



INDIA, CHINA, AND THE EVOLVING BALANCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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India is becoming a significant strategic player in Southeast Asia. Amid intense regional diplomacy, India has [strengthened defense ties](#) with Indonesia, sided with the Philippines in South China Sea sovereignty conflicts, and finalized an arms contract with Vietnam. India's rise in Southeast Asia not only revives their historical ties to the subregion but offers a potential counterbalance to China's growing influence. It shows Beijing's dominance in Southeast Asia is not inevitable, though navigating the region's complex landscape requires nuance.

This involves economic partnerships, maritime cooperation, and cultural reconnection. India's ascendance is not just about statistics and power dynamics; it's a story of history rewritten, anxieties addressed, and opportunities embraced. The gradual shift in India's "Look East" policy to the newer "Act East" has led to flourishing trade ties, cultural exchanges, and military exercises, providing an alternative model of engagement based on mutual respect, shared values, and regional stability.

India's growing presence via trade and economic alliances

India's strategic role in Southeast Asia is evolving from soft power credentials to becoming a reliable security and strategic ally. After 32 years of service, India decommissioned the 1,450-ton Khukri-class missile corvette [INS Kirpan](#), staffed by 12 officers

and 100 sailors. The [missile corvette](#) is now owned by Vietnam. Increased training for Vietnamese military personnel operating fighter jets and submarines, as well as collaboration on cybersecurity and electronic warfare, were also discussed during last month's visit of Vietnamese Defense Minister Phan Van Giang to India. There are rumors that a BrahMos agreement may be [signed soon](#) with the Vietnamese side, as well as that the two nations may soon conclude a trade agreement.

The bilateral relationship between the Philippines and the US has improved since the finalization of the \$374.96 million transaction with [BrahMos Aerospace](#) Private Limited in January 2022. India and the Philippines have signed a joint statement on the fifth India-Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation. The statement acknowledges the legitimacy of the 2016 arbitration ruling in favor of the Philippine's sovereignty [claims](#) in the South China Sea. The statement also suggests dispatching an Indian defense attaché to Manila and increasing interactions between defense agencies. India co-hosted the first-ever ASEAN-India [Maritime Exercise](#) in the South China Sea in May 2023, featuring Indian-made destroyers, frigates, and helicopters. [Defense ties](#) between India and Indonesia also strengthened, with an Indian Kilo-class conventional submarine port call in February 2023.

Strategic alliances and security cooperation

ASEAN, despite its regional [security cooperation](#) structures like ARF and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting, may struggle to counter China's aggressive measures due to its agreement-based nature. Southeast Asian nations have formed [security alliances](#) with countries like Australia, Japan, India, and the US, potentially entangling the region in great power rivalry, but also offering valuable resources and experience. The US retains a strong military presence in Southeast Asia and bilateral security partnerships with Thailand and the Philippines, faces criticism for its "on-again, off-again" relations with the region.

India has been actively involved in military exercises with Southeast Asian nations, such as Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercise and Maitree exercise with Thailand, focusing on maritime security and counter-terrorism tactics. Recent developments like the ASEAN-India [Maritime Exercise](#) have expanded their scope, involving humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These exercises foster interoperability, build trust, and contribute to a more secure Indo-Pacific region.

As noted, India has also become a significant defense [equipment supplier](#) to Vietnam, reducing dependence on China for military hardware. India participates in regional maritime security initiatives like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and collaborates with Southeast Asian countries on maritime domain awareness and capacity building. However, due to its underdeveloped military capabilities, India's power projection in Southeast Asia is limited. India can strengthen its [strategic engagement](#) in Southeast Asia by continuing to enhance defense cooperation, as well as economic ties with Vietnam and Indonesia, and contribute to maritime security initiatives while offering expertise in coastal surveillance and disaster response.

Countering China's dominance

According to the [Brookings Institution](#), China's influence in Southeast Asia is not predetermined but will be influenced by Chinese power, diplomacy, ASEAN responses, and other major powers like the US, Japan, and India. The OECD Asian Business Cycle Indicators show most Southeast Asian countries are transitioning from recession to recovery after COVID-19, while China has increased its influence in the last five years. India has been criticized for being indecisive when encouraged to act. Its strategic concerns with China include avoiding antagonization and benefiting from economic growth.

India's strategic engagement in Southeast Asia aims to counter China's growing influence, but focusing solely on "[countering dominance](#)" can be misleading. India is promoting a rules-based international order and fostering partnerships with Southeast Asian

nations, focusing on defense cooperation, economic ties, cultural exchanges, and regional infrastructure development. New Delhi has also signed an arms deal with Vietnam and sided with the Philippines over South China Sea sovereignty disputes, addressing security challenges.

Tensions are high in the South China Sea, a crucial [trade route](#) with conduit for over \$3 trillion in annual ship-borne commerce. China claims almost the entire region and seeks dispute resolution without external interference. India's growing security ties in the South China Sea region indicate a greater commitment to countering China's actions, offering the US an opportunity to manage China's assertive behavior, collaborate on infrastructure development, trade agreements, and technology transfer. In [June 2023](#), US Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink announced plans to strengthen its strategic partnership with India through regional groupings, focusing on promoting stability in South Asia and addressing the South China Sea issue, and promoting greater collaboration among the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue grouping (India, as well as the US, Japan, and Australia). Washington and New Delhi are collaborating to counter China's influence in Southeast Asia through military and diplomatic efforts. The US has increased its military presence in the Philippines, sold arms to Taiwan, and accused China of using its power to gain influence in the Indo-Pacific. The US may encourage India to intensify its effort in countering China in the region during their [2+2 dialogue](#).

India has been a champion of the principle of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and initiated engagements with its partners in the region, such as the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative that [aims to ensure the security](#) and stability of the region's maritime domain. India's policy has been to strengthen partnerships with like-minded countries, and form issue-based coalitions to address a new strategic and security environment.

Challenges and opportunities

Addressing India's limited presence in Southeast

Asia compared to China requires significant diplomatic and economic efforts. India's infrastructure and connectivity projects are still in their nascent stages, compared to China's extensive BRI. China's development loans to Southeast Asia, though expensive, are unlikely to be part of a "[debt trap](#)" strategy (even if they are not as benevolent as Beijing claims). China's physical control over some South China Sea islands does present a significant challenge for other superpower nations seeking to maintain strategic control over disputed territories.

India's diverse culture, diasporas, and [soft power](#) attract other nations seeking similar governance structures in the region. India's participation in multilateral forums like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and engagement with ASEAN promotes democratic principles and regional issues. It also benefits economic cooperation through transparent practices and intellectual property protection, serving as a counterbalance to China's authoritarianism. Strengthening ties [between India and the region](#) can provide an economic, diplomatic, and security boost. Infrastructure development initiatives like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor and the Indian Ocean Rim Association can improve connectivity and economic cooperation. India's maritime capabilities can counter China's assertive behavior.

Conclusion

The future of the region depends on India's strategic ambitions, Southeast Asian anxieties, and China's assertiveness. India's multifaceted approach offers a compelling alternative to singular dominance, potentially fostering a more diverse and resilient region. The coming years will be pivotal in determining the region's trajectory, with India's actions shaping its future as a key player. India's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific presents a chance for other superpowers like the US to establish a cooperative partnership. By promoting a rules-based order, addressing regional security concerns, and fostering economic development, the US and India can ensure a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific, benefiting all, not just one major power.

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