

# Associate Paper

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## Indonesia-India Maritime Defence Relations: Time for a More Robust Partnership

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### Key Points

- Indonesia and India, Asia's largest democracies, are both expected to be major actors in the Asian Century.
- Indonesia has the world's fourth-largest population and a highly strategic geolocation, while India has the second-largest population and, arguably, the most-developed regional navy in the Indian Ocean.
- During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2018 visit to Indonesia, the relationship between the countries was elevated to a "[Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)", with "[Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#)" as its component.
- Indonesia, and to a lesser extent India, have jurisdiction over the major maritime choke points of the Malacca Strait, the Six-Degree Channel and the Sunda Strait, through all of which large volumes of maritime trade pass.
- Both Indonesia and India are made uneasy by China's activities in the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, and its ambivalence towards international law.

### Summary

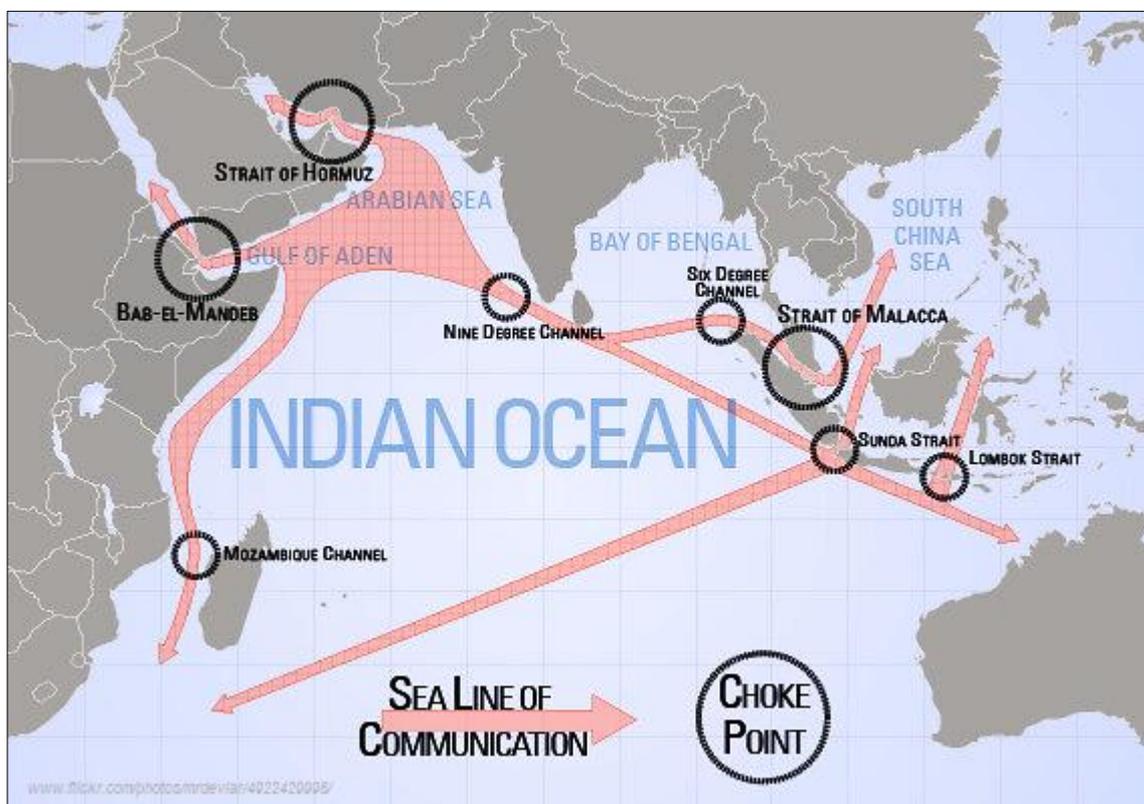
Historically, conflicts tend to occur around maritime choke points, making their security paramount. Indonesia, and to a lesser extent India, are the custodians of some major maritime choke points. The relationships between Beijing and Jakarta and Beijing and New Delhi are currently prickly due to China's activities in the [East China Sea \(ECS\)](#), the [South](#)

[China Sea \(SCS\)](#) and the Indian Ocean. Given their mutual suspicion of China and their strategic convergence, Indonesia and India are natural maritime partners. As custodians of major maritime choke points, they have a duty to ensure that the rules-based order is maintained in them.

### Analysis

‘Ever since man first put to sea, conflicts have tended to swirl around narrow sea passages called maritime choke points. Maritime choke points act as funnels drawing in shipping from surrounding seas. As critical pressure points in naval struggles for “command of the sea”, every navy seeks to secure them while denying their use to the enemy.’<sup>1</sup> In a globalised world, events in choke points tend to ripple far beyond their immediate surroundings.

Commercial shipping is restricted to a fixed set of maritime routes for reasons of economic efficiency and, consequently, is subject to choke points. The Malacca Strait, the main [shipping channel](#) between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, is reputed to be the world’s busiest, with approximately [25 per cent](#) of the world’s trade passing through it. Since it is about 1.5 nautical miles wide at its narrowest point in the Phillips Channel, it is also the world’s most significant shipping bottleneck. Indonesia exercises sovereignty over the strait, together with Malaysia and Singapore, while the ‘Straits of [Sunda and Lombok](#) provide deep water alternatives to the Malacca Strait’. Sunda and Lombok are located entirely within the Indonesian archipelago.



<sup>1</sup> Daly, J. ‘Naval Choke Points and Command of the Sea’, *World Politics Review*, 2 March 2009.

The lesser known Six-Degree Channel (SDC) lies south of Indira Point, in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and is largely within Indian waters. Located at the western edge of the Malacca Strait, the channel is a feeder and outlet for the Malacca Strait. The sea routes originating from or leading to the Cape of Good Hope, the Gulf of Aden or the Strait of Hormuz converge in the Six-Degree Channel. The density of shipping in the Channel, therefore, is high with increased vulnerability to disruption. While Indonesia and India are obliged to protect vital sea lines of communication in their waters, their locations also present them with a strategic benefit by creating a stronger negotiating position vis-à-vis adversarial countries that depend on the choke point for their trade. Both countries need to work together to ensure order is maintained in the channel and conflicts kept to a minimum. When Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Indonesia in June 1950, he travelled on board the then Indian Navy flagship, INS *Delhi*. With that single gesture, Nehru conveyed to Indonesia, and indeed to his own country, that he envisaged the navies playing a crucial role in the evolving relationship between the two countries. Nehru's vision was prescient in view of the Indonesia-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) and the current maritime environment.

### ***China-Indonesia and -India Relations***

China's rise has, arguably, been the most important strategic development of the twenty-first century. With its enormous land mass, huge population, economic heft, formidable military and political will to be a dominant state, China is omnipresent in its neighbours' strategic calculus. For Indonesia and India, managing their relationships with China continues to be an important challenge.

In Indonesia's view, China's use of the "Nine-Dash Line" to make its territorial claim over much of the SCS is a major irritant. That claim includes around 83,000 square kilometres of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone to the north of the Natuna Islands as China's "traditional fishing grounds". The waters surrounding the Natuna Islands contain valuable [oil and gas fields](#), as well as recently-established fishing grounds. Indonesia has rejected China's claims, since the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea does not recognise "traditional fishing grounds"; consequently, Jakarta refused to negotiate with Beijing on the matter. Chinese fishing vessels – often escorted by Chinese coast guard ships – have repeatedly breached Indonesian waters near the Natuna Islands. In June 2016, President Joko Widodo visited the Natuna Islands and held a Cabinet meeting onboard a warship to demonstrate Indonesia's resolve in safeguarding its sovereignty. A more tangible reinforcement of Indonesia's presence was the opening of a full-fledged tri-service military base at Natuna in December 2018. Further issues, like the ill-treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province, add to the prickly relationship.

India remains similarly uneasy about the Chinese navy's increased footprint in the Indian Ocean, an area that New Delhi sees as its zone of influence. The Sino-Indian land border dispute, which manifested in the Galwan Valley clash of June 2020, has caused very strong anti-China sentiments in India. This adversely affected the relationship, including in the maritime domain. China's unilateral claims over the SCS threaten India's access to its East Asian partners and markets; with approximately 55 per cent of India's seaborne trade

passing through the SCS, maintaining security and freedom of navigation in the region is [critical to India](#). China's military facilities on artificial islands in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos, furthermore, locate its naval and air assets in the vicinity of the Indian Ocean. Chinese investments in dual use facilities in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan add to India's unease:

Indonesian Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto was in New Delhi for a three-day visit, from 26-28 July 2020. Given the timing of the visit, and with no significant outcome except for a vaguely written statement, it is quite possible that [China was the primary subject of discussions](#).

### ***China's Malacca Dilemma***

As the *People's Daily* has noted, 'China imports over half of its oil requirement from overseas mostly from oil-rich nations in Africa and the Middle East. An estimated 70-85 per cent of this oil transits [through the Malacca Strait](#). In addition, between 70-80 per cent of the ships transiting the Strait have China as a starting point or destination.' In 2003, then President Hu Jintao used the term China's "Malacca Dilemma" to describe his country's energy security vulnerability. Having little control over the Malacca Strait, any disruption from piracy, terrorism or naval activity of forces opposed to China will adversely affect China's energy security. To mitigate that vulnerability, Beijing seeks alternative options like the Trans-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines and the proposed pipeline that is an element of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project. These options have their own vulnerabilities, however. As Guzansky *et al* note, 'They are costly to build and maintain and require significant international co-operation. Being on land, they are comparatively easy to access and are highly technology dependent (e.g. pumping stations, lock systems). These alternatives themselves can constitute choke points that are perhaps more vulnerable than the sea routes they are intended to supplement or replace.'<sup>2</sup> In the context of China's Malacca Dilemma, the fact that Indonesia and India straddle the SDC that feeds the Malacca Strait is immensely significant.

### ***Indonesia-India Co-operation; Going Beyond the Obvious***

'In August 2005, the then Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Michael Mullen introduced to an audience at the US Naval War College a new concept for international naval and maritime co-operation: the "1000-ship navy".<sup>3</sup> The concept, subsequently also known as the "Global Maritime Partnership Initiative", comprised a progressively larger network of maritime security partnerships to mitigate threats in the maritime domain. As Comprehensive Strategic Partners, the Indonesian Navy (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia-Angkatan Laut*, or TNI-AL) and Indian Navy (IN) can adopt a scaled-down version of Admiral Mullen's "[1000-ship navy](#)" concept. The concept can be modified for co-operation in other maritime spheres, too. Their pooled resources could cover an impressive and unbroken geographic region

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<sup>2</sup> Guzansky, Y., Lindenstrauss, G. and Schachter, J., 'Power, Pirates, and Petroleum: Maritime Choke Points in the Middle East', Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 14, No 2, July 2011, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> ADM Michael Mullen, USN; remarks delivered at the US Naval War College, Newport, RI, 31 August 2005.

stretching from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the eastern reaches of the Indonesian archipelago, an area that encompasses three time zones.

As noted in the *Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* of 30 May 2018, the countries resolved to strengthen existing naval co-operation and to commence regular bilateral naval exercises, share information on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, create better and expanded maritime awareness, co-operate in the areas of hydrography and marine cartography and address the emerging maritime security issues facing the Indo-Pacific region. Those initiatives are the predictable steps of the India-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The resolve of the two countries will become evident, however, in going beyond them.

The following three initiatives suggest a way forward:

### 1. *Patrols in the Six Degree Channel*

In view of China's "Malacca Dilemma" and its belligerence in the ECS and SCS, conflict in the Malacca Strait and its feeder, the SDC, is a distinct possibility. Referring to Indonesia's territorial disputes with China, Gen. Ryamizard Ryacudu, the Indonesian Minister of Defence until 2019, [commented](#): 'Natuna is a door; if the door is not guarded, then [thieves will come inside](#).' As the SDC is also a doorway to the world's busiest strait, the importance of guarding that entrance cannot be overstated. While a successful Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) has been conducted since 2004 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, nothing similar exists for the SDC. The TNI-AL and IN have conducted Co-ordinated Patrols (CORPATs) on their respective sides of the International Maritime Boundary Line twice a year since 2002. These patrols remain symbolic in practical terms. Indonesia and India should consider enhancing the CORPATs to make them more practical, like the MSP, and more regular. That will ensure the security of all legitimate users in this important waterway. It will also provide a degree of oversight and domain awareness to secure the common national interests in the region.

Once the channel patrols stabilise, board and search operations should be considered as the next step. The navies, in co-ordination with the national shipping lines, could exercise co-operative and opposed boarding of the merchant vessels in the Channel. These operations will demonstrate to the international maritime community Indonesia's and India's resolve to ensure the security of the maritime commons under their custody. That would give their naval officers and crew valuable real-life practice. A degree of interoperability for the officers and crew of the national shipping lines would be an important spin-off. After the Galwan Valley clashes, writing in the *Indian Express*, Admiral Arun Prakash, eighteenth chief of the IN, [stated that](#): 'It [India] must muster all elements of its "comprehensive national power", including the maritime, and create a strong negotiating position.' The Channel patrols could be seen as one such step.

### 2. *Mutual Logistics Support Agreement*

Speaking in Perth in February 2020, Japan's Ambassador to Australia, Reiichiro Takahashi, [queried](#) 'how to bring India to the Pacific side.' An Indonesia-India Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) perhaps would be the best enabler for such an endeavour. MLSAs make

available the signatories' military facilities for fuel and provisions to each other, simplify logistical support during deployments, exercises and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief on a reciprocal basis and are huge force multipliers. They improve the interoperability of the partner nations. The navies often are the biggest beneficiaries of such agreements. The MLSAs are important to overcome the constraints of medium-power navies, like those of Indonesia and India, both of which have facilities in far-flung reaches of the Indo-Pacific that could increase the reach of their ships, submarines and aircraft. An Indonesia-India agreement would step up co-operation and give Indian forces enhanced reach in the Pacific and Indonesian Forces enhanced reach in the Indian Ocean. As imagined by Admiral Mullen in his "1000-ship navy" concept, 'the ships will be standing watch over the seas, standing watch over each other.'<sup>4</sup>

### 3. *Quad-Plus*

The "Quad" is the informal Australia-India-Japan-US Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that supports a "free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region". The [group is important because](#) 'the four already enjoy three trilateral and six bilateral strategic dialogues, not counting a host of other military engagements and working groups.' Equally, however, 'Without at least one Association of South East Asian Nation (ASEAN) participant, the Quad could be seen as a vehicle for major powers to pursue [great power rivalry](#) against China rather than a [collective rebuke](#) of Beijing's attempts to overturn the liberal international order.' Including Indonesia in a Quad-Plus construct would not only bring the heft of 268 million people and the soft power accrued by having the world's three largest democracies in the group, but also the legitimacy of having an ASEAN nation as a dialogue member. India could be the bridge that convinces its Quad partners (and, indeed, Indonesia), to include Jakarta in a Quad-Plus construct. The Quad countries are open to a Quad-Plus configuration. On 20 March 2020, they held a video teleconference to discuss the coronavirus pandemic. Interestingly, they added several non-Quad countries in it. The Quad-Plus [met again](#) on 27 March 2020 at the vice-ministerial level. Broadening Quad participation to include an ASEAN country like Indonesia will weaken Beijing's narrative that the Quad is simply a group of extra-regional major powers attempting to contain it. In times to come, the Quad could adopt a military dimension and having Indonesia on board would be a positive outcome.

### **Conclusion**

Partnerships allow countries to combine their capabilities and collaborate on common challenges. Indonesia and India are comprehensive strategic partners and are ideally placed to jointly address their concerns. Their partnership is not without precedence, either. The governments in Jakarta and New Delhi follow in the footsteps of two ancient empires; the [Srivijaya Empire](#), the maritime and commercial kingdom that flourished between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, was largely located in what is now Indonesia. The kingdom extended its influence and controlled the Strait of Malacca. In the same period, the [Pala Dynasty](#) ruled much of north and east India. The Pala rulers were insightful diplomats, who had a diplomatic relationship with the Srivijaya Empire.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

This is an opportune moment to make the partnership between Indonesia and India more robust. SDC patrols, an MLSA and possibly as partners in a Quad-Plus configuration suggest a way forward.

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**About the Author:** Raj Mittal is an Indian Navy veteran and a master mariner. He has sailed on board bulk carriers trading worldwide for eleven years, which took him through most major choke points of the world and through the South China Sea, numerous times. Raj is a graduate of the Defence Services Staff College, India, and holds a Master's degree in Defence and Strategic Studies. He is a Perth-based marine consultant.

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