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# Maritime Security: The Pillar of India's IPOI in Southeast Asia and Its Implications for Vietnam

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**Abstract:** *This article analyses the maritime security pillar of India's Indo-Pacific Outlook Initiative (IPOI) in Southeast Asia and its far-reaching impact on Vietnam. The study utilizes the analytical framework of neorealism, liberalism, and constructivism to examine the objectives and intentions of India's IPOI and ASEAN's AOIP in the context of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. The author's findings reveal a significant convergence of strategic interests between IPOI and AOIP, which brings numerous and tremendous benefits to Vietnam, such as fostering the Vietnam-India comprehensive strategic partnership and equipping Vietnam to tackle challenges from the rise of China. The rise of China, strategic competition among major powers, and the increasing significance of the Indo-Pacific have spurred India and ASEAN to develop their visions to adapt to the Indo-Pacific concept. However, the implementation of IPOI in Southeast Asia still faces several limitations, primarily due to the divergent understanding and goals of IPOI, which places a premium on maritime security, and AOIP, which is more focused on naval cooperation. Furthermore, differences in the perceptions of India and ASEAN on maritime security also contribute to these limitations, highlighting the need for further research and development.*

**Keywords:** *Vietnam; India; Maritime Security; Indo-Pacific; IPOI; AOIP*

## INTRODUCTION

Being one of the seven pillars of the IPOI, maritime security plays an essential role in India's security engagement with Southeast Asia through India's Act East Policy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the IPOI initiative in November 2019 at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, Thailand. Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative or IPOI is an open, non-treaty-based initiative for countries to work together for cooperative and collaborative solutions to the common challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The idea was initially proposed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the 14th East Asian Summit in Bangkok, Thailand, on 4 November 2019.

The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) is a cooperative effort among various stakeholders to tackle common challenges. It expands upon the "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) initiative launched in 2015 by the Indian government. IPOI is dedicated to enhancing maritime boundaries and fostering partnerships, strongly promoting free trade and sustainable resource utilization. It covers seven thematic areas: maritime security, maritime ecology, maritime resources, capacity building and resource sharing, disaster risk reduction and management, trade connectivity and maritime transport, science and technology, and academic collaboration (Indian Council of World Affairs 2022, 7).

Like IPOI, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was embraced by ASEAN leaders at the 34th ASEAN Summit in 2019 in Thailand, which is seen as guidance for the engagement of ASEAN in the broader Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.



Indeed, the AOIP was formed as a strategic response to escalating geopolitical tensions and the growing influence of major regional powers (Lin 2024). Further, the AOIP affirms ASEAN's role in maintaining peace, security, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. It puts forward an open and inclusive dialogue and cooperation in the ASEAN's priority areas: maritime, economy, connectivity, and sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Kominfo 2023). To realize the critical elements of the AOIP, ASEAN will collaborate in a wide variety of domains, such as maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, economics, and other possible areas of cooperation (ASEAN Secretariat 2019a).

This article examines the convergence of maritime security in India's IPOI and ASEAN's AOIP. Both of these perspectives acknowledge the significance of maritime security as a critical focus area on their agenda and a crucial component of the collaboration framework in the Indo-Pacific region. This article examines the factors driving India and ASEAN to prioritize the maritime security pillar in regional cooperation. The article will analyze the convergence of interests of India and ASEAN in the maritime security realm despite the numerous challenges and obstacles faced by both IPOI and AOIP. The article additionally discusses and assesses India's IPOI implementation in Southeast Asia and its impact on Vietnam as a member of ASEAN and maintaining a comprehensive strategic partnership with India.

This article presents three main arguments. First, the evolving geostrategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific region, characterized by the emergence of China and India as major players and the strategic rivalry between the United States and China, has substantial implications. Second, India and ASEAN recognize the significance of aligning with the US Indo-Pacific strategy, thus placing great emphasis on maritime security. Third, Vietnam can strategically leverage its maritime security cooperation with India to effectively pursue its national interests by capitalizing on the opportunities presented by the IPOI and AOIP initiatives.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used various methodologies such as analysis, interpretation, historical-logical methods, policy analysis, comparison, and statistics to elucidate the disparities between IPOI and AOIP. Furthermore, the study also employs a logical approach to effectively analyze and contrast the similarities and disparities between these two visions. This method will also elucidate the fundamental advancements of the issue, scrutinizing the shared characteristics and regulations of movement in the relationships among nations in the Indo-Pacific region. Specifically, it will explore the rivalry between major countries and the conduct of smaller and medium-sized nations.

This research utilizes original, primary, and secondary research documents. The data presented in this report are sourced from official documents and figures provided by the governments of India, ASEAN, China, the USA, and Vietnam. This will enhance the credibility of research evaluations. The study incorporates secondary sources to obtain comprehensive insights and viewpoints on the assessment matter, achieving a multi-faceted perspective in evaluating maritime security concerns. This includes considering the perspectives of India and ASEAN on maritime security, as well as the vision for the Indo-Pacific region.



## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article employs a security analysis framework that focuses primarily on maritime security. The notion of maritime security is a comprehensive and universal concept that has yet to be unified. Christian Bueger argues that the concept of maritime security lacks a definitive definition (Bueger 2015). Basil Germond posits that maritime security can be comprehended as safeguarding the maritime sector, encompassing policies, regulations, measures, and activities implemented to ensure security within the maritime domain (Germond 2015). According to Indian scholars, maritime security encompasses various strategic concerns, including security measures, human safety, seaport security, anti-terrorism, and other related issues (Subbarao 2016).

Like the “maritime security” concept, the “regional security environment” concept lacks a precise definition. When discussing security, individuals frequently assert it to be countered in the absence - or at least unlikeliness - of threats to a particular object (Boemcken 2016). Some scholars argue that it represents the absence of acute threats to the minimal acceptable levels of the fundamental values that people consider essential to survival (Krause and Nye 1975). Arnold Wolfers (2011) defines security as the absence of threats to acquired values and the lack of fear that these values will be attacked. Every subject has core security attributes, such as national, personal, or collective security. The regional security complex (RSC) theory is frequently employed as a research framework for analyzing regional security. It elucidates the dynamics of international relations within a specific region, offering insights into the security landscape and revealing the evolving trends towards securitization reshaping the intricate region. It presents a regional security framework that facilitates the analysis, explanation, and prediction of the development of the situation in a specific geographical area (Sadurski 2022).

Strategic competition can be defined as rivalry between states, falling between cooperation and total war while remaining below armed conflict and violence. It encompasses various activities such as espionage, economic rivalry, theft of intellectual property, intense competition in cyberspace, imposition of sanctions, information operations, legal warfare, strategic military positioning, diplomatic and military threats, intimidation, promotion of alliances, and diplomatic maneuvering. According to Scott D. McDonald (2020), strategic competition refers to the active rivalry between nations that regard their fundamental interests as threatened by the opposing side. Strategic competition theory explicates the strategic interactions between the hegemonic and rising powers during the power transition process (Zhou 2019). Strategic competition is fundamentally a long-term contest between revisionist powers and those who wish to preserve the current international order’s status quo (Paul et al. 2022). Competitors engage in activities to obtain an advantage in pursuing one of these long-term goals rather than engaging in isolated contests.

## CHANGING STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE IN INDIA-PACIFIC

### The Rise of China

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China advocates promoting the motto “Chinese dream” to realize the Chinese nation’s rejuvenation. In 2012, the Beijing government set an ambitious long-term goal: to build China into a fully developed and prosperous power by 2049 - that is, 100 years after the founding of the Republic People of China (PRC). The “Chinese dream” idea was put forward by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping, at the 2013 National People’s Congress, emphasizing that the highest aspiration of the Chinese people is the nation’s revitalization (Kuhn 2013). The country’s economic development has made China seek to expand its influence in various regions and worldwide. China aims to find a way to replace the position of the number one super-power of the USA, establishing a new world order in the direction of equality with the USA. Thus, China, under Xi Jinping, has made its intentions clear with very ambitious initiatives and plans, including the Chinese Dream (Mohanty 2013), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ohashi 2018), the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) (Chung 2018), the Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Kaya and Woo 2021). To realize its ambitions, China has sought to expand its influence throughout the region and the world, thereby contributing to limiting US influence and moving to replace America’s leadership role in the world order (Hossain 2019).

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, the Chinese economy has quickly expanded, with its GDP growing from 53.9 trillion Yuan (about \$7.58 trillion) in 2012 to 114.4 trillion Yuan (about \$15.77 trillion) in 2021. Its share of the global economy has increased from 11.3% to 18.5%. Additionally, China’s gross national income per capita reached \$11,890 in 2022, twice the amount recorded in 2012. In 2012, the added value of China’s manufacturing sector was 16.98 trillion Yuan (approximately \$2.37 trillion). By 2021, it had increased to 31.4 trillion Yuan (approximately \$4.37 trillion), representing nearly 30% of the global total, an increase from 22.5% (Xinhua 2022). It is forecasted that by 2040, China’s GDP will reach about US\$70 trillion (35% of the world’s GDP), while the figure of the USA is US\$30 trillion (15% of the world) (Zhang 2016, 53). China has long been considered the “world’s factory”, with outstanding advantages in the number of suppliers, assembly lines, workers, and expertise. Many companies, especially “technology giants” such as Google and Apple, consider China their central production location. According to data released by the China Foreign Exchange Administration, as of December 2023, China’s foreign exchange reserves were \$3,238 billion (while US foreign exchange reserves reached \$240 billion) (SAFE 2024).

At the 5th Plenum of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in October 2020, “dual circulation” was affirmed as a long-term economic development strategy, one of the basic principles in the Planning 14th Five-Year Development Plan and China’s Goals and 2035 Vision. The Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road are components of the BRI initiated in 2013. Suppose the land belt includes the ancient Silk Road area as an extension and six major corridors connecting Europe with China. In that case, the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) creates a network connecting the three continents: Asia-Europe-Africa (Jiao 2013). Over 100 countries have expressed interest in participating in the BRI initiative. By mid-2020, China’s BRI

has attracted over 2,600 projects with a total investment capital of about \$3,700 billion (Holland and Faulconbridge 2021).

Militarily, China remains one of the world's leading military powers. In 2021, China announced its annual military budget increased by 6.8% to US\$209 billion, about 1.3 % of GDP. This number has grown continuously for more than 20 years, and China is also the second-largest military spender in the world (US Department of Defense 2021, 142). In 2022, China was ranked third out of 142 countries rated by Global Fire Power (GFP), behind only the USA and Russia, while India was ranked fourth (Global Fire Power 2022). Its defense budget is set to experience a modest increase, reaching a total of \$229 billion.

Moreover, to increase its military capabilities, China places great importance on enhancing the PLA and transforming it into a top-tier military force by 2049. The state media has reported that the defense budget increase is intended to modernize the PLA's operations. In an assessment of China's military potential, the USA's National Security Strategy 2022 states that China is the only competitor to the US with the intention and, to a greater extent, the ability to alter the international order (Biden 2022). A report by the US Department of Defense released in 2023 confirmed that China seeks to amass national power to achieve "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049 and to alter the global order better to serve China's national interests and governance structure. It also states that China's ambition to reshape the international order stems from the Party's political and governing structure's goals and national strategy (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2023).

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's rise led to views that the era of American dominance had come to a close. China has emerged from the "Hide your strength, bide your time" phase to fortify its position by enhancing its soft power and broadening its global influence to supplant the USA as the world's dominant power (Godbole 2015). China's ascent will undermine America's dominant position and significantly weaken its influence in the post-Cold War global order. Of course, the increasing prominence of China causes the US and other countries to view it as a challenge and perhaps a threat to their interests, leading to skepticism regarding China's true intentions and ambitions (Christensen 2015). China is actively enhancing its logistics infrastructure and establishing military bases in foreign locations to expand its influence. China's "String of Pearls" strategy has created a network of Chinese commercial and military establishments and connections along its maritime communication routes, including the construction of new facilities in Djibouti, a country in the Horn of Africa, access to areas of the Ream Naval Base in Cambodia, and other locations in the Indo-Pacific (Wuthnow 2020). Further, China constantly pressures neighboring countries, makes unlawful and coercive claims in the South China Sea (SCS) (Kuok 2019), and causes tension on the border with many countries, typically India.

For India, the rise of China has specific impacts on this country's interests, even considered challenges, as the two nations have historically been seen as competitors. China's ongoing efforts to increase its influence in South Asia by investing in various infrastructure projects, such as roads, highways, railways, and sea defense, have impacted its interests and India's traditional sphere of influence in the region. India's dominant role and influence are overshadowed, disrupting the balance of power in China's pursuit of regional and global power. In recent years, there has been an intensification of the Sino-Indian rivalry and China's increasing threat to India's security (Sheikh 2023). India was compelled to implement strategic adjustments



in response to the emergence of China in the Indian Ocean, which threatened its security and interests in the Western Indian Ocean (Hazra and Bhaskar 2023).

The Act East Policy of India serves as a mechanism to counterbalance the influence of China in the Indian Ocean and to encourage the country to strengthen its cooperative relationships with East Asia and Southeast Asia. In light of the USA's free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, India has endorsed establishing a rules-based order and the region's freedom of navigation (Bratton 2023). China's activities in the East China Sea and the SCS have caused concern among neighboring Southeast Asian countries and Japan, giving rise to the "China threat theory" (Meng 2017). The rift in Japan-China relations has long been affected by historical issues and continues to be affected by the dispute surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. There is still China's anti-Japanese sentiment with the perception that Japan is part of the US strategy to contain China. For Beijing, the formation of the QUAD and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIPS) of the US and Japan are evidence that the West and Japan want to restrain China (He and Li 2020).

### ***Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific***

The US-China rivalry is a competition for leadership between a hegemonic but declining power and a rising power that wants to transform the pre-existing international order into a multipolar direction. The USA's approach stems from the belief that maintaining an international system in which independent and sovereign states compete against each other based on a common set of rules ultimately serves the interests of the US even though states sometimes disagree with each other and even compete with the US (Shaw 2004). The US-China strategic competition is evident during the term of President Trump's administration. Washington sees China and Russia as "rivals" and "threats" to US interests and even considers "strategic competition" to be the biggest threat to US security in a broader strategic space of free and open Indo-Pacific.

Since the Trump administration, China has been viewed as an "adversary" that could threaten US interests over the next decade (Bush 2017). The Biden administration still stances against China, referring to China as a "most serious competitor" (Churchill 2021). In other statements, China is even regarded as a "serious challenge" by Joe Biden (Klar 2019) and a "geostrategic challenge" by Secretary of State Antony Blinken (De Luce and Williams 2021). In the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (Biden 2021), the US considers China the only competitor able to consistently combine its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might to threaten an open and stable international order (Biden 2021, 8). Secretary of State Blinken even stated that the US-China relationship should be "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be" (Blinken 2021). The Russia-Ukraine war has made the US-China competition even fiercer, not only between the US and China but also between the US and Russia.

For itself, India is continually enhancing its relations with large and mid-range countries, including the USA, Japan, and China, by joining the Quad group (QUAD) to contain China. Conversely, India is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which China established, and the BRICS group (Ahmed et al. 2019), but it declined to participate in the RCEP led by China. At the same time, India sought to enhance its relationship with Japan to deal with

China, as China has fortified its economic influence in the Indian Ocean by fostering relations with Pakistan, India's regional rival. In return, the Modi government deployed its "neighborhood policy" to manage relations with China, guaranteeing its role and influence in the South Asian region to counteract China's policies (Das 2016).

The dispute between India and China around the Galwan Valley in June 2020 made India feel uneasy about the threat from China. In the BRI initiative (BRI), China has enacted a strategy to create the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor (Jinbo 2022). Among these, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is located in South Asia, stretching about 3,000 km from Kashgar in China to Gwadar in Pakistan (Khan et al. 2020). India regards these economic corridors as a challenge to India's national interests, causing India to become even more apprehensive about the growth of China's influence in the region.

To deal with China, India also strengthens its defense potential to deal with challenges and threats by importing weapons from Russia and the US. During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington in June 2023, the Biden administration agreed to jointly produce military jet engines and ammunition technology and sell advanced drones to India for surveillance activities. To balance China's expanding influence in the region, India also became a member of the Indo-Pacific Prosperity Economic Framework (IPEF) and announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor at the G20 Summit in India on September 2023 (Suri et al. 2024). The Sino-Indian competition in South Asia is mainly expressed in the following points: 1) the "all-weather" strategic partnership between China and Pakistan; 2) the increasing close ties between China and other South Asian countries; 3) China's "strategic encirclement" the IOR (Pardesi 2021).

With China's influence in South Asia, India has improved relations with neighboring countries, including improving relations with Pakistan, through easing restrictions on the exchange of people and goods at Kashmir; resolving the issue of border demarcation with Bangladesh; strengthening strategic partnership with Afghanistan (Hussain and Jamali 2019). China's strengthening of relations with South Asia (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Pakistan) is considered by India to be China's strategic plot to restrain China under the so-called "String of Pearls" strategy in the Indian Ocean (Brewster 2018). The rivalry between India and China is also reflected in drawing these countries into their sphere of influence.

Meanwhile, the Sino-Japanese competition is quite complicated because of many historical issues, as well as the rise of China, which has had a substantial impact on the security and strategic environment surrounding Japan. China sees Japan as its rival in East Asia and competes to expand its influence in East Asia (Wirth 2009). Meanwhile, China sees the US-Japan alliance as aiming to encircle and contain China (Berkofsky 2022). However, China also wants to expand and maintain good relations with Japan because it needs a peaceful environment to develop, serving its goal of "the rejuvenation of China" (Carrai 2021). China needs capital and modern technology to develop the country and enhance its regional position. Therefore, China's policy towards Japan is to seek advantage, restrain, cooperate, and fight with each other. In recent years, Sino-Japanese relations have had many tensions, especially around the sovereignty dispute over Diaoyu Island (Senkaku), which Japan claims under its sovereignty. In addition, China often strongly criticizes Japan for its right to collective self-defense and Japan's building



of the potential of the Japanese self-defense force to protect the country and confront new challenges in the region.

### ***The Growing Role of the Indo-Pacific***

For Washington, the Indo-Pacific is an important strategic area for the USA. This area stretches from our Pacific coast to the Indian Ocean and is home to almost two-thirds of the world's economy, seven of the biggest militaries in the world, and more than half of all people on the planet (The White House 2022). This region is home to approximately 38 nations, which comprise 63% of the world's GDP and accommodate 65% or 4.3 billion of the world's population. In reality, this region is the site of over 50% of the global maritime commerce. An essential development in the Indo-Pacific region for the USA has been the increased vigor of intra-regional partnerships among the region's countries and with extra-regional actors to counteract China's growing influence (Bhowmick 2021).

The US goal of a vision for the Indo-Pacific region represents the goal of building this place into an open, peaceful region in which countries are strong, independent countries, and prosperous (US Mission to ASEAN 2020). A free and open region will also help the USA maintain a liberal order, project its power outside the region, prevent the rise of a dominant power, and compete with the US in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, the US attaches importance to the Indo-Pacific region to emphasize India's significant role in a geostrategic location in the Pacific, East Asia, and Southeast Asia (Wong 2018). The Trump administration's vision for the Indo-Pacific region embodies three fundamental principles: maintaining unimpeded free trade, building a rules-based order, and appreciating the centrality of ASEAN (Pitakdumrongkit 2019).

Under the Biden administration, the US prioritizes the Indo-Pacific region's significant role. The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy continues to strengthen the US's position in the Indo-Pacific region while strengthening the entire region. The strategy's primary focus is sustainable and creative cooperation with allies, partners, and institutions within and outside the region. The strategy's primary focus is sustainable and creative cooperation with allies, partners, and institutions within and outside the region. According to the USA's Indo-Pacific strategy announced on 12 February 2022, the USA will pursue the goal of building an Indo-Pacific region: free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient. This strategy also regards the importance of India as a like-minded partner in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, supporting its role as a net security provider (The White House 2022).

For India, New Delhi sees the Indo-Pacific as vital to its national interests and prosperity since it is a traditional area of influence. US strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan believes "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia" (Bajpai 2019). Indeed, India's interests are closely related to the interests of the Indian Ocean. This is the area where India can project its hard and soft power to ensure India's leadership role and influence in the region and neighboring countries (Scott 2009). The US's emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region makes India a "natural ally" of the US and forces the country to adjust its strategy towards the Indo-Pacific region (Pande 2018). India is determined to play an important role in the Indo-Pacific strategy and is a catalyst to shape its strategic vision. Several reasons are contributing to this change in India's perspective, including the change in the country's economic development strategy, the

geopolitical changes of the IOR and India's desire to become a regional power; China's penetration into the Indian Ocean; and the US Rebalance to Asia (Mann 2017).

However, one of the primary drivers behind India's strategic shift can be attributed to the influence of China. China's unprecedented economic rise and growing military power have transformed India's threat matrix. China is challenging India's interests in its periphery in various ways. Therefore, managing the strategic challenge from China has become a top priority in India's foreign policy. Due to the power asymmetry with China, India has strengthened quadrilateral security cooperation between the US, Japan, and Australia by reviving the QUAD (Kaura 2019). India's rapid modernization of its naval capabilities and expansion of maritime interests is related to two factors: 1) the rise of China as an "Asian power" with increasing influence in the IOR; 2) India's aspiration to become a leading country in the IOR while expanding its influence in the Pacific. India's increased engagement in the region and its strategic partnership with the US will strengthen India's footprint in the Indo-Pacific region (Sana and Akhtar 2020).

Meanwhile, Japan has been using the term "Indo-Pacific" for a long time since the 2010s, and it became popular after the US announced its vision for the free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). In 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced an innovative concept known as the FOIP in Kenya in August 2016. Indeed, Japan aims to promote regional stability and prosperity by enhancing connectivity between Asia and Africa in the Indo-Pacific region (Japan Ministry of Defense 2024). The content of Japan's IPOI strategy was then gradually concretized into three pillars, which are the promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade; pursuit of economic prosperity (e.g., improving connectivity); and commitment to peace and stability (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). From Japan's perspective, the Indo-Pacific region is the epicenter of global vitality and is home to over half the global population. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure this region's stable and autonomous development to ensure the world's stability and prosperity. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision aims to promote the prosperity of the entire region and enable free and robust economic activity throughout the Indo-Pacific.

In the Indo-Pacific strategy, former Prime Minister Abe committed to strengthening the strategic partnership with India as an essential pillar. Japan has also sought to enhance its relationship with the USA, QUAD, ASEAN, the EU, Britain, and France. In addition, Japan focuses on investing in infrastructure to meet the needs of both the construction and development of infrastructure projects in Asian countries while also bringing profits to Japanese manufacturing enterprises. In February 2022, Japan announced the "Asia-Japan Investing for the Future" initiative to significantly expand investment opportunities across the ASEAN region. Japan has focused on free trade cooperation with ASEAN based on four pillars: "Partners for Peace and Stability; Partners for Prosperity; Partners for Quality of Life; and "Heart-to-Heart Partners" (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022). In March 2023, Japan announced a new plan for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" in which it proposed four new pillars for its Indo-Pacific strategy: principles for peace and rules for prosperity; addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific manner; multi-layered connectivity and extending efforts for security and safe use of the sea to the air (Japan Go 2023).

In the context of the US launching the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, the role of ASEAN has been highlighted as a center of the FOIP. Within the FOIP strategy framework,

ASEAN is a critical player, central to US efforts in advancing the stated goals, including the freedom of the seas, market economy, respect for an order based on unambiguous and transparent rules, and good governance. ASEAN is even regarded as the heart of the Indo-Pacific, playing a central role in the Indo-Pacific vision (Pompeo 2018). Under the Biden administration, the US security strategy for Southeast Asia led by ASEAN is placed within the overall US strategy for the free and open Indo-Pacific region. The ASEAN-centered regional architecture helps the USA push to shape the promotion of a rules-based order in Southeast Asia, from which it can put pressure on countries seeking to change the status quo of the regional order. A solid and unified ASEAN will have great potential and benefits for the US in pushing back and containing China.

## IPOI'S MARITIME SECURITY PILLAR IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

### Convergence of Interests Between IPOI and AOIP

In his speech at the Shangri-La Security Dialogue held in Singapore in 2018, Indian Prime Minister Modi emphasized several points about India's Vision for an Indo-Pacific region. Accordingly, India advocates promoting a free, open, and inclusive region with Southeast Asia as the center of the Indo-Pacific and ASEAN as the core (Ministry of External Affairs 2018). The Modi government also emphasized the pursuit of a "rules-based order" common to the whole region, equal access to the common spaces at sea and in the air following the provisions of international law (Ungku and Kim 2018), and rising above divisions and competition through the pursuit of partnerships. Thus, by attaching importance to the centrality of ASEAN, India has demonstrated the goal of reducing China's importance in the new framework because Beijing has always considered the US vision to be aimed at containing China.

Prime Minister N. Modi announced the IPOI initiative in November 2019 at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, Thailand (Ministry of External Affairs 2019). Accordingly, the main objective of IPOI is to ensure the maritime sector's safety, security, and stability. It is also a way for India to build and develop a cooperation mechanism with other countries toward free, open, inclusive, and rules-based order. IPOI focuses on seven pillars, including 1) maritime security; 2) maritime ecology; 3) maritime resources; 4) capacity building and resource sharing; 5) disaster risk reduction and management; 6) science, technology, and academic cooperation; and 7) trade connectivity and maritime transport (Ministry of External Affairs 2020). To implement the IPOI, India established the Indo-Pacific Division (IPD) in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019. Its mission is to handle issues related to Indo-Pacific cooperation, strengthening India-ASEAN relations, the East Asia Summit, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) (Ministry of External Affairs 2020).

ASEAN's release of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept significantly impacts the region, especially amid the heightened US-China strategic competition. This competition is marked by the US initiating a trade war with China and considering Beijing a strategic competitor. Some countries like Singapore and Indonesia have supported the Indo-Pacific framework proposed by the US in Southeast Asia. In contrast, other countries such as Malaysia, Laos, and Cambodia seem absent. Vietnam also initially maintained a cautious attitude but did

not publicly mention this vision. Instead, Vietnam adheres to ASEAN principles and advocates a rules-based order in the region. Even so, to adapt to the changing US policy and the regional context, ASEAN must also respond not to adjust to the present but also to respond to security challenges, such as territorial sovereignty disputes, China's militarization activities in the SCS as well as the reality of maritime security being threatened by non-traditional security issues such as piracy, maritime terrorism, etc.

Meanwhile, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) was officially announced at the 4th ASEAN Summit held in June 2019 (ASEAN Secretariat 2019b). Due to the region's sensitivity and ASEAN's relations with China, the AOIP only emphasizes economic cooperation and fundamental common issues facing the region in the context of competition between great powers and the release of the USA's Indo-Pacific strategy. The AOIP outlines four main objectives: 1) towards the prospect of cooperation in the region; 2) promote an environment of peace, stability, and regional prosperity in addressing common challenges, maintaining a rules-based order and promoting closer economic cooperation, thus strengthening trust and confidence; 3) strengthen ASEAN's Community-building process and further strengthen existing ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the EAS; and 4) implement and explore other priority areas of ASEAN cooperation, including maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), economics and other possible areas of cooperation (ASEAN Secretariat 2020).

Based on the content of IPOI and AOIP, it can be seen that these two visions of India and ASEAN have mutual convergence in interests and definite similarities such as the centrality of ASEAN, the predominance of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry; the pursuit of peace and stability as a prerequisite for prosperity; the pursuit of inclusive development and prosperity for all; the criticality of the maritime domain; the primacy accorded to inclusivity, openness, and transparency; the indispensability of a rules-based framework; the essentiality of an abiding respect for sovereignty; the importance is given to complementarity with existing ASEAN-led cooperation-frameworks (Chauhan et al. 2020, 14). If IPOI emphasizes the issue of "maritime security", AOIP focuses on "maritime cooperation". From India's perspective, maritime security refers to threats such as maritime disputes between nations, maritime terrorism, piracy, maritime crimes, drug trafficking, illegal fishing, weapons trafficking for maritime use, and environmental crimes at sea. Therefore, ensuring maritime security for India means ensuring that India's seas are peaceful, eliminating any insecurity related to the above-mentioned maritime zones.

Meanwhile, AOIP's maritime cooperation pillar manifested more inclusiveness than IPOI's maritime security. As stipulated in the AOIP, areas of maritime cooperation may include expanding cooperation on sustainable management of marine resources; strengthening capacity to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; protecting the livelihood of coastal communities; supporting small-scale fishing communities, promoting maritime commerce, expanding efforts to protect and conserve marine environments, and improving maritime domain awareness. Moreover, it enhances maritime cooperation through ASEAN-led mechanisms by protecting freedom of navigation and overflight. It also stresses the need for peaceful conflict resolution based on internationally recognized legal principles, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982) (ASEAN Secretary Indonesia 2023). The differences in the maritime security pillar of IPOI and maritime cooperation in AOIP are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Comparison of IPOI’s Maritime Security and AOIP’s Maritime Cooperation (Source: Chauhan 2020)**

Sectors	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)	Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)
Maritime Cooperation	Freedom of Navigation and Overflight	Maritime Security
	Peaceful Dispute-settlement	
	Promote Maritime Connectivity	Capacity Building and Resource Sharing
	Promote Maritime Commerce	
	Address Transnational Crime (e.g., trafficking in persons or illicit drugs, sea piracy, robbery and armed robbery against ships at sea, etc.)	
	Develop a Blue Economy	Maritime Resources
	Sustainable Management of Marine Resources	Capacity Building and Resource Sharing
	Address Marine Pollution	
	Mitigate impacts of Sea-level Rise	
	Tackle Marine Debris	Maritime Ecology
	Preserve and Protect the Marine Environment and Biodiversity	
	Promote ‘Green’ Shipping	
	Protect the Livelihood of Coastal Communities	Capacity Building and Resource Sharing
	Support Small-scale Fishing Communities	
	Technical Cooperation in Marine Science Collaboration (R&D; sharing experience and best practices, capacity-building, managing marine hazards, raising awareness on marine and ocean-related issues, etc.)	Science, Technology, and Academic Cooperation

### *Deploying the Maritime Security in IPOI in Southeast Asia*

For India, maritime security is an important facet of India’s relations with ASEAN countries. Since implementing the “Look East Policy”, India has shown an interest in building a maritime security architecture with Southeast Asian countries. Thus, India advocates bringing together the states involved in a more prominent security architecture in Asia. India also helps ASEAN nations develop their maritime capabilities through training, search, and rescue assistance. India, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia have actively participated in the Indian Ocean Navy Symposium (IONS) since its inception in 2008. In addition, defense cooperation between India and countries such as Laos and Cambodia through training programs. Meanwhile, India trains pilots and engineers for Vietnam and Malaysia and cooperates with Indonesia in the maritime field.

The Indian and Thai navies have conducted coordinated patrols (CORPAT) along the international boundary line at sea (IMBL) twice yearly. Meanwhile, India, Thailand, and Indonesia’s navies also conducted joint patrols in the Andaman Sea to enhance coordination and prevent illegal activities. The 38th India-Indonesia Joint Patrol was conducted from June 13-24, 2022, in the Andaman Sea and the Strait of Malacca. This patrol is part of the SAGAR initiative to strengthen regional maritime security (Business Standard 2022; Indian Ministry of Defence 2022). Every year, India conducts maritime exercises with many regional countries to enhance maritime security. With Vietnam, India regularly has defense interactions at the highest level and has had port visits by Indian ships to various Vietnamese ports. India has also sent senior naval personnel to participate in the Regional Cooperation Agreement to Combat Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (RECAAP) program in Singapore and established a



Cooperation Center. Indian Navy Information Office for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) at Gurugram, where Singapore also has a liaison officer.

In November 2017, India conducted a joint naval exercise with Myanmar. In 2018, India joined the Samudra Shakti joint with Indonesia. These exercises strengthened bilateral relations and promoted mutual comprehension and interoperability in maritime operations between the two navies. The training will also provide an appropriate platform to share best practices and build a common sense of maritime security operations. Exercise Samudra Shakti 2022 took place in the Sunda Strait, between the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra.

Moreover, India has conducted naval exercises with Singapore (SIMBEX) and Malaysia (PASEX). Likewise, India undertook a maritime exercise in the SCS with the US, Philippines, and Japan navies in May 2019. India, Singapore, and Thailand naval exercises took place in September 2019. India-US military exercise 'Tiger Triumph' was conducted in November 2019 off the coasts of Visakhapatnam and Kakinada. In addition, India signed agreements on mutual logistical support with Singapore in 2018 and Australia and Japan more recently in 2020.

In relations with the Philippines, India, for the first time, recognized the legality of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in The Hague, supporting the Philippines' sovereignty claims in the SCS against China. India will also provide a preferential credit facility to the Philippines to purchase Indian defense equipment to help enhance maritime domain awareness. Meanwhile, India-Indonesia defense relations flourished in 2018 when Prime Minister Modi visited Jakarta and elevated the two nations' partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership. The same year, India and Indonesia launched a naval exercise, Samudra Shakti, with a combat element. Since then, the two navies have conducted four exercises, the most recent in May, prioritizing anti-submarine operations. The Indian Navy has continued to support Indonesia in humanitarian and disaster relief operations, especially after the Sulawesi earthquake and tsunami hit Palu in 2018.

India is also cooperating with Malaysia, another nation embroiled in a dispute with China over the SCS, based on an enhanced strategic partnership signed in 2015. In 2022, Jaishankar and Singh met their Malaysian counterparts and expressed their desire to deepen the bilateral cooperation. India's strategic partnerships with Singapore and Thailand are also very close and long-lasting. Singapore regularly participates in bilateral exercises, high-level dialogues, visits, and professional training with India. Modi visited Singapore twice in 2018. During his first trip, he signed 35 memorandums of understanding on various security and economic issues. For example, he signed a logistics agreement to promote bilateral naval cooperation and many agreements related to human resource investment. During his second visit, Modi attended the India-ASEAN summit, emphasizing New Delhi's importance to the region.

In May 2023, the ASEAN-India multilateral maritime exercise (AIME), co-organized by the Singapore Navy and the Indian Navy, showed that the parties increasingly emphasized maritime cooperation. The overall objective of the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise is three-fold: first, to achieve the highest level of coordination with ASEAN countries in the maritime domain for facing non-traditional threats and for coordinated rescue and relief operations; second, to build their defense capabilities by making them aware of new operational maneuvers; and third, to support the ASEAN countries in obtaining the latest advanced platforms, which India is producing. This is aimed at diversifying their imports of defense equipment.



This step will result in India's significant development of maritime cooperation with ASEAN countries and ensure regional peace and security (Pradhan 2023).

In September 2023, India and ASEAN issued a joint statement on maritime cooperation reaffirming their commitment to promoting the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, elevating maritime security cooperation to a top position. The statement also affirmed the promotion of an Indo-Pacific region that embraces ASEAN Centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rules-based framework, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, complementarity with existing cooperation frameworks, equality, mutual respect, mutual trust, mutual benefit and respect for international law, including, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982) (ASEAN Secretariat 2023). Regarding the SCS, India has also supported free maritime trade and reiterated that disputes should only be resolved through dialogue. India and many other dialogue partners strongly criticize any use or threat of force. Enhanced India-ASEAN naval cooperation benefits India's defense exports, as many countries have expressed interest in purchasing Indian weapon systems. While the Philippines has purchased the BrahMos Missile System jointly developed by India and Russia, Vietnam and Indonesia are also negotiating with New Delhi about purchasing an anti-ship missile system (Suri 2023).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA-VIETNAM TIES

India and Vietnam established full diplomatic relations in 1972, and the relationship has grown considerably since then. In 2003, the two countries elevated their ties to a comprehensive partnership. In 2007, both sides agreed to elevate their relations to a strategic partnership and continuously upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016, in which defence-security is a crucial pillar. The India-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) announcement by India in 2019 further strengthened the cooperation between India and Vietnam in some aspects.

First, it increases the possibility of cooperation between India, ASEAN, and Vietnam regarding maritime collaboration and security. The IUU is an urgent issue among ASEAN member countries in the SCS. IUU harms the interests of coastal states as well as the common interests of the international community. IUU directly reduces the catch value that a coastal state can make. Data sources from the European Union (EU) estimate that IUU fishing activities account for 19% of the total annual world fish catch, equivalent to 10 billion Euros (SFPA 2024). At the 18th ASEAN-India Summit in October 2021, India and ASEAN issued the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on ASEAN's Vision on the Indo-Pacific for peace, stability and prosperity (ASEAN Secretariat 2021). To deal with IUU, ASEAN and India support the implementation of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) programs. India also considered integrating the Center for Information Integration's MDA cooperation into the Indo-Pacific Initiative (IPOI) to cooperate with ASEAN, especially in the pillars of security or maritime connectivity (Saha and Mishra 2020; Singh 2022). The long-lasting situation of illegal fishing damaged Vietnam's economy and created many consequences for social life. According to statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Vietnam, as of June 2022, 32 cases involving 52 ships and 453 Vietnamese fishermen were arrested and handled by countries for illegal fishing (Tung 2022).

Second, strengthening cooperation between India and ASEAN in maritime security will also help improve Vietnam's maritime capacity. India has given Vietnam defense credit packages worth 100 million USD (in 2014) to help Vietnam buy 12 high-speed patrol boats and 500 million USD (in 2016) to buy military equipment from India. Since the 1990s, more than 1,000 Vietnamese officers, including 16 pilots and more than 500 naval officers, have attended courses at Indian army, navy and air force training facilities. In 2016, India announced a US\$500 million credit line for defense cooperation to help Vietnam strengthen its defense and security capabilities (The Express Tribune 2016). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also pledged to provide Vietnam with another US\$5 million to develop a military software park at the National University of Telecommunications in the province of Nha Trang (Hoai 2021). In August 2019, India initiated a project to build 12 speedboats for the Vietnam Coast Guard within the India-Vietnam high-speed patrol ship project framework to deal with security challenges (The Times of India 2022).

Third, the two sides engage in the annual Defence Policy Dialogue Mechanism and have completed 13 sessions. Defense cooperation between the two countries has been significantly enhanced in all three military branches: sea, land, and air force. The collaboration has been concentrated on the areas of training, the defense industry, and visiting ships. The two sides also regularly conduct joint military exercises that turn into training and capacity-building activities, including a joint naval exercise in 2018, 2019 (VNA 2019); the PASSEX exercise in the SCS (2020); joint exercises in the SCS in August 2021 (PIB 2021); a multilateral maritime exercise Milan in February 2022 (VNA 2022); The 3rd Ex VINBAX 2022 exercise in August 2022 at Chandi Mandir military zone, Haryana state, Northern India (VOV World 2023); the VINBAX exercise in December 2023; the MILAN exercise in February 2024 (Government News 2024). This exercise aims to enhance communication and cooperation during war or humanitarian relief. The two also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Logistics Support, simplifying each other's procedures for efficient logistics support (PIB 2022).

Fourth, promoting increased maritime security cooperation between India and Vietnam contributes to protecting Vietnam's territorial sovereignty in the SCS and protecting Vietnam's economic interests in the SCS in the context of China's militarization of the SCS. Indeed, deploying IPOI's maritime security pillar further helps India and Vietnam find common ground in dealing with China's territorial ambitions and its "String of Pearls" strategy. In principle, India supports the freedom of navigation in the SCS, upholds the principle of a rules-based order, and peacefully resolves territorial disputes in the SCS. China's coercive behavior has recently challenged India's energy projects with Vietnam. The Indian oil and gas company ONGC Videsh Limited (ONGC-VL) has operated in Vietnam since the 1980s with the Vietnam PetroVietnam (PVN). This cooperation also gives India many advantages as its economy depends on energy imports from outside, especially from the US and Russia. India has also repeatedly objected to China's public criticism of the cooperation between India and Vietnam to jointly conduct oil and gas exploration activities in the SCS, especially after the two oil and gas groups ONGC-VL and PVN signed cooperation agreements to explore Blocks 102/10 and 106/10 of PVEP and Block 128 of ONGC-VL in Vietnam's continental shelf.

## CONCLUSION

The changing situation in the world and the region has impacted the policy changes of India and ASEAN towards increased cooperation. Both have a potential convergence of strategic interests when it comes to strengthening the pillar of maritime security. Between India's Indo-Pacific Initiative (IPOI) and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), there is a resonance of interests in promoting maritime security in the region. However, India and ASEAN still face difficulties and challenges in finding an effective cooperation mechanism and ensuring harmonious relations with China. The increased cooperation between India and ASEAN in maritime security contributes to promoting cooperation between India and Vietnam while helping Vietnam improve its maritime capacity to deal with the security challenges of sovereignty from the rise of China. It will also help strengthen the comprehensive strategic partnership between India and Vietnam. While IPOI emphasizes maritime security, AOIP focuses on regional maritime cooperation. As a rising power, India has sought to promote maritime security, which plays an essential role in ensuring India's maritime security and its environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

The deployment of India's maritime security content in areas affected by the Chinese factor is due to Southeast Asia becoming an area of strategic competition between major countries. This is also a sensitive relationship between ASEAN and external partners, including the US and China. The challenge also comes from the difference in India's and ASEAN's perceptions of maritime security issues. While India views maritime security as a matter of ensuring national security and a military issue, ASEAN countries see maritime security as a common security challenge that needs to be resolved at the regional level. This, in turn, also limits India's role in ensuring maritime security in Southeast Asia, even though the country has annual military exercises with ASEAN member states.

Strategically, Vietnam can use India and ASEAN's maritime security and maritime cooperation pillar to promote its maritime interests. Strengthening maritime security awareness in Southeast Asia helps Vietnam take advantage of its advantages in resolving maritime security challenges and territorial disputes in the SCS. India's support will help Vietnam consolidate its advantages in strengthening the Coast Guard's potential to protect sovereignty, enhance Vietnam's position in the region, and respond to international threats and China's ambitions in the SCS. However, Vietnam also ensures the goals of its "four nos" defense policy, including no partaking in military alliances, no siding with one country to act against another, no foreign military bases in the Vietnamese territory or using Viet Nam as leverage to counteract other countries, and no using force or threatening to use force in international relations, especially in the context of very beneficial strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region and the SCS.

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