

India–ASEAN Defence Cooperation and Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Role of the Act East Policy

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Abstract

This paper examines how India–ASEAN defence cooperation contributes to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific and assesses the role of India’s Act East Policy. It argues that the relationship has expanded from dialogue and economic engagement to include maritime exercises, defence dialogues, capacity-building, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-terrorism, and cooperation through ASEAN-led institutions. The study uses a qualitative, descriptive-analytical method based on official policy statements and selected policy research. It finds that cooperation is most effective when it complements ASEAN centrality and responds to practical concerns such as safe sea lanes, disaster response, maritime domain awareness, and transnational threats. Constraints include differing threat perceptions among ASEAN members, uneven capabilities, resource limitations, and sensitivities around major-power competition. The paper recommends predictable capacity-building, non-exclusive exercises, practical maritime information-sharing, and respect for ASEAN-led processes. These measures can strengthen regional public goods without requiring Southeast Asian states to choose sides in strategic competition.

Keywords

India–ASEAN relations, Act East Policy, maritime security, Indo-Pacific, defence cooperation, ASEAN centrality, strategic autonomy

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become a central arena of international politics because economic interdependence, maritime connectivity, strategic competition, and non-traditional security challenges increasingly overlap. The Indian and Pacific Oceans connect major centres of production and consumption, while sea lanes carry energy, manufactured goods, food, and other essential commodities. Disruptions caused by conflict, piracy, illegal fishing, natural disasters, or coercive maritime behaviour can therefore have consequences beyond the immediate location of an incident. For India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), maritime security is not only a military concern; it is also linked to economic resilience, regional stability, and the ability of states to pursue independent foreign policies.

India’s Act East Policy provides an important framework for engagement with Southeast Asia. The Government of India describes ASEAN as central to the policy and identifies bilateral, regional, and multilateral engagement as key modes [1]. The 2024 India–ASEAN joint statement reaffirmed cooperation through ASEAN-led forums and called for collaboration in maritime security, counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, defence industry, peacekeeping, and other areas [2].

This paper asks how India–ASEAN defence cooperation contributes to maritime security and what limits its effectiveness. Its central argument is that the relationship is best understood as practical, institutionally embedded security cooperation rather than as a formal alliance or a single-minded

strategy of balancing another power. Cooperation can build trust and capability, but it cannot remove differences in threat perception and strategic priorities among ASEAN members.

2. Related Research Work

Research on India's Indo-Pacific role highlights the expansion of defence diplomacy beyond traditional military contacts. The International Institute for Strategic Studies describes India's regional engagement as encompassing military exercises, port calls, ministerial visits, arms sales, and defence lines of credit. These instruments can deepen security relationships while responding to China's growing regional presence [3]. Yet not every Indian initiative should be reduced to strategic competition: regional states also seek capacity-building, training, disaster-response support, and reliable partners for practical security problems.

Official India–ASEAN documents describe an increasingly broad institutional agenda. The 2024 joint statement connects defence cooperation with maritime safety, freedom of navigation, international law, counter-terrorism, cyber security, humanitarian assistance, and defence industry cooperation [2]. The Ministry of External Affairs' 2025 brief records the evolution of dialogue relations from 1992, the strategic partnership established in 2012, and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership announced in 2022. It also identifies maritime cooperation as a significant area of engagement [4].

ASEAN centrality is important to this framework. ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), provide platforms where India can work with Southeast Asian states and other partners without imposing a formal alliance structure. The 2024 joint statement recognises these forums and reiterates support for ASEAN unity and centrality [2]. Policy analysis on India's defence industrial development adds another dimension: domestic production and exports have grown, but durable regional influence depends on affordability, after-sales support, delivery reliability, training, and technology partnerships—not simply export totals [5].

3. Analytical Framework

The paper uses three connected ideas: cooperative security, institutionalism, and strategic autonomy. Cooperative security emphasises dialogue, confidence-building, information exchange, and practical responses to shared risks. It does not require states to agree on every strategic question. In this context, maritime exercises, port calls, training, and humanitarian assistance can create habits of communication and improve the ability of different forces to coordinate.

Institutionalism directs attention to the rules and forums through which cooperation is organised. ASEAN-led institutions provide an established regional setting and reduce the risk that security initiatives will be interpreted solely as instruments of great-power rivalry. India's support for ASEAN centrality is both a stated diplomatic principle and a practical condition for wider participation [2, 4]. However, institutions cannot automatically resolve disagreements; their value depends on implementation and tangible benefits.

Strategic autonomy refers to the capacity of states to retain independent judgement over foreign and security policy. For India, it means expanding partnerships without entering a binding alliance that dictates all strategic choices. For ASEAN members, it means cooperating with India while maintaining varied relationships with China, the United States, Japan, Australia, and others. This explains why states may welcome practical cooperation while remaining cautious about initiatives that appear to force a binary choice.

4. Research Methodology

The study follows a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design. It draws on official Indian and ASEAN policy documents and selected policy research to identify the stated purposes, instruments, and constraints of India–ASEAN defence cooperation. The sources include the Government of India’s explanation of the Act East Policy, the 2024 India–ASEAN joint statement, the Ministry of External Affairs’ 2025 India–ASEAN brief, and policy analysis on India’s regional defence diplomacy and defence exports [1–5].

The analysis is organised thematically around institutional cooperation, maritime activities, capacity-building, and strategic constraints. It does not claim to measure operational effectiveness or establish a causal relationship between a particular initiative and regional stability. Official statements are treated as evidence of commitments and policy priorities, not as independent proof that every commitment has been implemented. The study is limited by reliance on publicly available material and the diversity of ASEAN members’ security conditions.

5. India–ASEAN Defence Cooperation: Major Instruments

Institutional dialogue is one foundation of India–ASEAN security cooperation. India participates in regional platforms such as ADMM-Plus and the ASEAN Regional Forum, where officials can exchange views and develop practical cooperation. The 2024 joint statement identifies ASEAN-led mechanisms as important to regional architecture and notes cooperation under ADMM-Plus, including the Experts’ Working Group on Counter-Terrorism for 2024–2027 [2]. Such mechanisms provide continuity beyond individual visits. However, ASEAN members differ in geography, military capability, domestic priorities, and perceptions of major powers, so progress is likely to remain incremental and issue-specific.

Naval engagement is visible through exercises, port calls, professional exchanges, and maritime cooperation activities. The 2024 joint statement welcomed the first ASEAN–India Maritime Exercise held in 2023 and called for stronger cooperation through joint exercises and naval port calls [2]. Exercises can familiarise personnel with procedures and improve communication, while port calls create opportunities for professional engagement and public diplomacy. Their limits are important: an exercise is not proof of full interoperability, and the presence of ships does not by itself guarantee deterrence or crisis management. Results depend on repetition, clear objectives, lessons-learned processes, and follow-through.

Maritime security includes more than naval competition. Piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, natural disasters, marine pollution, and search-and-rescue emergencies affect coastal communities and commerce. The 2024 joint statement lists humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, military medicine, transnational crime, peacekeeping, demining, and confidence-building alongside defence and maritime security [2]. Capacity-building is most useful when it responds to recipient-defined needs and is sustained over time. Equipment or training without maintenance, local expertise, or clear operational priorities may have limited long-term effect.

Defence industry cooperation can link military requirements with production, maintenance, training, and technology. Government reporting published in March 2025 stated that Indian defence exports reached ₹23,622 crore in financial year 2024–25, while defence production reached ₹1.27 lakh crore in 2023–24 [5]. These figures indicate domestic-sector growth, but do not establish how much translates into ASEAN-specific capability or influence. For Southeast Asian partners, Indian products will be relevant only if cost, suitability, delivery, lifecycle support, and compatibility are credible. Co-production may offer deeper links than one-off sales, but requires realistic assessment of industrial capacity, intellectual-property arrangements, and long-term costs..

6. Constraints and Challenges

First, ASEAN is not a homogeneous security actor. Member states differ in maritime geography, defence resources, domestic politics, and assessments of regional threats. India should avoid assuming that a single regional narrative will fit every partner. Cooperation is more likely to endure when tailored to concrete needs and when it does not demand uniform strategic alignment.

Second, framing every initiative as an anti-China measure can narrow the space for cooperation. ASEAN members may be reluctant to join activities perceived as exclusive or confrontational. A cooperative approach that emphasises international law, maritime safety, disaster response, and transparent communication is more compatible with diverse national preferences [2, 3].

Third, a wider agenda requires personnel, funding, equipment, institutional coordination, and consistent diplomatic attention. Announcements are easier to make than commitments are to implement. Training must be followed by professional contact; equipment transfers require maintenance and spare parts; exercises need assessment; and information-sharing depends on trust and secure procedures.

Finally, public sources often describe activities and intentions more clearly than outcomes. The number of exercises, visits, or agreements can indicate engagement, but cannot by itself demonstrate improved maritime awareness, faster disaster response, reduced criminal activity, or crisis stability. Evaluation should track continuity, partner satisfaction, operational lessons, maintenance performance, and whether cooperation addresses locally identified problems.

7. Discussion: What the Act East Policy Can Deliver

India–ASEAN defence cooperation is best understood as a layered process. At the diplomatic level, institutional participation sustains dialogue and affirms ASEAN centrality. At the operational level, exercises and port calls provide opportunities for familiarisation and coordination. At the capacity-building level, training and technical cooperation can help partners respond to maritime challenges. At the industrial level, defence exports and technology partnerships may create longer-term links, provided affordability and support are credible.

These layers reinforce one another only when connected. An exercise without sustained professional exchange may have limited effect; equipment without maintenance support may not build lasting capability; and a declaration without implementation can weaken confidence. The Act East Policy should therefore be assessed not only by the breadth of its agenda but by whether initiatives are predictable, partner-oriented, and institutionally embedded. Official documents establish the ambition to deepen cooperation, while independent evaluation remains necessary to establish impact [2–5].

This policy has a diplomatic advantage: it allows India to contribute to regional security without insisting on a formal alliance. That approach is compatible with India's strategic autonomy and ASEAN members' interest in preserving policy flexibility. Its success depends on restraint in rhetoric, respect for regional diversity, and a willingness to deliver public goods even when the immediate strategic return is difficult to quantify.

8. Policy Recommendations

First, India should prioritise maritime capacity-building projects designed with partner governments and relevant civilian agencies. Needs assessments should precede training or equipment support, and programmes should include maintenance, follow-up training, and evaluation.

Second, India should strengthen practical cooperation on maritime domain awareness, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and responses to transnational crime. These areas can generate shared benefits while remaining less politically divisive than explicitly bloc-oriented initiatives.

Third, exercises should have clear objectives and structured post-exercise reviews. Lessons should inform subsequent activities, and exercise design should reflect the capabilities and priorities of participants rather than simply maximise scale or visibility.

Fourth, India should support ASEAN-led mechanisms and communicate the non-exclusive character of its engagement. Consultation before launching new initiatives can reduce misperceptions and improve local ownership.

Fifth, defence industrial cooperation should be judged by lifecycle value rather than headline export figures alone. India should strengthen after-sales support, training, spare-parts availability, transparent contracting, and feasible co-production arrangements.

Finally, India and its partners should develop transparent indicators of progress, including continuity of training, response time in joint exercises, completion of agreed activities, maintenance performance, and partner assessments. Public reporting should distinguish commitments, completed activities, and demonstrated outcomes.

9. Conclusion

India–ASEAN defence cooperation has broadened through institutional dialogue, maritime exercises, capacity-building, non-traditional security activities, and growing interest in defence industry links. The Act East Policy supplies a framework for this engagement, while ASEAN-led institutions provide channels for cooperation among states with different strategic preferences. Official statements demonstrate a commitment to expand collaboration, especially in maritime security and related fields [1, 2, 4].

Yet the significance of this cooperation should not be overstated. Exercises and declarations do not automatically create interoperability or regional stability, and the expansion of India's defence industry does not by itself guarantee successful partnerships. Diverse threat perceptions, resource constraints, implementation gaps, and sensitivities around major-power competition remain important obstacles. The most credible path forward is practical and inclusive: respond to partner-defined needs, sustain cooperation after announcements, strengthen maritime public goods, and measure outcomes honestly. In this form, India–ASEAN defence cooperation can contribute to a more resilient Indo-Pacific while preserving the strategic autonomy of India and its Southeast Asian partners.

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