 2021, at the fifth DMD, both sides signed an agreement implementing submarine rescue support (The Hindu, 2021). In 2015, the respective navies signed a white shipping information sharing agreement allowing them to exchange real-time information on the movement of cargo ships between Singapore's Information Fusion Centre and India's Directorate of Net-Centric Operations (Saint-Mézard, 2016, p. 185). Further, India has also accredited an International Liaison Officer to the Changi Regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Coordination Centre. In 2018, Trilateral Maritime Exercise between India, Singapore, and Thailand (SITMEX) was announced.

Indonesia, situated at the strategic crossroads of the Pacific Ocean in the east and the Indian Ocean in the West, makes it the gatekeeper of the two oceans and an important security actor in the region. In the ninth East Asia Summit in 2014, the Indonesian President introduced Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF), a maritime axis doctrine, highlighting the vision to transform Indonesia into a global maritime hub with an emphasis on maritime defence and security, maritime diplomacy, and maritime governance, among others (Tiola, 2019). India's vision articulated through SAGAR has close convergence with GMF, and both countries have the potential to increase cooperation in the maritime domain. While both share common concerns in the Indo-Pacific region, the progress of their relationship has been albeit slow. In 2001, both sides signed a defence cooperation agreement, and since 2002, the Indian navy and Indonesian Navy are conducting coordinated patrols (CORPAT) twice a year on their respective sides of the maritime boundary line to keep vital parts of the Indian Ocean region safe and secure for commercial shipping, international trade and legitimate maritime activities (Business Standard, 2016). Since 2015, India and Indonesia are also conducting bilateral maritime exercises. In 2018, India stepped up its security cooperation with Indonesia by elevating their bilateral relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership. They also introduced a new bilateral naval exercise *Samudera Shakti* that adds a war-fighting dimension to maritime cooperation (Gill, 2021). Further, India has also obtained access to Indonesia's Sabang port, which is strategically located at the mouth of Malacca Strait and is deep enough for submarines as well (Times of India, 2018).

While India and Myanmar share a maritime boundary, the maritime cooperation between them remains limited. Slowly, India is stepping up its naval interactions with Myanmar. Since 2013, two navies have conducted CORPAT along the international maritime boundary line. In 2016, both countries signed an agreement on Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) to facilitate the conduct of India-Myanmar Coordinated Patrols (CORPAT) (Saint-Mézard, 2016). India has a similar agreement with Thailand and Indonesia. In 2017, both countries signed maritime security and cooperation agreements, including the white shipping information agreement. New Delhi has also provided sonar and maritime surveillance aircraft to Myanmar's navy (Vijay, 2018). In 2018, both sides conducted their maiden bilateral naval exercise (IMNEX-18). During the state visit of Myanmar's President U Win Myint in 2019, both sides signed an MoU on maritime security cooperation and acknowledged the sharing of white shipping data as an important step towards maritime cooperation (MEA, 2020). In 2020,

India also gifted INS Sindhuvir, a kilo-class submarine to Myanmar, stepping up its maritime engagement with the neighbouring country. (Deccan Herald, 2020).

India's maritime cooperation with Vietnam includes naval exercises, technical assistance for naval modernisation, ship visits, maritime security dialogue and coast guard cooperation. India has provided several defence lines of credit to improve its military capabilities. As part of the defence projects, India handed over 12 high-speed guard boats to the Vietnam Board Guard Command, five of which were built in India and the rest in the Vietnamese shipyard under the \$100 million defence lines of credit. The Indian navy has trained Vietnamese Naval officers and has sent technical teams for the maintenance of Vietnamese ships (Solanki, 2021). In 2018, Indian and Vietnamese Navies held their first bilateral maritime exercise. They have also formalized the maritime security dialogue at the additional secretary level. In 2020, both navies conducted a naval passage exercise during INS Kiltan's visit to Vietnam to deliver humanitarian relief assistance to the flood-affected areas in Vietnam (PTI, 2020). Indian warships have made frequent port calls in Vietnam and have been given access to the Nha Trang Port, which is situated very close to a strategic Cam Ranh Bay (Bagchi, 2011). To enhance maritime security and cooperation, both sides signed a white shipping information agreement to enhance maritime domain awareness. In 2020, they also signed an implementing arrangement for hydrography cooperation to share hydrographic data (Solanki, 2021). Besides, the cooperation between the coast guards of the two countries is also a major element of bilateral maritime cooperation. Indian and Vietnamese coastguards have participated in the joint search and rescue drills operations. Both sides have also signed an MoU for joint oil exploration in the South China Sea.

India also has developed close links with the Royal Thai Navy. Since 2005, both have been conducting CORPAT exercises twice a year. Besides boosting interoperability and facilitating a deeper understanding of naval practices, these exercises also help in improving maritime vigilance in the Indian Ocean region. Since 2013, The Indian and Thai navies have engaged in annual Indo-Thai Joint Working Group meetings. India has also signed a defence agreement with the Philippines that seeks to deepen maritime cooperation and allow bilateral military exchanges. The cooperation between them remains limited to areas of disaster relief, transnational crimes, counterterrorism, and friendly naval ship visits (Parameswaran, 2017a). Both have agreed to "fast-track preparations for a bilateral maritime dialogue (Sibal, 2022). Manila has also acquired a BrahMos missile from India boosting its defence capabilities in the

maritime arena as it continues to posture a sea denial strategy over the disputed waters of the South China Sea. India has also provided training for Malaysian fighter pilots, submarine personnel and Special Forces; its dry docks have undertaken the repair and refit of several Malaysian naval vessels, and the two navies have taken joint exercises (Ladwig III, 2009, p. 97).

5.2 Conclusion

India's maritime cooperation with Southeast Asia is extensive. From bilateral level to multilateral forums both are interactive expansively on maritime issues. The recognition of the Indo-Pacific as an important geo-political region only adds to the significance of maritime cooperation between India and Southeast Asia. While there have been growing ties in the maritime domain between India and Southeast Asia, there is a lot where both regions can enhance their cooperation extensively. As the annual report of IFC-IOR stated that Southeast Asia remains a hub of maritime criminal activities, and there is a need for India and Southeast Asia to collaborate more closely. Not all Southeast Asian countries are part of IORA, IONS and IFC-IOR. Closer cooperation would see them becoming members of these multilateral forums. India and Southeast Asia can explore the avenues of defence collaboration, naval logistics agreement, and shipbuilding collaboration, undertake maritime medical missions and arrive at a common understanding of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Khurana, 2021). At present, India's maritime cooperation with Southeast Asian countries is asymmetrical and therefore, New Delhi should engage in increasing its naval diplomacy and maritime cooperation with countries which are still at the lower level.

CHAPTER VII

PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE TIES

Since 1992, India's relations with the Southeast Asian states have progressed from economic to political, security and cultural dimensions. In cultivating closer ties with the Southeast Asian states, India has always emphasised the importance of deep historic and civilisation links between the two regions. New Delhi has also given importance to cultural diplomacy to enhance social and cultural ties between the two regions through the projection of its soft power.

Soft power is an important tool of foreign policy in cultivating a positive image of a country abroad through various cultural avenues. Determinants of soft power can include promoting one's culture or values in other countries, highlighting cultural affinities, introducing language and study centres, building people-to-people ties through tourism and investing in Diasporic connections. A country's soft power and culture also travel through pop culture and movies and cultural exchange programmes. India has attempted to leverage its soft-power potential in Southeast Asia through Buddhism to Bollywood. India's promotion of soft power in the region has occurred through movies, cultural events, tourism and assisting Southeast Asian countries in renovating temples (Malone, 2011).

With its technical expertise, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has been involved in the restoration and conservation of various heritage and cultural sites in Southeast Asian countries. From 1983-1993 ASI was involved in the restoration of the iconic Angkor Wat Temple in Cambodia, which is a world heritage site by UNESCO. In 2018, India committed to helping Cambodia in restoring the ancient temple of Preah Vihear (MEA, 2020a). In Laos, it is working on the restoration of the UNESCO world heritage site at Vat Phou, an ancient Shiva Temple (MEA, 2021b). In Myanmar, ASI has preserved and restored stone inscriptions and temples of King Mindon and King Bagyidaw of Myanmar in Bodh Gaya (MEA, 2020c).

Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), India's premier institution tasked with promoting India's culture and heritage abroad has been hosting various cultural events and interacting with the respective Southeast Asian countries. In 2015, the first international conference on "ASEAN-India Cultural Links: Historical and Contemporary Dimension" was

held in New Delhi to strengthen social and cultural ties. In 2017, the second such international conference was hosted in Jakarta, on the theme, “ASEAN-India Cultural and Civilisational Links.” In his keynote address, Vongthep Arthakaivalee, Deputy Secretary General for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, stressed the importance of intercultural dialogue to bridge differences and promote cultural diversity (ASEAN, 2017). Similarly, Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, addressing the ASEAN-India Youth Awards, stated, “the cultural bonds between India and ASEAN are centuries old and the onus is on us to propagate this special relationship amongst the youth in the region” (Hindustan Times, 2018). Despite these attempts and the presence of Indian culture in Southeast Asia, the people-to-people ties between India and ASEAN remain limited. There is no institutionalised mechanism for the dialogue among the cultural ministries between India and ASEAN to further enhance the cultural and people-to-people contact between them (Chaturvedy, 2017). The following section looks at Tourism, Diaspora and Education in promoting people-to-people ties between India and Southeast Asian states.

6.1 Tourism

For Indians, Southeast Asia remains an important destination for tourism. The year 2019, was declared the ASEAN-India year of Tourism. In 2018, around 887 thousand tourists from Southeast Asia visited India, accounting for 8.40 per cent of total tourists visiting India. Equally, around 3.9 million Indians preferred Southeast Asia as a tourist location in 2017 (Ministry of Tourism, 2019). For Indian tourists, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines remain the top tourist destinations. The better ties between India and Southeast Asia have led to better air connectivity and a liberal visa regime, which has increased tourist flows between them. At present Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia offer an on-arrival visa facility to Indians. In 2018, the tourism industry contributed US\$ 28.59 billion in foreign exchange. According to a study, by 2028 Thailand can witness around 10 million Indian tourists (Thanthong-Knight, 2019).

While India has continuously iterated the cultural affinity and civilisational ties between India and Southeast Asia, it is now also beginning to focus on religious tourism. To promote religious tourism India is building Buddhist and Ramayana tourist circuits. Southeast Asian societies have strong influences on Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Indian mythology such as Ramayana is prominent in Southeast Asian society with local variations and influences. By focusing on Buddhist and Ramayana sites, India aims to leverage its soft power potential

through cultural heritage. An increase in religious tourism will also improve connectivity within India as well as with Southeast Asian states, and generate employment opportunities for the local population.

The Buddhist circuit traces the path of Buddha's journey from his birth at Lumbini in Nepal, through Bodh Gaya in Bihar, India, where he attained enlightenment, to Sarnath and Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh, India, where he gave his first sermon and attained Mahaparinirvana respectively. In addition to this, four additional sites linked to Buddha's life, Rajgir and Vaishali in Bihar and Sravasti and Sankasia in Uttar Pradesh are also included in this circuit. Ramayana circuit begins from Ayodhya, a place believed to be the birthplace of the mythological God, Lord Rama, covering 15 sites across 9 states and ending in Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu, India. To develop these sites as tourist hotspots, the Government of India is also developing international airports at Ayodhya and Kushinagar. The World Bank has also allocated \$15 million to upgrade Sarnath's pedestrian ways and roads linking over two dozen monasteries and heritage sites. Combined with this New Delhi's policy of upgrading regional airports and introducing low-cost flights to smaller towns can boost the tourism potential and strengthen Act East Policy.

Healthcare or Medical Tourism is another growing market in India. Medical tourism commonly refers to the practice of travelling to foreign countries to access healthcare and therapeutic services. Foreign tourists engage in medical tourism either to avoid high medical costs or long waiting lines in their home countries (Crooks et al., 2011). The healthcare tourism industry has grown significantly in the last decade, with India, Singapore and Thailand becoming attractive hotspots for foreign tourists to access healthcare services. Analysts have predicted a 110% growth in medical tourism, from US \$5 billion in 2019 to US \$13 billion in 2022. By 2030, India is expected to receive 3 million international patients. The availability of skilled labour, quality medical facilities and lower healthcare costs make India an attractive destination for healthcare tourism. India has been promoting itself as a medical destination for tourists through various trade shows and promotional events. In 2009, the first trade show, named *India: Medical Tourism Destination* took place in Toronto, Canada, to promote medical travel to India. With the growing medical tourism, India has also introduced medical visas that allow foreign nationals to travel to India seeking medical treatment. At present, countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Oman, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nigeria, Kenya and Iraq account for the majority of patient influx. It is now also attracting medical tourists from the Americas and

Europe (Dembi, 2022). Of the all tourists who arrived in India from Southeast Asia, 1.2 per cent visited India for medical purposes, accounting for around 10 thousand medical tourists. Though this is a small number of medical tourists as compared to tourists arriving from other countries. One reason for such small footfall is that Southeast Asian states such as Singapore and Thailand also offer accessible healthcare services and are regional competitors to India for the healthcare tourism market. To increase footfall from Southeast Asian states India can offer attractive medical and religious tourism packages. It also needs to increase its visibility by promoting medical tourism in Southeast Asian states and improving healthcare infrastructure at home that has a competitive advantage over other regional competitors. To enhance tourism, in 2021, India and Cambodia joint working group discussed the promotion of tourism between the two countries with a special focus on religious and medical tourism in India. India is now also looking for the commercial potential of its traditional medicines such as Ayurveda and is promoting these techniques in Southeast Asian countries.

6.2 Diaspora

For India, a large Diaspora around the world is an asset to broadcasting its soft power and attraction in foreign countries. Diaspora plays a crucial role in the foreign policy of any country. Located at the intersection of two different societies, Diaspora can help build trust and a positive image between the host and home countries. They are also important sources of remittances and investment to the home countries. In the host countries, they are tools for extending the soft power of the home country through the promotion of culture and values.

The High-Level Committee on Indian Diaspora defines Indian Diaspora as those Indians who have migrated to different parts of the world and have maintained their Indian identity (Kumar, 2021). India also hosts Pravasi Bhartiya Divas, every two years, to facilitate the contribution of the Overseas Indian community to the development of India and create engagement with the Diaspora to generate investments in the home country. It also organises Know India Programme (KIP) which aims to promote awareness and knowledge among the Indian youth Diaspora about India's cultural, economic, educational, scientific and technological achievements.

There is a significant presence of the Indian Diaspora in the Southeast Asian states (U. B. Singh, 2007). This has occurred through several waves of migration. During the colonial period, a large number, particularly of Tamil origin migrated to Malaysia, Indonesia and

Myanmar (Burma) to work as indentured labourers (Kumar, 2021, p. 209). In the post-colonial period, Southeast Asia attracted a skilled workforce from India, particularly in the Information Technology sector. A large Indian workforce is also present in the sectors relating to education, medical and legal profession. While Diaspora is a strategic asset for a country's soft power in building its positive image and people-to-people ties through civil society interactions, it is also an important source of remittances and investments. Singapore and Malaysia are the top destinations for sending remittances back home. Both Malaysia and Singapore also boast a large Indian population. In Malaysia, ethnic Indians constitute 8 per cent of the population and out of which 90 per cent are Tamils. Similarly, in Singapore, ethnic Indians constitute 9.1 per cent of Singapore's population. In addition, out of 1.6 million foreigners in Singapore, 21 per cent are Indian expatriates holding Indian passports. With such a large presence, Tamil is now one of the official languages of Singapore. Southeast Asian countries have also sought to take advantage of these connections to enhance ties with India. The appointment of Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu as the Special Envoy to India and South Asia on Infrastructure, who has a long-standing connection with Tamil Nadu and India was in recognition to help Malaysian companies benefit in the region (Nathan, 2015, pp. 11–14). In 2021, New Delhi launched the Indian Overseas Professional Network (IOPN), to leverage the strength and professional expertise of the Indian diaspora in Brunei in the areas of pharma and health, energy, education, information technology, primary resources, tourism and entrepreneurship (MEA, 2022, p. 60). Indian Diaspora also contributed to covid relief to strengthen India's efforts during the 2nd wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. 600 oxygen cylinders were ferried to India by INS Jalashwa from Brunei and 450 cylinders were ferried by INS Airawat from Singapore (MEA, 2021a).

Country	Remittances sent to India (in US \$ millions)
Singapore	886
Malaysia	287
Thailand	197
Myanmar	138
Indonesia	42
Philippines	42
Vietnam	6

Table 1: Remittances from Southeast Asia to India (Pew Research Center, 2019)

However, the presence of the Indian Diaspora in Southeast Asia is not without its problems. The ethnic Indians in Southeast Asia are a heterogeneous society, linguistically and economically. While a minority class within them has become affluent, the majority of ethnic Indians constitute a vulnerable group (Das & Bhattacharya, 2020). At times, the discriminatory policies towards ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia have raised tensions in the region. In 2007, the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) organised a massive protest in Kuala Lumpur against the government's discriminatory policy that favoured Bangsa Malaysia (ethnic Malaysians) against ethnic Indians. Additionally, the problem of stateless persons of Indian origin in Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand remains unresolved. Another problem faced by the expatriates is the non-recognition of Indian degrees in Malaysia creating problems in seeking job opportunities (Kumar, 2021).

Despite the significant presence of the Indian Diaspora in Southeast Asia, New Delhi has failed to utilise its potential. While the Diaspora has risen to influential political and business positions, its role in shaping foreign policy remains limited (Varadarajan, 2015). India has also refrained from discussing matters relating to Diaspora at the bilateral level fearing that it could affect bilateral relations. There is an urgent need for New Delhi to consider the Diaspora as an important element of its foreign policy. This recognition should go beyond the need for investment and remittances and cultivate relations through which it could project its soft power in the region. There is also a serious need for New Delhi to reconsider its stance on issues faced by ethnic Indians in Southeast Asia. It should make serious attempts in discussing their problems at the diplomatic level. Such an initiative should be aimed at not only creating better connections with Diaspora but also creating trust between host countries and ethnic minority communities.

6.3 Education

Another area that has the potential to increase people-to-people ties is the education sector. India's renowned institutions can act as a gateway for cooperation through academic and intellectual collaboration. The Indian government's initiative, 'Study in India' aims to attract foreign students to study in India (PIB, 2018). Another initiative, 'Destination India' seeks to streamline the process of foreign admissions (Sharma, 2020). Both these programmes aim to make India an attractive location for foreign students. Under the study in India programme, India has introduced short-term courses on Buddhism, Yoga and Ayurveda to attract foreign students as well to impart India's traditional knowledge.

Joint collaboration between India and ASEAN universities and student exchange programmes is one way of promoting people-to-people ties. India also provides scholarships to Asian students through ICCR. ICCR has been maintaining a Chair on Buddhist and Sanskrit Studies at Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University, Cambodia and a full-time Indian professor on Sanskrit and Buddhist Studies and deployed by the Government of India in the University (MEA, 2020a).

Southeast Asian students have found India an attractive location for educational pursuits. A significant number of Malaysian students visit India to study. It is estimated that in the 1960s and 1970s, thirty thousand Malaysian students were in Indian institutions. This also

led to joint educational programmes between India and Malaysia. An MoU on Higher Education was signed between India and Malaysia in 2010 (MEA, 2020b). The Vinayaka Mission Research Foundation, a Deemed University in Tamil collaborated with Penang International Dental College in offering twinning programmes. Similarly, Melaka Manipal College is a twinning programme, between India and Malaysia. In 2004, the National University of Singapore set up a South Asian Institute to accommodate Indian experts for promoting an understanding of issues in South Asia. About 2000 Indian students are studying in Malaysia, while an estimated 4000 Malaysian students are studying in India, mostly in medicine.

Under the Quick Impact project scheme that was launched under the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Initiative, India is assisting in building primary schools. Under New Delhi's assistance, two school buildings for children studying from Grade 1 to Grade 6 have been built at Wat Portisat Primary School (MEA, 2022, p. 62). It has also assisted in building Software Development and Training centres which organise online IT courses on Data communications, Networking and Java Programming. Similarly, Singapore's Institute of Technical Education and Delhi's Government's Training and Technical Education have collaborated to create skills centres in Delhi. In 2015, India and Singapore signed an MoU for a research partnership in artificial intelligence, machine learning, cognitive computing, big data analysis, smart energy systems and e-governance, joint PhD and research with IITs, IISC, IIST and establishment of an endowment for Indian researchers coming to Singapore. In 2018, the Centre for Vietnamese Studies was established in New Delhi. It has been conducting various activities to promote understanding of Vietnam in India through language classes, conferences and public diplomacy (Nga & Quang, 2021, p. 298). In 2021, Vietnam signed an MoU with three Indian private Universities, Integral University in Lucknow, KIIT in Bhubaneshwar and Rishihood University in Sonapat, to offer a scholarship to Vietnamese students to study in these centres (News18, 2021). Pham Sanh Chau, the ambassador of Vietnam to India has highlighted that the issues of safety, pollution, availability of food and the long application process hinder Vietnamese students from applying to India (Agrawal, 2021). In 2018, India announced a research fellowship for 1000 ASEAN students to pursue doctoral studies in the 23 IITs for three years. Under this scheme, the target was to attract 250 ASEAN fellows in the first year, however, only 42 students were enrolled (Nanda, 2020).

6.4 Conclusion

India's people-to-people ties with Southeast Asian states constitute many dimensions. New Delhi is engaged in the archaeological renovation and restoration of many historical sites and temples across Southeast Asia that brings out deep historical linkages between the two regions. Both India and Southeast Asian states engage in cultural diplomacy by organising cultural events in each other's countries. A significant number of Indian Diaspora in Southeast Asia acts as an asset in cultivating ties between India and Southeast Asia. However, New Delhi's Diaspora policy is limited and that limits its potential to leverage the Diaspora in enhancing its relationship with the region (Muni, 2021). There is a need to engage with Diaspora and highlight their issues at the bilateral level. Though Southeast Asians are looking towards India as a tourist and educational hub, however, this remains limited. New Delhi is not an attractive location for Southeast Asians, particularly for educational purposes. There is a need for India to invest in the education sector and become an attractive economy to attract students and tourists to the country. New Delhi should also focus on collaborating with higher educational institutions in Southeast Asia to facilitate student exchange programs. Compared to China's 400 daily flights to ASEAN, India only has 17 flights flying from ASEAN (Singh, 2021). This shows India's limitation in people-to-people integration. While a lot of emphasis on soft power promotion is done through religion - Buddhism and Hinduism-, the communal polarisation in India affects the countries in Southeast Asia (Muni, 2021). While India has immense soft power potential, there is a lot to be done for better people-to-people integration.

CHAPTER VIII

INDIA-SOUTHEAST ASIA COOPERATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In 2015, United Nations Organization member states agreed to work on seventeen goals as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a “universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere” (UN, 2022a). A fifteen-year deadline was set in 2015 to achieve these goals by 2030. While significant progress has been made by countries, the overall speed required to achieve these goals by 2030 is still lacking. In 2019, with only a decade left to achieve the goals, the decade of 2020-2030 was declared as the ‘Decade of Action’, highlighting the emergent need to mobilize finance, enhance national implementation and strengthen institutions to achieve 17 SDG goals by their target date.

SDGs encompass a holistic framework to improve gender equality, access to clean water, education and health, and protection of biodiversity on land and underwater with an objective to achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability. The United Nations does not impose any framework on countries to achieve the SDG goals rather each country frames policy depending on the need and local specificity.

SDG Goals	Objectives
Goal 1	No Poverty
Goal 2	Zero Hunger
Goal 3	Good Health and Well-Being
Goal 4	Quality Education

Goal 5	Gender Equality
Goal 6	Clean Water and Sanitation
Goal 7	Affordable and Clean Energy
Goal 8	Decent Work and Economic Growth
Goal 9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
Goal 10	Reduced Inequalities
Goal 11	Sustainable Cities and Communities
Goal 12	Responsible Consumption and Production
Goal 13	Climate Action
Goal 14	Life Below Water
Goal 15	Life on Land
Goal 16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institution
Goal 17	Partnership for the Goals

Table 1: Sustainable Development Goals and Objectives (UN, 2022a).

The Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian-Ukraine war and the climate crisis have shown that no one is shielded from the global crisis and its cascading effects. Further, these crises have not only exacerbated food, health, energy and refugee crises but have also posed challenges to states in achieving their SDG targets in the stipulated time. According to the UN SDG Report 2022, the Covid-19 pandemic has “wiped out more than four years of progress on

poverty eradication and pushed 93 million more people into extreme poverty” (UN, 2022b). It has become more urgent for the states to build cooperation on the SDGs, as addressing each goal allows for building resilient domestic, regional and international institutions that can shield its population from global crises such as climate change as well as improve the quality of life of the population and in essence the quality of the planet.

7.1 ASEAN and India’s Performance in achieving SDGs

According to the UN ESCAP report 2021, with the ongoing trajectory, the Asia-Pacific region will achieve less than 10 per cent of the SDG targets by 2030. The region has progressed most in the areas of good health and well-being, innovation and infrastructure. On the goals of no poverty, zero hunger, quality education and reduced inequalities, the region is making progress, albeit too slowly to complete the targets by 2030. However, in the areas of climate action, life below water and life on land, the progress of the region is regressing (ESCAP, 2021, pp. xi-xii)

Overall, the report does not paint a positive picture of ASEAN, however, each state has a differentiated performance. According to the UN Sustainability report-2022, which tracks the overall progress of countries in attaining all the 17 SDGs, Thailand scores the highest among the South and East Asian countries with a score of 74.13 evaluated out of 100. It ranks 44th out of 163 countries. Thailand is followed by Vietnam and Singapore. The worst performers in the region are Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, all ranked above 100. While the challenges remain, some of the ASEAN countries have fared well in achieving their targets within the stipulated period. Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand have achieved their targets of reducing poverty (Goal 1). Similarly, Brunei, Singapore and Vietnam have made significant progress in achieving their targets for Quality Education (Goal 7). However, none of the countries has successfully achieved their targets in the goals of Zero Hunger, Good Health and Well Being, Gender Equality, Clean Water and Sanitation, Affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, life below water and on land, strong institutions and partnership.

Rank	Country	Score (100)	Target Achieved
44	Thailand	74.13	No Poverty
55	Vietnam	72.76	Quality Education
60	Singapore	71.72	No Poverty, Quality Education, Infrastructure and Innovation
72	Malaysia	70.38	No Poverty
82	Indonesia	69.16	-----
93	Brunei Darussalam	67.10	Quality Education, Sustainable cities
95	Philippines	66.64	Responsible Consumption and Production
103	Myanmar	64.27	Responsible Consumption and Production
107	Cambodia	63.75	Responsible Consumption and Production, Climate Action
111	Lao PDR	63.39	Responsible Consumption and Production
121	India	60.32	Responsible Consumption and Production, Climate Action

Table 2: Overview of SDG completion target of India and ASEAN countries (Sachs et al., 2022)

Similarly, India too does not fare well in the SDG index. It is ranked 121st with a score of 60.32 and is among the worst performers in the region. On the positive side, India remains

on track to achieving the targets in areas of responsible consumption and production and climate change. However, major challenges remain in 11 areas, including zero hunger, gender equality, and life on water and land. Much of the gains have been reversed during the pandemic which has also led India to slip from 117th position to 121st in two years.

7.2 Avenues for Cooperation

The UN Sustainable Development Report 2022 shows that the achievements of India and ASEAN are not very satisfying and both are failing to keep pace in completing their targets. There are common overlapping areas in which both regions require major improvements. As India and ASEAN, celebrate their 30 years of diplomatic relations, achieving the targets of SDGs should become possible avenues of cooperation and priorities in the region. The 17th goal of SDG envisages partnership in achieving the targets through international investments, knowledge sharing, technological and development assistance and removing trade barriers by granting free and fair market access. India and ASEAN can enhance cooperation through knowledge sharing and technological and development assistance, in achieving the targets of SDGs in three possible ways.

First, they could share expertise and best practices in areas in which they have been successful. Southeast Asian countries have done fairly well in improving the quality of education and reducing poverty. There has been an increase in the participation rate in pre-primary organized learning, net primary enrolment rate and lower secondary completion rate. However, India is still struggling to achieve high enrolment rates, address the learning needs of children and build educational systems that focus on equity, inclusion and quality of education. Another area where Southeast Asian states have progressed fairly and can share expertise with India is in reducing poverty. Around 51 million people still live in extreme poverty in India (World Data Lab, 2022).

On the other hand, India's progress in climate action can be a roadmap that Southeast Asian states can follow. India can share knowledge, expertise and technology in reducing carbon emissions and working collaboratively on green technologies and disaster-resilient infrastructure. ASEAN-India Green Fund (AIGF) could be utilized to promote investment in green infrastructure.

Two, India and Southeast Asian states have bilateral agreements in developing a partnership that contributes towards the capacity building and achievement of sustainable

development goals. India's development partnership assistance focussing on regional connectivity, ITEC programmes, Quick-Impact projects for community infrastructure at the grassroots level, and restoration of ancient monuments align with the objective of sustainable development goals (Prabhu, 2021). In Cambodia, India has extended a line of credit for water resources and development and has been assisting it in socio-economic projects in the fields of agriculture, health, women empowerment and information technology (MEA, 2020a). Similarly, in Laos too, India has extended Lines of Credit for irrigation projects, rural electrification and agricultural projects (MEA, 2021). While this assistance is not made under the sustainable development goals programme, they eventually assist these countries to achieve their targets in SDGs. India could establish a separate division within the development partnership assistance to assist countries in achieving the SDGs (Prabhu, 2021). Such initiatives can be helpful for forums like MGC and BIMSTEC.

Third, India and ASEAN can cooperate in areas where they both lag to address the challenges of achieving SDG jointly. Both regions need to address major challenges in the areas of zero hunger, good health and well-being, and life underwater and on land. These goals should become central priorities of India and ASEAN in their vision of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. The fourth India-ASEAN Plan of Action (2021-2025), outlines cooperation in four areas, namely maritime cooperation, connectivity, UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and economics. The ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (APOI) and Indian Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) by New Delhi underscores the cooperation on maritime security and ecology. The joint statement on Indo-Pacific in the 2021 India-ASEAN Summit stresses the need for cooperation in the blue economy, and environmental and disaster management. Many communities in India and ASEAN are dependent on the sea for their livelihood and occupy a habitat prone to natural disasters. This makes it much more urgent for the region to achieve its SDGs target, as each goal is interlinked. Improving maritime ecology and land biodiversity will eventually also have a positive spillover in removing hunger and maintaining the well-being of the society living in those regions. It also makes it emergent for the region to engage locally and understand the needs and techniques of the community that places a balance between people and the environment. The introduction of the indigenous '*sasi*' technique Indonesia has improved the stocks of fish in the sea. India and ASEAN should focus on knowledge sharing at the community level that is located in a similar natural habitat and face the same threat.

There is an urgent need to build resilient global supply chains and address the widening inequalities in society through multilateral and regional cooperation. ASEAN-India Ministerial Meeting on New and Renewable Energy and ASEAN-India Environmental Ministers Meeting are two such institutionalized frameworks that could address the need for sustainable development and cooperation. The first ASEAN-Indian Environmental Ministers Meeting in 2012 adopted a statement on biodiversity recognising the “significant contribution of the coastal and marine ecosystem to livelihoods, poverty reduction and food security” and called for cooperation in achieving the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (National Biodiversity Authority, n.d.). The National Biodiversity of India (NBA) in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and Ministry of External Affairs along with the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) and ASEAN Secretariat collaborated on the project ‘Capacity Building towards implementing the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing, the City Biodiversity Index and Strategic Biodiversity’ (National Biodiversity Authority, n.d.). However, the Environmental Ministers’ Meeting has not taken place since 2012. The Special ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in 2022 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the ASEAN-India Dialogue acknowledged the “interdependent challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss by deepening cooperation for sustainable management” (MEA, 2022b). There is a need to revive cooperation on biodiversity especially under the Indo-pacific framework to enhance cooperation on coastal and maritime ecology and to improve SDG targets (Martinus, 2022).

There has been cooperation between Indian and the Southeast Asian countries on various fronts, however, they need to be accelerated and synergised. During Covid-19, the countries cooperated in providing medical supplies. India supplied 100 MT of Liquid Medical Oxygen and 300 Oxygen concentrators to Indonesia in July 2021. In August 2021, India supplied additional support of 10 empty ISO tanks on gratis lease to Indonesia. Made in India Covid vaccine, Covovax, manufactured by Serum Institute of India (SII) was supplied to Indonesia as part of a contract between SII and PT Indofarma (MEA, 2022a, p. 61). Under its ‘Vaccine Maitri’ programme, India supplied vaccines to Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand. The cooperation in health and medicine between the Indian and Southeast Asian states should be further extended and institutionalized.

In 2015, the Plan of Action for 2016-2020 was adopted to implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity. Under this India supported the ASEAN

integrated food security framework, ASEAN multi-sectoral Framework on Climate Change and ASEAN action plan on Joint response to Climate Change. While these institutionalized plans have been part of the discussion between India and ASEAN, there have been few on-ground activities, either in the form of investment or collaborations to address food security and climate change. The Plan of Action, adopted in 2020, for the year 2021-2025, India supported the implementation of the ASEAN plan of action in Combating Transnational Crime (2016-2025), disaster management and emergency response, cross-pillar cooperation that included connectivity, smart cities and institutional strengthening. India and ASEAN also have a working group on agriculture and food security that aims to enhance the productivity of agricultural products and meet the challenges of food security that add to the contribution of achieving the goal of zero hunger. Under this initiative, farmers' exchange visits are also organized to learn and develop efficient farming techniques from each other. In the 4th ASEAN-India Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture and Forestry in 2018, prioritization was put on collaborative projects in the areas of agroforestry intervention for livelihood opportunities, exchange of farm implements and machinery and genetic improvements of heterotic hybrid rice (MEA, 2018). To enhance cooperation in agriculture and food security, India and ASEAN should move forward in creating a food bank that addresses the problems of hunger and scarcity of food, especially during times of natural disasters. In 2021, India completed the project for the supply and installation of 1500 Afridev Hand Pumps for the Augmentation of a Rural Water Supply in Cambodia that would provide safe drinking water (MEA, 2022a).

India and Southeast Asian states can also collaborate and cooperate on new technology, Artificial Intelligence and smart cities. There has already been some progress in this direction. In 2021, India and the Philippines conducted their first-ever Joint Committee Meeting (JCM) under the Bilateral Programme of Cooperation in Science and Technology, identifying the key research areas such as virology, blockchain, Artificial Intelligence, health and smart cities, as the areas of cooperation (MEA, 2022a, p. 65). The companies from Singapore continue to participate in several smart cities, urban planning and infrastructure projects (MEA, 2020b).

The cascaded and interlinked effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian-Ukraine War and the climate crisis are affecting society in innumerable ways. Covid-19 and the Russian-Ukraine War have affected the global economy and disrupted the supply chains that had affected the local population in developing and less developed countries pushing them into severe distress, both financially and mentally. In addition, the pandemic has lowered life

expectancy, derailed the progress towards ending HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria and precipitated mental health deterioration. Along with this, climate change is affecting the land use pattern, food production and displacement of the human population putting them under severe stress. The rise in inflation due to global crises is pushing people into extreme poverty. These crises have not only reinforced the older disparities but have also brought to light newer inequalities such as the digital divide. In an era where everything, from education to health services, is shifting towards digital platforms, the inaccessibility to access digital technologies is further widening inequalities in multifaceted forms. The inability of the regional and international institutions in addressing global crises such as covid-19 and climate change and human-induced conflicts have led to economic shocks and growing inequalities among the developing and least developed countries. This has also affected countries' abilities in achieving their SDGs targets as well as halted the progress made earlier. India and ASEAN should move forward in building regional institutions that address the failures of present institutionalism and should lead forward in cooperating on sustainable development goals that contribute to the welfare of the society by providing and securing public good in the Indo-Pacific region.

CHAPTER IX

NORTHEAST IN ACT EAST POLICY

Northeast Region (NER) refers to eight Indian states, viz, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. This nomenclature gained popularity due to geographic location as well as administrative intervention. During the British Raj, much of today's NER was termed as North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA). In post-colonial India, the region was constituted into separate states based on linguistic reorganization. While the region is heterogeneous, the common problems faced by the region led the Indian government to form North-Eastern Council in 1972. In 2004, a dedicated Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region (MoDNER) was established for planning, execution and monitoring of the infrastructure projects.

The region covers 7.8 per cent of India's landmass and constitutes 3.73 per cent of its population. This landlocked region shares borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. It is connected to mainland India by a 21 km narrow landmass, known as the Siliguri corridor. The majority of people live in rural areas and agriculture remains the main source of livelihood. Most basic commodities in the region are imported. NER is not only geographically peripheral from mainland India but also remains economically and culturally marginalized. Despite its rich and abundant natural resources, it lags in social and economic indicators from the rest of the country. With abundant hydroelectricity resources, the production of electricity is negligible and per capita consumption lower than in the rest of the country (Singh, 2020, p. 24). The cultural distinctiveness alongside the underdevelopment has led to a social and political alienation of its population, which at times has resulted in violent insurgencies against the Indian state.

The region's image of an underdeveloped and troubled hinterland is a recent creation of colonial and post-colonial state construction exercises. During the pre-colonial period, the region had a flourishing trade with the neighbouring region of China, Tibet, Bhutan and Myanmar. The trade corridor was also a site of amalgamation of cultural exchanges, with the mixing of different languages, and religious and social practices (Panda, 2020, p. 146). The products of these exchanges are even visible today in the similarity of languages, costumes and practices of ethnic tribes straddling the borders of India and Myanmar. During the colonial period, the region was transformed into a frontier region. The British administration's

introduction of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) regime demarcated the region's demography into plains and hill populations. The ILP regime carved a semi-autonomous space that was politically and legally differentiated from British administrative territories. The purpose of the ILP regime was to separate the tribes from the subjects of the British Empire. They saw the former as racially and culturally different from mainland Indians and portrayed them as 'savage' and 'barbarians' reflecting the security anxieties of the colonial administration (Baruah, 2020). This also meant the absence of modern government institutions and the presence of security apparatus in the region. The British portrayal of the region from the strategic lenses affected the mobility of people, destabilized the trade patterns and subverted the social and economic networks skewed in the favour of British capitalists that were engaged in the production of tea, oil and coal. Further, the opening of the sea routes destabilized the trans-Himalayan border trade (Panda, 2020, p. 157). The partition of India in 1947 further severed the communication and economic linkages of the region with East Bengal, reducing it into a landlocked region (Patgiri & Hazarika, 2016, p. 240). Security concerns rather than trade and development dominated the post-colonial state-building exercise in the region. The construction of communication and transport infrastructure underscored the security relevance and hence created a development deficit and economic backwardness in the region. In addition, India's approach towards its eastern neighbours was dominated by security concerns of insurgents using India-Bangladesh and India-Myanmar borders as hideouts, which relegated the development concerns of the North-Eastern States to the back seat.

8.1 Northeast Region (NER) in Look/Act East Policy

Over the years New Delhi's approach toward the region has changed from a security to a developmental paradigm. This change in position was articulated by India's external Minister, Pranab Mukherjee when he stated that 'geography is an opportunity and the very geographical location of the Northeast makes it the doorway to Southeast and East Asia' (Haokip, 2015, p. 203). New Delhi positioned NER in its 'Look East Policy' discourse, with an aim to connect it with Southeast Asia through connectivity projects to improve trade opportunities in the region.

Four North Eastern states, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, share a land border with Myanmar. The ethnic tribes straddled along the boundaries share historical and cultural ties. This makes NER the crucial 'gateway' to Southeast Asia, both physically and culturally. Under the LEP/AEP, there is a recognition within New Delhi that the Southeast

Asian states can play an important role in the development of the region by investing in various development projects in the region. According to a former diplomat, Rajiv Sikri, the look east policy envisages NER as the 'centre of thriving and integrated economic space linking two dynamic regions with a network of highways, railways, pipelines, transmission lines crisscrossing the region'(cited in Haokip, 2015, p. 204). India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj stated that the '3Cs- Connectivity, Commerce and Culture' – are the essential pillars of India's Act East Policy. The role of the Northeast in India's Act East Policy is essentially predicated on these dimensions. For NER, the 3Cs are interlinked and interconnected to the development of the region. Improved connectivity between the regions will allow a greater flow of goods, people and culture, bringing more prosperity to the region through commerce, tourism and investments. The geographical contiguity, historical and cultural ties and prospects of economic development are the crucial factors that centre the NER in India's LEP/AEP. Through this, India not only aims to develop close economic and cultural relations with the region but also a cooperative environment along its border areas as well as aims to expand its footprints of soft power into Southeast Asia.

The geographical contiguity between NER and Southeast Asia makes the region central to New Delhi's connectivity projects. India has emphasized both maritime and land connectivity to facilitate greater movements of goods and people between the regions. The border between NER and Myanmar makes the former a gateway to cross-border connectivity projects. India has initiated several connectivity projects both within the NER as well as with the Southeast Asian countries to improve the infrastructure around the border areas. The India-Myanmar Friendship road project from Moreh-Tamu to Kalewa was built in 2001 with Indian assistance. In 2002, India, Myanmar and Thailand (IMT) agreed to build a highway connecting the three countries. The IMT trilateral highway connects Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand through Bagan and Mandalay in Myanmar. While the progress on the completion of the project remains slow but once completed it will allow unhindered movement from India to Thailand. There are also plans to extend the IMT highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. India and Myanmar are also working on another project known as Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP). The project connects Kolkata in India to Sittwe and Paletwa in Myanmar through inland water transportation and from Paletwa to Lanwangtlai (Mizoram) in India by road. There are also proposals for reopening Stilwell Road, which connects India with China through Myanmar. The road starts from Ledo (Assam) in India and passes through Changlang district in Arunachal Pradesh before entering Myanmar through Pangsau Pass. It goes through

the Myitkyina and Bhamo cities in Myanmar to Yunnan Province in China before reaching Kunming in China (Thomas, 2016, p. 230). This route can facilitate trade between India, Myanmar and China, reducing the time from seven days to two days (Pattnaik, 2016, p. 220). However, security concerns about the illicit trade in narcotics, human trafficking, the influx of migrants and flooding of the market with Chinese goods have kept the project on hold. Further, the existing highways in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur have been included as part of Asian Highways (AH) called AH-1 and AH-2. By enhancing connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, New Delhi's objectives are twofold. First, these infrastructure projects will end the landlocked situation and isolation of NER opening borders and facilitating border trade and people-to-people exchanges. Second, the land connectivity to Southeast Asia will not only provide NER access to the sea but also an alternative route to mainland India via Myanmar. Through these connectivity projects, New Delhi aims at breaking the territorial trap of the North Eastern region that it inherited as a legacy of partition.

The second factor that makes NER an important actor in India's eastward approach is enhancing the economic development of the region. The primary aim of India's Look East Policy was to improve economic ties with Southeast Asia by enhancing trade and investments. During the initial periods of LEP, New Delhi did not look east through the northeast. While the trade between India and ASEAN grew, it made little impact on the NER. Now, the essential element of looking east through the northeast is to transform the periphery into an important economic region toward eastward engagements. The logic of building connectivity infrastructure was to transform the borders from barriers to opportunity. The outcome of viewing borders not as restrictive but as an opportunity, allowed India and Myanmar to sign a border trade agreement in 1994. The trade along the India-Myanmar border mostly flows through Moreh (Manipur) in India-Tamu in Myanmar and Zokhawthar (Mizoram) in India – Rih in Myanmar routes. However, border trade remains limited due to the regulations on the quantities of goods that can be traded. To further boost trade and curb informal trade both countries have agreed to set up Border Haats at various mutually agreed locations, such as Nampong (Arunachal Pradesh) and Pangsau (Myanmar) (Trivedi, 2020). Among the 3Cs, commerce remains the weakest link between NER and Southeast Asia. The exports from the Northeast constitute less than 1 per cent of the total merchandise exports. The border trade between India and Myanmar is characterized as the transit trade – buying and selling of goods that originated in a third country. The competitive nature of trade between them makes the economic linkages appear weaker (Das et al., 2016). Prof. Amarjeet Singh states that the

LEP/AEP can function without the involvement of the Northeast region. In terms of economy, the region is heavily dependent on others and not in a position to trade with the countries of Southeast Asia. The subsistence economy and lack of industrial and manufacturing sites hamper the region to have any trade with Southeast Asia” (A. Singh, personal communication, September 14, 2022).

The people of the borderlands straddling the India-Myanmar border also share historical and cultural ties. The border construction not only constituted barriers to economic activities but also significantly affected the cultural mobility among the people sharing common ethnic bonds. The people belonging to the ‘Naga’ ethnic tribe are inhabitants of the Sagaing and Kachin regions in Myanmar as well as reside in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. Similarly, the Chins of Chin state in Myanmar and Mizos in Mizoram share common culture and history (Singh, 2020). Kukis living on both sides of the border move freely to discuss family matters or pay goodwill visits (Majumdar, 2020). The Treaty of Friendship, which came into force in 1952, allowed the indigenous population at the India-Myanmar border a free passage within 40 kms on both sides of the border for facilitating local trade and social visits (Trivedi, 2020). However, the cultural and traditional linkages between NER and Southeast Asia largely remain uncultivated and there is a need to pursue proactive cultural diplomacy linking NER and Southeast Asia.

8.2 Challenges and Prospects

The Look East Policy (LEP)/ Act East Policy (AEP) with NER as an important actor is not without its challenges and paradoxes. There is a consensus among policymakers that the shift from LEP to AEP has not changed the fundamental structure of engagement (Bhattacharya, 2021). There is also a view that the LEP/AEP has not been able to contribute much to the Northeast Region (A. Singh, personal communication, September 14, 2022).

While the policy envisages fostering, border trade, cross-border connectivity, mobility and investments in the region, the domestic policy and discourse are contradictory to the policy objectives reflecting a trust deficit between the state and society. First, there are ‘fears’ among the local people that the infrastructural projects and opening up to ASEAN can facilitate the migration of non-indigenous people in the region. The debate between insiders vs. outsiders has taken an insidious turn with xenophobic attitudes towards migrants. The second issue is about the meaning of development. Civil society has raised concerns that the exploitation of

natural resources and the extractive economy do not focus on social development. The infrastructure creation in the region has made it a hub of transit trade while no benefit accruing to the local population. This has been witnessed in the expansion of India's trade with Southeast Asia, however, having little impact on the NER. The flow of trade is mostly from metropolitan cities. Third, the centre-state relationships. While the NER has been placed central to the LEP/AEP, they have no role in devising and articulating the neighbourhood policy that reflects the local specificities. There seems to be no institutional architecture within the Indian foreign policy apparatus that allows and accommodates the sub-national voices and concerns in policymaking. Fourth, NER should not be treated as a passageway to Southeast Asia. The real transformation of the region is through railways which connect each state in the NER. Building roads to enhance connectivity is a flawed policy as it cannot support public transport as well as cargo movements (Datta, 2021). The improvement of connectivity in the NER has to be around three dimensions: among the region of NER, between mainland India and NER, and between NER and Southeast Asia. The linkages between NER and Southeast Asia should not become greater than the other two (S. Saran, personal communication, August 18, 2022).

Connectivity without productivity is the only tool for extraction. Ambassador Mukhopadhaya points out that New Delhi should build on productive resources that are not extractive but are harvested and built upon (Mukhopadhaya, 2021). Fifth, the discourse of development in the NER by New Delhi centred on resource extraction and infrastructure projects is viewed as 'paternal and controlling' (Sailo, 2016). There is a need to view development beyond the idea of cross-border trade and physical infrastructure that includes creating health and educational infrastructure that cater to people from both the region, which helps in not only generating employment but also increasing people-to-people movement for medical, educational and tourism purposes.

CHAPTER X

INDIA-SOUTHEAST ASIA IN INDO-PACIFIC

The idea of the Indo-Pacific as a new regional construct has gained prominence among policymakers and scholars alike, acknowledging the ‘growing economic, geopolitical, and security connections between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific’ (Medcalf, 2015). Geopolitically, it means to link together the region spread over the Indian and the Pacific Oceans into a single region acknowledging the rise of new powers in the region – India, China and Japan. Geo-economically, it underscores the displacement of the Atlantic Ocean as the most significant trade corridor. In terms of security, the region has gained prominence as a site of major power rivalry between waning American power and rising Chinese power. The assertive Chinese behaviour and its proclivity to challenge the normative order and sovereign claims of other states in the international system, particularly seen in its action in the South China Sea has posed a challenge to major and regional powers to shape an adequate response to China’s economic and political profile without spilling it into a conflict. Today, the Indo-Pacific region symbolises the power shift toward Asia and contestations over the rules of normative order with different actors having competing imaginations and interests in the region.

As the Indo-Pacific region has gained significance in recent years, as a theatre to challenge, contest, and re-imagine the normative order, major actors in the region have also articulated their Indo-Pacific strategy. In 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe delivered a speech before the Indian parliament framing the Indian and Pacific Oceans on shared values of freedom and prosperity (Abe, 2007). Japan’s vision of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) is to maintain rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade and pursue connectivity, and engage in capacity-building assistance, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and anti-piracy operations, counter-terrorism and non-proliferation (Sonoura, n.d.). Through this Japan also aims to promote an alternative developmental framework to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Australia’s 2017 foreign policy white paper refers to a secure, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific, seeking to facilitate the free flow of trade and investment, work for economic integration and secure marine resources and security.

The Indo-Pacific strategy of the US focuses on advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific that supports open societies, strengthens democratic institutions, rule based order, the rule of law, and strengthens the collective capacity of its allies and partners in tackling traditional

security issues. It puts emphasis on security alliances and partnerships to deepen interoperability and create ‘integrated deterrence’ in the region. It also aims to seek cooperation in the fields of critical and emerging technology, internet and cyberspace, global health and climate change (National Security Council, 2022).

9.1 India and Indo-Pacific

Indo-Pacific entered into Indian foreign policy discourse as early as 2007 when Gurpreet Khurana used the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in connection to securing sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and maritime choke points and expanding maritime cooperation with Japan (Khurana, 2007). In the first decade of the 2000s, the geo-strategic and geo-economic salience of the Indian Ocean was recognised for India’s economic prosperity as a significant amount of its trade and energy resources transited through the Indian Ocean. Former Ambassador Shyam Saran asserts that Indo-Pacific denotes the expansion of Indian security interests beyond the Indian Ocean theatre and at the same time recognition of the Indian subcontinent as an integral part of Asia-Pacific by the West (Saran, 2011). In 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used the phrase ‘Indo-Pacific’ to underscore the importance of the integrated region and the growing salience of India-US relations. She stated that the United States was expanding “work with the Indian navy in the Pacific because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce” (Saran, 2011). At the Commemorative India-ASEAN summit in 2012, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh acknowledged that an interlinked and stable Indo-Pacific region is crucial for the progress and prosperity of India and ASEAN (M. Singh, 2012). The Indo-Pacific construct, under the government of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, started emerging as a useful security concept. The importance of securing SLOCs and freedom of navigation was recognised, and in cognizance of that, New Delhi strengthened its Eastern Fleet in Visakhapatnam and the tri-command services in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Maritime issues and naval diplomacy acquired a new synergy under the aegis of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

The enunciation of Act East Policy expanded India’s geography of the East and intensified its engagement with Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands, along with ASEAN, thus providing a renewed push for India’s Indo-Pacific strategy. At the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined his vision for Indo-Pacific, calling for an inclusive and open Indo-Pacific that is not a club of limited

members or directed against any country. This vision, which is now referred to as India's Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI), outlines the following features; First, the region stands for a free, open and inclusive region comprising all nations that have a stake in the region. Second, it keeps ASEAN centrality and institutions at the core for cooperation in regional security architecture. Third, it envisages a region with a common rules-based order that respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation and norms based on the consent of all. Fourth, to uphold the international law in the sea and allow for freedom of navigation, peaceful settlement of the dispute, prevent maritime crimes, preserve marine ecology and focus on a blue economy. Fifth, a rule-based, balanced and stable trade regime in the Indo-Pacific region. Sixth, to enhance connectivity and sustainable development that promotes trade and not a strategic competition or debt burden. Seventh, to avoid great power rivalry or conflict spilling into the region (Modi, 2018).

Given the primacy and importance of the Indo-Pacific, the Ministry of External Affairs established a new division for the Indo-Pacific in 2019. At the 14th East Asian Summit (EAS) summit in 2019, Prime Minister Modi articulated seven basic arenas of cooperation and collaboration under the IPOI: (1) Maritime Security, (2) conservation of Maritime ecology following SDG 14, (3) Capacity building and Resource sharing, (4) Disaster Risk Reduction, (5) Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation, (6) Free and Fair Trade (7) Maritime connectivity.

IPOI places ASEAN centrality and its institutions at the centre of its Indo-Pacific strategy. At the 2019 East Asia Summit, PM Modi maintained that ASEAN centrality remains at the core of the Indo-Pacific platform, stating:

“The EAS is the logical platform to promote a free, open, inclusive, transparent, rules-based, peaceful, prosperous Indo-Pacific region, where sovereignty and territorial integrity and the application of international law, especially UNCLOS [United Nation Convention on the Law of Sea], are assured to all States equally. We all agree, and it is to the benefit of all of us that Indo-Pacific should be a space in which freedom of navigation, overflight, sustainable development, protection of the ecology and the marine environment, and an open, free, fair and mutually-beneficial trade and investment system are guaranteed to all” (Modi, 2019).

Similarly, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reiterated that India's IPOI does not envisage a new institutional framework, stating that,

“India's IPOI does not envisage a new institutional framework but will rely on the Leaders-led East Asia Summit process, its framework and its activities. It is in fact

envisaged to be structure-light and cooperation-heavy. And we really don't want it to be caught up with institutional divergences and differences and we are willing to work with everyone in the region to take forward the IPOI" (Jaishankar, 2022).

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is at the heart of its Act East Policy, which envisages an inclusive and open Indo-Pacific region. It goes beyond the traditional security narrative to include an entire range of developmental and environmental challenges pertaining to the maritime domain. It aims to seek cooperation in the field of maritime security to ensure freedom of navigation and enforcement of International laws that uphold territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Admiral Karanbir Singh (retd.) points out that for New Delhi the value of Indo-Pacific lies in its core ideas as enunciated by the initiatives like Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and IPOI. The approach for India is to have a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific; free to pursue lawful activities in pursuit of prosperity, open to all stakeholders and inclusive, meaning built on a collaborative and cooperative framework that does not stand against anyone (K. Singh, personal communication, September 15, 2022). Along with the ideas of SAGAR and strategies of cooperation listed in IPOI, India is also engaging with states at multiple levels on minilateral and plurilateral platforms. It has 2+2 dialogues with the United States, Japan and Australia; trilateral dialogues grouping involves India-Japan-United States; Japan-Australia-India; Russia-India-China; India-Australia-Indonesia, India-Australia-France; and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) having India, Japan, United States and Australia. Quad has emerged as an important platform in the Indo-Pacific as well as in India's strategy. It is effectively addressing global and public goods challenges in the Indo-Pacific with initiatives such as vaccine partnerships and increasing maritime domain awareness.

9.2 Southeast Asia's Outlook on Indo-Pacific

Southeast Asia, which is located at the midpoint of the Indo-Pacific, has reacted cautiously to the Indo-Pacific strategy articulated by the major powers. There has been unease within ASEAN about the narratives of the Indo-Pacific aimed at containing China and dividing the region as a theatre of major power rivalry. This has also been viewed as an attempt to securitize the region and weaken the ASEAN centrality and its multilateral institutions. Therefore, motivated by the concerns of reinforcing ASEAN centrality, ASEAN members have converged together, led by Indonesia to present its Indo-Pacific outlook.

The report titled ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’ (AOIP) acknowledges the opportunities and challenges produced by the geostrategic and geopolitical shifts in the Indo-Pacific region. The report stresses the geographical and institutional centrality of the ASEAN in shaping the economic and security architecture of the region. It emphasises strengthening the existing ASEAN-led mechanism such as EAS and ADMM+ as the platform for the implementation of regional solutions rather than creating new ones. As opposed to others, AOIP eschews the promotion of universal values and focuses instead on common interests such as economic and sustainable development, and marine connectivity. The discomfort of using the language of universal development emerges from ASEAN’s political diversity as well as the connotations of isolating China by defining the world in terms of democracies and autocracies.

The report highlights the Indo-Pacific as a region of dialogue and development with objectives of upholding rules-based regional architecture, enhancing the ASEAN community-building process and exploring cooperation in maritime cooperation, connectivity, economy and sustainable goal development (ASEAN, 2019). In framing its outlook on Indo-Pacific, ASEAN has avoided legalistic institutionalisation and remains consistent with its principles of inclusiveness, consensus building and stresses on political and diplomatic approaches.

9.3 Southeast Asia’s Response to Quad, AUKUS, IPEF

While the Indo-Pacific outlook articulates the interests and strategies of each major power, the QUAD, AUKUS and IPEF have emerged as the key institutions to implement these objectives among the actors with the convergence of interests. Though differing in their nature, actors, and strategies, all three institutions are motivated by the attempt to constrain China’s position in the emerging global order and the Indo-Pacific region through security and economic mechanisms.

9.3.1 QUAD

The idea of Quadrilateral (Quad) originated during the 2004 Tsunami when the navies of India, the US, Japan and Australia coordinated for the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations (HADR) (Sharma, 2010). In 2007, the delegates of Quad met on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to discuss the issues like transnational security, piracy and terrorism in the Asia-Pacific region. In September 2007, Quad navies along with the Singapore navy conducted the naval exercise in Bay of Bengal. China saw the grouping as a security

alliance against itself and protested strongly against it. In addition to the Chinese concerns, the domestic objections in Japan, India, and Australia were already pushing Quad towards its demise (Madan, 2017). In 2008, Australia opted out of the Malabar naval exercises, and subsequently in February 2008, stated that they were cautious of Chinese concerns about the quad strategic dialogue, it would not propose dialogue of such nature in future (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2008).

In 2017, the Quad countries - Australia, Japan, India and US- met again along the sidelines of the ASEAN summit in Manila to revive the grouping. The grouping describes itself as a group of democracies with a shared interest in securing rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. The concerns over the growing political and economic influence of China and its assertive behaviour to imagine the international order has led to renewed interest in the re-emergence of Quad. Since then it was elevated to the ministerial level with foreign ministers participating in the meetings. In March 2021, Quad held its first Leaders' Summit virtually, signalling the gradual development of the institution and conveying the shared interest of the actors in the Indo-Pacific region.

In Southeast Asia, the revival of the Quad has seen a mixed response. ASEAN member states do not have a unified position but different countries have different perceptions about it. The ambivalence around Quad seems to emerge from the concerns of diluting ASEAN centrality and undermining its multilateral institutions and partly from the narrative around Quad as a security partnership to contain China. However, as Quad has evolved in the last few years by clarifying its vision and objectives and broadening its ambit of cooperation in areas related to climate change and technology, it has found a positive response from Southeast Asian countries.

In 2018, a survey published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute on 'Southeast Asian perception of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue' noted that the ASEAN scepticism around the Quad emerges from the lack of clarity about its objectives among the Quad members. The ambivalence and scepticism were clear in the survey as 39 per cent of the respondents welcomed the initiative whereas 36 per cent thought of it as a vague idea. A majority of respondents (68 per cent) were not in favour of its expansion and 57 per cent of respondents saw Quad as an anti-China grouping (Thu, 2018). This survey, released just a few months after the Quad revival, reflected the anxieties among the Southeast Asian countries

about its effect on regional security and therefore, the perception within ASEAN was to have a wait-and-watch approach without challenging the formation of the Quad.

In the Southeast Asia Survey 2020 published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, only 42.8 per cent of respondents thought of Quad as having a positive impact on regional security. A majority of respondents from Indonesia (68.9 per cent), Malaysia (67.5), Laos (65.2 per cent), Thailand (63.5 per cent) and Cambodia (61.6 per cent) felt that it would have either no impact or negative impact on regional security. However, a majority of respondents - 61.6 per cent - also believed that their countries should participate in the security initiatives and military exercises of the Quad (Seah et al., 2022). The ambivalent attitude around Quad emerges from the concern of challenge to its centrality. There was a concern that Quad may supplant the existing regional mechanism to shape the region's security discourse order (Laksmana, 2020). Another apprehension was due to the Chinese factor. Quad was portrayed as an 'Asian NATO' to contain China. While Southeast Asians are worried about Chinese aggressive behaviour, they prefer engaging with China through ASEAN institutions (Stromseth, 2021). The security discourse revolving around the Quad and its attempt to securitize the region does not sit comfortably with the ASEAN member states (Kwek, 2021). Third, the discourse QUAD about upholding rule-based order and democratic values in the region, which is politically diverse, made them uncomfortable (Kwek, 2021). Therefore, the lack of clarity about the goals, objectives, and intention of Quad and its discourse veiled in the language of security and promotion of universal values did not excite the ASEAN and they were apprehensive of its success.

The first leadership Summit of Quad in March 2021 sought to address the ASEAN concerns by affirming the ASEAN centrality. The joint statement by the four leaders did not refer to China or security issues but focused on cooperating on non-security issues such as climate change and vaccine delivery (The White House, 2021). By acknowledging ASEAN's importance to the Indo-Pacific region and seeking cooperation with ASEAN, the Quad summit clarified any misapprehension of its wanting to supplant ASEAN institutions. Second, forming working groups on climate change, vaccine supply and critical and emerging technology sends the signal that Quad is willing to cooperate on issue areas beyond the realm of traditional security.

The Quad's attempts to allay ASEAN's concerns about the grouping as anti-Chinese or bypassing ASEAN centrality have certainly had a positive effect on the Southeast Asian

countries' perceptions of it. The summit clarified Quad's objectives which earlier seemed hazy and demonstrated the ability of its members to converge to common interests. In the Southeast Asia Survey 2022, 58.5 per cent of respondents agreed to strengthen the Quad with the prospects of cooperation in areas of vaccine diplomacy and climate change. While the Philippines (81.6 per cent), Laos (75 per cent), Vietnam (65.9 per cent) and Indonesia (64.9) are the strongest supporter, Cambodia (28.4 per cent) is most apprehensive about strengthening Quad for cooperation on the vaccine and climate change (Seah et al., 2022). The change of attitude is reflected in the position of Indonesia and Laos, which were apprehensive about its impact on regional security during the 2020 survey, whereas in the 2022 survey they seem to be strongly supporting Quad.

The change in the attitude of Southeast Asian countries reflects that the Quad by focusing on non-security issues and without undermining ASEAN centrality can gain more support from Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN member states may not have a unified view on Quad; however, they do not challenge it and are willing to work with them if it reduces their over-reliance on one partner. Southeast Asian states have attempted to balance their relations between US and China amid the growing tensions and are wary of being seen in one camp or the other. Therefore, they are more welcoming to avenues that work on issues that enhance the development and security of the region without exacerbating conflict in the region.

9.3.2 AUKUS

AUKUS defence partnership, a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, has raised apprehensions in the region about its impact on the regional geo-strategic environment. The defence pact will provide Australia with a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines and commits to cooperation on critical technologies, including cyber, artificial intelligence and undersea domains. The emergence of the new security architecture in the region without ASEAN has also led to concerns over ASEAN centrality among its member states. Concerned about the negative response it could elicit, Australia was quick to announce its commitment to the ASEAN centrality and Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (DFAT, 2021).

Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines' response to the new security partnership was positive. Vietnam and the Philippines were more welcoming to the security partnership, viewing it as a step towards regional balance in the geostrategic competition (Djalal, 2021). A

Vietnamese spokesperson responded to queries on Quad as, “all countries strive for the same goal of peace, stability, cooperation and development in the region and the world over” (Anh, 2021). The official response from the Philippines’ Foreign secretary, acknowledged the need for a balancer in the region due to the lack of military wherewithal of ASEAN to maintain peace and security. In this view, Australia’s acquisition of a nuclear-powered submarine is viewed by Manila as enhancing the capability in the region to correct the imbalances and is beneficial to regional security (DFA, 2021).

Indonesia and Malaysia were both critical of the security partnership citing concerns about the emergence of the arms race in the region. The Malaysian Prime Minister commented that this could “provoke other powers to act more aggressively in the region and trigger an arms race” (Barrett & Massola, 2021). Similarly, Jakarta too showed deep concerns about the arms race and power projection that could affect military balance in the region (Barrett, 2021). Both Malaysia and Indonesia are concerned about the nuclear aspect of AUKUS. While Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines does not violate the NPT and Southeast Asia Nuclear Free Zone treaty, the worry is that it could set a dangerous norm for other countries to acquire similar technology. Another concern is the growing number of nuclear submarine accidents in Southeast Asian waters that would affect the marine resources of the region (Supriyanto, 2022). Thailand, which has recently procured submarines from China, stated that the AUKUS would intensify the arms race in the region and negatively impact non-nuclear proliferation efforts (Xinhua, 2021). While Myanmar and Laos have abstained from commenting on the alliance, Cambodia expects that the alliance should not fuel any unhealthy rivalries and further escalate tension (Dara, 2021). In the South East Asia Survey 2022, 36 per cent of respondents felt that AUKUS will help balance China’s growing military power, whereas 22 per cent felt that it has the potential to escalate the regional arms race (Seah et al., 2022).

9.3.3 Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF)

Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) a US-led framework for economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, comprises Quad member states, New Zealand, South Korea and 7 ASEAN countries – Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Through this, the US aims to economically engage with the Indo-Pacific countries and counter China’s economic influence. IPEF, however, is not a free trade agreement that aims at greater market access. Rather the aims of IPEF are more ambitious in that this arrangement sets to

build the rules for the twenty first century economic order ranging from the digital economy to supply chains, clean energy infrastructure and taxation (The White House, 2022). Many view this as the replacement of the Trans-Pacific Partnership(TPP), which former US President Donald Trump withdrew.

The framework focuses on issues varying from fair and resilient rules for trade and digital economy and building resilient supply chains to clean energy and anti-corruption. It envisions creating a fair, connected, resilient and clean economic order that focuses on the challenges of the twenty first century, particularly in the areas of digital trade, supply chains, green infrastructure and life quality of the workforce. The framework is flexible and sensitive to the interests of the participating countries as the member states are free to commit to any one of the four pillars without participating in all of them. However, the lack of a trade agreement does not offer any long-term stability in the trade relations between the US and the member states. The concern here is about the policy continuity of the US administration as without a trade agreement the new administration can raise tariffs or change the terms of trade. While IPEF is still at the early discussion stage, however, with its ambitious vision it looks like the US strategy to create version 2.0 of ‘embedded liberalism’ (Ruggie, 1982).

Except for Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos, all other ASEAN countries are members of the IPEF. The enthusiastic response of ASEAN to the IPEF has both economic and political rationale. First, unlike the Quad and the AUKUS, it is not perceived as challenging ASEAN centrality or attempting to securitize the region. Second, its flexible approach to working on any pillars without choosing all becomes attractive for the ASEAN states that are keen to diversify their economic engagements amid the shocks of the Ukraine-Russia War and the Covid-19 pandemic without having to choose sides. Third, by signing the IPEF, Southeast Asian states are also posing themselves as the hub for potential manufacturing sites for industries that are moving away from China. Fourth, according to the Southeast Asian Survey 2022, the threat to health posed by the pandemic, unemployment and economic recession, and climate change are the top three challenges faced by Southeast Asian countries (Seah et al., 2022). The objectives of IPEF to work on green infrastructure, and trade, and thereby boost the economic potential and employment makes the proposition of IPEF attractive to the Southeast Asian states even if there is no clarity about the US commitments. In the same survey, a majority of respondents note that China has the most influence on the economic, political and strategic issues of Southeast Asia. However, a majority of them also see Chinese growing

influence as a worrying sign for the region. Therefore, a majority of the respondents – greater than 60 per cent - are keen to welcome the growing presence of the US in the region. The IPEF also brings the geo-economic dimension to the US Indo-Pacific strategy, which was hitherto missing making it more appealing for the Southeast Asian states.

9.4 Conclusion

India's Act East Policy is subsumed under the Indo-Pacific vision in terms of its geopolitical outreach while maintaining the principle of ASEAN centrality (Khurana, 2021). India's participation in the Quad shows its willingness to counter the hegemonic intent of China. Increasingly it also shows India's willingness to build strong strategic partnerships with the Southeast Asian states. Forums like Quad, AUKUS and IPEF are still new and much will depend on the agenda and narrative that they will construct. Southeast Asia is willing to work with these institutions if they enhance its economic and security capabilities and are not highly provocative towards China (D. McLain, personal communication, September 2022). Southeast Asia welcomes any engagement that does not make it choose between the US and China. Within this arrangement, the presence of India in the Indo-Pacific is welcomed by Southeast Asia as it allows them to diversify their relations while maintaining similar interests. Both India and ASEAN need to work together in the areas of maritime connectivity, sustainable and economic development, value and supply chains and setting up production facilities that could cater to the markets in the European Union and Africa (G. Singh, 2021).

CHAPTER XI

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a political, economic, cultural, and social union of countries in Southeast Asia, and as a regional organization is proving increasingly influential on a worldwide basis. Cooperation with major powers, especially links with India, is viewed by ASEAN as a privilege in the negotiation process and is therefore prioritized at all times. India and the ASEAN have a lot in common, from their near proximity to each other to the shared ocean and sea space that they occupy. India and the member states of the ASEAN share a rich history of cultural and religious ties. Throughout history, the two groups' relationship has been one of mutual friendship and tranquility. In addition to paralleling one another in strategic and economic benefits, ASEAN and India face similar difficulties in the areas of traditional and non-traditional security. Both ASEAN and India view India as an important regional partner; for India, ASEAN is a key aspect of its Act East Policy. Both parties feel comfortable discussing any topic openly and respectfully.

In the current era of intense strategic competition among major powers in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, relations between India and ASEAN have never been stronger or more mutually beneficial. The future of ASEAN-India ties is consequential not just for the countries of ASEAN and India, but also for the security, politics, economic growth, and stability of the region and the globe at large. However, in light of the fact that geopolitical events are always shifting, the challenges the India-ASEAN ties face take on greater significance.

To begin, the regional comprehensive economic partnership (RCEP) continues to be a source of tension between India and ASEAN. Tariff liberalization, protecting the agricultural and dairy industry, exposure to Chinese imports, and conflicts between RCEP criteria and India's national policy are all areas of concern for the country. The importance of India and ASEAN working together on matters like RCEP is growing as both groups want to keep regional power dynamics stable. In this light, there has been growing debates in India and elsewhere about a potential deepening of the rift in economic cooperation between India and the Indo-Pacific and India and the ASEAN countries. Thus, many have opined that staying out of the trade bloc may not serve its interests in the long term (Panda, 2019)

Second, while India and ASEAN have bolstered connectivity cooperation, infrastructural development remains underutilized in their ties. In particular, the term "connectivity" in the context of India-ASEAN ties encompasses not just the physical establishment of networks for movement, but also the development of digital connections and physical infrastructure through joint efforts. It is crucial for India to increase its connectivity efforts, as the country has already been investing in them by providing maritime and air connections between India and ASEAN. This was also emphasized at the September 2021 ASEAN conference on the Future of India-ASEAN Connectivity Partnerships. Shri Sarbananda Sonowal, the Union Minister for Ports, Shipping & Waterways and AYUSH, emphasized the importance of connectivity during this summit, saying that "connectivity provides the transmission channels through which development impulses can spread across the region and can add to the dynamic of economic and social progress" (PIB, 2021).

However, divergent and frequently opposing development goals of the countries have led to delays in many projects, including the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP), the Indian-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway, and the Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) (A. Singh, personal communication, September 14, 2022). Additionally, insurgency security concerns and the underdeveloped and undeveloped nature of the border regions chosen to host the development initiatives have caused setbacks. To achieve the connectivity goal, India needs to prioritize the speedy rollout and completion of connectivity projects currently underway between it and the ASEAN countries.

Continuing to invest in Northeast India's development is another crucial step in strengthening ties between India and Southeast Asia. The eight states that make up India's Northeastern Region (NER) are generally seen as being on the periphery of the country's attempts to improve its infrastructure and economy. Due to its proximity to the ASEAN states and China, NER is quickly becoming a key factor in India's Act East Policy and has the potential to serve as a catalyst for strengthening India's partnerships with the West and the East. However, the region has remained neglected despite efforts like the previous Look East and the updated version of this policy, Act East. Both international and domestic insurgencies have complicated the NER's development prospects. If the states in the NER are allowed to keep operating as they have for so long, the area will become nothing more than a transit route for the import and export going place at the border points or a problematic extraction point for oil.

Large-scale informal trade, narcotics smuggling, and other sources of unease will continue to be a source of concern (The Hindu, 2021).

While measures to improve connections with the continent's eastern half are already being taken, the other half of this initiative needs investigation. The latter entails making investment opportunities available while also reducing risks. However, India would need to reorganize its priorities if it wants to achieve this goal. India must prioritize improving commerce and connectivity between the Northeast States and the rest of India first. This should be then subsequent by enhancing trade and connectivity between the states of the Northeast themselves, and then between the NER and the ASEAN region (S. Saran, personal communication, August 18, 2022).

In addition to bolstering the current connectivity initiatives, digital connectivity should be a primary area of concentration. Heng Swee Keat, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies, spoke at length on the topic at the CII's Annual Meeting 2021, highlighting the country's efforts to better connect the digital economies of India and ASEAN in order to facilitate the freer exchange of information, goods, and services. That "ASEAN is a fast-growing consumer market with a growing middle class and a population that is increasingly digitally connected" was emphasized here. As a result, ASEAN and India should look into measures to improve digital connectivity in addition to facilitating the flow of commodities and people (Economic Times, 2021).

Here, it is also important to look at the social connectivity between India and ASEAN. A major problem here remains that not enough initiatives have been taken by India, or countries like ASEAN to invest in development of the border communities, not just physically, but also politically and socially. While there has been a renewed interest in the region, the border communities are marginally represented in the polices, which often results in a gap between national policies and local interests. It is thus important for India to invest in the social and political development and representation of the NER, and particularly the border areas (A. Singh, personal communication, September 14, 2022).

The struggle between great powers is another source of tension between India and ASEAN. India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been strategically and economically dependent on the United States (US) and China, respectively,

although they are hesitant to pick a side. This was evident during this year's Shangri-La Dialogue, when the level of uneasiness among Southeast Asian and Pacific countries about the intensifying China-U.S. strategic competition became apparent. In fact, some have gone so far as to call it a "systemic rivalry". As such, India is in a position to reassure ASEAN to seek a middle ground and credible solutions. Even though ASEAN nations' economies are highly intertwined with China's, they see India as a countering power as China increases its unilateral behavior in the area. India may reinforce its role as a balancer by increasing its naval capabilities in the region, but it should avoid becoming entangled in power confrontations with China, which poses a threat to India's security as well. It also may reassure ASEAN that it, too, prefers peace over conflict in the region and won't take sides in the rivalry between the United States and China, paving the way for mutual growth and prosperity (Basu and Bhowmick, 2021).

Another difference has been ASEAN and India's divergent approach towards groupings like Quad and AUKUS. Since organizations like the Quad and AUKUS are often seen to be striving to establish themselves at the center of the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN has been hesitant to fully accept them. The return of the Quad in Southeast Asia has been met with a variety of reactions. There is no consensus among ASEAN member states; instead, each country has its own view. Concerns that ASEAN's influence will be eroded and its multilateral institutions will be undermined appear to be contributing factors to the reluctance over Quad. Different groups within ASEAN have different reactions to the formation of AUKUS. To resolve this, India has to reaffirm its support for ASEAN's leadership role in the area and use the organization as a venue for mediating tensions and issues in the region. The Quad has also often stressed the importance of ASEAN throughout their meetings (Lakshmana, 2020).

Finally, there has been Sustainable Development collaboration between India and Southeast Asian countries on several fronts, but these efforts need to be intensified and synergized. For instance, there should be more formalized and widespread medical and health collaboration between India and Southeast Asian countries. Despite some progress in health cooperation between India and ASEAN, especially in the wake of Covid-19 through the provision of medical supplies and vaccines, relations between the two have not yet reached their full potential. India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could work together to establish a food bank to combat hunger and food insecurity, particularly in the wake of natural catastrophes.

New technologies, AI, and smart cities present more opportunities for collaboration and cooperation between India and Southeast Asian states. Some development has already taken place in this area. During the first-ever Joint Committee Meeting (JCM) held under the Bilateral Programme of Cooperation in Science and Technology between India and the Philippines in 2021, the two countries agreed to collaborate on research into key areas like virology, blockchain, Artificial Intelligence (AI), health, and smart cities. Singaporean firms' involvement in global smart city, urban planning, and infrastructure initiatives continues unabated.

OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

- The end of the cold war, economic reforms, advent of regionalism and globalization acted as immediate drivers for India's rethinking of its foreign policy wherein India formulated its 'Look East Policy'. The rapid economic growth of the Asian tigers, the need for markets and investments, reaping the benefits of globalization and regionalism projects and diversification of energy resources acted as key drivers for the formulation of the Look East Policy. India has positioned its northeastern region in its broader Look East Policy discourse aiming to connect it with Southeast Asia through close economic, cultural and through connectivity projects to improve opportunities in the region. And expand its footprints of soft power into Southeast Asia. There is a wide consensus that India's Act East Policy has been barely successful in India's Northeast region. The said benefits of connectivity, trade and free movement have not reached people in the region, the people in the Northeast region see the region being transformed as a transit point between India and Southeast Asia. There is a need to bring in more investment in the region for the education and health infrastructure under the Act East Policy.
- Similar to Look East Policy, Act East Policy is not a well-structured policy but has evolved over time. Scholars and policymakers believe that Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific strategy are concurrent and do not have much differences. The Covid-19 pandemic, Russia-Ukraine war and the protectionist policies amid these crises have shown the fragility of the post-war world order and the urgency to replace it with a more open and inclusive system. Within this context, India-ASEAN needs to step up its process of strengthening supply chains, building resilient regional architecture based on inclusivity and shared rules, enhancing free trade and labour mobility, and seeking cooperation on newer avenues made possible by the fourth industrial revolution.

- India's trade with ASEAN has steadfastly grown in the last thirty years but the last few years have witnessed slow trade growth and the trade between these two have not realized its full potential. India has not been able to raise the benefits of the free trade agreements due to non-tariff barriers, low domestic productivity and the failure of domestic firms to compete in the ASEAN markets. India needs to re-look at the FTAs as the current agreements do not have the capacity to include new drivers of regional and global trade such as e-commerce, investment dispute resolution and environmental issues and challenges. To improve its economic partnership with ASEAN, India needs to renegotiate the free trade agreements allowing for broader trade engagements with more market access and reduction in non-tariff barriers with provisions of trade in service sectors. There is a need for the Indian government to provide impetus for private sectors to invest more in Southeast Asian states.
- Physical and digital connectivity remains one of the most important areas of cooperation between India and Southeast Asia. While India has focused mostly on the road connectivity leading to its asymmetrical development of its relationship with Southeast Asian states. India needs to balance this approach focusing on more shipping and air services between the two regions. New Delhi still lags behind the completion of some of the connectivity projects. India needs to improve its record of delivering projects that remain mired with a lack of coordination among different agencies. To compete with China and reduce ASEAN dependence on China, India must intensify its engagement in the digital domain through attractive credit lines and investing more in the region.
- Digital connectivity has emerged as a newer domain in India-Southeast Asia cooperation but faces severe competition with China. China has been providing attractive financial packages to Southeast Asian states. While India cannot match

China's financial investments, it could engage with Southeast Asia in creating rule-based systems for digital infrastructure and services. India can share its expertise in deploying Unified Payment Interface (UPI) allowing low-cost digital transactions between the two countries.

- India's participation in the ASEAN's regional security architecture and its adherence to ASEAN centrality has further bolstered India-ASEAN security cooperation. China's assertiveness in the region has resulted in ASEAN viewing to strengthen its relations with India focusing on trade and maritime cooperation through multilateral and bilateral forums. While India is notionally seen as a balancer to China, in reality, Southeast Asian states see it as the first respondent in the event of a natural or maritime crisis.
- India and Southeast Asia could enhance their maritime engagement and cooperation at the bilateral level through increased naval diplomacy, joint patrols and exercises and white shipping agreements. The cooperation could also extend towards collaboration on undertaking medical missions, naval logistics and joint operations in tackling traditional and non-traditional security issues such as climate change and maritime crime.
- India and Southeast Asia are lagging behind in their achievement of the SDGs, and can cooperate by building separate programmes by sharing technological know-how, capacity building, and providing assistance in reaching the objectives of SDGs. Sub-regional forums such as Mekong-Ganga cooperation and BIMSTEC could enhance these development cooperation projects and in areas of zero hunger, good health and well-being. These goals should become central priorities for both India and ASEAN in their vision of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.
- Despite the significant presence of the Indian Diaspora in Southeast Asia, India has failed to utilize its potential in the region. Indian Diaspora has risen to influential

political and business positions but its role in shaping foreign policy remains limited. There is a serious need for India to consider the Indian diaspora as an important part of its foreign policy. India must go beyond its traditional role of investment and cultivate relations through soft power projection in the region. New Delhi must also reconsider its stance on issues faced by Indians in Southeast Asia, such an initiative must be aimed at creating better connections with the diaspora and building trust between host countries and ethnic minority communities.

- The people-to -people engagement between India and Southeast Asia remains limited. India is not an attractive education or tourist hub for Southeast Asians. More investment in education and tourism as well as ease in the visa services could enhance people-to-people engagement. India is engaged in the archaeological renovation and restoration of many historical heritage sites and temples across Southeast Asia that brings out deep historical linkages between the two regions. The cultural and traditional linkages between India's North Eastern Region and Southeast Asia largely remain uncultivated and there needs to be a proactive cultural diplomacy linking both regions.
- Southeast Asia, located at the midpoint of the Indo-Pacific region has reacted cautiously to the Indo-Pacific strategy articulated by the major powers. There has been unease within ASEAN about the narratives of the Indo-Pacific aimed at containing China and dividing the region as a theater of major power rivalry. Further, this has been viewed as an attempt to securitize the region and weaken the ASEAN centrality and its multilateral institutions. Therefore, motivated by the concerns of reinforcing ASEAN centrality, ASEAN members have converged together, led by Indonesia to present its Indo-Pacific outlook.
- ASEAN member states do have a unified position on QUAD and the revival of QUAD has seen a mixed response. The ambivalence around QUAD seems to emerge from the

concerns of diluting ASEAN centrality and undermining its multilateral institutions and partly from the narrative around QUAD as a ‘security partnership to contain China’. Southeast Asia welcomes any engagement that does not make it choose between the US and China. They are more welcoming to avenues that work on issues that enhance the development and security of the region without exacerbating conflict in the region. Within this arrangement, the presence of India in the Indo-Pacific is welcomed by Southeast Asia as it allows them to diversify their relations while maintaining similar interests. India and ASEAN need to work together in the areas of maritime connectivity, sustainable and economic development, value and supply chains and setting up production facilities that could cater to the markets in the European Union and Africa.

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