



## Repositioning India in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Implications of the Act East Policy on ASEAN Relations

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### Abstract:

India's Act East Policy (AEP) marks a significant shift in India's foreign policy orientation, emphasizing stronger engagement with the ASEAN region and the broader Indo-Pacific. This paper analyzes India's evolving strategy, focusing on its diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions. By examining the key drivers behind the AEP, including economic integration, regional security concerns, and China's growing influence, this paper evaluates India's efforts to strengthen multilateral ties with ASEAN, aiming to counterbalance China's hegemonic aspirations. The paper also explores the challenges and opportunities in the region's geopolitical environment, emphasizing ASEAN's centrality in India's strategic calculus. Employing a qualitative approach based on policy analysis, regional security frameworks, and secondary literature, the paper concludes that while India's Act East Policy enhances its role in the Indo-Pacific, its long-term success will hinge on balancing regional aspirations with global strategic realities.

**Keywords:** *India, ASEAN, Act East Policy, Indo-Pacific, strategic partnerships, regional security, economic cooperation, China, maritime security, regionalism*

### Introduction

India's engagement with ASEAN has evolved dramatically in recent years, particularly with the shift from the "Look East" to the "Act East" policy. This transition reflects India's growing recognition of the Indo-Pacific's strategic importance, driven by both the economic dynamism of the region and the emerging security challenges posed by China's expansion. The Act East Policy (AEP), formally articulated in 2014, aims to deepen India's ties with Southeast Asia through stronger diplomatic, security, and economic cooperation. At the heart of this policy shift is a desire to secure India's role as a key player in the Indo-Pacific, while simultaneously contributing to regional stability and prosperity.

The strategic implications of the Act East Policy have profound consequences for both India's national interests and its relationship with ASEAN. This paper explores the strategic



drivers of India's Act East Policy, examines its impact on India's regional security and economic cooperation with ASEAN, and assesses the broader geopolitical implications of this policy shift. In particular, the paper emphasizes ASEAN's centrality in India's strategic vision and how the AEP aligns with India's broader goals in the Indo-Pacific.

### **India's Act East Policy: Evolution and Strategic Drivers**

India's Look East Policy, initiated in the early 1990s, laid the foundation for engagement with Southeast Asia, focusing primarily on economic integration and cultural diplomacy. However, with the rise of China and the shifting global power dynamics, India recognized the need for a more assertive approach. The Act East Policy, introduced in 2014, reflects a more comprehensive strategy, encompassing not only economic ties but also security and strategic cooperation. This policy reflects India's growing recognition that regional stability in Southeast Asia is essential for its own economic and geopolitical aspirations.

The strategic drivers behind the AEP are multifaceted, reflecting both regional and global considerations:

#### **Regional Security and Geostrategic Realignment**

The first driver is regional security, which has become more complex due to the increasing influence of China. The South China Sea dispute, China's assertiveness in maritime territorial claims, and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have raised alarms among Southeast Asian nations. India's AEP represents a counterbalance to China's growing dominance in the region. As part of its engagement with ASEAN, India emphasizes the importance of a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific," positioning itself as a credible partner for security and stability in the face of China's maritime expansion (Kapur, 2019). India has deepened its defense and maritime security cooperation with ASEAN countries, including through joint naval exercises and the provision of maritime security assistance.

#### **Economic Integration and Infrastructure Development**

The second key driver behind the AEP is economic integration, particularly in terms of trade and infrastructure. The ASEAN region is an economic powerhouse and represents one of India's most important trading partners. India's engagement with ASEAN economies—such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand—has been marked by increasing trade flows, enhanced connectivity projects, and investments in infrastructure. The India-ASEAN Free Trade Area (AIFTA) and other bilateral trade agreements are part of this strategy to build deeper economic ties with ASEAN. One of the key features of India's AEP



has been its focus on improving physical connectivity, such as through the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and enhancing digital and economic integration (Chadha, 2020).

### **Countering China's Growing Influence**

India's Act East Policy is also a strategic response to China's rising influence, particularly its economic and military expansion in Southeast Asia. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to create a network of infrastructure projects linking China with countries across Asia and beyond. While some ASEAN nations have embraced the BRI, India has voiced concerns over the lack of transparency, unsustainable debt traps, and the geopolitical implications of Chinese dominance. India seeks to provide an alternative through initiatives like the Blue Dot Network, which aims to offer transparent, sustainable infrastructure financing and promote connectivity without the coercive influence of China (Bhatt, 2018).

### **Global Power Dynamics and Strategic Autonomy**

The fourth strategic driver is India's aspiration to maintain its strategic autonomy while expanding its global role. India's growing economic clout, coupled with its democratic values, positions it as a key player in the Indo-Pacific. The AEP also aligns with India's broader goal of asserting itself as a global power in an increasingly multipolar world. India is mindful of balancing its regional engagements with ASEAN, while maintaining independence from the influence of larger powers like the United States and China (Pant, 2020). The AEP allows India to play a more active role in shaping regional norms and frameworks without being unduly influenced by any one major power.

### **Strategic Implications for ASEAN**

The Act East Policy has profound implications for ASEAN, as it seeks to strengthen ties with India in the face of a rapidly changing regional security environment. ASEAN, which has historically been at the center of regional diplomatic initiatives, faces significant challenges from China's growing assertiveness. India's AEP offers ASEAN nations an alternative partner to China, particularly in terms of security cooperation, maritime security, and economic partnerships.

India's approach to ASEAN is premised on a few key principles:



### **Promoting a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”**

India’s vision for the Indo-Pacific aligns with ASEAN’s central tenets of inclusivity, openness, and non-coercion. ASEAN has emphasized the importance of a regional order based on international law, free trade, and respect for sovereignty. India’s support for multilateralism and a rules-based regional order directly complements ASEAN’s efforts to maintain peace and stability in the face of rising tensions in the region (Dhanapala, 2021). India’s commitment to regional security initiatives, including the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), enhances the multilateral architecture that ASEAN champions.

### **Economic Connectivity and Infrastructure Development**

India’s participation in initiatives like the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) highlights its commitment to deepening economic ties with ASEAN. The AEP is focused on improving connectivity, trade, and investment across the region, helping to diversify economic relationships away from China’s influence. Infrastructure development, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, is crucial for enhancing regional trade and promoting mobility. These projects provide a tangible way for India to contribute to regional economic development while also ensuring its own growth.

### **Security Cooperation**

India’s growing defense and security partnerships with ASEAN countries, including joint military exercises, training, and maritime security cooperation, highlight India’s commitment to supporting ASEAN’s security architecture. India is increasingly involved in ASEAN-led dialogues on defense and security, such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). By focusing on maritime security and counter-terrorism, India plays a vital role in supporting ASEAN’s objectives of regional stability and security (Singh, 2020).

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

India’s Act East Policy faces several challenges:

#### **China’s Regional Hegemony**

The growing Chinese presence in ASEAN countries through economic diplomacy and the Belt and Road Initiative presents a significant challenge to India’s efforts. ASEAN nations,



particularly those in Southeast Asia, are increasingly dependent on China for trade, investment, and infrastructure development. India must compete with China's soft power, including economic incentives and infrastructure projects, to secure its place as a preferred partner (Pillai, 2019).

### **Geopolitical Rivalries**

The competition between India and China for influence in the Indo-Pacific poses a dilemma for ASEAN countries, who must navigate the strategic tensions between these two rising powers. While some ASEAN nations, such as Vietnam and Indonesia, view India's engagement positively, others may be more cautious due to their economic ties with China. This geopolitical rivalry can complicate efforts to build a cohesive and unified regional response to China's rise (Li, 2021).

### **Institutional Inertia**

ASEAN's consensus-driven decision-making processes can be slow, complicating efforts to deepen India's integration into the region's security and economic frameworks. Additionally, ASEAN's reluctance to align with any one power poses a challenge to India's ambitions of leading regional initiatives. The varying interests and priorities of ASEAN member states make it difficult to achieve uniform alignment with India's strategic objectives (Sen, 2020).

Despite these challenges, the Act East Policy offers several opportunities:

### **Strategic Diversification**

India's engagement with ASEAN provides the region with an alternative partner to China, offering economic cooperation and security assurances without the coercive dynamics associated with China's rise. India's multifaceted approach to ASEAN—spanning economic, diplomatic, and security cooperation—strengthens its role in shaping regional outcomes.

### **Infrastructure and Connectivity**

India's focus on improving connectivity through projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project provides ASEAN with critical infrastructure to enhance regional trade and mobility. These initiatives strengthen regional integration and reduce ASEAN's reliance on Chinese infrastructure projects.



## Strengthening Regional Institutions

India's active participation in ASEAN-led initiatives such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) enhances its role in shaping the future of regional governance. India's support for ASEAN centrality underscores its commitment to regional multilateralism and cooperative security frameworks.

## Conclusion

India's Act East Policy marks a transformative shift in its foreign policy, reflecting the country's ambition to secure a more prominent role in the Indo-Pacific. The policy, which builds on India's historical engagement with ASEAN, emphasizes strategic, economic, and security cooperation. While challenges remain, particularly due to China's growing influence and ASEAN's institutional constraints, the Act East Policy offers significant opportunities for India to shape regional dynamics and enhance its strategic influence. India's efforts to deepen ties with ASEAN, particularly in the realms of economic integration, maritime security, and infrastructure development, will continue to play a key role in regional stability and prosperity.

Ultimately, the success of the Act East Policy will depend on India's ability to balance its regional aspirations with broader global power dynamics. As the Indo-Pacific becomes increasingly contested, India's relationship with ASEAN will be critical in determining the future of the region's geopolitical landscape.

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