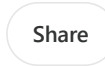
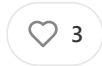


Review: Global South, Quad and Beyond in ASEAN India Futures

Ex-ambassador details future geopolitical and geoeconomic roadmap for India's engagement with Southeast Asia and candidly assesses challenges that lie ahead.

AUG 22, 2025 · PAID



A new book by an ex-ambassador details future geopolitical and geoeconomic roadmap for India's engagement with Southeast Asia and candidly assesses challenges that lie ahead for both sides in the rest of the 21st century.

WonkCount: 1,458 words (~6 minutes)

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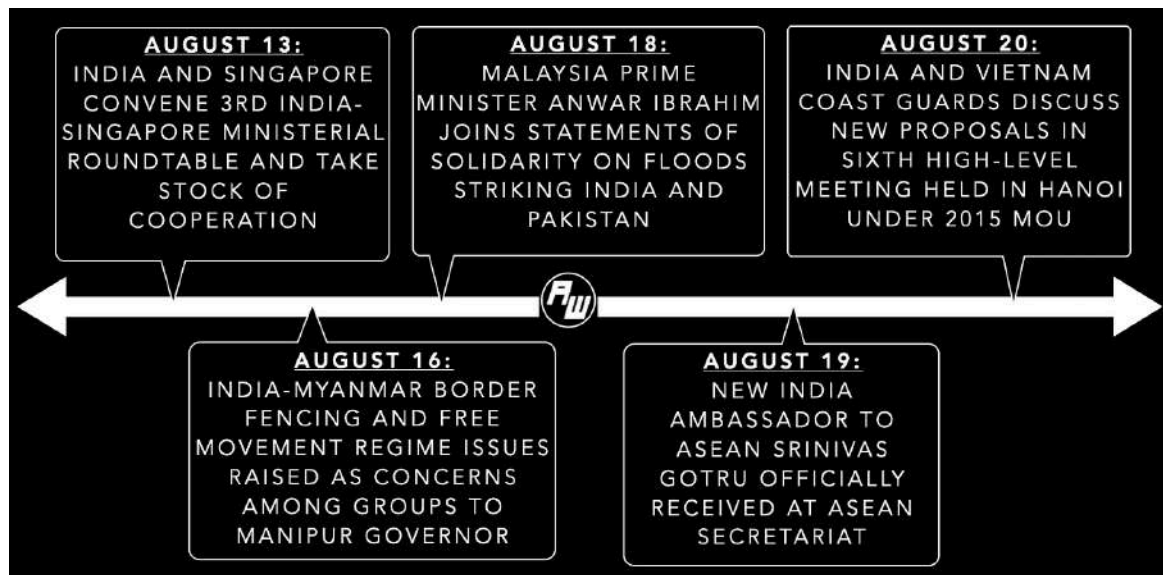


Source: Facebook/Armed Forces of the Philippines

Context

“There is an impression in diplomatic circles that strategic partnerships have become common currency. Not for the Philippines,” Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. told an audience earlier this month in New Delhi where he had officially elevated India-Philippine ties to the level of a strategic partnership, which is only Manila’s fifth such relationship to date ¹. The elevation, which came as the two sides also completed their first-ever maritime drills in the South China Sea, was an important datapoint in India’s engagement in Southeast Asia, with Manila looking ahead to its [upcoming ASEAN chairmanship year in 2026](#) ². Engagement is also taking place within a broader context where both New Delhi and Southeast Asian states play important roles in evolving strategic conceptions with respect to the Global South and the Indo-Pacific, even if occasional developments like past intra-ASEAN differences over [Quad perceptions](#) or India’s withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) also expose periodic differences.

Select Recent Developments Involving India and Partners in Southeast Asia and ASEAN



Source: Graphic by ASEAN Wonk Team

A new book by India's former ambassador to ASEAN Gurjit Singh titled *The Mango Flavour: India and ASEAN After a Decade of the Act East Policy* details the future strategic roadmap for India's engagement with Southeast Asia as a region and ASEAN as an institution³. In doing so, it offers a rare deep dive into India's ties with Southeast Asia also addressed in broader books on [India's foreign policy worldview](#) and [great power quest](#) recently reviewed on *ASEAN Wonk*. The book both details candid practitioner insights on future trends as well as current realities, including interagency divisions within the Indian government that led to "no whole-of-government approach" to RCEP membership and challenges in getting traction for fora like the Delhi Dialogue as well as new educational programs targeting Southeast Asian students⁴. "At present, the world needs more South-South collaboration, and India and ASEAN are well-placed to provide this," the book notes alongside an outline of a future-looking agenda for policymakers on both sides⁵.

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Analysis

The book also forecasts future trends to watch in the coming years and their wider regional and global implications (see originally-generated *ASEAN Wonk*

table below for a summary of these critical areas, along with major policy manifestations and datapoints. Paying subscribers can also read the rest of the “Analysis” section and “Implications” section looking at how these dynamics play out in the future).

New Proposed Future Policy Pathways, Major Cooperation Areas and Key Domains

KEY DOMAINS	MAJOR COOPERATION AREAS	NEW PROPOSED FUTURE POLICY PATHWAYS
SECURITY	DEFENSE SALES	INDIA OFFERING MORE ATTRACTIVE CO-PRODUCTION AND LOCALIZATION TERMS TO COMPETE WITH MIDDLE POWER DEFENSE PARTNERS LIKE KOREA OR TURKEY
GEOPOLITICS	MINILATERAL COOPERATION	FURTHERING “ASEAN-QUAD PARTNERSHIP” FOCUSED ON FUNCTIONAL AREAS LIKE TECHNOLOGY, ENERGY, CRITICAL MINERALS AND INFRASTRUCTURE
DEVELOPMENT	INITIATIVE FINANCING	NEW ARRANGEMENT OF MATCHING CONTRIBUTIONS FROM ASEAN STATES TO ASEAN-INDIA FUND (VS. INDIA FUNDING EMERGING PRIORITIES); TRILATERALIZING DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION TO OFFSET PERCEIVED INDIA FINANCE BURDEN
ECONOMICS	IMPACT INVESTING	BUILD IMPACT UNICORNS WITH A FOCUS ON SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP, SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND GREEN ECONOMY; EMPHASIZE JOINT SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION INITIATIVES ADDRESSING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS
CONNECTIVITY	FOCUSED SUBREGIONAL COOPERATION	ADDRESSING DUPLICATION CHALLENGES IN INITIATIVES LIKE INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION AND INDO-PACIFIC OCEANS INITIATIVE; ACTIVATE NETWORK OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND THANK TANKS IN BIMSTEC REVIVAL
PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE	EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES	LOWERING ADMISSION LEVEL TO BACHELOR OF TECHNOLOGY COURSES VS. PHD SCHOLARSHIPS AT INDIAN INSTITUTES OF TECHNOLOGY; NEW TWINNING PROGRAMS
PRIORITIZATION	HUMAN RESOURCES	MORE RESOURCING FOR ASEAN-SPECIFIC EXPERTISE IN INDIA’S MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (GIVEN ASEAN DIVISION MERGED WITH LARGER INDO-PACIFIC DIVISION); CONSIDERING INDIAN “REGIONAL” DEFENSE ATTACHES IN JAKARTA
PROJECT DELIVERY	PROJECT MONITORING	GEATER FOCUS ON PROJECT MONITORING IN ASEAN-INDIA INITIATIVES (DRAWING ON MOVES SUCH AS NEW PROJECT MONITORING UNIT WITHIN ASEAN SECRETARIAT)

Source: Table by ASEAN Wonk Team

The book’s practitioner approach to the subject accounts for both its value and limitations. While a structure is not explicitly set out in the book’s introduction, the book’s 14 chapters detailed across just under 270 pages are largely divided into three sections: 1) origins and evolution of India’s policy from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy [Chapters 1-3]; 2) defining the contours of cooperation and complications to date in security, economics, diplomacy, connectivity, understanding, sociocultural

ties and regional integration [Chapters 4-12]; 3) navigating future opportunities and challenges [Chapters 13 and 14] ⁶. As such, readers benefit from a highly readable and policy-focused account of India's ties with Southeast Asia with forward-looking insights across multiple chapters rather than just a short conclusion as may be the case in other works. On the flip side, limitations-wise, these insights are not held together by a coherent framework or lens (beyond the rather vivid image of "the mango flavor," following from Singh's three earlier works which have similarly utilized the abalone, masala and injera and paratha in accounts of India's connections with Japan, Indonesia, and Ethiopia respectively ⁷). Additionally, the anecdotal nature of some of the book's narrative can also contribute to unevenness in terms of treatment of key issues in ASEAN-India ties. For example, India's RCEP withdrawal, the slow uptake in New Delhi's new student exchanges as well as the difficulties in sustaining Track 1 and Track 1.5 mechanisms like the Delhi Dialogue, are explored across several compelling pages ⁸. By contrast, ASEAN's unprecedented non-issuance of a joint communique in Phnom Penh in 2012 over the South China Sea issue gets only a brief reference as a "jarring" event (even ASEAN's late secretary general Surin Pitsuwan was more sober at the time, calling it a "soul searching" moment for the grouping) ⁹.



Implications

Looking ahead, the book makes the case for greater convergence despite challenges. In Chapter 12 candidly titled "What Unites and What Divides Us," Singh argues that four major issues divide India and ASEAN that both sides will need to manage in the coming years: 1) trade (as exemplified by India's RCEP withdrawal); 2) varied approaches to China; 3) Indo-Pacific vs. Asia-Pacific conceptions; and 4) the tendency for both sides to "look away from instead of at each other" in areas like connectivity ¹⁰. Still, he is persistent in his belief that India and ASEAN can engage each other in future opportunities based on agenda based upon the "hypothesis of an India-ASEAN engagement that will neither tread on Chinese toes nor raise ASEAN's anxiety." ¹¹ This agenda in his view, as detailed in the above *ASEAN Wonk* table, includes a Quad-ASEAN partnership to alter regional security perceptions; impact investing and South-South cooperation focused on the Sustainable Development Goals; and trilateral Indo-Pacific cooperation with development partners with a focus on cooperative project implementation. He also suggests more specific measures for both sides, including broadening India's ASEAN education programs to bachelor-level courses for rather than PhD-level ones and more matching contributions from ASEAN states in the ASEAN-India Fund. "To create a strategic vision for their relationship

relevant to current times, India and ASEAN would do well to recognize the benefits of working together in a rapidly changing world,” Singh writes ¹².

While aspects of this cooperation agenda may ultimately prove realizable, it will require tough balancing acts. As Singh himself admits in several parts of the book, India has repeatedly found that traction for initiatives it leads like the International Solar Alliance or the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative are more often found on the bilateral track with a few individual Southeast Asian rather than multilaterally within ASEAN ¹³. Additionally, moving past multilateral challenges such as financing is easier said than done. To take just one example, while Singh suggests that India could seek matching financing from ASEAN states for several programs within the ASEAN-India Plan of Action or work with trilateral programs alongside development partners like Australia, Japan or the European Union, the former requires a departure from how ASEAN has managed its dialogue partnerships, while the latter raises other coordination challenges of its own ¹⁴. In the introduction, Singh admits his selection of the mango as an image for ASEAN-India relations stems not only from its iconic nature in both India and Southeast Asia, but also its encapsulation of the challenges in cultivating, growing and shipping the fruit which require “adjustment, accommodation and acceptance” before its flavor can be enjoyed ¹⁵. While enjoying the fruit of one’s labor is certainly not a conception unique to India among Southeast Asia’s key partners, the extent to which both sides can shape the fruit-labor ratio such that it translates into prioritization of the relationship relative to others remains to be seen.



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- 1 Presidential Communications Office, “Remarks by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. at the Foreign Policy Address hosted by the Observer Research Foundation,” August 6, 2025. The others, Marcos noted, were Japan, Vietnam, Australia and Korea.
 - 2 Ibid.
 - 3 Gurjit Singh, *The Mango Flavour: India and ASEAN After a Decade of the Act East Policy* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2025).
 - 4 Ibid, pp. 202-207. Singh notes the “mortification” of being ignored by India’s Ministry of Commerce and Industry even in their visits to Indonesia despite his role as the Indian ambassador to Indonesia.
 - 5 Ibid, pg. 251.
 - 6 Ibid, Chapters 2-13.
 - 7 Ibid, especially pp. viii-ix.

8 Ibid, pp. 62-105.

9 Ibid, pg. 42.

10 Ibid, pp. 201-202.

11 Ibid, pg. 251.

12 Ibid, pg. 241.

13 See for instance: Ibid, pp. 112-115.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, pp. viii-ix.



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