

From Sea Lane Security to Strategic Interoperability: India's Evolving Strategy toward the Strait of Malacca

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Abstract

The Strait of Malacca has become pivotal in the geopolitical competition. As a critical chokepoint for trade and energy imports, it has anchored India's maritime diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region. Over the years, China's Malacca Dilemma has been extensively discussed relative to India's engagement. This paper traces the paradigm shift in India's evolving posture from a narrow focus on sea-lane security in the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), centred on anti-piracy patrols and surveillance, to a broader strategy of strategic interoperability, characterised by institutionalised partnerships, coordinated exercises, and information-sharing architectures with littoral states. The paper aims to explain the drivers of India's reorientation to strategic interoperability through a qualitative analysis of official statements and bilateral agreements among regional states. This reorientation is also reflected in the reconstitution of India's maritime role from being a coastal security provider to a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, the paper argues that India's approach has moved away from being a reactive security posture to ensuring security through collaboration. Drawing on India's participation in the Malacca Strait Patrols dialogue and bilateral logistics agreements, the paper demonstrates how interoperability functions simultaneously as a normative hedge against Chinese presence and as a means of building cooperative regional leadership. The analysis contributes to debates on middle-power maritime strategy where identity and capability of the states are ensured through the navigation safety and security of maritime chokepoints.

Keywords: chokepoints, maritime security, littoral states, India, Strait of Malacca, Indo-Pacific

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Introduction

The nexus of economy, security, and power in geopolitics has evolved from states claiming only territorial boundaries to critical maritime chokepoints that encompass them. The Indo-Pacific region consists of these SLOCs, which facilitate the interconnectivity of goods and resources from one side of the world to another. The Strait of Malacca has been at the heart of this maritime exchange for centuries because of its cost-effectiveness and shortest maritime corridor, despite new connectivity projects. For India's vast coastline of 7500 km, whose maritime interests are reinvigorated by the proximity of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Strait of Malacca acts as a strategic frontier. The stretch of 80 nautical miles between India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Indonesia's Aceh province is the western entry point of the Strait of Malacca, enhancing the regional maritime contestations. The bilateral trade between India and ASEAN has steadily increased over the decades with the implementation of the ASEAN–India Free Trade Area (AITIGA). This growth is seen in India's global trade share, which is around 11 per cent, up from 5 per cent in 2006, the year the talks were initiated (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2026). However, there is a decline in India's domestic crude production, raising import dependency to 90 per cent.

The need for safe passage for global energy imports along critical SLOCs threatens the reliability of the global maritime network. Disruptions at the Strait of Hormuz also affect India's LNG imports, which come either through the Strait of Hormuz or from Russia; therefore, supply shortages from these sources threaten India's domestic and global contribution to energy security (Stahle, 2026). India's supply chain network is facing the 'double chokepoint dilemma' amid increasing trade flows via these maritime corridors: the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. As India's energy demands have increased, so have sea route energy imports. This contributes to surges in energy risk, and these critical sea lanes have become strategic leverage for an integrated maritime security arrangement, such as route-diversification strategies needed to manage energy vulnerability (Shepard & Pratson, 2020). Such chokepoint disruptions affect vessel-level operations, and re-routing decision-making can increase operational costs (Wen et al., 2026). The region also faces rising risks of non-traditional threats such as sea piracy, making maritime domain awareness and institutional coordination necessary to safeguard the Strait.

In this context, existing literature has examined India's maritime diplomacy through developing maritime cooperation with littoral states across the Strait of Malacca. It has also

recognised India's naval posture and expanding maritime role, but comparatively little has been discussed about India's shift from a tunnel view of sea-lane security to strategic interoperability characterised by institutionalised maritime partnerships. It suggests that, despite its longstanding objective of an uninterrupted flow of trade through the Strait of Malacca, India's strategic adaptation has shifted. Against this gap, the paper asks: How has India's maritime strategy towards the Strait of Malacca evolved from conventional sea-lane security towards strategic interoperability with littoral states?

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative document analysis to trace the evolution of India's maritime strategy towards the Strait of Malacca from 2015 to 2026. The analysis draws on official policy documents, official statements, bilateral agreements, and defence and maritime cooperation records regarding India's engagement with the littoral states across the critical sea routes. Secondary documents are selected for their direct relevance to India's maritime security posture, naval cooperation, and institutional engagement across the Strait. The analysis operationalises strategic interoperability through three dimensions—operational, institutional, and logistical—and examines how these dimensions emerge across India's maritime engagements. By comparing these patterns, the study identifies the shift from conventional sea-lane security towards institutionalised maritime cooperation and strategic interoperability. The documents were examined comparatively to identify recurring evidence of operational coordination, institutional mechanisms and logistical support, and these patterns were then assessed against the three dimensions of strategic interoperability.

The conceptualisation of strategic interoperability depends on two factors: compatibility and sustained coordination between states. Littoral states need to maintain their maritime security, because of which they work with like-minded maritime partners often compatible with their established processes and institutional practices. The paper explains this through three dimensions, such as the operational dimension, which comprises the ability of coordinated patrol vessels and joint maritime exercises. Similarly, the institutional dimension refers to the mechanisms through which maritime information is coordinated, through institutions such as the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), which facilitates maritime domain awareness among partner states. Furthermore, the third is the logistical dimension, through which mutual access to port facilities for refuelling or repairs ensures the smooth transition of a ship's maritime passage or operation along the sea route.

In this context, this paper argues that India's approach towards the Strait of Malacca is part of its Indo-Pacific maritime vision. It has evolved from unilateral foreign policies to multilateral maritime partnerships with cooperation from the littoral states for both protecting and institutionalising the critical SLOCs. The first section explains the importance of the Strait of Malacca through the lens of a rules-based order. Next, it discusses the changing approach from protection to maritime partnerships as strategic adaptation, highlighting the need for regional engagement for coordination between naval deployments and strengthening regional institutions. The third section assesses the opportunities and constraints in deepening India's strategic interoperability with the littoral states. It also underscores how strengthening institutions can help secure the maritime corridor of the Strait of Malacca.

Why the Strait of Malacca matters to India

Strait of Malacca is a narrow maritime strip and a major chokepoint in the Indo-Pacific region. It is bordered by the littoral states of the Malay Peninsula of Malaysia, Sumatra Island of Indonesia, and Singapore at the southern tip, and has gained geopolitical attention as the quickest route connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean (Greco, 2022). With the recent maritime security threat created by the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait has become a vital zone of control. This zone of control is defined by its economy of chokepoints, which empowers a state such as China or the U.S. to disrupt economic interdependence on critical sea routes (Fishman, 2025). The Strait of Hormuz makes the potential chaos significant, yet a similar effect could occur if the Strait of Malacca is blocked, showing how a single-point blockade can emphasise the need for alternatives. However, these alternative maritime routes create tension over who establishes control over them for Indian Ocean-bound trade. Therefore, the unlikely contingency of direct conflict between the U.S. and China makes the region prominent for maritime standoff warfare. In this context, the section explores India's awareness of contestations that can reshape the region and the need to monitor critical sea lanes through embedding itself in regional maritime cooperation supported by each state working on enhancing their own maritime capacity.

India's maritime dependence on the Strait of Malacca

One of the primary dimensions of monitoring sea lanes of communication (SLOC) is the interdependence of a state's economy and maritime security. India imports around 85 per cent of its crude oil supplies, concentrated among six states, including Russia and West Asia

(Mohan et al., 2026). Also, 55 per cent of India's trade passes through the South China Sea via the Strait of Malacca, making this dependence structure vulnerable to disruptions (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). This reliance has renewed the importance of secure, connected energy corridors via sea routes for India. It has prompted India to remain flexible in diversifying supplier risk, but it hasn't been beneficial in resolving trade route constraints, as it only secures the buying of crude oil or LNG; the route it shall travel and whether it will have safe passage remain a concern. To mitigate potential blockades or piracy attacks on ships, India must continue to maintain cordial maritime partnerships with littoral states. By gaining Singapore's support for patrolling the Strait of Malacca alongside Malaysia and Indonesia, India has underscored the future direction of their bilateral Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Bhaumik, 2025). As India faces vulnerabilities in the Strait of Malacca, it is also exploring alternative land-sea connectivity alongside developing maritime partnerships. However, due to a chain of conflicts and persistent security challenges, progress on certain projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) has been slow, despite India's diplomatic outreach through local channels (Roy & Mitra, 2023).

India's Siliguri corridor, a stretch of 20 km, is a strategic location and a bottleneck for land connectivity between Northeast India and mainland India. The new Triangular Security grid arrangement around the corridor is designed to handle defence as a single unit for immediate coordination with New Delhi in case of any escalations in the region (India's World, 2026). It strengthens the Strait of Malacca, which connects Kolkata and Northeast India via Myanmar, ensuring trade security during chokepoint disruption. Therefore, the Strait of Malacca underpins economic stability in the Indo-Pacific region, as India aspires to be a regional maritime power.

Significance of the Strait of Malacca for India's Indo-Pacific vision

India is a state with a long coastline and a history of maritime trade, which has been the foundation of its Indo-Pacific Vision. India's Indo-Pacific vision is based on ensuring a free, open and inclusive rules-based order at its centre. India's coastline, which extends from the Andaman Sea to the Bay of Bengal, is the gateway to the narrow strip of the Strait of Malacca, increasing the significance of the Indo-Pacific construct. With tensions brewing in similar chokepoints such as the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, India's eastern strategic outreach and engagement must be strengthened. The maritime corridor provides the opportunity to maintain ASEAN centrality while operationalising India's Act East Policy. The development

of the tri-services of the Army, Air Force and Navy at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands demonstrates India's readiness to face any disruption at sea.

The largest tri-services joint amphibious exercise, AMPHEX, showcases India's joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and sea-to-land strikes, signalling India's operational capability (The Indian Express, 2025). Along with the tri-services, India's coastline is guarded by the Indian Coast Guard and Coastal Security Group, responsible for preparedness, alertness, and security in the coastal areas through the annual exercise Sagar Kavach (The Hindu, 2026). Such layered readiness facilitates India's trust-building and strategic interoperability with neighbouring and littoral states. India's preparedness on all three fronts- navy, army, and air remains necessary to secure critical sea lanes while providing on-ground refuelling and repair or troop support from the port infrastructure and maintaining air defence through coastal radar systems. India advances its maritime vision through the initiatives of SAGAR and MAHASAGAR, reinforced through shared responsibility, collective maritime security, and regional resilience in the Indo-Pacific.

From sea lane security to cooperative maritime security

India's maritime strategy has evolved over the years from protecting trade through maritime chokepoints to regional cooperation for maritime security. There are primarily two major reasons for the paradigm shift: the growing presence of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has altered the balance, and the consequent rise of non-traditional security threats. China's establishment of overseas bases, including military infrastructure such as in Djibouti and dual-use ports like Hambantota and Gwadar, has triggered a sense of proactive maritime presence to strategically counter-balance in the Indo-Pacific. The section discusses the evolution of India's maritime strategy from protection to defending critical SLOCs and the role of maritime partnerships in ensuring maritime cooperation amid security concerns.

Sea lane security as India's strategy

As contestation in the Indo-Pacific makes it strategically and economically significant, India has shifted from protecting SLOCs to defending them. Securing the SLOCs ensures the continued flow of maritime traffic, whereas a proactive yet capable response to any threats that may emerge beyond the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) falls under India's defence responsibility. Growing regional instability has prompted India to pursue a steady, sustained maritime presence, as the Strait of Malacca is among the world's busiest maritime chokepoints.

It connects the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia, making the safeguarding of freedom of navigation and maritime commerce necessary. India has maintained a continuous naval presence and anti-piracy deployments through the Maritime Capability Perspective Plan to build deterrence at sea; however, battle readiness requires stringent planning by the Indian Navy (Shukla, 2026). As threats increasingly extend beyond the EEZ, expanding the Indian Navy into a blue-water navy is crucial to improve distant monitoring of maritime space and ensure the strategic effect of India's power projection.

To support naval vessels beyond the EEZ, India needs strong port infrastructure, a core component of strategic interoperability. Port infrastructure supports maintenance and repair while providing operational resupply, such as fuel, hence strengthening the Indian Navy's logistical theatre. India's Eastern Naval Command in Visakhapatnam underscores the importance of logistical support for improving maritime domain awareness through coastal radars and hydrographic support (Singh, 2025). The commissioning of three indigenous platforms equipped with surface and anti-submarine capabilities supports a major fleet expansion (Ministry of Defence, 2026b). It underscores the Indian Navy's balanced approach to developing its calibre to sustain maritime operations and reduce reliance on distant naval facilities during vessel deployment (Fanell, 2025). The Strait is a common maritime space, with each littoral state having their own EEZ and maritime jurisdiction. This creates opportunities for India to strengthen its relationships with like-minded states by building maritime partnerships through interoperability based on shared maritime interests.

Maritime partnerships as strategic adaptation

Littoral states, because of their geographic location, often face transnational maritime threats amid growing naval competition. A state's maritime development can achieve only a limited degree of strategic surveillance without trespassing another state's EEZ. This jurisdictional limitation creates a structural incentive for the Indian Navy to pursue maritime partnerships. These partnerships provide relative security for the SLOCs, transcending a state's inherent limitations across a shared sea chokepoint. The regional institutional framework, such as the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI), enables maritime cooperation without formal alliances. This principle underpins the elevation of enhanced strategic cooperation to comprehensive strategic partnerships among India and other littoral states such as Indonesia. India's Act East Policy has evolved with the emergence of the strategic construct of the Indo-Pacific. It has converged with Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum through institutional interoperability,

strengthening maritime security through engagement in sectors like port infrastructure and connectivity, rather than diplomatic goodwill. This convergence is reflected in recurring maritime exercises, information-sharing arrangements and bilateral mechanisms that provide continuity to maritime cooperation.

These institutional frameworks are backed by operational interoperability through regular naval exercises such as Samudra Laksamana and the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME), building trust and capability among each other. India utilises such joint naval exercises to emphasise its regional autonomy and national interests amid growing Chinese naval expansion in the Indian Ocean. This network helps enhance maritime partnerships among trade-dependent economies that abide by the rule of law, which becomes necessary for building supply-chain resilience across the Strait of Malacca.

Rethinking India's maritime strategy

A state's maritime strategy is defined by its national policies as well as its strategic interoperability with maritime partners and cannot be reduced to naval capability only. India's maritime strategy along the critical SLOCs such as the Strait of Malacca is based on national policies enhancing maritime domain development with Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand- the littoral states encompassing the Strait of Malacca as part of the Indo-Pacific. This section discusses the reasons for deepening strategic interoperability and the asymmetry that exists between India and the littoral states. It analyses the ways to bridge these constraints, situating them within India's maritime diplomacy in the evolving Indo-Pacific.

Deepening strategic interoperability

Maritime partnerships are backed by strategic interoperability, which provides operational capability beyond diplomatic signalling in the maritime domain. Independent naval deployments fail to coordinate information and surveillance unless multiple navies cooperate following common operational procedures for engaging with evolving threats in the Strait of Malacca. States build cooperation through bilateral engagements, which is reiterated through multilateral institutional participation for shared maritime security. These are not interchangeable because bilateral engagements require a different level of operational interoperability than multilateral engagement, where dialogue and rules are expected to be followed without operational commitment. The partnership with Indonesia is partial and less

formalised in this capability among the Indian Ocean littoral states, limited to multilateral institutions like the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

For this reason, India has sought to coordinate and participate in information sharing with the littoral states of the Strait of Malacca. India has established an Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), strengthening Indo-Pacific maritime domain awareness (IPMDA) needed for interoperability between states. Out of the three littoral states that operationalise the Strait of Malacca, India has an agreement on the real-time sharing of White-Shipping Information with Singapore (Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 2015). The recent appointment of a liaison officer to the IFC-IOR from Indonesia comes at a time when the maritime domain is faced with economic and security constraints to improve coordination and develop a common maritime pathway for partner navies (Parmar, 2025). Maritime operational cooperation with Malaysia, at the same time, remains fragmented, without a liaison officer to the IFC-IOR or a dedicated coast guard agreement (Panachoor, 2026). India and Malaysia co-chair the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus Experts' Working Group on Counter-Terrorism for the 2024-2027 cycle, which builds diplomatic dialogue and not operational protocols. This is not a replacement for continuous bilateral coordination to build a network of non-traditional security. There remains asymmetrical cooperation in terms of interoperability, reflecting differing institutional capacities and strategic priorities among the littoral states and India.

Implications for India's maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific

India's maritime strategy has been reshaped through policy measures, from the protection of trade routes to strategic interoperability and coordination among maritime states in the Indo-Pacific. Due to the emerging nature of non-traditional threats, which have become international, the Strait of Malacca and Singapore have re-emerged as Asia's piracy hotspot (Buchholz, 2026). National policies alone couldn't tackle the multiple frontiers of threats such as sea piracy and maritime cyberattacks on seaports and cargo vessel operations, which are becoming targets for so-called cyber pirates (Laso & Salmon, 2025). The unilateral national responses often fail structurally against non-traditional threats like sea piracy, as they happen outside the maritime jurisdiction of a littoral state, which can be tackled through collective enforcement. It necessitates convergence of interests for the alignment of political intent across different states to utilise their resources to achieve a shared maritime interest.

Institutions such as IFC-IOR depend on coordination and transparency to improve the MDA process in the Indo-Pacific. Within the framework of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, a non-military yet technologically driven initiative serves as a multiplier for India's regional maritime policy, thus positioning India as a primary information provider (Mohan, 2022). The functional role of MDA is to strengthen the littoral states against any non-traditional threats, which is consistent with India's maritime vision of securing the Indo-Pacific as partnerships and convergence of interests and not dominance. India's domestic policies, such as MAHASAGAR, aspire to comprehensive integration of national interests of like-minded states rather than focusing only on naval deployments, even as the operational asymmetry persists across Singapore and Malaysia.

Limitations of Indo-Pacific maritime security framework

Yet states face sovereignty constraints when committing to different information-sharing policies and maritime radar data protection laws, risking exposure of a state's own naval surveillance coverage. States under-sharing information can lead to distrust among partners within the MDA framework, impacting their commercial vessel regulations at both international and domestic levels. They still need to track the regional waters and cargo vessels; hence, agreements on standardised commercial AIS (Automatic Identification System) data systems are used. They work in parallel with aggregated tracking outputs or threshold alerts, such as suspicious course deviations and dark-target AIS disconnections, which are fed into the external server, preventing any leakage of classified real-time data.

At the institutional level, liaison officers deployed at international IFC-IOR centres act as a single point of contact, supervising and coordinating with home data resource centres, safeguarding national sovereignty and promoting capacity-building on foreign soil. At the maritime domain level, the Indian Navy also participates in routine exercises like MILAN, which continue to build trust, coordination, and inter-navy familiarity within shared maritime spaces, supporting data-sharing and surveillance. There is a lack of uniform information-sharing platforms within the state due to limited manpower and non-standardised software systems. This makes it difficult to share synthesised data sources with partner maritime states. Even so, through bilateral exercises such as IN-THAI CORPAT, India and Thailand conduct coordinated patrols and standard search-and-rescue practices near the Strait of Malacca, using a uniform tactical communication mechanism. They also address platform non-standardisation, as reiterated in the India-ASEAN Year of Maritime Cooperation (Ministry of Commerce &

Industry, 2026). Therefore, states have converging interests at different engagement levels that act as prerequisites rather than a guarantee for the freedom of navigation and a rules-based order. This helps states mitigate underlying sovereignty-trust tensions in the Strait of Malacca and the broader Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

India's maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific renders special status to the Strait of Malacca due to its proximity to the eastern coastline of India. The critical sea lane is central to India's trade, commerce, and energy resources, and ensuring its safety is key to addressing the strategic vulnerability it creates. The region faces geopolitical contestation between the US and China, a great-power rivalry on one side, and PLAN's expansionist policies regarding its claim on the maritime domain have increased the strategic sensitivity. This impacts the Exclusive Economic Zones of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, shaping their national and foreign policies. India has a long maritime history, further consolidating its involvement in the region with these states. India's policies have evolved from protecting trade routes to strategic interoperability through maritime partnerships, as an outreach to mitigate critical sea lane vulnerability. When India's Act East policy acts as the anchor for the Strait of Malacca, situating the chokepoints within India's Indo-Pacific vision, SAGAR and MAHASAGAR function as instruments of maritime diplomacy for regional integration. Each state's institutional readiness and maritime infrastructure contribute towards ensuring a rules-based order. Singapore's White-Shipping agreement with India is institutionalised, enabling continuous exchange of surveillance data, whereas involvement of the other littoral states in the maritime domain awareness of the region is still emerging and less formalised. This indicates that the transition has remained uneven, where strategic interoperability is treated as a differentiated process best suited to each state's capability and national interests. Through institutions like IORA, primarily through the framework of the Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS), thus leveraging the platform to build strategic trust.

As the maritime domain in the Indo-Pacific is faced with evolving non-traditional threats, a complex maritime security strategy requires building a transnational network with resource input through a standardised protocol. Connectivity is another area where India and littoral states need to work. India has been working on improving its eastern port infrastructure. Ports like Paradip are equipped with a real-time vessel monitoring system, which further minimises turnaround times, and links hinterland cargo flows directly to maritime shipping routes.

Strategically located, the Eastern Naval Command operates as India's forward fleet post capable of handling multilateral naval exercises such as MILAN and AMPHEX in the Bay of Bengal, linking it to the Strait of Malacca. Andaman and Nicobar Command is a geostrategic gateway for India towards the littoral states, serving as a primary platform in the region for improving the joint maritime security architecture of the Strait of Malacca, extending towards the broader Indo-Pacific.

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