



India's ASEAN Bonhomie

This editorial is based on "[India's ASEAN challenge](#)" which was published in Financial Express on 17/11/2022. It talks about Indo-ASEAN relations and challenges related to it.

For Prelims: Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN, Act East Policy, Free Trade Agreement, Strategic Partnership to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, ASEAN-India Green Fund, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral (IMT) Highway, 19th ASEAN-India Summit, South China Sea , Russia-Ukraine war.

For Mains: Areas of Cooperation Between India and ASEAN, Challenges Related to ASEAN.

Against the backdrop of **multi-dimensional developments and interventions in the [Indo-Pacific region](#)**, India's foreign policy underwent substantial changes in the past few decades.

Starting with the [Look East Policy in the 1990s](#), India advanced its policy in 2014 as [Act East Policy](#) taking up its partnership with the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\)](#) to a step further which provided an **opportunity for India to explore Southeast Asia**.

As there are several **geopolitical challenges that hinder smooth India-ASEAN transit**, it is critical to demonstrate how **India's Act East Policy fits into ASEAN's prospects** and overcoming the **challenges of India-ASEAN ties**.

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ASEAN GROUPING



What is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)?

- ASEAN, a **10-nation grouping**, is considered one of the most **influential groupings in Southeast Asia**.
 - It includes **Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Brunei, the Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Malaysia and Myanmar**.
- ASEAN states are located at a **strategically important junction of the Indo-Pacific** which makes ASEAN a **focal point for both regional and global powers**.

What are the Areas of Cooperation Between India and ASEAN?

- **Economic Cooperation:** ASEAN is India's **4th largest trading partner**. India signed an **FTA ([Free Trade Agreement](#))** in goods in 2009 and an FTA in services and investments in 2014 with ASEAN.
 - ASEAN and India have also adopted a joint statement announcing the elevation of the existing [Strategic Partnership to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#).
- **Peace and Security:** The two sides reaffirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting **peace, stability, maritime safety, and overflight freedom** in the Indo Pacific.
- **Financial Assistance:** India provides **financial assistance to the ASEAN nations** through various mechanisms like **ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund** and **ASEAN-India Green Fund**.
- **Connectivity:** India has been undertaking several connectivity projects like [India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral \(IMT\) Highway](#) and the [Kaladan Multimodal Project](#).
- **India and ASEAN** countries recently gave a new vigour to their ties by establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership at the [19th ASEAN-India Summit](#) in **Cambodia**.

What are the Challenges Related to ASEAN?

- **Territorial Disputes: ASEAN member states** are enmeshed in **territorial disputes** with interested powers for a long time. For example, **China's claim to territories in the [South China Sea](#)** overlaps with competing claims by **Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam**.
- **Indo-Pacific Rivalry:** For a long time, the **assumption of China as the primary economic partner** and the **US as the primary security guarantor** has been at the heart of the ASEAN balance.
 - Today, that **balance is falling apart** and the **[Russia-Ukraine war](#) has further aggravated this tension**. This sharpening of major power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region is threatening the **underlying stability on which rested the regional growth and prosperity**.
- **Unstable Geoeconomics:** The geopolitical tension in the Indo-Pacific is **producing geoeconomic consequences** where issues of **trade and technology** cooperation as well as **[supply chain resilience](#)** is at peak.
 - And this is happening at a time when **ASEAN remains a divided organisation internally** on how to manage these challenges.
- **India-ASEAN Challenge:** Many bilateral deals with these nations are **yet to be finalised**, leading to the halting of various aspects of economic ties.
 - In spite of India's commitment to many connectivity projects, such as the **India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway**, they have not been completed. By contrast, **[China's Belt and Road Initiative](#)** is gaining the trust of some ASEAN countries.

What Should be the Way Forward?

- **Building Resilient Supply Chain:** Current engagement in value chains between ASEAN and India is not substantial. **ASEAN and India can leverage the emerging scenario** and support each other to build new and **resilient supply chains**.
 - However, to explore this opportunity, ASEAN and India must **upgrade their logistics services** and strengthen the **transportation infrastructure**.
- **Maritime Security in Indo-Pacific:** The **[maritime security](#)** of the **Indo-Pacific region** is crucial for the protection of India's interests as well as those of ASEAN.
 - Both sides need to work towards ensuring **maximum utilisation of resources without harming the marine environment**. They need to adopt strong and responsible initiatives to harness the **potential of the ocean in a sustainable manner**.
 - Also **ASEAN should emphasise the principles of the [UN Convention for the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\)](#)** to solve the disputes in the **South China Sea region**.
- **Regional Tourism:** India and ASEAN should also enhance **regional [tourism](#)** and **people-to-people connectivity** as they already have **civilisational and cultural influences** on each other.
- **Unfolding Act-East Policy:** Reciprocity and mutual understanding on common concerns will help both ASEAN and India to overcome some of the challenges.
 - Through coordination in the fields of **[Digitalisation](#), Pharmaceuticals, Agriculture Education and [Green Growth](#)** will **unfold the potential of India's Act East Policy**.

Drishti Mains Question

Examine the importance of ASEAN for India to maintain an open and free Indo-Pacific region.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q1. Consider the following countries: (2018)

1. Australia
2. Canada

3. China
4. India
5. Japan
6. USA

Which of the above are among the 'free-trade partners' of ASEAN?

- (a) 1, 2, 4 and 5
- (b) 3, 4, 5 and 6
- (c) 1, 3, 4 and 5
- (d) 2, 3, 4 and 6

Ans: (c)

Q2. The term 'Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership' often appears in the news in the context of the affairs of a group of countries known as (2016)

- (a) G20
- (b) ASEAN
- (c) SCO
- (d) SAARC

Ans: (b)

Mains

Q. Evaluate the economic and strategic dimensions of India's Look East Policy in the context of the post-Cold War international scenario. **(2016)**