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India–ASEAN Relations in a Changing Geopolitical Landscape: From Strategic Convergence to Security Cooperation

Sanjay Pulipaka and Sayantan Ghosal

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Sanjay Pulipaka* and Sayantan Ghosal**

Abstract: There is a growing uncertainty in international politics. This uncertainty stems from major powers undermining the international trading system, international organisations failing to adapt to shifting power dynamics, and rising territorial contestations. Amid these uncertainties, the India-ASEAN relationship provides stability in the wider Indo-Pacific region. This discussion paper maps the evolution of India-ASEAN relations under the Look East and Act East policies and the subsequent elevation of the relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership. It then moves on to examine the non-traditional security threats such as narcotic trafficking, piracy and armed robbery, humanitarian disasters, cybersecurity challenges, and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing. The discussion paper also reflects on defence and security cooperation between India and the Southeast Asian countries and calls for a multi-vector, multi-track engagement between India and ASEAN, with an early conclusion of AITIGA and enhanced supply chain collaboration.

1. Introduction

International politics is a realm of anarchy. Anarchy does not necessarily imply a persistent state of war. Instead, it implies the absence of a centralised government above sovereign states in the international polity.[1] In such a context, sovereign states build capabilities to survive. However, the English school thinkers point out that while international politics is a realm of anarchy, it is also modulated by institutions, norms, rules, and sometimes by shared common purposes such as economic prosperity.[2]

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In recent years, the behaviour of major powers has undermined the functioning of international organisations and the norms/rules that govern international trade and politics. While China surreptitiously rigged the international trade system, the United States (US) undermined it openly with its tariff policies. It is well known that China has excess domestic industrial capacity. To emerge as a leading economy, China has invested heavily in various manufacturing sectors. However, there was a mismatch between domestic consumption and its industrial capacities. Over the years, household spending accounted for just about 40 per cent of China's GDP, which is well below that of many developed countries and of developing countries such as Vietnam and Mexico.[3] Given domestic excess industrial capacities and low domestic consumption rates, China aggressively promoted its manufactured exports.

China has implemented policy measures such as industrial land discounts,[4] preferential loans (for high-tech items such as semiconductors and electric vehicles),[5] tax incentives (including for consumer goods manufacturing)[6], and other support initiatives to ensure the exports remain competitive in the global economy.[7] To retain its export dominance in the world economy, China has signed numerous free trade agreements (approximately 23 as of 2024)[8], played a proactive role in the creation of regional trade agreements (such as the RCEP), and also launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. In response to China's export promotion strategies, various developed countries sought to curtail the flow of Chinese goods into their countries by imposing additional duties [such as the European Commission's imposition of additional duties – ranging from 7.8 per cent to 35.3 per cent – on battery electric vehicles in 2024][9] and encouraging domestic industrial production.[10] Despite pushback from developed economies (such as in Europe), it is unlikely that China will alter its export promotion strategy, as domestic consumption rates continue to be less than satisfactory. On the other hand, the international trading system received a severe jolt because of US President Trump's tariff policies. Some of Trump's tariff policies did not withstand judicial scrutiny, as the US Supreme Court held that the

imposition of tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers (IEEPA) Act was unconstitutional.[11] Despite such judicial pushback, President Trump recently imposed "new tariffs of 10 per cent and 12.5 per cent on goods from 60 trading partners."[12] While China and the US continue to generate considerable stress on the world trading system, the less-than-efficient functioning of various global organisations such as the United Nations (UN) has contributed to uncertainty in global politics.

The victors of the Second World War defined the architecture of various global institutions. However, there have been significant shifts in global power dynamics, and countries such as India have made significant contributions to global peace. In fact, as of 2025, India has participated in over 50 UN peacekeeping missions[13] and has contributed significantly in terms of development assistance to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. And yet, countries such as India have not been inducted as permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). Ideally, given the growing polarisation and complexity in international politics, international organisations should include countries that can bridge the fault lines. Sadly, the permanent members of the UNSC have failed to proactively pursue the reform agenda, and consequently the UN is struggling to address the global security challenges. Even more disheartening have been attempts by some of the major powers to delegitimise the UN and its affiliated organs. It was not surprising that there is no concerted effort by the UN to honestly resolve conflicts such as the wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East. Developing countries and emerging economies have experienced considerable challenges because of these wars. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz compelled South Asian, Southeast Asian, and East Asian countries to contend with shortages of energy resources, which led to a significant increase in the prices of other commodities/products, including fertilisers, and the oil price hike was felt across all sectors of the economy.

Interestingly, the Ukraine and the Middle East wars, instead of prompting countries to consolidate alliances, have nudged them to re-examine the utility of alliances. The concerns pertaining to a possible

'entrapment' [when a country(ies) drag their allies into a war] and 'abandonment' [when allies refuse to cooperate in war] got amplified. For instance, there were apprehensions among many in Europe that the Trump administration is keen to strike a deal with Russia and thereby abandon Ukraine.[14] On the other hand, President Trump accused Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of attempting to entrap the US in a bigger war by "gambling with World War Three."[15] Similarly, there is a perception among many in the US that "Israel had dragged the United States into a war with Iran."[16] On the other hand, Israeli leadership was reportedly unhappy with the 14-point Memorandum of Understanding between the US and Iran, specifically on the "inclusion of Lebanon in the agreement, as Israel considers Iran and Lebanon separate arenas."[17] To sum up, these wars had a negative impact on the global economy, demonstrated the weakness of global institutions, showed the limits of alliance frameworks, and it is precisely for these reasons that the uncertainty in international politics will persist for a long time to come.

The global challenges are daunting, and they require sovereign states to focus on institutions and relationships that promote peace and stability. From the perspective of India and other countries in the region, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has promoted peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Perhaps there was some hesitation in India to engage with ASEAN during the Cold War era. The independent functioning of ASEAN, along with the expansion of its membership to include 11 countries in Southeast Asia, has bolstered its legitimacy in the region. One of the striking features of ASEAN has been its consensus-based decision-making approach, which was often criticised for contributing to delays and a lack of decisive action. Such evaluation fails to take note of regional economic integration and habits of cooperation that ASEAN has engendered in the region. Furthermore, it should be recognised that the uncertainty in global politics today is also a consequence of unilateral actions of major powers.

ASEAN today has numerous frameworks [such as East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), ADMM-Plus, ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and others, which indicate ASEAN's convening power to address traditional and non-traditional security issues. While it is true that ASEAN could not resolve the South China Sea territorial disputes, it did play a positive role in responding to the Cambodia Conflict and the Thailand-Cambodia Border Crisis (2025).

Of course, there were instances when some ASEAN members were disappointed with the conduct of other member states, such as with Myanmar's military for its 2021 military coup. ASEAN did enunciate a Five-Point Consensus roadmap, and yet it refrained from aggressively intervening in the domestic politics of Myanmar. There can be debates on the prudence of such strict adherence to the principle of non-interference, but the possibility that such a policy may have contributed to stability in the region merits reflection.

In the coming years, ASEAN will need to develop a conflict-resolution toolkit that does not undermine the sovereignty of nation-states while maintaining regional stability.

2. India, ASEAN and the Road to CSP

Over the years, there has been consolidation of India-ASEAN engagement, and today they share a comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP). ASEAN was established in 1967. However, the shift in global political dynamics – the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War – laid the foundation for enhanced India-ASEAN engagement. Additionally, India's economy experienced severe stress in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which prompted India to shun socialist policies and adopt liberal economic policies as well as look for new economic partners. The rapid economic growth of Southeast Asian economies [for example: Vietnam 8.6 per cent (1993), Singapore 11.5 per cent (1993), Thailand 8.3 per cent (1993)][18] also caught the attention of many policymakers in India.

India's Southeast Asia engagement was not merely rooted in economic interests; there were robust historical and cultural relations which provided a foundation for enhanced engagement between the two. India and Southeast Asia "…inhabit a shared geographical and cultural space; each country retains its distinctiveness and unique identity. It is this celebration of diversity, of plural yet related cultures."[19] India's cultural presence is evident in numerous temples spread across Southeast Asia, similar cultural practices, and shared mythologies. For instance, there are numerous versions of the Ramayana across Southeast Asia. The spread of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia also resulted in interconnected spiritual spaces. For instance, the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon houses a sacred relic of the Buddha's hair, which is venerated by many, and many from Southeast Asia often travel to Bodh Gaya in India.

During the Second World War, about 7,50,000 Indian soldiers played a pivotal role in pushing back Japanese forces in Southeast Asia. Geographically, India connects West Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. These historical, cultural, and political factors laid the foundation for India's economic engagement with Southeast Asia. In terms of institutional engagement, India became a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992 and a full dialogue partner in 1995. ASEAN's membership expanded steadily. With Cambodia joining ASEAN in 1999, ASEAN membership reached 10 countries.

In 2002, the India-ASEAN Summit-level dialogue was initiated, and a year later, India acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC).[20] Initially, some ASEAN countries, such as Malaysia, resisted ASEAN's regular summit-level dialogue with India. For instance, the Prime Minister of Malaysia stated that: "..if you keep on adding new members, soon the grouping itself will lose meaning….Our fear, of course, is that once we admit India, there may be others in the South Asian region who will insist that they should also be a partner…But we have resolved that…We now support an ASEAN-India arrangement in which we have ASEAN+1…But separate from ASEAN+3."[21] However, other ASEAN member states such as "Singapore, Vietnam, Laos and

Cambodia, and Thailand" strongly called for ASEAN-India summit meetings, which laid the foundations for robust engagement between the two in subsequent years. [22]

The economic relations between the two countries took an upward turn after the India-ASEAN free trade agreement (FTA) in goods was signed in 2009. Twenty years after becoming a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN, the India-ASEAN relationship was upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2012. The Vision Statement of the ASEAN India Commemorative Summit in 2012 called for increased Political and Security Cooperation through ASEAN-led forums such as ADMM, ARF and AMF.[23] The vision statement also called for "strengthening 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."[24] The references to maritime security indicated growing anxiety among Southeast Asian countries with the developments in the South China Sea and a recognition of diversified security partnerships.

Meanwhile, as India registered sustained economic growth and engaged more intensively on international platforms, the Indo-Pacific construct gained greater currency.[25] However, some Southeast Asian countries expressed concern that the Indo-Pacific construct would undermine ASEAN centrality and amplify great power rivalry in the region. To allay such concerns, the Indian Prime Minister, in his Shangri-La Dialogue speech, articulated a seven-point approach to the Indo-Pacific that celebrates ASEAN centrality, a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and a region free of great-power rivalry.[26] A year later, in 2019, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was announced. The AOIP called for an Indo-Pacific characterised by cooperation, not rivalry, in which ASEAN-centred processes such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) will serve as a principal platform to address regional issues and promote cooperation.[27] The AOIP constituted an attempt by its member states to embrace an Indo-Pacific regional construct while retaining ASEAN centrality. It should also be noted that, with the articulation of

AOIP, there was considerable convergence in the Indo-Pacific visions of ASEAN and India.

Amid the convergence of geopolitical visions, the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent disruption of supply chains, and the growing fluidity of international politics, India and ASEAN were nudged to deepen their partnership. At the 2022 Phnom Penh (Cambodia) Summit, the India-ASEAN partnership was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). A CSP is in play if a partnership, in the long run, results in a favourable balance of power for the cooperating partners. Therefore, a CSP requires a comprehensive agenda for cooperation across the economic, connectivity, political and security domains. Since other chapters in this volume address diverse themes such as economic cooperation, connectivity projects, and people-to-people interactions, the subsequent section of this chapter will focus on India-ASEAN cooperation on non-traditional security threats and defence/security cooperation.

3. Non-Traditional Security Threats

The successful realisation of the India-ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership is contingent on addressing traditional and non-traditional security challenges. ASEAN member states face numerous security challenges, and they have varying degrees of state capacity to address them. Nonetheless, given the collaborative platforms within ASEAN, its member states are better positioned to address various nontraditional security challenges.

A report of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) points out that "a record 236 tons of methamphetamine were seized in East and Southeast Asia in 2024, a 24 per cent increase from 2023."[28] This poses a few challenges for the countries in the region: first, the above numbers are only indicative, and actual production of illicit narcotics could be much higher; and second, the presence of an illicit narcotic industry can fuel crime and instability, as is evident in Myanmar.

India is located between two narco-producing regions. To its west, Afghanistan has a long history of opium production, and to its east, the Golden Triangle region, comprising the forested regions of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, is also a significant hub of illicit drug production. Myanmar constitutes a significant transit point, not the only one, for the flow of illicit drugs into India. Myanmar is the only ASEAN country with which India shares a territorial boundary or border. The 1643-kilometre border between the two countries is porous and witnesses significant informal movement of people. Due to the persistent political instability and conflict in Myanmar, there has been a significant increase in opium production [over 50 per cent between 2020 and 2024].[29] Given the porous borders, a large number of illicit drugs is being trafficked into India. Therefore, many parts of India, particularly northeast India, have become vulnerable to increased consumption of opium, heroin, methamphetamine, and related products. Unlike in its western frontiers, in its eastern neighbourhood, India has countries such as Thailand with robust state capacities and regional frameworks such as ASEAN, which are committed to combating the drug menace. ASEAN has created specialised agencies, such as Airport[30] and Seaport[31] Interdiction Task Forces, and has also established forums, such as the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD), to assist member states in narcotics control and related strategies.[32] Such platforms could be used by India and ASEAN to further scale up cooperation between their agencies and platforms to prevent the flow of illicit drugs through information sharing and joint operations.

India depends heavily on maritime trade to power its economy. Approximately 70 per cent of India's trade by volume and 90 per cent by value is conducted through the maritime domain. Therefore, the safety and security of ships carrying goods are significant to India. This is more so in narrow shipping routes such as the Straits of Malacca, through which an estimated "90,000 merchant vessels and 60 per cent of global maritime trade pass through."[33]

Globally, there were more piracy and armed robbery (PAR) incidents in 2025 (171) than in 2024 (146). The regions that witnessed the most PAR were the Straits of Malacca and the Singapore area (122 incidents), West Africa (21 incidents), and the Indian Ocean (10 incidents), followed by other regions.[34] It should be noted that, in the recent past, the PAR in the Strait of Malacca and Singapore area have not resulted in hostage taking or grievous bodily harm to the sailors.[35] Nonetheless, PAR in Southeast Asia is a source of concern.

India plays an important role in containing PAR activities in the Indian Ocean region due to its robust presence. In fact, in 1999, the Indian Navy deployed a task force to take back a hijacked Japanese ship, Alondra Rainbow.[36] In 2024, the Indian Navy was able to rescue hijacked ships – MV Ruen and FV Al Naeemi.[37] India is one of the contracting parties to the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which was formalised in 2004 and is located in Singapore. Many Southeast Asian countries also have Liaison Officers at India's Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). The inaugural ASEAN India Maritime Exercise was held in 2023 with the aim of increasing interoperability and to "promote peace, stability and security in the region."[38]

In addition to securing sea lanes, India is also a Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) first responder in the neighbourhood and in the Indian Ocean Region. India's HADR capabilities came to the fore after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. The earthquake and tsunami resulted in the tragic loss of the lives of over 2,25,000 people.[39] India launched a massive, coordinated response involving the Air Force, Navy, and Army, "enabling large-scale airlift of relief material, evacuation of survivors, and search-and-rescue missions."[40] Even in subsequent years, India has proactively engaged in HADR activities in Southeast Asia. Following an earthquake and tsunami in Central Sulawesi province in Indonesia in 2018, India launched Operation Samudra Maitri to assist the affected population with relief material and medical personnel.[41] In 2020, when Cambodia

was reeling from floods, India's naval ship, INS Kiltan, delivered 15 tons of relief material.[42] In 2024, India provided approximately 35 tonnes of humanitarian assistance to Vietnam after it was hit by Typhoon Yagi, including water purification items, kitchen utensils, solar lanterns, and other materials.[43] Similar assistance was also provided to Vietnam and Laos following the destruction caused by Typhoon Yagi.[44] India launched Operation Brahma to provide disaster-relief materials after Myanmar experienced an earthquake in 2025. Over the past two decades, India has provided disaster relief and medical assistance to Myanmar more than a dozen times.[45] In January 2026, India dispatched 30 tonnes of humanitarian assistance to the Philippines after the country was struck by a super typhoon.[46] These are a few instances, not an exhaustive account, of India's hard work in Southeast Asia and its neighbourhood.

The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, and the subsequent demonstration of India's capabilities and its willingness to coordinate with other major powers, laid the foundation for the emergence of the Quad comprising Australia, India, Japan and the United States. The Quad HADR efforts are defined by meetings and military exercises to ensure greater "interoperability and operational synergy to undertake HADR operations".[47] In an important development, the 2025 Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting Joint Statement referred to the ongoing efforts to "strengthen shared airlift capacity and leverage…collective logistics strengths to respond to natural disasters more rapidly and efficiently, providing support for regional partners."[48] The Quad member states collaborated with New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam under the rubric of Quad Plus on healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.[49] India launched a massive Vaccine Maitri (Vaccine Friendship) initiative, and under the Quad vaccine initiative, some of the Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia and Thailand also received vaccines from India.[50]

There are a host of other non-traditional security threats that require coordinated action by India, ASEAN and its member states. For instance, hundreds of Indian tech professionals were tricked

into working in extremely harsh conditions in cyber scam centres in Myanmar-Thailand. Coordinated operations with assistance from law enforcement agencies in Thailand and other countries in the region resulted in the rescue and repatriation of these individuals to India.[51] The cyber scam centres are often operated by, or protected by, various narco-trafficking groups, indicating a fusion of non-traditional security threats. A similar challenge can also be seen with reference to Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. It is estimated that IUU fishing accounts for 20 per cent of global catch,[52] and it not only undermines sovereignty and the economy but also threatens a country's food secure ty. Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean Region have witnessed significant IUU fishing activity. According to reports, Southeast Asian countries lost about US$ 6 billion because of IUU fishing in 2019.[53] In locations dotted with maritime disputes, the application of IUU fishing regulations is also contested. There are also growing concerns that illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is creating maritime transport networks for narco-trafficking.[54]

These experiences demonstrate that non-traditional security threats rarely respect sovereign state and regional boundaries. Therefore, to consolidate the India-ASEAN comprehensive security partnership, it becomes imperative for India, ASEAN, and its member states to regularly interact and fine-tune institutional cooperation to address such challenges. It should also be recognised that non-traditional security threats can create conditions that lead to a long-term poly-crisis, implying that India and ASEAN will have to scale up cooperation in the traditional security and defence domains.

4. Prioritising Defence and Security Cooperation

India and ASEAN engage on various security issues through platforms such as the ADMM, ARF, EAS and other related forums. However, it should be recognised that India's security cooperation with ASEAN is also bolstered by India's bilateral security and defence partnerships with many Southeast Asian countries.

Vietnam: India has a very strong and friendly relationship with Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, India unhesitatingly supported the people of Vietnam. Over the years, the threats both countries face have been similar. While India is responding to aggressive territorial assertions on its continental domains, Vietnam is responding to similar phenomena in the maritime domain.

There is also considerable convergence on a host of global issues between the two countries. India has often avoided entanglement in great-power rivalries by pursuing policies of nonalignment and, subsequently, strategic autonomy. At the same time, it should be noted that within the rubric of strategic autonomy, India scaled up its interactions with major powers without hesitation through various frameworks such as the Quad and BRICS. Similarly, Vietnam also follows a 'Four Nos' policy ("no military alliances, no siding with one country to act against another, no foreign military bases, and no using force or threatening to use force in international relations").[55] And yet, it has developed positive relations with Japan and the United States. Interestingly, Vietnam was also a member of the Quad+ framework during the pandemic. Given such convergences, it was no surprise that India and Vietnam elevated their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016.

India's strategic partnership with Vietnam has gained significant momentum over the past decade. In 2022, an India-Vietnam Defence Policy Dialogue was launched, an MOU on Mutual Logistics Support was inked, and a 'Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defence Partnership towards 2030' was announced to consolidate the defence partnership.[56] India also provided Vietnam with 12 High-Speed Guard Boats, manufactured under the US$ 100 million Line of Credit.[57] A year later, an Indian-made missile corvette, INS Kirpan, was gifted to Vietnam.[58] Reports suggest that India has agreed to provide Vietnam with BrahMos missiles,[59] which would add significant firepower to the latter's defence forces. In addition to providing defence platforms, India conducts joint military exercises with Vietnam (VINBAX) and trains Vietnam's defence personnel on Russian Kilo-class submarines

and Russian-made Sukhoi Su-30 fighter aircraft.[60] In 2025, both sides signed the Mutual Submarine Search, Rescue Support, and Cooperation, as well as an agreement to strengthen defence industry cooperation.[61] A year later, in 2026, the first India-Vietnam Cyber Policy Dialogue was organised to deepen cooperation in cybersecurity and ICT governance.

Singapore: Singapore, a city-state, with its economic progress and political stability, moulds regional security in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. It is also because of Singapore that the Straits of Malacca remain a safe transit point for global commerce.

Singapore's leadership often advocated for India's greater participation in ASEAN, as it would contribute to peace and stability in Asia. For instance, then Singapore's prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, stated: "I like to think of (a) new Asia as a mega jumbo jet that is being constructed…Northeast Asia, comprising China, Japan and South Korea, forms one wing with a powerful engine…India, the second wing, will also have a powerful engine…The Southeast Asian countries…will be lifted by the two wings." As the Indo-Pacific construct gained credence, Singapore viewed India's role as critical to the security of the Indo-Pacific region and to the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea, which constitute critical Sea Lines of Communication.[62]

In 2003, both countries signed the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA).[63] Defence cooperation between the countries is promoted through various forums, such as the Defence Ministers' Dialogue and the Defence Policy Dialogue. Both countries have exchanged a Letter of Intent permitting Singapore to conduct live fire tests at the Chandipur Integrated Test Range in India.[64] India and Singapore have also agreed to "deepen defence technology cooperation in emerging areas such as Quantum Computing, AI, Automation and Unmanned Vessels."

India and Singapore have a long history of conducting joint exercises. The Singapore-Indian Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) was first initiated in 1994.[65] The Exercise Bold Kurukshetra, between the

two armies, was first initiated in 2005, and the 14th edition was hosted by India in Jodhpur in 2025.[66] In 2007, both countries signed a 'Bilateral Agreement for the Conduct of Joint Military Training and Exercises in India between the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) and the Indian Air Force (IAF), which facilitated RSAF use of Kalaikunda Air Force Station for joint training.[67] To enhance security in the maritime domain, both countries are part of trilateral initiatives such as the Singapore-India-Thailand Maritime Exercise (SITMEX).

Thailand: Thailand is strategically located in continental Southeast Asia. Despite considerable political strife in the neighbourhood, Thailand has achieved impressive economic growth. Thailand and India share a maritime boundary in the Andaman Sea. Therefore, for India, Thailand is critical to maritime security and overall regional stability. India-Thailand relationship was upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2025, and both countries "reaffirmed their shared interests in a free, open, transparent, rules-based, inclusive, prosperous and resilient Indo-Pacific region and reiterated their strong support for ASEAN Centrality."[68] Both countries have created regular interactions under the Defence Dialogue mechanism. The most recent defence dialogue was held in June 2026 and explored ways to further strengthen military-to-military engagements and capacity-building initiatives.[69] While the militaries of both countries conduct joint military Exercise MAITREE,[70] the navies conduct joint maritime patrolling and, in 2024, conducted a maiden bilateral exercise, named 'Ex-Ayutthaya.'[71] Efforts are underway to strengthen the defence industry cooperation between the two countries.

Given the fluidity and the need to maintain a delicate balance in Thailand's relations with the US and China, Bangkok has, over the years, sought to consolidate its relationship with India as part of its diversification strategy. There is also considerable convergence in the vision for external engagement between India's Act East Policy and Thailand's Look West Policy. In addition to ASEAN, India and Thailand are working to consolidate their partnership through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation

(BIMSTEC). The BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs' Meeting, with its comprehensive agenda, has proved to be a useful platform for exchanging notes on diverse security threats in the region.[72] Both countries also collaborate extensively on counter-terrorism, and there were high-profile extraditions from Thailand to India of individuals for their criminal activities and also for support to insurgent groups.[73]

Myanmar: The challenge of insurgent groups operating from Myanmar is a challenge for India. Because of the political instability in Myanmar, the State's writ sometimes does not extend to all border regions. As noted earlier, India has a long and porous border with Myanmar. Therefore, political, social, and economic developments in Myanmar tend to have a spillover impact on India. To address such challenges, in 2014, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Border Cooperation was signed, which mandates coordinated patrols of the border regions and the exchange of information pertaining to the trafficking of weapons and illicit drugs.[74] There were reports of coordinated operations – Operation Golden Bird[75] and Operation Sunrise[76] – by the two militaries to mitigate the challenge posed by various insurgent groups. To discuss insurgency-related matters and non-traditional security issues, the Regional Border Coordination Committee Meetings are convened regularly.[77] In 2019, an MoU on defence co-operation and maritime Security cooperation was signed between the two countries. There were regular visits by the leadership of defence establishments of the two countries. The defence forces of both countries participate in regular exercises such as the India-Myanmar Bilateral Army Exercise (IMBEX),[78] the Indo-Myanmar Coordinated Patrol (IMCOR), and a Table Top Exercise between the Air Forces of the two countries.[79]

The Philippines: During much of the Cold War, relations between India and the Philippines were constrained. India pursued a policy of non-alignment, while the Philippines was an ally of the United States. Consequently, the bilateral relationship did not flourish. However, in recent years, there has been considerable strategic convergence between the two countries. India is responding to aggressive grey-zone tactics along its continental borders (such as in Galwan Valley, Chumar,

Demchok, and Doklam Plateau). The Philippines is responding to the construction of artificial islands (such as Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal) by Beijing in the South China Sea. The shared threat perceptions are nudging the two countries – an ally of the US and a country that celebrates strategic autonomy – towards greater defence cooperation.

During the visit of the President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr, to India in 2025 there were four important developments: first, a formal declaration of strategic partnership was announced; second, a plan of action to operationalise the partnership was agreed upon; third, terms of reference for talks between the defence forces of both countries were approved; and fourth terms of reference for enhanced maritime cooperation between the two countries were finalised.[80] The South China Sea was the site of the first India-Philippines naval exercises in 2025,[81] and India also delivered three batteries of BRAHMOS supersonic cruise missiles as part of a US$ 375 million deal.[82] With the Philippines expressing interest in purchasing the Aakash Surface-to-Air Missile from India,[83] Delhi and Manila are emerging as close defence partners.

Indonesia: India and Indonesia are maritime neighbours and have significant opportunities to collaborate in maritime, economic and political domains. Both countries are working to improve connectivity, people-to-people interactions, tourism and trade between Aceh Province, Indonesia and Andaman & Nicobar Islands (ANI) in India.[84] In addition to economic interactions, both countries exhibit significant convergence in their foreign policy visions. Indonesia's policy of avoiding military alignments and its foreign policy doctrine of "rowing between two reefs" are in consonance with India's strategic autonomy construct. While Indonesia was the Chair of the G20 in 2022, India, as the Chair, organised the leadership summit in September 2023. Both countries made sustained efforts to bring the developing countries' agenda to the G20 and other global platforms.

In terms of regional and national security, Indonesia is also contesting China's territorial claims. It is well known that Beijing

claims that Natuna Island in Indonesia and the adjacent sea are part of its nine-dash line. Indonesia has often reiterated that the Chinese "claims have no international legal basis.[85]" The foreign policy and security establishments of India and Indonesia regularly interact through various engagements, such as foreign office consultations, the security dialogue, the defence minister dialogue, the joint defence cooperation committee, and joint working groups on counterterrorism and narcotics. With an intent to promote maritime safety and security, develop marine resources, and collaborate on disaster risk management, a 'Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' was signed in 2018.[86]

India and Indonesia also conduct numerous joint defence exercises. The 10th edition of Garuda Shakti[87] (comprising special forces of both countries) and the fifth edition of Samudra Shakti[88] (maritime exercises) were organised in India. In addition, the India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT)[89] has become a regular feature, and defence forces interact regularly in other multilateral exercises. Indonesia also reportedly showed interest in procuring India's BRAHMOS missile systems.[90] India is also very keen to nurture joint ventures with Indonesian firms to process and refine critical minerals such as nickel, a key component of EV batteries. There is growing diversity in India-Indonesia economic, political, and security interactions, indicating the deepening of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries.

Malaysia: There has been a gradual evolution of the India-Malaysia defence relationship. In 1993, an MOU on defence cooperation was signed between the two countries, and in subsequent years, Malaysia-India Defence Cooperation Committee (MIDCOM) meetings were regularly held to promote defence cooperation.[91] The ships of both navies have been calling at each other's ports and regularly participating in the bilateral Exercise Samudra Laksamana.[92] The militaries of India and Malaysia have been regularly participating in the bilateral army exercise Harimau Shakti.[93] Malaysia and India are also engaged in the maintenance of the SU-30 MKM aircraft for the Malaysian Air Force.

5. Conclusion

It should be noted that the above information does not constitute a detailed description of all aspects of India's defence/security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. However, the above analysis demonstrates a wide-ranging defence/security cooperative agenda that India is pursuing with its Southeast Asian neighbours, which will have long-term implications for the power balance in the Indo-Pacific.

As noted, there is convergence in India's and ASEAN's visions for the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, India's position on the 2016 judgment of the international arbitration tribunal of the South China Sea was in consonance with the interests of its Southeast Asian friends. India's official statement noted that it "urges all parties to show utmost respect for the UNCLOS, which establishes the international legal order of the seas and oceans."[94] Given the commonality of security threats and the growing habits of cooperation to address non-traditional security issues, defence and security cooperation between India and ASEAN will be further consolidated.

The recent Hormuz Crisis has underscored the importance of keeping the sea lines of communication open at all times. India and ASEAN will need to work closely to ensure that a crisis akin to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz is not repeated in their maritime domains. India is working to improve its economic and security presence in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (ANI). The Great Nicobar Project [with a greenfield international airport, a hybrid power plant, an International Container Transhipment Terminal (ICTT) and a new township] aims to transform the ANI into a major hub of connectivity and economic activity.[95] Thereby, the Great Nicobar Project would protect the sea lanes of communication near one of the busiest routes (the Strait of Malacca)[96] and would also increase economic interactions between India and neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

Building a robust economic partnership is a critical component of a comprehensive strategic partnership and therefore, the review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) should be concluded

quickly. While the revised AITIGA would partially negate the challenges posed by the trade policies of major powers, it would also constitute an acknowledgement of the need for new epistemic frameworks that help emerging economies to better prioritise their interests. The criticality of rare earth minerals and the concentration of their processing in a few countries pose a significant challenge and point to the need for India and ASEAN supply chain collaboration.

The enhanced CSP between India and ASEAN mandates a multi-vector [forums such as BIMSTEC and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation] and multi-track engagement. The perception that India's engagement in the Quad would undermine ASEAN centrality requires critical reflection, as India often reiterated the importance of ASEAN centrality through its policies and also official articulations. India's proactive advocacy of the interests of developing countries on various international forums (stemming from shared anti-colonial struggles) is also in the interests of the Southeast Asian countries.

In every challenge, there is an opportunity. There is growing uncertainty in global politics, fuelled by the policies of major powers, and technological changes that many sovereign states will have to confront. The current uncertainty in global politics also constitutes an important opportunity for India and ASEAN to move closer together and consolidate the CSP to address regional and global challenges.

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