NEXT IAS

DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: STRENGTHENING STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

www.nextias.com

INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: STRENGTHENING STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

Context

- The forthcoming **ASEAN, 21st East Asia, 23rd India-ASEAN summits**, and the **QUAD leaders' meeting** in **Manila in Philippines** offer India an opportunity to strengthen maritime security, economic cooperation and strategic partnerships amid intensifying geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific.

About Southeast Asia

- Southeast Asia is a strategically located subregion of Asia, situated between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.
- It comprises **countries** like Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam.
- **Ten of these countries** are members of the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**, while Timor-Leste became its 11th member in 2025.
- ASEAN provides an important regional platform for economic integration, political dialogue and security cooperation.
- India's engagement with the region has evolved from the **Look East Policy (1991)** to the more comprehensive **Act East Policy (2014)**, with greater emphasis on connectivity, economic integration and strategic cooperation.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

- **Established:** 8 August 1967
- **Founding document:** Bangkok Declaration
- **Five founding members:** Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand
- **Current Membership:** 11 countries (following Timor-Leste's admission in 2025).
- **Headquarters:** Jakarta, Indonesia

East Asia Summit (EAS)

- **Established:** 2005
- **First Summit:** Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- **Nature:** ASEAN-led leaders-led forum for strategic dialogue and cooperation.
- **Membership:** 19 countries (ASEAN's 11 members and eight external partners).
  - Eight partners: India, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Russia.

Strategic Significance of Southeast Asia

- **Global Significance:**
  - **Geostrategic Location:** The Malacca Strait and South China Sea connect the Indian and Pacific Oceans and facilitate international maritime trade.
  - **Global Trade:** The region lies along critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), making its stability essential for global commerce and energy security.
  - **Economy:** ASEAN is a major manufacturing and investment destination, particularly in electronics, semiconductors and emerging technologies.
  - **Geopolitical:** The region is central to the strategic competition between the United States and China.

- **Significance For India:**
  - **Maritime Security:** Over 55% of India's trade reportedly passes through the South China Sea and Malacca Strait, making freedom of navigation a vital national interest.
  - **Economic Opportunities:** Southeast Asia offers markets for Indian goods, services, pharmaceuticals, IT and manufacturing.
  - **Northeast Connectivity:** Projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway can integrate India's Northeast with regional markets.
  - **Strategic Balancing:** Stronger regional partnerships enhance India's strategic autonomy and contribute to a stable, multipolar Indo-Pacific.
  - **Energy & Supply Chains:** Cooperation can diversify India's sources of critical minerals, energy and industrial inputs.

Key Priorities of India's Engagement with Southeast Asia

- **Maritime Cooperation:** India has designated 2026 as the ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation, emphasising maritime safety, freedom of navigation, anti-piracy operations and adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).
- **Trade Reforms:** Fast-tracking the review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) to address trade imbalances, improve market access and simplify trade procedures.
- **Digital Integration:** Promoting cooperation under the ASEAN-India Digital Work Plan through India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), including Aadhaar, UPI and e-KYC.
- **Supply Chain Resilience:** Supporting diversification of semiconductor, critical mineral and telecommunications supply chains.
- **Connectivity:** Strengthening physical, digital and maritime connectivity, particularly through India's Northeast and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Complementary Pillars of India's Indo-Pacific Policy: QUAD and ASEAN

- India follows a two-pronged approach to regional stability by **strengthening both** ASEAN-led institutions and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD).

ASEAN	QUAD
• Promotes regional dialogue and economic integration.	• Promotes cooperation on maritime security and strategic challenges.
• Emphasises ASEAN centrality and inclusive regionalism.	• Focuses on a free, open and rules-based Indo-Pacific.
• Provides an institutional platform for wider Asian cooperation.	• Advances cooperation in critical technologies and resilient supply chains.

Areas of Convergence:

- **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** through the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).
- Cooperation on critical minerals, semiconductors and resilient supply chains.
- Opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo through coercion.
- Promotion of connectivity, digital infrastructure and regional stability.

- India uses the East Asia Summit (EAS), an ASEAN-led forum, to reinforce its commitment to ASEAN centrality.
- Thus, **ASEAN and QUAD are complementary** rather than competing arrangements.
  - ASEAN-led institutions offer broader regional legitimacy and inclusiveness, while QUAD provides practical security and technological cooperation.

Strengthening Defence Cooperation: Philippines as a Strategic Partner

- **BrahMos Agreement (2022):** India signed a $375-million agreement to supply shore-based BrahMos supersonic cruise missile systems to the Philippines, strengthening its coastal defence capabilities.
- **Strategic Partnership (2025):** During the Philippines' President visit to India in August 2025, bilateral relations were elevated to a Strategic Partnership, accompanied by a **2025–2029 Action Plan.**
- **Joint Naval Exercise (2025):** The Indian and Philippine navies conducted their first-ever joint naval exercise within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea.
- **Maritime Capacity Building:** India has offered assistance in maritime domain awareness, defence technology and Philippine Coast Guard capacity-building.

Strategic Implications For India

- Strengthens India's position as a credible defence equipment supplier.
- Supports a rules-based maritime order and peaceful settlement of disputes.
- Counters China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea without entering into a formal military alliance.
- Creates strategic leverage in the wider Indo-Pacific, particularly given India's own concerns along the Himalayan frontier.
- India has supported the South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Award (2016), which rejected the legal basis of **China's expansive Nine-Dash Line claims.**

Long-standing India-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation

- **MILAN Exercise:** Initiated in 1995 in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, it has developed into a major multilateral naval exercise.
- **SIMBEX:** Conducted with Singapore since 1994, it is India's longest uninterrupted naval exercise with another country.
- **CORPAT:** Coordinated Patrols with regional navies strengthen maritime surveillance and prevent illegal activities.
- **ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME):** Inaugurated in 2023, it institutionalised maritime cooperation between India and ASEAN members.
    - These initiatives contribute to maritime domain awareness, interoperability, anti-piracy operations, disaster response and regional confidence-building.
- The **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**, located near the **Malacca Strait,** further enhance India's ability to contribute to maritime security across the eastern Indian Ocean.

Challenges Ahead

- Despite growing strategic convergence, India faces several challenges:
    - **China's Growing Influence:** China's economic and military presence in Southeast Asia limits India's strategic space.
    - **Trade Imbalance:** Persistent trade asymmetries and non-tariff barriers constrain the full potential of India-ASEAN economic relations.
    - **Connectivity Bottlenecks:** Delays in infrastructure projects, particularly in Myanmar, undermine India's regional connectivity ambitions.
    - **ASEAN Divisions:** Different threat perceptions among member countries complicate consensus on the South China Sea.
    - **Limited Economic Integration:** India's regional trade and investment presence remains below its potential.
    - **Geopolitical Uncertainty:** Great-power rivalry and instability in West Asia can disrupt maritime trade, energy supplies and regional supply chains.

Way Forward

- **Reinvigorate Economic Engagement:** Complete the AITIGA review and improve market access for Indian businesses.
- **Accelerate Connectivity:** Prioritise the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and port connectivity.
- **Strengthen Maritime Partnerships:** Expand joint exercises, coastal surveillance, information-sharing and capacity-building.
- **Promote Digital Cooperation:** Scale up DPI partnerships and digital public services while ensuring data protection and cybersecurity.
- **Deepen Defence Industrial Cooperation:** Expand defence exports, technology transfer and joint production with Southeast Asian countries.
- **Maintain ASEAN Centrality:** Support ASEAN-led mechanisms and the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in accordance with international law.
- **Leverage Northeast & Andaman and Nicobar Islands:** Develop them as gateways for regional trade, connectivity and maritime cooperation.

Conclusion

- Southeast Asia is no longer merely an extension of India's Act East Policy; it is central to India's economic resilience, maritime security and strategic positioning.
- India can contribute to a **free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific** by combining ASEAN-led multilateralism with practical defence partnerships, while safeguarding its national interests and strategic autonomy.

Source: HT

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] India's engagement with Southeast Asia has evolved from economic cooperation to a broader strategic and maritime partnership. Discuss the significance of this shift in the context of India's Act East Policy and its vision for the Indo-Pacific.