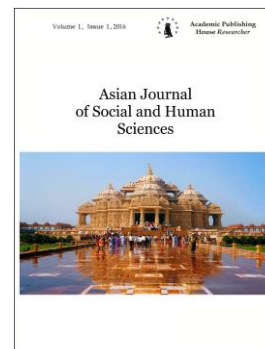


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## Prospects of ASEAN-India Relations: An Analysis

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### Abstract

ASEAN-India relations have been broadening and deepening since 1992 on the basis of mutual understandings and mutual interests. As India and ASEAN have emerged as significant players in Indo-Pacific geopolitics, developments of ASEAN-India relations have attracted academic attention. This paper seeks to offer a broad picture of ASEAN-India relations and importantly put forth some suggestions to enhance this relationship in the future. It will examine ASEAN's perspectives of India's Look East Policy towards ASEAN. Then it will explore how the SEAN-India partnership has progressed since 1992. It will also make some recommendations to further advance this partnership in the future.

**Keywords:** Look East Policy, Act East Policy, India – ASEAN relations, cooperation and connectivity.

### 1. Introduction

Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in the context of global economic and financial crisis, the world is moving towards a multi-polar and multi-layered setting, embedding increasingly important roles of India and the ASEAN Community to play in the evolving architecture of the Asia-Pacific region. As India and ASEAN's interests have been aligned more closely than ever before, especially when ASEAN has become a full-fledged community since the end of 2015 and India has made remarkable achievements in national developments and international significance. It is time now to build a stronger ASEAN-Indian strategic partnership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, heading to the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ASEAN-India relations. Toward this end, this paper will begin with a discussion of ASEAN views of India's Look East Policy before reviewing India-ASEAN relations since 1992 up to present. Importantly, it goes on to analyze the possible shape of ASEAN-India in the new 25 years. It will be concluded that ASEAN-India strategic partnership will be beneficial to both ASEAN and India. Henceforth, ASEAN and Indian leaders should work closely together to better address challenges facing time and establish mechanisms to enhance their relations.

### 2. Discussion

#### India's Look East Policy: ASEAN perceptions

India's Look East Policy (LEP) has been the cornerstone in India's foreign policy towards ASEAN after Cold War. The India's LEP has undergone two phases. The first phase started with the aim to enhance economic relations, and reached towards the strategic, political and institutional linkages with ASEAN. The second phase became more extended and comprehensive with the

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adoption of “extended neighborhood” theory, therefore LEP included not only ASEAN but also Northeast Asia (China, Japan and South Korea), apart from Australia, New Zealand. India’s Look East Policy developed into a dynamic and action oriented “Act East Policy” in November 2014. Through the “Act East Policy”, India has intensified its outreach to India’s key partners, such as Japan, Vietnam, Australia and ASEAN. The shift to Act East Policy can be seen as a manifestation of Modi government’s stronger commitment to engage with Southeast Asia (Modi, 2014).

### ***The Look East Policy Phase I (1990s-2002)***

During Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao’s visit to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore in 1994, he made a speech which reflected the essence idea of the India’s “Look East Policy”. In his speech, N.Rao mentioned close, long-term, historic and cultural relations between India and Southeast Asia. He also calmed down the fears and suspicions among some Asia-Pacific countries about Indian Navy presence and Indian performance in the region. On this occasion, he also introduced India’s economic reform and the Indian Government’s attempts in implementing the economic reforms. The speech showed four major contents of India’s “Look East Policy” including: (i) Expanding Indian influence to the sea, space and the external of India’s territory; (ii) Increasing the mutual understanding and cultural exchanges between India and Southeast Asia; (iii) Utilizing enormous resources to India’s development process; (iv) Promoting cooperation and exchanges between India and the region in economic-political field such as human rights, labor standards, management of resources and environmental protection, to take advantage of liberalization in information...

As such, India’s Look East Policy phase I focused on strengthening relations between India and ASEAN countries in trade, investment, politics and security. Moreover, the first LEP phase, provided the foundation for India to join the regional security, economic and political organizations such as APEC, WTO, and ARF.... India aimed to use economic diplomacy as a pillar in its foreign policy. Southeast Asia was considered as “springboard” for India to enter to the regional market (Rao, 1994).

### ***The Look East Policy Phase II (2003-2014)***

In October 2003, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee attended the 2nd ASEAN-India Summit in Indonesia and made a visit to Thailand. These trips on one hand marked the India’s LEP’s achievements after its inception nearly a decade before under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, on the other hand marked a new phase in the India Look East Policy.

Earlier, in September 2003, India’s External Affairs Minister Shri Yashwant Sinha, made a speech at Harvard University in which he mentioned India’s new initiative to Asia: “In the past, India’s engagement with much of Asia, including Southeast and East Asia, was built on an idealistic conception of Asian brotherhood, based on shared experiences of colonialism and of cultural ties. The rhythm of the region today is determined, however, as much by trade, investment and production as by history and culture. That is what motivates our decade-old ‘Look East’ policy. Already, this region accounts for 45 % of our external trade” (Sinha, 2003).

In Mr Sinha’s speech, he distinguished the differences between the two phases of LEP. “The first phase of India’s Look East policy was ASEAN-centered and focused primarily on trade and investment linkages. The new phase of this policy is characterized by an expanded definition of ‘East’, extending from Australia to East Asia, with ASEAN at its core. The new phase also marked a shift from trade to wider economic and security issues, including joint efforts to protect the sea-lanes and coordinate counter-terrorism activities” (Sinha, 2003). Mr. Sinha also highlighted a number of points to illustrate the LEP second phase, namely:

Firstly, geographic scope of the LEP was broader, spreading from Southeast Asia to East Asia and the South Pacific. The LEP phase II was marked by the concept of extension in Look East Policy, “stretching from Australia to China and East Asia, with ASEAN at center” (Sinha, 2003).

Secondly, there was a change from different single issues in the first phase of LEP to comprehensive issues in second phase. In the early 90s of the twentieth century, there were only lower levels joint exercises and the military visits between India and ASEAN countries. Things have been changed. The comprehensive defense cooperation occurred between the two sides. India also built up the bilateral agreements which allowed their naval ships regularly go to the ports in

Southeast Asia. India began expand defense exchanges with Japan, South Korea and China. Never before did India deploy strongly its multilateral defense policy to Asia.

Thirdly, there are increases in transportation and infrastructure cooperation between India and ASEAN. For example, India actively built the transportation corridor which linked India with Southeast Asian, including trilateral projects on building motorway routes connecting India with Myanmar and Thailand, building railroad linked New Delhi to Hanoi.

Fourthly, the second phase of LEP did not aim to deal with the “China threats”. With India, as mentioned in the Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee’s visit to China in 6/2003, the second phase of LEP focused on the resolution in the issues in Indian bilateral relations with other countries, and then took advantage in LEP phase II to create opportunities for economic cooperation and bilateral trade.

Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has upgraded India’s Look East Policy to a greater momentum – ‘Act East Policy’ at India-ASEAN Summit in November 2014. India’s strategic objective in Act East Policy is improving strategic relations with major powers to a higher level and create conditions for India emerged as a “global power”, reinforcing the recognition India as a regional power ([East Sea Studies, 2014](#)). Obviously, Modi’s recent movements have shown some major changes in Act East Policy.

The first change is that Modi's government has broadened agenda for economic development including connectivity. Prior to the 2014 election, Modi strengthened Gujarat’s existing economic links with China, Japan, and Singapore in order to deepen India’s engagement with the Asia region. During PM Modi’s visit to Japan in August 2014, PM Abe promised to mobilize nearly \$35 billion dollars of aid and investment into India in the next five years. Also the Chinese President Xi Jinping, during his visit to India in September 2014 set an investment target of about \$ 20 billion in the coming years. Both Japan and China have ambition to build trans-boarder transport corridors between India and East Asia. Connectivity – over land and sea – is also a major priority for Modi’s government in its engagement with ASEAN. As the business and economic environment improved under Mr. Modi’s government, more investments are likely from across East Asia, including Korea, Australia and the South East Asian nations ([Mohan, 2015](#)).

Secondly, Modi has also significantly expanded the geographic scope of India’s Act East policy. He has become the first Indian Prime Minister in 28 years to visit Australia that has emerged as a major partner for India. Modi also became the first Indian PM in 33 years to travel to Fiji in November 2014.

Thirdly, Modi’s government has put special emphasis on promoting India’s soft power in the region—through a vigorous engagement with the diaspora and a strong commitment to build on shared civilizational bonds. India’s new government considered cultural and spiritual connectivity as an important connectivity to Asia ([Mohan, 2015](#)).

Fourthly, India also fully engages with the emerging political players in East Asia. Modi has reaffirmed the centrality of ASEAN in building a stable and prosperous order in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific. On the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Modi stated that India shared deep interests in the freedom of navigation in sea and air. He underlined the importance of all parties abiding by the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas. This is also the new in Modi’s policy. He emphasized the importance of maritime security and need to expand India’s defense partnerships with Asia. In the last few months, India has deepened defense ties with the United States, Japan, Australia and Vietnam.

In sum, for over two decades, India's Look East policy has shaped the way India deals with its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region, leading to substantially deep economic, politic, institutional, security, cultural and sub-regional relations. India's Look East Policy was initiated in the early 1990s with the aim of increasing its economic ties with Southeast Asia. Since then, the objectives of Look East have broadened to the all fields and to the entire Asia-Pacific. Given the swiftly changing security dynamics in the region, Indian PM Narendra Modi rechristened the ‘Look East’ as the ‘Act East’ policy, stating the importance of strengthening deeper ties with partners such as Japan, Vietnam, South Korea and Australia. India's interest in the Southeast Asia is being driven by mutual understandings and mutual interests in many fields, especially in economic, security...

### **Review India-ASEAN relations.**

Under the impact of the India's Look East, now is Act East Policy, India-ASEAN relations have improved rapidly and flourished on many fields.

#### ***Political cooperation***

The ASEAN-India political cooperation is constantly being tightened and expanded, creating a foundation for cooperation in other fields. The first milestone marked the warmth in India-ASEAN relations was in 1992 when India became a sectorial partnership. Then, India became a full dialogue partnership of ASEAN in December 1995 and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996. Those dialogues established and promoted India's activities in other regional mechanisms such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The relationship further elevated with the convening of the ASEAN- India Summit in 2002 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Since then, the ASEAN-India Summit has been held annually. In 2004, the two sides signed a plan "Partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity". At the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit held on 20 December 2012 in New Delhi, India, ASEAN-India Partnership elevated to a Strategic Partnership. It was considered as an important breakthrough, creating a foundation to bring the relations between India and ASEAN to a comprehensive development.

The political cooperation between the India-ASEAN was also demonstrated through the official visits of Indian government to the ASEAN member countries and vice versa. Particularly, in 2014-2015, the Indian Prime Minister and his External Affairs Sushma Swaraj paid visits to most of ASEAN member countries including Myanmar, Singapore and Vietnam. During the visit, India always affirmed its support to the peace, stability and development of ASEAN, and clearly demonstrated the role of Southeast Asia in India's strategic development in particular, and in the region, the world in general.

#### ***Economic cooperation***

The India's Look East Policy focused on strengthening Indian economic relations with ASEAN countries. Since then, India-ASEAN economic cooperation has obtained great achievements.

The two sides have established various mechanisms to promote economic, trade and investment cooperation. ASEAN- India Free Trade Area (FTA) was the most important economic framework, which covered other fields of cooperation, including goods, investment, services, connectivity, infrastructure, tourism, and agriculture and forestry sector. (ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreements (TIG), ASEAN-India Trade in Services and Investment Agreements (2012), The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project; India's Inter-Ministerial Group on Connectivity...).

Trade and investment ties between the two sides have been strengthened and accelerated in growth. In 2014, total trade amounted to US\$77 billion, a significant increase over the US \$ 44 billion seen during 2009-10. Over the past decade, bilateral trade has increased at an average annual rate of a blistering 23 percent (ASEAN briefing, 2015). A key factor for the growth in trade and investment was India's "Act East" policy and the establishment of ASEAN Economy Community in the end of 2015. ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (2010) combined with Modi's new FDI policy opened up a range of investment opportunities into India, particularly in the services sector. Moreover, the economic cooperation between India and ASEAN has also brought benefits to other fields including connectivity, infrastructure, tourism, agriculture and forestry.

#### ***Defense cooperation***

In the field of defense and security cooperation, India and ASEAN have shared some mutual interests and understanding in regional security challenges, including traditional and non-traditional security issues such as terrorism, piracy, transnational crimes, climate changes, maritime security, cyber security, water security, etc. India-ASEAN defense cooperation is geared through exchanges of high-level visits, strategic dialogue, port calls, training exchanges, joint exercises and provision of defense equipment. At bilateral level, India has strengthened its military and defense links with some ASEAN countries including Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia and

Vietnam. At the multilateral level, India has become member of ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meet Plus (ADMM+), ARF... The basic objective of ADMM+ framework is to bring a cooperative security mechanism, especially in the areas of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, maritime security, counter-terrorism and peace-keeping operations. The joint exercises between India and ASEAN members have organized regularly, which made ASEAN-India defense cooperation become key factor in Modi's Act East policy.

Moreover, on anti-terrorism battlefield, the two sides signed the Declaration on cooperation against terrorism in 2003. On border issue, both India and ASEAN agreed to maintain stability in border areas to create favorable conditions for two sides' economic development. Furthermore, India is also the country provides for ASEAN military equipment, experts, and military training.

ASEAN and India have shared mutual interests in maritime security in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Therefore, both ASEAN and India support for maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation, and settling territorial disputes through peaceful means on the basis of international law, including UNCLOS 1982. ASEAN urged India's support to the full implementation of the Declaration of the Conduct (DOC) and early finalization of the Code of Conduct (COC).

### ***Socio-Cultural Cooperation***

India and ASEAN have worked together to promote human resources development and educational exchanges, science and technology cooperation, information technology, SMEs development, tourism and other cultural activities. Moreover, India has contributed to narrowing the developmental gaps in ASEAN by supporting the capacity building programs in the CLMV countries namely the creation of the Entrepreneurship Development Centers (EDC) and the Centers for the English Language Training (CELT) in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam (Chheang, 2014).

The Indian Look East Policy is being implemented in the right direction and has great contribution to promote India-ASEAN relations in many fields. Economic cooperation is always the bright side, which contributes to other fields such as politics, military-defence and socio-culture. However, beyond those achievements, the India-ASEAN cooperation exist some limitations such as the economic development gap, the differences in politic regime, culture and the secure in sensitive issues...which made ASEAN-India relations couldn't develop as their potential. Therefore, forging a strong India-ASEAN relation requires not only addressing future challenges, but also seizing new opportunities and proactively initiating new ideas for future cooperation.

### ***Future of ASEAN-Indian Relations***

After having the celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ASEAN-India relations and heading to the Road together between India and ASEAN, it is timely now to consider how the ASEAN-India relations could be improved and elevated to a higher level, strategic partnership, beyond the plan of action in 2016-2020 periods. Follows are some of the suggestions for all to consider:

Firstly, in globalized and inter-connected world, top priority in ASEAN-India relations is to ensure an open, inclusive, sustainable and transparent regional architecture for peace and stability in Asia. Both India and ASEAN should seek to build up a strategic trust, uphold the international law, consolidated the existing and emerging regional arrangements. India remains ASEAN's indispensable partner towards this goal. And ASEAN should be considered as the top priority in the India's foreign policy. ASEAN is not only a hub of economic growth and prosperity in Asia, but is also significant for global stability against China's assertiveness. India's role becomes critical in such an evolving balance of power. As Singapore's elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew suggested long back, India should be "part of the South-East Asia balance of forces" and "a counterweight (to China) in the Indian Ocean". While trade and investment remain central to India in South-East Asia, the larger strategic context should not be lost sight of as India engages with the region. India has built strategic partnerships with several nations in the region but New Delhi needs to engage more with the region in terms of trade, investment.

Secondly, India should implement more concrete and determined actions to place the AEP into implementation. The complexity in the Asia Pacific region is now increasingly high with both opportunities and challenges. There is increasing doubt about the US's role as a power rebalancing

factor in the region especially now with the new administration in the context of China's rising and increasingly complicated dispute in SCS, therefore ASEAN countries are looking for new factors who can maintain constructive competition and stability in the region. ASEAN member-states are also working hard for easing of tensions, including the start of negotiations for a binding regional "code of conduct" to govern activities involving conflicting claims. But China has resisted, and progress on the code has been slow. Naturally, India is a choice, even ideal choice because of its traditional influence and regional policy. This has opened up crucial geopolitical space for India. Besides, India and ASEAN need to cooperate in addressing global issues, including climate change, natural disasters, epidemics, food-water-energy security, maritime safety and security, terrorism, transnational crimes, money laundering, drug trafficking and cyber security

Thirdly, ASEAN and India should forge two-ways economic and trade linkages. ASEAN and India should redouble efforts to promote India-ASEAN economic relations in the framework of FTAs and ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Regarding to promoting economic cooperation between the two sides, the India – ASEAN Business Council could have annual meetings or its thematic sub-group can meet more frequently with the inclusion of small and medium entrepreneurs (SMEs). India and ASEAN should work together to outline the difficulties and opportunities for SMEs when entering into regional economic integration and jointly work out ways to grasp the opportunities as well as overcome the difficulties for mutual benefits. It is time for India to push for its membership in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, especially as this is something that India's partners in the region and beyond are enthusiastic about under a proactive Modi government. The India government should think of the way to drive the relations into more productivity for both sides. Take Vietnam is an example, the Strategic Comprehensive Partnership relations was built in 2016 marks the milestone on the bilateral relations. However, trade and investment relations remain moderate compared with each side's potential and the importance of the relations.

Fourthly, connectivity should be developed in all dimensions of ASEAN-India's strategic partnership. The infrastructure developments along India, Myanmar and Thailand border, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for multi-sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the ASEAN-India Highway Network are the major connectivity projects between India and ASEAN. Both India and ASEAN should encourage people-to-people exchanges among academics, scholars and journalists, policymakers, business leaders. In addition, India and ASEAN need to pay more attention to mass media cooperation. To implement these initiatives needed financial and technical resources. It is therefore necessary to expand the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund and the ASEAN Development Fund (Chheang, 2014).

Fifthly, Defense and security should be the most important pillar of India's ASEAN policy. India-ASEAN's defense and security cooperation should deepen through such mechanism as ADMM+1, between ASEAN and other power partners. These mechanisms would create more favorable condition for India – ASEAN cooperation in security and defense fields. Commerce, Culture and Connectivity are popularly seen as the three fundamental pillars of India's robust engagement with ASEAN, however, defense and security are strongly recommended to be the first priority of India's foreign policy. The reason is that India is one of the military powers of the region in terms of personnel, weapons and military technology. Moreover, due to China's OBOR and its desire to expand its influence not only in Asia-pacific but also in India Ocean, India is facing with potential threats from geo-politic competition with China right at India's backyard. In order to pursue becoming India's regional power, it is vital to deepen defense relations with ASEAN members, focusing on those who have shared traditional relations with India.

Moreover, India and ASEAN can cooperate and coordinate to improve the ARF's operation, move the ARF agenda forward, and enhance practical cooperation in confidence-building and preventive diplomacy. Particularly in the context of many emerging regional security mechanisms in the region (ADMM+, EAS,) competing with ARF. ASEAN member-states are also working hard for easing of tensions, including the process of negotiations for a binding regional "code of conduct" to govern activities involving conflicting claims. But China has been trying not to support it and progress on the code has been slow. This has opened up crucial geopolitical space for India.

Among these countries, Vietnam could be one of the most potential countries in the region for India to boost defense ties. Vietnam and India upgraded the relations in 2016, which opens new space for defense relations. Due to its rapid economic development in the past decade, Vietnam is

now on a fast track on its military modernization with the focus on Navy, Coast Guard, and Air Force aiming at dealing with the increasing tension in the SCS. The reason is that defense relations also the best way to show the nature of the trust worth of the relations. Vietnam supports India to join the ADMM+1 mechanism and to play a bigger role in ARF. Vietnam as a coordinator will increase and enhance ASEAN-India cooperation in joint defense research, designing, developing and manufacturing of military equipment, including transfer of technology on weapon and defense equipment.

In the 2016-2018 periods, as a coordinator of ASEAN-India relations, Vietnam is ready to provide broader gateways for India's stronger engagement in South East Asia, especially through India's Look East and now Act East Policy. Vietnam could actively give new initiatives to strengthen and enhance India – ASEAN relations in priority areas, especially in economic, security and socio-culture.

In economic cooperation, ASEAN, particularly Vietnam is becoming a hub for India's attempt in promoting the strategic partnership, comprehensive partnership and FTAs with all the leading economic partners in the region. Thus, Vietnam will continue support India's economic engagement in the region and create favorable condition for Indian enterprises come to ASEAN's market.

In socio-cultural cooperation, as an IT power, India could help ASEAN in establishing an e-network for tele-medicine, tele-education in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. Moreover, tourism is the strength of both India and ASEAN countries, including Vietnam. In 2016, the ASEAN's chairman-Laos might promote tourism as her priority field. Therefore, both India, Vietnam could increase tourism and business trips along Mekong River, Bay of Bengal region and Malacca Strait. Furthermore, we all think of direct air-lines from Delhi (or at least major Indian city) to Jakarta, Manila and capitals at CLMV countries (or commercial centers, like Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam).

Last but not least, the Delhi Dialogue should be maintained on the lines of Strategic Dialogue that focus on specific projects and action. ASEAN-India dialogue relations have grown rapidly from a sectorial dialogue partnership in 1992 to a full dialogue partnership in December 1995. At the 13th ASEAN-India Summit held in Kuala Lumpur on 21 November 2015, the ASEAN Leaders welcomed India's initiative, namely the "Act East Policy" and "Make in India" and noted that the initiatives could complement ASEAN's community building efforts. In that regard, the ASEAN Leaders encouraged India to work with ASEAN to realize the vision and goals outlined in the ASEAN 2025: *Forging Ahead Together*.

In conclusion, the robust cultural and civilizational connections between ASEAN and India in the past and the common interests that both parties share today provide significant potential for the development of a strong strategic partnership for tomorrow. But an agenda for future relation is not forged by common interests alone. It will require bold decisions, innovative policies, and smart politics on the part of ASEAN and Indian leaders in order to get over potential obstacles as well as push through initiatives that provide opportunities for enhancing the relations. Only when both parties are determined to build a strong ASEAN-India strategic partnership, an outcome that is beneficial to not only India and ASEAN, but the entire Indo-Pacific as well.

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