

## Critically Analysing India's Connectivity Projects with ASEAN

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### Abstract

India has proposed massive connectivity projects with the ASEAN member states. Nevertheless, the connectivity initiatives have specific geopolitical and geoeconomic implications. It is important to critically scrutinise those connectivity projects. Thus, the study elucidates the geopolitical inferences for India in the Indo-Pacific region by increasing links with Southeast Asian countries. Notably, the research points out that geopolitical consequences are attached to positive geoeconomic insinuations. India's Act East Policy plays a very significant role in these purposes. Regarding connectivity, the study purports the Northeast region of India to be pivotal. The study focuses that analysis of the Northeast region is essential while critically analysing the connectivity projects with ASEAN. Overall, the study has critically analysed India's connectivity projects with ASEAN.

**Keywords:** *India, ASEAN, Connectivity, Northeast India, Geopolitics, Geoeconomic.*

### Introduction

The problem in the academic domain of International Relations (IR) is that the *regions* are taken as secondary levels of analysis. However, many argue that globalisation has become a leading buzzword in global politics, but the sub-global phenomenon of regionalisation has been largely missed (Oliveira, 2017). The process of regional integration is necessary if viewed from a liberal perspective. Nevertheless, because of the interdependent nature of world processes, interactions among the regions have been inevitable. The idea of connectivity among the regions is being highly put forward. The connectivity among the regions has brought countries, societies, and people to

enhance better economic, financial, infrastructural, and people-to-people ties through functional linkages like energy, transport, IT, and others.

The connectivity among the regions has been considered a core element of the national strategies of the states. Since the initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, aiming for overall connectivity in Asia, Europe, and Africa, the other major powers have started the promotion of regional connectivity. In response, Japan in 2016 initiated the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy', and India joined later with Japan in the same year to promote the 'Asia Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC) (Plagemann, Datta, & Chu, 2021). India, as a rising power in the world, has put connectivity with different regions of the world as its strategic priorities. A significant growth in connectivity projects can be observed between India and Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Notably, the study focuses on India's strategy to connect with Southeast Asia under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who metamorphosed the 'Look East' policy into 'Act East' policy. While analysing India's connectivity attempts to link with Southeast Asia, it is essential to note the connectivity infrastructure in Bangladesh and Myanmar by China. This geopolitical connectivity competition shows challenges and opportunities for Asia to link with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries (Plagemann, Datta, & Chu, 2021).

After the independence of India in 1947, the Northeast states (so-called 'seven sisters') have been strategically essential but at the same time underdeveloped and culturally distant. Thus, there have been several attempts to connect mainland India with Southeast Asia (Majumdar, Sarma, & Majumdar, 2020). With the introduction of its Look East strategy in the 1990s and the following reformulation of its Act East policy, New Delhi has endeavoured to connect mainland India with Southeast Asia and its thriving economy through the region's northeast (Nachiappan, 2021). As a result, a more considerable strategic engagement replaced the bilateral agenda of trade, investment, and economic interactions between ASEAN countries (Nachiappan, 2021). The South Asian Association for Regional Corporation (SAARC) (the only regional organisation in South Asia) has been stalled for various reasons. Hence, India has opted for sub-regional platforms like Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) and inter-regional organisations like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) for linking India (as a whole South Asia) with ASEAN member states (Majumdar, Sarma, & Majumdar, 2020).

Similarly, the ASEAN perception of India's connectivity attempts to the region is vital. The ASEAN states are also keen to cooperate with India in various sectors, including security, trade, and people-to-people relations (Singh, 2018). However, the ASEAN

member states are more optimistic about India's support in the Indo-Pacific region (Singh, 2018). As the centre for geopolitics has been shifting to ASEAN states, realising such, the member countries have sought to cooperate with India and are welcoming New Delhi's connectivity investment projects (Izzudin, 2020). Nevertheless, both India and ASEAN member states have promised to enhance connectivity, specifically the former, and it is vital to analyse the connectivity projects targeted to link India with Southeast Asia. Thus, the study attempts to do so by focusing on the promised connectivity projects by India. The study attempts to justify the chosen functional linkage by India to connect with ASEAN critically.

### **Brief Outlook: Indian Connectivity Projects towards ASEAN**

The ethos of shared prosperity drives India-ASEAN connectivity projects. The connectivity between the two can be observed in the physical, digital, civilizational, and people-to-people domains through the proposed railway, road, air, and maritime networks (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). Through this proposed multifaceted network of connectivity, India and ASEAN states are focused on strategic partnership at a more significant level. Different summits have been held between the two to enhance the two hubs economically and strategically. New Delhi's Act East policy has been crucial in inducing dynamic connectivity projects with ASEAN member states and accelerating trans-regional integration (Nachiappan, 2021). Notably, there has been a positive response to the connectivity between the two. In 2018, India provided each ASEAN country with a USD 1 billion Line of Credit (LoC) for connectivity and infrastructure projects (Chaudhury, 2020).

Previously, the link between India and ASEAN states was only limited to air and sea. However, there has been an initiation regarding connectivity through land corridors. The landmark project, among all others, is the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. This is about 1,360 KM long, connecting Moreh in Manipur, India, to Mae Sot in Thailand through Bagan and Mandalay in Myanmar (De, 2014). India has taken a large part of the responsibility for the highway. This is also seen as an initiative to counter Chinese influence in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Nevertheless, this project seems to be stalled due to funding, human resources, and interstate and intrastate challenges (Medina, 2022). Another connectivity project is the Delhi-Hanoi railway link, a Trans-Asian railway that has been forwarded years back and endorsed, but this project is nowhere to be seen turning into reality (De, 2014). Another important connectivity project between ASEAN states and India is the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project which is to join the Kolkata port in India with the Sittwe port in the Rakhine state of Myanmar (Datta, 2020). This strategic project also seems to halt because of the

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militant activities in the Rakhine state and the land acquisition problem in India (Datta, 2020). The 2021 military takeover in Myanmar itself has been a huge problem for India and ASEAN states to initiate any cooperative activities between the two.

Moreover, the Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) is among the vital land and sea connectivity projects to link India with four Mekong countries - Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam (De, 2014). India has long been promoting Mekong-Ganga cooperation for its connectivity with ASEAN countries. Although there have been high hopes regarding this initiative, the pace is still to be taken to make this strategic project successful (De, 2014). Another connectivity project to join India with Southeast Asia is the Stilwell Road, also known as Ledo Road (De, 2014). This is a strategic road with historical importance. The revival of the Stilwell Road links Assam with Yunnan province of China through the India-Myanmar border. The Act East strategy is aimed to improve cross-border trade in Arunachal Pradesh by use of the Stilwell Road (Pattnaik, 2018). Due to their shared cultural links, the population of India and Myanmar, who live on opposite sides of the international boundary, might facilitate commerce through this connectivity projects. It is predicted to increase the growth triangles in the area due to the Stilwell Road (Pattnaik, 2018). Also, building a connection between Myanmar and India's Northeast regions is one of the goals of the Tiddim-Rih-Falam (TRF) road project (Singh & Kathuria, 2015). An MoU was signed between the two countries to upgrade the road, but the completion of the road seems to be uncertain.

Similarly, enhancing the air connectivity between India and ASEAN countries could increase trade and people-to-people connectivity. The air connectivity can help the two realise their true trade potential. It could help India and Southeast Asian countries with trade liberalisation (The Economic Times, 2021). Some ASEAN member countries do not have a direct flight with India; thus, a direct flight with India could enhance connectivity and tourism interest. For the purpose of people-to-people connectivity, India has initiated exchange programs between farmers, students, and media personnel. The 1000 integrated PhD Fellowships initiative for ASEAN students at the IITs was introduced in September 2019 by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Human Resource Development jointly (Chaudhury, 2020). The connectivity is not only restricted to India and ASEAN countries through road, air, and marine ways, also the connectivity can be developed in other sectors like telecommunications, energy, environmental issues and others (Chaudhury, 2020). Other essential sectors through which connectivity can be enhanced are digital and cyber domains.

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Regarding the connectivity between India and ASEAN, New Delhi has forwarded three funds, namely, the ASEAN-India Cooperation Fund (AIF), the ASEAN-India Green Fund (AIGF), and the ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund (AISTDF) (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). The annual meetings (ASEAN-India Summit) are the highest level of institutional mechanism, followed by Foreign Minister Level and Senior Official Level meetings. The cooperation between the two is directed by the 5-year 'Plan of Action' officiated by Foreign Ministers Level meeting and Work Plans of cooperation by ASEAN Sectoral bodies (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). The cooperation between India and ASEAN is guided by the Delhi Dialogue hosted by India annually. The Sectoral Mechanism dialogue for cooperation focuses on the cooperation between the two in the areas of business and trade, energy, education, ICT (digital domain), maritime and road connectivity, agriculture, space, and other sectors like combating terrorism, transnational crimes, and drug trafficking (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022).

Furthermore, the Northeast states in India have an essential role in the connectivity of the country with ASEAN. Since the Union Budget for 2017–2018, there has been a significant increase in financial allocation under the current government of Prime Minister Modi (Chakroborty, 2022). The allocated budget for the Northeast region in FY 2023-2024 is INR 5892.00 crore which is ~114% higher than the allocated budget of FY 2022-2023 (Government of India, 2023). In order to expedite road building in Northeast India and border regions, the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL) was established in January 2015 (Chakroborty, 2022). Additionally, the opening of the Dhola-Sadiya Bridge in May 2017 is anticipated to change the game in terms of fostering connectivity, trade, and growth, as well as making it easier for troops and military supplies to move between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (Shillong Times, 2018).

Similarly, the central union government launched the Bharatmala Pariyojana in 2019, intending to improve road connectivity to border regions (Ministry for Development of North-east Region, 2019). The Indian Railways had proposed a broad-gauge connection to the capital cities of the northeastern states by 2020 and the conversion of the whole rail network through a massive Rs. 10,000 crore construction spree in the area (The Economic Times, 2021). In order to improve inland waterways, ports, and railroad connections, the national government has invested Rs. 25 lakh crores, acknowledging that these infrastructure improvements are essential for accelerating economic growth (The Economic Times, 2020). A significant step forward for the Act East Policy has been the adoption of the National Civil Aviation Policy 2016, which aims to improve regional air connectivity by making aviation more accessible and affordable, while also fostering

employment, tourism, balanced regional growth, and ease of doing business through deregulation, streamlined processes, and e-governance (Chakroborty, 2022).

### **Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Analysis of India's Connectivity Project with ASEAN**

The realisation of the strategic importance of ASEAN member states drives the connectivity initiatives of India, with ASEAN as an essential and crucial geopolitical player in Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. India started its ties with ASEAN in 1991 as a part of its Look East policy. The ASEAN member countries have been at the heart of Indian foreign policy through the Act East policy. The partnership has always been politically, economically, and strategically important for India. In order to achieve political cohesion, economic integration, and social responsibility, the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress, and Shared Prosperity from 2016 to 2020 covered the priorities and measures to deepen further political security, economic, and sociocultural cooperation (Roy, 2022). India's connectivity with ASEAN via multifaceted support in the changing geopolitics of the Indo-pacific region is growing. As the geopolitical and geoeconomic scenario has changed increasingly with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India will benefit from this group of states as an economic ailment and strategic partner (Chaudhury, 2022). The Russia-Ukraine crisis has disrupted the supply chains to Southeast Asia impacting the economy of the region (Saha, 2023). The connectivity projects of India come with a shared view of economic development, industrialisation, and enhanced trade which could aid the Southeast Asian economies in this crisis. Notably, the connectivity with the ASEAN member states comes with the strategic outlook of going beyond Southeast Asia, making the region a leveraging point.

Moreover, the enhanced Indian links with ASEAN member states aim to create a more open, transparent, sustainable, inclusive, and rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. The strategic partnership of connectivity, India as the fourth largest trading partner, can help the country to develop strategic positioning in trade, investment, and security and defence as well (Bhattacharya, 2019). This was reiterated in the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN-India Joint Cooperation Committee (AIJCC) Meeting held at the ASEAN Secretariat in March 2023 (ASEAN, 2023). India also believes that the growing connectivity can neutralise Chinese aggression in the Southeast Asian region. The Indian connectivity projects with ASEAN states shall provide leverage against the external powers in the region, economic success, regional security, and, if possible, shape political architecture (Bhattacharya, 2019).



Moreover, the connectivity projects of India with ASEAN come with the convergence of policies with the USA. India's link with ASEAN has the strategic implication of strengthening QUAD and Malabar naval exercises, indicating an enhancement in the coordination and sharing of technologies (Roy, 2022). This emanates from the growing aggression of China in the Indian Ocean. Along with cooperating with the USA, India has navigated its relation with the ASEAN member states that are concerned with the great power rivalry between the USA and China. The Indian Navy has recently boosted port visits to ASEAN nations, including Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. India's relationship has evolved into a strategic alliance, especially with Vietnam and Singapore, opening up more room for manoeuvring and potentiality for collaboration (Menon, 2021). This can also be seen as a show of newfound political realism in the twenty-first century (Chakroborty, 2022).

The connectivity projects seem to be the most critical point of convergence. India's connectivity initiatives with ASEAN primarily concentrate on that problem, which prepares the way for developing the Indo-Pacific vision (Chaudhury, 2022). India and ASEAN have worked together on political, security, economic, and cross-pillar interactions, paving the path for future ties that promote the region's peace, prosperity, and stability (Menon, 2021). Additionally, the Act East Policy of India has been gradually morphing into the nation's Indo-Pacific Policy, and now that ASEAN has embraced the Indo-Pacific vision, it is simpler for the two organisations to cooperate in this area. As the Indo-Pacific region continues to develop its connectivity and maritime ties become a primary priority, it is essential to consider how Chinese expansionism and aggression, which has threatened numerous ASEAN nations in the South China Sea, must be seen in this context (Bhattacharya, 2019).

Furthermore, it is vital to understand the rise of India to analyse the increasing connectivity of India with ASEAN. With the overall and robust growth of the GDP of India, the World Bank has estimated a 6.3% growth rate in FY 2023-2024 (World Bank, 2023). Also, India is the fifth largest economy in the world (World Bank, 2023). The other economic indicators for India are very impressive as well. The domestic demand-driven economy of India, with an increasing number of industries and commercial start-ups, has complemented the growth and is estimated to become the fastest-growing economy (MacDonald & Xu, 2022).

Similarly, ASEAN as a region has been collectively growing. If the ASEAN is treated as a single entity, it would be the third-largest economy in Asia and the fifth-largest economy globally. The regional organisation's collective GDP is estimated to cross USD 4 trillion by 2025 (HKTDC, 2021). The monolithic nature of the market and

macroeconomic stability in the region have made ASEAN an economic powerhouse (HV, Thompson, & Tonby, 2014). ASEAN is growing as a hub for consumer demand, and being placed at an advantageous position in global trade flows have profoundly enlarged the intraregional trade (HV, Thompson, & Tonby, 2014). Considering India's economic strength and ASEAN, India's connectivity projects have geoeconomic implications too.

The economic cooperation with ASEAN has been and will continue to be a key component of India's Act East policy. The "Act East Policy" of India prioritises enhancing ASEAN, increasing connectivity, and strengthening economic integration between India and ASEAN. The relationship between India and ASEAN has a great deal of potential to develop into a powerful trading bloc in the future. To improve trade and investment relations between India and ASEAN, the role of commerce and connectivity is still crucial. Increased trade in products, services, skilled labour, and capital are all predicted to significantly improve economic relations (Bhattacharya, 2019). Future opportunities for enhancing India-ASEAN cooperation in other crucial areas are also enormous, including Make in India, infrastructure development, the creation of smart cities, innovation and skill-set development, and cooperation in science, technology, and space explorations (Datta, 2020). Increased commercial and economic ties between Asian nations will benefit India and those economies. By fostering and facilitating India's foreign commerce and investment, particularly with Asian nations like ASEAN, the government is making significant efforts to play a catalytic role in boosting India's integration with the global economy (Menon, 2021).

The ASEAN member nations and India have established a free trade zone known as the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA). Through the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) Scheme for AFTA, ASEAN member nations have made notable strides toward reducing intra-regional tariffs (Chacko, 2015). Through the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) Scheme for AFTA, ASEAN member nations have made notable strides toward reducing intra-regional tariffs. The implementation of the ASEAN-India Trade in Services and Investment Agreement came into effect in 2015 (Chacko, 2015). The main goals of the Investment Agreement are investment protection, non-discriminatory treatment of investors in cases of expropriation or nationalisation, and just compensation (Chacko, 2015). In FY 2022, India's trade amount with ASEAN countries amounted to over USD 110 billion, while trading the largest portion with Singapore valued at over USD 30 billion and followed by Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand respectively (Statista, 2023). The ASEAN area contributes significantly to India's international trade and FDI inflows, and joint ventures and other forms of collaboration between the two regions are flourishing.



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Thus, while critically analysing the connectivity projects of India for ASEAN, it is crucial to look through the lenses of geopolitics and geoeconomics. The geopolitical ambitions and challenges drive the infrastructure projects of India for ASEAN countries and the economic prosperity and infrastructural development of India simultaneously.

### **The implication in the Northeast: India's Project towards ASEAN**

The northeast region of India received little attention under India's Look East Policy, which emphasised fostering political connections, boosting economic integration, and expanding security cooperation with ASEAN nations and other nations. However the Act East Policy, now, focuses on economic cooperation, cultural convergence, and strategic alliance. Through the Act East Policy, improved connection to the North Eastern area of India and other neighbouring nations, particularly ASEAN countries, will boost India's economic and trade growth, create jobs, and ultimately aid regional development. Consequently, the "portal to the region of Southeast Asia" has been referred to as the Northeast states (Roy, 2022). This offers opportunities for enhancing regional and cross-border trade and developing economic corridors between India (particularly northeast states of India) and regional neighbours in Southeast Asia (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

During a three-day tour to the Northeast states of Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Nagaland on 29 November 2014, Prime Minister Modi reaffirmed his commitment to the need to fulfil the region's potential (Chakroborty, 2022). In order to develop the northeast region and open the door to Southeast Asia, the digital connection is another area of collaboration that has to be improved. The northeast area of India was emphasised in the Niti Aayog study "Strategy for New India@ 75", which offered several important connectivity-related recommendations (Chakroborty, 2022). To increase connectivity and unlock the region's potential as a hub for global trade and commerce, the Act East Policy has not only accelerated ongoing connectivity projects but also promoted the launch of new ones. The Asian Highway and Asian Railway Link are only two of the several cross-border connectivity projects India is currently working on or discussing (Basak, 2020). These projects would connect Northeast India to more of Southeast Asia.

The border region is isolated and poor, and its residents are diverse ethnic groups with shared cultural affinity. They are different from the other Indian and people of Myanmar in terms of ethnicity. The difference in per capita income between the area and the national average is getting larger (Chakroborty, 2022). Despite having the most natural resources in the nation, the area remains underdeveloped and destitute. For there to be

increased economic interaction with Southeast Asia, the physical connection is crucial. Due to its geographical position, the northeast area of India gains significance in this perspective (Basak, 2020). Northeast India has received significant attention from the policy. It has frequently been predicted that Northeast India will become a significant entry point for commerce and other interactions with ASEAN. Between India, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, Northeast India serves as “the geographical and cultural bridge” (Basak, 2020). The strategic cooperation under the Act East policy initiative has provided opportunities for India in general and Northeast India in particular.

## **Conclusion**

The connectivity projects between India and ASEAN strive to realise the full potential of an ASEAN-India strategic relationship, striving for a people-centred, rule-based Indo-Pacific region, closing the development gap, and improving ASEAN connectivity. The ASEAN Connectivity Agenda, which includes capacity building, outreach, and resource mobilisation, strongly emphasises connectivity. Its goal is to improve physical connectivity by addressing the missing links between South and Southeast Asia through railways, roads, waterways, and airports. In order to create strong connections that will assist intra- and interregional transport cooperation as well as economic, geographic, and seaport development, the agenda is heavily focused on the marine sector. Facilitating visa applications and improving people-to-people communication through media, tourism, and education are necessary to promote the Connectivity Agenda. Connectivity also requires the construction of infrastructure. As a result, connectivity is the most crucial aspect of ties between India and ASEAN. Only if connection succeeds will other types of collaboration succeed. Hence it is necessary to examine these relations in more detail.

The connectivity initiatives India is undertaking with ASEAN, in which ASEAN is anticipated to play a significant role, serve geopolitical and economic goals. Economic and strategic interests are intertwined. As the most critical area of agreement, connectivity is the main topic of discussion in India’s ties with ASEAN. This helps to advance the Indo-Pacific strategy. India and ASEAN have worked together on political, security, economic, and cross-pillar interactions, paving the path for future ties that promote the region’s peace, prosperity, and stability. The connectivity projects between the two also provide India with significant economic opportunities. The analysis through the geoeconomic perspective should be primarily concerned while discussing connectivity projects. It is also vital to focus that the Act East Policy’s strategic centre in Northeast India and the region’s economic recovery in the borderlands has given rise to a new initiative in communicative diplomacy to enhance economic and cultural

exchanges with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and its eastern neighbours in order to support regional development.

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