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India-ASEAN relation in a contested indo-pacific region

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Abstract

India-ASEAN relations have undergone a significant transformation since the end of the Cold War, evolving from limited cultural engagement to a comprehensive strategic partnership. The launch of India's Look East Policy in 1991, institutionalised India's engagement with Southeast Asia. This paper examines the evolving India-ASEAN partnership within the broader context of the Indo-Pacific, a region increasingly shaped by maritime dynamics and intensifying great power competition. The study focuses on maritime cooperation as a central pillar of India-ASEAN engagement, highlighting the convergence between India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The paper also assesses the implications of emerging strategic groupings like the QUAD and AUKUS, evaluating whether these arrangements undermine or complement ASEAN centrality. The paper argues that despite concerns over the erosion of ASEAN centrality, ASEAN remains indispensable to the evolving Indo-Pacific architecture due to its geographical and institutional centrality.

Keywords: India-ASEAN, ASEAN centrality, QUAD, AUKUS, Maritime security, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)

Introduction

India and South East Asian countries share deep civilisational linkages that can be traced back to ancient times, rooted in sustained interactions through trade, religion, culture, and the exchange of ideas across the Indian Ocean. These historical connections laid an early foundation for cultural affinity between the regions. In the modern era, both India and South East Asian nations emerged from the colonial yoke almost around the same time, with different foreign policy trajectories. India followed a policy of non-alignment whereas South East Asian countries formed the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the late 1960s amidst the onslaught of Cold War. Till the end of Cold War the relationship between India and ASEAN can be described as almost non-existent and confined largely in the domain of culture, social, and with little trade and commercial activities. Structural constraints imposed by Cold War alignments, coupled with India's inward looking economic, led to limited engagement between the two sides. A decisive shift began with the launch of India's Look East Policy (Act East Policy since 2014) in 1991. It marked a strategic reorientation of India's foreign policy towards East and South East Asia. This policy was a major turning point as it started institutionalising the relation of India-ASEAN and its affiliates (Kipgen, 2020) ^[7]. India and ASEAN engagement has evolved over the years, becoming sectoral dialogue partners in 1992, full dialogue partners in 1996, summit level partners in 2002, and strategic partners in 2012.

India and ASEAN celebrates 2022 as the 'Year of ASEAN-India Friendship', marking three decades of their Sectoral Dialogue Partnership. Relationships nurtured over the years has opened up new set of opportunities and challenges amidst the heightened global interest in the Indo-Pacific region. Emergence of the new centre of power like China and regional power India in the Asia-Pacific and growing intensification of strategic competition between the United States of America and China has revived the significance of South East Asia and Indo-Pacific. These developments have renewed the strategic importance of South East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, positioning the region at the centre of contemporary geopolitical, economic and security discourses.

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Maritime Domain and Strategic convergence

The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) is reflective of the huge maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific region and underscores India's recognition of the oceans as central to regional stability and prosperity. Of the seven pillars of cooperation proposed by India under the IPOI as a global initiative, three are maritime domain based-Maritime Security; Maritime Ecology; and Maritime Resources (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2020) ^[6]-highlighting India's emphasis on sustainable and secure maritime domain. The maritime orientation finds strong resonance with ASEAN strategic outlook. ASEAN-India Plan of Action (POA) for 2021-2025, guided by the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) identifies maritime cooperation as one of the four principal areas of cooperation between ASEAN and India through the ASEAN-led mechanisms, the other three being connectivity; UN Sustainable Goals (SDGs) 2030; and economic cooperations (ASEAN, 2020) ^[11].

Economic integration is an important aspect of India-ASEAN relations. ASEAN has emerged as India's fourth largest trading partner, with US\$ 81.33 billion, which is approximately 10.6 percent of India's overall trade. To enhance economic engagement, in the 2015 ASEAN-India summit, India announced a US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit for connectivity and infrastructure projects in ASEAN (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020) ^[6]. Connectivity projects such as India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway as well as the Kaladan multi-modal transit are being developed to provide better connectivity between the two regions, thereby facilitating trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges. However, the long-term success of these economic integration and connectivity initiatives remain closely linked to political stability and security conditions in the region.

Securitising the maritime routes while acknowledging the importance of stability in the Indo-Pacific region seems to be the priority of India and ASEAN in maintaining regional stability based on peace and rules-based order. The stress on maritime security is not surprising given that an estimated 80 per cent of global trade by volume and 55 per cent by value is transported by sea and out of that volume 60 per cent of maritime trade passes through Asia (UNCTAD report, 2016). India's economic ambitions are also tied to the stability of the region as 40 per cent of India's trade passes through the South China Sea. India's ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) has oil exploration projects off the Paracel Islands which fall within the Exclusive Economic Zone of Vietnam.

The on going territorial dispute and maritime claims in South China Sea (SCS) between ASEAN member countries with China poses a threat to disrupt peace and stability in the region. With many of the ASEAN nations-Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Vietnam-involved in the maritime territorial dispute and maritime claims with China in the South China Sea when seen in tandem with India and China border standoff, ASEAN and India cooperation becomes essential in maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region (Bhattacharya, 2020) ^[4]. Reflecting this shared concern, the joint statement at the 18th India-ASEAN Summit emphasised on ASEAN and India cooperation to promote "respect for international law, including the UN Charter, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)" (ASEAN, 2021) ^[1], as the foundation for

managing maritime disputes and ensuring freedom of navigation.

India's commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific was clearly articulated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi advocated for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific while emphasising on ASEAN centrality at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018. India's Indo-Pacific initiatives have the potential to complement ASEAN's approach to managing security challenges in the South China Sea, which priorities non-confrontation, dialogue, and adherence to a rules-based order. This convergence of perspectives reinforces the scope for deeper India-ASEAN cooperation in shaping an inclusive and stable Indo-Pacific region.

QUAD, AUKUS, and the Question ASEAN centrality

The evolving Indo-Pacific security architecture has witnessed the emergence of new plurilateral arrangements, most notably the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership. The QUAD functions as a non-military, plurilateral mechanism that covers a wide spectrum of global issues. In contrast, AUKUS represents a security oriented arrangement among Australia, UK, and US to share nuclear technology program with Australia and to cooperate on strategic technology primarily aimed as military deterrent (Panda, 2022) ^[10]. In QUAD, India can fulfil its broad agenda including global health, infrastructure, climate, education, critical and emerging technologies, cybersecurity and space. AUKUS can aid with the Indo-Pacific visions of ASEAN and India, as both can benefit from contained China while absolving from anti-China security arrangement (Miller, 2021) ^[9].

A central aspect of the Indo-Pacific initiatives of both ASEAN and India respectively, is the focus on ASEAN centrality. Geographical centrality of ASEAN member countries in the Indo-Pacific region entailed Indo-Pacific initiatives of Australia, India, Japan, the United States of America to acknowledge the centrality of ASEAN. For ASEAN, its centrality in the region is its core value thus, AOIP emphasises on ASEAN centrality with ASEAN led initiatives (ASEAN, 2019) ^[12]. For decades, the centrality of ASEAN was not challenged as there were low big power contestation in the region. However, with "Chinese aggression towards ASEAN Countries, and also towards India, and Japan, the balance of power has been disrupted" (Singh, 2021) ^[12]. The inability of ASEAN to end or to bring an amicable solution on issues of South China Sea disputes, the territorial disputes of ASEAN member countries with China, and more recently on Myanmar issue, questions its centrality.

Concerns regarding waning of ASEAN centrality are significant given that several ASEAN member states remain wary of the QUAD, perceiving it as a potential to ASEAN-led regional mechanisms. This has prompted anxieties about ASEAN's place within the rapidly evolving regional architecture (Stromseth, 2021) ^[13]. However, it would be too soon to disprove ASEAN centrality. Indo-Pacific initiatives whether advanced by India, ASEAN or other regional actors extend beyond narrow security concerns and encompass economic cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and people-to-people engagement. ASEAN's persistent emphasis on economic integration and connectivity seems to be in this regard. It appears to follow a principle of maximum economic integration and

connectivity to minimise confrontations and dilute the security entanglements. Geographical centrality of Southeast Asian countries places ASEAN at the centre Indo-Pacific region, thus engagement with ASEAN is both strategic and unavoidable.

Conclusion

Big power contestation in the Indo-Pacific region has become an enduring feature of the Indo-Pacific regional order, shaping the strategic environment in which both India and ASEAN operate (Medcalf 2020) ^[8]. Intensifying China-US contestation in the region has altered regional power dynamics and heightened security concerns. India and ASEAN has however, consistently demonstrated preference for approaches that prevent direct confrontation and has instead emphasised on inclusivity, strategic autonomy and adherence to rules based order.

In this context, QUAD and AUKUS need not be viewed as a challenge to ASEAN centrality or a threat to balance of power. Rather they can be perceived as an opportunity that contribute to maintaining regional balance of power (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020) ^[5]. Both IPOI and AOIP covers broad areas of cooperative mechanisms, which is anticipated to further deepen the India and ASEAN relations. India-ASEAN cooperation represents a stabilising force within the contested Indo-Pacific region. By leveraging inclusive framework and supporting ASEAN centrality, India and ASEAN can collectively contribute to regional peace and stability while promoting strategic autonomy.

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