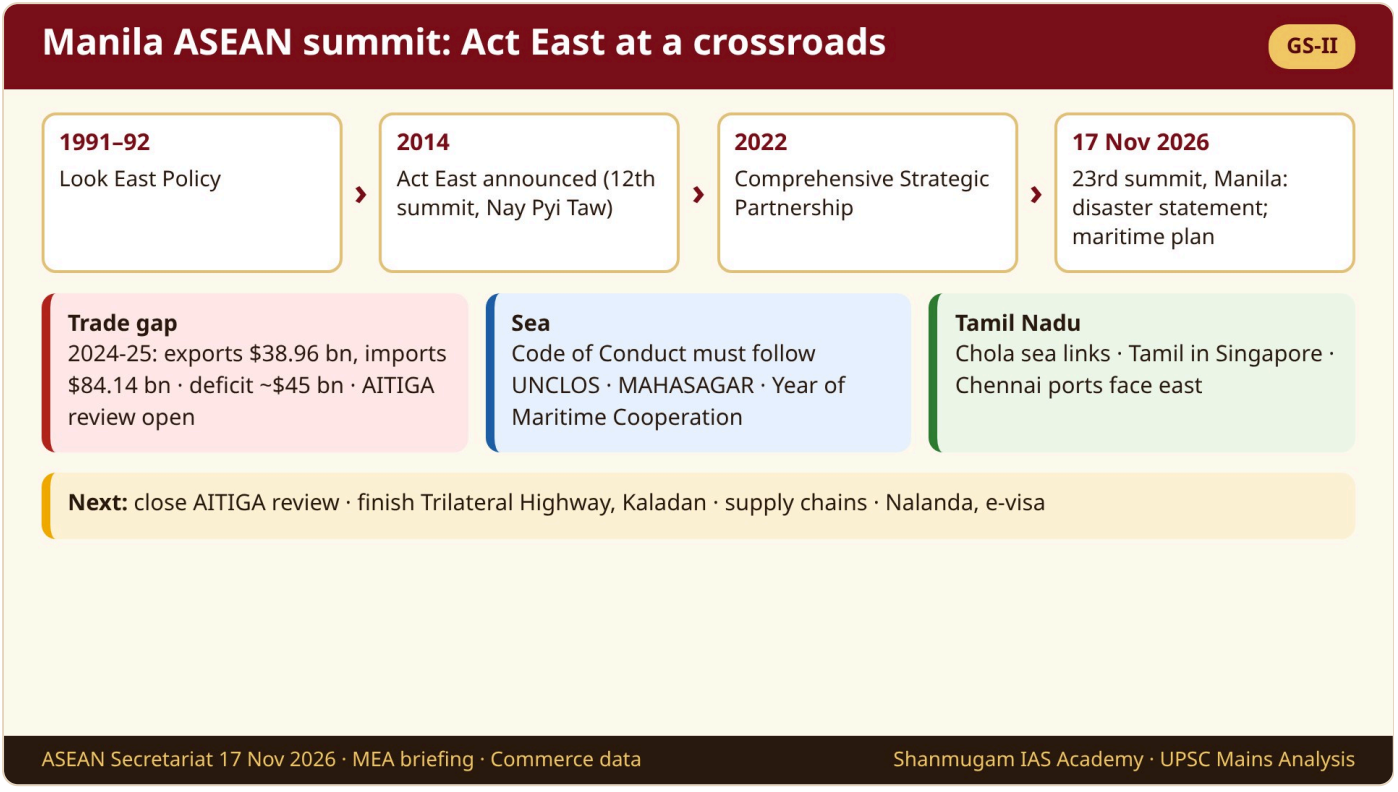
Mains Analysis: Manila ASEAN summit – Act East at a crossroads

Topics: International Relations – India and its Neighbourhood, Regional Groupings, Indo-Pacific · GS-II · UPSC Mains Analysis

Key takeaways

- The 23rd ASEAN-India Summit and the 21st East Asia Summit were held in Manila on 17 November 2026; leaders adopted a Joint Statement on Cooperation in Disaster Management, and India proposed nine initiatives led by a long-term ASEAN-India Maritime Cooperation Plan and free e-visas for ASEAN tourists.
- Act East is strong in strategy but weak in trade: in 2024-25 India exported US$38.96 billion to ASEAN and imported US$84.14 billion – a deficit of about US$45 billion – and the AITIGA review is still unfinished.
- Way forward: close the AITIGA review with tighter rules of origin, insist that the South China Sea Code of Conduct follows UNCLOS, finish the Trilateral Highway and Kaladan links, and give MAHASAGAR concrete maritime projects. PYQ: Prelims 2018 (ASEAN FTA partners).



Why in news

Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the **23rd ASEAN-India Summit** and the **21st East Asia Summit** in **Manila** on **17 November 2026**, during a visit to the Philippines (16–18 November), which chairs ASEAN this year. The leaders reviewed the **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership** and adopted the **ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation in Disaster Management** (ASEAN Secretariat, 17 November

2026). 2026 is the **ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation**, and 2027 will mark 35 years of dialogue relations. The summit came with three hard questions for India's Act East Policy: an unfinished trade review, tension in the South China Sea, and stalled land connectivity through Myanmar.

What happened at Manila

- **Adopted:** the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation in Disaster Management – early warning, information and satellite-data sharing, joint simulation exercises and response to earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, cyclones and landslides.
- **India's proposals (nine):** a long-term **ASEAN-India Maritime Cooperation Plan** (connectivity, marine research, disaster management, Coast Guard cooperation, maritime domain awareness, seafarers' safety); a joint cyber-forensics training programme; nuclear energy technical exchanges; an ASEAN-India space hackathon; cooperation in mining and critical minerals; ASEAN-India Youth Connect; more scholarships at Nalanda University; a creative partnership pavilion at WAVES 2027; and free e-visas for ASEAN tourists.
- **Message:** the Prime Minister said the region's future must be shaped "not by competition, but by cooperation", and that India and ASEAN should not remain mere consumers of technology but co-develop it.
- **Before the summit (MEA, Secretary East):** India wants the review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) completed "as soon as possible"; any ASEAN-China Code of Conduct on the South China Sea must fully conform to international law, especially **UNCLOS**; and isolating Myanmar is "not the right approach".

Background: from Look East to Act East

Year	Milestone
1991–92	**Look East Policy** (P.V. Narasimha Rao) – economic opening towards South-East Asia after the Cold War
1992 / 1995	Sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN (1992); full dialogue partner (1995)
2002	First ASEAN-India Summit (summit-level partnership)
2009–10	AITIGA signed (August 2009, Bangkok); in force from January 2010
2012	Strategic Partnership (commemorative summit, New Delhi)
2014	**Act East Policy** announced at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit, Nay Pyi Taw – adds security, connectivity and people-to-people ties to trade
2019	India stays out of RCEP (ASEAN + 5 partners), citing trade-deficit and market-access concerns

Year	Milestone
2022	**Comprehensive Strategic Partnership** (Phnom Penh)
2025	**MAHASAGAR** vision (Mauritius, March 2025) – Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions, successor to SAGAR (2015); 2026 declared ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation (October 2025)

Verified data

Indicator	Figure
India–ASEAN trade, 2024-25	Exports **US$38.96 billion**; imports **US$84.14 billion**; total about **US$123 billion**
India's trade deficit with ASEAN, 2024-25	About **US$45.2 billion**
ASEAN membership	**11** (Timor-Leste joined in October 2025)
India–Myanmar land border	**1,643 km**
Philippines–BrahMos deal (2022)	About **US$375 million** for three shore-based anti-ship missile batteries – India's first BrahMos export

Trade figures: Commerce Ministry data for 2024-25 as reported in July 2026; other figures from the MEA briefing coverage (15 November 2026).

Analysis: why Act East is at a crossroads

Pillar	Gain so far	Problem
Trade (AITIGA)	ASEAN is one of India's largest trading partners	Imports have grown much faster than exports; low use of the FTA by Indian firms, rules-of-origin worries (routing of third-country goods) and non-tariff barriers. The review, still open, is India's main tool to rebalance
Maritime security	BrahMos to the Philippines; Coast Guard links; Year of Maritime Cooperation; new Maritime Cooperation Plan	ASEAN members differ on how far to push China in the South China Sea; the Code of Conduct talks are slow
Connectivity	Kaladan Multi-Modal project (Sittwe port is working); North-East as gateway	India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway still incomplete; Myanmar's civil conflict and the Manipur situation slow work

Pillar	Gain so far	Problem
Strategic balance	India seen as a non-threatening partner that backs ASEAN centrality	Great-power rivalry (US–China) and India's absence from RCEP limit its economic weight in the region

The core dilemma: ASEAN wants India as a strategic balancer but also wants market access; India wants strategic depth but fears an import surge. Act East will stay half-done unless India links its security role to a competitive trade and investment offer – for example, electronics and pharmaceutical supply chains, digital public infrastructure (UPI links) and services trade.

Static syllabus link

- **GS-II:** bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; effect of policies of developed and developing countries on India's interests.
- **UNCLOS (1982):** territorial sea 12 nautical miles, EEZ 200 nautical miles; the 2016 arbitral award in *Philippines v. China* under UNCLOS found no legal basis for China's "nine-dash line" claims to historic rights in those waters.
- **GS-III link:** blue economy, maritime security, critical minerals supply chains.

Tamil Nadu angle

- Historic sea links: the Chola navy's expedition against Srivijaya under Rajendra Chola I (around 1025 CE) is the classic example of Tamil maritime reach into South-East Asia.
- Large Tamil-origin communities live in Malaysia and Singapore; Tamil is one of Singapore's four official languages – a soft-power asset for Act East.
- Chennai and the Tamil Nadu coast face east: ports, electronics and automobile exports and the new maritime cooperation plan (seafarers, Coast Guard, disaster early warning) all matter directly to the State.

> **Faculty view**
>
> Do not write a summit diary. Examiners want a judgement: Act East has succeeded in *strategic* terms (partnership upgrades, maritime ties, defence exports) but lags in *economic* terms (a widening deficit, an unfinished AITIGA review, India outside RCEP) and in *connectivity* (Trilateral Highway). Use the 2024-25 trade numbers, cite UNCLOS for the South China Sea, and end with a balanced way forward: rebalance trade through the review, finish connectivity, and make the maritime plan concrete. Mention ASEAN centrality – it shows you understand how ASEAN sees itself.

Way forward

- **Close the AITIGA review** with stronger rules of origin, faster product-specific market access for Indian goods and a mechanism for non-tariff barriers.

- **Make the Maritime Cooperation Plan concrete:** Coast Guard drills, shared maritime domain awareness through the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (Gurugram), hydrography, seafarer protection.
- **Finish connectivity:** Trilateral Highway and Kaladan road link; engage all stakeholders in Myanmar while supporting ASEAN's peace plan.
- **Economic depth:** link supply chains (semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, critical minerals), digital payments and services trade.
- **People-to-people:** Nalanda scholarships, tourism (e-visa), Buddhist and Tamil heritage links before the 35th anniversary in 2027.

Glossary – ASEAN centrality

The principle that ASEAN – now 11 South-East Asian countries – should sit in the driver's seat of the regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN-led forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit and the ADMM-Plus set the agenda, and outside powers engage the region through them. India openly backs ASEAN unity and centrality and links it to its own Indo-Pacific vision. The idea is tested when ASEAN members disagree – for example on the South China Sea or Myanmar – because ASEAN works by consensus, so a divided ASEAN cannot lead.

Asked before in UPSC

We did not find a verified UPSC GS Mains question on the AITIGA review or the 2026 summit. Two verified Prelims questions on the same area:

1. "Consider the following countries: 1. Australia 2. Canada 3. China 4. India 5. Japan 6. USA. Which of the above are among the 'free-trade partners' of ASEAN?" – Prelims 2018 (answer: 1, 3, 4 and 5).

2. "With reference to 'Look East Policy' of India..." (India wants to be an important regional player in East Asia; to restore historical and cultural ties) – Prelims 2011 (answer: statements 1 and 3).

For Mains, prepare the topic under GS-II (India and regional groupings, Indo-Pacific).

Mains practice question

"Act East has delivered more in strategy than in trade." Examine this statement in the light of the 23rd ASEAN-India Summit (2026) and suggest how India can rebalance its economic engagement with ASEAN. (15 marks, 250 words)

FAQ

When and where was the 23rd ASEAN-India Summit held?

In Manila, Philippines, on 17 November 2026, along with the 21st East Asia Summit. The Philippines chairs ASEAN in 2026.

What did the summit adopt?

The ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation in Disaster Management. India also proposed nine initiatives, led by a long-term ASEAN-India Maritime Cooperation Plan.

What is the AITIGA review?

A review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (in force since 2010). India wants it to correct a trade deficit of about US$45 billion (2024-25) and to tighten rules of origin.

What is MAHASAGAR?

Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions – India's maritime vision announced in Mauritius in March 2025, building on SAGAR (2015).

When did Look East become Act East?

At the 12th ASEAN-India Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, in November 2014.

Sources: ASEAN Secretariat – Secretary-General attends the 23rd ASEAN-India Summit (17 November 2026); MEA special briefing by Secretary (East) (ANI/The Tribune, 15 November 2026; Business Today, 16 November 2026); reports of the Prime Minister's proposals (India Shipping News, 18 November 2026); PIB/PMO – PM's remarks at the 22nd ASEAN-India Summit (26 October 2025); Ministry of Commerce trade data 2024-25; UNCLOS 1982; PCA award in Philippines v. China (12 July 2016). Analysis is our own.

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