

ASSESSING INDIA'S STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract: This dissertation examines India's strategic engagement with Southeast Asia within the broader framework of the Act East Policy, assessing how political, economic, and defence interactions have evolved in response to regional power shifts. By analysing India's bilateral relationships with Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, the study highlights varying degrees of strategic convergence driven by shared security concerns, maritime cooperation, and economic complementarities. The research evaluates India's role in shaping a stable Indo-Pacific architecture and identifies key opportunities and constraints influencing its outreach. Through comparative case studies, the dissertation provides insights into India's strategic priorities and its long-term engagement trajectory in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Act East Policy (AEP), Indo-Pacific Strategy, Maritime Security, ASEAN Centrality, Strategic Partnerships, Defence Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

India's engagement with Southeast Asia has developed from a solely economic standpoint in the 1990s to a multi-dimensional strategic engagement in the 2010s and 2020s. The 'Look East Policy' transitioned to the 'Act East Policy' (AEP) along with India's growing interest in the Indo-Pacific has reflected the above said evolution. The Southeast Asian region is an integral part of India's strategic concerns. The region lies along critical sea-lanes which connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, specifically the Malacca Strait which paves a way into the South China Sea. This path is important for the flow of India's energy imports and trade. ASEAN, which is the multilateral organisation made up of the countries in the region remains as the principal architecture shaping diplomatic and security. New Delhi's policy objectives are to be seen as a reliable, non-coercive partner which advances ASEAN centrality, contributing to maritime security and deepening political, economic and people-to-people connections across the region.

This dissertation examines the strategic engagement of India with Southeast Asia through the comparative case studies of Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. These were selected because they are representatives of different strategic postures within Southeast Asian region. Indonesia is an island country which preference strong multilateral balancing and strategic autonomy- both practiced by India as well. Vietnam is a mainland state with maritime security concerns with China and a growing defence convergence with India. The Philippines is the major claimant in the South China Sea and has resisted China's growing ambitions in the region militarily as well as legally. The Philippines had won a favourable verdict from the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2016. All these have forced Manila to rapidly diversify its security partnerships. The analysis covers defence, cultural, social and economic engagements and assesses the points of both convergence and divergence.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The study applies a strategic-partnership framework combined with middle-power diplomacy and institutionalist approaches. Strategic partnerships emphasise flexible but durable political, economic and security cooperation without formal alliance obligations; they are appropriate for India and ASEAN states that prefer strategic autonomy (Brewster, 2020). Middle-power diplomacy explains India's emphasis on norm promotion, capacity building and multilateralism rather than territorial assertion (Chong & Tan, 2021). Institutionalism highlights ASEAN centrality and the role of ASEAN-led mechanisms—East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ADMM-Plus — as conduits for India's policy (ASEAN, 2019).

EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S POLICY: LOOK EAST → ACT EAST → INDO-PACIFIC CONVERGENCE

When the Indian economy was opened up in 1990-91, Southeast Asia was identified as a major partner (Ngalung, 2022). The Look East Policy from 1991 onwards was initiated to mark a presence in the East and Southeast Asian markets after India's domestic reforms. In 2014, the elevation to the Act East Policy denoted a more proactive posture that explicitly included defence cooperation, maritime security and institutional linkages. The endorsement of ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) by India along with the consolidation of the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022 is a reflection of New Delhi's strategy to pursue its strategic objectives through the ASEAN-led institutions and mechanisms to project India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region.

The initial Look East Policy was primarily driven by post-liberalisation economic needs (Roy-Chaudhury, 2025). It aimed at reconnecting and integrating with the fast-growing economies of Southeast Asia. During this period, India focused mainly on trade, investment, cultural exchanges and institutional exchanges with ASEAN which marked its diplomatic and economic entry into the region. When the policy developed into the Act East Policy in 2014, there was an immense shift from engagement to implementation. Economic cooperation still played an important role in the relationship but, greater emphasis was placed on strategic and security dimensions. This included defence cooperation, maritime security, connectivity projects and high-level political and diplomatic meetings. This helped in establishing India as a more proactive and reliable partner for Southeast Asian countries, especially in areas such as naval cooperation, capacity building and counter-terrorism.

The late 2010 saw India's Southeast Asia policy further converging into the broader Indo-Pacific framework. Indo-Pacific became an important focus point in the world due to the changing global power dynamics which shifted the relations from an economic engagement to security-driven one. This development indicated India's growing interests in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. This highlighted maritime cooperation, freedom of navigation, abidance of international law and mainly-ASEAN centrality. These three phases together reflect how India evolved from economic outreach to a comprehensive strategic partner for Southeast Asia which aimed at strengthening regional stability and elevating India's role as a key player in the Indo-Pacific.

INDIA-INDONESIA: MULTILATERAL ANCHORING, MARITIME COOPERATION AND GROWING ECONOMIC TIES

Political And Institutional Relations

India and Indonesia share post-colonial history which evolved steadily into strategic partnerships which were shaped by regional and global developments. The first leaders of both the countries- Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Sukarno of Indonesia were pioneers of non-alignment and independent foreign policies. The initial relationship was limited in depth and was confined to diplomatic exchanges and cooperation within the Non-Aligned Movement.

In the early 1990s, the relationship transformed with India's economic liberalisation and the launch of the Look East Policy. This helped in renewing India's engagement with its Southeast Asian partners. Indonesia's growing influence within ASEAN helped in positioning itself as a key partner in India's regional outreach.

Maritime cooperation and regional stability became the main areas in the 2000s due to their shared interest in securing sea lines of communication. The elevation of the bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2018 further cemented regular political and strategic dialogues across security, economic and socio-cultural domains (India-Indonesia Joint Statement During Visit of Prime Minister to Indonesia (May 30, 2018), n.d.). This upgrade indicated the mutual recognition of each other's strategic importance especially in the Indo-Pacific context. During the 2020s, the political and institutional ties deepened further through convergence on the Indo-Pacific. Indonesia and India align closely with each other's visions such as ASEAN centrality and emphasis on inclusivity. The India-Indonesia relationship can be characterised as stable and strategically aligned with a common commitment to ASEAN-led regional architecture.

Defence And Maritime Cooperation

Defence relations between both the countries have evolved from simple confidence-building exchanges into a fully structured and multi-layered partnership. The main objectives of this relationship are maritime security and defence capacity building. The shared strategic concerns in the eastern Indian Ocean, the Malacca Strait and the wider Indo-Pacific reflect this evolution. India has become a preference for Indonesia as a reliable partner to diversify its military capabilities as well as its growing role as a defence supplier in the Southeast Asian region.

The Defence Ministers' Dialogues, Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC) Meetings, service-to-service talks and staff-level consultations are the institutions which anchors the defence cooperation between India and Indonesia. Sustained engagement in policy, operations, training and defence industry cooperation has been enabled by the above mechanisms. In 2018, the bilateral relations upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership enabled the two parties to expand defence ties more rapidly, especially in the maritime domain.

The two countries have placed maritime security collaboration and naval interaction as the central feature of defence cooperation (Kharisma, 2025). Indian navy ships are regular visitors in Indonesian ports such as Sabang and Jakarta by conducting port calls, while the Indonesian naval vessels also conduct reciprocal visits to Indian ports. Ship-to-ship interactions and maritime exercises (Samudra Shakti) focuses on enhancing interoperability, understanding and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (INDIAN NAVY HOSTS FIFTH EDITION OF BILATERAL EXERCISE "SAMUDRA SHAKTI" – 2025 WITH INDONESIA NAVY AT VISAKHAPATNAM, n.d.). Sabang, a port in Indonesia has been identified by India to be of strategic importance near the Malacca Strait and therefore Indian naval vessels conduct regular port calls here (Aniruddh, 2024). Maritime surveillance, search and rescue missions, humanitarian and disaster assistances as well as responding to non-traditional security threats such as piracy and illegal fishing are conducted in the coordinated patrols and joint naval exercises between the two navies (36TH EDITION OF INDIA – INDONESIA COORDINATED PATROL, n.d.).

Military education and training forms another key pillar of defence relations between India and Indonesia. Armed forces personnel from Indonesia including officers from army, navy and air force are regular attendees in various professional military institutions and specialised training programmes in various Indian institutions across the country. Such courses mainly include staff courses, defence management programmes and technical training. These exchanges help in creating long term relationships between the personnels of both the countries thereby enhancing mutual understanding between the two militaries. India has always displayed defence training as the core element of the capacity building initiatives especially in Southeast Asia. At the same time, Indonesia views the military education ecosystem as professional and cost effective.

With the launching of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', India has been developing its domestic defence industry ecosystem. Southeast Asia has been a major buyer of Indian defence equipments. Multiple reports suggests that Indonesia has shown interest in Indian artillery and missile systems, including the Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launcher (MBRL). Indonesia's broader efforts to modernise its military systems and to diversify suppliers and India's push to promote its indigenous defence systems aligned together which created the said

interest. No contract has been confirmed, however the interest itself signifies Indonesia's growing trust in Indian military systems as well as India's transition from a training partner to a potential supplier in the region.

Economic And Financial Engagement

Economic and financial engagements between the two countries are still developing but is an important facet of the relationship between India and Indonesia which complements the political and strategic cooperation. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed between the two countries signify policy changes to align economic cooperation more closely.

Indonesia is one of the largest trading partners of India. A target of \$50 billion dollars had been set during the 2023-24 financial year. However, this target was not achieved with bilateral trade touching only \$29.4 billion in the financial year (PRactice, 2024). Products like coal, palm oil and minerals are imported by India whereas refined petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, automotive components, steel and agricultural goods are exported. The trade is very limited and is heavily commodity-oriented despite a steady growth. Investment flows have expanded gradually but has not yet reached its full potential. Indian companies like HCL Tech, Adani Global, TVS and Apollo Hospitals have invested in multiple sectors such as energy, mining, IT services and more (Embassy of India, Jakarta, n.d.). Indonesian companies like Gojek Indonesia, CP Prima, Bank Indonesia International and IndoFood on the other hand are largely concentrated in resource-linked activities (Embassy of India, Jakarta, n.d.).

Economic engagement has been increasingly linked to strategic and maritime considerations. The Andaman-Aceh corridor is a strategic economic and maritime connectivity initiative between India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Indonesia's Aceh province. It was launched to boost tourism, economic growth and maritime security in the region and focuses on connecting India's Port Blair with Indonesia's Sabang which is only 90 nautical miles apart (Admin, 2020). Both the countries have also signed multiple agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) over areas of cooperation like digital economy, start-ups, energy research and information and communication technology (Sulistiyandari, 2025). Such initiatives signal a shift towards future-oriented sectors compared to relying solely on traditional trade. While trade is significant, economic ties lag behind the rapidly expanding strategic and defence relationship. The two governments are aware that deeper investment linkages and diversification of trade are essential to provide economic substance to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership which in turn ensures a long-term stability in the bilateral relations. The relationship between India and Indonesia has evolved into a stable and strategically relevant partnership grounded in historical affinity, institutional depth and converging regional interests. The present stage was not achieved suddenly but over a period of time. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework has helped immensely in developing mechanisms for dialogue and continuity beyond leadership changes. Indonesia is a major actor in ASEAN which gives India a wider regional significance by placing Jakarta as a gateway to ASEAN diplomacy. Defence and maritime cooperation is the backbone of the strategic relationship. Naval engagement, naval exercises and joint maritime patrols along with port calls signifies a shift from symbolic cooperation to operational and institutional integration. Culturally and socially, civilisational linkages and people to people exchanges creates a soft power foundation that strengthens trust and long-term stability. The economic relationship is still the weakest portion of the interaction between the two countries. An imbalance in trade is existent since the trade structure is heavily depended on commodities and the investment flows are very limited. The connectivity projects and industrial projects undertaken by both India and Indonesia are very slow to reach fruition. Overall, the two countries have a strategically strong, institutionally stable, but economically underutilised. The partnership has evolved from symbolic to operational and strategically purposeful. Economic and financial engagement must deepen to match the pace of defence and political cooperation.

INDIA–VIETNAM: DEFENCE PILLAR, MARITIME CONVERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENTAL TIES

Political Trust and Strategic Alignment

India and Vietnam have one of the strongest bilateral relations in Southeast Asia which developed steadily over the past two decades. Consistent political support shared normative positions on regional order and a high degree of strategic comfort which had sustained across changes in leadership in both the countries are the factors which contributed to such a relationship between the two countries. During the Cold War, India had supported Vietnam throughout its conflict period and reconstruction period. Vietnam was a receptive partner for the initial Look East policy and later the Act East Policy due to India's non-interventionist approach and respect for Vietnam's sovereignty.

The gradual upgrading of bilateral ties reaching the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 has helped in reinforcing the political trust between the two (Joint Statement Between India and Vietnam During the Visit of Prime Minister to Vietnam, n.d.). This signalled that both Vietnam and India viewed this partnership as long-term and strategically significant. Since this, regular high-level visits and strategic dialogues and the official statements released after bilateral summits emphasises consistently the mutual trust, reliability and shared strategic interests. India and Vietnam have a shared outlook on regional security and maritime domain which shows the strategic alignment between the two. Both support a rules-based regional order, adherence to international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Vietnam has also been affected by the increasing activities in the South China Sea region by China which converges with India's broader interest in freedom of navigation and regional stability. Hanoi sees New Delhi as a dependable and non-coercive strategic partner in the issue. The political relationship between India and Vietnam has been a consistent one with no major diplomatic disruptions, policy reversals or trust deficits.

Defence Cooperation and Capability Building

Defence cooperation and capability building form the most substantive part of the relationship between India and Vietnam. It has steadily evolved since the early 2000s and further strengthened in 2016. Regular Defence Minister's meetings, the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC), strategic dialogues and service-to-service talks becomes the framework for the cooperation. They provide continuity and make sure that coordination across policy planning happens. Vietnamese military officers are trained regularly by Indian defence institutions in submarine operations, IT related military applications and technical training.

India also extended a Line of Credit (LoC) of USD 500 million to support Vietnam's military modernisation efforts, defence capability building including naval platforms. India has expressed its interest for continuing its support through financing and technical assistance. The Indian Navy conducts regular port calls to Vietnamese ports as well as conducts joint maritime activities and naval exchanges focusing on interoperability, maritime domain awareness and capacity building. Vietnam had purchased 12 high-speed patrol boats for its navy using the USD 100 million defence Line of Credit. Multiple reports also suggests that Vietnam is closing on a BrahMos supersonic cruise missile deal potentially worth \$450-\$700 million to enhance its maritime defence capabilities against regional threats (Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh Hands Over 12 High Speed Guard Boats, Constructed Under India's \$US 100 Million Line of Credit, to Vietnam, n.d.).

Economic and Financial Engagement

The economic relation between the two countries has expanded steadily since the early 2000s and is a secondary pillar of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Manufacturing linkages, development cooperation and long-term capacity building constitutes the economic and financial relationship between India and Vietnam. This reflects Vietnam's export-oriented growth model as well as India's aim to diversify its supply-chain diversification.

In Financial Year 2024-2025, key items of exports from India to Vietnam include frozen bovine meat, fishery products, machinery and equipment, electrical equipment, auto component, pharmaceutical and API, chemicals, ordinary metals, cereal, cotton, animal fodder and gems & jewellery. Key items of imports into India from Vietnam were electronic equipment, telecom equipment, machinery and mechanical appliances, iron and steel, ordinary metals, chemicals, article of plastic, products of steel, footwear, garment, textile materials, wood, rubber, coffee, etc. Indian companies have mainly invested in Vietnam's energy, agro-processing, IT services and manufacturing sectors which aligns with Vietnam's industrialisation strategy. Oil and gas exploration is also conducted by Indian public-sector enterprises despite geopolitical sensitivities (Pti, 2024).

India has extended Lines of Credit (LoCs) and development assistance to support infrastructure, digital connectivity and capacity-building projects in Vietnam (Vietnam+, 2024). These are presented as developmental partnerships rather than aid which is consistent with India's broader South-South cooperation initiatives. Such programs help in deepening long-term economic interdependence between the two along with emphasising on Vietnam's developmental priorities. Joint Commission for Economic, Trade, Science and Technology Cooperation (JCM), Joint Trade Sub-Committee, Joint Working Groups on Agriculture, Healthcare, ICT and Science and Technology are established institutional mechanisms by both the two countries.

India and Vietnam stand out as one of the most stable, strategically significant and trusted relationships in India's engagements with Southeast Asia. It is characterised by strategic consistency, long-term political trust and gradual deepening across multiple domains.

India's consistent support for Vietnam's sovereignty and development combined with historical goodwill dating back to the Cold War era has helped immensely in creating a high level of mutual trust and confidence. Vietnam views India as a reliable partner and on the other hand, India views Vietnam as a key pillar of its Act East Policy.

Defence cooperation forms the core strength of the relationship. India's role in extending defence Lines of Credit, supporting naval modernisation, engaging in maritime cooperation and training Vietnamese officers has given the bilateral defence relationship real operational substance. Vietnam's confidence in India as a credible and a non-coercive defence partner is clear through discussions on advanced defence platforms, including missile systems. Economically, the relationship is steadily growing but under-realised. It has grown but is still limited when compared to Vietnam's economic engagement with other East Asian powers.

INDIA-PHILIPPINES: RAPID MILITARISED COOPERATION AND FLEDGLING ECONOMIC TIES

Strategic Context and Political Dynamics

The political and strategic relationship between India and the Philippines have undergone a notable transformation in the past decade. It has evolved from a limited diplomatic engagement into a focused strategic partnership mainly shaped by maritime security concerns and converging Indo-Pacific interests. The relationship is relatively recent in strategic depth and contemporary geopolitical developments are the primary drivers.

Engagement between India and the Philippines were mainly diplomatic exchanges and cooperation in multilateral forums such as the United Nations and ASEAN-related mechanisms. In the 2010s, when India started to intensify its Act East Policy and the Philippines started reassessing its regional and global partnerships due to the increasing security challenges in the West Philippine Sea which is a part of the South China Sea. India has supported the Philippine's claims in the South China Sea and has backed the Arbitral Tribunal ruling in 2016.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. had met in August 2025, and the bilateral relations was upgraded to a Strategic Partnership which indicated a clear intent to broaden cooperation beyond traditional diplomacy into security, economic and defence domains. India has elevated its political relevance in Manila as a defence and maritime partner since it is seen as a credible, non-coercive security partner and a country that can contribute to capacity building without any political conditions (Parashar, 2025). ASEAN centrality aligns with the Philippine's preference for multilateral engagement helped in embedding India-Philippines relations with a broader regional framework rather than positioning them as an isolated bilateral arrangement.

Defence Exports and Joint Operations

Defence exports and joint operational activity have become the defining features of the contemporary India-Philippines relationship. This marks a sharp departure and a rapid advance from limited defence relation through high-visibility arms exports and operational maritime engagement driven largely by Manila's urgent security needs in the maritime domain.

The export of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile system is the most significant milestone in India-Philippines defence relations in January 2022 when the contract for the supply of the Shore-Based Anti-ship Missile System (SBASMS) was signed (BrahMos Signs Contract With Philippines for Export of Shore Based Anti-Ship Missile System, n.d.). It marked India's first major export of a high-end missile system to Southeast Asia. This deal is strategically important for both sides. It substantially enhances the coastal defence and deterrence capability amid maritime confrontation with China for the Philippines and for India, it represents a decisive step to establish itself as a credible defence exporter and a security partner in Southeast Asia.

Reuters, in 2025 had reported that there were discussions for the trade for the Akash surface-to-air missile system, valued at approximately USD 200 million ("Exclusive: India Expects \$200 Million Missile Deal With Philippines This Year, Sources Say," 2025). Such talks indicate Manila's interest in diversifying its defence procurement and India's growing confidence in exporting advanced weapon systems. Joint operations and maritime activities like the first joint sail between the Indian Navy and the Philippine Navy in the South China Sea in August 2025, involving Indian naval vessels and Philippine frigates (Philippines, India Hold First Joint Sail in South China Sea | DD News, n.d.). Such joint maritime engagements focus on communication procedures, interoperability and confidence building. China's public criticism of these joint maritime activities has underscored their strategic signalling value without prompting India to adopt overtly confrontational rhetoric.

India has also helped the Philippines by providing technical training, maintenance support and operational orientation for the personnel involved in operating the BrahMos systems. This ensures sustainability and effectiveness of the platform and also aligns with India's broader emphasis on capability development and enablement rather than one-off arms sales.

Economic and Financial Engagement

When compared to the rapid evolution of defence and strategic ties between India and the Philippines, the economic relationship remains the least developed pillar of the bilateral relations. The economic engagement is service-oriented, exploratory and narrow in scale when compared to the engagement with both Indonesia and Vietnam. The bilateral trade has grown gradually according to the data cited by India's Ministry of External Affairs and Philippine governmental sources (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2025).

India-Philippines trade is growing with India exporting pharmaceuticals and India importing gold and electronics, driven by strategic partnerships and efforts to diversify beyond basic goods, focusing on defence, infrastructure, and digital systems for deeper economic integration. Both nations are exploring preferential trade agreements (PTA) and linking payment systems, with significant Indian investment in Philippine infrastructure projects. The investment flows between the two are uneven and limited. Indian investment is primarily concentrated in pharmaceuticals, automotive components, IT services and healthcare. On the other hand, Philippine investments in India remain very negligible.

The Philippines has not been a major recipient of huge financial initiatives by the Indian government unlike both Vietnam and Indonesia. Economic dialogues have mainly focused on trade facilitation, sector-specific collaboration and private-sector cooperation, especially in fintech, renewable energy, healthcare and digital services. High-level meetings in the mid-2020s have highlighted the importance to institutionalise these economic dialogues to help in complementing the evolving strategic partnership.

During the recent years, the political emphasis on strengthening economic ties have been renewed. The bilateral engagements, the leadership of both the sides have acknowledged that economic cooperation lagged behind defence engagement and wanted to expand the trade, investment and supply-chain cooperation. Indian professionals have marked their presence in pharmaceuticals, IT services and healthcare which contributes to service-sector linkages. Filipino nurses and other healthcare workers have started to engage increasingly with Indian medical institutions and training programmes.

The relationship between India and the Philippines can be said to be a structurally unbalanced with the defence and security cooperation outrunning political and economic commitments. The India-Philippines engagements developed and evolved rapidly and contemporary security concerns in the Indo-Pacific are the main drivers when compared to the long-standing partnership with Vietnam and the multi-dimensional engagement with Indonesia.

Shared commitment to a rules-based international order, adherence to UNCLOS and concerns over maritime security in the West Philippine Sea have helped immensely in gaining strong momentum for the political and strategic relationship between India and the Philippines. The upgradation to a Strategic Partnership signifies the growing political trust and Manila's perception of India as a reliable regional partner.

The core strength and defining feature of the relationship between the two countries is defence cooperation. The partnership has achieved a tangible operational depth through the export of BrahMos missile systems, follow-on delivery schedules, talks for acquiring additional missile systems and the conduct of joint naval activities in sensitive maritime spaces. All these programmes have elevated India's profile to a frontline defence partner in the Philippines' security strategy.

CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

The relationships of India between Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines display clear convergence around a set of shared strategic principles and functional priorities. This reflects the broader approach of India towards Southeast Asia under the Act East Policy and the Indo-Pacific framework.

Maritime security and rules-based order is the most evident point of convergence. The three countries are maritime states with strong interests to secure sea lines of communication, freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific and adherence to international laws, especially the UNCLOS. India has articulated such principles without siding with any power on particular territorial disputes which is welcomed by all the three states. Vietnam and the Philippines are claimants in the South China Sea and have multiple disputes with China over the region whereas, Indonesia wants to safeguard maritime commons and regional stability over direct confrontation. Port calls, naval engagements, information sharing and capacity building forms the framework of all the three maritime engagements. Defence cooperation and capacity building is at different intensities between each country. However, all three countries view India as a credible and politically acceptable defence partner which not only offer sales, but also provides training, platforms and cooperation without any compulsion to form an alliance. Vietnam is the most institutionalised case, and the Philippines reflects a more recent but sharper convergence, whereas Indonesia can be placed in a middle position. India's emphasis on self-reliance, capacity development and professional military education has elevated its position as a supportive partner rather than a dominating one.

India's support for ASEAN centrality and inclusive regionalism aligns clearly with the policies of Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. This convergence is very important because it differentiates India's approach from the polarising great-power strategies and also enhances its diplomatic legitimacy across the Southeast Asian region. Vietnam is a strong advocate for ASEAN-led mechanisms, the Philippines is an active

participant in all the ASEAN forum and Indonesia is a leading ASEAN voice. In the economic domain, the convergence is limited but is visible in the shared interest in diversification and resilience. India is seen as a potential partner who will help in reducing overdependence on a single market, particularly in critical sectors.

Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines views India as a long-term and a non-threatening stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific region and will help in balancing strategic engagement with total respect and freedom for sovereignty and autonomy. This image of India helps it to deeply engage across various domains like defence, maritime security and institutional frameworks without creating any domestic and regional backlashes in partner states.

India's relationships with all three countries converge in broader principles, they portray divergences in terms of drivers, depth, instruments and long-term sustainability. These arise from the differing national threat perceptions, economic structures, strategic cultures and domestic political priorities within each country. Security threat perceptions is one of the major domains of divergence. Indonesia, when compared to Vietnam and the Philippines do not perceive any immediate maritime threat from China over the South China Sea region despite the concerns over multiple incursions near the Natuna Islands.

Economic engagement is another weak domain of cooperation. Trade between India and Indonesia is the largest among the three but still remains commodity-heavy and shallow structurally. Vietnam's economic ties are manufacturing oriented, whereas with the Philippines it's limited in scale and mainly services-driven. These differences highlight how economic structures shape the depth of India's bilateral partnerships.

Overall, divergence across these relationships underscores that India's Southeast Asia strategy is adaptive rather than standardised. Shared principles between India and the three countries converges, varying national contexts mould the speed, scope and substance of cooperation. They cannot be seen as weaknesses but should be seen as a pragmatic approach by India to diversify its partners.

CONCLUSION

India's strategic engagement with Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines reflects a gradual but effective transformation in its approach to Southeast Asia. It changed from a largely diplomatic outreach to a substantive, security-oriented partnerships embedded within the Act East Policy and the broader Indo-Pacific framework. India has positioned itself as a credible, non-coercive and strategically autonomous partner, particularly in the maritime and defence domains for all the three countries.

A comparative assessment of the three case studies brings out a common structural imbalance. While strategic and defence cooperation has rapidly progressed more than economic, financial and societal engagement. India's relations with Vietnam are rooted in deep political trust and long-term defence cooperation thereby creating one of India's strongest strategic partnerships in the Southeast Asian region. However, the economic integration remains limited relative to potential. In the Philippines, defence exports and maritime activities have elevated the relations rapidly but, economic ties and people-to-people engagement lags behind the speed of security cooperation. When it comes to the case of Indonesia, the political alignment and institutional engagements are strong but economic outcomes are uneven despite the huge trade volumes. India has a huge trade deficiency with every country signifying the importance in increasing and diversifying trade with the region.

India should be capable to translate its strategic convergence into economic and societal linkages. Deeper investment facilitation, sector-specific economic engagement and stronger connectivity projects both physical and digital are very important to take these relationships beyond the security domain. Defence cooperation should still be the main component should be built up around capacity building, training and maritime stability rather than power projection. Sustained investments in education, research collaboration, cultural exchange and professional mobility helps in building long-term societal trust and familiarity across the three countries.

When all these experiences are taken into consideration collectively, India is considered and accepted as a stabilising power in the Southeast Asia. It combines strategic relevance with diplomatic restraint. The challenge in the future is to deepen India's economic and social foundations which creates longevity and resilience for the strategic partnerships. If India is able to achieve this balance, then its engagement with Southeast Asian region will move beyond situational convergence and evolves into a comprehensive and enduring presence within the Indo-Pacific regional order.

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