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Addressing Non-Traditional Maritime Threats - Options for India and ASEAN

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***Abstract:** Addressing non-traditional maritime threats forms the major basis of cooperation in the maritime domain. The varying degrees of instability and security related issues in the Indian Ocean Region and South China Sea provide India and ASEAN a large menu of threats and cooperative mechanisms to work together. This commentary analyses various aspects that can provide options for India and ASEAN to work together in the Indo-Pacific and address the multitude of common non-traditional maritime threats.*

Convergences and Platforms

As non-traditional maritime threats continue to evolve and grow, leveraging convergences and platforms becomes crucial for enhancing maritime security and fostering regional economic prosperity by promoting stability, enhancing security, and preserving peace. In the India-ASEAN context, there are several convergence points and platforms where threats, challenges, risks are discussed, and cooperative options arrived at. There has been consistency in the list of various aspects, linked directly or even indirectly, to the maritime domain. There are many common aspects that flow from platforms like ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Extended ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), and have also been documented in the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021-2025), the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO). These aspects under the broad umbrella of maritime cooperation include maritime security, maritime connectivity, maritime cooperation, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), defence dialogue, peacekeeping operations,

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counterterrorism, and transnational crime. Two aspects that do not generally form part of dialogues and joint operations, except in alliances like NATO, have been part of the ADMM Plus discussions, military medicine and humanitarian mine action. While mine action mainly looks at mine clearance on land, there is a need to examine the same in the maritime domain. The past experience of the enormous efforts required in clearing sea mines in the Persian Gulf and the forthcoming Black Sea demining operation to make transit navigation safe for ships are issues that should be discussed keeping the South China Sea situation in mind. Military Medicine is an aspect that could generate enormous cooperative dividend as the Indian Navy apart from extensive land-based infrastructure and expertise also has adequate experience from surgeries carried out on ships with adequate onboard capacity and capability as well as surgeries on smaller ships carried out guided through continuous online video connectivity.

The Maritime Cooperation Matrix

Trust and confidence in each other's capacities and capabilities constitute the corner stone of cooperation matrices. For maritime nations these aspects translate into enhanced interoperability between maritime forces. Recognition and identification of strengths and weak areas in turn aid building of capacities and enhancement of capabilities. This cyclical movement builds interoperable synergy, which through maritime exercises, interactions at regional level organisations, information sharing, and dialogues strengthens the maritime cooperative matrix, especially for addressing non-traditional threats. As part of this endeavour, the Indian Navy carries out established institutionalised maritime exercises with ASEAN navies; bilateral with Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, and Vietnam; and trilateral with Thailand and Singapore. The first multilateral exercise with ASEAN navies, ASEAN India Maritime Exercise (AIME), which was co-hosted with the Singapore navy in May 2023 saw participation from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. The Indian Navy also carries out coordinated patrols with Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand, essentially in the Bay of Bengal. In addition to these exercises, ASEAN nations have actively participated in the MILAN series hosted by India since its inception in 1995. The first MILAN saw the participation of five navies that included the navies of Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand, and MILAN 2024 held in February saw the participation of eight ASEAN navies. While such exercises provide an opportunity for navies to engage beyond their regional maritime domains, there is a need for such endeavours to be parallelly supported by participation in regional organisations beyond those of ASEAN. This is important considering that ASEAN centrality is considered by many nations as a major corner stone of the Indo-Pacific. Hence ASEAN nations while engaging India could consider enhancing its presence in organisations and initiatives like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and the Coalition of Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). More participation would enhance multi-lateral engagement beyond the South China Sea, and a larger footprint

in the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN nations who do not fulfil the requirements of becoming members of either IORA or IONS could come onboard as dialogue partners and observers, respectively. At present, none of the ASEAN member states is a member of the CDRI. Given the fact that India and ASEAN nations are frequent victims of natural disasters, ASEAN nations should strongly consider joining CDRI as members. ASEAN can also follow the European Union (EU) to join as an organisation.

East Asia Summit and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative

Prime Minister Modi introduced IPOI in the 2019 during the EAS meeting. During his speech at the summit, the prime minister Modi while proposing the IPOI as a cooperative effort to translate principles for the Indo-Pacific into measures to secure our shared maritime environment, had stated that “The EAS is the logical platform to promote a free, open, inclusive, transparent, rules-based, peaceful, prosperous Indo-Pacific region, where sovereignty and territorial integrity and the application of international law especially UNCLOS are assured to all States equally.”¹ Therefore, the IPOI should be considered a joint India-ASEAN initiative as it is also supposed to rely on the ASEAN-led EAS framework² but would not be limited to it, thereby providing a degree of flexibility. Consisting of seven pillars or spokes IPOI is ubiquitous as these pillars covers a wide array of aspects that shape multifarious cooperative mechanisms, including the maritime domain. However, it is heavily undersubscribed by ASEAN nations as only Singapore and Indonesia are onboard. The status is depicted in table 1.

Table 1: IPOI Pillars and Lead Nations

Ser	Pillar	Lead Nation(s)
(a)	Maritime Security	India and UK
(b)	Maritime Ecology	Australia
(c)	Maritime Resources	France and Indonesia
(d)	Capacity Building and Resource Sharing	Nil
(e)	Disaster Risk Reduction and Management	India
(f)	Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation	Singapore and Italy
(g)	Trade, Connectivity and Maritime Transport	Japan and USA

Germany has also come onboard the IPOI but is yet to indicate which pillar it will join. The IPOI while exploring cooperation to promote common principles, objectives, and elements between IPOI and AOIP and AMO would also simplify joining and working in IORA, IONS and CDRI due to the commonality and convergence of addressing issues. Therefore, ASEAN nations should consider joining one or more pillars based on their capacities and capabilities, and national interests. IPOI would also ease working with Quad nations and the broader Indo-Pacific region, outside the remit of Quad initiatives while being linked with them as the IPOI is aimed at furthering practical

cooperation as an open, non-treaty-based global initiative seeking to better manage, conserve, sustain and secure the maritime domain.³ This approach could allay the fears of ASEAN nations of ‘choosing sides’, which has been a long-standing ASEAN dictum.

Way forward

India and ASEAN can navigate the complex maritime security landscape and promote regional stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific by leveraging convergences and platforms to address non-traditional threats effectively. While a path has been forged for India-ASEAN maritime cooperation, there is a requirement of prioritising steps to further cement the relationship. Some steps that can be considered are as indicated:

- ASEAN nations can consider joining regional organisations like IORA and IONS, and initiatives like IPOI and CDRI.
- Establish trilaterals to enable focussed work on aspects flowing from the IPOI pillars. These trilaterals could even be established outside the remit of the IPOI if there is any apprehension in joining IPOI.
- Signing of logistics agreements between India and ASEAN nations to maintain presence, and in time permanency of that presence, which would enhance interoperability in addressing common threats and challenges. These agreements could be based on the existing agreements with Singapore and Vietnam.
- Increase information sharing by positioning of Liaison Officers at the Indian Navy’s International Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region at the earliest opportunity. This would aid generating a more comprehensive and informative Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).
- In addition to MDA, establish cooperation and information sharing in Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA).
- Work towards addressing future Pandemics as is done for HADR. The experiences, efforts, and lessons learnt in combatting Covid 19 would aid drafting of a Standard Operating Procedure.

Endnotes

¹ Government of India/ Prime Ministers Office, “Prime Minister’s Speech at the East Asia Summit”, 04 November 2019, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32171/Prime_Ministers_Speech_at_the_East_Asia_Summit_04_November_2019

² Government of India/ Ministry of External Affairs, “EAM’s remarks at CII Partnership Summit 2020”, 17 December 2020, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33309>

³ Ibid

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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 works with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and undertakes evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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