

Issue

Brief

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Marine Governance in Asia: A Case for India-ASEAN- South Korea Cooperation

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Abstract

Maritime Asia is at a crossroad. Growing military activity, and rising non-traditional challenges in the littorals threaten the health of the oceans and the people who depend on them. Asia's leading maritime powers must engage in a development alliance that can help deliver security and sustainable growth. This brief evaluates the prospects for a partnership between India, South Korea, and ASEAN in the areas of ocean governance, maritime connectivity, and marine infrastructure.

As the world enters the second year of the final decade leading up to the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a sense of urgency is rapidly building. In 2015, when the United Nations (UN) announced the Sustainable Development Agenda, the primary objective was to tackle environmental degradation and climate change. Ban Ki Moon, then Secretary-General of the UN had underlined these central concerns, calling the SDG-2030 as an “agenda for the people”— a promise by leaders to improve the state of the environment and people’s standards of living.¹ There has been an overall optimism about the enterprise, described by many as the most inclusive and participatory in the history of the UN.

Yet progress in recent years has been slow. With the continuing exploitation of natural resources, rising consumption of animal products, and high demand for energy, as well as declining trends in health, education, and gender parity, the SDG project has moved haltingly. Many developing countries in Asia and Africa, in particular, face higher obstacles. Most Asia-Pacific states are unlikely to achieve the SDGs by 2030, with some projected to reach less than 10 percent of the targets.² The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 has rendered the task even more difficult, exposing inadequacies in the approaches of individual countries.³

In Asia, the decline has been sharper than expected, the economic slowdown being exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic. Many governments in the region have turned to collaborative efforts with other countries to address current environmental and developmental challenges.⁴ In key sectors such as healthcare and education, connectivity, trade, and employment, states have undertaken joint endeavours to deliver development and services, especially in the areas of infrastructure, connectivity, and the environment.

For example, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted a plan of action (2021-25) for development and connectivity,⁵ and Japan has unveiled an ASEAN investment initiative.⁶ South Korea and ASEAN have also agreed to strengthen cooperation on environment.⁷

Introduction

This brief evaluates the prospects for a partnership between India, South Korea, and ASEAN in the areas of ocean governance, trade, connectivity, and infrastructure. Amidst growing economic and security challenges – including the militarisation of the littorals by China, and intensifying great-power competition in the Western Pacific and the Eastern Indian Ocean — the brief explores the prospects for a common framework for marine governance and economic growth.

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An Overlap in Strategic Interests

Ocean governance is traditionally motivated by a need for positive transformation: boosting ocean-based economic development, reversing global biodiversity loss, and securing the rights of marginalised coastal communities. In Southeast Asia, however, marine governance has been a casualty of strategic competition. The region is marked by jurisdictional overlap, with territorial claims in the South China Sea posing a constant threat to peace and stability. Security dynamics in the littorals are rendered more complex by China's attempts to exert dominance, using instruments of military and non-military intimidation.⁸ Beyond military and militia operations in contested waters, Beijing has been militarising its artificial islands in the South China Sea—such as the reefs Subi, Fiery Cross, and Mischief in the Spratly Islands—causing significant damage to the marine environment.⁹

China has sought to coerce Southeast Asian states into surrendering their territorial claims in the South China Sea. Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea—three countries that have stood in the way of China's expansionist ambitions—have seen Beijing weaponise trade against them, targeting their valuable exports. China has also imposed tariffs on beef and barley imports from Australia, which endorsed an independent investigation into the origins of SARS-CoV-2 that causes Covid-19. Beijing threatens to cut the supply of rare-earth minerals to states that challenge its territorial claims.¹⁰ It also continues to extend fast loans for infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), creating dependencies that many analysts refer to as “debt traps”.¹¹

There is pushback from certain fronts. ASEAN, for one, has long struggled to present a united front against China. In January 2020, however, the group reaffirmed the importance of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in resolving maritime disputes and determining territorial entitlements.¹² ASEAN is no longer willing to acquiesce to Chinese belligerence in Southeast Asia. India, too, has moved to counter Chinese aggression in contested territory on its Northern border. Following a stand-off between Indian forces and the People's Liberation Army in the Himalayas in June 2020, India has strengthened its ties with the US, Japan, and Australia, organising joint maritime exercises in the Bay of Bengal and the Western Pacific.¹³ New Delhi is also keen to reduce its dependence on China-driven manufacturing supply chains, and is creating strategies for boosting domestic production and integrating local businesses with new or emerging global supply chains.¹⁴

An Overlap in Strategic Interests

South Korea, for its part, has moved to limit China's influence in the country's economic affairs. Seoul has been working to promote domestic manufacturing, and to provide relocation and facility costs for firms moving out of China.¹⁵ In an effort to reduce dependence on China, South Korean authorities are helping reshoring firms build smart factories and utilise industrial robots.¹⁶ Under its New Southern Policy, the South Korean government has been looking to expand collaboration with regional partners, particularly ASEAN, Taiwan, and India.

Indo-Pacific states have largely been willing to deepen security and economic ties and strengthen political engagement. The question is whether key regional players—India, South Korea, and ASEAN—can come together to create a joint framework for development and governance in the littorals.

“In Southeast Asia, marine governance has been a casualty of strategic competition.”

ASEAN-South Korea Cooperation

Cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea predates the pandemic. A dialogue partner of ASEAN since 1991, Seoul has been a key contributor to development in Southeast Asia. The two have a joint plan of action to promote political security, economic, social, and cultural cooperation, and to support the bloc's goal for a fully integrated ASEAN community. Since the announcement of President Moon Jae-in's New Southern Policy (NSP) in 2017, the South Korean government has made Southeast Asia a focal area of its security and developmental efforts.¹⁷ At the 1st ASEAN-ROK Infrastructure Ministers' Meeting in 2018, Seoul and the Southeast Asian states agreed to strengthen cooperation in sustainable infrastructure and regional connectivity. Senior officials met to discuss priorities and development plans in sustainable infrastructure and 'smart cities'. Both sides recognised the importance of developing smart infrastructure technologies related to, among others, transport and water resources.¹⁸

For ASEAN, the priority has always been to advance sustainable infrastructure in ways that can make Southeast Asian states competitive, accessible, and liveable.¹⁹ Individual countries have sought to create an ecosystem of planning and developing infrastructure. At the ASEAN-South Korea meeting in 2018, the two identified 20 key cooperation areas and encouraged regular exchanges at different levels of government and across sectors to promote cooperation in the field of infrastructure.²⁰ These initiatives are not necessarily driven by a desire to counter China. ASEAN and South Korea have kept channels for cooperation open with all regional states. At the heart of these endeavours is a collective appreciation of the need to diversify partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

In recent months, Seoul and ASEAN capitals have focused their attention on infrastructure building, digital economy, cyber security, and people-to-people exchanges. Many Southeast Asian states have pledged a greater commitment to support community-building activities. The resumption of air services agreement negotiations between ASEAN and South Korea in January 2019 was a good start. With both sides signing up to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), attempts are on to strengthen the ASEAN-South Korea Free Trade Area and collaborate in new areas such as smart cities, digital economy, and cyber security.²¹

ASEAN-South Korea Cooperation

The most promising cooperation has been in green finance, where Seoul (in partnership with the Asian Development Bank) has pledged USD 350 million for co-financing and USD 5 million in grants for technical assistance towards the ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility, with a focus on projects to boost ocean health.²² This is meant to support the implementation of ADB's new Action Plan for Healthy Oceans and Sustainable Blue Economies.²³ In essence, ASEAN and South Korea have sought an economic partnership aimed at creating growth avenues in the Western and Eastern Pacific.

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India-ASEAN Partnerships

India's recent initiatives have sought to anchor its Indo-Pacific policy in pragmatic economics, with a view to intensify economic, strategic and diplomatic relations with countries that share common concerns on security and development. Under the 'Act East' policy, the Indian government is working to promote India-ASEAN connectivity. For India—an aspiring stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific region—the notions of inclusiveness, openness, and ASEAN centrality and unity are intertwined. New Delhi has been keen to leverage its engagements with the Bay of Bengal littorals to expand its reach in Southeast Asia. Beyond serving as a counter-weight to China, India is widely considered by ASEAN as a partner in the broader endeavours of creating a prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

Physical Connectivity

India considers itself an indispensable stakeholder in ensuring regional stability by growth creation. The focal point of Indian attention is regional integration. Delhi's approach is marked by a desire to convert corridors of connectivity into economic corridors of shared prosperity. India has looked to partner with ASEAN in the Master Plan for ASEAN connectivity-2025 (MPAC-25) and the ASEAN comprehensive recovery framework. The Indian government has recognised ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific framework and looked to find complementarities with the AEP.²⁴ India's own connectivity projects in Southeast Asia include the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT) and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP).²⁵

The IMT is crucial as it serves as a bridgehead to booming markets in ASEAN countries. It therefore has the potential to transform the economic fortunes of people living in India's north-eastern states. New Delhi has plans to extend the highway to Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam—this could help open new vistas for enhanced trade, tourism, and people-to-people contacts between India and ASEAN.²⁶ Meanwhile, the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) grouping – of which India, Myanmar and Thailand are members – have endorsed an ambitious master plan for air, land, and sea connectivity.²⁷ An India-Myanmar-Thailand Motor Vehicle Agreement (IMT MVA) is set to spur seamless movement of passenger, personal and cargo vehicles along the roads linking the three countries.²⁸ There are also plans to encourage private-sector participation in developing roads and railways and logistics networks.

Digital connectivity

India and ASEAN have approved the Digital Work Plan-2022 aimed at strengthening regional digital cooperation.²⁹ An integrated blueprint for digital connectivity involves the setting up of a regional high-capacity fibre optic network, a National Rural Broadband Network, and Digital Villages in Remote Areas.³⁰ Since the ASEAN-India ICT Expo in December 2017, digital connectivity has indeed been a focal point of attention in New Delhi and ASEAN capitals. In particular, India has been looking to promote broadband connectivity in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (to give larger populations, especially in the rural regions, access to the internet. India and ASEAN have also been working to encourage startups in this domain.³¹

Maritime Connectivity

ASEAN-India engagement in the maritime domain has been designated a key area of cooperation. At the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit on 25 January 2018, leaders of ASEAN countries and India outlined their vision for the future of the partnership.³² India was only the third dialogue partner of ASEAN (after China and Japan) to initiate a meeting with the ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee to establish maritime linkages. The joint endeavours are likely to be in the shipping sector, where India has been lagging behind several ASEAN countries—particularly Singapore and Malaysia—that are home to some of the world's leading ports and container terminals. Meanwhile, the India-ASEAN maritime transport cooperation agreement is being negotiated and finalised.³³ India is looking to set up a maritime transport working group of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam to explore the feasibility of shipping networks to build resilient supply chains. New Delhi is keen to interlink islands in India and ASEAN countries to improve cultural ties and people-to-people relationships.

Ocean Resources and Conservation

India and ASEAN realise that they share a common maritime domain, and that they both have stakes in the sustainable exploitation of the ocean's resources. Since 2017, India's Ministry of External Affairs has been holding regular ASEAN-India Workshops on the Blue Economy (BE).³⁴ The partners have

designed an action plan to implement the Blue Economy Vision, with India considering extending technical and financial support to implement the plan. ASEAN and India have also decided to come together to combat marine debris, particularly from land-based activities, and strengthen collaboration.

Blue Economy

With the establishment of the ASEAN-India Blue Economy Framework (AIBEF) announced at the Leaders' Summit in Delhi in January 2018, BE is likely to be further strengthened at a regional level.³⁵ India will hope to garner cutting-edge technologies for strengthening the capacity to explore blue resources such as placer and marine minerals, deep-sea and ultradeep sea hydrocarbons (e.g., oil, natural gas and gas hydrates), renewable energy (e.g., wind, wave, current, thermal energy), freshwater desalination, and marine bio prospecting. The promotion of tourism and people-to-people linkages is another priority area. At a connectivity summit in 2017, Indian officials unveiled plans to boost cruise tourism from 80 ships per year to 900, but progress in this area has been slow.³⁶ The Indian government's IPOI is expected to build on the shared vision of a free and open Indo Pacific region, with the following pillars: maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology and academic cooperation; and trade connectivity and maritime transport.

Economic Cooperation and Trade

Efforts are ongoing to make the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) more effective in facilitating trade. New Delhi has asked for a review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement and ratification of the ASEAN-India Investment Agreement to facilitate further economic integration.³⁷ Having signed an FTA in goods with ASEAN in 2009, and a separate FTA in services in 2014, India is keen that non-tariff measures faced by Indian exporters of automobiles and agriculture in the bloc be removed. With Indian exports to ASEAN at USD 46 billion in 2021-22, New Delhi has been hopeful of a review of non-tariff measures but ASEAN is hesitant.³⁸

Taken together, however, the developments suggest close coordination between India and ASEAN, and a growing desire on both sides for joint endeavours and greater cross-border investments. The expectation in New Delhi is that ASEAN will share best practices in marine governance and promote greater business and investment flows, allowing Indian businesses to leverage Southeast Asia's financial hubs.

India-South Korea Ties

As encouraging as India's partnership with ASEAN has been, it is its cooperation with South Korea that has enthused observers. Under its new Southbound Policy, Seoul has sought to elevate ties with India to the same level as those with China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. After President Moon Jae's visit to New Delhi in July 2018, and the announcement of a shared vision for peace and prosperity, bilateral synergy has expanded rapidly.³⁹ The vision document highlights complementarities between India's rapid economic growth and its highly-skilled workforce, and South Korea's technological prowess. It calls for the sharing of manufacturing expertise and developmental experience, proposing a joint endeavour for growth and for global economic development. Seoul has been willing to partner in India's flagship initiatives such as 'Make in India', 'Skill India', 'Digital India', 'Start-up India', and 'Smart Cities'.⁴⁰

The two have also expressed a desire to expand bilateral trade, and upgrade the South Korea-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). They announced an early "Harvest Package" that could lead towards an upgraded CEPA.⁴¹ During a bilateral exchange in New Delhi in January 2022, efforts were made to impart fresh momentum to CEPA, upgrade negotiations in ways that might address difficulties expressed by industry from both sides. New Delhi and Seoul will promote extensive business-to-business interactions on trade and investment.⁴² The aim is to get the business community in both countries to leverage opportunities arising from complementarities, enhance investment, promote joint ventures, and work towards raising bilateral trade to USD 50 billion by 2030.⁴³ Seoul has expressed willingness to support India's infrastructure development through South Korea's Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF), and offered export credit.

Anxious over China's growing assertiveness, Delhi and Seoul are keen to restructure regional supply chains. Both countries hope to intensify the trade relationship, which has been stagnant since CEPA was signed in 2009. Despite an overall boost in bilateral trade, India's trade deficit with South Korea has seen an increase from USD 5 billion in 2008-09 to USD 8 billion in 2020-21.⁴⁴ Both countries recognise the extent to which increased economic growth can be driven by supply chain diversification and greater foreign direct investments. India's 'Korea Plus' platform is positioned to facilitate Korean investments while promoting greater bilateral economic collaboration. The challenge is to find ways to promote Indian manufacturing and businesses overseas.

India-South Korea Ties

South Korea has strong developmental credentials: for instance, it was one of the first countries to be invited to join the ‘plus’ format of the Quadrilateral security dialogue of India, Japan, Australia, and the United States, in which countries discussed a global response to COVID-19.⁴⁵ New Delhi is particularly looking to benefit from South Korea’s New Green Deal. In May 2020, President Moon Jae-in announced a bold push for the Korean version of a ‘New Deal’ meant to help overcome the coronavirus crisis and develop new growth engines.⁴⁶ Indian officials are well aware of the deleterious impact of China’s infrastructure projects in South Asian and Southeast Asian countries.⁴⁷ In littoral Southeast Asia, China’s reclamation drive has been a crucial cause of biodiversity loss. New Delhi is keen to leverage Seoul’s ‘new deal’ to close the developmental gap in the Eastern Indian Ocean in a sustainable manner.⁴⁸

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A Shared Developmental Agenda

More robust bilateral ties between India, ASEAN, and South Korea in recent years, are a cause for optimism. Yet a wider cross-cutting relationship has so far been elusive. A trilateral partnership in the maritime and developmental arenas would need a higher level of commitment and investment from all sides; it is an onerous proposition, given their evolving individual priorities. India, for instance, is focused on connectivity, marine governance, and the environment, and among its priorities will likely be enhancing maritime and air connectivity with ASEAN countries.

India will also want to prioritise the Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative, which recognises marine conservation, biodiversity, and the Blue Economy (BE) as primary areas of cooperation. The latter concept resonates with a large number of regional countries and has the potential to boost economic activity. The contemporary BE discourse highlights maritime safety and security, maritime connectivity, and maritime domain awareness, as well as the sustainable harnessing of oceanic resources. India, ASEAN, and South Korea could cooperate to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, with a focus on maximising employment opportunities. This will necessarily need cooperation between small and medium enterprises. Strengthening maritime safety at the operational level, too, will be priority, not least as it would help realise India's Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative.

For South Korea and ASEAN, evidently, the focus is more on infrastructure creation and energy. With many South Korean contractors supporting key projects in Southeast Asia, infrastructure has emerged as a priority for Seoul. Seoul has partnered with ASEAN countries through Infrastructure Asia, an outfit that brings together stakeholders to develop, finance, and implement bankable projects in the region. With the country's high innovation density, South Korean industries have valuable technological expertise that can help build smart cities in Asia. South Korean assistance in infrastructure building for ASEAN's Masterplan on Asean Connectivity 2025, could also be extended to India's Sagarmala project. An enhanced infrastructure partnership between ASEAN, India, and South Korea would help "connect the connectivities", by integrating India into a Smart Cities Network.⁴⁹ New-age technology and

A Shared Developmental Agenda

solutions will help India embrace efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability dimensions in public infrastructure. At the same time, India will look to involve ASEAN and South Korea to contribute to infrastructure development and capacity-building in the Indian Ocean. So far, Seoul and ASEAN have done little to contribute to projects in the region, but the latter has volunteered to assist India in its endeavours.⁵⁰


In the arena of blue growth, the opportunities are significant. ASEAN and India have undertaken to explore potential cooperation between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific (AOIP) and the Indo-Pacific Ocean's initiative, including in the four areas of maritime domain: maritime cooperation, connectivity, SDGs, and the economy.⁵¹ South Korea, meanwhile, has initiated negotiations for free trade agreements and launched an official development assistance (ODA) strategy aimed at six NSP partner countries, but is yet to announce a plan for capacity building in the IOR. From an Indian perspective, a critical consideration will be ASEAN's and South Korea's ability to jointly commit resources to projects in the Indian Ocean.⁵²

Clean energy is likely to be another area of common focus. India, ASEAN, and South Korea have displayed remarkable commitment for the idea of green growth, undertaking to increase their share of renewable energy sources and phase-out polluting hydrocarbon fuels from the energy mix. Each has shown a willingness to advance its energy transition, using clean and sustainable ways to expand domestic energy production. If South Korea has introduced a Green New Deal as part of its Covid-19 economic recovery package in July 2020, India has announced new rules to push new green energy, lower emissions, and fight climate change. Achieving new targets will require collaboration with partner states to address structural and institutional barriers. India will seek to use the expertise of partner countries in advanced technologies and innovative capacity.

To be sure, any joint endeavours by India, ASEAN, and South Korea are likely to be affected by the pandemic. COVID-19 has hit supply chain management, and the possibility of more external shocks in the future remains strong, despite nascent signs of recovery. The developments of 2021 highlight the hazards. With many regional economies in recession, trade witnessed a significant reduction, leading to a decrease in production. Movement and travel restrictions had a negative impact on productivity, with employee layoffs

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and factory closures. With infection control measures coming in full force—in particular the restrictions on public transport and the need for social distancing—production inefficiencies increased, culminating in increased transportation costs. A mutating virus could potentially hinder supply chain connectivity in ways that regional states have not anticipated. As they seek to jointly chart a course ahead, India, ASEAN, and South Korea will be aware of the need to overcome Covid-related challenges.

A minilateral partnership aimed at enhancing marine governance is not going to be enough to address the whole gamut of challenges in the Indo Pacific region. Any endeavour involving select members will need to be a subset of a larger, more comprehensive plan to establish a ‘rules-based’ and ‘human-security-centred’ order. That makes it imperative for India to work with partners like Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, Australia and the United States. Even so, for a viable governance architecture to evolve, India, ASEAN and South Korea need to play a key role. Beyond infrastructure and connectivity, each country will look to focus on areas that help improve the quality of people’s lives; smart, sustainable, inclusive growth that transcends geographical and physical realms, measures that open new avenues for revitalising civilisational and people-to-people contacts. Cooperation between the Asian powerhouses is an essential prerequisite to realise an Asian century. Going forward, the mantras should be “commerce, connectivity, culture, creativity, and sustainability”. Such an approach will also help realise the SDG agenda, helping regional states achieve a wider set of development objectives. 

“Any minilateral endeavour in the Indo-Pacific needs to be part of a larger, more comprehensive plan to establish a ‘rules-based’ and ‘human-security-centred’ order.”

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