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ASEAN-India Digital Masterplan 2030: DPI as Strategic Soft Power

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ASEAN-India Digital Masterplan 2030: DPI as Strategic Soft Power

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✎ WHY IN NEWS

The 3rd ASEAN-India Digital Ministers' Meeting on January 18, 2026, adopted the ASEAN-India Digital Masterplan (AIDM) 2030, covering digital infrastructure cooperation, UPI interoperability with ASEAN payment systems, AI governance alignment, and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) sharing — positioning India's technology stack as a model for Southeast Asia.

INDIA'S DPI STACK — THE FOUNDATION

India's **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** is a set of open, interoperable technology platforms built for population-scale use. The G20 New Delhi Summit (2023) endorsed DPI as a global development tool, and India's DPI has emerged as arguably the country's most influential export in the digital age.

The three foundational layers of India's DPI:

Layer	Platform	Function
Identity	**Aadhaar**	Biometric digital identity for 1.4 billion
Payments	**UPI (Unified Payments Interface)**	Real-time interbank payments
Data	**DigiLocker / Account Aggregator**	Consent-based data sharing

Built on these three, several additional layers have been added:

ONDC (Open Network for Digital Commerce): open protocol for e-commerce, decoupling logistics, buyer apps, and seller apps

ABDM (Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission): digital health records, ABHA (Ayushman Bharat Health Account) identity

National Academic Depository (NAD): digital academic certificates

e-RUPI: purpose-specific digital vouchers for welfare delivery

The **India Stack** concept — these interoperable DPI layers — is what India is proposing to share with ASEAN partners.

ASEAN-INDIA RELATIONS — DIGITAL DIMENSION

Strategic Context

ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is India's 4th largest trading partner with bilateral trade of approximately **$130 billion** in FY25. Under the **Act East Policy** (2014), India has deepened engagement with ASEAN across trade, defence, connectivity, and now digital cooperation.

India and ASEAN concluded a Free Trade Agreement in goods (AIFTA, 2010) and services and investment (2015). However, these agreements predate the digital economy era. The **ASEAN-India Digital Masterplan** is an attempt to create a framework for the emerging digital trade landscape.

The ASEAN Digital Ecosystem

ASEAN members vary enormously in digital readiness:

Singapore: globally top-ranked in digital infrastructure; 98% internet penetration

Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam: large, rapidly growing digital economies; high mobile payment adoption

Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar: lower connectivity; significant digital divide

GovTech Singapore: Singapore's government digital agency is a world-leading digital government model

The **ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025** (ADM 2025) was the earlier ASEAN-wide framework. The new **ASEAN-India Digital Masterplan 2030** creates a bilateral overlay focused on specific India-ASEAN cooperation priorities.

THE AIDM 2030 — KEY PILLARS

1. Digital Payments Interoperability

The centrepiece of AIDM 2030 is connecting **UPI** with the payment systems of ASEAN member states. India has already achieved:

Singapore: UPI ↔ PayNow linkage (2023) — first cross-border real-time payment link

UAE: UPI accepted at many merchant points via NEOPAY/LuLu networks

Mauritius, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka: UPI payment acceptance (inward)

France: UPI at Eiffel Tower and selected French retailers

Under AIDM 2030, the target is to create real-time **bilateral interoperability** (not just acceptance) with the payment systems of Indonesia (GoPay/GoBiz), Malaysia (DuitNow), Thailand (PromptPay), Philippines (InstaPay/PESONet), and Vietnam (NAPAS).

The payments layer is the most commercially significant — it enables diaspora remittances (India has a large community in ASEAN), trade settlement, and tourism payments at near-zero transaction cost.

2. Cybersecurity Cooperation

AIDM 2030 establishes:

Joint Cybersecurity Incident Response protocols between CERT-In (India's Computer Emergency Response Team) and ASEAN member CERTs

Information sharing on emerging threats (ransomware, state-sponsored attacks, supply chain compromises)

Capacity building for ASEAN members with less developed cybersecurity agencies

Joint exercises (tabletop simulations) for coordinated responses to cross-border cyber incidents

CERT-In (Computer Emergency Response Team – India): established 2004 under the **IT Act, 2000**; nodal agency for cybersecurity in India; under Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY).

3. AI Governance Alignment

Both India and ASEAN are developing AI governance frameworks. AIDM 2030 proposes:

Mutual recognition of AI testing and certification standards

Alignment on **AI ethics principles** (referencing India's NITI Aayog "Responsible AI for All" framework and the Singapore Model AI Governance Framework)

Cooperation on **AI for public services**: using AI for agriculture advisory, early warning systems, and healthcare triage in rural areas

Exchange of AI talent and joint research under ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund

India's **IndiaAI Mission** (2024): Rs 10,371 crore initiative for AI compute infrastructure, datasets, application development, and governance — including the creation of a **National AI Data Platform**.

4. Digital Public Infrastructure Sharing

India offered to share the **DPI design principles and technical specifications** — not the code, but the architecture and implementation experience — with ASEAN governments seeking to build similar systems. This includes:

Aadhaar's biometric deduplication methodology (without sharing biometric data)

UPI's interoperability protocol architecture

ONDC's open network protocol

ABDM's federated health record architecture

Several ASEAN countries — Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand — are actively building digital identity and payment systems; India's technical assistance is strategically valuable.

5. Digital Skilling and Human Capital

AIDM 2030 includes a commitment to:

ASEAN-India Digital Academy: virtual training platform for government officials and digital entrepreneurs in ASEAN

STEM cooperation — Indian IT colleges and IITs to offer MOOCs and fellowships for ASEAN students

Women in digital economy: supporting women-led digital businesses in both regions

UPI INTERNATIONALISATION — STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

UPI's internationalisation is not merely a convenience for Indian tourists. It is a **geopolitical instrument**:

Financial connectivity as soft power: When India's payment protocol becomes the technical backbone for ASEAN digital payments, it creates technical dependency, regulatory alignment, and strategic influence — similar to the role SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) plays for Western financial powers.

Dollar bypass: UPI transactions are settled in local currencies — Indian rupee to Singapore dollar, etc. — bypassing the US dollar for bilateral transactions. This reduces transaction costs and modestly reduces dollar dependence in bilateral trade.

India's G20 DPI push: At G20 India (2023), India successfully got DPI included in the G20 Agenda. The **G20 DPI Task Force** produced a framework that India now operationalises through bilateral agreements like AIDM 2030.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims:

ASEAN members: 10 (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam)

UPI international links: Singapore (PayNow), UAE, France, Mauritius, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka

CERT-In: under IT Act 2000; nodal agency; under MeitY

Act East Policy: 2014; replaced Look East Policy

ONDC: Open Network for Digital Commerce; open protocol

IndiaAI Mission: 2024; Rs 10,371 crore

Mains GS-2: India-ASEAN relations; digital diplomacy; UPI internationalisation; DPI as soft power; cybersecurity governance **Mains GS-3:** Digital economy; payment systems; India's tech stack; AI governance; digital skilling

📌 FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

ASEAN-INDIA DIGITAL MASTERPLAN (AIDM) 2030:

Adopted: 3rd ASEAN-India Digital Ministers' Meeting, January 18, 2026

Key pillars: payments interoperability, cybersecurity cooperation, AI governance, DPI sharing, digital skilling

INDIA DPI STACK:

Identity: Aadhaar (1.4 billion enrolled)

Payments: UPI (total transactions: 100+ billion annually)

Data: DigiLocker, Account Aggregator

Commerce: ONDC (open e-commerce protocol)

Health: ABDM / ABHA (health identity + federated health records)

Welfare: e-RUPI (purpose-specific digital vouchers)

UPI INTERNATIONAL (AS OF 2026):

Singapore: UPI-PayNow real-time link (2023, first bilateral RTG link)

UAE, France, Mauritius, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka: acceptance

AIDM 2030 target: bilateral interoperability with Indonesia (GoBiz), Malaysia (DuitNow), Thailand (PromptPay), Philippines (InstaPay), Vietnam (NAPAS)

ASEAN — QUICK FACTS:

Founded: August 8, 1967; Bangkok Declaration

Members: 10 (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam)

HQ: Jakarta, Indonesia

India-ASEAN trade: ~$130 billion (FY25)

AIFTA (goods): 2010; ASEAN-India Services/Investment FTA: 2015

CERT-IN:

Full form: Computer Emergency Response Team — India

Established: 2004

Legal basis: IT Act, 2000

Ministry: MeitY (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology)

INDIAAI MISSION (2024):

Budget: Rs 10,371 crore

Components: AI compute (GPU cloud), datasets, startups, applications, governance

National AI Data Platform: open dataset repository

ACT EAST POLICY:

Announced: 2014 (East Asia Summit, PM Modi)

Replaced: Look East Policy (1991)

Focus: ASEAN + Japan, South Korea, Australia, Pacific; upgraded from economic to strategic engagement

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

G20 DPI Framework: adopted at G20 New Delhi 2023; India's initiative

Singapore Model AI Governance Framework: world-leading voluntary AI governance guide

NITI Aayog "Responsible AI for All": India's AI ethics principles document

SWIFT: Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication; Belgium; US-led sanctions tool

GovTech Singapore: government digital agency; leads Singapore's Smart Nation initiative

Sources: PIB, MeitY, The Hindu, Indian Express

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