

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Opinion – ASEAN Centrality in Indian Discourse: Rhetoric or Realpolitik?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/07/19/opinion-asean-centrality-in-indian-discourse-rhetoric-or-realpolitik/>

BIYON SONY JOSEPH, JUL 19 2025

Over the years, Indian leaders have frequently reaffirmed their commitment to 'ASEAN centrality' in regional affairs. In fact, as per the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) website, since Prime Minister Modi's keynote address at Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, where India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region was articulated for the first time, New Delhi has invoked ASEAN Centrality in official speeches and statements with predictable regularity—at least 30 times. Yet, in practical terms, what does ASEAN centrality mean for India? Does India genuinely prioritise ASEAN-led mechanisms, or is the phrase a diplomatic nicety, particularly as India deepens ties with the Quad and recalibrates its strategic vision through the Indo-Pacific lens?

As a principle, ASEAN centrality refers to the notion that ASEAN should remain at the core of the region's diplomatic architecture. This includes a network of summits and dialogue platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). For India, ASEAN centrality has been a consistent element of its 'Act East Policy,' which builds on the earlier 'Look East Policy,' and forms an integral part of its broader vision for the Indo-Pacific. Within this framework, ASEAN is regarded as a key partner in fostering economic integration, enhancing connectivity, and promoting security cooperation.

India's engagement with ASEAN is driven by geographic proximity, economic prospects, shared security interests, and enduring cultural ties. The northeastern states of India serve as an interface between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, forming a natural land bridge. On the economic front, ASEAN constitutes a vital market, with bilateral trade reaching US\$131.57 billion in 2023. Strategically, ASEAN member states are important actors in upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, which aligns closely with India's maritime and geopolitical priorities. Additionally, India shares longstanding civilisational links and vibrant people-to-people connections with Southeast Asia, reinforcing the perception of a shared regional history and cultural affinity. Taken together, these factors position ASEAN as a pivotal partner for India across multiple domains.

As larger multilateral blocs have struggled with institutional inertia and stagnation in reform efforts, Indo-Pacific middle and major powers have increasingly turned to minilateral arrangements as viable alternatives. In recent years, India's evolving role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), along with its participation in other trilateral formats, has introduced a new dimension to its regional engagement in the fast-changing Indo-Pacific landscape. Although initially cautious about the Indo-Pacific narrative, ASEAN came to recognise the risks of marginalisation in regional geopolitics and, in response, released the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019. The document underscored inclusivity and reaffirmed ASEAN-led mechanisms as central to regional governance.

There are differing views on whether ASEAN centrality and India's Indo-Pacific strategy can coexist. Some regard the two as complementary. India continues to engage in ASEAN-led forums, and the bilateral relationship has deepened significantly, particularly following the elevation of ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022. Furthermore, since India announced the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at the East Asia Summit in 2019, both sides have reiterated their commitment to enhancing cooperation. This is evident in the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region, which serves as a framework to advance collaboration between AOIP and IPOI. The joint efforts to explore synergies between these

# Opinion – ASEAN Centrality in Indian Discourse: Rhetoric or Realpolitik?

Written by Biyon Sony Joseph

initiatives—particularly in areas such as the economy, maritime cooperation, connectivity, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—highlight the shared commitment of India and ASEAN to promoting peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, ASEAN's limited capacity for collective security action, particularly visible in its restrained stance on the South China Sea disputes, and its internal challenges stemming from intensifying great power competition, reveal the constraints it faces amid the shifting regional order. India's growing engagement with the Quad and other minilateral groupings suggests that New Delhi sees the value in diversifying its partnerships. In a geopolitically fractured environment, minilateralism offers a more agile and effective platform. As a result, there is a growing perception that India's swift embrace of minilateral formats marks a strategic pivot away from ASEAN.

India appears to be walking a fine line. While it continues to reaffirm ASEAN centrality in its official statements and supports ASEAN-led initiatives, it simultaneously builds strategic weight through minilateral mechanisms such as the Quad and deepens bilateral relationships with ASEAN member states, including Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia. This dual-track approach represents a pragmatic balancing strategy. ASEAN centrality helps India sustain regional goodwill and sidestep perceptions of alignment with any single great power. At the same time, minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific offers India strategic flexibility and leverage to deter coercive behaviour, particularly from China.

For India, ASEAN centrality functions as both a diplomatic principle and a strategic convenience. It enables multilateral engagement while preserving space for more flexible coalitions to respond to emerging regional challenges. However, the long-term viability of this dual approach depends on ASEAN's continued relevance and India's willingness to match its rhetorical commitments with substantive economic and institutional engagement.

If India intends to project a credible and inclusive Indo-Pacific vision, it must prevent ASEAN centrality from becoming a hollow slogan. This requires revitalising economic partnerships, investing in connectivity, and ensuring that ASEAN-led platforms remain integral to its regional strategy. Only through such efforts can ASEAN centrality evolve from rhetorical device to a meaningful pillar of India's foreign policy.

---

## About the author:

**Biyon Sony Joseph** is currently an Assistant Professor of Political Science at St. Thomas College (Autonomous), Palai, Kerala, India. He was also a Network for Advanced Study of China Fellow (2024-2025) at the Takshashila Institution, where he studied the influence of the Communist Party of China on the Communist Party of India in the area of political economy. His primary research interests include India's engagements in the Indo-Pacific, maritime security and paradiplomacy.