

STRENGTHENING TIES THROUGH THE SEA: INDIA'S MARITIME COOPERATION WITH ASEAN IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Abstract

In India, roughly 95% of trade by volume is undertaken by sea, and therefore, maritime security is critical for the Indian economy. India is a rising force in the Indian Ocean thanks to its extensive coastline and its central location in this body. The Indo-Pacific has become a critical arena of geopolitics and economics where the importance of maritime cooperation is central to the stability and growth of states. With China expanding its influence in Southeast Asia, concerns have risen among ASEAN countries, and they are looking towards India as a partner to counter the challenges ahead. From southern seas to eastern seas: The significance of India-ASEAN maritime cooperation in fostering economic engagement, stability and nontraditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. It further explores India's bilateral maritime ties with Southeast Asian countries and how the former's HADR activities have promoted confidence and augmented India's soft power in this part of the world. By reviewing previous studies, the paper shows the importance of India-ASEAN cooperation in the maritime field is growing. It notes that these are not only addressing regional challenges of mutual concern but also establishing India as a key factor in the Indo-Pacific, working for a stable and prosperous future for all.

Keywords: maritime cooperation, fostering development, geopolitics, soft power.

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Introduction

Being so, India remains at the center of the Indian Ocean with a 7,500 km coastline, two strategically located island groups, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Lakshadweep Islands — a crucial piece in the larger maritime power puzzle. Such assets are essential for both defense and regional connectivity. In addition, India has strong restrictions on its overland trade routes due to the Himalayas and also the tensions it has with its neighbours, viz, Pakistan and China. As a result, maritime trade becomes, if not the only, but the most crucial with 95% of India's trade by volume happening through the seas. Top of Form the Indo-Pacific stretches from the east coast of Africa right up to the central Pacific, the most strategically-important theatre in the world with vital global trade chokepoints including the Strait of Malacca, Bab el-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz. Such routes carry a considerable portion of international trade and energy transit all over the world. India and the Richelieu: The Geopolitical Imperative in the Fringe (Saha, 2023) Note: In the region where we see the maximum geopolitical rivalry between the U.S and The China, India CONTINUE READING » India has been a benevolent maritime power with low-key maritime engagements until now, but the recent signing of the strategic partnership with some ASEAN nations indicates a shift in this trend towards strategic partnerships. India offsets growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia by enhancing economic and security cooperation with ASEAN states and protecting important sea lines of communication (SLOCs) while furthering regional prosperity. Sen (2023) points out that India is no longer the cultural power player of Independently, but is now a reliable partner to Southeast Asia in the realm of security. An evolution is also manifesting in the maritime challenges such as climate change, piracy, overfishing, and transnational crimes (Kumar, 2019). These include the e-ASEAN Agreement, the Vision Statement of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit (2012), the Delhi Declaration (2018), and the India-ASEAN Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (2021). These milestones shed light on common values that promote peace, stability and prosperity in the region. These commitments were reaffirmed at the 20th ASEAN-India Summit in Jakarta (2023), which

laid particular emphasis on the importance of the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. India protects its national interests and seeks to contribute to a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific through its strategic maritime location and its strong regional partnerships. This collective method not only strengthens India's international presence but also tackles common problems faced in the region.

Methodology

In this article, we utilise a qualitative lens to unpack the drivers of India-ASEAN maritime cooperation in the context of the Indo-Pacific, namely economic connectivity, security, humanitarian and non-traditional threats. It examines aspects such as maritime security, the blue economy, disaster management, and connectivity, using case studies of existing naval exercises like SIMBEX, Samudra Shakti, and AIME and then combining the analysis thematically. In this regard, the research employs primary documents, including the India-ASEAN Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation (2023), and secondary sources like peer-reviewed journals, think-tank reports and media outlets of repute. Regional bodies such as ReCAAP and IONS contribute to the analysis too. Methods such as comparative and policy analyses examine bilateral relations with countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore, as well as frameworks like SAGAR and IPOI. Although this approach is constrained by its reliance on publicly available data, it offers a broader perspective on India-ASEAN maritime cooperation within the context of regional security, sustainable development, and connectivity strategies.

India's Strategic Maritime Role

India has gradually shifted its maritime strategy to the Indo-Pacific due to its geostrategic and economic importance. A department in the Ministry of External Affairs has been created to handle the nuances of this important region, increasing its focus on things such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, ASEAN and the QUAD. IORA and ASEAN aspire for regional

connectivity; however, after the QUAD of states, i.e., India, Japan, Australia and America, respond to collective security threats in the Indo-Pacific (Sen, 2023). India has matured its maritime strategy over the past twenty years toward security cooperation with regional countries and against transnational crime, climate change, and disaster management. While countering Chinese expansionism is certainly one of the priorities (of course, always keeping the Chinese in sight), the objectives of India-ASEAN interaction also go beyond that to include a blue economy, piracy and sustainable development. This partnership was further extended during the COVID-19 pandemic to include the supply of vaccines, medicines and medical equipment. They indicate a deepening of India-ASEAN maritime cooperation and an acknowledgement of a growing strategic role in the region (Manhas, 2024). India's proactive role in the Indo-Pacific fits with its Policy of Act East of India, to bolster economic, cultural and security ties with Southeast Asia. The Indo-Pacific approach not only highlights the role of India in ensuring regional stability but also emphasises India's dedicated approach towards global maritime governance (Manhas, 2024).

SAGAR: India's Maritime Vision

Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) forms the bedrock of India's maritime vision, as announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015. SAGAR stresses the importance of safety, security and stability in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and encourages capacity building in the nations around it. Broad domains where SAGAR spans over include coastal surveillance, infrastructure development and information sharing (Padmaja, 2018). Over the years, interoperability with regional navies has been strengthened by means of naval exercises like SIMBEX and MILAN, are important tools to meet common challenges, including piracy, unlawful fishing, and marine pollution. It is in this context that SAGAR's principles are consistent with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and are conducive to cooperation on both traditional and non-traditional security issues. Indo-Pacific strategy – SAGAR, a key principle of India's maritime diplomacy, which seeks to promote maritime order based on rules and also to

provide an inclusive architecture for regional cooperation. Trust-building and strengthened partnerships allow India to reinforce its role as a reliable actor assisting the peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region (Padmaja, 2018; Manhas, 2024).

India-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) is a guide for ASEAN in its engagement in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. AOIP is based on the principles of openness, transparency, inclusivity and possession of ASEAN Centrality with respect for sovereignty and a commitment to international law, such as the Charter of the United Nations and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (ASEAN-India Summit, 2023). The framework encourages collaboration with external partners such as India in four areas, which are maritime, connectivity, sustainable development and economic integration (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). India views its Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) as complementing AOIP towards shared objectives of peace, stability and prosperity in the wider Indo-Pacific. The 20th ASEAN-India Summit reaffirmed the importance of ASEAN-led mechanisms as the sole and inclusive platform for strengthening maritime cooperation to enhance security, stability, and economic development, as expressed in the ASEAN-India Summit held in Jakarta on 7 September 2023 (ASEAN-India Summit, 2023).

Maritime Security and Blue Economy

Under the “Connecting the Connectivities” approach, India and ASEAN aim to integrate the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, 2025, with India’s regional initiatives. This collaboration focuses on sustainable and resilient connectivity through joint development of port infrastructure, maritime corridors, and quality infrastructure projects to support economic growth (ASEAN-India Summit, 2023). India and ASEAN’s Blue Economy collaboration prioritises sustainability in the development of marine

resources, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem protection. Efforts to address climate change and marine pollution, alongside promoting green maritime transport and marine-based renewable energy, highlight the shared commitment to environmental sustainability and energy security in the region (ASEAN-India Summit, 2023).

Promoting Peace and Stability

Both India and ASEAN prioritise peace, stability, and maritime safety in the Indo-Pacific. These include such principles as freedom of navigation and overflight and lawful maritime commerce and peaceful dispute resolution in accordance with widely accepted principles, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Together, their partnership highlights a rules-based maritime order to create confidence and collaboration among regional stakeholders (ASEAN-India Summit, 2023). Thirdly, the key focus is on the maritime peace in the South China Sea, where both agree in the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation, 2023, on a need to support the full implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties and support an early conclusion of a substantive Code of Conduct. Working together on sanctions will help us uphold international legal standards – from the likes of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) – we need to involve them to ensure regional stability.

Convergence of AOIP and IPOI

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India Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation, 2023, on a need to support the full implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties and support an early conclusion of a substantive Code of Conduct. Collaborating on sanctions will help uphold international legal standards set by organisations such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), and we need to involve these organisations to ensure regional stability.

Strengthening Bilateral Maritime Cooperation

Under India's Act East Policy, India has significantly expanded its maritime co-operation with ASEAN, with a view to strengthening its strategic orientation towards the Indo-Pacific. One significant element of this engagement is bilateral naval partnerships, which boost cooperation, interoperability and trust.

Bilateral Naval Exercises

India's commitment to regional security is reflected in naval exercises with ASEAN nations. Samudra Shakti with Indonesia is tailored towards joint operations and maritime security, whereas SIMBEX with Singapore themes on regional maritime security is one of the oldest series of drills in the region that showcases similarities in the shared focus of both nations on stability. Furthermore, the India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) is focused on enhancing maritime security and combating illegal activities in the areas between the two countries. These exercises are key to building operational coordination, adding to ASEAN's security objectives.

Multilateral Engagement and Anti-Piracy Efforts

India has been involved in multilateral initiatives such as Exercise MILAN, a naval exercise aimed towards strengthening regional collaboration since 1995, and the regional anti-piracy cooperation agreement, or ReCAAP, that aims to build capacity and share common information to counter piracy. A

significant event in this regard was also the first-ever ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise 2023, co-hosted by India and Singapore. The AIME took place in the South China Sea and included all ten ASEAN countries, showcasing Indian ships like the INS Delhi and INS Satpura, which were made in India, while also highlighting India's role amid increasing geopolitical tensions (Suri, 2023).

Defense Cooperation and Maritime Security

ASEAN countries have strategic needs in terms of maritime security, which India serves to address specifically in the South China Sea. It includes the export of BrahMos missiles to the Philippines and discussions with Vietnam and Indonesia. Exercises such as Samudra Shakti and patrolling together in the Malacca Straits secure vital trade routes and stabilise the region (Panda, 2023; Mishra, 2023).

Expanding Maritime Reach and Strategic Frameworks

India's logistics and white shipping agreements extend its naval presence into the Indo-Pacific, enhancing operational reach and aligning with the Make in India initiative to boost defence exports (Suri, 2023). Platforms like the ASEAN Regional Forum and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium enable discussions on counter-terrorism and disaster management. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) complements ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) by prioritising connectivity, sustainability, and maritime ecology. India's bilateral maritime partnerships with ASEAN are pivotal in addressing shared challenges and countering geopolitical threats. Through defence collaboration, joint exercises, and enhanced frameworks, India reinforces itself as a trusted stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific, fostering regional security and sustainable growth.

Challenges and Threats in Maritime Cooperation

Having been integral to economic prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, oceans are now increasingly threatened from nontraditional security threats. The 20th India-ASEAN Summit in Jakarta (2023) reiterated the need to tackle human trafficking, smuggling, terrorism, piracy, Illegal, Unreported Undocumented (IUU) fishing and marine pollution (asean.org). Such transnational threats require strong regional and global cooperation (ASEAN-India Summit, 2023).

Non-Traditional Maritime Security

Unconventional threats such as piracy and terrorism still hinder maritime trade routes and destabilise the region. Highlighting just one example, piracy at important chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait continues to be a perennial problem (Bateman 2023). In response to these challenges, India and ASEAN have enhanced their cooperation; for example, by undertaking coordinated naval patrols, sharing intelligence, and launching capacity-building initiatives. Participating in an agreement such as the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia is an example of India addressing maritime security concerns. Furthermore, bilateral navy exercises like Samudra Shakti and SIMBEX, conducted with Indonesia and Singapore respectively, bolster regional readiness and interoperability, creating a united front against common threats (ASEAN Centre for Maritime Cooperation, 2023).

Climate and Environmental Security

Debris and plastic waste are a serious threat to ecosystems, the economy and public health, representing one of the largest forms of marine pollution. Aware of this reality, India and ASEAN have taken joint action to control marine pollution, one of their priorities. The ASEAN Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris operates as a guideline for collaborative efforts targeted at waste reduction and sustainable approaches in maritime sectors

(ASEAN-India Summit, 2023). In addition, India and ASEAN also cooperate on joint research programmes and projects relating to the conservation of marine biodiversity and marine ecosystems. The efforts form part of sustainable development goals to reduce the long-term consequences of climate change impacts on coastal communities and maritime economies. The partnership highlights a commitment of stakeholders to preserve the ecology of the Indo-Pacific while addressing environmental challenges. The partnership between India and ASEAN sets a clear precedent in cooperation in regional affairs by addressing non-traditional maritime security threats and environmental challenges. Through initiatives like ReCAAP, bilateral naval exercises, and joint environmental schemes, they are enhancing their collective capacity to uphold maritime safety, security, and sustainability. India and ASEAN tackle these cross-border issues and ensure resilience, peace and stability of the regional environment, and sustainable growth of the Indo-Pacific.

Trust Through Help: India's Humanitarian Role

India has also built trust with and strengthened partnerships between ASEAN nations through its active contribution in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). ASEAN and India share a common interest in maritime safety, which includes combined efforts in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as well as countering transnational crimes like piracy and trafficking; these areas are central to ASEAN-India maritime cooperation. India has been a reliable partner, as demonstrated by its proactive efforts in HADR. Of particular note are its rapid response to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar (2008) and the Mission Sagar III operation, wherein COVID-19 relief supplies were provided via INS Kiltan to Cambodia and Vietnam amid the pandemic (Ministry of Defence, 2023). These moves contribute to the soft power of India by cementing trustworthy goodwill in the region. India and ASEAN also focused on cooperation in disaster preparedness, such as organising joint training exercises or capacity-building workshops, as well as India sharing its expertise in early warning systems. Search and rescue (SAR) operations that emphasise interoperability and seamless communication—in

other words, interdependent crisis management (ASEAN HADR Centre, 2023) The HADR efforts of India also serve as instruments of soft power diplomacy. Through providing material assistance and capacity-building support coupled with institutional cooperation, India has transformed into a reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific – its humanitarian role in the region is enhancing regional trust and ensuring shared prosperity.

Conclusion

Maritime cooperation between India and ASEAN is crucial, as it influences the security, economic, and humanitarian landscape of the Indo-Pacific region. Placed strategically between the West and East, India has political, economic and historic ties with ASEAN member countries and hence plays a crucial role in maintaining regional stability and sustainable growth. The results highlight the fact that India's maritime postures (such as, for instance, naval exercises and relief measures after disasters) are important for regional security and connectivity. Not only do these activities push back against expanding Chinese influence, but they also respond to nontraditional threats like piracy on the seas and climate change. India and ASEAN partner through frameworks such as the India-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the Vision Statement to promote peace, prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific. In conclusion, India–ASEAN maritime cooperation is important to secure the sea lines of communication, enhance economic integration, and promote sustainable development among countries which are becoming increasingly important in the global geopolitical order.

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