RIS Discussion Paper # 367

India–ASEAN Maritime Partnership: From Cooperation to Collaboration in the Indo-Pacific

Sujeet Samaddar and Vanshika Goyal

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RIS-DP # 367

November 2026

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India–ASEAN Maritime Partnership: From Cooperation to Collaboration in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract: India and ASEAN are natural maritime allies, with maritime space between them serving as a foundation for strong economic and cultural ties. The two began maritime engagement through policy dialogues and capacity-building programmes on maritime security, counter piracy, and search and rescue operations, which have since expanded into areas such as the blue economy, ocean management, renewable energy, climate-resilient infrastructure, and the sustainable use of ocean resources in the Indo-Pacific. Leveraging the convergences of two visionary documents, IPOI and APOI, maritime engagement between the two, seen so far through the lens of cooperation, requires deeper engagement towards collaboration. The paper distinguishes maritime cooperation that builds trust through coordination and maritime collaboration that creates joint regional capabilities. India and ASEAN both support an open and rules-based Indo-Pacific and ASEAN Centrality. Therefore, the paper proposes a Joint Blue Economy Roadmap, a Global Maritime Accord and initiatives such as MARRS and MAGIC, an ASEAN-India maritime policy coordination mechanism, cyber resilient frameworks and a HADR training institution, offering a practical pathway to collaboration for a secure, rules-based, and sustainable Indo-Pacific maritime order.

Keywords: India, ASEAN, Maritime Cooperation, Maritime Collaboration, Blue Economy, Indo-Pacific

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, oceans have connected civilisations. It has facilitated long-distance trade, cultural exchange, and people-to-people connections. Peninsular India connects with West Asia across the North Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, and through the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea, and the Eastern part of the Indian Ocean, it connects with East Asia and

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even further into the Pacific Island States. India has gained immensely from this geographical advantage.

India, in alignment with its declared vision of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, has been enhancing maritime engagement and forging partnerships with its maritime neighbours[1]. One such partnership that India seeks to beneficially strengthen is with ASEAN. ASEAN, with 10 of the 11 members being coastal states, is fundamentally a maritime region, and from a strategic viewpoint, the "region's major sea lines of communication, such as the Malacca, Singapore, and Lombok Straits, and the South China Sea, are vital arteries in the world's supply chain, energy security, and connectivity"[2]. The maritime space between the two has served as the foundation of economic and cultural connections and contributed immensely to each other's well-being and prosperity since pre-modern times. It continues to do so even today. The modern period economic engagement between the two began in the early 1990s when India announced a major overhaul of its economic policies. Since then, ASEAN has become a key trading partner of India, with an 11 per cent share in its global trade, with bilateral trade reaching about US$ 128 billion in 2025-26[3], up from US$ 5.84 billion in 1996-97[4]. However, India has consistently recorded a merchandise trade deficit with ASEAN, and the deficit was approximately US$ 45.2 billion in 2024-25[5].

In recent years, maritime engagements between ASEAN and India have seen an upward trend. The sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the region, including the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, carrying one-third of the world's crude oil, are a key medium for merchandise and energy shipments, and therefore a stable maritime environment becomes a matter of global importance both from an energy and commodity security perspective. Food security is another consideration. The region accounts for nearly 22 per cent of global fishery production, but overfishing and Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing have become a constant threat to this important source of protein for the regional population. Marine debris and solid waste remain

untreated and eventually flow into the seas and oceans. Single-use plastic compounds the problem, particularly as microplastics enter the food chain through salt and marine fisheries. Other concerns include maritime crime, terrorism, smuggling and human trafficking, piracy and armed robbery against ships.[6]

For these reasons, maritime issues between ASEAN and India extend well beyond shipping and transport to encompass trade, investment, blue economy cooperation, maritime safety and security, sustainable development, digital innovation, capacity building and resilient supply chains. Though earlier engagements between India and ASEAN have focused more on maritime security in the region but, now there is a visible thrust to explore a multifaceted agenda that entails ocean management, safety at sea, compliance and regulation requirements in accordance with international treaty obligations, renewable energy, climate resilient infrastructure, sustainable use of ocean resources, all of which significantly and cumulatively impact the region's economic development. This requires a paradigm shift in maritime engagement that scales from tactical cooperation towards operational and strategic collaboration.

Therefore, the paper distinguishes between maritime cooperation and maritime collaboration between India and ASEAN. It identifies additional maritime issues that could form the baseline agenda for future dialogue, suggests convergences, and presents actionable pathways and institutional mechanisms for leveraging synergies in existing institutional mechanisms for the common purpose of co-prosperity.

2. ASEAN-India Maritime Partnership

2.1. Political Engagement

India and ASEAN began their formal engagement in 1992 through a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership. In 1996, it was elevated to a full Dialogue Partnership. In 2002, the first India-ASEAN Summit took place, marking the start of an annual apex leader-level meeting and by

2012, the engagement had expanded into a Strategic Partnership[7]. After India-ASEAN relations were elevated to the summit level, the two jointly presented normative action plans to strengthen maritime engagement and coordination in the priority areas discussed. The first Plan of Action (POA) was adopted for 2004 - 2010 to implement the partnership, and subsequently it focused on trade and economic cooperation, Science and Technology (S&T), and tourism and cultural exchanges[8]. In 2022, the collaboration reached its highest level when the two sides celebrated 30 years of engagement with the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)[9]. As per a Ministry of External Affairs briefing note, "India's engagement with the ASEAN has been driven primarily by (i) Act East Policy (AEP) with focus on ASEAN; (ii) build on our Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiatives (IPOI); and (iii) enhancing physical and digital connectivity"[10].

2.2. Trade Relations

ASEAN is India's second-largest regional trading partner, with bilateral merchandise trade at about US$ 128 billion in 2025-26. This underscores that ASEAN-India engagement is beyond strategic or geopolitical contours but is very significantly economic in nature too.

However, the trade deficit has been consistently widening, reaching approximately US$ 45.2 billion in 2024-25[11] from about US$ 14.1 billion in 2015-16.[12] This widening trade deficit highlights the need to complement trade liberalisation with deeper industrial and maritime collaboration. Considering that the core connectivity is oceanic, deepening maritime engagement could enhance the efficiency, resilience, and competitiveness of bilateral trade and enlarge its constituent elements. Joint initiatives in shipbuilding, maritime logistics, port digitalisation, marine technology, and Blue Economy value chains could help shift the partnership from one driven primarily by merchandise trade towards one based on co-production, innovation, and integrated maritime supply chains that may ultimately narrow the deficit in the future if not reverse it altogether.

2.3. Regional Maritime Cooperation Through the Decade

Maritime issues were not initially recognised as a specific area for cooperation, but as engagements evolved and dialogue intensified, it was given specific mention in the POA for 2016 - 2020, which called for promoting cooperation in maritime security, counter-piracy, and search and rescue cooperation, along with strengthening maritime transport connectivity[13].

India - ASEAN maritime cooperation spans the entire Indo-Pacific region. Individually, in 2018, India unveiled its vision for the Indo-Pacific through the IPOI, calling for a free, open, and inclusive order,[14] and ASEAN articulated its maritime perspective on the Indo-Pacific through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (APOI), launched in 2019[15]. Both visions espouse the principle of ASEAN Centrality.

Maritime Cooperation has, therefore, assumed a new salience since 2018. The POA to implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021- 2025) calls for exploring implementation activities to advance *cooperation* between APOI and IPOI, with a focus on maritime connectivity and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[16].

The extracts of the Plan are placed in Box 1. The Plan, therefore, reflects a transition from a predominantly security-centric conception of maritime cooperation towards a multidimensional cooperation agenda encompassing other elements such as sustainability, economic development, and ocean governance.

2.4. Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation

In 2023, India and ASEAN issued a joint statement on Maritime Cooperation at the 20th ASEAN-India Summit in Indonesia[17]. The statement builds upon the CSP signed in 2022. It states, "Reaffirming their commitments towards peace, stability, and security in the Indo-Pacific region through a rules-based approach and recognising the importance of oceans and seas, they declared to:

Box 1: Extract from Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021-2025)

14. Promote maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation and overflight, unimpeded commerce, mutual trust and confidence, exercise of self-restraint, the non-use of force or of the threat to use force, and the resolution of disputes by peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the relevant Standards and Recommended Practices of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and the relevant instruments and conventions of the International Maritime Organization (IMO).
15. Explore cooperation, where appropriate, to promote common principles, objectives and elements between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) adopted at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) announced by India at the 14th East Asia Summit in Bangkok.
16. Promote maritime cooperation, including maritime security, counter piracy, maritime safety and search and rescue (SAR) cooperation, and information sharing, through appropriate mechanisms under the ASEAN-India framework and other appropriate Final 4 ASEAN-led mechanisms, including EAS, ADMM-Plus, ARF, Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum and where appropriate, promote technical cooperation, capacity building and development, exchange of experience and sharing of knowledge and expertise.
36. Promote maritime transport cooperation between ASEAN and India and encourage potential private sector participation in the development of seaports, maritime logistics network and maritime services in order to create greater efficient linkages.

a) Explore cooperation on the sustainable use of the oceans, seas, and marine resources,
b) Enhance connectivity by exploring synergies between the 'Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025',

c) Promote cooperation in the Blue Economy,
d) Prevent and reduce marine debris,
e) Development of maritime infrastructure, including maritime industries focusing on the areas of fisheries and shipbuilding,
f) Enhance food security and nutrition,
g) Enhance ASEAN-India Space Cooperation,
h) Cooperation for the development and research of marine technology, including digitisation, data analytics, and data statistics,
i) Conservation and preservation of underwater natural and cultural heritage,
j) Task appropriate mechanisms to strengthen maritime cooperation."

Therefore, this 'Joint Statement' prepares a comprehensive bilateral maritime agenda, encompassing maritime domain awareness (MDA), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), counter-piracy, combating IUU fishing, capacity building, sustainable ocean management, and enhanced maritime connectivity.

Further, realising the potential of marine transport connectivity, the POA 2026-2030[18] outlines areas of cooperation such as private-sector participation in the development of seaports, maritime logistics network and maritime services to improve maritime efficiency, lowering logistics costs and deepening supply chains.

2.5. Recent Initiatives

In the 21st ASEAN-India Summit meeting held in Vientiane, Lao PDR, the joint statement declared, "To Advance the implementation of ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation and continue to cooperate on areas such as maritime security, blue economy, sustainable fisheries, marine environmental protection, marine biodiversity, and climate change issues, among others"[19]. The declaration also referred "Enhance connectivity between ASEAN and India in line with the "Connecting the Connectivities" approach, by exploring synergies between the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and its successor document, the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Final 5 Plan (ACSP) and India's

connectivity initiatives in the region under India's Act East Policy and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision". Incidentally, the concept of 'Connecting the Connectivities' was first articulated in an ASEAN Plus Three summit meeting in 2018[20].

At the 22nd India-ASEAN Summit, held on 26 October 2025 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the year 2026 has been designated as 'ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation', under which, among other activities, ASEAN-India Conference on Blue Economy, ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise, East Asia Summit Conference on Maritime Security Cooperation and East Asia Summit Maritime Heritage Festival are planned to be organised to forge partnerships with the ASEAN members[21]. Therefore, the maritime engagement between ASEAN and India continues to grow proactively.

As seen from the foregoing, ASEAN-India maritime relations reflect a clear evolution. From an initial focus on political dialogue and maritime security, it is now a comprehensive partnership encompassing connectivity, sustainable development, technological innovation, environmental stewardship, and ocean governance. This historical progression provides the foundation for the next phase of the partnership characterised by jointly developed capabilities, new institutions, technologies, and practical initiatives that deliver tangible sustainable benefits for regional peace, stability, and shared prosperity on the principle of mutual respect, equity, and transparency.

2.6. Bilateral Maritime Engagements with ASEAN Member States

India has also engaged bilaterally with ASEAN member states for maritime cooperation. For instance, with Indonesia, through the India-Indonesia Security Dialogue (2022), both countries agreed to enhance maritime, defence, and cyber security cooperation[22]. India extended a Letter of Credit (LoC) for US$ 100 million (2014) and another US$ 500 million (2023) and transferred an Indian Navy Corvette to Vietnam.[23] The Philippines and India signed a US$375 million deal for BrahMos

supersonic cruise missiles[24]. India along with Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand had periodic interactions with the Indian Navy on maritime security, including maritime exercises in 2023[25]. In 2024, the Philippine Coast Guard and the Indian Navy concluded a White Shipping Information Exchange. Earlier, India had concluded White Shipping Agreements with Singapore, Malaysia, and Myanmar. During the discussion on the POA for the Implementation of the India-Vietnam CSP for the period 2024-2028, Vietnam and India signed an MoU for the development of a national maritime heritage complex at Lothal, Gujarat[26].

ASEAN-India naval engagement has evolved from bilateral confidence-building exercises and coordinated patrols to increasingly complex multilateral engagements such as MILAN 2026 and International Fleet Review 2026, which was held in Visakhapatnam in February 2026. Nine ASEAN navies[27] participated in a range of exercises and professional exchanges, and the ASEAN Navy leadership also joined a "Conclave of Chiefs" following the operational phase. Interestingly, the theme of the IFR and MILAN 2026 was "Camaraderie, Cooperation, Collaboration"[28].

This evolution reflects a transition from tactical interoperability and maritime security cooperation towards broader maritime collaboration encompassing MDA, HADR, anti-submarine warfare, cyber resilience, and coordinated responses to emerging maritime challenges. A summary of the significant bilateral maritime engagements with ASEAN member countries is placed in Table 1[29].

There has, therefore, been substantial improvement in maritime engagement which have become pivotal in strengthening dialogue, cooperation, and coordination in the Indo-Pacific region across not only with ASEAN member countries but also in other regional forums.

Though only five of the eleven ASEAN states are members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between ASEAN and IORA was concluded on 4 September 2023

Table 1: India's Bilateral Maritime Engagements with ASEAN Countries

Countries	Key Maritime Milestones with India	Strategic Significance
Singapore	SIMBEX has been going on since 1994, including naval logistics, submarine rescue exercises, maritime training, and port cooperation.	India's longest-running bilateral naval exercise, a benchmark for interoperability.
Vietnam	US$600 million Defence Lines of Credit. Also, India transferred INS Kirpan in 2023. Cooperation in hydrography, MDA, naval training and defence-industrial cooperation is ongoing.	India's most comprehensive maritime strategic partnership in ASEAN.
Philippines	Export of the BrahMos coastal defence missile system (2022) and expansion of naval and coast guard cooperation and training.	India's emergence as a regional defence and maritime security partner.
Indonesia	Cooperation on Sabang Port, conduct of coordinated patrols along the maritime boundary line, naval exercises and maritime security cooperation. Renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Maritime Safety and Security Cooperation and the conclusion of the Implementing Arrangement between BAKAMLA RI and Indian Coast Guard	Strategic partnership at the gateway to the Strait of Malacca.

Table 1 continued...

Table 1 continued...

Thailand	India - Thailand Naval CORPAT, White Shipping and maritime security cooperation.	Enhances security in the Andaman Sea and eastern Indian Ocean.
Myanmar	Joint naval exercises, transfer of patrol vessels, coastal surveillance and maritime infrastructure assistance such as the Development of Port Sittwe and the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project.	Critical for Bay of Bengal security and connectivity. Entrepôt to ASEAN hinterland.
Malaysia and Brunei	Naval visits, training exchanges and maritime capacity building.	Expanding operational engagement with ASEAN maritime partners.
South Korea	Comprehensive Framework for Partnership in Shipbuilding, Shipping & Maritime Logistics, Cooperation in the Field of Ports, Maritime Heritage	Joining the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative

Source: Authors' own.

on the sidelines of the 43rd ASEAN Summit and Related Summits in Jakarta. The MoU is aimed at setting out, "practical cooperation between ASEAN and IORA to be undertaken by their respective Secretariats, particularly in the following areas: i) priority areas of cooperation of the AOIP and the IORA outlook on the Indo-Pacific (IOIP); ii) blue economy; iii) people-to-people exchanges; and iv) digital and green economies"[30] which focuses on enhancing cooperation and the adoption of sustainable practices in the Indian Ocean[31].

As per a PIB Release[32], "India launched SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) in 2015 to secure its immediate Indian Ocean neighbourhood. It later evolved and expanded its reach globally by launching MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) in 2025 to build partnerships across the broader Global South. Both doctrines work to improve regional security, grow the ocean economy, and respond to disasters".

These statements and briefings provide clear guidance for policymakers in identifying specific maritime aspects that are potential areas of constructive and productive maritime engagement.

3. Making the Next Move: From Cooperation to Collaboration

3.1. Cooperation and Collaboration

Although the terms "maritime cooperation and maritime collaboration" are frequently used interchangeably in policy discourse, they represent different levels of engagement between states and institutions. While no universally accepted definition in maritime law or international maritime policy formally distinguishes the two, the broader literature on international relations and collaborative governance provides a useful conceptual framework.

Maritime cooperation refers to the coordination of policies and activities among sovereign states in pursuit of shared or compatible

interests. As Robert O. Keohane[33] argues, "cooperation occurs when states adjust their behaviour to accommodate the preferences and interests of others because they recognise that such coordination produces mutual benefits, even though each actor continues to pursue its own national objectives". In the maritime domain, cooperation typically encompasses information sharing, MDA, naval exercises, search and rescue operations, hydrographic surveys, coast guard training, and coordinated responses to piracy, illegal fishing, marine pollution, or humanitarian disasters. Such activities generate interoperability and Standard Operating Protocols (SOPs) that strengthen confidence, reduce uncertainty, and improve collective maritime security while preserving the autonomy of participating states.

Maritime collaboration represents a more advanced, sophisticated and complex phase of engagement. It moves beyond coordination towards the joint creation of capabilities, institutions, technologies, or policies that no single participant could develop as effectively on its own. Barbara Gray[34] defines collaboration as "a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision". Similarly, Chris Huxham[35] argues that, "collaboration generates 'collaborative advantage' by enabling organisations to create outcomes that exceed what each could achieve independently". Applied to the maritime sector, collaboration implies shared governance, co-investment, joint research and development, common technological platforms, and long-term institutional arrangements. Examples include jointly developed maritime digital infrastructure, collaborative shipbuilding programmes, regional centres for marine scientific research, blue carbon restoration initiatives, or common maritime innovation ecosystems. Table 2 summarises the distinction between these terms.[36]

As shown in Table 2, the objective of maritime cooperation is to build trust, confidence, and mutual understanding among partners through dialogue, coordination, and shared action. The desired outcome

Table 2: Maritime Cooperation and Maritime Collaboration

Domain	Maritime Cooperation	Maritime Collaboration
Strategic Objective	Coordinate national policies and activities to address shared interests.	Jointly create regional capabilities, institutions, and long-term strategic outcomes.
Maritime Security	Naval exercises, White Shipping agreements, information sharing, coordinated patrols, search and rescue.	Integrated Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), jointly developed surveillance systems, common maritime security architecture, and co-development of autonomous maritime systems.
Blue Economy & Trade	Facilitate shipping, port calls, logistics dialogue, customs cooperation, fisheries management.	Joint port development, integrated logistics corridors, maritime industrial clusters, common digital trade platforms, regional blue economy value chains.
Maritime Technology and Innovation	Exchange technical expertise, training, best practices, and academic exchanges.	Joint R&D, co-development of autonomous vessels, AI-enabled shipping, smart ports, digital twins, maritime cybersecurity platforms, shared innovation hubs.
Climate and Ocean Sustainability	Information exchange on marine pollution, disaster response, ocean observations, and conservation initiatives.	Joint blue carbon programmes, collaborative marine scientific research, regional ocean observing systems, common climate adaptation projects, co-financed ecosystem restoration.

Table 2 continued...

Table 2 continued...

Marine Living Resources	Fisheries agreements, stock assessments, capacity building.	Joint aquaculture research, marine biotechnology, sustainable seafood value chains, shared resource management institutions.
Critical Marine Infrastructure	Coordination on submarine cable protection, navigational safety, and emergency response.	Joint investment in subsea cable resilience, offshore renewable energy, strategic ports, and resilient maritime infrastructure.
Industrial Development	Business delegations, investment promotion, regulatory dialogue.	Joint shipbuilding programmes, green ship technologies, offshore engineering, maritime manufacturing ecosystems.
Knowledge and Human Capital	Student exchanges, professional training, workshops, policy dialogue.	Joint centres of excellence, common research agendas, shared doctoral programmes, regional maritime innovation networks.
Governance	Consultation and coordination while retaining independent national implementation.	Shared governance mechanisms, joint funding, common standards, institutionalised decision-making, co-ownership of regional initiatives.

of maritime collaboration is creating shared capabilities through joint investment, technological innovation, institutional partnerships, and scientific research. Cooperation enables states to manage shared challenges through coordination and confidence-building, whilst collaboration enables partners to create shared capabilities and institutional capacities that can shape regional governance and jointly influence the future maritime order. Hence, cooperation and collaboration are successive stages of institutional maturity in diplomatic engagement.

This distinction has important implications for the future of ASEAN-India maritime relations. Over the past three decades, ASEAN and India have established a strong foundation of maritime cooperation through political dialogue, naval interactions, capacity-building programmes, MDA, and support for a rules-based order under United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). These initiatives have strengthened mutual confidence and trust and hence contributed to regional stability. However, the strategic and technological challenges of the Indo-Pacific now require a much more elevated engagement.

A transition from maritime cooperation to maritime collaboration calls for advancing a more resilient, innovative, imaginative, and sustainable partnership across the Indo-Pacific. This transition can trace its origins to the two visionary documents of India and ASEAN, namely IPOI and the AOIP. An analysis of these documents could possibly prepare a pathway for substantive collaboration.

3.2. IPOI and the AOIP: Convergence for Collaboration

As the POA (2021-25) calls for cooperation with IPOI and AOIP as the foundational basis, the first step is to identify convergences between the two. Both the initiatives emphasise, firstly, an open and rules-based Indo-Pacific, secondly, ASEAN Centrality, and finally, a cooperative maritime governance framework. The strategic vision is to have inclusive engagement rather than exclusive collaboration, underlying the significance of ASEAN's central role in the Indo-Pacific. They share

four overlapping pillars, namely maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development (including maritime ecology and resources), and economic cooperation.

3.3. Pillars of Collaboration

Three ASEAN member states co-lead various IPOI pillars that map to the AOIP's four priority areas. First, Thailand with Australia is the co-lead on maritime ecology, which also includes sustainable development. Second, Indonesia is the co-lead with France on maritime resources. Third, Singapore and Italy co-lead the science, technology, and academic cooperation pillar. However, the IPOI's trade, connectivity, and maritime transport pillar is co-led by Japan and the US, while maritime security, which has been subsumed under the AOIP's maritime cooperation umbrella pillar, is co-led by India and the UK, and disaster risk reduction and management is co-led by India and Bangladesh. All three are without ASEAN co-lead partners. Similarly, capacity building and resource sharing is co-led by Germany with no other partner country. Potentially, the capacity building pillar could accommodate an ASEAN member country, such as Vietnam or the Philippines.

Under the maritime cooperation pillar, maritime security, freedom of navigation, environmental protection, and sustainable ocean governance are the common objectives outlined in both initiatives. These areas cannot be effectively mitigated by one state as they require high human and capital resources, technological capabilities, and collaboration. Crucially, non-participation of even one relevant stakeholder can disrupt decades of cooperative efforts.

Significantly, the region, specifically the Bay of Bengal littoral, is prone to natural disasters such as cyclones, which have become an annual phenomenon causing substantial economic and human losses to the littoral states, India, Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand. Therefore, a higher level of collaboration on HADR could be considered through more institutionalised and robust alignment on knowledge sharing and research in associated S&T and instituting collaborative frameworks.

The other common pillar is trade connectivity and maritime transport. APOI also calls for focusing on physical, institutional, and digital connectivity. Since most of the trade between India and ASEAN is seaborne, maritime connectivity becomes a paramount subject for enhancing both cooperation and collaboration. Measures to ruggedise supply chains and leverage technological means to track vessels and cargoes via satellites, for shared real-time information sharing, etc., to ensure the safety and security of shipping could be considered.

Another pillar of convergence includes a commitment to sustainable development through climate-resilient infrastructure, biodiversity protection, and blue economy cooperation. Capacity building through institutional platforms, resource sharing, and training then becomes an area of potential collaboration.

Hence, both visions provide a solid foundation for maritime collaboration and offer a platform to prepare a comprehensive agenda for maritime collaboration.

4. Agenda for Maritime Collaboration

As per a World Bank report, "The ASEAN region is geographically diverse, covering a land area of 4.5 million km^2 or 3.3 per cent of the world area, and a coastline of 173,252 km, the third longest in the world". Adding India's own 2.4 million km^2 of EEZ and 11,098 kms of coastline[37] makes the region one of the world's largest contiguous maritime domains. Hence, with a total population base of more than 2 billion people, a combined GDP approaching US$ 8 trillion[38], an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of approximately 12.4 million km², and annual bilateral merchandise trade exceeding US$ 120 billion, makes the partnership one of the largest and most strategically significant maritime jurisdictions in the world, underscoring its potential to shape the future of the Indo-Pacific's maritime economy, security architecture, and ocean governance. Particularly, this region is home to some of the world's largest fisheries, substantial offshore energy resources, blue carbon ecosystems, and

marine biodiversity, amongst other resources, with globally critical SLOCs transiting through its adjoining ocean spaces. Indeed, ASEAN and India possess the credentials to shape the future of the Indo-Pacific maritime order through deeper maritime collaboration to unlock the full economic and strategic potential offered by geography, geo-economics and geo-politics to the region.

Therefore, recognising this latent potential, the ASEAN-India maritime agenda has undergone a significant but incremental transformation over the past three decades. Initially, cooperation was driven largely by traditional maritime security concerns, including sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and the peaceful resolution of disputes, together with non-traditional threats such as piracy, maritime terrorism, illegal trafficking, and HADR.

As the Indo-Pacific emerged as the centre of global economic activity and strategic competition, these concerns became increasingly intertwined with broader economic, environmental, and developmental challenges. The sustainable management of marine resources, maritime connectivity, the Blue Economy, marine pollution, food security, climate resilience, and marine scientific research have consequently become integral components of the maritime agenda.[39] This entails jointly developing technologies, investing in resilient maritime infrastructure, strengthening regional maritime institutions, fostering coordination on international forums, and undertaking collaborative scientific research. The convergence of security and economic interests, reinforced by intensifying strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific,[40] underscores the need for practical, outcome-oriented initiatives.

Although ASEAN and India have established a comprehensive normative framework for maritime engagement, implementation has yet to keep pace with ambition. The next phase of the partnership must therefore focus on translating shared principles into concrete, time-bound programmes that deliver measurable outcomes for regional security, sustainable development, and shared prosperity. The issue, therefore, is

to move beyond fragmented national initiatives towards creating trusted regional value chains supported by resilient connectivity.

4.1. ASEAN-India Blue Economy Collaboration

The Blue Economy has emerged as one of the most promising pillars of ASEAN-India cooperation because it combines economic growth with sustainable management of marine resources. The Blue Economy should also be recognised as a strategic instrument for supply-chain diversification in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment. As global production networks become more distributed, maritime industries will play a central role in ensuring resilient trade and secure access to critical resources. The Blue Economy,[41] collaboration agenda mentioned in the Annex to the POA (2021-25) focuses on the sustainable development of ocean resources, the reduction of marine debris, fisheries and agriculture, amongst others[42].

ASEAN Policy on Blue Economy. ASEAN has progressively institutionalised the Blue Economy as a central pillar of regional cooperation through a series of policy initiatives. The ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the Blue Economy (2021)[43] noted the 'emerging significance of the Blue Economy' and called for 'developing a regional action plan' to promote sustainable and inclusive ocean-based development. Building on this political commitment, the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework (2023)[44] established the Blue Economy as a new engine of regional growth, which accorded priority "to facilitate value creation, resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability". The Framework also advances the 'ASEAN ambition to develop an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable blue economy, making the region a significant contributor to economic growth and prosperity'. These priorities are further operationalised through the ASEAN Blue Economy Implementation Plan (2026-2030)[45], which "aims to guide ASEAN Member States (AMS) in harnessing the full potential of the Blue Economy as a driver of inclusive, sustainable, and resilient growth". It is "structured around five cross-cutting 'Blue outcomes' which provide the foundation for

identifying broad, integrative activities and supporting initiatives that reflect the ambition of the Blue Economy to promote regional coherence and collaboration. The outcomes focus on growing financial, physical, natural, human, and social capital to achieve the overall vision of ASEAN Blue Wealth".

India's Blue Economy Policy. India has prepared a draft Blue Economy Policy[46]. It stated, "India's Blue Economy can be defined as a subset of the national economy comprising the entire system of ocean resources and man-made economic infrastructure in marine, maritime and the onshore coastal zones within India's legal jurisdiction, which aid in the production of goods and services and have clear linkages with economic growth, environmental sustainability and national security." Though the policy is awaiting formal approval before promulgation, other documents, such as the Maritime India Vision 2030[47] and the Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047[48] introduce many elements of the Blue Economy as "policy". It "recognizes the vital importance of the Blue Economy as one of the fundamental pillars of economic growth. It also outlines a roadmap for sustainable development related to oceans, rivers and coastal regions, while also focusing on equity, inclusivity and innovation"[49].

ASEAN - India Blue Economy Roadmap. Despite the importance attached to the Blue Economy both in India and ASEAN, as well as convergence between the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework, the AOIP and the IPOI, a Joint ASEAN - India Blue Economy Roadmap is considered necessary for creating a common maritime economic architecture that links governments, industry, academia, and financial institutions. Such an approach would transform the regional Blue Economy from a collection of sectoral initiatives into a comprehensive and inclusive framework for sustainable, equitable and inclusive regional prosperity. Given the strategic importance of the maritime economy to both partners, this roadmap would provide an institutional mechanism for translating visionary political commitments into practical coordinated programmes covering all aspects and related activities of the Blue Economy, particularly focusing on sustainable fisheries, maritime

connectivity, shipbuilding, marine technology, ocean science, blue finance, and resilient coastal infrastructure.

4.2. Collaboration on Ocean Governance

Ocean Health and the Indo-Pacific Economy. As the world is increasingly challenged by the impact of climate change and global warming, many of its solutions are to be found in our oceans. Every second breath we take, we owe it to our oceans. The oceans provide critical ecosystem services such as carbon storage and oxygen generation, and products such as energy, food, and salt, apart from their central role in climate regulation. More than ninety per cent of the excess heat generated by global warming is absorbed by the oceans, with visible detrimental impacts on sea-level rise, marine biodiversity, fisheries, and coastal communities. However, these "oceanic public goods" are under increasing threat due to overexploitation of marine genetic resources, increasing marine pollution, unplanned mariculture, irresponsible marine tourism, indiscriminate wind farms, offshore infrastructure, wanton port expansion, offshore exploration, etc., leading to the creation of "ocean slums".

Marine pollution presents another area for collective action. Plastic waste, fertiliser runoff, agro-pesticides, hazardous chemicals and even abandoned fishing gear do not recognise man-made maritime boundaries. Increasingly, the world community believes this is a present and growing threat to energy, food, and climate security, which can have a downstream impact on migration, livelihoods, and eventually conflict between nations and, finally, on all of mankind. Ultimately, ocean health is no longer solely an environmental concern, but it has now assumed the contours of economic resilience, food security, and regional stability. Investing together in healthy oceans is, therefore, an investment for the long-term prosperity and security of the Indo-Pacific.

The oceans should, therefore, become the central platform for ASEAN-India environmental collaboration. Coordinated regional approaches to waste management, circular economy practices, and

sustainable fisheries management would deliver both environmental and economic benefits. Such engagement can begin with strengthening scientific collaboration in ocean observation systems, climate modelling, marine biodiversity research, and early warning systems for cyclones, storm surges, and tsunamis. Equally important is the protection and restoration of blue carbon ecosystems such as mangroves, seagrass meadows, and salt marshes, which not only capture significant quantities of carbon but also provide natural coastal protection against increasingly frequent extreme weather events.

These critical issues directly impact mankind's collective future and remain largely unaddressed in maritime discussions. For ASEAN and India, whose economies and populations are closely tied to the sea, oceans are integral to their existence. Therefore, the safety, security, stability, and sustainability of our oceans cannot be left only to the goodness of humankind and the good sense of nations or the lack of it.

Global Maritime Accord. The time is now for mankind to together prepare a Transformational Framework for the governance and administration of the global oceanic commons. A Global Maritime Accord (GMA), under the stewardship of India and ASEAN, can become a beacon of hope for a beleaguered world that sees the exploitation of oceanic public goods for private benefit. The GMA is proposed to be a novel, important, and timely initiative towards mitigating the risks of global warming, climate change, and unsustainable marine production through the judicious and equitable exploitation of oceanic resources in alignment with achieving broad-spectrum human security by leveraging the oceans.

Significantly, COP16[50] reaffirmed the commitment to conserve at least 30 per cent of coastal and marine areas by 2030, strengthened biodiversity monitoring and reporting frameworks, advanced biodiversity finance, and reinforced the sustainable management of marine and coastal ecosystems. The Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction

Table 3: ASEAN-India Collaboration on Ocean Governance

Agreement	Objective	Relevance for ASEAN-India Collaboration
Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (implemented through CBD COP16)	Implement the global biodiversity framework, including the "30×30" target, biodiversity monitoring, restoration and finance.	Joint marine biodiversity conservation, connected Marine Protected Area (MPA) networks, ocean observation systems, coastal ecosystem restoration, Blue Economy and marine scientific research.
BBNJ Agreement (High Seas Treaty)	Conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction through MPAs, environmental impact assessments, marine genetic resources, capacity building and technology transfer.	Collaborative ocean governance, marine scientific research, blue biotechnology, marine spatial planning, environmental impact assessments, ocean data sharing, capacity building, and development of common regional positions in future BBNJ COP negotiations.

Source: Authors' own

(BBNJ Agreement)[51] marked a significant shift in global ocean governance. Table 3 highlights how these two global frameworks can serve as practical drivers of ASEAN-India maritime collaboration.

These recent developments offer a unique opportunity for ASEAN-India maritime collaboration. India and ASEAN could jointly develop regional scientific research programmes, establish interoperable marine biodiversity observation systems, collaborate on blue biotechnology and marine genetic resources, undertake coordinated environmental impact assessments for transboundary maritime activities, and co-design networks of ecologically connected marine protected areas. By jointly implementing the key requirements of this framework for the common good of humanity, ASEAN and India can strengthen regional ocean governance while assuming stewardship in building a resilient, sustainable, and science-driven Indo-Pacific maritime order.

The GMA can become the base framework document for the international community to adopt as its primary mechanism for safe, secure, stable, and sustainable oceans. Hence, to halt and prevent further degradation of the oceans from human activities, a comprehensive GMA to conjoin forces in an organised and systematic manner for the conservation, preservation, protection and sustainable use of marine areas beyond national jurisdiction is necessary.

ASEAN and India, by collaborating on a jointly drafted GMA, a unique pact between oceans and mankind, will have an opportunity to shape emerging global ocean governance by coordinating their positions on biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction, sustainable ocean finance, and marine scientific research.

4.3. Case for the BBNJ Secretariat in the Global South

The BBNJ Agreement also presents an opportunity for ASEAN and India to collaborate in strengthening the emerging institutional architecture for global ocean governance. ASEAN and India could work together to support the establishment of an effective, accessible, and representative

BBNJ Secretariat that reflects the interests of the Indo-Pacific and the Global South. Given that almost all International Bodies have located their Secretariats in the Global North, it merits consideration that the BBNJ Secretariat be located in the Global South. ASEAN and India could diplomatically collaborate to identify a suitable candidate city for locating the BBNJ Secretariat in the region.

4.4. Maritime Technology and Strategic Industry Collaboration

For nearly three decades, ASEAN-India maritime engagement has been characterised by operational cooperation through confidence-building measures, naval exercises, MDA, hydrographic cooperation, search and rescue, HADR, and institutional capacity building. Today, however, the maritime domain is being transformed by digitalisation, artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, satellite-enabled surveillance, smart ports, advanced shipbuilding, and offshore renewable energy.

The next phase of the partnership should position ASEAN and India as co-developers of regional maritime solutions and innovation ecosystems that will shape the future of the Indo-Pacific. India's strengths in software engineering, digital public infrastructure (DPI), artificial intelligence, space technologies, and maritime analytics complement ASEAN's capabilities in advanced manufacturing, electronics, maritime logistics, and industrial production.

Collaborative initiatives could include smart ports, maritime cybersecurity platforms, autonomous navigation systems, digital logistics corridors, predictive maintenance technologies, marine data platforms, and green shipping solutions. Such partnerships would strengthen supply-chain resilience, promote technological self-reliance, and reduce dependence on extra-regional technology providers. These would build joint capabilities, shared institutions, and pooled innovation ecosystems that will provide the underlay for the next generation of maritime industries.

Shipbuilding is perhaps the most compelling opportunity for collaboration. India's share of global shipbuilding is only 0.06 per cent,

placing it at the 18th position in shipbuilding rankings, whereas three ASEAN states (South Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines) are placed in the top 6 shipbuilding nations[52]. As global demand grows for low-emission vessels, offshore support ships, autonomous surface vessels, research platforms, and specialised maritime infrastructure, ASEAN and India can build complementary industrial capabilities through joint design, co-development, co-production, and technology transfer rather than competing for the same markets. Universities, research institutions, classification societies, start-ups, and private industry should be integrated into collaborative innovation networks that accelerate research, demonstration projects, skills development, and commercialisation across the maritime sector.

Ultimately, maritime technology should not be viewed solely through a commercial or industrial lens. It is increasingly a strategic enabler of economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability, maritime security, and regional resilience. By moving beyond technology cooperation towards a more integrated technological collaboration, ASEAN and India can jointly create trusted maritime capabilities, resilient industrial ecosystems, and shared innovation platforms that strengthen both strategic autonomy and regional prosperity. The avenues to institutionalise maritime industrial collaboration are discussed as follows:

ASEAN-India Maritime Innovation Collaboration Initiative. Such an initiative would be a state-backed program that could be jointly developed by the ASEAN Secretariat working with the think tanks of the member countries. The elements of such a program could include, firstly to identify generation after next blue economy technologies notably oriented towards sustainability, reliability, and resilience. Secondly, co-design, co-development and co-production of innovative blue economy products and services that could be led by each Member country, and finally set up a special fund to support such innovations to grow in scope, scale and size for the benefit of all parties.

ASEAN-INDIA Maritime Industrial Collaboration Initiative. This initiative is proposed to be led by the captains of industry on both sides. The aim would be to create opportunities, leads and prospects for encouraging, facilitating and promoting maritime industry 4.0 within the ASEAN-India maritime industrial collaboration framework. It would structure mechanisms to encourage larger industrial participation/ investment in the regional maritime manufacturing ecosystem, by sharing technology, systems and processes for the common good of the region.

4.5. Maritime Collaboration on Security

Maritime security is a broad term encompassing the measures, policies, and practices adopted to combat threats to maritime interests. Maritime security and the Blue Economy evolve and develop in an interdependent manner. Maritime security provides the underlay for the Blue Economy, for example, through securing freedom of navigation and overflight, providing safe navigation and safety of the merchant marine fleet, sharing weather and oceanographic information with industries, and protecting assets and resources within the jurisdictional zones of its maritime arena. As the Blue Economy evolves, there is a natural requirement for greater demand for maritime security, which triggers investment and growth in the induction of appropriate capabilities. It is, therefore, vital that India and ASEAN balance these diverse issues to derive the maximum benefit from the maritime domain.

The enhanced and increasingly diverse role that maritime security will continue to play in the Blue Economy can be seen across all sectors in the Indo-Pacific arena. However, the oceans become a source of concern as non-state and state actors use the oceans in manners that impinge upon the safety of crew and cargo, the security of SLOCs, blocking of straits and passages that challenges the sovereign rights of nations for freedom of navigation and overflight, etc. These cause turbulence in maritime affairs that test political stability in the region. To preserve, protect and promote the sustainable use of the ocean spaces and support the precepts and principles of the Blue Economy Model of socio-economic development

requires apex-level collaboration, contribution and cooperation from all stakeholders.

Baseline requirements for Maritime Security and Safety. A combination of shared space, surface and seabed surveillance systems, supported by high-speed rapid response platforms such as interceptor crafts, hovercrafts and seaplanes is required to ensure that the oceans are not degraded by miscreants and criminals. None of these platforms are built at scale in the region though India can build hovercrafts.

Surveillance Mechanisms. In the context of developing a robust MDA architecture, there is a strong case for collaboration in developing and deploying an India-ASEAN equatorial orbit satellite system, Long Range Identification and Tracking systems, and widespread application of Automated Identification Systems for Dark Vessel tracking and recognition supported with Big DATA and artificial intelligence.

Seaplanes. The region is well suited for seaplane operations. These aircraft combine surveillance with response in one platform and offer a unique capability for MDA, SAR, HADR, logistics support to remote islands, environmental monitoring, and law enforcement. Such a platform would be highly useful for implementing the COP 16 and the BBNJ provisions. Given the archipelagic geography of Southeast Asia and India's extensive island territories, collaborative development, acquisition, production, training, and operational employment of amphibious aircraft could become an important new area of ASEAN-India maritime collaboration. India had earlier evinced interest in the Japanese US-2 amphibian aircraft for maritime safety and security operations in the entire Indian Ocean Region (IOR), although its acquisition did not materialise owing to its high capital cost. A future India-Japan-ASEAN collaboration on amphibious aircraft would fit naturally within the broader theme of moving from maritime cooperation to maritime collaboration by focusing on shared capability development rather than isolated national acquisitions. ASEAN and India could explore collaboration on amphibious aircraft for maritime security and humanitarian assistance.

White Shipping Agreements. At the state level, White Shipping Agreements and generation of data-fused common operational pictures shared amongst the relevant security and intelligence agencies would require the combined resources and strengths of nations working together for a common sustainable, safe, secure and stable future.

Towards institutionalising the above concepts for developing a structured maritime security collaboration mechanism, the following is proposed.

5. Recommendations

Maritime Automated Routing and Reporting System (MARRS). MARSS is conceived as a structured integration of earth-based information centres, intelligence and surveillance systems, with space-, sea-based and coastal sensors to create a composite picture of all activities in the common ocean spaces of interest. It is designed to identify and track all vessels in the region and provide early warning of deviations from established ocean routes. Leveraging AI algorithms that provide pattern recognition and anomaly detection features, MARSS can thus provide early warning of disruptions in maritime traffic, which will improve the safety of shipping and seafarers, reduce crime at sea, detect IUU fishing, and trace polluting vessels, thus contributing to better ocean governance in the region.

ASEAN-India Maritime Policy Coordination Mechanism. To strengthen maritime legal cooperation, it is proposed to create an ASEAN - India Maritime Policy Coordination Mechanism to facilitate regular consultations before major international maritime meetings, develop common positions on maritime security and safety, coordinate interventions in negotiations under the IMO, ILO, and UNCLOS frameworks, and promote joint initiatives on emerging issues such as autonomous shipping, maritime cybersecurity, green shipping, and marine environmental governance.

ASEAN-India Cooperation to Address Grey-zone and Hybrid Threats. The rapid digitalisation of the maritime sector has expanded

maritime vulnerabilities beyond conventional security challenges to include cyberattacks, GPS interference, AIS spoofing, attacks on critical port infrastructure, offshore energy installations, and subsea communication cables. ASEAN and India could, therefore, move beyond information sharing towards jointly developing cyber resilience frameworks, common technical standards, shared maritime threat intelligence, coordinated incident response mechanisms, and regular joint exercises to strengthen the security and resilience of the Indo-Pacific maritime domain. This would help build regional resilience against grey-zone and hybrid maritime threats.

ASEAN-India Institute for HADR Training. Given the frequency and intensity of climate-induced events combined with limited resources available in some of the ASEAN member countries, HADR assumes a critical humanitarian priority for collaboration. India has consistently demonstrated its credentials as a reliable first responder through HADR operations not only in the Indo-Pacific but more recently, through long-range emergency assistance to Venezuela, underscoring its growing capability to support humanitarian missions beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Building on the existing cooperation between India's National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), ASEAN and India could collaborate to create an ASEAN-India institute for HADR training at a location to be jointly agreed.

Maritime Administration and Governance Information Collation Systems (MAGIC). ASEAN and India should jointly develop an AI-enabled Maritime Administration and Governance Information Collation (MAGIC) System to support evidence-based maritime governance and data-driven decision-making. MAGIC would seamlessly source and synergistically integrate information from spaceborne and ground-based systems and combine it with open-source intelligence sources. Using advanced multi-source data fusion and Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) technologies, MAGIC converts isolated

'dots of data' into a coherent vector representing the larger operational picture while providing for event or activity related deep dives. Its RAG-based query architecture enables users to retrieve only the most relevant information for a specific operational or policy requirement, converting large volumes of disparate data into concise, evidence-based intelligence while avoiding information overload.

The above-mentioned collaboration opportunities can translate strategic dialogue into shared principles and into tangible outcomes through outcome-driven practical collaboration.

6. Conclusion

This chapter argues that the ASEAN-India maritime relationship should evolve from operational and tactical cooperation towards deeper strategic collaboration. Maritime cooperation builds trust, confidence, and mutual understanding through dialogue, coordination, and shared action. Maritime collaboration goes a step further by creating shared capabilities through joint investment, technological innovation, institutional partnerships, and scientific research. While cooperation enables ASEAN and India to respond effectively to contemporary maritime challenges, collaboration, on the other hand, equips them to anticipate, shape, and deal with future challenges and opportunities of the future. As the maritime domain becomes increasingly central to regional security, economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and technological advancement, the enduring success of this partnership will ultimately be determined by the depth and impact of its collaboration. Such an approach would elevate this engagement from tactical and operational cooperation to strategic collaboration and coordination.

The institutional foundations for this transition are already in place through the AOIP, IPOI, the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework, the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, successive Plans of Action, and India's Act East and MAHASAGAR policies.

India-ASEAN maritime collaboration can truly shape a secure, rules-based, resilient, and sustainable Indo-Pacific maritime order that could generate enduring regional value through shared capabilities, innovation, and co-prosperity.

Endnotes

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39 Khurana (2019)

40 Paul (2021)

41 The Blue Economy, per se, is multi-sectoral and multi-faceted and includes diverse elements including, but not limited to shipping, energy, marine infrastructure, fisheries, marine scientific research, environmental stewardship etc. It represents an integrated maritime economic ecosystem encompassing ports and logistics, shipping services, offshore renewable energy, marine biotechnology, aquaculture, seabed resources, and digital maritime services.

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Acknowledgements

Authors are grateful for the comments and suggestions received from reviewers for finalising the Discussion Paper. Thanks are also due to the publication team at RIS comprising Mr. Sachin Singhal and Mr. Sanjeev Karna for arranging the production of this Discussion Paper. Views are authors' own. Usual disclaimers apply.

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