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**AIC**  
ASEAN-India Centre at RIS

# AIC COMMENTARY

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## Unraveling the India-ASEAN Cooperation Paradigm for Non-Traditional Maritime Security Threats

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***Abstract:** Emphasising the importance of oceans, the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation, issued last year, acknowledged the need for deeper global and regional collaboration to address the emerging maritime issues such as terrorism, piracy and armed robbery against ships, human trafficking, smuggling of arms and drugs, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and marine pollution. This commentary focuses on selected non-traditional maritime security threats such as rise in sea levels, ocean acidification and unregulated fishing and suggests measures which ASEAN and India can take jointly to address these non-traditional maritime security challenges.*

### Introduction

The ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation 2023 has categorically emphasised the importance of oceans and seas as the important factor in driving the growth and prosperity of the area. It also acknowledged the need of a global and regional collaboration to address emerging maritime issues such as terrorism, piracy and armed robbery against ships, human trafficking in persons, smuggling of arms and drugs, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and marine pollution.<sup>1</sup> These issues fall under the category of non-traditional maritime security threats. In fact, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has officially expressed these concerns in his intervention where he shared the vision of a progressive Indo-Pacific that ‘encompasses maritime

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<sup>1</sup> <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ASEAN-India-Joint-Statement-on-Maritime-Cooperation-FIN-1.pdf>

cooperation to ensure sustainable use of maritime resources – particularly in tackling IUU fishing, promoting the blue economy, and mitigating maritime pollution, among others. As the country coordinator for ASEAN-India relations, the Philippines is hoping to see more ASEAN-India cooperation in protecting the environment, addressing climate change, and promoting biodiversity through the ASEAN-India Green Fund'<sup>2</sup>. This commentary focuses on select non-traditional maritime security threats such as rise in sea levels, ocean acidification and unregulated fishing and suggest measures to address these non-traditional maritime security challenges.

## **Non-Traditional Maritime Threats**

Climate change has triggered the melting of the ice resulting in rising sea levels. The unhealthy practices of people in the land particularly in islands have also destroyed the aquifer leading to liquefaction. These activities had cumulatively destroyed the environment and eventually affected the residents, especially the coastal population due to shoreline damages, flooding, salinity intrusion, water shortage and food insecurity. This resulted in climate refugee problems. Ocean acidification has also emerged as a serious concern. It is the result of chemical processes that happen when the seawater reacts with the Carbon dioxide emissions and forms carbonic acid. The sea level rise leads to intrusion of seawater to agricultural lands close to the coasts and causes salinisation, which distresses food security. One of the factors of such a threat is the burning of fossil fuels and land use change.

The creation of artificial islands in the contested waters of the South China Sea (SCS) also contributed to the destruction of corals and reefs. As early as 2015, Philippine officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs have sounded the alarm on the damages being done to the SCS, particularly in the West Philippine Sea (WPS). Part of the damage to the marine environment of the WPS is brought by the “massive, large-scale ocean filling” or “reclamation”. Other claimants are also concerned about the impact of building artificial islands on regional security, maritime governance, the rule of law, and transboundary effects on environment. This development is also a concern for India since the latter has vested interest in the freedom of navigation and overflight in the SCS. Moreover, it has strategic partnerships with several countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines which have territorial disputes with China.

The illegal unreported unregulated fishing which pertains to the unsustainable practices that lead to the depletion of fish stocks and are detrimental to the marine environment is another major non-traditional maritime challenge. These criminal activities include surpassing approved allocation of fishing targets, fishing without an authorisation, fake licenses, or breaking the fisheries law. This threat causes extensive distress in regions with weak governance as such nations struggle with socio-economic development. In the Philippines alone, more than

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<sup>2</sup> <https://pbbm.com.ph/speeches/intervention-of-president-ferdinand-r-marcos-jr-at-the-20th-asean-india-summit/>

40 per cent of all wild-caught seafood in the archipelago came from IUU fishing in 2019. Such irresponsible action added to the depletion of fish stocks and destroyed marine habitats. Economically, this IUU fishing also meant losing an estimated 62 billion pesos (USD1.3 billion) in annual revenues for the Philippine government. This problem was further exacerbated by fragmentation as well as a lack of transparency in seafood supply chains.<sup>3</sup>

These changes in climatic conditions have significant effects on the economies of Indian and ASEAN states due to their heavy reliance on agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and tourism sectors which are highly sensitive to weather patterns and environmental changes. Such conditions are further exacerbated by the challenges encountered by these countries in addressing the impacts of climate change on their economies. These include limited resources, vulnerability of marginalized communities, lack of infrastructure and adaptive capacity, and transboundary impacts which require regional cooperation and coordinated efforts of state and non-state actors.

## **Plans and Actions**

With respect to rising sea levels and the unavoidable effects of climate change, the governments of India and ASEAN should adopt various policies such as resettlement and rehabilitation among densely populated coastal areas. Tisdell has identified several policies to address this threat. These include ‘prohibition of settlement on low-lying land, a start on re-settlement of those on the low-lying ground to higher ground, the drawing up of contingency plans for the evacuation of residents of low-lying islands in case of inundation or natural disasters, and relocation of infrastructure to higher ground or the placing of new infrastructure on higher ground’<sup>4</sup>. It is also important to enhance the capability of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management to deliver immediate services to those climate refugees not only from one country to the other but also domestically, from one island to the other. Furthermore, to curb the debasement of mangrove forests and to protect the coral reefs, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and IORA need to create a productive zone of regional cooperation in the area. These include regulation of coral reef uses and cessation of coal mining, as well as ensuring the treatment of sewage water before releasing it to the oceans to avoid sedimentation and wrecking the bay. There is also a need to make use of the existing satellite technologies of India and some countries of ASEAN to monitor the areas prone to flooding and disasters. Cooperation should be encouraged among the space agencies and ministries of science and technologies to produce more nanosatellites as tools for disaster monitoring and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://sustainablefish.org/impact-initiatives/supporting-small-scale-fisheries/better-seafood-philippines/>

<sup>4</sup> Tisdell, C. (2008), Global warming and the future of Pacific Island countries. International Journal of Social Economics. Vol. 35 No. 12, pp. 889-903.

forecasting. In recent times, the use of satellite communications has played a significant role in disaster management by assisting the assessment of damage and facilitating the recovery process aside from the usual provision of real-time coordination during emergencies. At the same time, the network of universities should also be encouraged in forging cooperation in this field including India Institute of Technology and even open universities.

For ocean acidification, it is important to have solutions no matter how small or slow they are. To lessen the consumption of fuel-based energy, there is a need to ramp up solar power and other sources of renewable energy including the storing of energy in batteries. It is important to generate energy from the ocean – be it from tidal, current, wave, ocean thermal, as well as osmotic energy. Given the Ocean Renewable Energy (ORE) potentials of Indo-Pacific countries, it is in the best interest of these countries to synergise their efforts in jointly extracting marine energy resources. For this, ASEAN and India should

1. Encourage public-private partnerships between countries in research and development.
2. Tap the expertise of academic institutions and promote an alliance of the best engineering centres specialising in ocean engineering.
3. Organize collaborative workshops of experts on how to address grid availability concerns, technology development as well as environmental and administrative issues.
4. Support the development/design of cost-competitive technologies.
5. Educate the local communities as stakeholders (social acceptance issues) about the project.

Regarding IUU fishing, it is important to have good governance structures in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. These can be brought through effective network structures that generate resource bases, sustainable fishing methods, and the inclusion of multiple contributing factors. A community-based institutional management of marine resources is another policy alternative that can be adopted in the Indo-Pacific Oceans involving non-state actors as players.

It is also essential that India and ASEAN countries particularly the littoral states push for the realisation of an agreement in curbing harmful subsidies that will contribute to overcapacity and depletion of marine resources. Their joint efforts can add weight in negotiating for better terms in World Trade Organization's meetings about fisheries subsidies by defining which subsidies are harmful and should be prohibited or disciplined, establishing exemptions or special treatment for certain types of subsidies to support the needs of developing countries, and determining how to address capacity-enhancing subsidies that contribute to overfishing.

Apart from the above-mentioned measures, strengthening the capacity of ASEAN countries for monitoring, which requires well-equipped tools including navigation instruments and fast crafts for coast guards, is also important. In this context, India can help either by providing the equipment under an affordable

scheme or encouraging its firms to set up facilities in Southeast Asia for building ships and perhaps unmanned vessels required for monitoring illegal maritime activities and consequently apprehending illegal fishers. Additionally, India and ASEAN can also partner for the development and construction of ports with storage facilities in strategic points of the Indian and Pacific Oceans; thereby converting them practically as economic zones to provide better facilities to the fishermen for preserving and marketing their harvests. Having port and storage facilities can potentially contribute in reducing illegal fishing activities through enhanced monitoring, regulation enforcement, increased presence and controlled access. Small fishers can also benefit from these facilities but will greatly depend on the design and management of these facilities, access to resources and markets, and the effectiveness of regulatory enforcement among others.

Hard infrastructure development should also need to be complemented with soft infrastructure development. With the emergence of Industrial Revolution 4.0, the maritime world is up for a radical technological shift which is going to redefine the skill requirement in this sector. Therefore, collaborative steps to develop maritime human resources, fostering skilled individuals who can contribute to the maritime industry's growth and sustainability are required. India can consider offering specialized training and capacity building in the areas such as robotics, navigation systems, blockchain technology, and perhaps metaverse knowledge, relevant to marine sciences and technology.

## About AIC



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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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