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**AIC**  
ASEAN-India Centre at RIS

# AIC COMMENTARY

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## An Agenda for Strengthening Maritime Transport Cooperation in Indo-Pacific

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*Maritime trade and maritime security are essential components of the Indo-Pacific initiative. The Facilitation of maritime trade and transportation is found to be one of the key pillars of all Indo-Pacific visions introduced till date. While tariff is no longer the prime barrier to international trade, non-tariff issues such as missing links in inter-country transportation and variation in domestic regulations have a direct impact on trade in the Indo-Pacific. An inefficient port or shipping line can affect the price of traded products in the same way a high tariff does. On the other hand, domestic regulations in the transportation sector also strongly affect the trade in goods and services. This commentary makes an attempt to identify a set of recommendations in order to enhance maritime transport cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.*

### 1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is a multipolar region with geographical coverage in the Indian and the Pacific oceans. India occupies a prominent position in the Indian Ocean in terms of geographical, cultural and civilisational linkages. Indo-Pacific participating countries strongly believe in an Indo-Pacific that is free, open and inclusive, and one that is founded upon a cooperative and collaborative rules-based order. At the UNSC High-Level Open Debate on 9 August 2021, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi underlined the five principles as a global roadmap of maritime security cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Maritime trade and maritime security go hand in hand. Both are congruous and essential components of the Indo-Pacific initiative.

To strengthen the Indo-Pacific partnership, India has introduced the country's Indo-Pacific vision by announcing the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI) in November 2019.<sup>2</sup> Several other nations and regional blocs such as the European Union (EU) and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have gradually introduced their respective Indo-Pacific

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visions and/or work plans with latest being the African nation Kenya. Facilitation of maritime trade and transportation is found to be one of the key pillars in all Indo-Pacific visions.

Indo-Pacific participating countries recognize that maritime connectivity is a prime catalyst for international trade competitiveness and economic growth. For example, the strength of maritime trade acts as a stimulus to the growth of the countries. Better efficiency in maritime transport may boost competitiveness and stimulate economic growth in Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> To strengthen the maritime connectivity in the Indian Ocean, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has envisioned the concept of SAGAR – “Security and Growth for All in the Region”.<sup>4</sup> SAGAR in a way signifies India’s engagement in the Indian Ocean to ensure peace, stability and prosperity. Therefore, enhanced understanding of the strategic importance of maritime transport for trade and development is important. However, contrary to popular belief, maritime transport occupies a relatively small part of conventional regional integration analysis.

Tariff is no longer the prime barrier to international trade. Non-tariff issues such as missing links in inter-country transportation and variation in domestic regulations have a direct impact on trade in the Indo-Pacific. An inefficient port or shipping line can affect the price of traded products in the same way a high tariff does. On the other hand, domestic regulations in the transportation sector also strongly affect the trade in goods and services. For example, port regulations and stevedoring vary across countries in the Indo-Pacific. While the rise of maritime trade triggers the growth of the countries and vice-versa, variations in trade flows and resource endowments between countries increase maritime costs. Legal and regulatory issues also adversely impact on maritime connectivity in Indo-Pacific.<sup>5</sup> What follows is that Indo-Pacific countries face many “common” challenges in the maritime transport sector. This commentary makes an attempt to identify a set of recommendations for enhanced maritime transport cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

## **2. Maritime integration and regional cooperation**

The Indo-Pacific contributes more than half of the world’s GDP and population and has huge natural resources and potential for new economic opportunities. Nearly 65 per cent of world trade is from Indo-Pacific participating countries, thus indicating strong interdependence in trade and has a potential strength of economic integration in the Indo-Pacific. About 68 per cent of India’s sea-borne exports to and about 51 per cent India’s sea-borne imports are from Indo-Pacific countries, respectively, indicating high dependence on the Indo-Pacific region in trade. Access to port and quality of port infrastructure are some important factors contributing to developing country’s rise in international trade and to improve a region’s connectivity.<sup>6</sup> Studies show the scope for potential strength of economic integration across the Indo-Pacific region, and indicate that the Indo-Pacific could become a powerful bloc if the South and Southeast Asia could be linked through stronger connectivity, particularly developing maritime linkages and improved trade facilitation and other networks that would reduce trade costs, which are a necessary step in order to realise the trade potential of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>7</sup> While world’s best performing ports are in Asia, Asia also leads in construction of new ports and terminals. Identifying these challenges in advance and corresponding mitigating strategies would be the correct step forward in adding further momentum to the Indo-Pacific integration. A way of classifying the challenges of maritime transportation from the supply side is to divide them into five groups: (i) ports, shipping and logistics; (ii) regulatory barriers, (iii) supply chain; (iv) human resources, and (v) investment. Given these challenges, we present a set of maritime transportation proposals that may strengthen the Indo-Pacific partnership.

### (i) Value of direct maritime connectivity

Volume of maritime trade is a crucial building block for greater economic integration in the Indo-Pacific. About 80 percent of global trade by volume and more than 70 per cent by value are managed by sea-bound trade across the world, thereby demonstrating the importance of the maritime sector to international trade. Asia has become the driver of world maritime trade till the recent COVID-19 outbreak. Sea-bound trade in Asian countries will hold a share of about 50 per cent (i.e. 11.33 billion tonnes) in 2019, followed by Europe, North America and Latin American countries.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the importance of direct maritime linkages is crucial for Indo-Pacific maritime connectivity. For example, China having the highest number of trading partners with zero transshipment (including its top 15 trading partners), compared to Singapore and Hong Kong, is ranked as the number one maritime connected country in the world.<sup>9</sup> Direct maritime connectivity reduces the costs of transportation and time. Some high impact cooperation areas could be explored are short-sea shipping, cruise shipping, inland waterways, to mention a few.

**Table 1: Indo-Pacific Shipping Indicators**

Country	Country LSCI	Number of services	Number of Country calls	Number of operators	Ship capacity (TEU)	Deployed annual capacity (TEU)	Number of direct calls
Australia	37.23	49	46	28	10,622	70,12,238	37
France	77.43	78	73	33	23,964	2,02,57,192	80
India	57.21	96	89	44	14,000	1,76,39,963	55
Indonesia	34.93	111	106	36	6,910	96,30,971	17
Japan	87.49	203	206	59	23,656	2,04,77,147	47
United States	103.83	198	179	61	23,656	4,20,64,326	104

Data refers to the year 2020

Source: Author's own based on MDS Transmodal, the UK

### (ii) Reducing disparity in maritime infrastructure

Containerised trade infrastructure including ports and shipping networks is important for countries participation into regional and global value chains. Indo-Pacific participating countries had a share of 70.5 per cent (572.3 million TEUs in 2019) in global container throughput.<sup>10</sup> East Asia and Southeast Asian countries had covered about 50 percent of container traffic in 2019.<sup>11</sup> China alone contributes over one fourth of the world's total container traffic. Next comes the USA and Singapore. More developed regional economies – such as Singapore, the UAE, Malaysia, Australia and South Africa – have better ports than less developed economies, particularly in Africa. Notwithstanding China's phenomenal rise in containerised trade, the gap between China and the rest of the other Indo-Pacific participating countries is quite high and also growing.

Table 1 clearly highlights the shipping strengths of select Indo-Pacific countries as of 2020. India's strength in shipping does commensurate with its long coastline, making it truly a maritime nation. However, both India and Indonesia require scaling up the number of shipping operators and ship capacity. Indonesia, in particular, requires adding more direct calls which would lead to improving the country's liner shipping connectivity index (LSCI) and corresponding global rank. Therefore, narrowing the maritime infrastructure gap in the Indo-Pacific has high merit. Narrowing the maritime infrastructure gap in the Indo-Pacific has high merit, which will have lasting and more critical effect on the regional economies.

### **(iii) Deepening liner shipping network**

Since trade is largely carried through the ocean, stronger maritime transport cooperation will lead to strengthening the liner shipping networks, both within and between countries in the Indo-Pacific. Liner shipping connectivity improvement, particularly in developing countries and LDCs should be the priority of Indo-Pacific maritime cooperation. In the Indo-Pacific, there is more than enough scope to improve liner shipping connectivity. Being a maritime zone, an Indo-Pacific-wide regional initiative to develop and improve liner shipping connectivity, involving operators, regulators, and shippers would be extremely beneficial in terms of promoting more liner services, lowering transportation costs, and enhancing connectivity.

At the same time, container ship size has been increasing globally. About 52 per cent of the merchant fleets are under the control of Indo-Pacific countries as of 2020.<sup>12</sup> However, most of the merchant fleets are registered in the small island countries such as Panama, Liberia, Marshall Islands, Hong Kong and Singapore due to the advantage of lower taxes and hassle free registration in these countries. Getting back the business in Indo-Pacific may require setting in a favourable environment for registration of merchant fleets.

### **(iv) Development of port facilities**

Seven out of the largest 10 container ports in the world are in China. Some of the major ASEAN ports such as Singapore Port, Port Klang and Tanjung Pelepas in Malaysia, Laem Chabang, Thailand, Ho Chi Minh City Port, Vietnam are within 35 rank globally. The principal port in South Asia is Colombo (ranked 24<sup>th</sup> in the world). The largest container ports in India are on the west coast (Jawaharlal Nehru Port and Mundra port). Among the deep-sea ports in Asia, only a few are located in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the majority are located in China and South Korea. This also calls for new investments in the port sector in the Indo-Pacific in order to accommodate bigger vessels and also in strengthening backend connectivity with the hinterland.<sup>13</sup> Several Indo-Pacific participating countries are currently building new port facilities, and some are either under construction or in the planning stage. India has taken an ambitious port development project called Sagarmala. Sagarmala project offers important lessons on developing new ports which are environment friendly (Green Port), financing models and multi-modal transportation.

### **(v) Implementing digital maritime programme**

Indo-Pacific countries exchange large amounts of data, particularly between North America and Asia. The massive data exchanges are carried through submarine cables across the globe. As of early 2019, there are approximately 378 submarine cables in service around the world.<sup>14</sup> Indo-Pacific region should provide special attention to manage the choke points such

as the Strait of Malacca between Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia; the Strait of Luzon between Chinese Taipei and the Philippines; and the South China Sea. Greater cooperation among cable operators, content developers, industry associations, private sector, etc. may help designing a regional programme in order to protect the digital infrastructure, sharing information among service providers and governments, conduct training and capacity building, etc.

Port and shipping services or the maritime transport quality can significantly benefit from digitalization. Digitalization and new developments in Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, the Internet of things and automation are of increasing relevance to maritime transport. They help optimize existing processes, create new business opportunities and transform supply chains and the geography of trade. Digitalization in maritime transport offers new business opportunities in the Indo-Pacific. Development of information and communication technology will be essential to reach a regional convergence of port community systems. Indo-Pacific countries may convene a global conference on investment opportunities in port sector digitalization.

**Table 2: Largest Container Ship Operators, 2021**

Rank	Operator	Number of Ships	TEU (000's)	Share (%)
1	Maersk	708	4121.78	16.9
2	Mediterranean shipping corporation (MSC)	589	3920.78	16.1
3	CMAA CGM Group	557	3049.74	12.5
4	COSCO Group	498	3007.41	12.3
5	Hapag-Lloyd	256	1789.39	7.3
6	Ocean Network Express	221	1600.53	6.6
7	Evergreen Line	202	1345.53	5.5
8	HMM Company Ltd	75	752.6	3.1
9	Yang Ming Marine Transport Corporation	89	628.46	2.6
10	Zim	95	409.81	1.7
<b>Total</b>			<b>24,571.68</b>	<b>100</b>

Note: based on capacity on offer

Source: Alphaliner. <https://alphaliner.axsmarine.com/PublicTop100/>

#### **(vi) Strengthening competition and supply chain networks**

The global market is highly concentrated on a few major players, as shown in Table 2. Top five shipping lines together share a staggering 65 percent of container shipping operations in 2021. The skewed distribution of container ship operators is a matter of concern. Although disproportionate trade across the countries has led to rise of concentration of container transportation, it may cause several risks: first, generate inefficiency when there is excess capacity; second, rise in shortage of containers and shipping rates, which pose severe threat to

supply chain networks; and third, put a halt to product (or services) differentiation. To encourage competition, Indo-Pacific countries may consider regulatory reforms and set up a forum of competition authorities of Indo-Pacific countries. While higher competition may encourage more enterprises joining the business, particularly from developing parts of the Indo-Pacific such as India, this may also promote the supply chain resilience in the region.

#### **(vii) Climate change adaptation and sustainability**

Indo-Pacific participating countries should collaborate to promote green shipping and development of green ports, including through GHG emission reduction and work to help improve understanding of issues at the interface of maritime transport and the climate change challenges. Special emphasis should be placed on climate change adaptation and the need to enhance the climate-resilience of transport systems. To meet this objective, Indo-Pacific participating countries may organize a policy dialogue to generate new ideas in climate change adaptation of maritime transportation in the Indo-Pacific.

#### **(viii) Enhanced trade facilitation for maritime transportation**

Indo-Pacific participating countries may undertake Enhanced Trade Facilitation for Maritime Transportation in Indo-Pacific (ETFMT-IP). The ETFMT-IP may aim for, among others, (i) simplification and harmonization of maritime trade procedures; (ii) designing and implementing common trading standards; (iii) application of digital technology to marine logistics chain; (iv) promoting the use of new technologies to facilitate transport and logistics in the region by sharing experience, developing knowledge products, including transport facilitation tools, and undertaking pilot demonstrations; and (v) training and capacity building programmes in the maritime transportation and logistics. Performance monitoring of Indo-Pacific ports will add immense value in designing an appropriate regional policy for the development of ports and shipping. Besides, the ETFMT-IP will lead to integrate port community systems with their respective integrated customs management systems within and between countries. Indo-Pacific participating countries can facilitate ETFMT-IP by promoting national collaborative platforms such as the single windows, port community systems or national trade facilitation committees. A network of national trade facilitation committees of Indo-Pacific participating countries could be a good start.

#### **(ix) Gains from institutional cooperation**

There are several ways to strengthen institutional cooperation. First, in order to move ahead with the enhanced programmes on maritime transportation, Indo-Pacific participating countries may establish an intergovernmental group of experts on maritime transportation to support participating countries in planning and operationalization of international transport and maritime corridors in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Second, Indo-Pacific participating countries may introduce new academic courses on maritime transportation or maritime economics. India may offer a Masters programme on maritime economics / management at the Indian Maritime University (IMU) in partnership with similar organisations in other Indo-Pacific countries. Third, to cope up with the unfolding challenges in the port sector, Indo-Pacific participating countries may consider organising the first ever Indo-Pacific Ports Conclave in 2022. An Indo-Pacific Forum of ports in Indo-Pacific may be set up which would then facilitate sharing of information; promote training and capacity building programmes and exchange of best practices in post-COVID-19 period. Similarly, a regional

maritime fund for promotion of maritime connectivity in the Indo-Pacific will facilitate implementation of regional projects.

#### **(x) Partnering with Japan in maritime connectivity**

Japan's connectivity initiatives are well known for quality infrastructure investment.<sup>15</sup> India-Japan collaboration can offer support to the enhanced maritime connectivity, which may help to lower logistic costs and increase trade in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan with its capabilities on ship building with over 1000 shipyards domestically, can offer technological support for ship building. Maritime transportation in India may get the desired technological fillip with Japan's participation in IPOI. India and Japan may join hands to build maritime infrastructure in third countries.

#### **(xi) Coordination with regional bodies**

For coordinated improvements of maritime connectivity, Indo-Pacific countries shall connect with regional programmes having impacts on maritime trade and integration such as the ASEAN (Master Plan of ASEAN Connectivity), BIMSTEC (BIMSTEC Master Plan of Transport Connectivity), the EU (TEN-T), etc.

#### **(xii) Need of a regional comprehensive maritime transport policy**

In view of scaling up the maritime activities, Indo-Pacific participating countries shall aim for a regional policy framework in maritime transport, which will facilitate simplification of maritime trade procedures and reforms, sourcing and sharing best practices, and regional coordination, leading to promote maritime transportation across the region. It may also provide a mechanism for knowledge-sharing and policy dialogue around good practices. Standardized and harmonized data reporting, dissemination and statistical framework is required for regional cooperation in maritime transportation including short sea shipping and/or coastal shipping. In this context, BIMSTEC offers important lessons for regional maritime cooperation. Negotiation of BIMSTEC maritime cooperation agreement, which was earlier used to be known as BIMSTEC coastal shipping agreement, has been concluded and all participating countries have agreed to liberalise the Cabotage in the region.

### **3. Concluding Remarks**

The Indo-Pacific contributes more than half of the world's GDP and population and has huge natural resources and potential for new economic opportunities. Nearly 65 percent of world trade is from Indo-Pacific participating countries, thus indicating strong interdependence in trade and has a potential strength of economic integration in the Indo-Pacific. About 68 per cent of India's sea-borne exports to and about 51 percent India's sea-borne imports are from Indo-Pacific countries, respectively, therefore indicating high dependence on the Indo-Pacific region in trade. Access to port and quality of port infrastructure are some important factors contributing to developing countries' rise in international trade and to improve a region's connectivity. While tariff is no longer the prime barrier to international trade, non-tariff issues such as missing links in inter-country transportation and variation in domestic regulations have a direct impact on trade in the Indo-Pacific. An inefficient port or shipping line can affect the price of traded products in the same way a high tariff does. On the other hand, domestic regulations in the transportation sector also strongly affect the trade in goods and services. This commentary has identified a dozen of recommendations in order to

enhance maritime transport cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. It concludes by suggesting a regional comprehensive maritime transport policy in Indo-Pacific.

## End Notes:

1. Refer, Indian Prime Minister's speech at PM's remarks at the UNSC High-Level Open Debate on "Enhancing Maritime Security: A Case for International Cooperation", available at [https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news\\_updates/pms-remarks-at-the-uns-unc-high-level-open-debate-on-enhancing-maritime-security-a-case-for-international-cooperation/?comment=disable&tag\\_term=pmspeech](https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-remarks-at-the-uns-unc-high-level-open-debate-on-enhancing-maritime-security-a-case-for-international-cooperation/?comment=disable&tag_term=pmspeech)
2. The IPOI focuses on seven pillars: (i) Maritime Security; (ii) Maritime Ecology; (iii) Maritime Resources; (iv) Capacity Building and Resource Sharing; (v) Disaster Risk Reduction and Management; (vi) Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation; and (viii) Trade, Connectivity and Maritime Transport.
3. Refer, *Indo-Pacific Report 2019* (NMF, 2019).
4. Refer Prime Minister's speech delivered during his Mauritius visit in March 2015, available at [https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news\\_updates/text-of-the-pms-remarks-on-the-commissioning-of-coast-ship-barracuda](https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/text-of-the-pms-remarks-on-the-commissioning-of-coast-ship-barracuda)
5. Refer, ADB (2019)
6. Refer, for example, Munim and Schramm (2018)
7. Refer, Rahman *et al.* (2020) investigate the potential economic effect of Indo-Pacific regional economic cooperation and compares with the extended CPTPP. Using the Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) modelling, authors have shown that the quadrilateral alliance between the US, Japan, Australia, and India along with South and Southeast Asia would lead to substantial economic gain.
8. Refer, AIC-RIS (2021)
9. Refer, Saeed and Cullinane (2021)
10. Refer, AIC-RIS (2021)
11. *ibid*
12. *ibid*
13. In a recent paper, Wignaraja *et al.* (2021) have argued that success in the new operating environment requires Commonwealth countries to build resilience by improving the quality of seaport infrastructure, logistics and transport networks, enhancing trade openness and trade facilitation, addressing maritime security threats and increasing the environmental sustainability of shipping operations. These are equally valid for Indo-Pacific countries.
14. Refer, for example, *Indo-Pacific Report* (NMF, 2019)
15. Refer, for example, Yanagida (2021)

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## About AIC

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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