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THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORICAL LINKAGES ON INDIA'S CONTEMPORARY ASEAN POLICY

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ABSTRACT

India's engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has emerged as one of the most significant pillars of its foreign policy in the twenty-first century. While economic, strategic, and geopolitical considerations are often highlighted in discussions of India–ASEAN relations, the role of historical linkages remains equally important. The centuries-old interactions between India and Southeast Asia through trade, religion, culture, migration, and maritime exchanges have created a strong civilizational foundation that continues to influence contemporary diplomatic relations. India's Look East Policy, launched in 1991 and transformed into the Act East Policy in 2014, has drawn extensively upon these historical connections to strengthen political, economic, and strategic partnerships with ASEAN countries. This paper examines the historical foundations of India–ASEAN relations and analyzes how these linkages continue to shape India's contemporary ASEAN policy. The study argues that historical and cultural ties have provided India with valuable soft-power resources, enabling deeper cooperation and mutual trust in the region. The city of Bagan in Central Myanmar, a centre for religious and secular studies, specialising in Pali scholarship as well as prosody, phonology, grammar, astrology, alchemy, medicine, and legal studies is known to have attracted monks and students from as far as India, Sri Lanka and the Khmer Empire in Cambodia. Such intermingling of ideas could have been possible only because of the cosmopolitan nature of our society in ancient times. Today, in a world of sealed borders and trade wars, a world of religious terrorism and ethnic conflicts, history bestows on us a magnificent torch of plurality and inclusiveness to uphold. Deriving inspiration from Tagore again, we hope 'this torch that India and ASEAN will carry together on their path to progress will converge to illuminate the common ray of knowledge for the entire world.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between India and Southeast Asia is rooted in a long history of interaction dating back over two millennia. Ancient maritime trade routes connected Indian merchants with kingdoms across present-day Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Philippines. These exchanges facilitated the spread of Indian religions, languages, cultural practices, political ideas, and artistic traditions throughout Southeast Asia.

In the contemporary era, ASEAN has become a central component of India's foreign policy. Established in 1967, ASEAN consists of ten member countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. As one of the world's most dynamic regional organizations, ASEAN occupies a strategically important position in the Indo-Pacific region.

India's engagement with ASEAN has evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War. Economic liberalization in 1991 prompted India to seek stronger ties with Southeast Asia through the Look East Policy. Later, the Act East Policy expanded the scope of engagement beyond economics to include strategic, security, cultural, and connectivity dimensions. Historical linkages have played a crucial role in facilitating this engagement by providing a foundation of shared heritage and mutual understanding.

This paper explores the influence of historical linkages on India's contemporary ASEAN policy and evaluates their significance in shaping diplomatic, economic, and strategic cooperation.

India's contemporary ASEAN policy relies heavily on millennia of shared cultural, religious, and commercial ties. These historic linkages spanning the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism, Sanskrit, and maritime trade routes provide a strong "soft power" foundation. They shape New Delhi's modern Act East Policy by fostering mutual goodwill, facilitating people-to-people connectivity, and building regional trust. The profound impact of these historical ties on India's ASEAN strategy can be broken down into three key pillars.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY

Soft Power & Civilizational Links India uses centuries-old shared heritages such as the epics of Ramayana, architecture like Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and shared linguistic roots in Sanskrit as a unique diplomatic tool. This shared past creates a deep sense of affinity and distinct cultural diplomacy with nations like Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Institutional

Ties Organizations and regular commemorative summits emphasize this historical continuity to foster closer tourism, academic exchanges, and spiritual tourism.

ECONOMIC INTEGRATION TRACING THE ANCIENT TRADE ROUTES

Ancient maritime routes that connected the ports of the Indian subcontinent (like Tamil Nadu, Bengal, and Gujarat) with the Srivijaya and Khmer empires serve as a historical blueprint for contemporary trade partnerships. Act East & Bilateral Trade India's modern economic engagement, upgraded from the 1991 Look East Policy, heavily relies on this legacy. Singapore, for instance, remains India's largest trading partner in the bloc.

GEOPOLITICAL AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Just as ancient Indian traders sought peace and stable sea lanes, contemporary India works with ASEAN to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific. Shared histories make India a trusted, non-hegemonic strategic partner in a region where several countries are seeking to balance the growing influence of China. Historical migration has resulted in significant Indian diaspora populations in Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar, providing a vital bridge for continuous economic and political collaboration.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INDIA–SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS ANCIENT MARITIME TRADE NETWORKS

The earliest connections between India and Southeast Asia were established through maritime trade. Indian traders sailed across the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, exchanging spices, textiles, precious stones, metals, and agricultural products with Southeast Asian kingdoms. The ports of South India, particularly those along the Coromandel Coast, served as important centers of trade with Southeast Asia. These commercial exchanges facilitated not only economic interactions but also cultural and religious diffusion. Trade routes connected Indian ports with major Southeast Asian centers such as Srivijaya in Indonesia, Funan in Cambodia, and later the Majapahit Empire. These networks fostered long-term relationships and created a shared maritime heritage that continues to influence contemporary regional cooperation.

SPREAD OF HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

One of the most enduring legacies of India–Southeast Asia relations is the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism throughout the region. Indian merchants, monks, scholars, and travelers introduced religious ideas that profoundly influenced Southeast Asian societies. Hinduism shaped the political and cultural development of several Southeast Asian kingdoms. Concepts of kingship, governance, and social organization were adapted from Indian traditions.

Similarly, Buddhism spread widely across Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The influence of Indian religions can still be observed in temples, rituals, festivals, and cultural practices throughout Southeast Asia. Monuments such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Prambanan in Indonesia reflect the deep impact of Indian civilization on the region.

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC INFLUENCES

Indian cultural influence extended beyond religion to include language, literature, art, architecture, and education. Sanskrit served as an important language of administration and scholarship in many Southeast Asian kingdoms. Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata became integral parts of Southeast Asian cultural traditions. Local adaptations of these epics continue to be performed through dance, theatre, and storytelling across ASEAN countries. Architectural styles, temple designs, sculpture, and artistic motifs derived from Indian traditions remain visible throughout Southeast Asia. These cultural similarities contribute to a sense of shared heritage that strengthens contemporary diplomatic relations.

POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE INFLUENCES

Ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms adopted several political and administrative concepts from India. Ideas regarding statecraft, law, taxation, and governance influenced local political systems. Indian texts such as the Arthashastra and Dharmashastra provided models for administration and kingship. Although these concepts were adapted to local conditions, they contributed significantly to state formation in Southeast Asia. The historical experience of political interaction created a foundation for mutual understanding and respect that continues to shape modern relations between India and ASEAN countries.

EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S ASEAN POLICY

Post-Independence Period

After independence in 1947, India's foreign policy focused primarily on decolonization, non-alignment, and relations with major powers. Although cultural ties with Southeast Asia remained important, economic and strategic engagement was relatively limited. The Cold War created geopolitical divisions that constrained closer cooperation. ASEAN countries often aligned with Western powers, while India maintained a non-aligned position and developed close relations with the Soviet Union. Consequently, India–ASEAN interactions during this period were less intensive than historical linkages might have suggested.

The Look East Policy

The end of the Cold War and India's economic liberalization in 1991 marked a turning point in relations with Southeast Asia. Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao launched the Look East Policy to strengthen economic and political engagement with ASEAN. The policy recognized Southeast Asia as a vital region for India's economic growth and strategic interests. Historical and cultural connections were frequently emphasized as a means of fostering goodwill and cooperation. Under the Look East Policy, India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992, a full dialogue partner in 1995, and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996.

The Act East Policy

In 2014, the Government of India upgraded the Look East Policy into the Act East Policy. The new approach emphasized proactive engagement across economic, strategic, security, and connectivity dimensions. The Act East Policy seeks to strengthen India's role in the Indo-Pacific while deepening partnerships with ASEAN countries. Historical linkages continue to be highlighted as an important element of this engagement. The policy recognizes that shared cultural heritage can complement contemporary economic and strategic cooperation.

INFLUENCE OF HISTORICAL LINKAGES ON CONTEMPORARY ASEAN POLICY CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER

Historical connections provide India with substantial soft-power resources in Southeast Asia. Cultural diplomacy has become an important component of India's ASEAN policy. India promotes cultural exchanges through educational programs, scholarships, cultural festivals, and academic collaborations. Institutions such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations support initiatives that highlight shared historical heritage. Celebrations of Buddhist traditions, Ramayana festivals, and heritage conservation projects reinforce cultural bonds and strengthen diplomatic relationships. The use of cultural diplomacy demonstrates how historical linkages continue to influence contemporary foreign policy objectives.

BUDDHISM AS A DIPLOMATIC BRIDGE

Buddhism serves as an important bridge connecting India with several ASEAN countries. As the birthplace of Buddhism, India occupies a unique position in the religious and cultural consciousness of Southeast Asia. Pilgrimage tourism to Buddhist sites such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar attracts visitors from Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. India has invested in the development of Buddhist circuits

and international cooperation programs aimed at strengthening people-to-people contacts. These initiatives enhance India's image and contribute to stronger relations with ASEAN nations.

SHARED CIVILIZATIONAL HERITAGE

India's contemporary ASEAN policy frequently references the concept of shared civilizational heritage. Diplomatic speeches, policy documents, and cultural programs emphasize centuries of interaction between India and Southeast Asia. This narrative helps distinguish India's engagement from purely strategic or economic relationships. It creates a sense of familiarity and mutual trust that facilitates cooperation in multiple areas. Shared heritage also supports India's efforts to promote regional integration and connectivity across the Indo-Pacific region.

EDUCATIONAL AND ACADEMIC COOPERATION

Historical linkages have encouraged greater collaboration in education and research. Universities and academic institutions in India and ASEAN countries increasingly engage in joint research projects, student exchanges, and cultural studies programs. Research on ancient trade routes, cultural interactions, archaeology, and historical connections contributes to a deeper understanding of shared heritage. Educational cooperation helps cultivate future generations of leaders who appreciate the historical foundations of India–ASEAN relations.

ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF HISTORICAL LINKAGES TRADE AND CONNECTIVITY

Historical maritime trade routes continue to influence contemporary economic cooperation. Modern connectivity initiatives often draw inspiration from ancient networks that linked India and Southeast Asia. Projects such as the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and other connectivity corridors seek to revive traditional trade links and facilitate economic integration. These initiatives support trade, tourism, investment, and regional development while reinforcing historical patterns of interaction.

TOURISM AND HERITAGE PROMOTION

Historical and cultural heritage plays an important role in tourism cooperation between India and ASEAN countries. Religious tourism, heritage tourism, and cultural exchanges generate economic benefits while strengthening people-to-people ties. Joint efforts to preserve cultural heritage sites and promote historical tourism contribute to sustainable economic development. Tourism serves as both an economic and diplomatic instrument in India's ASEAN policy.

INVESTMENT AND BUSINESS COOPERATION

The historical familiarity between India and Southeast Asia has facilitated business cooperation and investment flows. Diaspora communities and long-standing commercial relationships contribute to economic engagement. Indian companies increasingly invest in ASEAN markets, while ASEAN firms view India as an important destination for investment and trade. Historical linkages help create a favorable environment for economic cooperation and commercial partnerships.

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF HISTORICAL LINKAGES INDO-PACIFIC COOPERATION

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept has enhanced the strategic importance of ASEAN in India's foreign policy. Historical maritime connections support India's vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. India emphasizes the historical interconnectedness of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions as a basis for contemporary cooperation. This perspective aligns with ASEAN's central role in regional architecture and multilateral institutions.

MARITIME SECURITY

Ancient maritime interactions provide a historical context for contemporary maritime cooperation. India and ASEAN countries share interests in maintaining freedom of navigation, maritime security, and sustainable use of marine resources. Joint naval exercises, maritime dialogues, and capacity-building initiatives reflect growing strategic cooperation. Historical awareness of shared maritime heritage contributes to mutual trust and collaboration in addressing security challenges.

COUNTERBALANCING REGIONAL COMPETITION

Historical linkages strengthen India's position as a natural partner for ASEAN countries amid increasing geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. Unlike relationships based solely on strategic calculations, India's engagement is supported by deep cultural and civilizational ties. This historical foundation enhances India's credibility and attractiveness as a regional partner.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite the importance of historical linkages, several challenges limit their effectiveness in contemporary policy. First, historical connections alone cannot overcome economic and strategic constraints. ASEAN countries

prioritize practical benefits and economic opportunities in their foreign relations. Second, China's growing economic and political influence in Southeast Asia presents significant competition for India. Third, connectivity projects have faced delays due to financial, administrative, and logistical challenges. Fourth, awareness of historical ties varies across ASEAN countries, and younger generations may place greater emphasis on contemporary economic and technological cooperation. Therefore, historical linkages must be complemented by concrete policy initiatives and sustained engagement.

CONCLUSION

Historical linkages have played a significant role in shaping India's contemporary ASEAN policy. Ancient trade networks, cultural exchanges, religious connections, and shared civilizational experiences have created a strong foundation for modern diplomatic relations. These historical ties provide India with important soft-power resources and contribute to mutual trust, cultural affinity, and regional cooperation. The Look East and Act East policies have successfully utilized historical connections to promote economic, political, and strategic engagement with ASEAN. While contemporary challenges require practical and forward-looking approaches, historical linkages remain an important source of legitimacy and influence in India's relations with Southeast Asia.

As the Indo-Pacific region becomes increasingly significant in global politics, the combination of historical heritage and modern cooperation will continue to shape the future of India–ASEAN relations. By building upon centuries of interaction, India and ASEAN can create a stronger partnership that contributes to regional stability, prosperity, and integration. In 1927, one of the greatest architects of modern India, Rabindranath Tagore undertook an intellectual pilgrimage to south-east Asia. The prolific writer expressed his intent, 'We have embarked on this pilgrimage to see the signs of the history of India's entry into the universal.' Almost a century ago from today, Tagore had realised the necessity to rekindle India's historical cultural exchanges with the Swarnabhumi or the Golden land of lore.

As we traverse through history, we realise PM Modi was not off the mark. Our part of the world was largely contiguous and borderless in the pre-colonial era. Courtesy our unfragmented geography and common values of peaceful assimilation of diversity, we became inheritors of a shared legacy in linguistics, literature, performing arts and fine arts, textiles, architecture, and even our religious customs, imprints of which are discernible till date. A felicitous example of our symbiotic exchanges is the proliferation and adoption of the great Indian epic Ramayana across the geography of south-east Asia.

Interestingly, well into the 21st century, these influences continue to manifest in traditional practices across the region. For instance, the Thai king is still referred to as Rama, where he is considered a reincarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu. Wayang or traditional puppet theatres of south-east Asia are still famous for depicting scenes from Indian epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana. These exchanges, however, have always been coactive or two-way. As Indian emperors sent out Buddhist monks and state emissaries to Southeast Asia to propagate Buddhism, monks from the region travelled to India to gain admission to Indian monasteries in the ancient Indian cities of Nalanda, Bodhgaya and Sarnath (Varanasi).

We must acknowledge that an extensive trade network within the Southeast Asian region had been the catalyst for these cultural exchanges. Tamralipti, an ancient Indian city in the Bay of Bengal, was a busy centre of maritime trade as far back as the 1st century. Coins from the Gupta dynasty of the 4th-6th century have been discovered as far as the Malay Peninsula. The expanse of the Chola Kingdom under Rajendra Chola I of the 11th century, known for boosting maritime trade in the region, had spread till the modern-day state of Kedah in Malaysia. Even the spread of Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia can be traced to traders originating from the Indian state of Gujarat, or merchants from Arab nations who found their way to South East Asia through India. In addition to augmenting the spread of religion, thriving trade led to an emergence of novel architectural styles which had both Indian influences and unique regional characteristics. In central Thailand, evidence of Indian influence is found through Dvaravati form of representing the Buddha which is derived from the Indian Amaravati and Gupta styles. In Cham, in southern Vietnam, there is evidence of extensive influence of Indian architecture through many ancient Shiva temples. The Prambanan, a UNESCO world heritage site in Yogyakarta, Indonesia was built in the Hindu architectural style in the 9th century as a tribute to God Shiva. Built in the same century is the Borobudur Mahayana Buddhist Temple in Central Java, the world's largest Buddhist temple and Indonesia's single most visited tourist attraction which demonstrates a heavy influence of Gupta art. The 12th century Angkor Wat in Cambodia, built in the local Khmer style architecture, originally known as Vrah Visnuloka remains the largest Hindu temple in the world.

For a research paper titled "The Influence of Historical Linkages on India's Contemporary ASEAN Policy", the following references (books, journal articles, reports, and official documents) can be used. These sources cover India's civilizational ties, cultural interactions, maritime connections, and the evolution of the Look East and Act East policies.

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