

ASEAN BULLETIN

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From the CAG Team

India–ASEAN Relations in an Evolving Strategic Landscape

By Srinath Raghavan



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India and ASEAN are marking 2026 as the “Year of Maritime Cooperation”. The two sides are keen to promote and deepen maritime exchanges in both commercial and defence domains. They had held the first ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME) in 2023; a second edition is currently in the works. Such targeted initiatives are aimed at imparting momentum to a relationship that is perceived as flagging—even in comparison to India’s own bilateral ties with countries in the region. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s decision not to attend in-person the ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur in October 2025 was seen as underlining the dip in New Delhi’s interest.

The *ASEAN Bulletin* is published quarterly by the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It seeks to bring together a key summary of current news articles, reports, events, and academic publications produced in English on the three pillars of the ASEAN Community - the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).


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Such assessments, however, overlook the importance of the broader geopolitical context in shaping the India-ASEAN relationship. Further, they understate the tensions in the economic and security imperatives that shape India's policy towards ASEAN. The current geopolitical and economic conjuncture, in fact, holds the possibility for a significant deepening of this relationship.

The long arc of India's relationship with Southeast Asia helps contextualise its current challenges. In the high noon of the British empire in Asia, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, British India was closely tied to Southeast Asia. Indian capital and labour traversed the "great crescent," stretching from Bengal to Singapore. The colonial Indian Army was the strategic reserve to secure this region—up to the aftermath of the Second World War. The decolonisation and partition of colonial India fractured these economic and strategic linkages. Independent India chose to turn inwards in pursuit of planned economic development and to adopt a posture of non-alignment in the emerging Cold War. Although India played an active diplomatic role in early wars of decolonisation in Indonesia and Vietnam, the Bandung Conference of 1955 proved the high-water mark of its engagement in the region.

Only after the end of the Cold War and India's own economic turn towards liberalisation and globalisation, did New Delhi renew its interest in Southeast Asia. India's "Look East" policy initiated in 1992 accorded a central role to ASEAN. Indeed, India's subsequent forging of ties with the region was principally enabled by ASEAN. A decade later, ASEAN opened talks for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India. This led to agreements on goods trade in 2009 and to agreements on services and investments in 2014.

Around the same time, India also began taking a vocal stance on freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and espousing its support for an open and balanced security architecture in Asia. This was, of course, in the context of China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and the United States' pivot towards Asia in the Obama years. Even as broader geopolitical shifts enabled a convergence of India's economic and security interests towards ASEAN, it proved difficult to maintain in practice.

It is a truism that trade liberalisation creates winners and losers in an economy. India's trade deficit with ASEAN increased significantly after the FTA was concluded: from 7.5 billion USD in 2011 to 44 billion USD in 2023. Key sectors of Indian manufacturing faced stiff competition in the hitherto protected domestic market from imports from ASEAN countries.

This was portrayed as the consequence of the ASEAN FTA enabling China indirectly to “dump” its goods in Indian markets. By 2015, the trade deficit as well as the volubility of the sectoral lobbies had grown sufficiently for the Indian government to seek a review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement. Eight years passed before these negotiations commenced in earnest. They are yet to be concluded. New Delhi’s perception of the existing agreement was given public expression last year, when the Indian commerce minister referred to the FTA as “silly” and some ASEAN countries as “China’s B Team”. These concerns also underpinned India’s decision to walk out of the negotiations for RCEP in 2019 and its introduction of strict FTA Rules of Origin requirements.

On the security front, India and ASEAN elevated their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023 and agreed to synergise New Delhi’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. A joint statement issued at the time began by reaffirming both sides’ commitment to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Substantively, however, India seemed to emphasise other groupings for security in the Indo-Pacific—notably the Quad with the United States, Japan, and Australia—as well as bilateral security ties with some Southeast Asian countries. Indeed, India’s interests and capabilities in the naval domain make the South China Sea a lesser priority. So far, its

main priority has been to ensure that the Chinese navy does not substantially expand its footprint in the western Indian Ocean and remains confined in the South China Sea and the Pacific.

The slack in India’s relations with ASEAN reflect these tensions within its economic and security interests in engaging with the region. Then again, the geopolitical changes currently underway could provide another opening to both sides. For US President Donald Trump’s trade and security policies have compelled American allies and partners to reconsider their interests and options.

Trump’s decision last year to impose 25 percent tariffs on imports from India and an additional 25 percent as penalty for purchasing oil from Russia forced New Delhi to press ahead with long-pending FTA negotiations in a bid to find new export markets. In recently concluded FTAs with the EU and the UK, India has agreed to open its economy in ways that are a sharp departure from its approach over the past decade. This recent turn in India’s trade policy could help not just to complete the review of the ASEAN FTA but also encourage India to be more ambitious in its economic ties with ASEAN and less concerned about China.

Meanwhile, the ongoing US-Iran war has underscored two points that both India and the ASEAN should note. The Trump administration is unilaterally willing to trigger conflicts even when it goes against the interests of its own allies. Further, maritime conflicts in the Indian Ocean, even if limited in geographic scope, will have severe implications for global supply chains. Catering for such contingencies requires much closer planning and interoperability than either India or ASEAN have deemed necessary. The coming edition of the AIME presents the ideal opportunity to start preparing for a robust and real strategic partnership.

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NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN POLITICAL-SECURITY COMMUNITY

News Articles

At Malaysia's arms bazaar, drone dealers chase Southeast Asian market share

South China Morning Post, April 26

Drones in Southeast Asia is becoming a key emerging arms market as regional militaries are ramping up procurement amid shifting security threats.

Beijing's diplomatic handshakes reinforce South-East Asia' stability amid global tensions

The Star, April 26

China's intensified diplomacy in Southeast Asia is reinforcing regional stability and cooperation, positioning Beijing as a reliable partner amid rising global tensions and economic uncertainty.

Iran war is accelerating SE Asia's drift from America

Asia Times, April 25

The Iran war is accelerating Southeast Asia's drift from the US by eroding trust in Washington and pushing countries to diversify partnerships.

Chinese drone discovery sharpens focus on Asia's undersea security race

South China Morning Post, April 24

The discovery of a suspected Chinese underwater drone in Southeast Asia is intensifying concerns over a growing undersea security race, as regional powers compete to monitor strategic waterways and protect critical seabed infrastructure.

'No unilateral decisions' on Malacca Strait, ASEAN work by consensus: Malaysia's foreign minister

CNA, April 23

Malaysia Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan said that any decision pertaining to the Malacca Strait cannot be made unilaterally, adding that countries in the region adopt a consensus-based approach on maritime security.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

How new US-Indonesia defence pact sharpens China's 'Malacca dilemma'

South China Morning Post, April 21

By Julien Chaisse, a Professor of law & RGC Senior Research Fellow at City University of Hong Kong and President of the Asia Pacific FDI Network.

The US-Indonesia defence pact highlights Washington's effort to strengthen influence over key maritime chokepoints like the Malacca Strait, intensifying China's strategic vulnerability over its energy and trade routes.

The U.S. Is Pushing Southeast Asia Toward China. The Iran War Made It Worse.

CFR, April 9

By Joseph Kurlantzick, a Senior Fellow for Southeast Asia and South Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations.

US unpredictability, especially amid the Iran war, is weakening Washington's credibility in Southeast Asia and contributing to a gradual shift toward China, though countries still hedge rather than fully align.

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN POLITICAL-SECURITY COMMUNITY

News Articles

China's top diplomat Wang Yi to tour Southeast Asia this week

CNA, April 21

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi is touring Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar to deepen ties and position Beijing as a stable partner amid rising geopolitical and economic uncertainty.

Japan remains most trusted power in Southeast Asia despite military build-up: survey

South China Morning Post, April 16

Japan is likely to remain Southeast Asia's most trusted power, but must ensure transparency and reassure the region that its military build-up supports regional stability.

Shifting sentiments: If forced to choose a side, Southeast Asia picks China over US - narrowly, survey shows

CNA, April 7

The latest survey report by ISEAS on the State of Southeast Asia found a narrow majority of Southeast Asians are leaning toward China over the US if forced to choose. Nevertheless, the region remains deeply divided and strongly prefers neutrality.

After America: How Southeast Asia can defend itself
The Interpreter, March 30

As US security guarantees become less certain, Southeast Asia must develop its own defence capacity and regional strategies to manage great power pressures rather than relying on external powers.

Southeast Asia's nuclear weapons-free zone needs reinforcement

The Interpreter, March 4

Southeast Asia's nuclear weapons-free zone is under growing strain, highlighting the need for stronger enforcement, and renewed regional cooperation to preserve its credibility.

Selected Commentaries
& Publications**AI infrastructure on the front line: Lessons for Asean from the Iran war**

South China Morning Post, March 29

By Elina Noor, a non-resident scholar in the Asia Programme at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The Iran war shows how AI and digital infrastructure are becoming frontline targets, exposing Southeast Asia's vulnerability to disruptions where economic systems and security risks increasingly overlap.

The Neglected Security Aspect of Outer Space Capacity Building in Southeast Asia

IDSS Paper, March 9

By Bich Tran, a Research Fellow with the Military Transformations Programme at RSIS.

Southeast Asia must strengthen its space capabilities as growing reliance on satellites raises new security vulnerabilities in orbit.

Media
Discussions

CIP: Can Small States and Middle Powers Shape the Indo-Pacific?
LKYSPP, April 14

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

News Articles

ASEAN inflation: Vietnam and Philippines hit hardest by Iran war

Nikkei Asia, April 23

ASEAN economies, especially Vietnam and the Philippines, are facing stronger inflation pressures from Middle East-driven oil shocks, highlighting uneven vulnerability across the region.

AMRO Warns Of Inflation Risks, Calls For Stronger ASEAN Economic Integration

Bernama, April 20

ASEAN economies are urged to strengthen integration and resilience amid global uncertainty, including geopolitical tensions and supply-chain risks, to sustain growth.

ASEAN financial leaders voice concern about Middle East and trade threats

Reuters, April 10

ASEAN finance ministers and central bank governors warned of rising external and domestic risks, including Middle East tensions, tariff uncertainty, capital volatility, climate shocks, and debt pressures.

US to remain key ally of Asean despite Iran war fallout: diplomat

South China Morning Post, April 9

US diplomats stress Washington will remain a key ASEAN partner despite Middle East spillovers.

A new logic of China-Asean economic integration emerges from the Middle East conflict

Business Times, April 7

The conflict in the Middle East is accelerating a shift towards China-ASEAN economic ties as both adapt to disruptions in supply chains, energy systems, and financial arrangements.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

Revisiting Economic Security in Southeast Asia

Contemporary Southeast Asia (April 2026)

Edited By Denis Hew, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre on Asia and Globalisation, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and Su-Hyun Lee, Deputy Head of Graduate Studies and Senior Associate Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

This special issue examines how shifting geopolitical and economic dynamics are challenging ASEAN's traditional openness-based model of economic security and explores how it must evolve to strengthen resilience, manage risks, and address broader security concerns in a more fragmented global environment.

ASEAN's Rules of Origin Need a Rethink

The Diplomat, April 21

By Sugekawa Seiya, a professor at the Faculty of Political Science and Economics at Kokushikan University and a visiting professor at the Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology.

Despite major tariff reductions under the ASEAN Economic Community, intra-regional trade remains relatively low, highlighting structural limitations, particularly in the design of Rules of Origin, that constrain deeper integration.

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

News Articles

US trade probes risk alienating Asean, casting doubt on future of deals

South China Morning Post, March 18

US trade probes into Southeast Asian economies risk straining relations, potentially pushing ASEAN to diversify away from the US and closer to China.

Southeast Asia is paying the environmental price of the rare earth boom

The Interpreter, March 17

Southeast Asia's rare earth boom is driving economic opportunities but increasingly shifting the environmental and social costs of extraction onto the region, exposing weak regulation, and uneven governance.

Southeast Asia faces spillover cyber risk from Iran war as 'blast radius' widens

South China Morning Post, March 12

Southeast Asia faces rising spillover cyber risks from the Iran war, as globally interconnected firms become vulnerable to attacks targeting energy, financial, and supply-chain networks beyond the conflict zone.

Southeast Asia Governments on Alert for Economic Impact of Iran Crisis

The Wall Street Journal, March 5

Southeast Asian governments are acting to cushion the economic impact of Middle East conflict, particularly rising oil prices and supply chain disruptions.

Southeast Asia braces for 'increasing divergence' after mixed 2025 growth

Nikkei Asia, February 20

Economists are divided on the region's outlook, citing optimism and external risks including US tariffs and "deflationary exports" from China, alongside rising domestic policy uncertainties.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

ASEAN's Economic Agenda: Towards Greater Strategic Agency?

RSIS Commentary, April 14

By Nazia Hussain, an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

As the global landscape becomes more fragmented, ASEAN's challenge is no longer simply to remain open, but to translate its economic integration into greater strategic agency.

Southeast Asia may be a distinct region but its risks affect each country differently

World Economic Forum, April 13

By Ricky Li, Insight and Data Lead, World Economic Forum and Joseph Liow, Dean and Wang Gungwu Professor in East Asian Affairs, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Southeast Asia faces a shared set of economic, geopolitical, and technological risks, but their impacts vary widely across countries due to differing economic structures, capacities, and levels of development.

Media Discussions



[Policy Unpacked] Reimagining Regional Resilience: Technology, Global Value Chains & Health Security
LKYSPP, February 24

NEWS ARTICLES & COMMENTARIES

ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY

News Articles

'Soft power, hard cash: Southeast Asia & NE India cultural exchange will boost Act East Policy'**The News Mill, April 25**

Keying on the traditional and cultural link, Northeast India can act as bridge for India to the Southeast Asia Nations and help bring forward a synergic relation that stands to benefit both the regions.

Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Launch ASEAN Fertilizer Alliance to Bolster Food Security**Jakarta Globe, April 6**

Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei launched a regional fertilizer alliance (SEAFA) to coordinate production and strengthen supply chains, aiming to boost ASEAN food security amid global disruptions.

Cultural capitals: Southeast Asia seeks soft power to outlast the buzz**South China Morning Post, April 4**

Southeast Asia's creative economy is projected to contribute more than 300 billion USD to the region's gross domestic product by the end of the decade.

PH urges Asean to boost sociocultural cooperation**Inquirer, March 3**

Adonis Sulit, the Chair of the 40th Senior Officials' Committee for Asean Socio-Cultural Community, highlighted how "the meeting provides an important platform for reflection, coordination, and collective action to ensure that the sociocultural pillar remains responsive, inclusive, and resilient."

'SEAbings' v Korea: Online spat reveals long-buried racial tensions**The Straits Times, February 24**

A minor dispute at a K-pop concert escalated into a regional online feud that exposed long-standing racial tensions and resentment between Southeast Asian fans and South Koreans.

Selected Commentaries & Publications

Food Security in ASEAN's 2026 Agenda: Perspectives on Human Security and Inclusiveness Amidst Crises**RSIS, April 10**

By Mely Caballero-Anthony (RSIS, NTU Singapore), Jose Ma. Luis P. Montesclaros and Kayven Tan (NTS Centre, RSIS), and Mercedita Sombilla (SEARCA, SEAMEO).

Food security must be elevated as a central ASEAN 2026 priority by adopting a human-security approach to build more inclusive and resilient food systems.

Women Farmers: First Defenders of a Warming Southeast Asia**Fulcrum, March 4**

By Elyssa Kaur Ludher, Visiting Fellow with the Climate Change in Southeast Asia Programme, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Women farmers are crucial frontline actors in Southeast Asia's climate resilience and food security, but persistent inequalities have limited their potential and must be addressed.

Media Discussions



Unlocking Biomethane for Decarbonisation in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from Malaysia and Indonesia
ISEAS-Yusof Ishak, March 6



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OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *Revisiting Economic Security in Southeast Asia* (Contemporary Southeast Asia, April 2026)
- [ASEAN in Practice Podcast Series] *Philippines' ASEAN Chairmanship 2026: Managing Geopolitics and Economic Uncertainty* (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, March 23, 2026)
- [Counterpoint Southeast Asia] *How should Southeast Asian states respond to the evolving challenges in the South China Sea?* (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, March 23, 2026)
- *Enhancing ASEAN-EU Cooperation on Subsea Cable Security* by Barbora Valockova (Fulcrum, March 9, 2026; republished in South China Morning Post, March 15, 2026)
- [ASEAN in Practice Podcast Series] *Navigating Uncertainty: ASEAN's Economic Challenges as its Chairmanship Shifts from KL to Manila* (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, March 4, 2026)
- *Multidirectional altercasting among middle powers: role alignment in Western Pacific maritime security* by Barbora Valockova and Mae Chow (The Pacific Review, 2026)
- *Strategic choices for middle powers in developing AI capabilities: a case study of Singapore* by Jassie Hsi Cheng, Byron Chong and Miguel Alberto Gomez (Asia Security, 2025)



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