

Shifting Alignments in India's Southeast Asia Policies

Intan Zurina Dollah^{1*} and Kamarulnizam Abdullah²

^{1,2}Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,
Bangi, Selangor Malaysia 43600

¹intanzurina_dollah@yahoo.co.uk; ²kamarulnizam@ukm.edu.my

*Corresponding author

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Abstract

Drawing on historical and contemporary sources, this research argued that India's policies toward Southeast Asia have been shaped by the interplay of three primary drivers: security maximization, economic maximization, and power maximization. The dominance of one driver or a combination of drivers varies across temporal phases, producing shifting alignments in India's policy orientation and its regional engagement with Southeast Asia. This research applied neo-classical realism to examine the evolution of India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia from the Cold War through the post-Cold War period. This research used qualitative methods and process tracing to trace historical progression and debates that show a non-linear pattern in India's policy path towards Southeast Asia. While India's policy during the Cold War period demonstrated an interplay among the three drivers, this shifted in the later Cold War period, when security maximization became more prominent. After the Cold War, economic maximization became more dominant as India sought deeper institutional and economic engagement with Southeast Asia, reflected in the Look East Policy. The Act East Policy, which was subsequently launched under India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, further broadened this engagement to encompass stronger security and power considerations. The research further finds that India's shifting alignments are influenced not only by structural international pressures but also by domestic political considerations, including elite legitimation shaped by material and ideational factors.

Keywords: India, ASEAN, regionalism, neo-classical realism, act east policy

Introduction

India and the region of Southeast Asia enjoy close engagement that transcends time not only due to their geographical proximity, but also the convergence of ideas shaped through informal exchanges of trade, cultures, and religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, in a process called by scholars as Indianization (Coedes, 1947; Mabbett, 1977). However, this popular narrative is not entirely accurate, as shown by India's evolving policies toward Southeast Asia since the start of the Cold War and post-Cold War.

Most recent studies focus on India's engagement in Asia, including its role in regional power dynamics (Nandy & Das, 2025), strategic security engagement in the Indo-Pacific (Singh & Marwah, 2024), and the evolution of India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific (Jaishankar, 2019). Some literature focuses on sectoral analysis of India's security engagement with Southeast Asia (Pardesi, 2022) or economic and trade engagement (Sebastian et al., 2022). While some studies examine India and Southeast Asia as a region or ASEAN, they primarily use realism and neorealism, focusing on power dynamics, strategic interests, and regional stability in their analysis of India's policies toward Southeast Asia (Bajpae, 2022).

This research argues that India's policies towards Southeast Asia have been fundamentally shaped by the dynamic interplay of three strategic drivers: security maximization, economic maximization, and power maximization. While these drivers are interrelated, they are treated as analytically distinct in this research to allow clearer examination of their individual influence on India's policies. Security maximization refers to India's efforts to manage threats, deepen security, and defense cooperation, as well as strengthen its strategic capability and stability. On the other hand, economic maximization refers to the pursuit of material gains, including investment, economic growth, and trade expansion. While power maximisation, is broadly conceptualised as India's pursuit of regional status, influence and strategic autonomy, enabling it to shape regional institutional agenda and outcome.

This layered approach is demonstrated in India's engagement not only in ASEAN-led platforms but also in other multilateral platforms including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). While India's participation in the Quad reflects the emerging security and power developments in the region, its involvement in BRICS reflects its efforts to strengthen economic partnerships and influence within the Global South outside from the usual US and Western-dominated multilateral frameworks. The presence of ASEAN countries within BRICS, including Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia further highlighted the multilayered strategy and the overlapping institutional frameworks which India utilises to shape regional engagement.

The relative dominance of one or more of these drivers has shifted across historical and geopolitical phases, resulting in shifting alignments in India's foreign policy orientation and its regional engagement strategies toward Southeast Asia. While all three drivers are present throughout India's foreign policy phases, their relative importance changed according to India's priorities during each period. During the pre-Cold War phase, India's foreign policies

were shaped by the combination of the three drivers, security, economic, and power maximization, without any single dominant driver. However, during the Cold War, security maximization became the dominant driver, followed by power maximization, while economic maximization took a back seat in India's Southeast Asian policies.

Meanwhile, in the post-Cold War period, India's foreign policies placed greater emphasis on economic, followed by security and power maximization. These variations reflect the shifting in India's strategic priorities influenced by the three drivers and moderated by domestic factors - elite legitimation which is defined here as a process in which the ruling elites seek to justify and consolidate their power by appealing to certain ideals, constructing narratives and utilising corresponding pathways, including ideology-based and development-based performance, to gain support as well as strengthen their domestic authority (Kuik, 2021a). This analysis provides a structured explanation for India's shifting foreign policy behavior across the different temporal phases. This finding challenges the popular narrative that India has maintained a strong and cohesive strategic engagement with Southeast Asia. While existing studies may acknowledge systemic factors, they often overlook how key domestic determinants, such as elite legitimation, mediate and shape foreign policy behavior. A significant dearth of scholarship that applies a neoclassical realist lens to India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia remains.

This research is organized into six main sections. The first section explains the theoretical framework that underpins the analysis. This is followed by a brief overview of the research methodology employed. The third section provides a historical account of India's premodern outlook towards Southeast Asia. The fourth section examines India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia during the Cold War period (1947–1990), with particular attention to its response to the establishment of ASEAN in 1967. The fifth section discusses India's evolving policies towards ASEAN in the post-Cold War era, covering the period from 1990 to 2025. The final section concludes the article by summarizing the key findings.

Neoclassical Realism as a Theoretical Framework

Other theoretical frameworks, such as constructivism, liberalism, and securitization, provide valuable insights into identity formation, international cooperation, and security discourse. However, they are less suitable for analyzing variation in India's strategic behavior across different historical phases, as they may discount the material and strategic constraints that shape a state's behavior. Constructivism emphasizes norms and identity, liberalism focuses on institutional cooperation and mutual gains, and securitization theory focuses on how issues are framed as security concerns through political discourse. Neoclassical realism is the most suitable theory to utilize in this research as it builds upon the dual approach of both classical realism and neorealism by recognizing the significance of relations between state and society, while simultaneously acknowledging the structural constraints of the international system, shaped by material constraints and systemic incentives, as well as by domestic dynamics (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998). It acknowledges that India's foreign policy outcomes are influenced not only by external factors but also by internal domestic processes.

According to Waltz (1979), all states are functionally similar units, distinguished primarily by their relative power distribution within an anarchic international system. Logically, states facing similar external constraints should behave similarly. However, India's behavior during the Cold War challenges this assumption. Despite its limited material capabilities, India opted for non-alignment rather than aligning with either superpower. This research identifies three key foreign policy drivers from earlier scholarship, namely security maximization, economic maximization, and power maximization. The first, security maximization, draws from the logic of defensive realism, which posits that states prioritize survival in an anarchic international system by seeking sufficient security guarantees (Waltz, 1979). For India, national survival in a complex geopolitical environment has led to the careful calibration of defense postures, and regional alignments. The second driver, economic maximization, is analytically distinct from security maximization, but remains closely linked, as its pursuit is often facilitated by stable security conditions. While their objectives are inter-related, they are not interchangeable; each reflects the distinct dimension of India's strategic priorities. This nuanced relationship aligns with classical realist insight, which suggests that economic vulnerability compromises a state's ability to defend itself and makes it more susceptible to external pressure (Morgenthau, 1985). The third driver, power maximization, is grounded in offensive realism, which asserts that states are inherently driven to expand their power and influence to pre-empt potential threats and safeguard long-term survival (Hoffmann, 1986; Mearsheimer, 2001).

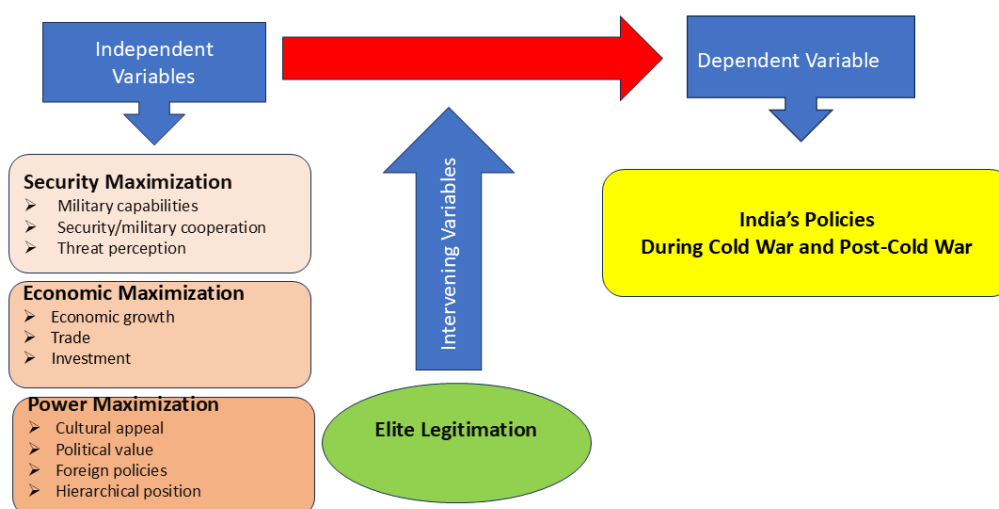


Figure 1. Conceptual Map

In India, foreign policy choices are significantly shaped by the preferences and calculations of domestic elites (Foulon, 2015; Kitchen, 2010), their understanding of extraction and mobilization capacity (Lobell et al., 2009), and elite legitimacy (Kuik, 2021b). Legitimation enables elites to rationalize foreign policy choices and shape public and

institutional acceptance (Goddard & Krebs, 2015). One notable example is the introduction of the Look East Policy, which emerged under India's former Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao. His strategic foresight and political boldness enabled India to pivot from its socialist past and adapt to the post-Cold War global order by embracing economic liberalization and regional engagement. Figure 1 illustrates the research conceptual framework depicting three strategic drivers: security maximization, economic maximization and power maximization which interact with domestic factors to shape India's foreign policies towards Southeast Asia.

Research Methods

To gain empirical insights relating to India's policies towards Southeast Asia, this research applies qualitative methods, uses process tracing to establish value, and draws on historical events to support causal claims (Collier, 2011). Process tracing applies at two levels. First, at the theoretical level, it traces the causal process, and second, at the empirical level, it assesses the evidence used to trace these processes (Beach, 2023). For this research, the theoretical lens used is neoclassical realism, and historical events are used as empirical evidence.

This research draws on qualitative data from written and oral sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, online media, official government websites, and relevant archival documents. Systematic and purposive sampling identify appropriate sources from academic databases such as JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar, using keywords relevant to the research's core themes. In addition to written sources, semi-structured interviews are conducted with scholars, policymakers, and security experts to triangulate findings, clarify ambiguous points, and validate the causal mechanisms inferred from the documentary data (Checkel, 2021).

Pre-modern India and Southeast Asia

Early Indian Sanskrit texts referred to the lands of Southeast Asia as *Suvannabhūmi*, which means the land of gold (Majumdar, 1927). Depictions of the Hindu epic Ramayana are assimilated into the cultures of Southeast Asia but with unique local variations, such as in *Wayang Kulit* or shadow puppets (Indonesia and Malaysia), *Ramakien* and *Khon Hanuman* dance (Thailand), *Reamker* (Cambodia), and *Phra Lak Phra Lam* (Laos) (Bhuyan, 2014; Chang, n.d.). Indian-origin religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, were widely spread in Southeast Asia, and these were evident through the architecture of their temples.

Indianization defines as a complex process of gradual and organic dissemination of Indian cultures, religions, political ideas, and societal norms, resulting in a hybrid Indianized local culture (Mabbett, 1977). The idea of an Indianized character of the Southeast Asian region is popularly accepted by Indian elites and scholars, including Nehru. Southeast Asia is fondly looked as evidence of India's civilisation influence. These "evidences" inspired Nehru (1947) to identify Southeast Asia as part of Greater India. Other Indian elites, such as Tagore

(1917), also share this paradigm, albeit a larger vision of Asia as a bloc, belonging to a large family of Asiatic nations.

Before India's independence, Indian elites' anti-colonial ideologies shaped by Mahatma Gandhi reached Southeast Asia, creating a sense of solidarity around anti-colonialism. This colonial network inadvertently brought forth significant Indian connections into these countries (Jaishankar, 2025). India sent laborers and clerks to Southeast Asia, creating the Indian global diaspora (Trimmer, 2014). This Indian diaspora later played an important role in promoting shared ideals between India and Southeast Asia.

During the British colonial period modern Indian administration, legislation, and military structures were developed and later adopted by Malaysia and Singapore. This shared colonial legacy also serves as a strong link that further binds India and the formerly colonized countries in Southeast Asia. India's struggle for independence reverberated to other British colonies worldwide, especially in Southeast Asia. During the peak struggle for India's independence in the late 1930s and early 1940s, many leaders in Southeast Asia were sympathetic to India's struggle, which is evidenced by Sukarno's letter:

In these circumstances, it was only natural that we should have turned our eyes towards India, and in my opinion we are entitled to do so, because your country and your people are linked to us by ties of blood and culture which date back to the very beginning of history (Sukarno, 1946).

Historically, Southeast Asia is seen as India's natural sphere of influence, often regarded as an extension of Greater India and reflecting Indian elites' nationalist expansionism (Jaffrelot, 2003). Consequently, Indian elites' perception of deep cultural and historical connections between India and Southeast Asian leads them to view Southeast Asia as part of India's "bigger family".

Cold War Period (1947-1990)

Just a few months before India's independence, former United States President Truman delivered an important speech signaling its policy of containment against the spread of communism (McCourt & Mudge, 2023). This event marked the advent of a bipolar world, between the US and the Soviet Union which brought forth the Cold War. Throughout this period, India's policies towards Southeast Asia were non-linear, and they can be divided into two phases.

In the early phase of the Cold War, from India's independence in 1947 through the 1950s, none of the three drivers dominated. Instead, India's policies were characterized by diplomatic convergences and the pursuit of non-alignment, reflecting a dynamic interplay between security, economic, and power maximization. These convergences can be interpreted through India's friendly outreach to nations in Southeast Asia. Its assistance during their independence struggles is catalyzed by the convergence of anti-colonialism ideals and Asian solidarity (Vo, 2013).

Despite its material limitations in the early Cold War, power maximization shaped India's foreign policy toward Southeast Asia which, reflecting its elites' vision of India's leadership of Asia. India pursues diplomatic outreach to create a regional cohesive network of Asian nations as a counter-hegemonic critique of the contemporary world order. By hosting the Asian Relations Conference (ARC) in New Delhi in April 1947, India sought to gather a collective voice from the soon-to-be independent nations in Southeast Asia (Abraham, 2008). The significance was tremendous. It consolidated Asian voices and highlighted their right to present their views, not dictated by global powers. Nehru's *raison d'être* was to emphasize India's central role within a historically shared Asian heritage as a region-builder and defacto leader (Singh, 2011). India aspired to establish its position in global affairs through international discourse (Thakur, 2019). As the originator of Asian civilization, India has a special role as a leader for the nations, under the banner of Asian solidarity (Jaffrelot, 2003).

The Bandung Conference of 1955 in Indonesia, a significant event in fostering solidarity in both Asia and Africa, was used by India to promote the "non-alignment" concept as an alternative for these nations to ease global tension (Appadorai, 1955). It was a symbolic act of unity against perceived bullying by colonial powers against the "brown or coloured people," with no "white" nations invited. It catalyzed the evolution of the post-war order and demonstrated the agency of non-Western nations in creating a new norm (Acharya, 2016).

Security maximization was the main driver in the second phase of the Cold War, which spanned from the mid-1950s until the 1990s. India's policies towards Southeast Asia metamorphosed and could be characterized as reactive, tactical, and assertive. During this phase of the Cold War, security became India's main concern, unlike the first phase, when idealism dominated its interpretation of international relations. In the second half of the Cold War, there is already a clear divergence of interests between India and the largely anti-communist nations of Southeast Asia.

Despite being besieged by domestic problems, including the socio-economic mess inherited from Britain (Zachariah, 2004), India is wary of the West's strategic agenda in Southeast Asia. The establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) is seen as the Western intervention in the region. India's antipathy towards SEATO could be attributed to three main concerns: regional instability, non-alignment, and security.

First, India believed that SEATO would jeopardize regional stability in Southeast Asia. This military pact would practically turn the region into a war theatre, directly undermining the safety of the countries within and neighboring it, including India (Roy, 2015). Second, India believed it could spare the region from catastrophic development by encouraging countries in Southeast Asia, as well as in Asia and Africa, to remain independent of any military pact with the bipolar powers (Singh, 2011). Third, India distrusted the West's motives, as SEATO was seen as a tool for the US to push its dominance rather than a genuine concern for regional security. This distrust intensified because Pakistan was a member of SEATO. India feared that Pakistan would use its connection with Western powers in their ongoing conflict (Jha, 2017). This concern reflects how security maximisation and not

ideological factor alone, influenced India's cautious stance towards regional security arrangement.

According to Nehru's biography, he believed military pacts in Asia would endanger world peace and risk proxy conflicts in this region, plunging Asia into instability (Rajan, 1963). The Bandung Conference was prompted by Nehru's desire to mobilize Asian and African independent alignment away from the US or the Soviet Union, as well to bring the non-European world together (Zachariah, 2004). This shows that India's adoption of non-alignment was not merely ideological, but a strategic response influenced by the interplay of security, economic and power considerations. Based on a security perspective, non-alignment allowed India to avoid entanglement in the superpowers' conflict between the US and the Soviet Union, preserving its strategic autonomy. Economically, it allowed India to engage both superpowers to provide it with multiple financial aid and other development assistance. At the same time, it served as a tool for power maximization, enabling India to advance its influence over newly independent countries through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). In this sense, non-aligned is not only an ideological position for India but a multi-dimensional strategy reflecting the three drivers stated earlier.

The non-aligned ideology, originating from India's idealistic worldview and influenced by Gandhi's doctrine of non-violent resistance (Satyagraha), established a new normative approach, an alternative path for nations that wished to maintain neutrality between the opposing camps. Despite this appealing narrative, it failed to garner significant interest from Southeast Asian nations at its inception. Indonesia was the first Southeast Asian country to join NAM in 1961 and became the only NAM member when ASEAN was established in 1967. This point should be highlighted, as it influenced India's perception of ASEAN.

In the 1960s, Southeast Asia became the theatre of great-power competition between the US and the Soviet Union. India's policy towards Southeast Asia was then best described as reactive, tactical, and assertive, as the perception was that the establishment of ASEAN in 1967 was another extension of neo-imperialist Western-backed security arrangement similar to SEATO (Yong & Mun, 2009). This contributed to India's ambivalent and lukewarm reaction on ASEAN's establishment. This view reinforced the argument that security maximization was the dominant driver due to the increase in threat perceptions of a possible emerging alliance with the West led to India's strategic distancing from ASEAN. Security maximization became more pronounced during the leadership of Lal Bahadur Shastri (1964-1966) and Indira Gandhi (1966-1977; 1980-1984). During this period, change in India's interpretation of non-alignment and its foreign policy reflected India's pragmatism and ambition for sub-continental hegemony (Mitra, 2009). India's assertive stance mirrored Indira's authoritarian personality (Sabu, 2024). This signaled a shift from Nehru's earlier idealistic foreign policy, evident in India's involvement in East Pakistan.

However, some literature argues that India initially welcomed the idea of ASEAN, citing a statement by M.C. Chagla, India's External Affairs Minister, when he visited Singapore in 1967, indicating India's enthusiasm to join any regional grouping that Singapore was joining (Mishra, 2018). Questions were even posed to the External Affairs Minister about

whether India was invited to join ASEAN, but since there was no invitation from ASEAN, the Minister replied that the issue did not arise (India Parliament Lok Sabha, 1967). Despite India's earlier close relations with Southeast Asia, its exclusion from ASEAN, coupled with the alignment of two ASEAN founding members, Thailand and the Philippines, with the US as members of SEATO, further deepened the suspicion against ASEAN (Jha, 2017).

This suspicion was further reinforced during the first ASEAN meeting in Bangkok in August 1967. The meeting was perceived as focusing primarily on security issues rather than the economic and social cooperation that ASEAN had initially emphasized (Silverman, 1975). India's logic was that ASEAN aligned with the US, particularly in its anti-communist orientation and tolerance of the US presence in the region, which dispelled the narrative of an autonomous regional organization. Domino theory shaped the strategic thinking of democratic leaders in Southeast Asia at the time, though each country interpreted differently. Meanwhile, ASEAN saw India as a tool for the Soviet Union.

India's policies during the second phase of the Cold War were influenced by all three drivers: security, economic and power maximization, each distinct but operating inter-relatedly. Security maximization dominated this phase as it was influenced by threat perceptions triggered by the memory of the India-China war, which exposed India's military vulnerabilities and pushed it to seek security aid from the US. However, the help came with strings attached in the form of a Kashmir deal, which India found "annoying" (Chaudhuri, 2012). This event led India to question the limits of the security guarantees the West could provide. The lack of support from the US, which openly helped Pakistan during the Indo-Pak war of 1971, further disillusioned India. This sense of betrayal and victimization drove its tilt towards the Soviet Union (Raghavan, 2017).

Furthermore, India perceived Pakistan's participation in US-supported alliances such as SEATO and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) as altering the balance of power in the region and further heightening its strategic vulnerabilities, given that Pakistan was considered as its primary regional threat (Jabeen & Mazhar, 2011). This pushed India to reassess its strategic options and realize that the Soviet Union was a better and more reliable "countervailer" against both Pakistan and China, which was further reinforced by the Soviet Union ten-year credit deal to purchase defense equipment (Subrahmanyam, 2012). This tilt was evident when India signed the Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union in 1971. At the same time, India also pursued economic maximization, albeit secondary to security, as it tried to diversify its external assistance. It continued to receive development assistance from the West while increasingly turning to the Soviet Union for military and financial aid, boosting its strategic autonomy and economic resilience.

India's position during the Vietnam War (1965-1973) demonstrates the interplay between security and power maximization. India was sympathetic towards Vietnam and was especially critical of the US's intervention, which was seen as a neo-imperialist action (Vo, 2013). Despite being a US aid recipient, India refused to align with the US position during the Vietnam War (Weinraub, 1973), prompting US criticism of India as hypocritical and fragmented (Power, 1967). Beyond moralistic principled framing, it reflects India's power

maximization by demonstrating strategic autonomy in rejecting external intervention and pressure, thereby reinforcing credibility among newly independent states. In this sense, India's strategic defiance is not merely ideological but also enhances its legitimacy and influence among developing states by projecting high moral political values. India's critical outlook on the US's policy in Asia, was evident in the remark given by Mrs. Indira Gandhi when she had a meeting with President Nixon in February of 1973:

Would this sort of war or the savage bombing which has taken place in Vietnam have been tolerated for so long had the people been European? Western nations have withdrawn as colonial powers, but their political or military presence continues on our continent. This has been done in the name of filling a vacuum or to wage a crusade against communism or other doctrines (Weinraub, 1973).

During this period, India's general perception of most Southeast Asian countries as pro-Western persisted, despite some signs of recalibration following ASEAN's declaration of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971 (Sridharan, 1996). While ZOPFAN signaled ASEAN's intention to assert regional neutrality and autonomy, India remained sceptical, primarily because of the US continued its presence through its military bases around the Philippines and Thailand, were acknowledged and even tolerated. This reinforced India's view that ASEAN was significantly within the West's sphere of influence.

In 1975, when the US left Vietnam after years of bloody war, India sent a congratulatory message to the Vietnamese Provisional Revolutionary Government and extended an invitation for Vietnam to join NAM. This response reflects India's assessment of the conflict as an opportunity to strengthen its commitment to anti-colonialism and strategic autonomy (Howe, 1975). India's reaction was in direct contrast to the leaders of Southeast Asia, who took US' loss as an ominous sign of communism spreading in the region. These differences in views explain India's strategic distancing from ASEAN.

India perceived the US, Pakistan, and China as hostile to India, and their intervention in any states or regions, especially those adjoining India, were seen as a direct security threat. ASEAN countries' friendliness with the US (e.g., Thailand and the Philippines), China (e.g., Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore), and Pakistan (e.g., Indonesia and Malaysia) induced India's wariness, contributing to its reactive and assertive policies.

India was enthusiastic when ASEAN wanted to bring Vietnam into its fold after the US loss in 1975. In 1978, ASEAN sent a team led by its Secretary-General to New Delhi on an exploratory visit to initiate discussions on India-ASEAN trade (Sridharan, 1996). However, this early progress was stunted due to the war between Vietnam and Cambodia in the late 1970s. India was concerned about China's dominance in Southeast Asia, especially in the adjoining countries (Anand, 2009). This development led India to prioritize on security maximization.

From the late 1970s until the end of the Vietnam-Cambodia War in 1989, India's policies toward the Southeast Asia could be characterized as tactical with security maximization

taking the lead in priority, followed by power maximization. ASEAN worried about India's perceived alignment with Soviet Russia, especially in Indo-China. To gauge India's position, an invitation was sent on a pretext of possible trade cooperation with ASEAN officials in Kuala Lumpur in 1981. However, it never took place because the Indian Foreign Minister could not participate. Soon after, India announced its support for the new Cambodian government under the leadership of Heng Samrin and became the first democratic country to recognize the new Cambodian government (Sridharan, 1996; Warbrick, 1983).

In 1981 and 1982, India sent high-level delegations to Southeast Asia, for a formal dialogue between India and ASEAN, but its request for a dialogue partnership was put on the backburner. India was not particularly concerned about ASEAN's shift in its strategic security policy toward Indochina, as limited economic interdependence meant that establishing a dialogue partnership was not a matter of urgency (Jaffrelot, 2003; Sridharan, 1996). This shows that the prioritization of security maximization in India's strategic calculation over the other two drivers during that period.

This prioritization of security reflects the leadership style of Indian leaders during that period, such as Indira Gandhi. She personified this realist orientation, boldly criticized Western imperialism and reinforced India's self-reliance. However, Gandhi explained that self-reliance does not mean "isolation or repudiation of cooperation" but a measure of interdependence under equality and self-respect (Sabu, 2024; Gandhi, 1982). Analyzing this position through the lens of neoclassical realism, India's policies during the Cold War reflect a transparent shift in the hierarchical prioritization of drivers, with security maximization dominating, power, and economic maximization.

Post Cold War (1991-2024)

India's relations with the regional organization ASEAN began to thaw in the early 1990s, coinciding with the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which effectively ended the Cold War. With the conclusion of the Cold War, India's policy toward ASEAN transformed into one characterized by engagement, economic focus, and caution. This transformation demonstrates a shift in priorities, with economic maximization dominating. During this period, India and Southeast Asian countries, as well as ASEAN, aligned their interests in shared economic. This alignment of interests, led to the institutionalization of engagements under the India-ASEAN Dialogues and other ASEAN-led mechanisms. Despite this, India remained cautious in its multilateral engagements with ASEAN, especially on security matters.

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s also signifies a shift from India's earlier focus on security maximization to economic maximization policy. However, this does not mean security and power maximization are absent from India's strategic calculation. Rather, they are embedded in the broader economic orientation. By strengthening ties with Southeast Asia, India managed to diversify its strategic partnerships and presence, which can be seen as part of India's strategy to manage the regional balance of power. This strategic calculation catalyzed India to pivot toward Southeast Asia, especially after its remarkable economic

transformation, leading to the formation of the Look East Policy (Sikri, 2009). The first phase of India's Look East Policy is characterized by renewed engagement with Southeast Asia on multiple fronts, especially in the economy. This renewed engagement is designed to launch India's charm offensive in the region, which has undergone a "strategic distancing" period during the Cold War. This Look East Policy would not have been possible without the foresight of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, who served as Finance Minister at that time.

Pursuing economic maximization as his goal, Narasimha Rao visited Singapore in October 1991, only a few months after taking office. The visit marked the first of several external public outreaches in the region aimed at promoting India's new economic reforms. His visits were accompanied by Indian business and industry leaders, showing India's earnest effort and his political will to pull the country out of the rut (Morarji & Sharma, 2015). This period showed intensified efforts from India and ASEAN countries to strengthen cooperation, often premised on "Asian Values," where their exchanges were more aligned and less than those with Western nations (Jaffrelot, 2003). It was meant to emphasize India's shared values with ASEAN. Thus, increasing the likelihood of India receiving preferential treatment reserved for Asian brethren, compared to Western friends. This also shows the role of elites in the prioritization of economic maximization, accelerating India's integration into the regional trade network.

Southeast Asia was also considered a vibrant economic region, with the introduction of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992. India wanted to reap the benefits of AFTA, and ASEAN was seen as a credible and dependable economic partner, aligning neatly with India's goal of economic maximization. It provides India with access to ASEAN's efficient institutional mechanism for external relations (Zainal-Abidin, 1996).

Although India's economic liberalization was ongoing, ASEAN received its earnest engagements positively, which led to the establishment of the India-ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partnership in 1992, marking the start of India's Look East Policy and the intensification of institutionalized engagements with ASEAN (Sridharan, 1996).

India's pivot towards Asia resulted from Narasimha Rao's political leadership. In the second half of 1992, the External Affairs Minister was tasked directly with responsibility for the Southeast Asian region, signaling the deliberate reorientation of India's foreign policy. During his speech in Singapore in 1994, Narasimha Rao outlined his vision of India's leap into the globalized world by using the Asia Pacific as its "springboard." India was hoping to emulate successful developed countries like Singapore and Japan (Jaffrelot, 2003). The expansion of ASEAN to include countries in Indochina, namely Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar, further spurred India's efforts to strengthen its strategic ties with ASEAN, as those countries are adjacent to India (Bajpae, 2017). This reflects how domestic elite legitimization via its leadership preference influences India's policy trajectory.

This shift signifies India's prioritization of economic maximization, leveraging regional partnership to accelerate its domestic development. By 1995, India was already elevated as a full Dialogue Partner after less than three years, a rapid institutional elevation in ASEAN. A

former Indian senior diplomat reiterated that the primary task of India's foreign policy in the 21st century is to facilitate India's development process by leveraging its international partnership, "it was a regional organisation with global significance and reach and in position to evolve a larger regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific region" (Bhasin, 2012, 25-26). Through the ASEAN-India Dialogue, economic has expanded with investments from ASEAN countries, increasing from a negligible amount in 1991 to USD2.5 billion in the late 1990s (Jaffrelot, 2003). Strengthening ties with ASEAN contributes towards a more stable regional environment with neighboring states (security maximization) and also enhances India's influence (power maximization).

In 1996, India joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a significant departure from its past policy of distrust of regional security arrangements, demonstrating its readiness to help build the region's security architecture (Naidu, 2000). This is significant as it shows that security maximization remains an important component in India's strategic calculus in Southeast Asia. India's first real test was when it became the subject of international condemnation for its foray into nuclear tests in 1998. Sanctions were imposed by the US and its allies to pressure India to stop pushing forward with its nuclear program. From a security perspective, India's pursuit of nuclear weapon aims to strengthen its deterrence capabilities in response to its perception of regional threats. At the same time, it also reflects power maximization, as this achievement demonstrated India's science and technological advances, enhanced its international recognition, and aimed for great power status. Before the ARF Manila meeting, India dispatched its Minister of External Affairs to ASEAN capitals for diplomatic outreach to explain on India's nuclear position. Despite expecting harsh criticism during the 1998 ARF meeting, India was received respectfully, true to the ASEAN Way of consensus-based, process-driven, and non-intervention in other countries' affairs (Naidu, 1998).

Economic maximization remains to be the main driver during the second phase of the Look East Policy. This phase is significant because it marks a deepening of India's multilateral engagement beyond ASEAN to broader East Asian nations. In 2003, India acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), a legally binding code governing inter-state relations in Southeast Asia, suggesting that ASEAN has a socializing effect on India (Bajpae, 2017). This development suggests that India has increasingly aligned itself with ASEAN-led institutional practices and normative framework. India has irrevocably committed to ASEAN's socializing effect of non-interference, multilateralism, and trade regionalism (Acharya, 2011). In 2005, although India was not part of the East Asian region, India was invited to join the East Asia Summit despite objections from some member states (Naidu, 2005). This marked a momentous moment, recognizing India's growing clout in the region and aligning with its power maximization aims. India's economic maximization efforts deepened India-ASEAN economic cooperation during the second phase of Look East Policy with the creation of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) in 2003 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). The Look East Policy has tremendously transformed India-ASEAN trade, growing from USD 2.9 billion in 1993 to USD 81.33 billion in 2018 (Das & Guha, 2022). On the strategic security front, India-ASEAN engagements also matured into broader cooperation across various security-related ASEAN-led mechanisms.

While economic maximization plays an important role in catalyzing India's outreach to ASEAN under the Look East Policy, security maximization is another important reason behind this move apart from expanding India's influence in the region (power maximization). India's strategic rivalry with China is not new and has long been central to its strategic calculation in dealing with Southeast Asian countries (Ayoob, 1990). Hence, India's strategic calculus in Southeast Asia cannot be understood solely through economic lens; it must encompass strategic competition and regional dynamics. Indian scholars had long predicted this unavoidable tension between India and China because of the overlapping sphere of influence in South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia (Rajan, 1963). Some studies suggest that the second phase of the Look East Policy aims to carefully position India within the security folds of ASEAN and East Asia to balance China (Bajpae, 2017; Mishra, 2013). Rather than pursuing an overt balancing strategy and ever mindful of its asymmetrical capabilities, India has adopted a calibrated approach by deepening its engagement with ASEAN while explicitly avoiding both direct alignment and confrontation with China. Significantly, India has deliberately tailored the narrative of the Look East Policy and framed it as an inclusive regional cooperation rather than a counterweight to China. Instead, India established itself as a benign power and a preferred security partner for Southeast Asia (Brewster, 2013). This strategic positioning allowed India to expand its strategic presence in this region and mediated its strategic competition with China through economic engagement and diplomatic signaling vis-à-vis the ASEAN-led platforms.

This calibrated approach is evident in the elite-level perception echoed by former Indian Ambassador to Indonesia and ASEAN where he highlighted that although China is the biggest threat for a free and open Indo-Pacific, "India does not want to be pushed as direct balancer or competitor to China" (G. Singh, personal communication, March 24, 2025). This approach is further reinforced by other Indian scholars who supported to maintain the policy of strategic ambiguity, India would be at the best position to keep its option open vis-à-vis its relations and cooperation with China in the ASEAN context (Naidu, 2004). Even in the face of China's aggressive conduct in the South China Sea, India prefers not to adopt a confrontational approach (Ngaibakching & Pande, 2020). Together, these readings reflect a consistent pattern in India's regional policies vis-à-vis Southeast Asia, managing competition without direct confrontation.

The Act East Policy, announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in November 2014, reflects a deepening of India's regional engagement. It is also a continuation of India's earlier calibrated and strategically ambiguous approach. While the Look East Policy focuses more on the economy, the Act East Policy emphasizes, among others, a wider spectrum of strategic issues (Sharma & Basu 2024). The Act East Policy is characterized as comprehensive, strategic, and assertive, befitting its rising global status. Among others, it encompassed India's strategic convergence with ASEAN on how they aspire Indo-Pacific to be free, open, inclusive and rules-based. Despite India's closer engagement with the broader Indo-Pacific, it continues to recognize ASEAN Centrality, which plays a crucial role in regional stability (Bajpae, 2022). India's Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) illustrate its willingness to play a more proactive role in securing its interests and shaping regional security dynamics, while maintaining the narrative of inclusivity and cooperation.

After more than ten years, questions about whether the policy has made any substantial impact on the engagement trajectory between India and ASEAN. While the policy has extended India's geo-strategic footprint, scholars have highlighted the persistent structural constraints, including regional connectivity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inconsistencies in India's "functional implementation" on the ground (Bajpae, 2017; Hussain & Hui, 2024). These limitations show that while India has a strategic aim to evolve, progress outcome is slow and uneven because of its limited capacity to achieve its vision quickly.

Despite this narrative of a deeper level of comprehensive cooperation, India's engagement under the Act East Policy reveals an uneven pattern. While the policy led to India's elevation as ASEAN's Comprehensive Strategic Partner in 2022, it also intensified cooperation between India and ASEAN countries across several strategic areas (Vignesh & Singh, 2022). However, there are mixed signals from the ground. While the economic relationship between India and ASEAN appears robust based on total trade volume, further scrutiny revealed that India has experienced a trade deficit, with its imports from ASEAN countries are higher. This imbalance caused India to push ASEAN to review the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA), citing it as lopsided and benefiting only one party (Seshadri, 2022; Sharma & Basu, 2024). Domestic concern over asymmetric economic benefit is clearly reflected in India's withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free-trade agreement negotiation between ASEAN nations and six other countries (Australia, New Zealand, China, South Korea, Japan, and India). India's decision to bail out shows the limits of economic maximization when the domestic pressure and vulnerabilities against external competition. While RCEP would have meant lower tariffs, the downside is that India would face intense competition from other member countries (International Institute for Management Development, 2024; Jain, 2021). This highlights that India's engagement with ASEAN remains conditional on domestic constraints, despite external benefits. These issues have further necessitated India to advocate reform of the AITIGA to level out the playing field between India and the ASEAN countries, while promoting "Make in India" products in the region, consistent with its economic maximization strategy. Thus, the strategy reflects a continued economic engagement, albeit more selectively and cautiously.

These economic constraints are supported by a parallel strengthening of the security sector. Various studies suggest that India is viewed as a favorable security partner because of its largely benign narrative and perceived lack of hegemonic intentions towards Southeast Asia (Ahmed, 2012). This perception is evident by the increasing interest from ASEAN countries in establishing defense cooperation with India, such as the inaugural ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise in 2023 (Ministry of Defence India, 2023). A notable example is the Philippines' purchase of BrahMos supersonic missiles in 2022, with Vietnam and Indonesia have also expressed interest in purchasing it (Pant & Singh, 2022). This inaugural maritime exercise speaks volumes about ASEAN countries' comfort level with India as their strategic security partner. This reinforces India's strategic engagement in the region, which positions security maximization alongside power maximization by gradually strengthening its regional influence through trust-based partnerships. Despite these positive developments between India and ASEAN under the Act East Policy, they have not fully translated completely into

favorable public perception. Based on the State of Southeast Asia survey by the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute (Seah et al., 2021,2023), Southeast Asian countries' perception of India as a strategic partner has been steadily low over the years. In 2024, India ranked 9th as among ASEAN's 11 Dialogue Partners as a strategic partner, with China topping the list as the most strategic partner and edging out the United States (Seah et al., 2024). In fact, India consistently rank at 9th out of ASEAN's 11 Dialogue Partners from 2021 to 2024 (Padmanabhan, 2024). This suggests a disconnect among the ASEAN public in their perception of India as a strategic partner.

However, in a promising development, the State of Southeast Asia Survey 2025 indicates that India has made remarkable strides, climbing from 9th to 6th place overall in the ranking of strategic relevance of Dialogue Partners to ASEAN. This positive trajectory may reflect India's growing involvement in the region through its more prominent role as the Comprehensive Strategic Partner (CSP) to ASEAN, its involvement in the Quad, and its efforts to strengthen bilateral ties with ASEAN countries. Notably, India's image has improved significantly in countries like Brunei, Laos, and Myanmar, with Laos elevating India's position from 9th to 4th place in just one year (Seah et al., 2025). Analytically, this suggests that India's strategies of security and power maximization are gaining traction, translating into gradual recognition of its regional influence. India's participation in the Quad further strengthened its security role in regional security cooperation and demonstrate its rising profile as a regional power within the evolving Indo-Pacific security framework. Although the Quad is not a formal alliance, it serves as a strategic security collaboration that can be understood as part of India's response to China's growing influence in the region.

This raised the question of how successful the Act East Policy was in India's strategy to deepen and strengthen its relations with Southeast Asia. This public poll is barometer that can be used to gauge the success of India's Act East Policy in Southeast Asia. While it may be insufficient, the realities on the ground directly contrast the official narrative of India's desire to deepen ties with ASEAN. There is a perceptible gap between strategic intent and public reception. Under the current administration, there has been a perceptible reorientation of India's foreign policy focus toward the West, especially toward the United States, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific Quad framework, often at the expense of deeper regional engagement with Southeast Asia. While ASEAN remains rhetorically important, it is arguably no longer the central axis of India's external priorities, as it was during the Look East Policy. This tilt reflects elite calculations about where strategic benefits, prestige, and domestic legitimacy can be most effectively leveraged. India's foreign policy posture is shaped not only by international incentives but also by the preferences and legitimization strategies of its ruling elites.

Analysis of public perceptions in ASEAN shows that several factors may have contributed to this view of India in Southeast Asia, including its ambivalent behaviour in this region, its increasingly hawkish Hindu-nationalist image, inconsistent commitment, inward-looking priorities, and economic protectionist policies (Lin, 2024). These factors have eroded trust and visibility among Southeast Asian publics, despite India's longstanding civilizational and historical links to the region, especially in majority-Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Nonetheless, there is some positive shift that in the earlier 2024 survey showed

a distrust in India's ability to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance dropped from 44.7% in 2024 to 35.8% in 2025 (Seah et al. 2024, 2025).

India's low strategic ranking in ASEAN public perception is not merely an external image problem, but reflects a deeper misalignment between India's systemic position, domestic political calculations, and regional behavior. While structural realism might attribute this to India's relatively limited material capabilities *vis-à-vis* China or the US, it also shows a lack of agency among Indian leaders in facilitating robust engagement with Southeast Asia. Based on neoclassical realist perspective, this gap could be explained by how elite preferences and legitimizing narratives shape India's inconsistent engagement with ASEAN. To improve its standing in the region, India must not only recalibrate its strategic messaging but also reassess the domestic political drivers that have deprioritized Southeast Asia within its broader foreign policy agenda. It may be prudent for India to take note and recalibrate its Act East Policy to address ASEAN countries' aspirations and see how it fits India's own interests. Through a comprehensive assessment, India may be able to further leverage its already special position within ASEAN to tap into the extensive opportunities it has missed so far.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that India's policies towards Southeast Asia are non-linear but characterized by shifting alignments of engagement shaped by the dynamic interplay of three strategic drivers: security maximization, economic maximization, and power maximization. This results in varying alignments in India's foreign policy orientation and regional engagement strategy across different phases.

During the first phase of the Cold War (1947–mid-1950s), India pursued an idealistic and diplomatic approach to the region, grounded in its sense of moral leadership and responsibility as a newly independent Asian country, reflecting a prioritization on power maximization through ideational leadership. However, this approach gave way to a more reactive, tactical, and security-focused foreign policies in the second phase of the Cold War, resulting in India maintaining a cautious distance from ASEAN.

From a neoclassical realism perspective, this shift is not purely structural. It is also mediated by domestic elite preferences and legitimation imperatives. Only in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and India's deepening economic crisis, did India recalibrate its Southeast Asia policy. The initiation of the Look East Policy under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao represented a pragmatic turn toward economic integration, strategic diversification, and re-engagement with the region, beginning with Sectoral Dialogue Partnership in 1992. This reflects an increasing prioritization of economic maximization. However, India's cautious engagement during this time was shaped not only by economic logic but also by strategic relearning after decades of isolation. The subsequent evolution of the Act East Policy from 2014 expanded India's engagement, encompassing security and normative leadership in the Indo-Pacific.

However, this research finds that India's engagement with Southeast Asia remains uneven and constrained despite these positive institutional developments. The expansion of diplomatic engagement and frameworks has not translated into favorable regional perception. From a neoclassical realist lens, this disconnect is explained by how India's systemic ambitions are filtered through its domestic political realities and elite legitimization strategies. While India has made rhetorical and structural advances under the Act East Policy, its actual influence is shaped by competing domestic priorities, ideological shifts, and leadership choices that often favour global partnerships over regional ones.

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About The Authors

Intan Zurina Dollah is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). She holds a master's in Strategic Analysis and Defence Studies from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and a Bachelor of Law (Honours) from Cardiff University, UK. Her career includes senior roles at Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including Undersecretary in the Administration and Security Division, Director for the ASEAN Economic Community Division, and Counsellor at the Embassy of Malaysia in Manila, Philippines. Her research focuses on international relations and ASEAN multilateralism.

Kamarulnizam Abdullah is Director and Principal Fellow at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), UKM. His research interests include national and regional security, border studies, political violence, terrorism, and conflict studies. He has extensive academic and policy experience and has contributed to national and international consultancy projects, including Malaysia's White Paper on Defence (Defence Ministry); Maritime Criminality, Rehabilitation, Deradicalization and Counter-Terrorism Programs and the Formulation of Home Security Policy (Home Affairs Ministry).

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