

The Mango Flavour: India and ASEAN After a Decade of the Act East Policy

by Gurjit Singh, Singapore, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025, 284 pp., US \$43.00, paper, ISBN 9789815203981

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Mango Flavour: India and ASEAN After a Decade of the Act East Policy, by Gurjit Singh, Singapore, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025, 284 pp., US\$43.00, paper, ISBN 9789815203981

India and Southeast Asia share a long civilisational and commercial history. From the spread of Hindu-Buddhist ideas across maritime kingdoms to centuries of Indian Ocean trade, the two regions have been deeply connected. These linkages are captured evocatively in the title of a new book by former Indian Ambassador to ASEAN Gurjit Singh, *The Mango Flavour: India and ASEAN After a Decade of the Act East Policy* (ISEAS Press).

Mangoes are both a symbol and a traded commodity linking India and Southeast Asia. In that sense, they reflect a broader relationship characterized by exchange, kinship, and everyday ties. Yet mangoes also represent an area of successful integration, something that has often eluded India's efforts to translate its strategic relevance into sustained influence in ASEAN. *The Mango Flavour* is best read as a bridge between diplomatic memoir and policy handbook. It offers a textured first-person account of why historical affinity has not translated into strategic weight and urges readers toward practical, multi-domain engagement instead of grandiose diplomacy. India–ASEAN relations are not self-sustaining; they must be cultivated through predictable delivery and clearer articulation of expectations on both sides. That requires the hard work of statecraft, which is often obscured by lofty rhetoric.

After World War II, India and Southeast Asian countries navigated decolonization, Cold War pressures, and developmental state-building before rediscovering one another in the 1990s through India's Look East policy and ASEAN's expanding regional outlook. These historical connections have frequently been invoked as the foundation for a renewed strategic partnership. Yet the promise has not been realized. India struggles to make meaningful strategic inroads in Southeast Asia. *The Mango Flavour* seeks to chart what a more substantive strategic future with ASEAN might look like as India's power, role, and relevance in Asia continue to grow.

The book offers both a historical and contemporary overview of India's relations with Southeast Asia through the eyes of a practitioner. In 14 chapters, Singh examines the origins and evolution of India's policy, from Look East to Act East, alongside cooperation in security, trade, diplomacy, and connectivity. He concludes by outlining future opportunities and challenges. The book appears primarily intended for a Southeast Asian audience that may be puzzled by India's inability to convert economic weight into influence. These readers will find it instructive. Its policy-oriented approach recounts developments, especially since the launch of the Act East policy in 2014, while offering ways to upgrade ties.

Several chapters are forward-looking, asking how best to advance what remains, at best, a middling partnership. Institutions like the ASEAN–India Fund, Green Fund, and Digital Fund are potential instruments to strengthen ties, particularly through civil society and youth engagement. The current context ostensibly opens space for cooperation in maritime security, skills development, energy, the green economy, critical minerals, defence production, and educational exchanges. Singh further argues that a robust India–ASEAN partnership aligns with the broader “Global South” moment marked by efforts to consolidate longstanding ties among developing countries.

The book's focus also raises a central question: why have India–ASEAN ties not progressed meaningfully? What accounts for the gap between aspiration and delivery? Two arguments find emphasis. First, Singh recognizes that ASEAN's internal dynamics, its consensus-based decision-making, claims of centrality, and uneven member priorities shape and condition what India can realistically achieve. Second, he highlights mismatched expectations. ASEAN member states have often harboured implicit expectations of India, while India's own expectations have been less clearly articulated. The result has been a partnership that “never really seemed to reach its full potential” despite promise.

Singh is at his strongest when he treats Southeast Asia as diverse rather than monolithic and when he carefully explains ASEAN's institutional logic, or its centrality, community-building, and functional cooperation. However, the book's civilizational opening—temples, epics, and “Greater India” debates—risks leaving casual readers with the impression that historical-cultural affinity is itself a sufficient strategic asset. Singh's core argument, in fact, is the opposite: cultural resonance alone does not translate into influence. A clearer separation between “soft resonance” and “hard capability to deliver” might have sharpened the analytical frame.

What should happen next? Singh's analysis suggests that India's underperformance is not due to a lack of intent but to political, economic, institutional, bureaucratic, capability, and normative constraints. Institutionally, India's ASEAN engagement is complicated by the need to coordinate across multiple domestic ministries. Bureaucratic routines can slow momentum. Domestic trade politics have hindered deeper economic integration. Trade frictions are increasingly entangled with growing unease over China's dominance in Southeast Asia. It has become more difficult for India and ASEAN to formalize ambitious partnerships when their strategic outlooks do not fully converge. Repeated reliance on shared language, ASEAN centrality, UNCLOS, and ASEAN-led mechanisms has not entirely bridged these differences.

The Mango Flavour is a readable practitioner's account of India–ASEAN relations. It is strongest when it connects strategy to the granular frictions of policy execution. It is less persuasive when evocative metaphor substitutes for a more consistent analytical framework. Even so, it provides a valuable insider's perspective on a partnership that remains important, unfinished, and in need of sustained strategic attention.

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