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India–ASEAN Maritime Security Framework: Normative Frameworks and Institutional Convergence

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India–ASEAN Maritime Security Framework: Normative Frameworks and Institutional Convergence

Sarabjeet S Parmar* and Sinderpal Singh**

Abstract: The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal theatre of twenty-first-century geopolitics, with the maritime domain at its epicentre. This chapter examines how India and ASEAN conceptualise maritime security, mapping convergences and divergences across issues including freedom of navigation, sea lines of communication, choke-point security, critical undersea infrastructure, capacity building, and the South China Sea. It argues that the strongest convergences lie in functional, non-sovereignty domains where cooperation is readily achievable, while differences cluster around territorial disputes and great-power alignment. The chapter proposes a practical dual-track architecture: an ASEAN-wide track focused on maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and blue economy cooperation, complemented by a bilateral track delivering capability-intensive outcomes. It outlines a sequenced pathway—short-, medium-, and long-term—anchored in the Bay of Bengal and building on SAGAR/MAHASAGAR, the IPOI, the AOIP, IORA, and BIMSTEC, to translate shared interests into a resilient, rules-based maritime order.

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become the principal theatre of twenty-first century geopolitics with the maritime domain as the epicentre. For India, the waters stretching from the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal through the Straits of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok into the South China Sea (SCS) are not peripheral but central to its strategic geography, trade and energy security. For the eleven members of the Association of

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Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the SCS, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, and the approaches to the Pacific constitute the very core of their geopolitical relations and economic lifelines. These two regions are bound by geography, history and an expanding web of economic interdependence, yet their maritime security outlooks have evolved along somewhat different trajectories. India's maritime security outlook was shaped by its continental and now continental-maritime identity, and its rivalry with China on the land border and now the Indian Ocean. ASEAN's maritime security outlook was shaped mainly by the SCS dispute and the structural reality of having to manage, rather than balance, China as a resident growing power.

This paper examines how India and ASEAN, both individually and collectively, conceptualise maritime security. It identifies the central elements that could anchor a maritime security framework between them by mapping the convergences and divergences, and proposes a practical, two-track architecture that blends India's bilateral relationships with individual ASEAN nations and institutionalised India-ASEAN engagement. The paper also identifies gaps in the present arrangements and suggests short-, medium-, and long- term avenues towards a more cogent India-ASEAN maritime security framework.

2. Conceptualising Maritime Security through the Lens of India and ASEAN

India's articulation of maritime security has moved from an Indian Ocean-centric naval doctrine to an expansive maritime, rules-based approach captured in the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision announced in 2015 and the 2025 evolution to the vision of MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions).[1] These visions fold together traditional concerns- deterrence and conflict- with non-traditional ones such as anti-piracy, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Blue Economy development, conservation of marine resources and ecology, and capacity cum capability building for smaller littoral states. Following

the SAGAR vision, the 2015 Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS, 2015) widened the aperture to the Indo-Pacific as a strategic space, explicitly linking the security of the Indian Ocean with the approaches to the SCS and the Western Pacific. This has been reiterated by the 2026 Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (INMSS, 2026).[2]

ASEAN's conceptualisation of maritime security is constrained by the bloc's consensus-based decision-making and the divergent threat perceptions of its eleven members. The 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) frames maritime cooperation as one of four priority areas, emphasising connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), economic cooperation and "other areas of cooperation," while studiously avoiding any explicit balancing language vis-à-vis China.[3] For continental Southeast Asian nations such as Laos and Cambodia, maritime security is a marginal concern and is centred around the right of access to and from the seas by landlocked nations as provided for by Article 125 of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).[4] For archipelagic and littoral states such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia, maritime security is an existential aspect, touching on sovereignty, fisheries, energy resources and, increasingly, undersea infrastructure. Therefore, it can be argued that ASEAN centrality functions less as a unifying maritime flag and more as a diplomatic shield that allows individual members to pursue divergent bilateral hedging strategies while preserving the appearance of collective neutrality. However, at the broader ASEAN level, UNCLOS can be considered a unifying factor based on the shared commitment to freedom of navigation and overflight, unimpeded lawful commerce, and peaceful resolution of disputes. This shared legal vocabulary, even where its application diverges sharply, as over the SCS, provides the normative scaffolding on which a maritime security framework can be built.

This strategic and operational convergence found institutional expression in the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) announced by

Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 14th East Asia Summit in Bangkok on 4 November 2019.[5] As a non-treaty-based, voluntary arrangement, the IPOI is deliberately designed to avoid creating new institutional machinery, as it leans on the existing East Asia Summit (EAS) framework of ASEAN and the eight dialogue partners. The seven pillars of the IPOI seek volunteers from individual nations to lead one or more of the pillars that span: Maritime Security, Maritime Ecology, Maritime Resources, Capacity Building and Resource Sharing, Disaster Risk Reduction and Management, Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation, and Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport.[6] This EAS anchoring situates the IPOI as a practical, implementation-oriented complement to the AOIP. ASEAN and India have acknowledged in a joint statement that the two frameworks share common underlying principles in promoting peace, stability, and prosperity through the maritime domain.[7] The convergence continues to be reinforced at the institutional level, including through the AOIP Seminar Series on Maritime Cooperation, co-hosted by Singapore, Australia, India, and Japan for EAS participating nations, the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO), and ASEAN's own sectoral stock-take of the region's maritime challenges and priorities.[8] Collectively, SAGAR/ MAHASAGAR, IPOI, AOIP, and the AMO form a layered architecture in which India's bilateral vision, ASEAN's normative outlook, and the EAS's convening capacity can reinforce each other in pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific maritime order.

3. Core Elements of an India-ASEAN Maritime Security Framework

An analysis of the official statements and joint statements emanating from the ASEAN-India Summit process, including the 2018 Delhi Declaration following the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, highlights several elements that can form the building blocks of a putative framework. These encompass the areas of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and information-sharing, freedom of navigation and overflight, the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), capacity-building, training,

hydrography, HADR, Blue Economy, fisheries, marine biotechnology, port connectivity, counter-piracy and counterterrorism, and adherence to international law, particularly UNCLOS, as the basis for resolving disputes. These aspects were also reflected in the 2021-2025 India-ASEAN Plan of Action.[9] However, these elements remain largely aspirational at the ASEAN-India multilateral level, where institutional mechanisms are thin. The ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) provide venues for dialogue but rarely produce binding commitments. By contrast, bilateral engagement, particularly with Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines, has produced substantive outcomes, from logistics agreements to coastal surveillance radar projects to defence platform transfers. A coherent framework must therefore explicitly recognise and integrate these two tracks rather than treating ASEAN-level diplomacy as a substitute for bilateral substance.

3.1 The Indian Perspective

India's approach to an India-ASEAN maritime security framework rests on three specific pillars that merit separate examination.

Convergence with ASEAN Nations Who are also IORA Members

A structurally important but underexploited convergence lies in the overlapping membership of ASEAN nations with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Among ASEAN's eleven members, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand sit within the IORs geographic and hence IORA's institutional remit.[10] India, as a founding IORA member and an early proponent of its revival after 2011, has used IORA to advance Blue Economy cooperation, maritime safety and security working groups, and disaster risk management. The convergence with Indonesia is particularly significant. Jakarta's Global Maritime Fulcrum doctrine and its IORA chairmanship in 2015 dovetailed closely with India's SAGAR vision, producing a 2018 India-Indonesia Joint Statement that articulated a "Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in

the Indo-Pacific". This explicitly links bilateral cooperation to both IORA and ASEAN-led mechanisms.[11] Singapore's engagement is concretely evidenced by the IORA-Singapore customised programme on Maritime Safety and Port Management.[12]

There is a high degree of convergence between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (IOIP), as expected, as both were shaped significantly by India and Indonesia. The convergence is strongest in UNCLOS, freedom of navigation, non-coercion, inclusivity, rules-based order, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This reflects a shared strategic interest in resisting prescriptive, great-power-imposed frameworks without naming any power. The difference lies in the institutional instruments. While the AOIP is anchored in ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms, the IOIP has no equivalent institutional anchors. The IORA's mechanisms are far thinner, and the stress is on consensus and non-intrusiveness. The AOIP is also more explicit on dispute resolution, while the IOIP places greater operational weight on maritime safety mechanisms. To strengthen the bridge, IORA and ASEAN signed a formal MoU on 23 September 2023 to synergise their respective outlooks. Table 1 depicts the major convergences between IPOI and AOIP.

This dual-membership convergence allows India to use IORA as a complementary, less China-sensitive forum through which to advance maritime governance norms that can subsequently be mainstreamed into ASEAN-India dialogues, effectively creating a secondary track insulated from the political sensitivities of the SCS.

Working with ASEAN Nations in the Bay of Bengal

The Bay of Bengal is the maritime space that overlaps India's eastern and ASEAN's westernmost strategic space, as it is bordered directly by Myanmar and Thailand and accessible to Indonesia through the Andaman Sea and the Strait of Malacca. Historically, the Bay has suffered from weaker regional institutionalisation as compared to the SCS or the Western Indian Ocean. However, the Bay of Bengal Initiative

Table 1: Convergence between the AOIP and the IOIP

Theme	AOIP	IOIP
Framing of the Indo-Pacific	The Indo-Pacific is one integrated and interconnected region. Not contiguous but seamlessly linked.	Indo-Pacific is an inclusive, rules-based space of shared prosperity. It avoids zero-sum security framing.
Core principles	Openness, transparency, inclusivity, rules-based framework, good governance, sovereignty, non-intervention, equality, mutual respect, international law (UN Charter, UNCLOS).	Sovereign equality, territorial integrity, inclusivity, non-interference, peaceful co-existence, mutual benefit, respect for international law (UN Charter, UNCLOS).
Role of international law / UNCLOS	Explicitly cites the 1982 UNCLOS as a foundational legal instrument alongside the UN Charter. Supports freedom of navigation and overflight.	Explicitly cites the 1982 UNCLOS. The objective is to enhance freedom of navigation and overflight in accordance with UNCLOS and the UN Charter.
Maritime cooperation	Priority areas: maritime dispute resolution, maritime safety, freedom of navigation/overflight, non-traditional threats, marine resource management, blue economy, pollution, capacity-building.	Primary objectives: enhance maritime safety and security, promote conservation and sustainable use of marine resources, strengthen WGMSS and SAR mechanisms.
Connectivity	Complements MPAC 2025; physical, institutional and people-to-people linkages; PPP mobilisation, environmental sustainability of projects.	Objectives: enhanced connectivity to promote inclusive growth, unimpeded flow of commerce, resilience to future crises and disruptions.

Table 1 Continued....

Table 1 Continued....

SDGs	Priority area: UN SDG 2030. Poverty eradication, food security, energy, health, finance, technology. Recognises development as central to the Indo-Pacific vision.	Objectives: conservation, SDG-14 (Life Below Water). climate change, biodiversity, marine pollution, sustainable trade and investment.
Inclusive, non-coercive approach	Inclusivity explicitly defined as holding no prejudice against any country. An all-encompassing outlook resisting exclusionary configurations.	Objectives: fair, non-discriminatory, non-coercive, inclusive, equitable, transparent, stable, predictable trade and economic environment.
Complementarity with existing frameworks	Explicitly complementary. Recognises potential cooperation with other Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean mechanisms, including IORA.	Explicitly notes AOIP as a 'similar document'.
Institutional anchoring	ASEAN-led mechanisms (EAS, ARF, ADMM-Plus, EAMF) as primary platforms. Preserves their formats and existing cooperation arrangements.	Strengthen existing mechanisms with a consensus-based, evolutionary, non-intrusive institutional approach.
Strategic trust-building	Generates momentum for strategic trust through win-win cooperation. Reaffirms TAC principles: peaceful settlement of disputes, non-use of force.	Builds strategic trust through dialogue, transparency, and engagement. Peaceful settlement of disputes is a core principle.
Economic cooperation	Priority areas: trade, investment, economic and financial integration. Includes reducing barriers and strengthening the economic community.	Promotes open, transparent, inclusive, rules-based and fair systems for balanced and sustainable development. Includes a non-coercive trade environment.

Source: Authors' own

for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which includes Myanmar and Thailand alongside India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, has changed the equation through the pursuit of the objectives stated in Article 1 of the Charter.[13] This sub-regional architecture is uniquely positioned to serve as a connective tissue between India's maritime strategy and ASEAN's Indo-Pacific outlook and ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO), as it straddles the geographic and institutional seam separating South Asia from Southeast Asia. Myanmar and Thailand can function as the organisation's dual-hatted members, sitting simultaneously within BIMSTEC and ASEAN, and this overlapping membership creates a natural conduit for policy coordination that neither IORA nor bilateral arrangements can replicate.

BIMSTEC's Security pillar, led by India and encompassing counterterrorism and transnational crime, disaster management, and energy security[14], has deepened since the 2016 Goa Retreat, with four rounds of BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs' meetings and dedicated expert groups on maritime cooperation and cyber security.[15] Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) has increasingly been identified as the operational core of this pillar[16], offering a basis for anti-piracy patrolling and coordinated HADR response that could complement ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ADMM-Plus, and which aligns with India's SAGAR and MAHASAGAR visions. On connectivity, projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway extend India's Act East Policy into ASEAN's continental and maritime domains simultaneously. However, as both remain vulnerable to Myanmar's internal instability, there is a need to embed them within multilateral platforms such as BIMSTEC to reduce dependence on fragile bilateral arrangements. Further, BIMSTEC's blue economy agenda, covering fisheries management, sustainable coastal tourism, and marine resource governance, offers a functional template that could be harmonised with the AOIP's cooperative maritime provisions. This could narrow the institutional gap that has historically weakened Bay of Bengal governance relative to other Indo-Pacific sub-regions.

BIMSTEC and ASEAN could consider signing an MoU like the April 2025 BIMSTEC-IORA MoU, and the three organisations could consider a trilateral arrangement that would further cement the convergences.

India's planned development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, specifically the Greater Nicobar project, could give substance to bilateral and trilateral cooperation.[17] Further, a functional Bay of Bengal sub-regional maritime security architecture, linking India's Eastern Naval and Andaman and Nicobar Command assets with the surveillance assets of Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar, a step beyond the existing coordinated patrols, could address the existing geographic surveillance gap and possibly reduce reliance on the slow-moving ASEAN process to address the same. The recent agreement between India and Indonesia towards the integrated development of the Sabang Port[18] would add weight to this endeavour, apart from enhancing connectivity in the region.

Freedom of Navigation, SLOC Security, Choke Points and Information Sharing

India's position on Freedom of Navigation (FoN) upholds the principle as a matter of customary and conventional international law under UNCLOS. New Delhi does not conduct FoN operations (FONOPs) in the assertive, transit passage testing manner of the US. Nevertheless, India has consistently advocated for the security of SLOCs as a global public good. The bulk of India's maritime trade by value and the majority of its energy imports transit the Indian Ocean, and its trade with ASEAN, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the broader Pacific traverses the SCS through the Malacca Strait. As per a reply tabled in the Indian Parliament in April 2022, over 55 per cent of India's trade passes through the South China Sea and the Malacca Straits.[19] For ASEAN's maritime states, India's emphasis on SLOC security, expressed through anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, periodic Indo-Pacific deployments of Indian naval ships, and coordination through the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) offers a less polarising point of cooperation than alignment with US FONOPS.

The Indo-Pacific chokepoints, the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok and Ombai-Wetar, together with the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz at the western end of India's Indo-Pacific maritime periphery, are the connective tissue between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. They are also the primary points of vulnerability for SLOC disruption, whether through piracy, terrorism, accidents, or deliberate interdiction. Hence, there is a requirement for increasing interoperability and more exchange of information. India's IFC-IOR has progressively increased the number of International Liaison Officers (ILOs) and partner agencies and currently has 17 ILOs and collaboration with 28 partner nations and 54 organisations.[20] Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines have positioned ILOs at the IFC-IOR, and the associated complementary architecture on the Southeast Asian side includes Singapore's Information Fusion Centre. The IFC-IOR is poised to graduate from a regional centre to a global centre, and hence an India-ASEAN maritime framework should aim at more information exchanges between these fusion centres and identified offices in ASEAN nations. A single merged architecture is not required, and standardised data formats, liaison exchanges, and joint MDA products that can be shared in near-real time would greatly aid and address vulnerabilities, including choke point vulnerabilities. This interaction could be based on the Maritime Security pillar of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), which India leads.[21]

Protection of Critical Undersea Infrastructure

The protection of undersea cables and pipelines has moved from a technical challenge to a first-order security concern following the series of incidents in the Baltic Sea and recurring cable disruptions near Taiwan's Matsu Islands, several of which have been linked to vessels with opaque ownership or flagging.[22] India sits astride some of the world's busiest submarine cable corridors connecting Europe and West-South-Southeast-East Asia, with major cable landing stations in Mumbai, Chennai and the Andaman Islands. ASEAN states such as Singapore (a global cable hub), Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines are similarly cable dependent. Hence, India and ASEAN also have a stake in undersea cable security and, prospectively, in seabed-

based critical infrastructure such as offshore wind transmission and carbon storage installations. A maritime security framework should therefore incorporate a dedicated undersea infrastructure protection track through shared incident reporting protocols, joint identification of vulnerable cable landing points, and, where feasible, coordinated maritime, specifically coast guard, presence near critical nodes. This is an area where India's survey vessels can offer practical assistance to ASEAN partners that currently lack mapping capabilities.

Addressing Great Power Competition

Neither India nor ASEAN seeks formal alignment in the ongoing US-China contestation, yet both face the practical consequences of the intensifying competition. India's approach, consistent with its policy of strategic autonomy and being part of the Quad's cooperative frameworks such as the 2022 Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative[23], the 2025 Quad Critical Minerals Initiative[24], and the 2026 Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Cooperation (IPMSC) Initiative[25] announced during the recent Foreign Ministers' meeting held in New Delhi, is to build 'latticed' plurilateral arrangements. These are not 'formally' anti-China but raise the costs of unilateral coercion through transparency and presence. ASEAN's stated position over time, also reflected in the AOIP's deliberate avoidance of containment language, is to avoid being forced into 'choosing sides'.[26] However, the India-ASEAN convergence is practical, not symbolic, especially in areas like joint disaster-relief exercises, shared maritime awareness data, and capacity-building that make nations more resilient without forcing them to publicly take a side. India's own experience of balancing the relationship with Russia, a deepening partnership with the United States, and an adversarial but engaged relationship with China could give it some credibility with ASEAN nations seeking a similar middle path.

3.2 The ASEAN Perspective

From Southeast Asia's perspective, four issues dominate the maritime security conversation, each carrying distinct implications for how individual ASEAN members, and the grouping, might engage India.

The South China Sea and the Question of the Philippines as an Outlier

The SCS remains the central maritime security issue for ASEAN, encompassing competing sovereignty claims over the Spratly and Paracel Islands, arming of islands, China's expansive nine-dash line that was found to be without legal basis by the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling[27], and recurrent confrontations around Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal and the Vanguard Bank. However, within ASEAN there is a marked difference in how individual claimant states assertively pursue their positions. The Philippines has in recent years adopted a markedly more confrontational transparency initiative, publicising Chinese coast guard actions, deepening defence cooperation with the US to grant access to additional sites under the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement. It is also pursuing capability acquisitions, including the BrahMos missile system, explicitly framed around South China Sea contingencies.[28] Following the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia have also evinced an interest in the BrahMos missile that will enhance their respective deterrent and combat value.[29] The Philippines' transparency initiative approach, while welcomed by some external partners, has generated a degree of unease among other ASEAN members, including Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Cambodia and Laos. The view is that Manila's high-visibility confrontations could result in escalation that could draw the wider region into a crisis not of its choosing, and could complicate ASEAN's preferred posture of managed engagement with Beijing.[30] Vietnam, while arguably being a claimant with the most at stake after the Philippines, continues to favour quiet bilateral management alongside incremental capability build-up, illustrating that claimant solidarity within ASEAN is considerably weaker than is often assumed from outside the region.[31] For ASEAN, this divergence matters as the Philippines' approach risks being read by other ASEAN members as taking sides in an intramural ASEAN debate, whereas a posture centred on UNCLOS principles and capacity-building applicable to all claimants is more likely to be acceptable across the grouping.

Freedom of Navigation and Chokepoint Anxieties amid US-China Competition

For ASEAN maritime member states, FoN is less an abstract legal principle than a daily economic necessity. The Strait of Malacca connects the Indian Ocean to the SCS and alone carries 23.7 per cent of the global seaborne trade by volume, which, commodity-wise, accounts for 45 per cent crude oil, 42 per cent propane, 26 per cent cars, and 23 per cent dry bulk.[32] The intensification of US-China great power competition, manifested in expanded naval presence and operations, coast guard and maritime militia activity, and periodic commentary about chokepoint vulnerabilities duly supported by the ongoing Strait of Hormuz crises, has heightened anxieties across ASEAN as this core trade artery could become contested space in a broader US-China confrontation. This makes chokepoint security, a distinct aspect vis-à-vis sovereignty disputes, one of the most promising areas for India-ASEAN convergence and cooperation. For India, keeping the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits open and stable is a shared interest. The number of bilateral maritime exercises with ASEAN member navies and the Biennial ASEAN India Maritime Exercise (AIME) could include Chokepoint and SLOC security in the schedule.

The Taiwan Contingency and the 'Sucked-in' Dilemma

A growing concern among the ASEAN strategic community, particularly in Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, is the prospect of being drawn into a Taiwan crisis through geography, alliance entanglement or simple economic disruption, despite having no formal stake in the cross-Strait dispute.[33] The US-Philippines Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT), the renewed military relations with the US, and its proximity to Taiwan via the Bashi Channel make it the ASEAN member most directly exposed to entanglement, a reality that compounds the unease described earlier regarding Manila's broader posture. Singapore and Vietnam, despite having no treaty obligations, would face immediate and severe disruption to shipping and supply chains given the volume of regional trade that transits the waters near Taiwan. ASEAN members

broadly lack viable options in such a crisis. They can neither credibly deter a conflict between the two powers nor easily insulate themselves from its military, economic, and humanitarian fallout, and ASEAN's consensus-based mechanisms are widely seen as too slow and too divided to produce a coordinated response.[34] India's 'One China' policy, along with its unofficial ties with Taiwan, places the Taiwan Strait as a lower salience issue. However, the prospect of SLOC disruption emanating from a Taiwan crisis, which would impact shipping through the SCS and therefore India's maritime trade that flows through the SCS, points to New Delhi's indirect, but real stake in contingency planning.

Critical Undersea Infrastructure: The Cable Concern

Mirroring the Indian concern, ASEAN members have become acutely sensitive to undersea cable security following a series of incidents involving cable damage near Taiwan's Matsu Islands and in the Baltic Sea. These incidents have been linked to vessels with opaque or third-country ownership, raising the prospect of similar grey-zone disruption in the SCS or the Malacca Strait.[35] Singapore, as a global cable hub hosting numerous landing stations plus Vietnam and the Philippines, whose cable systems traverse contested waters, are particularly exposed. ASEAN telecommunications and connectivity officials have begun discussing region-wide approaches to cable protection[36], but enforcement capacity and capability, particularly the ability to monitor and respond to suspicious vessel activity near cable routes, remain thin across most member nations. This is an area where India's expanding maritime domain awareness network, its Coast Guard's presence in the eastern Indian Ocean, and its own stake in cable security create a natural basis for technical cooperation, shared best practices on cable route mapping, incident response protocols, and potentially coordinated surveillance of high-risk segments.

Convergences and Divergences

Mapping the Indian and ASEAN perspectives reveals a pattern in which the strongest convergences lie in functional, non-sovereignty-related domains, while the sharpest divergences cluster around issues directly

implicating territorial sovereignty and great power competition and alignment.

Areas of convergence include a shared commitment to UNCLOS as the basis for maritime order. Even where interpretation of certain articles differs, a shared interest in chokepoint security, particularly the straits extensively used by maritime trade, creates complementary rather than competing roles. There is growing convergence on undersea infrastructure protection, which is an issue with no pre-existing sovereignty baggage and is witnessing rising salience on both sides. Capacity and capability building, where India's defence exports meet ASEAN requirements, particularly among states seeking to diversify their supplier base, is an upcoming area of convergence. The shared preference for non-aligned or multi-aligned approaches to great power competition will allow functional cooperation on MDA and HADR without requiring formal bloc alignment is another area.

Areas of divergence include the SCS itself, where India's interests and therefore stance are largely derived from the notion of FoN and the general value of the 2016 arbitral ruling for international law. ASEAN internal divisions, epitomised by the Philippines' approach, make it difficult for India to calibrate its posture without appearing to take sides in an intra-ASEAN debate. Another area is the Taiwan Strait, where India's stakes are indirect and its declaratory posture cautious, while for several ASEAN states the issue is an existential high-risk challenge. The Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia are receptive to Indian defence equipment, reflecting one pace of military capacity building. Other ASEAN members, particularly those with closer ties to China and the US, or strong non-alignment traditions, remain more circumspect about visible defence cooperation that could be read as bloc-building. Bilateral relationships with India move considerably faster than the ASEAN-India multilateral process, revealing a distinct institutional pace. This creates a structural mismatch between the rhetoric of ASEAN centrality and the reality of where substantive cooperation occurs.

Towards a Cogent India-ASEAN Maritime Security Framework

A cogent framework can be summarised around four organising principles. First, sequencing by sensitivity. The framework should front-load cooperation in low-sensitivity domains, like undersea infrastructure protection, Blue Economy, HADR, and ocean governance advocacy, where ASEAN consensus is achievable. Reserve higher-sensitivity aspects, such as defence equipment and intelligence-sharing on the SCS, for the bilateral track with willing partners. Second, geographic anchoring. The Bay of Bengal should serve as the primary geographic anchor for the framework's most concrete deliverables. The advantage in this approach is the comparative absence of great power contestation there relative to the SCS, allowing the framework to demonstrate tangible results before extending into more contested waters. Third, normative leadership through ocean governance. India and ASEAN shared interests offer a venue for joint diplomatic leadership that requires no military commitment and reinforces the rules-based credentials of both sides. Fourth, capability diversification as the connective thread. By positioning Indian defence and Blue Economy capabilities as complementary, rather than alternative to those offered by other partners, India can be embedded within ASEAN members' broader diversification strategies without forcing binary choices. An example is the approach exemplified by the Philippines' BrahMos acquisition alongside its continuing alliance relationship with the US.

Such a framework would be cogent as it does not attempt to resolve the structural divergences on the SCS, on Taiwan, or on alignment vis-à-vis China, which are issues highly unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. Instead, it channels cooperative energy into domains where India's and ASEAN capabilities and requirements, and the absence of zero-sum dynamics align. This could enable building the institutional plumbing of working groups, interoperable MDA, and financing mechanisms that would allow cooperation to expand into more sensitive domains as and when the political space permits.

A Practical Framework: Blending Bilateral and ASEAN-Wide Tracks

Given these convergences and divergences, a workable India-ASEAN maritime security framework should be conceived not as a single architecture but as a dual-track, mutually reinforcing system. However, there are a few gaps that need to be acknowledged and addressed first.

Gaps to be Addressed

Presently, there are several structural gaps that limit the effectiveness of India-ASEAN maritime cooperation. First is the institutional gap, which would be addressed by the institutionalisation of a dedicated ASEAN-India Maritime Security Working Group (AIMSWG) with its own budget and charter. Second, there is a capability-interoperability gap. India's naval and coast guard communication systems, though increasingly compatible with Quad partners, have not been systematically tested for interoperability with most ASEAN navies and coast guards beyond Singapore and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam. Third, there is an information-sharing gap. While the IFC-IOR has expanded its partner network, the granularity and timeliness of data shared with ASEAN partners lag behind that shared with Quad members. Further, there is no agreed-upon framework for a common operating picture spanning the common areas of maritime interest, i.e., the Bay of Bengal and the SCS. Fourth, there is a financing and procurement gap. India's defence export financing mechanisms remain less competitive in tenor and terms than those offered by some other suppliers. This has perhaps constrained the scalability of the BrahMos-type success beyond a handful of cases. Fifth, there is a normative-coordination gap on emerging ocean governance issues. India and ASEAN states have not developed a coordinated position on the various emerging facets of international maritime law despite substantially overlapping interests as developing littoral and archipelagic states. Sixth, and perhaps most importantly, there is a perception gap. ASEAN members frequently view India's Indo-Pacific engagement as secondary to its Quad commitments and its IOR preoccupations, while India sometimes treats ASEAN centrality as a process to be managed rather than a partnership to be substantively resourced.

Track One: The ASEAN-wide Track

This should be confined to functions where consensus is achievable. These include MDA and related information-sharing built on linkages between the IFC-IOR and Southeast Asian fusion centres under the IPOI Maritime Security pillar; HADR coordination and joint exercises open to all ASEAN members regardless of their South China Sea posture; Blue Economy cooperation under the ASEAN-India Plan of Action; and joint advocacy on global ocean governance issues where India and ASEAN interests substantially align. This track should deliberately avoid framing itself around any specific contingency, specifically Taiwan, and should present itself as a capacity-capability-resilience-building aspect. This framing could, most likely, retain the participation of ASEAN's more China-aligned members.

Track Two: The Bilateral Track

This track should be where substantive, capability-intensive cooperation occurs, calibrated to each partner's threat perception and political comfort level. With the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, this would mean continued defence platform cooperation, building on the BrahMos precedent, intelligence-sharing on South China Sea developments, and maritime exercises that stop short of formal alliance signalling. With Indonesia, the emphasis should be on the IORA-linked Blue Economy and Bay of Bengal-Andaman Sea connectivity, leveraging the existing 2018 Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation reinforced by the recent visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Jakarta.[37] With Singapore, the relationship should anchor technical cooperation on undersea cable security and MDA, given the IFC-IOR and Singapore's Fusion Centre connection. With Thailand and Myanmar, the BIMSTEC and Bay of Bengal sub-regional architecture should be the primary vehicle, alongside the Trilateral Highway's maritime logistics components. With Malaysia and Brunei, cooperation can focus on hydrocarbon-sector maritime safety and chokepoint monitoring given their position along the Malacca Strait and SCS, respectively. With Cambodia and Laos, engagement should remain modest and largely confined to capacity and capability building

scholarships and HADR training, avoiding any framing that could be perceived as anti-China.

The connective tissue between the two tracks could be the AIMSWG, distinct from existing dialogue mechanisms. This working group could be tasked specifically with cataloguing which initiative could be 'multilateralised' for wider ASEAN participation. It would have to consider political sensitivities and ensure that ASEAN-wide mechanisms remain interoperable with bilateral systems already in place. This would ensure that bilateral progress is not orphaned from the multilateral architecture.

Short, Medium and Long-Term Avenues

In the short term, roughly one to two years, priorities should include formally establishing the AIMSWG under the existing Track 1.5 ASEAN-India dialogue architecture; expanding IFC-IOR liaison arrangements to ASEAN coastal states that have not yet positioned ILOs; conducting a baseline interoperability assessment between Indian and ASEAN naval and coast guard communication systems; and initiating a joint India-ASEAN technical dialogue on undersea cable protection under the IPOI Maritime Security pillar.

In the medium term, roughly three to five years, priorities should include scaling bilateral defence capability cooperation; building on the BrahMos precedent with the Philippines a more structured Indo-Pacific capacity and capability partnership facility offering standardised financing terms for ASEAN maritime states seeking to diversify suppliers; institutionalising the biennial MILAN exercise as the anchor multilateral naval engagement linking India's Andaman and Nicobar Command with ASEAN navies; establishing a standing HADR component pre-positioned for Bay of Bengal contingencies; developing a joint India-ASEAN position for emerging maritime law issues; and operationalising a Bay of Bengal sub-regional MDA arrangement linking India, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh under a BIMSTEC maritime security mechanism.

In the long term, five to ten years, the aspiration should be to pursue an Indo-Pacific maritime security architecture in which the India-ASEAN relationship constitutes the stable middle layer. This could be more substantive than the ASEAN Regional Forum, less alliance like and built around a genuinely interoperable MDA network spanning the eastern Indian Ocean and the SCS; a mature defence-industrial relationship in which Indian defence exports form a meaningful part of the procurement mix for several ASEAN navies; joint India-ASEAN leadership on ocean governance issues within global fora, leveraging shared interests; and a standing consultative mechanism, not a formal alliance commitment, for contingencies such as Taiwan and strait disruptions, a major chokepoint incident, or large-scale disasters.

4. Conclusion

India and ASEAN approach maritime security from distinct but increasingly complementary vantage points and an interconnected strategic space. India's expansive SAGAR and now MAHASAGAR vision and ASEAN's more constrained, consensus-bound approach shaped by the immediate realities of the SCS, the Taiwan conflict spillover risks, and growing concern over critical undersea infrastructure are an intrinsic part of the interconnected strategic space. The increasingly assertive posture of the Philippines, while strategically significant, has also exposed the limits of ASEAN cohesion on its most sensitive maritime issue. This is a reality India must navigate carefully. Rather than seeking a single overarching maritime security treaty or alliance, neither feasible nor desirable given ASEAN's institutional culture and India's strategic autonomy tradition, the most promising path is a dual-track framework that allows substantive bilateral cooperation. Addressing the institutional, interoperability, information-sharing, financing, normative-coordination, and perception gaps through the short-, medium-, and long-term measures proposed would transform the current pattern of episodic, largely bilateral cooperation into a cogent India-ASEAN maritime security framework.

Endnotes

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2 Indian Navy (2015); Indian Navy (2026)

3 ASEAN Secretariat (2019).

4 United Nations (1982)

5 Saha and Mishra (2020)

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10 Indian Ocean Rim Association (n.d.)

11 Republic of India and Republic of Indonesia (2018)

12 Haldar and Maheshwari (2026, March 2)

13 Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (2022)

14 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2025)

15 Xavier and Banerjee (2024, August 27)

16 Chaudhary and Bose (2022, June 29)

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18 Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs (2026, July 7)

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