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Material, instrumental, and emotional dimensions: India's behavioral logic and identity politics in constructing trust with ASEAN

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Abstract. Since the beginning of the 21st century, India's trade deficit with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has continued to deepen. However, India's persistent efforts to strengthen economic and trade relations with ASEAN have drawn increasing academic attention. Existing studies, from the perspectives of major-power rivalry between China and the United States, ASEAN's "centrality," and India's interests and identity, have argued that India's sustained cooperation with ASEAN aims to pursue domestic economic reform, great-power status, and regional influence. Nevertheless, these studies tend to emphasize unidimensional considerations of interest, identity, or power and have largely overlooked the interactive process underpinning India-ASEAN relations. This paper adopts the theory of social trust—which conceptualizes trust as a mechanism for simplifying complexity by integrating rational calculation with moral and emotional factors—to analyze how India constructs trust in ASEAN. The study finds that India's efforts to build trust with ASEAN are primarily driven by the pursuit of great-power identity recognition. Specifically, India constructs "material trust" by incurring economic costs to justify its trust-building rationale; "instrumental trust" by using normative trust networks to mitigate security dilemmas; and "emotional trust" by fostering trust preferences that acknowledge ASEAN's centrality. Therefore, India's trust-building with ASEAN is fundamentally aimed at achieving great-power identity recognition and operates across three dimensions: material, instrumental, and emotional.

Keywords: India-ASEAN relations, identity recognition, ASEAN centrality, social trust theory

1. Introduction

With the rapid economic development and accelerated opening-up of both India and ASEAN, the two sides have gradually assumed increasingly important positions in the global system, accompanied by more frequent communication and cooperation. Since the end of the Cold War, India and ASEAN have established cooperation in various fields, including politics, economy, and security—especially in the economic domain. Key milestones include the India-ASEAN Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation (2003), the India-ASEAN Agreement on Trade in Goods (2009), and the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (2010). As two of the world's fastest-growing economies, India and ASEAN reached a total trade volume of US$113 billion in 2022, representing a 23.4% increase compared to 2021. In that same year, India-ASEAN trade surpassed India's trade with both China and the United States, making ASEAN India's largest trading partner. However, since the early 21st century, India has faced persistent annual trade deficits with ASEAN. Between 2000 and 2013, the deficit grew from US$1.2 billion to US$8.1 billion [1, 2], and from 2013 to 2022, it further expanded to US$24 billion. In 2023, the deficit rose sharply to US$43 billion, marking an increase of approximately 70%. Against the backdrop of the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy," India's trade deficit with ASEAN has continued to widen. As shown in Figure 1, ASEAN's share in India's total trade deficit increased from 5.96% in 2013 to 16.42% in 2022. In fact, by 2022, India's trade deficit with ASEAN exceeded the combined trade deficit India recorded with South Korea, Japan, and Australia. A sustained trade deficit can lead to a range of serious economic and social problems for a country, such as reductions in foreign exchange reserves, currency depreciation, inflation, a decline in domestic industries, rising unemployment, and increased social instability. Yet, despite facing a severe and worsening trade imbalance, India has continued to intensify its economic and trade cooperation with ASEAN. This behavior presents a puzzling contradiction. This paper, therefore, poses the central question: Why has India continued to strengthen its economic and trade cooperation with ASEAN, despite the worsening trade deficit since the early 21st century?

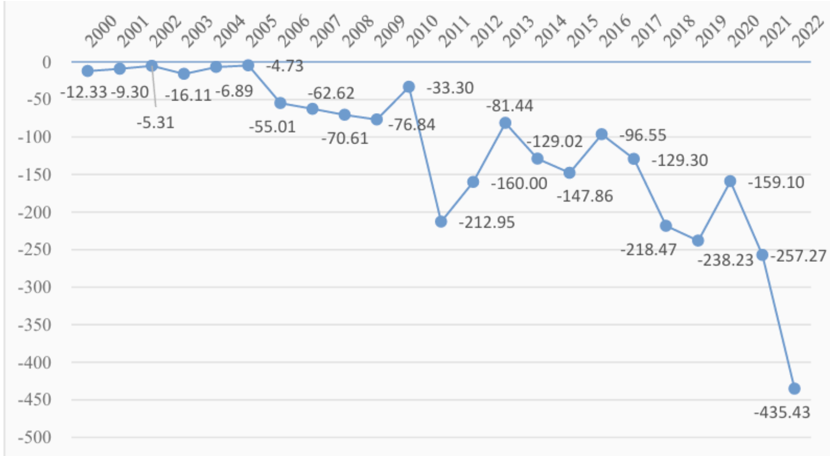

Figure 1. India-ASEAN trade balance (US$100 million)

Data Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India [3]

2. Existing research and its limitations

A trade deficit refers to a situation where a country's imports exceed its exports, typically caused by asymmetries in industrial structures and product competitiveness between economic actors. However, India and most ASEAN countries are developing economies that lack significant advantages in manufacturing and high-tech sectors. Both tend to play the role of raw material suppliers. Given this context, there is considerable debate in the existing literature over why India continues to maintain economic and trade cooperation with ASEAN despite its persistent trade deficit. This paper categorizes the research into three primary perspectives: the China-U.S. great-power rivalry perspective, the ASEAN centrality perspective, and the India's interests and identity perspective.

2.1. The perspective of China-U.S. great-power rivalry

Some scholars have analyzed India's persistent strengthening of economic and trade ties with ASEAN through the lens of strategic competition between China and the United States. Key factors influencing India-ASEAN relations include the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and China's "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" initiative. From this viewpoint, India's deepening engagement with ASEAN is seen as a response to the negative impacts of China-U.S. strategic rivalry.

First, regarding geopolitical competition: The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy spans from India's western coast to the U.S. eastern seaboard, encompassing the Indian Ocean-Pacific region. In contrast, China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road stretches from its southeastern coast through the Indochinese Peninsula and South China Sea nations, crossing the Indian Ocean to reach East Africa and Europe. Some scholars, analyzing from a trust-based perspective, argue that the intensifying China-U.S. rivalry is shaping the direction of regional reconstruction [4, 5], and that India's economic engagement with ASEAN fosters political trust, which in turn enables security cooperation. Others, from a power-balancing perspective, argue that the power asymmetry between China and India has prompted India to leverage its "Act East" policy in conjunction with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy to strengthen ties with the U.S., Japan, South Korea, Australia, and ASEAN, thereby counterbalancing China's dominance [6].

Second, in terms of maritime security competition: In August 2018, the United States announced nearly US$300 million in new security assistance for Southeast Asian countries as part of its Indo-Pacific security commitments [7]. In response, on April 23, 2019, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed the concept of a "maritime community with a shared future," underscoring China's great-power status in the Indo-Pacific region. In September 2021, the Biden administration hosted a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) meeting in Washington, D.C., involving the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia. Scholars argue that QUAD provided additional legitimacy to the Modi administration's Act East policy and enabled India to better safeguard its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific amid China-U.S. rivalry [8]. Other scholars note that although India and the U.S. diverge on the issue of "freedom of navigation," India's strengthened relations with Japan and ASEAN bolster its military presence in the South China Sea, further complicating the regional situation [9].

Finally, in the realm of economic and trade competition: In November 2020, China formally joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Shortly thereafter, in May 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden announced the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in Tokyo, aimed at strengthening U.S. economic ties with Indo-Pacific nations. Curiously, India joined neither RCEP nor IPEF. To explain this anomaly, scholars argue that Southeast Asia is a key area where

Indian and Chinese interests intersect. India has sought to counterbalance the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) by advancing its own India-ASEAN Framework Agreement on Economic Cooperation and the India-ASEAN Free Trade Area (IAFTA) [10]. From the perspective of international political economy, other scholars suggest that deepening China-ASEAN cooperation under CAFTA may threaten India's regional hegemony in Southeast Asia [11].

2.2. The ASEAN centrality perspective

In examining why India continues to strengthen its economic and trade relations with ASEAN, scholars have explored the concept of ASEAN centrality, forming two opposing camps: one argues that ASEAN's centrality is being reinforced, while the other contends it is being weakened. Generally, ASEAN centrality refers to the key role ASEAN plays in shaping regional security architectures, regional orders, and the power dynamics among external actors with vested interests in the region [12].

The reinforcement perspective argues that ASEAN's centrality comprises both internal centrality and external centrality. The former involves the expansion of ASEAN membership, deepening economic integration, and accelerating the establishment of the ASEAN Community. The latter refers to ASEAN's platform role in leading regional cooperation initiatives [13]. Some scholars argue that ASEAN's continued centrality is rooted in its institutional framework, the regional balance of power among major states, and India's recognition of ASEAN's status [14]. Others contend that ASEAN maintains its central role because India contributes to the institutionalization and normalization of a "relational balance" [15]. Within India's "Act East" policy, ASEAN occupies a central role by advancing integration around the Bay of Bengal, and India's involvement in QUAD complements ASEAN's centrality [16]. However, this view has been contested by many scholars.

The weakening perspective asserts that the United States, as a leading actor, uses the QUAD as a strategic tool to contain China, which undermines ASEAN's cohesion. India's participation in QUAD, according to this view, exacerbates divisions among ASEAN countries on the South China Sea issue and diminishes ASEAN's centrality [17]. Scholars adopting a psychological approach find that India and ASEAN member states have differing understandings of the "Indo-Pacific" strategy, which has led to tensions in both security and economic cooperation. India's withdrawal from RCEP and its decision not to join IPEF have weakened ASEAN's trust in India and raised doubts about India's commitment to reinforcing ASEAN centrality [18]. Other scholars argue that India's Act East strategy reflects its aspiration for great-power status, aimed at counterbalancing China and showcasing its strategic acumen in the Indo-Pacific. From this perspective, India's eastward engagement is inherently detrimental to ASEAN's central role in the region [19].

2.3. The perspective of India's interests and identity

Under the framework of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, scholars analyzing India's continued trade engagement with ASEAN—despite ongoing trade deficits—often do so from political-economic and identity-based perspectives. From a political-economic standpoint, post-Cold War India saw ASEAN as a partner to bolster its national strength. Within the "Look East" policy, ASEAN was viewed as a bridge for India to transition from a closed economy toward openness and integration with East Asia and the global economy [20]. India's engagement with ASEAN—alongside economic liberalization and marketization reforms—transformed India from an inward-looking economy to an outward-oriented one [21]. These scholars believe that the "Look East" policy helped improve India-ASEAN relations and overcome Cold War-era ideological divisions. From the identity perspective, some scholars argue that India's engagement with ASEAN is part of its pursuit of greater regional influence and a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council [22]. Geopolitically, ASEAN leverages the ambitions of major powers to maintain its centrality in East Asia, foster economic prosperity, and ensure political security [23]. ASEAN's outward-oriented diplomacy aligns with India's ambitions for great-power status and South Asian hegemony, indicating a policy convergence between the two [24]. Scholars in this camp believe that India's cooperation with ASEAN is aimed at enhancing its comprehensive national strength and international identity—in essence, a strategic effort to attain regional hegemony and expand its soft power.

To date, no scholarly consensus has been reached regarding why India continues to deepen its economic and trade cooperation with ASEAN. From the perspective of China-U.S. rivalry, India is seen as seeking deterrence and containment of China through strategic engagement with ASEAN, the U.S., Japan, South Korea, and Australia—an approach grounded in realism. From the ASEAN perspective, India aims to demonstrate leadership and exert influence, while ASEAN seeks to leverage India to maintain power balance in the region and preserve its centrality. From India's own perspective, it seeks both economic reform and identity recognition. The shift from the "Look East" to "Act East" policy reflects a strategic upgrade across multiple domains, including economy, security, power, and identity construction. This paper acknowledges the valuable insights of existing scholarship but identifies an underexplored perspective worth deeper investigation. While the first two perspectives emphasize India's pursuit of regional power, they tend to overlook the crucial role of identity recognition. Identity is a key factor in reducing obstacles to international cooperation and a critical variable in resolving distributive conflicts in such cooperation [25]. Current studies on India-ASEAN relations often emphasize unidimensional aspects of interest, identity, or power, lacking a bidirectional theoretical framework that explains the interaction between India's and ASEAN's interests and identities. Most existing works are normative or descriptive, with a notable absence of empirical analysis.

Based on this review, the present study argues that India's interaction with ASEAN is aimed at securing great-power identity recognition, and that the persistent trade deficit between the two sides serves as both evidence and justification for India's trust-building efforts and identity pursuits. In international relations, numerous authoritative studies have effectively employed trust theory to explain state behavior, either from a domestic system level—focusing on actor preferences, reputations, emotions [26-28]—or from an international system level—addressing norms, cooperation, identity, and alliances [29-34]. Moreover, trust research can be categorized into three major theoretical schools: Realism, which focuses on alliances, security, and power; Institutional liberalism, which emphasizes cooperation, norms, and interests; Constructivism, which highlights identity, cognition, and ideational factors. Clearly, applying trust theory to explain interstate behavior has become increasingly robust. To account for this empirical phenomenon and contribute to theoretical advancement, this paper draws on sociological trust theory, extracts key variables, and constructs a theoretical framework of trust, interests, and identity to explain the actual goals of India-ASEAN interactions—and how those goals are pursued.

3. Theoretical framework, issue selection, and logical mechanisms of key variables

This study divides its research design into four parts to explain the behavioral logic behind India's construction of trust with ASEAN. First, it introduces the origin and components of trust theory. Second, it establishes two foundational research premises to define the theory's core elements and avoid conceptual ambiguity. Third, it extracts three key variables from trust theory—reason, norm, and preference—and explains the logical mechanisms linking them. Finally, based on the thematic focus of this study, it operationalizes the concepts of trust reason, trust norm, and trust preference, thereby constructing the theoretical framework for this paper.

3.1. The construction of trust theory

The conceptualization and systematic interpretation of trust theory originated in the fields of sociology and psychology. Georg Simmel argued that the value of money lies in the trust it symbolizes, and the emergence of counterfeit or inferior currency undermines both individual and societal trust. This reflects a contradiction between heterogeneity and unity in personal and social values [35]. As a "socially constructed entity" (Gebilde), money has no inherent meaning; its value is derived from a societal need to establish a "trust contract." Niklas Luhmann posited that the establishment of social trust requires reasons, norms, and preferences [36]. He emphasized that, consistent with the views of sociology and political ethics, trust functions as a rule, and the process of constructing trust determines the effectiveness and legitimacy of the trust system [37]. Morton Deutsch explored trust as a dependent variable that can be assessed through the degree of cooperation between subject and object. He saw trust as a reaction to environmental stimuli, which shape psychological and behavioral preferences between parties. Deutsch further interpreted trust as a form of psychological expectation and believed that trust involves irrational risk-taking behavior [38, 39]. Charles Sabel focused on the shared moral beliefs, ideologies, and legal consciousness embedded in social trust. According to him, trust is a mutual confidence that neither party will exploit the other to achieve their own ends. However, such trust entails risk, which must be regulated by moral and legal norms [40]. Francis Fukuyama argued that trust should be understood through the structure of social relationships and the dimension of moral norms. First, trust is a social relationship based on members' mutual expectations and behavioral norms within a given social group. Second, individuals who belong to a common social group develop trust due to shared moral values, which lead to voluntary associations. These associations generate what Fukuyama calls "spontaneous sociability", a behavior grounded in norms and social preferences that fosters trust [41].

In summary, within sociology, trust is considered a socially constructed relationship. Sociologists understand trust as a social-cultural institution and a legal-ethical norm rooted in society. The formation of trust between subject and object includes not only rational cost-benefit calculations but also non-rational factors such as morality, ideas, and emotional preferences. Therefore, for trust to be established, the subject must possess: Rational legitimacy (reason); Social normativity (norm); Emotional inclination (preference). These three dimensions—reason, norm, and preference—form the foundation of trust theory.

3.2. Research premises and interpretations

A theory is composed of concepts, variables, hypotheses, statements, and formal structures [42]. In the context of international relations, state and international actors are often assumed to be "rational actors." However, rational actors do not always behave in a way that maximizes rational gain. Since trust theory incorporates affective preferences, it cannot be confined solely to rationalist logic—it must also consider emotional dimensions of behavior. Furthermore, trust-building requires temporal recognition and spatial development. That is, the establishment of trust between subject and object does not occur overnight; it involves a gradual process of communication, connection, interaction, feedback, and re-communication. It is an evolving, incremental process. Based on this understanding, the paper proposes two foundational research premises:

Premise 1: States or international actors should be regarded as "real persons" who possess both rational and emotional cognition.

Premise 2: The construction of trust between subject and object is a two-way interactive process, where the subject builds trust toward the object, and the object reciprocates by sending positive trust signals back to the subject—forming a virtuous cycle of trust.

3.3. Complexity simplification—reason, norm, and preference

Trust serves as an effective mechanism for simplifying complexity within social systems. With the progression of human society, the complexity of the world and its social systems has steadily increased. To manage this: First, human societies require language and self-reflexive awareness as generalizing and selective mechanisms to simplify global complexity. Second, entire social systems must establish trust relations to alleviate systemic complexity and reduce insecurity. Last, the complexity in the subject-object relationship is ultimately simplified into a trust relation, broken down into three parallel and interdependent dimensions: reason, norm, and preference. These three are not hierarchically ordered but represent the jointly sufficient and necessary conditions for constructing trust.

Reason forms the basis for building trust between subject and object. It generally refers to the rationale or justification behind an action—evidence that can be explained or understood. This is especially evident in economic contexts, where trust is often initiated through investment, i.e., fulfilling obligations in advance. The formation of trust is frequently based on economic foundations, and in economics, this is framed as investment risk. "Investment" implies the subject's commitment of capital, resources, or willpower toward the object in hopes of securing future returns. "Risk" highlights the uncertainty in the subject-object relationship, which may involve ethical concerns such as betrayal, breach of trust, or avoidance. Therefore, trust can be established through two key approaches to mitigate these risks: (1) The subject acts first, exposing themselves to potential loss or risk. (2) The subject sacrifices absolute gain, reducing the object's potential loss or increasing their relative benefit [43]. These two approaches constitute sufficient conditions for building trust, and the dynamics of "risk" and "investment" are reflected in the interaction between actors. Furthermore, trust must be voluntarily offered and received—it cannot be coerced. Coercive power results in high cost and low return. Trust-based power, by contrast, yields low cost and high return [44].

Norms are essential in facilitating trust between subject and object. They refer to agreed-upon standards or established rules that guide the behavior of international actors and ensure activities adhere to acceptable criteria [45]. There is debate in academia about whether norms are individually constructed or collectively shaped, but most perspectives agree on the following: (1) Norms represent shared social expectations among group members. (2) Norms are closely related to behavioral rules and decision-making standards within a group. (3) Norms are informal, based on custom rather than codified law [46]. From a systemic view, norms encompass both rules and regulations. However, unlike rules or laws, which are binding and enforceable [47], norms lack direct legal effect and typically rely on shared understanding and collective cognition rather than institutional enforcement [48]. The link between norms and trust is mediated through order and law, which help reduce the cost of investment and risk in trust-building. When norms are constructed through stable legal and social frameworks, the object (i.e., the recipient of trust) experiences greater security and is more likely to reciprocate with trust. Thus, actors that operate under a framework of legal and orderly norms are more capable of minimizing uncertainty in trust relations and alleviating security anxiety and relational risk among actors. Social norms are therefore seen as a powerful driver of behavioral change, and a critical component in organizing and receiving trust-based interactions [49].

Preference represents the motivational force behind building trust. It is an internal emotional inclination that often favors affective over rational factors. In social psychology, preference is widely seen as a value judgment that influences whether an individual likes or dislikes something [50]. Preferences evolve over time, particularly evident during decision-making processes, and such changes often occur subconsciously [51]. While preferences are not directly observable, they are revealed through choices. According to rational choice theory, a state's given preferences can be inferred through its observable selection behavior [52]. Moreover, preference (Preference) and desire (Desire) are closely related psychological states that guide the actions of trust-building actors [53]. The distinction lies in that desire targets a specific object, while preference implies comparison between two or more options—where one is usually favored over others [54]. As such, preference entails choice. These trust-building preferences emerge from familiarity, interaction, and anticipated behavior between subject and object. In practical terms: When the object expresses a preferential choice toward the subject, trust is more likely to form, as the object (the recipient) tends to downplay rational calculation and act more emotionally. Conversely, when the subject shows preference toward the object, the object becomes more rational, critically evaluating the subject's actions in terms of cost-benefit analysis. In short, when the object exercises preferential selection toward the subject, it tends to become more emotionally driven; whereas when the subject exercises preferential selection toward the object, the object becomes more rational. This transformation is the result of the object's self-reflection, leading to the formation of relational trust.

3.4. Issue attribute selection: dissecting the relationship among trust, interest, and identity recognition

3.4.1. Issue attributes

In this context, issue attributes refer to the nature of India's agenda in establishing trust relations with ASEAN. In the field of international relations, issue attributes encompass various dimensions, such as economic versus identity issues [55, 56], security versus gender issues [57, 58], or political versus electoral preference issues [59]. This paper categorizes issue attributes into two types: confrontational-exclusionary issues and cooperative-inclusive issues. Confrontational-exclusionary issues are designed to reduce uncertainty and instability in the ASEAN-India interest relationship. These include minimizing investment risk, eliminating security dilemmas, and stimulating psychological expectations. Cooperative-inclusive issues aim to enhance ASEAN's recognition of India's great-power identity in terms of legitimacy, normativity, and desirability. Examples include deepening economic interdependence, building military cooperation, and acknowledging India's regional centrality.

Moreover, these two categories of issues are linked through a logical progression: Common interests shape identity recognition, including recognition of great power or regional hegemon identities. Reducing confrontational-exclusionary issues helps maintain mutual interests between subject and object actors, which serves as the foundation for trust. Shared interests eliminate unfamiliarity and perceived threat. Conversely, increasing cooperative-inclusive issues contributes to the construction of the subject's identity. A subject with reputation and prestige is more likely to stimulate trust from the object. In this sense, a subject's proactive construction of a credible great-power identity can facilitate recognition of its regional hegemonic status by the object. This process is grounded in a trust-based relationship: the attainment of hegemony depends on the object's recognition of the subject's economic power, military capabilities, international reputation, and, crucially, trust in the subject's role in safeguarding regional security. The object's policy expectations and preference behaviors reflect this recognition.

3.4.2. Maintaining common interests

National interest is the driving force behind actor interaction [60], and shared interest is composed of common threats, security concerns, and mutual benefits [61]. Maintaining shared interests is not merely a single-dimensional cost-benefit calculation; it also involves stimulating preference and satisfying the necessary and sufficient conditions of trust—reason, norm, and preference. This involves: (1) Reducing investment risk (2) Eliminating security dilemmas (3) Stimulating psychological expectations.

First, Reducing Investment Risk. Maintaining shared interests implies sustaining economic interests between the subject and object. Investment risk refers to potential financial losses and uncertainties in investment value. In the ASEAN-India context, such risks are significant obstacles to building trust. Reducing investment risk is the primary economic challenge for the subject when initiating trust, and proactive efforts to mitigate these risks can enhance the object's sense of security, fostering a greater degree of familiarity in identity perception. This process also entails reducing relational uncertainty, as economic foundations shape ideological perceptions and lay the groundwork for effective cooperation. Regional initiatives such as investment and collaboration in trade, enterprise, technology, and infrastructure help to solidify trust. Examples in the ASEAN-India case include: India's investments in mainland Southeast Asia; India-led regional platforms such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation); The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). These all reflect India's efforts to reduce investment risks and thereby lay a trust-building foundation.

Second, eliminating the security dilemma. Maintaining shared interests also entails safeguarding the security interests between the subject and the object. The security dilemma refers to the situation in which the enhancement of one actor's military or economic capabilities generates anxiety and suspicion among others, prompting mutual distrust and triggering an arms race, thereby leading to a vicious cycle of security competition [62]. Preserving common security interests helps to eliminate the security dilemma between the subject and the object. These security interests can be institutionalized through rules and normative frameworks. Trust relationships built upon such norms carry legal obligations and can effectively ensure shared security interests. Moreover, security interests are established within a context of mutual familiarity. For both subject and object, familiarity is a key factor. A common empirical observation is that people tend to trust those they are familiar with before extending trust to those they are not. If there exists asymmetry of information between subject and object, a solid trust relationship becomes difficult to establish. When the object is unable to perceive the intentions and behaviors of the subject, a sense of insecurity arises, which may lead to suspicion and fear. Utilizing normative institutions to address the security dilemma is one of the more effective trust-building measures to reduce such suspicion and fear. For example, agreements such as the India-Vietnam Defence Cooperation Agreement, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), and the India-ASEAN Plan of Action for 2021-2025 all exhibit varying degrees of legal binding force and normative influence.

Third, stimulating psychological expectations. Maintaining shared interests also shapes the collective psychological expectations and value preferences of both subject and object. The object's preference toward the subject is often driven more by emotional factors than by rational calculation. Thus, the formation of trust preference by the object is less about "what your goals are" and more about "who you are." This implies that the subject's stimulation of the object's psychological expectations involves projecting credibility, goodwill, and the release of positive signals. The process of signaling goodwill can in turn trigger a cognitive shift within the object, which facilitates the formation of new value preferences. Furthermore, the object may judge whether to trust the subject based on the perceived value of the subject's positive signals. The signaling process often incurs costs for the subject, known as sink costs [63]. The greater the cost the subject bears to send a positive signal, the stronger the object's trust becomes, and the weaker its sense of vigilance. It is worth noting that psychological expectations, signals, ideational changes, and preferences are all part of the intangible mental realm and cannot be directly observed. However, they can be visualized and operationalized through the subject's policy choices and behavioral patterns. For instance, India's participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), along with its enduring trade deficit with ASEAN over the past two decades, reflects economic costs borne by India. These actions serve as clear signals of goodwill that stimulate ASEAN's psychological expectations and help improve political and economic relations between the two sides.

3.4.3. Constructing identity recognition

The process of identity construction involves both the emotional preference selection of the object and a two-way interaction of recognition between the subject and the object. Identity recognition primarily includes collective identity and role identity, reflecting an objective interaction between the subject's self-positioning and the object's perception, as well as a subjective process of building trust. Shared interests and ideational consensus act as the bridge for cultivating trust relationships. While considering rational factors such as cost-benefit analysis and investment risks, one must also emphasize emotional preference-based selection. In this sense, the reasons, norms, and preferences required for constructing identity recognition and generating trust correspond to the following: (1) deepening economic interdependence; (2) establishing military cooperation; (3) recognizing centrality.

First, deepening economic interdependence. The rationale for the object to build a trust relationship with the subject should not be limited to risk reduction, but should also be based on deepening economic interdependence to form a more solid foundation for trust. Economic interdependence between the subject and object promotes more robust cooperation and improves mutual trust. This interdependence includes market dependence, investment dependence, and resource dependence. Market dependence refers to the object's reliance on the subject's consumer market and total trade revenue. Investment dependence refers to the object's reliance on capital or technological inputs from the subject's government and enterprises. Resource dependence involves the object's reliance on the subject's industrial raw materials and labor resources. In addition, dependence can be categorized as sensitivity dependence and vulnerability dependence: Sensitivity dependence denotes the extent to which a change in one actor's behavior affects the other, without disrupting the existing dependency framework. Vulnerability dependence indicates the costs and risks one actor must bear when attempting to break the established rules and interdependence between the two [64]. When the subject intentionally exposes its vulnerability dependence or constructs sensitivity dependence indirectly, it fosters a sense of security and familiarity for the object, which in turn generates trust. Therefore, by reinforcing these forms of economic dependence, the subject strengthens the rationale for trust and increases the object's sensitivity and vulnerability dependence, thus consolidating the trust relationship.

Second, establishing military cooperation. Military cooperation between the subject and object contributes to reducing traditional security threats, and norms become the basis for security and mutual trust. Joint military actions and security agreements serve as effective normative mechanisms to eliminate mutual security concerns and establish trust. However, military cooperation does not entirely eliminate the security dilemma; as long as anarchy exists in the international system, security concerns will persist. Still, cooperation facilitates frequent interactions between the subject and object, enhancing their trust in one another. Military cooperation includes joint activities such as arms and technology collaboration, joint exercises, and expert exchanges. Specifically, this includes:(1) conducting joint military exercises; (2) jointly combating terrorism and criminal activities; (3) signing mutual military security agreements. First, conducting joint military exercises is a behavior through which the subject constructs a "common hypothetical enemy" to reduce the sense of unfamiliarity with the object. Second, jointly combating terrorism further deepens the practice of joint exercises by engaging in actual combat to fight against a common adversary, thereby fostering a collective identity recognition. Finally, signing military agreements serves to standardize cooperative behaviors between the subject and the object, giving them legal binding force and restrictions, which provides a legal guarantee for establishing trust relations.

Third, recognizing centrality. Preference inherently contains a unidirectional tendency, yet the identity constructed through such preference demonstrates a bidirectional nature. The unidirectional dimension is reflected in the subject's application of preference by recognizing the central position of the object. This preference is manifested in the subject's support for ASEAN's active role and leadership within the Southeast Asian regional framework, and the tendency to avoid external powers' interference in ASEAN's ability to manage regional affairs. Specifically, this includes: (1) Geopolitical centrality; (2) Normative centrality [65]; (3) Relational centrality. First, geopolitical centrality refers to acknowledging ASEAN's central geographic position in East Asia, particularly in the context of strategic competition between major powers such as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Second, normative centrality refers to recognizing ASEAN's use of the "ASEAN

Way" to address internal affairs and regional disputes, while resisting intervention from external powers. Third, relational centrality refers to ASEAN's efforts to maintain a "balance of relationships" and "balance of power" within its complex network of relations with major powers, thereby preventing any single external actor from dominating ASEAN through relational power [66]. It is therefore necessary to emphasize ASEAN's centrality from a great power perspective while simultaneously preventing external powers from controlling or infiltrating ASEAN internally [67]. As shown in Figure 2, the bidirectional dimension indicates that the preference expressed by the subject further shapes the identity recognition and trust relationship of the object. In return, the object, having received recognition of its centrality from the subject, will respond by expressing preferential behavior toward the subject.

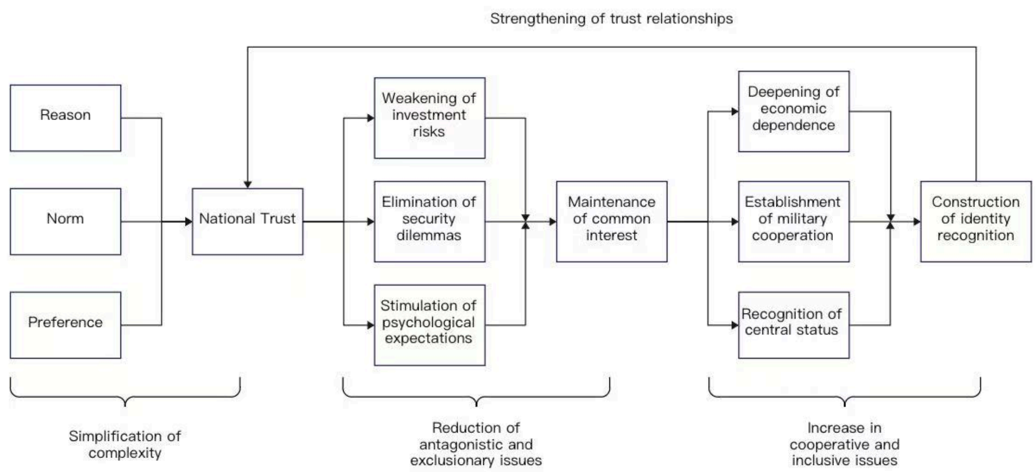

Figure 2. Interactive process of trust-building and identity recognition between India and ASEAN

Source: Compiled by the author

4. Case selection and empirical analysis

4.1. Case selection and justification

This study positions India as the subject constructing trust and ASEAN as the object receiving trust-building signals, with the research premise excluding the direct interference of external great powers and actors. Specifically, it selects three cases to support the argument: India's investment in and leadership of the cross-regional cooperation organization BIMSTEC; the implementation of the "Look East Policy" and "Act East Policy"; and India's active participation in the East Asia Summit (ASEAN Summit).

There are three primary reasons for selecting these cases: First, in terms of geographical and spatial dimension, all cases are situated within South and Southeast Asia, directly corresponding to India-ASEAN relations. Second, from a social theoretical perspective, all three cases involve the elements of trust theory: rationale, norms, and preferences, which together form the basis for mutual identity recognition between India and ASEAN. Third, from a political-economic standpoint, all cases demonstrate the interactive process of mutual trust-building between the two actors—India and ASEAN—and are directly or indirectly related to the issue of India's trade deficit with ASEAN. In summary, the more substantial and competitively interpretable the evidence is, the more robust and convincing the argument becomes.

4.2. Empirical analysis

4.2.1. India's investment and leadership in BIMSTEC cross-regional cooperation organization

BIMSTEC was formally established in 2004, evolving from the Bangkok Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIST-EC) founded in 1997. As of 2022, BIMSTEC represented approximately 1.73 billion people and a combined GDP of $5.2 trillion USD, with India alone accounting for about 1.408 billion people and a GDP of $3.42 trillion USD [68]. Over the past two decades, BIMSTEC's main areas of cooperation have included trade and investment, land transportation, and road connectivity, with substantial infrastructure funded by India and Thailand. Additionally, BIMSTEC covers three critical subregions—the Mekong subregion, the Bay of Bengal region, and the Himalayan region—linking South and Southeast Asia and forming vital maritime trade routes between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean [69]. Consequently, in terms of economy, population, and geopolitical position, India occupies a dominant role.

India's rationale for constructing trust toward ASEAN has developed over time. When the ASEAN Financial Crisis erupted in 1997, large volumes of foreign capital from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and others flowed into India, targeting logistics, highways, and ICT in regions such as Bangalore and the Bay of Bengal [70]. Investment between India and ASEAN was mutual. In the three years following the crisis, over 150 Indian companies established operations in Singapore, and India also planned to invest in Thailand (automotive parts), Indonesia and Vietnam (automotive and energy sectors), the Philippines (ICT), and BIMSTEC's regional roads and digital connectivity projects [71]. During the 7th ASEAN-India Summit in 2009, ASEAN supported India in establishing investment and entrepreneurship development centers, English language training centers, and IT training hubs in CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam) [72]. In addition, under the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement, both sides revised their trade target to $70 billion USD. ASEAN also encouraged the establishment of an ASEAN-India "Roundtable," composed of think tanks, policymakers, scholars, media, and business representatives to contribute policy input for bilateral cooperation. At the 2012 New Delhi Summit, ASEAN agreed to upgrade its economic relations with India to a strategic partnership. It further supported India's involvement in subregional development initiatives such as BIMSTEC, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLVDTA), and the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation (AMBDC). ASEAN also promoted cooperation with India in the fields of culture, education, sports, science and technology, telecommunications, and software development [73]. These measures to mitigate investment risks were grounded in the structural complementarity between India and ASEAN in transportation, industry, and technological capabilities. A principal actor's mutually beneficial or friendly behavior provides the object actor with sufficient rationale to build trust. Through continuous investment, exchanges, and communication, both sides reduce heterogeneity and uncertainty, cultivating familiarity. This process of bilateral investment and trust-building is not only an "economic man" pursuit of shared interests but also a mutual process of identity formation and trust-building that helps eliminate unfamiliarity between the actors.

India also sought to institutionalize norms of trust through BIMSTEC. On December 9, 2004, the first BIMSTEC Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime was held in New Delhi. India emphasized that, due to the complexity of regional network linkages, it was necessary for one country to assume a leading role to maximize cooperative efficiency. India proposed thematic groups on intelligence sharing, legal and enforcement issues, terrorist financing, and illicit trafficking of narcotics, psychotropic substances, and precursor chemicals [74]. Subsequently, India increased its military exercises in the Bay of Bengal, fostering defense-based normative trust with ASEAN. In January 2012, India and Thailand signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation, initiating sustained dialogue across land, air, and sea military domains [75]. In 2015, India and Vietnam, in the Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defense Cooperation (2015-2020), stressed the strengthening of maritime security cooperation, with India providing extensive military equipment and training support to the Vietnamese Navy [76]. In November 2017, India signed a bilateral naval agreement with Singapore to enhance collaboration in maritime security, joint exercises, naval base access, and logistical support [77]. In May 2018, India signed a defense cooperation agreement with Indonesia, and in July 2019, with Myanmar. Through BIMSTEC, India has thus established military norms to reduce security dilemmas and mitigate heterogeneity-related tensions between subject and object actors. Trust grounded in such norms possesses legal enforceability, which helps safeguard the shared security interests of both parties. Only in a context of mutual familiarity and safety can national trust on the part of the object be genuinely cultivated.

ASEAN's recognition and trust toward India are also evident in India's demonstrated political preferences. In its leadership over both SAARC and BIMSTEC, India has shown stronger political will and engagement with BIMSTEC than with SAARC [78]. In 2004, Rajiv Sikri, Secretary to the Indian Prime Minister, noted: "India has high expectations for BIMSTEC trade and investment, as the region holds significant hydropower and natural gas resources. India is also responsible for cooperation in transportation, communications, tourism, and investment. Moreover, Indian universities and think tanks are actively engaged in BIMSTEC-related research [79]." On November 13, 2008, the second BIMSTEC summit was held in New Delhi, during which it was agreed to establish energy and environmental/climate centers in India [80]. At the 2012 New Delhi Summit, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that in the services and investment sectors, Indian and ASEAN businesses were already cooperating in energy, agricultural products, raw materials, machinery, electronics, and information technology [81]. Preferences entail the quality of choice, and India's evident preference for ASEAN is reflected in its significantly greater investment in BIMSTEC compared to SAARC, as well as the much broader scope of issues involved.

4.2.2. India's implementation of the "Look East Policy" and "Act East Policy"

India's implementation of the "Look East Policy" served as the foundation for building trust. This policy, formulated and announced in 1991 by then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao amidst dramatic global changes, was a diplomatic initiative aimed at reforming India's economic system, altering its development model, and actively opening up to external relations. Also referred to as the "Look East" initiative, the policy was conceived as a "bridge" for India to establish political and economic ties with Southeast Asian countries. Economically, it sought to create and expand markets for trade, investment, and industrial development in the region [82]. Before the end of the Cold War, relations between India and ASEAN countries were generally strained (with the exception of Vietnam). India had leaned toward the Soviet Union, while ASEAN aligned with the United States. This ideological conflict and the resulting security dilemma prevented the establishment of trust between the two sides. However, with the advent of economic liberalization and the gradual departure from Cold War-era policies and activities, India shifted its strategic focus toward building closer economic and commercial ties with ASEAN, strengthening strategic and security cooperation, and emphasizing historical, cultural, and ideological linkages [83].

India established the basis for trust through its asymmetric trade behavior. After joining the World Trade Organization in 1995, India began to enhance its international trade cooperation, deepen its participation in the global division of labor, and integrate into the East Asian economic system. These efforts gradually fostered familiarity, interdependence, and trust from ASEAN toward India, laying the groundwork for a complex, interdependent economic network between the two. This process is reflected in the signing of various trade agreements between India and ASEAN, including the India-ASEAN Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation (2003), the India-ASEAN Agreement on Trade in Goods (2009), and the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (2010). Despite the overall positive trajectory of India-ASEAN economic and trade relations, a persistent asymmetry exists: India consistently runs a trade deficit with ASEAN. As shown in Table 1, between 2000 and 2013, India's trade deficit with ASEAN increased several times over. In 2000-2001, India's exports to ASEAN totaled $2.914 billion, while imports stood at $4.147 billion, resulting in a total trade volume of $7.061 billion and a trade deficit of $1.233 billion. By 2013-2014, India's exports had grown to $33.134 billion, imports to $41.278 billion, and total trade to $74.412 billion, marking nearly a tenfold increase. Although India has consistently faced a trade deficit with ASEAN since the early 21st century, the extent of this deficit has fluctuated. The lowest deficit occurred in 2005-2006, at just $473 million, while the highest was in 2012, at $21.295 billion. At the same time, ASEAN's share in India's total trade has steadily increased, from 7.43% in 2000 to 9.73% in 2013.

Table 1. India-ASEAN trade performance (2000-2013) (Unit: US$ Billion)

Year	Exports to ASEAN	Imports from ASEAN	Total Trade Volume	Trade Deficit	India's Total Trade Volume
2000-2001	29.14	41.47	70.61	-12.33	950.16
2001-2002	34.57	43.87	78.44	-9.30	951.67
2002-2003	46.19	51.50	97.69	-5.31	1,140.40
2003-2004	58.22	74.33	132.55	-16.11	1,418.83
2004-2005	84.26	91.15	175.41	-6.89	1,906.46
2005-2006	104.11	108.84	212.95	-4.73	2,327.39
2006-2007	126.07	181.08	307.15	-55.01	3,121.41
2007-2008	164.13	226.75	390.88	-62.62	4,147.51
2008-2009	191.41	262.02	453.43	-70.61	4,889.81
2009-2010	181.14	257.98	439.12	-76.84	4,670.99
2010-2011	272.78	306.08	578.86	-33.30	6,195.82
2011-2012	227.60	440.55	668.15	-212.95	7,952.70
2012-2013	259.37	419.37	678.74	-160.00	7,909.87
2013-2014	331.34	412.78	744.12	-81.44	7,645.94

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India—https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/

Under the "Act East" policy, India has strengthened its mutually dependent economic and trade relations with ASEAN. As shown in Table 2, India's trade deficit with ASEAN increased from USD 12.902 billion in 2014 to USD 43.543 billion in 2023. Additionally, from 2014 to 2023, total ASEAN-India trade rose from USD 76.528 billion to USD 131.611 billion, with ASEAN's share in India's total trade increasing from 9.73% to 11.28%. India places particular importance on trade and investment ties with Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, whose combined trade accounts for over 90% of India's total trade with ASEAN. In 2022, ASEAN's main imports from India included: meat and edible offal (19.7%), cereal products (8.5%), pharmaceutical products (7.3%), metals and metal products (6.6%), and organic chemicals (6.5%). ASEAN's main exports to India included: animal and vegetable oils and cleavage products (15.9%), organic chemicals (9.7%), plastic products (6.6%), inorganic chemicals (6.4%), and mineral fuels and bituminous substances (5.9%) [84]. The primary commodities traded between India and ASEAN also include: mineral products, precious metals, electromechanical products, textiles and raw materials, chemical products, and animal and vegetable oils and fats. Notably, over 95% of the trade deficit is attributable to five ASEAN countries: Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

Table 2. India-ASEAN trade statistics (2014-2023) (Unit: US$ Billion)

Year	Exports to ASEAN	Imports from ASEAN	Total Trade Volume	Trade Deficit	India's Total Trade Volume
2014-2015	318.13	447.15	765.28	-129.02	7,583.01
2015-2016	258.77	406.63	665.40	-147.86	6,420.97
2016-2017	309.62	406.17	715.79	-96.55	6,588.29
2017-2018	342.04	471.34	813.38	-129.30	7,690.58
2018-2019	374.74	593.21	967.95	-218.47	8,441.49
2019-2020	315.47	553.70	869.17	-238.23	7,880.56
2020-2021	315.11	474.21	789.32	-159.10	6,862.43
2021-2022	423.54	680.81	1,104.35	-257.27	10,350.38
2022-2023	440.34	875.77	1,316.11	-435.43	11,670.31

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India—https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/

India has constructed a trust network through the "Act East" policy. In 2014, the Modi administration upgraded the "Look East Policy" to the "Act East Policy." In terms of geopolitical scope, India expanded its engagement from Southeast Asia to the Pacific; in the international dimension, India extended diplomatic ties beyond ASEAN to include Japan, South Korea, Australia, Mongolia, and others. In the political-economic dimension, India shifted its focus from purely economic and trade interests to pursuing major-power status and an Indo-Pacific strategy [85]. The strategic upgrade of the "Look East" policy enhanced ASEAN's trust in India, reflected in the increased number of formal agreements signed following the launch of the "Act East" policy. In 2015, India and Vietnam emphasized strengthening maritime security cooperation in the Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defence Cooperation 2015-2020, and India provided Vietnam's navy with significant military equipment assistance and technical training [86]. In November 2017, India and Singapore signed the Bilateral Naval Agreement, reinforcing cooperation in maritime security, joint military exercises, naval facility deployment, and logistical support [87]. In May 2018, India signed the India-Indonesia Defence Cooperation Agreement. In July 2019, the India-Myanmar Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed.

As the "Act East" policy progressed, India's trust network gradually became more comprehensive. In 2018, India and Indonesia jointly released their first global maritime strategic documents, including the Shared Vision on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the synergy between India's "Act East" policy, the "SAGAR" (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision, and Indonesia's "Global Maritime Fulcrum" strategy [88]. Additionally, India has actively supplied sonar systems, torpedoes, patrol boats, and submarines, and provided Myanmar with radar surveillance systems. In March 2018, the Indian and Myanmar navies conducted their first bilateral joint naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal [89]. In May 2018, India and Vietnam held their first joint naval exercise. Both India and ASEAN are committed to establishing a rules-based security architecture to promote peace and development in Southeast Asia. During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Indonesia in May 2018, the two sides discussed strengthening maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, and in June of the same year, they held their first bilateral joint military exercise in the Java Sea [90].

4.2.3. India's active participation in The East Asia Summit

The East Asia Summit (EAS) best embodies the "ASEAN Way" and reflects recognition of ASEAN's "centrality." The EAS can only be held in ASEAN countries, its rotating chair must be an ASEAN member, and membership criteria are determined solely by ASEAN. As a result, the agenda of each EAS is proposed and decided by ASEAN states, securing ASEAN's dominant position in the platform and ensuring the agenda aligns with ASEAN's collective preferences [91]. India was among the first countries to join the EAS. Since its accession in 2005, India has acknowledged ASEAN's central role in various issue areas, including trade, energy, education, avian flu prevention, and disaster reduction, and has maintained active cooperation in these fields [92]. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also emphasized the importance of the EAS, describing it as the only leader-led cooperative mechanism in the Indo-Pacific region and a key platform for building trust in Asia [93]. Modi has repeatedly affirmed ASEAN's centrality, expressing full support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and asserting that ASEAN occupies a more central position in the Indo-Pacific than mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD).

The "centrality" of ASEAN refers to its leading role in regional institutional cooperation in East Asia, encompassing geostrategic centrality, normative centrality, and relational centrality. First, India acknowledges ASEAN's geostrategic centrality. The term "Indo-Pacific" is a geographic concept that refers to the Indian Ocean–Pacific region. The shift from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific" represents a spatial expansion, which may dilute ASEAN's geographical centrality. ASEAN has expressed concern that the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" might threaten its central position, and in 2019 issued the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), the core objective of which is to uphold and reinforce ASEAN's centrality and regional leadership [94]. Before the release of the AOIP, India had already recognized and supported ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific. At the 2012 India-ASEAN Summit, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that "a secure, stable, and prosperous Indian Ocean-Pacific region is in India's interest" [95]. Singh believed that acknowledging ASEAN's centrality would benefit regional institutional norms and the implementation of India's "Look East" policy. In June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated at the Shangri-La Dialogue that the "Indo-Pacific" is purely a geographical concept and emphasized ASEAN's geostrategic centrality in the region [96]. Furthermore, from the perspective of geopolitical preference, India's cooperation preference for ASEAN is stronger than that for SAARC.

Second, India acknowledges ASEAN's normative centrality. Normative centrality refers to the application of the "ASEAN Way"—a form of open and inclusive regionalism that emphasizes cooperative security, consensus-based decision-making, and non-interference [97]. A key treaty embodying the "ASEAN Way" is the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which is a prerequisite for joining the East Asia Summit. India signed the TAC as early as 2003 during the India-ASEAN Bali Summit, in addition to signing other ASEAN-mandated treaties such as the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and the Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is another regional mechanism similar to the East Asia Summit. Its political objectives are outlined in the Statement of the First ARF Chair and fall into two categories: (1) to serve as a platform for constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common concern, and (2) to be a mechanism that significantly contributes to confidence-building in the Asia-Pacific. Although the ARF is a regional communication platform, it strongly reflects the diplomatic characteristics of the "ASEAN Way," including consensus-based decision-making and respect for ASEAN's centrality. A third-party country seeking to join the ARF must first demonstrate its geopolitical relevance to peace and security in East Asia; second, it must fully adhere to and agree with ARF decisions and statements; and finally, admission is subject to the approval of the ARF Chair. India's active participation in the ARF demonstrates its acceptance of consensus-based approaches to regional security issues and its respect for the "ASEAN Way" and ASEAN's central role in the East Asian region.

Finally, India acknowledges ASEAN's relational centrality. Relational centrality refers to ASEAN's position, role, and function within the East Asian network [98], which establishes ASEAN's centrality based on its position among relationships between countries. Essentially, ASEAN's relational centrality is the "product" of its internal and external interactions with various stakeholders [99]. India, as one such stakeholder, is a necessary condition for sustaining ASEAN's relational centrality. At the 16th East Asia Summit, Modi reaffirmed ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific and emphasized the synergy between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) [100]. At the 17th East Asia Summit, Modi reiterated ASEAN's centrality and its core role in India's "Act East" policy, and pledged a $1 billion line of credit to support ASEAN connectivity initiatives [101]. India's recognition of ASEAN centrality, implementation of the "Act East" policy, and participation in regional governance through the "ASEAN Way" are all goodwill signals that stimulate ASEAN's trust preferences. This stimulation ensures ASEAN's ability to function as the central actor. The core of ASEAN's relational centrality lies in its reliance on internal integration norms and in balancing power among participating countries to avoid domination or fragmentation by any single major power.

5. Conclusion

The construction of trust between India and ASEAN is a dynamic process. India constructs trust relations through formulating rationales, building norms, and stimulating preferences, all aimed at pursuing its own national interests. This leads us back to the central research question: Given the worsening trade deficit between India and ASEAN, why does India continue to maintain close economic and trade cooperation with ASEAN? (1) Formulating trust rationales to integrate into the East Asian economy. Through the "Look East" and "Act East" policies, India has managed to overcome its domestic economic stagnation of the pre-Cold War period. By deepening trade and investment ties with ASEAN, India has effectively integrated into the East Asian economic sphere. This constitutes a form of material trust. (2) Constructing trust norms to exclude China from the Indian Ocean region. In the course of economic and trade interactions with ASEAN, India has also gradually developed a network of trust norms. Through joint military exercises with Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand, India aims to contain China within the South China Sea issue area, thereby reducing China's attention and presence in the Indian Ocean region, and ensuring India's absolute security in the Indian Ocean. This constitutes a form of instrumental trust. (3) Stimulating trust preferences to seek great power identity recognition. India's construction of trust relations also seeks ASEAN's recognition of India's hegemonic role in South Asia and its status as a major power in Southeast Asia. Trade deficits, active participation in East Asia Summits, and recognition of ASEAN centrality are all trust preferences aimed at building great power identity. In summary, formulating trust rationales at economic cost reflects India's construction of material trust; eliminating security dilemmas through normative trust networks reflects instrumental trust; and stimulating trust preferences by recognizing ASEAN centrality reflects emotional trust.

However, the lack of integration between international institutions among actors may lead to increased contradictions or loss of trust [102]. Interactions between India and ASEAN face challenges such as hedging risks, uncertainty, and relative gains, all of which hinder the construction of trust. Moreover, India's pursuit of great power identity through trust-building inevitably entails costs, with the trade deficit being just one such price. Currently, certain frictions still affect the trust relationship between India and ASEAN—for example: to what extent India's refusal to join the ASEAN-led RCEP affects mutual trust; whether India's membership in the QUAD threatens ASEAN's centrality and thus undermines trust; and how to quantify the relationship between India-ASEAN economic ties and the level of mutual trust. Due to limitations in research scope and space, these questions remain for further analysis by relevant scholars.

This study contributes both theoretically and practically. The goal of case analysis is not merely descriptive but rather epistemological—to produce knowledge and contribute to theory. It aims to explain causes, understand characteristics, and establish normative principles [103]. The practical motivation of constructivist theory lies in explaining social phenomena and addressing real-world needs. First, it contributes to the field of international relations by generating theoretical insights. While conventional wisdom holds that higher levels of trust lead to stronger cooperation, this study deepens that understanding by demonstrating that national cooperation is also shaped by interests and identity. Drawing on empirical data and observable phenomena, the paper shows how India has constructed trust with ASEAN in order to gain identity recognition—thus enriching theoretical discourse. Second, the study highlights the strategic significance of India's pursuit of major power identity. India's normative trust-building through military cooperation with ASEAN, including joint exercises, has potential implications for China's national security and may intensify tensions between China and ASEAN, especially in areas such as island sovereignty, energy development, and maritime boundary delimitation in the South China Sea. Finally, the paper offers an empirical reflection of inter-state interaction. Since the 21st century, India and ASEAN have emerged as two of the fastest-growing economic regions globally. Both play critical roles within the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and China's "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" initiative. If East Asia is considered a stage for international role-playing, India and ASEAN are among the key players—alongside other major powers like China, the United States, and Japan. Through discursive, behavioral, and performative interactions on this stage—including statements, actions, and diplomatic postures—actors send signals that influence how their identities are constructed and recognized by others [104]. Identity recognition in turn shapes role performance [105]. In the context of the great power competition between China and the United States, both India and ASEAN occupy strategically critical positions on China's periphery. Studying the dynamics of India-ASEAN interaction thus offers China a valuable analytical framework for managing its own complex regional diplomacy.

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