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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Acting East, Not Just Looking: Reviving India's Southeast Asian Ambition

 INDIAN EXPRESS

15 July 2026 · IR · GS2

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 **The Indian Express** 15 July 2026 **GS2**

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THE LIFT LINE

Thirty-five years after India first turned its gaze eastward, the policy still risks being a compass without a road, rich in summits and declarations yet thin on the highways, trade deals and factories that would make the eastward tilt tangible.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

A recent sequence of high-level Indian visits to Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand has renewed attention on the **Act East policy** (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/act-east-policy/>), India's framework for engaging Southeast Asia and the wider eastern Indo-Pacific. The visits signalled intent to deepen economic and strategic ties, yet they also exposed the familiar gap between diplomatic warmth and delivery on connectivity, trade and defence. The editorial matters because Act East is the clearest test of whether India can translate its aspiration to be a leading Indo-Pacific power into infrastructure on the ground and goods in the market, rather than communiques.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood, **bilateral** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/bilateral/>) and regional groupings involving India, and agreements affecting India's interests.

For **Prelims**, hold the milestones: the Look East policy launched in 1991 under P. V. Narasimha Rao and upgraded to Act East in 2014; ASEAN as a ten-member grouping with India a Comprehensive Strategic Partner since 2022; the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) of 2010 now under review; the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway; and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. For **Mains**, argue that Act East succeeds or fails on connectivity and trade, not on the number of summits attended.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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The Look East policy was born of the 1991 reforms, when a liberalising India sought new markets and partners after the Cold War. Over two decades it built dialogue partnerships with ASEAN, culminating in a strategic partnership. In 2014 the rebranding to Act East promised a shift from consultation to construction, from looking to acting, extending the ambit beyond Southeast Asia to the broader Indo-Pacific including Australia and the Pacific islands.

The promise remains half-kept. India remains outside the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, its flagship connectivity projects run years behind schedule, and its trade with ASEAN, while sizeable, is skewed against it. The eastern Indo-Pacific offers India a strategic hedge against an assertive China, but only if economic substance underwrites the strategy.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The connectivity deficit

The physical spine of Act East is unfinished. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, meant to link India's Northeast to Southeast Asia, has stalled amid instability in Myanmar, and the Kaladan project connecting Kolkata to Mizoram via a Myanmar port has slipped repeatedly. Without roads and ports, the Northeast cannot become the bridge to ASEAN that policy documents imagine.

The trade imbalance

The ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement has widened rather than narrowed India's trade deficit with the bloc, and Indian industry has long complained of [asymmetric](https://ujjayanti.com/vocab/asymmetric/) market access. The ongoing AITIGA review is the moment to rebalance terms, tighten rules of origin and open genuine space for Indian goods and services.

PILLAR	INSTRUMENT	CURRENT STATE
Connectivity	Trilateral Highway, Kaladan project	Delayed, hit by Myanmar instability
Trade	AITIGA (2010), under review	Deficit-heavy, review under way
Strategic partnership	ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partner (2022)	Strong on paper, uneven delivery
Defence	BrahMos exports, joint exercises	Emerging, high potential

The defence opening

The brightest thread is defence cooperation. BrahMos [supersonic](https://ujjayanti.com/vocab/supersonic/) cruise missile exports, first to the Philippines, have positioned India as a credible defence partner in the region, and interest from other Southeast Asian states signals a market where India's strengths meet real demand.

Deepening this, alongside joint exercises and training, gives Act East a strategic edge that trade alone cannot.

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HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Judge a foreign policy by its infrastructure, not its itinerary. Summits and state visits generate goodwill, but Act East is measured on kilometres of highway completed, tariff lines opened and missiles delivered. The transferable rule for GS2 is that regional influence follows economic integration and hard capability, and that a policy which stays at the level of declarations cedes ground to competitors who build. The examiner rewards the candidate who ties the recent visits to concrete deliverables rather than treating diplomacy as an end in itself.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Look East 1991 (post-reform market search) -> Act East 2014 (from looking to acting) -> ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partner 2022 -> recent visits to Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand -> test on three pillars: connectivity (Trilateral Highway, Kaladan, both delayed) + trade (AITIGA review to fix deficit) + defence (BrahMos exports, rising demand) -> deliver substance = leading Indo-Pacific role, stay rhetorical = strategic drift

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Finish the connectivity spine.** Prioritise completion of the Trilateral Highway and Kaladan project, using alternative routing and financing to work around Myanmar's instability rather than waiting it out.
- ❷ **Rebalance AITIGA.** Use the trade agreement review to correct the deficit, tighten rules of origin and secure market access for Indian services, turning trade into a two-way benefit.
- ❸ **Scale defence diplomacy.** Build on BrahMos exports with training, maintenance ecosystems and joint production offers that make India a durable defence partner across Southeast Asia.
- ❹ **Anchor the Northeast.** Integrate India's Northeast into Act East as the launchpad it is meant to be, with border infrastructure, trade facilitation and people-to-people links.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly asked about the Look East to Act East evolution and India-ASEAN relations. This editorial grounds that theme in current diplomacy and unfinished projects, which is exactly the contemporary application the examiner prefers over a static account of the policy's history.

Practice question: “India’s Act East policy has been stronger in ambition than in delivery.” In the light of connectivity, trade and defence cooperation, critically examine the challenges to deepening India’s engagement with Southeast Asia. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *The Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/>), *Ministry of External Affairs* (<https://www.mea.gov.in/>), *ASEAN* (<https://asean.org/>)

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