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INDIA-ASEAN

SYLLABUS:

GS 2 > International Relations >> India and Global Regions

REFERENCE NEWS:

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh addressed the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in Kuala Lumpur, reaffirming India's commitment to a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

Key Highlights

- **Rule of Law & Freedom of Navigation:** India's emphasis on **freedom of navigation and overflight** in the Indo-Pacific is **not aimed at any country (implicitly China)** but intended to **safeguard collective regional interests**.
- **India's Approach:**
 - India's engagement with ASEAN is **principle-driven and long-term**, not transactional.
 - Stresses **inclusivity** giving all nations, regardless of size or power, a role in shaping the regional order.
 - Promotes **sustainability** building resilient, cooperative, and adaptable security architectures.
 - Integrates **defence cooperation** with **economic growth, technology sharing, and human capital development**.
- **Strategic Context:**
 - ADMM-Plus includes ASEAN + 8 dialogue partners (India, US, China, Japan, Russia, Australia, South Korea, New Zealand).
 - Seen as a key component of **India's Act East Policy** and **Indo-Pacific vision**.
- **India's Active Role in ADMM-Plus:**
 - **Co-chaired Expert Working Groups (EWGs):**
 - Humanitarian Mine Action with Vietnam (2014–17)
 - Military Medicine with Myanmar (2017–20)
 - Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief (HADR) with Indonesia (2020–24)
 - Counter-Terrorism with Malaysia (2024–27)
 - Participated in **joint field exercises**, contributing to **shared operational standards**.
- **ASEAN–India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2022):**
 - Symbolizes the **maturity of political ties** and **alignment of regional priorities**.

- ADMM-Plus complements India's **diplomatic and economic** engagements with ASEAN.

India's message at ADMM-Plus underscores its role as a **responsible, cooperative, and inclusive regional actor** promoting **collective security, regional ownership, and peaceful coexistence** in the Indo-Pacific amid growing geopolitical tensions.

ASEAN:

- **The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)** is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising ten countries in Southeast Asia.
- It was established in **1967** in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration).
- ASEAN promotes intergovernmental cooperation facilitates and economic, political, security, military, educational, and sociocultural integration among its members and other countries in Asia.
- It is headquartered in Jakarta (Indonesia). **East Timor (Timor Leste)** has been added newly as the 11th member country of the grouping.



EVOLUTION OF INDIA-ASEAN RELATIONS:

Early Phase (1950s–1980s): Limited Engagement

- **Post-Independence Diplomacy:** India supported Southeast Asian nations in their decolonization efforts, reflecting its anti-imperialist vision.
- **Cold War Constraints:** During the Cold War, India viewed ASEAN (founded in 1967) as a Western-aligned bloc, limiting engagement.
- **Focus on Domestic and Regional Issues:** Conflicts such as the 1962 Indo-China War and India's internal challenges diverted attention from Southeast Asia.

The Turn of the 1990s: Economic Liberalization and 'Look East Policy'

- The **end of the Cold War** and India's **1991 economic reforms** catalyzed its outreach to Southeast Asia.
- **1992:** India became a **Sectoral Dialogue Partner** of ASEAN.
- **1995:** Upgraded to **Full Dialogue Partner** status.
- **1996:** India joined the **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)**, enhancing security dialogue in the Indo-Pacific.

Deepening Partnership (2000s–2010s): From 'Look East' to 'Act East'

- **2009:** Signing of the **India–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA)** in goods.
- **2012:** Elevation of ties to a **Strategic Partnership**.
- **2014:** Launch of the **'Act East Policy'**, emphasizing connectivity, culture, and commerce.
- Cultural diplomacy expanded through the **ASEAN–India Business Council**, student exchanges, and the **Delhi Dialogue Track 1.5** mechanism.

- **2022:** Relations elevated to a **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)** at the ASEAN–India Summit in Cambodia.
- **2025–2030 Plan of Action:** Adopted at the **22nd ASEAN–India Summit (Kuala Lumpur, 2025)** to strengthen cooperation.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ASEAN TO INDIA:

Economic and Trade Significance

- **ASEAN as India’s 4th Largest Trading Partner (2023–24):** Bilateral trade reached **USD 122.67 billion**, accounting for **~11% of India’s total global trade**. Exports valued at **USD 44.03 billion**. Imports valued at **USD 78.64 billion** (*Source: Ministry of Commerce, 2024*)
- **Investment Ties:** ASEAN contributes nearly **18% of India’s total FDI inflows**. **Singapore** is India’s 2nd largest FDI source, with cumulative investments of over **USD 150 billion (2000–2024)**. **Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia** have emerging joint ventures in pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals, and digital tech.
- **ASEAN–India Trade in Goods Agreement (AIFTA, 2009):** Efforts are underway to **upgrade** the FTA to address issues of rules of origin, tariff liberalisation, and services trade, a priority in the **2025–2030 Action Plan**.

Strategic and Security Relevance

- **ASEAN Centrality in the Indo-Pacific:** India aligns its **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)** with the **ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)** to promote a free, open, and inclusive regional order.
- **Maritime Security and Freedom of Navigation:** India supports **freedom of navigation and overflight** in accordance with UNCLOS crucial amid tensions in the **South China Sea**.
- Conducted **ASEAN–India Maritime Exercise (AIME-2023)** in the South China Sea.
- Initiatives like the **SAGAR Doctrine** (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and **Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC–IOR)** enhance regional maritime domain awareness.
- **Defence Cooperation through ADMM–Plus:** India co-chairs multiple **Expert Working Groups** under the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM–Plus):
 - **Counter-Terrorism (2024–27)** with Malaysia
 - **Humanitarian Mine Action and Disaster Relief Operations** with Vietnam and Indonesia (earlier cycles)
 - **Military Medicine (2017–20)** with Myanmar

Connectivity and Regional Integration

- **Trilateral Connectivity Projects: India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway** expected completion by **2026**, connecting India to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.
- **Kaladan Multimodal Transit Project:** Links Kolkata port to Myanmar’s Sittwe and Mizoram. These projects support India’s **Act East and Neighbourhood First** policies by integrating India’s Northeast with ASEAN economies.
- **Digital & Physical Infrastructure:** Cooperation in **5G, fintech, semiconductor manufacturing, and critical minerals** was emphasized at the **22nd ASEAN–India Summit (2025)**.

Cultural and Civilizational Ties

- **Shared Heritage:** India's cultural footprint in Southeast Asia is evident through **Buddhism, Ramayana traditions, and temple architecture** (e.g., Angkor Wat, Borobudur).
- **ASEAN–India Cultural Exchange Programme** and **Buddhist Circuit Projects** strengthen soft power diplomacy.
- The **Nalanda University Centre for Southeast Asian Studies** (approved in 2025) aims to deepen academic and cultural linkages.
- **People-to-People Connections:** A strong Indian diaspora in **Malaysia (8%), Singapore (9%), and Myanmar** acts as a bridge of cultural and commercial interaction. **2025 declared ASEAN–India Year of Tourism**, furthering interpersonal engagement.

Blue Economy and Sustainable Development

- **2026 ASEAN–India Year of Maritime Cooperation:** Joint initiatives in **marine ecology, fisheries, and ocean research**. India to host the **East Asia Summit Maritime Heritage Festival** at Lothal, Gujarat. Focus on *Blue Economy partnerships, disaster resilience, and climate-smart ports*.
- **Energy & Environmental Collaboration:** ASEAN supports India's leadership in the **International Solar Alliance (ISA)** and **Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment)**. Joint projects are advancing in **renewable energy, waste recycling, and circular economy models**.

Geostrategic Balancing

- ASEAN acts as a **strategic counterbalance** in a region dominated by **China's influence**. India's engagement reinforces multipolarity and collective regional security.
- Cooperation in the **Quad's Indo-Pacific framework** complements ASEAN-led mechanisms without undermining ASEAN Centrality.

CHALLENGES IN THE RELATIONS:

Trade and Economic Challenges

- India's trade with ASEAN reached **USD 122.67 billion (2023–24)**, but growth has plateaued since 2018, and the **trade deficit (~USD 34.6 billion)** remains high.
- ASEAN accounts for nearly **11% of India's total trade**, while India's share in ASEAN's trade is less than **3%** showing asymmetry in dependence.
- Indian exporters face non-tariff barriers, complex rules of origin, and standards compliance issues in ASEAN markets.
- **Ineffectiveness of AIFTA (ASEAN–India Free Trade Agreement, 2009):** Many Indian industries (esp. steel, auto, and electronics) claim that AIFTA has favoured ASEAN exports more than India's. **Indian Chamber of Commerce (2024)** noted that tariff reduction commitments remain uneven, discouraging small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Connectivity and Infrastructure Bottlenecks

- **India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT):** delayed beyond **2026** due to insurgency in Myanmar and funding gaps.
- **Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project** faced setbacks due to security challenges in the Chin and Rakhine states.
- These delays limit India's access to Southeast Asian markets and weaken the **Act East Policy's physical connectivity pillar**.

- **Limited Air and Maritime Connectivity:** Absence of direct shipping routes and high freight costs constrain trade. **Air connectivity agreements** with ASEAN states remain underutilised only ~**30 direct weekly flights** between India and ASEAN capitals (except Singapore).

Strategic and Security Divergences

- ASEAN countries are divided in their approach towards China — Vietnam and the Philippines seek strategic balancing, while Cambodia and Laos tilt towards Beijing.
- This limits ASEAN's collective stance on maritime security, weakening India's SAGAR and **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)** objectives.
- Despite participation in **ADMM-Plus** and **AIME-2023**, joint military engagement remains symbolic.
- India's defence exports to ASEAN (except the **BrahMos deal with the Philippines, 2023**) are minimal.

Geopolitical and Institutional Constraints

- ASEAN unity is under stress due to competing national interests, e.g., differences on the **South China Sea Code of Conduct** and **Myanmar crisis**.
- India's engagement through **ASEAN-led frameworks** like the East Asia Summit or ADMM-Plus often slows due to ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making model.
- India's **exit from RCEP (2020)** has limited its economic integration compared to China, Japan, and South Korea.
- Regional competition with frameworks like **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** and **U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)** reduces India's economic leverage.

Political and Governance Challenges

- Ongoing civil conflict in Myanmar affects both security and connectivity projects critical to India's Act East Policy.
- **India's cautious diplomacy**, balancing ASEAN's stance with strategic concerns, has slowed engagement.
- Coordination between **India's central and state governments (especially Northeastern states)** and ASEAN mechanisms is limited. Absence of a high-frequency dialogue mechanism comparable to U.S.–ASEAN or China–ASEAN forums reduces India's visibility.

Limited People-to-People and Tourism Engagement

- Despite **2025 declared as ASEAN–India Year of Tourism**, only about **3.2%** of India's outbound tourists visit ASEAN, and **2.5%** of ASEAN's inbound travellers come to India (Ministry of Tourism, 2024).

Environmental and Climate Cooperation Gaps

- While both sides commit to the **Blue Economy** and **Maritime Sustainability**, coordination on **marine pollution, disaster resilience, and renewable energy standards** remains limited.
- India's leadership in the **International Solar Alliance (ISA)** is yet to translate into large ASEAN-based projects.

WAY FORWARD:

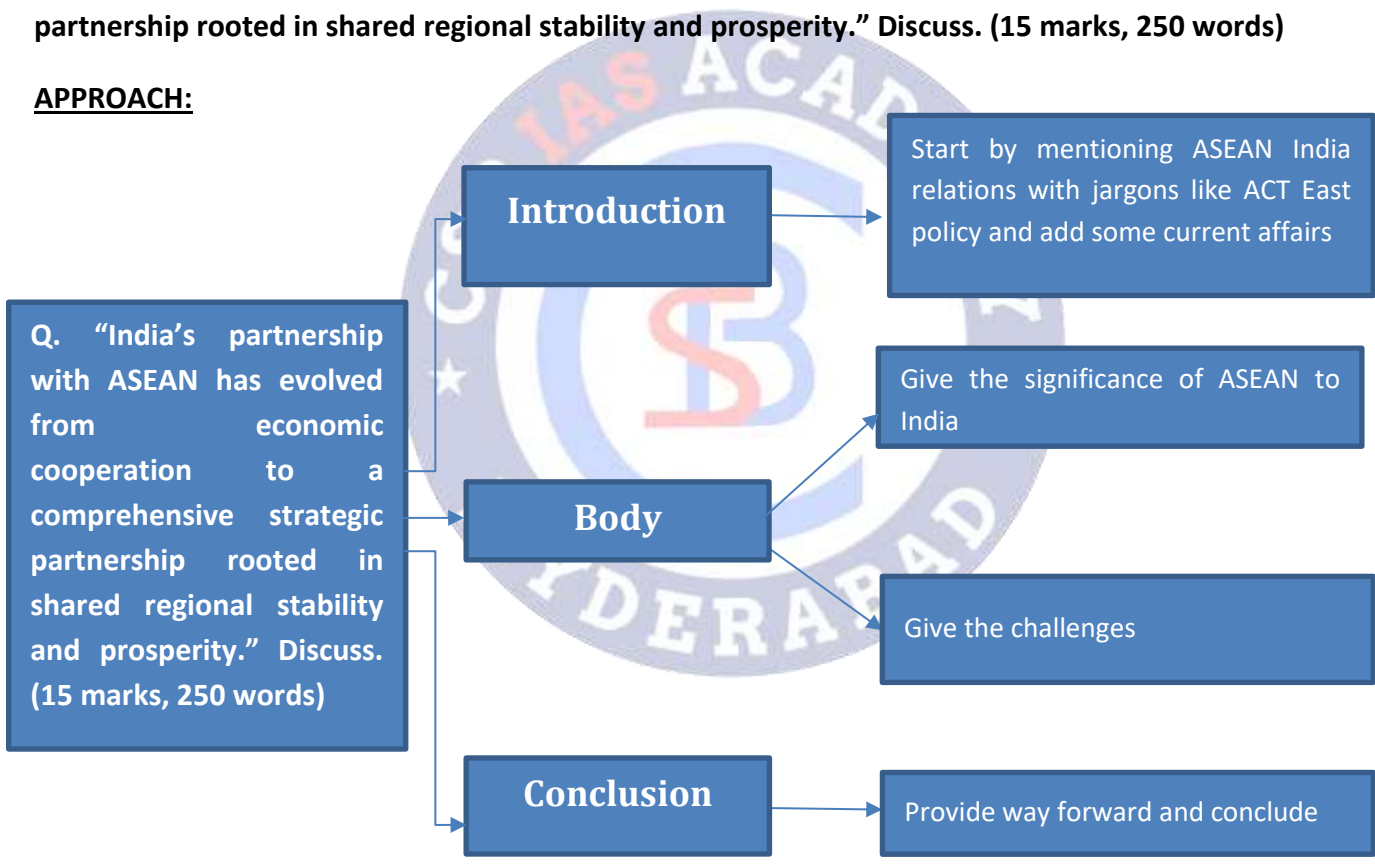
- **Enhance Economic Integration:** Address trade deficit by improving market access in sectors like IT and pharma. Strengthen India-ASEAN FTA for balanced benefits.

- **Fast-Track Connectivity:** Expedite key projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. Extend connectivity to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.
- **Strengthen Maritime Security:** Deepen defence cooperation, joint maritime exercises, and information sharing. Focus on combating piracy and ensuring maritime freedom.
- **Improve Strategic Ties:** Strengthen partnerships with ASEAN members like Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines.
- **Post-Pandemic Cooperation:** Focus on health security, renewable energy, and disaster management.
- **Build Institutional Mechanisms:** Create dedicated departments for ASEAN cooperation. Expand people-to-people ties through cultural diplomacy.
- **Leverage Multilateral Platforms:** Use forums like the East Asia Summit to push for regional stability.
- **Counter China’s Influence:** Provide ASEAN countries alternatives through deeper engagement and Act East Policy integration.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. “India’s partnership with ASEAN has evolved from economic cooperation to a comprehensive strategic partnership rooted in shared regional stability and prosperity.” Discuss. (15 marks, 250 words)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

India–ASEAN relations represent a cornerstone of India’s *Act East Policy* and its Indo-Pacific vision. From limited engagement during the Cold War, the partnership has evolved into a *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)* in 2022, reflecting converging political, economic, and security interests.

Significance of ASEAN to India:

- **Economic Integration:** ASEAN is India's **4th largest trading partner**, with bilateral trade at **USD 122.67 billion (2023–24)**. **18% of India's FDI inflows** come from ASEAN; Singapore is the **2nd largest investor** (USD 150 billion cumulative FDI).
- **Strategic and Security Cooperation:** ASEAN Centrality aligns with India's **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)**. Regular participation in **ADMM–Plus** and **ASEAN–India Maritime Exercises (AIME-2023)**. Joint efforts under **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)**.
- **Connectivity and Regional Integration:** **India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway** and **Kaladan Multimodal Project** link India's Northeast to Southeast Asia. Cooperation expanding in **5G, semiconductors, fintech, and critical minerals**.
- **Cultural and Civilizational Ties:** Shared Buddhist and Ramayana heritage; ASEAN–India cultural exchange programmes. **Nalanda University Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (2025)** to strengthen academic linkages.
- **Sustainable Development and Blue Economy:** Cooperation under the **ASEAN–India Maritime Heritage Festival** and renewable energy initiatives through the **International Solar Alliance (ISA)**.

Challenges in India–ASEAN Relations:

- **Economic Imbalance:** High trade deficit (**USD 34.6 billion**) and limited market access for Indian goods. **AIFTA (2009)** seen as favouring ASEAN industries.
- **Connectivity Delays:** Projects like the **Trilateral Highway** and **Kaladan Project** delayed due to unrest in Myanmar and funding issues.
- **Geopolitical Divergences:** ASEAN's disunity on China and South China Sea issues affects India's Indo-Pacific strategy.
- **Limited Defence Integration:** Engagement through ADMM–Plus remains mostly symbolic.
- **India's Exit from RCEP (2020):** Reduced India's regional economic presence compared to China and Japan.
- **Weak People-to-People and Tourism Links:** ASEAN accounts for only **3.2% of India's outbound tourists** and **2.5% inbound travellers**.

Way Forward:

- **Revitalize Trade Ties:** Upgrade **AIFTA** to include services and digital trade; promote MSME participation.
- **Accelerate Connectivity Projects:** Prioritize IMT Highway and multimodal corridors for seamless regional integration.
- **Maritime and Defence Cooperation:** Conduct regular joint naval patrols, expand **IFC–IOR** data sharing.
- **Leverage Soft Power Diplomacy:** Promote cultural tourism and educational partnerships through Nalanda and ITEC programmes
- **Sustain Environmental Cooperation:** Collaborate on **Blue Economy**, renewable energy, and disaster resilience.

The India–ASEAN partnership has transformed from a trade-focused engagement into a *comprehensive strategic partnership* anchored in shared democratic values, maritime security, and sustainable development. Strengthening this partnership is vital for ensuring an *inclusive, rules-based Indo-Pacific* and realizing India's vision of *"Act East, Act Fast, and Act Together."*