

## Aligning the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP): Establishing Operational Frameworks

### Key Takeaways

- The current evolving environment warrants the need for stronger India-ASEAN cooperation in maritime capacity-building, information sharing, joint patrols, and resilience-building mechanisms to uphold a rules-based regional order.
- Leveraging platforms such as BIMSTEC, expanding maritime domain awareness, strengthening coastal security, development cooperation and coordinating connectivity initiatives can transform shared vulnerabilities into opportunities for India-ASEAN cooperation.
- Aligning AOIP and IPOI through practical cooperation in sub-regional theatres like the Bay of Bengal can enhance regional resilience, strengthen multipolar stability and reinforce ASEAN centrality.

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The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) both advocate a free, open, inclusive, stable, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, he emphasized that India "does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members," an approach that aligns closely with ASEAN's "cooperation first" and non-confrontational outlook.

Amid ongoing debates on operationalizing the alignment between AOIP and IPOI, this brief argues that re-examining their conceptual foundations is equally important and can serve as a force multiplier. It examines recent geopolitical shifts, particularly those stemming from the actions of the Trump administration and highlights the Bay of Bengal sub-region and coastal security as potential catalysts for deeper India-ASEAN alignment.

## Re-examining Conceptual Alignment

Both ASEAN and India have deliberately avoided describing their Indo-Pacific documents as a “strategy.” The AOIP is explicitly framed as an outlook, intended to complement existing ASEAN-led mechanisms rather than create new ones. It envisions the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean as an integrated region, with ASEAN playing a “central and strategic role” in fostering dialogue, development, and “cooperation instead of rivalry.” Similarly, the IPOI is presented as an initiative rather than a formal alliance. It emphasizes transparent and functional cooperation among like-minded countries, while encouraging bilateral partnerships that reinforce the broader regional architecture and cultivate habits of cooperation. The choice of words and nomenclature reflects a calibrated response to regional power dynamics, particularly between the United States and China, while underscoring shared conceptual priorities of inclusivity, respect for sovereignty, and a rules-based order. India’s broad maritime vision, articulated through Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and its expanded MAHASAGAR framework, similarly advances a vision that avoids containment narratives and instead promotes a multistakeholder approach.

In his 2018 speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined six principles guiding India’s Indo-Pacific approach: an open and inclusive region; ASEAN centrality; a common rules-based order; freedom of navigation and peaceful settlement of disputes; open and fair trade; and connectivity based on respect and transparency. In essence, both AOIP and IPOI conceptualize the Indo-Pacific as a cooperative space grounded in shared norms, aimed at peace, stability, and mutual growth. This perspective was further institutionalized when ASEAN leaders adopted the AOIP at the 34th ASEAN Summit in June 2019, articulating a vision that views the Indo-Pacific as a contiguous and holistic integration of the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions. AOIP identifies broad areas of cooperation centered on maritime security, peaceful dispute resolution, sustainable resource management, protection of the marine environment, addressing transnational challenges, strengthening connectivity, enhancing economic cooperation, and promoting resilience in areas such as climate change and public health.

Around the same time, India launched the IPOI at the 2019 East Asia Summit, structuring it around

seven pillars to operationalize its Indo-Pacific vision. Much like the AOIP, the IPOI views the region not through the lens of “strategy” or inter-state rivalries, but as a space for inclusive growth and development. The seven pillars include 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. India views the IPOI as an inclusive framework aimed at promoting peace, stability, and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific, open to all like-minded partners, aligned with its SAGAR and MAHASAGAR visions.

The ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP, issued at the 18th ASEAN-India Summit in October 2021, underscored the deepening of the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership through enhanced cooperation between the AOIP and IPOI. The statement identified key areas for collaboration aligned with AOIP priorities, including maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and broader economic and mutually beneficial areas of engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. However, aligning AOIP and IPOI requires careful management of sensitivities. While India seeks a larger regional role, ASEAN remains cautious about perceptions of external influence and continues to prioritize ASEAN centrality. At the same time, varying levels of consensus within ASEAN on the Indo-Pacific concept will require India to navigate its bilateral ties with ASEAN countries while forging ahead the multilateral platform. Consequently, both sides must continuously calibrate their approach towards India’s support for ASEAN-led mechanisms, and ASEAN’s support for India’s involvement in the region as a force for good.

## Geopolitical Shifts: From Pandemic to US Reorientation

Since AOIP and IPOI were adopted in 2019, the Indo-Pacific’s strategic context has shifted dramatically. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of global supply chains and sparked calls for regional resilience. More significantly, the United States’ evolving posture in the Indo-Pacific carries important implications for India-ASEAN alignment. The US National Security Strategy (NSS) 2025 and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) 2026 suggest a

recalibration of U.S. priorities toward the Western Hemisphere. The NSS elevates the Americas as the primary theatre of U.S. strategic focus, echoing a revived Monroe Doctrine-style emphasis on hemispheric defense. Although the Indo-Pacific continues to be recognized as a critical economic and geopolitical arena for the United States, it appears to occupy a secondary tier within Washington's evolving strategic hierarchy. In operational terms, this shift places homeland and Western Hemisphere defense at the forefront of U.S. strategy.

These shifts suggest that in an increasingly transactional curve in U.S. foreign policy and national security strategy and a reorientation in its Indo-Pacific strategy. Therefore, regional capability and capacity-building become imperative, with functional cooperation becoming an essential plank navigating global uncertainties. The recent U.S. strategic documents no longer explicitly reaffirm commitment to a rules-based order or international law, principles that are arguably most consequential in the Indo-Pacific. In the absence of a consistent U.S. security and economic commitments, India and ASEAN will need to deepen practical cooperation, including capacity-building, information-sharing, joint patrols, and maritime domain awareness, to uphold these norms collectively rather than relying on external guarantees. Moreover, India and ASEAN need to reexamine the resilience and forward-looking posture of their economic engagements that will be germane to the evolving economic architecture in the region.

In this evolving strategic landscape that is shaped by global health disruptions, supply-chain realignments, and heightened great-power unpredictability, the urgency of operationalizing the AOIP and IPOI becomes even more pronounced. Closer India-ASEAN collaboration can provide continuity and resilience amid geopolitical uncertainty, helping both sides weather emerging strategic shocks while preserving a stable and multipolar balance in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Sub-Regional Dynamics: Bay of Bengal's Strategic Importance**

The re-emergence of the Bay of Bengal as a central pivot of sub-regional connectivity has been concurrent with the rise of the Indo-Pacific as an integrated geopolitical region. While the South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits continue to grab attention as major

geopolitical hotspots over which a future US-China armed confrontation could take place, maritime spaces like the Bay of Bengal require much more attention in their prospects for regional growth and the potential for great power rivalry that might derail such a vision. India's strategic push to link its eastern economic space to Southeast Asia through its Act East Policy has also brought the Bay of Bengal into sharper policy focus, lending more currency to sub-regional institutions like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The logic of geopolitics and geoeconomics places the Bay of Bengal at the center of the evolving regional engagement. China's growing strategic investments, India's maritime vision, and ASEAN countries' efforts to balance competing influences together reinforce the Bay's geopolitical significance.

The Bay of Bengal presents a complex mix of maritime security challenges that cut across traditional and non-traditional domains. Conventional concerns such as naval competition, piracy, and maritime crime now intersect with issues like disaster response, illegal and unregulated fishing, environmental degradation, and humanitarian emergencies. These shared vulnerabilities between South and Southeast Asia underscore the interdependent nature of maritime security in the Bay and the rationale for India-ASEAN cooperation. The strategic importance of the Bay has come a full circle from its centrality during the pre-colonial and colonial times to an era of lost promise during the Cold War to its new eminence. Many factors such as the rise of China and its outward security and economic projection, India's own trajectory of regional and global aspirations, the role of extra-regional powers like the United States and the development patterns of the littoral countries have brought the Bay of Bengal back to business. Institutionally, existing regional mechanisms such as the BIMSTEC already provide a foundation for such cooperation. Practical cooperation in the Bay is already evolving through coordinated patrols and other confidence-building and operational coordination. Enhanced maritime domain awareness through radar networks, data-sharing arrangements, and coastal surveillance partnerships, are reinforcing the broader AOIP and IPOI priorities on maritime security and capacity-building.

At the same time, the Bay of Bengal has become a focal point for competing connectivity and

infrastructure initiatives largely under the shadow of China's BRI projects. The need for alternative vision and projects calls for more concerted efforts between India, ASEAN and other like-minded partners, such as Japan. In this context, the AOIP and IPOI frameworks offers an avenue to align to ensure that infrastructure projects enhance connectivity while supporting climate resilience and local development. Given the Bay's growing strategic importance, coastal security and sustainable maritime development are emerging as key areas for India-ASEAN synergy. Efforts such as India's coastal surveillance networks, search-and-rescue coordination, and blue economy initiatives could be aligned with ASEAN maritime cooperation programs. More inclusive exchange of experiences and best practices between the coastal regions of India and ASEAN countries will be germane for coordinated strategies and operations in areas including fisheries management, maritime law enforcement, and disaster preparedness.

## Conclusion

The evolving Indo-Pacific landscape underscores the growing importance of deeper India-ASEAN cooperation anchored in the complementarities between the AOIP and IPOI. Both frameworks share a common vision of a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific, grounded in ASEAN centrality, multilateral cooperation, and sustainable development. Their conceptual alignment reflected in principles such as respect for sovereignty, connectivity, maritime cooperation, and peaceful dispute resolution provides a strong normative foundation for advancing practical collaboration across the region. However, changing

geopolitical realities have made operationalizing this alignment increasingly urgent. Since 2019, disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, supply-chain vulnerabilities, and shifting great-power dynamics, particularly the United States' recalibrated strategic focus toward the Western Hemisphere are reshaping the Indo-Pacific security environment. As U.S. engagement becomes more transactional and burden-sharing oriented, India and ASEAN will have to assume greater responsibility for maintaining regional stability.

This evolving environment reinforces the need for stronger India-ASEAN cooperation in maritime capacity-building, information sharing, joint patrols, and resilience-building mechanisms to uphold a rules-based regional order. Within this broader context, the Bay of Bengal emerges as a crucial sub-regional catalyst for India-ASEAN alignment. Positioned at the intersection of South and Southeast Asia, the Bay represents both a strategic crossroad and a testing ground for cooperative governance. Leveraging platforms such as BIMSTEC, expanding maritime domain awareness, strengthening coastal security and development cooperation plus coordinating connectivity initiatives can transform shared vulnerabilities into opportunities for cooperation. Ultimately, aligning AOIP and IPOI through practical cooperation in sub-regional theatres like the Bay of Bengal can enhance regional resilience, strengthen multipolar stability and reinforce ASEAN centrality. By translating shared principles into actionable mechanisms, India and ASEAN can help shape a cooperative Indo-Pacific architecture capable of navigating strategic uncertainties while promoting peace, stability, and sustainable growth.



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