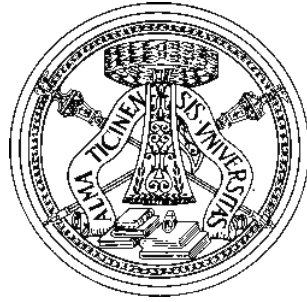


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Act East Through a Security Lens: India's Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction

A. Major Research Question

B. Significance of the Research Question

C. Literature Review

1. Increased Maritime Cooperation between India and Southeast Asia

2. India's Motivations for Increased Maritime Cooperation

3. Southeast Asia's Motivations for Increased Maritime Cooperation

4. Defence Diplomacy

D. Methodology

E. Hypothesis

F. Theoretical Framework

1. Defence Diplomacy: Conceptual Basis and Historical Evolution

2. Applied Defence Diplomacy: Adaptive Bilateralism

3. Applications to India–Southeast Asia Relations

4. Typological measurement of partnership depth

II. Increased ASEAN-India Maritime Cooperation, 1990–2026

A. Introduction

B. 1990–2000: Beyond the “Look East Policy”

C. 2001–2009: Terrorism and Nontraditional Maritime Threats

1. Terrorism

2. Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief

3. Antipiracy

D. 2010–2026: Enhanced ASEAN-India Engagement

1. 2011–2013: Strategic Partnership
 2. 2014–2017: Act East Policy
 3. 2018–2026: Enhanced Maritime Initiatives and Future Outlook
- E. Conclusion

III. India's Bilateral Maritime Cooperation with Southeast Asian Countries

- A. Introduction
- B. India's Increased Naval Cooperation in Southeast Asia
- C. Bilateral Maritime Cooperation
 1. Indonesia
 2. Philippines
 3. Singapore
 4. Vietnam
 5. Malaysia
 6. Thailand
- D. Emerging Patterns and Concluding Comments

IV. Conclusion

- A. Summary of Findings
- B. Implications for Future Research
- C. Concluding Remark

Bibliography

List of Tables

Table 1. Coding indicators for tier assignment

Table 2. Frequency of Port Visit 23-24

Table 3. Bilateral Naval Cooperation between India and Southeast Asian Countries

Table 4. Number of Bilateral Exercises in Last Ten Years and 23-24

ABSTRACT

The present thesis focuses on India's defence diplomacy towards Southeast Asia since the 2014 Act East Policy with special emphasis on bilateral naval cooperation as its most visible manifestation. It argues that India follows a logic of adaptive bilateralism: New Delhi calibrates the mode, intensity and scope of each partnership to the partner state's geography, capability needs and political constraints, rather than a single regional template. We develop a three-tier typology – Advanced, Developmental and Probing – to assess the depth of defence-diplomatic engagement and apply it to six case studies: Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia.

The thesis finds that control of maritime chokepoints and naval capacity (Singapore, Indonesia) correlates with Advanced-tier status, using data on naval exercise and port-visit frequency (2014–2024), supplemented by qualitative analysis of institutional architecture and defence-industrial cooperation tracked through mid-2026, while Vietnam's Advanced status reflects direct exposure to South China Sea contestation and high absorptive capacity for technology transfer. The Philippines' 2022 acquisition of BrahMos bumped it from Developmental to Advanced, while Thailand and Malaysia remain hamstrung by structural limits on external alignment, especially vis-à-vis China.

Three hypotheses are examined: economic-linkage protection, capability-development imperatives, and strategic hedging against Chinese assertiveness. The evidence is compelling for capability development, partial for economic linkage and confirms hedging, not balancing, as the dominant logic across all six partnerships: no partner state has sought exclusive alignment with India against China. The thesis concludes that India's tiered, adaptive approach is an effective model of middle power regional engagement, building long-term influence through sustained institutional contribution rather than competitive alignment.

Keywords:

India, Defence Diplomacy, Act East Policy, Southeast Asia, Adaptive Bilateralism, Maritime Security, Naval Cooperation, South China Sea, Indo-Pacific, Strategic Hedging.

Abstract (Italiano)

La presente tesi analizza la diplomazia della difesa dell'India verso il Sud-Est asiatico a partire dalla Act East Policy del 2014, con particolare attenzione alla cooperazione navale bilaterale quale sua manifestazione più visibile. La tesi sostiene che l'India segue una logica di bilateralismo adattivo: New Delhi calibra la modalità, l'intensità e l'ambito di ciascun partenariato in base alla geografia, alle esigenze di capacità militare e ai vincoli politici dello Stato partner, piuttosto che applicare un modello regionale unico. Viene sviluppata una tipologia a tre livelli — Avanzato, di Sviluppo e di Sondaggio — per valutare la profondità dell'impegno diplomatico-militare, applicata a sei casi di studio: Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Filippine, Thailandia e Malesia. La tesi rileva che il controllo degli snodi marittimi strategici e la capacità navale (Singapore, Indonesia) sono correlati allo status di livello Avanzato, sulla base di dati relativi a esercitazioni navali e visite portuali (2014–2024), integrati da un'analisi qualitativa dell'architettura istituzionale e della cooperazione nell'industria della difesa aggiornata a metà 2026, mentre lo status Avanzato del Vietnam riflette l'esposizione diretta alle contese nel Mar Cinese Meridionale e un'elevata capacità di assorbimento dei trasferimenti tecnologici. L'acquisizione dei missili BrahMos da parte delle Filippine nel 2022 ne ha determinato il passaggio dal livello di Sviluppo al livello Avanzato, mentre Thailandia e Malesia restano vincolate da limiti strutturali all'allineamento esterno, in particolare nei confronti della Cina. Vengono esaminate tre ipotesi: la protezione dei legami economici, l'imperativo dello sviluppo delle capacità militari e l'hedging strategico contro l'assertività cinese. Le evidenze raccolte sono solide per l'ipotesi dello sviluppo delle capacità, parziali per quella dei legami economici, e confermano l'hedging, piuttosto che il bilanciamento diretto, come logica dominante in tutti e sei i partenariati: nessuno Stato partner ha cercato un allineamento esclusivo con l'India in funzione anti-cinese. La tesi conclude che l'approccio stratificato e adattivo dell'India rappresenta un modello efficace di impegno regionale per una media potenza, capace di costruire un'influenza di lungo periodo attraverso un contributo istituzionale costante piuttosto che attraverso l'allineamento competitivo.

List of Acronyms

ADMM(-Plus)	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (Plus)
AEP	Act East Policy
AIME	ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CORPAT	Coordinated Patrol
DCA	Defence Cooperation Agreement
FY	Fiscal Year
HAL	Hindustan Aeronautics Limited
HTMS	His/Her Thai Majesty's Ship (Royal Thai Navy vessel prefix)
IN	Indian Navy (vessel prefix, e.g. "IN LCU 56")
IND-INDO CORPAT	India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol
IND-VIE CORPAT	India-Vietnam Coordinated Patrol
INS	Indian Naval Ship
JCBC	Joint Committee (on Defence Industry and Logistics Cooperation), used in the Philippines case study
KRI	Kapal Republik Indonesia (Indonesian Navy vessel prefix)
LCU	Landing Craft Utility
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGOPV	Next-Generation Offshore Patrol Vessel
RSS	Republic of Singapore Ship
SAGAR	Security and Growth for All in the Region
SIMBEX	Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise
USD	United States Dollar
VINBAX	Vietnam-India Bilateral Army Exercise

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Appendix: Chronology of Bilateral Defence Engagements

Singapore

Date	Event	Type
1991	Singapore begins leasing Indian training facilities (Kalaikunda, Babina, Deolali)	Agreement
1993	Singapore becomes first ASEAN state to conduct joint naval exercises with India	Exercise
1994	MoU on Defence Cooperation signed; SIMBEX begins as an annual exercise (Exercise Lion King)	Agreement
October 2003	Comprehensive Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) signed	Agreement
October 2006	Defence Technology Steering Committee established	Institutional Visit
November 2015	DCA revised; annual Defence Ministers' Dialogue institutionalized	Agreement
2017	Training facilities lease renewed for a further five years	Agreement
January 2017	Air Force Bilateral Agreement renewed	Agreement
November 2017	First-ever Navy Bilateral Agreement signed	Agreement
1 June 2018	Modi visit to Singapore; Mutual Coordination, Logistics and Services Support Agreement signed	Joint Statement
20 January 2021	Submarine rescue support and cooperation agreement signed	Agreement
September 2024	Relations elevated to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during Modi visit	Joint Statement
October 2024	Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen visit to India; partnership Roadmap adopted at 6th Defence Ministers' Dialogue; Joint Military Training agreement extended five years	Institutional Visit
23-29 October 2024	SIMBEX 31st edition, Visakhapatnam and Bay of Bengal	Exercise
28 July - 1 August 2025	SIMBEX 32nd edition, Singapore and southern South China Sea	Exercise

Indonesia

Date	Event	Type
March 1951	Diplomatic relations established	Other
2001	Defence Cooperation Agreement signed (ratified 2006 under Law No. 21)	Agreement

Date	Event	Type
2002	India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT) established	Agreement
June 2007	Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, 1st session, Jakarta	Institutional Visit
June 2010	Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, 2nd session, New Delhi	Institutional Visit
January 2011	Yudhoyono visit to India; Biennial Defence Ministers' Forum agreed	Institutional Visit
October 2012	Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, 3rd session, Jakarta; Biennial Defence Ministers' Forum, 1st session (Antony-Yusgiantoro)	Institutional Visit
2013	Singh state visit reaffirms 2005 India-Indonesia Strategic Partnership	Institutional Visit
December 2013	Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, 4th session, New Delhi	Institutional Visit
10 June 2015	Navy-to-Navy Staff Talks session, New Delhi	Institutional Visit
3-21 October 2015	CORPAT 26th edition, including 17-18 October freestanding exercise with INS Saryu embedded within it	Exercise
December 2016	2001 Defence Cooperation Agreement expires	Other
January 2017	Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, 5th session	Institutional Visit
January 2018	Biennial Defence Ministers' Forum, 2nd session	Institutional Visit
May 2018	New Defence Cooperation Agreement signed; relationship elevated to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; Shared Vision of Maritime Cooperation adopted (Modi-Widodo)	Agreement
12-18 November 2018	Exercise Samudra Shakti, 1st edition, Surabaya	Exercise
November 2019	Exercise Samudra Shakti, 2nd edition, Bay of Bengal	Exercise
September 2021	Exercise Samudra Shakti, 3rd edition, Sunda Strait	Exercise
May 2023	Exercise Samudra Shakti, 4th edition, Batam	Exercise
June 2023	Indonesia's KOMODO exercise, 4th edition	Exercise
February 2024	Indonesia participates in India's MILAN exercise, Visakhapatnam	Exercise
December 2024	Indian Navy Chief Admiral Dinesh Kumar Tripathi visit to Indonesia (BrahMos negotiations)	Institutional Visit
January 2025	Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto attends India's Republic Day as chief guest	Institutional Visit

Date	Event	Type
July 2025	CORPAT reaches 44th edition	Exercise
September 2025	Navy-to-Navy Staff Talks, 13th session	Institutional Visit
Early 2026	Indonesia's Defence Ministry confirms BrahMos agreement in principle	Arms Deal

Vietnam

Date	Event	Type
2014	Defence Policy Dialogue created	Agreement
September 2016	Relationship elevated to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Joint Statement
June 2023	India announces gift of decommissioned corvette INS Kirpan to Vietnam, during Gen. Phan Van Giang's visit to India	Other
July 2023	INS Kirpan formally handed over at Cam Ranh	Port Visit
4-23 November 2024	VINBAX 2024, 5th edition, Ambala and Chandimandir; first joint participation of air force and army personnel	Exercise
Early May 2026	Possible signing of BrahMos contract during Vietnamese President To Lam's state visit to India	Arms Deal
30 May 2026	BrahMos cruise missile deal announced by Indian Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh at the Shangri-La Dialogue	Arms Deal

Philippines

Date	Event	Type
2004	First Security Dialogue established (later renamed Strategic Dialogue)	Institutional Visit
2006	MoU on Defence and Security Cooperation signed	Agreement
2012	Scarborough Shoal standoff	Other
2012	Joint Defence Cooperation Committee constituted	Agreement
3 November 2017	MoU on Defence Industry and Logistics Cooperation signed, during Modi's visit to Manila	Agreement
January 2018	Duterte visit to New Delhi; further security cooperation measures agreed	Institutional Visit
June 2018	First Joint Committee Meeting on Defence Industry and Logistics Cooperation, Mumbai and New Delhi	Institutional Visit
2019	Quadrilateral "group sail," South China Sea (India, Philippines, United States, Japan)	Exercise

Date	Event	Type
November 2020	4th Joint Committee on Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) session	Institutional Visit
January 2022	\$375 million contract signed for three shore-based BrahMos missile batteries	Arms Deal
2023	Philippines participates in India's first joint military exercise with ASEAN as a bloc	Exercise
August 2023	MoU signed between the two coast guards; white shipping information exchange SOP agreed	Agreement
April 2024	First BrahMos missile battery delivered by Indian Air Force strategic airlift	Arms Deal
September 2024	Joint Defence Cooperation Committee upgraded from joint secretary to secretary level	Institutional Visit
2025	First joint India-Philippines naval exercise, South China Sea	Exercise
2025	Philippine Coast Guard begins exploring India's Next-Generation Offshore Patrol Vessel design	Other
April 2025	Second BrahMos missile battery delivered by sea	Arms Deal
4-8 August 2025	Marcos Jr. state visit to New Delhi; relationship upgraded to Strategic Partnership; thirteen bilateral agreements signed; Plan of Action 2025-2029 adopted	Joint Statement
Late 2025	Manila discusses expanding BrahMos order by up to nine additional batteries	Arms Deal

Thailand

Date	Event	Type
May 2003	Joint Working Group on Security Cooperation established	Agreement
2005	India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol series begins	Exercise
2006	Exercise Maitree begins as an annual army-to-army exercise	Exercise
25 January 2012	MoU on Defence Cooperation signed	Agreement
2022	Ten Indian companies exhibit at Thailand's Defence and Security exhibition, Bangkok	Other
20-23 December 2023	First India-Thailand Bilateral Maritime Exercise, Ex-Ayutthaya, conducted alongside CORPAT's 36th edition	Exercise

Malaysia

Date	Event	Type
1993	Malaysia signs first ASEAN bilateral defence cooperation memorandum with India, following its acquisition of MiG-29 fighters	Agreement
January 2012	Malaysia-India Defence Cooperation Committee, 9th session, Kuala Lumpur	Institutional Visit
2022	Malacca Strait Patrol arrangement institutionalized (India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore)	Agreement
July 2023	Rajnath Singh visit to Kuala Lumpur; amendment to original MoU signed; HAL's first regional office in Malaysia inaugurated	Institutional Visit
28 February 2024	Exercise Samudra Lakshmana	Exercise
9 August 2024	Exercise Udara Shakti	Exercise
August 2024	Relationship elevated to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Joint Statement
October 2025	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, Kuala Lumpur; separate ten-year US-India defence framework agreement signed	Joint Statement
January 2026	Malaysia launches National Defence Industry Policy	Other
February 2026	Modi visit to Kuala Lumpur; Strategic Affairs Working Group and Su-30 Forum agreed	Joint Statement

I. INTRODUCTION

A. RESEARCH QUESTION AND THESIS STATEMENT

One of the most significant shifts in contemporary Indo-Pacific security is India's strategic rebalancing towards Southeast Asia, with defence diplomacy as its principal instrument. Since the formal launch of the Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014, New Delhi has steadily deepened its defence engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member states, turning a largely trade-centric relationship into a substantial security architecture built on naval cooperation, defence-industrial ties, and institutionalized military exchange — the instruments through which defence diplomacy typically operates.

India's strategic rebalancing toward Southeast Asia raises a question the existing literature has not answered systematically: why has the depth of India's bilateral defence partnerships varied so significantly across an ostensibly single regional policy? **The central research question addressed here is: what factors have shaped the evolution of India's defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia since 2014, and how do those factors account for the varying depth of its bilateral partnerships?**

This thesis proposes and tests the argument that New Delhi conducts its defence diplomacy under a logic of adaptive bilateralism: India customizes the nature, intensity, and scope of each security partnership to the partner state's geography, capability needs, and political constraints, rather than applying a single regional template. Concretely, adaptive bilateralism describes the process through which India allocates the three tools of defence diplomacy — security engagement, capacity-building, and geopolitical signaling — disproportionately and intentionally across a structurally diverse set of partners. If this

argument holds, the result should be a differentiated but coherent regional security architecture that advances India's core Indo-Pacific objectives (sea lane security, non-traditional threat management, and a rules-based maritime order) while accommodating the multi-alignment imperatives of contemporary Southeast Asian strategic culture. The thesis further proposes that the depth of institutionalization in any given bilateral relationship reflects the interplay of three factors — strategic hedging, capability development, and economic interdependence — whose relative weight varies across bilateral dyads. Methodologically, this proposition is operationalized in Section D as a three-tier typology (Advanced, Developmental, Probing): the typology is not a separate classification device but the empirical measure of adaptive bilateralism itself, with the three hypotheses in Section E offered as candidate explanations of the variation it captures. Section F.2 situates this operationalization within the broader theoretical framework.

B. Significance of the Study

The contribution of this study to the literature on Indo-Pacific security is threefold.

It first offers a systematic empirical account of India's military engagement both within the ASEAN institutional framework and in bilateral relationships with individual countries since the launch of the AEP in 2014. It demonstrates the structural depth of India's security ties with Southeast Asian states and the conditions under which deeper cooperation has been achieved through detailed analysis of defence pacts, arms-transfer arrangements and joint-exercise patterns.

Second, it goes beyond descriptive accounts of bilateral activity to explore the causal logic of cooperation — the nexus between

regional security concerns, geopolitical rivalry and the operational realities of military interoperability. The question is not only what has been done by India and its partners but why specific forms of cooperation have been evolved. This attention to causal mechanisms sets the current study apart from policy-oriented surveys that simply describe activity without explaining variation across cases.

Third, the study situates India's regional defence engagement in the broader context of Indo-Pacific security governance, including its relations with the United States' strategic objectives in the region¹. As Washington has begun to see India as an increasingly indispensable partner in preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific, both for its geographic position and for its growing security capability in Southeast Asia, understanding the exact nature and limits of India's regional role has become directly relevant to policy².

This thesis traces the contours of India's adaptive bilateralism and the ceilings that structural constraints impose on the depth of partnership to delineate the realistic scope of India's contribution to regional order.

C. Literature Review

1. Increased Maritime Cooperation between India and Southeast Asia

India's engagement with Southeast Asia in the maritime domain shows a clear periodization, with a substantial shift in the scale and character of cooperation following New Delhi's transition

¹ White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America." 2025.

² Kumar, N, "India's Role in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security: Challenges and Strategic Choices." SSRN Electronic Journal. 2. 633-653, 2024.

from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy. Kumar and Dahiya (2025) provide a fundamental analysis of this transformation, arguing that the SAGAR doctrine—Security and Growth for All in the Region—rethinking India’s regional role by reorienting the maritime strategy toward shared non-traditional security challenges, such as piracy, climate-related disasters, human trafficking, and maritime terrorism³. Their analysis demonstrates that SAGAR was not only a naval exercise but also included blue-economy development and sustainable security arrangements tailored to the needs of Southeast Asian partners. At the bilateral level, Huỳnh (2022) argues that the growing India-Vietnam relationship is driven by convergent threat perception⁴. A shared concern about China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea has created political space for operational coordination, including technology transfer and capacity-building, that exceeds traditional confidence-building. Zeberlein (2024) extends this argument further, demonstrating that Chinese coercive actions in the South China Sea are the key variable explaining the pace of Vietnam’s external security partnerships, which explains why its relationship with India has been faster than partnerships formed under less acute threat conditions⁵. The Vietnam case is used in this thesis as an empirical benchmark of threat-driven, Advanced-tier deepening, against which the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand are compared in Chapter III.

There is also increasing attention to the multilateral dimension of maritime cooperation. Chandrasekar and Siang (2018) argue that

³ Kumar, P., and Dahiya, P. V, “Exploring India's maritime foreign policy in Southeast Asia: The SAGAR initiative.” *Contemporary Social Sciences*, 34(1), 2025.

⁴ Huỳnh, Tâm Sáng. "The Growing Importance of Vietnam to India's South China Sea Policy." *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, March–April 2022, 133–150. 2022.

⁵ Zeberlein, Jeff. "Vietnam and the Four Nos: How Chinese Actions in the South China Sea Influence Vietnam's Hedging Strategy." *Naval War College Review* 77, no. 1: 115–136. 2024.

India-ASEAN cooperation on scientific and technical projects, including environmental governance and maritime safety, is a trust-building mechanism, laying down the institutional foundation for stronger security cooperation and an example of functional spillover where low-stakes cooperation builds the relational infrastructure for more difficult engagement in the future⁶. Dey (2020) examines the evolving piracy context in the Eastern Indian Ocean, and contends that what is required is a multilateral response that builds local capacity as well as addresses short-term operational concerns⁷. This work shows that India's engagement in the region is not merely bilateral, but part of a systematic effort to lead in regional maritime domain awareness and develop collective response mechanisms. The literature also describes the institutional architecture that has come to underpin these ties. Specialized dialogue channels, exchanges on military education, and sustained training programmes all represent a deliberate move to ensure that cooperation is a constant, not an intermittent, process. This process of institutionalization can be seen in the trajectory of the India-Philippines relationship, from the 2022 BrahMos missile deal to later talks of local production facilities in Manila⁸. However, researchers point out that the level of institutionalization differs significantly across partnerships, with some moving toward full integration and others at the early stages of engagement⁹.

⁶ Arga, Chandrasekar, A and Siang, TK, "ASEAN-India cooperation project on 'Extent of transfer of alien invasive organisms in South/Southeast Asia region by shipping'." *Asian Journal of Science and Technology Development*, 461, 1-12, 2018.

⁷ Dey, A, "Changing face of sea piracy in the Eastern Indian Ocean region: Examining India's role in maritime cooperation." *Journal of International Studies*, 18(1), 1-25, 2020.

⁸ BusinessWorld, "India offers local defense production to Philippines amid modernization push." *BusinessWorld*, 2026.

⁹ Kumar and Dahiya, "Exploring India's maritime foreign policy in Southeast Asia"

2. India's Motivations for Increased Maritime Cooperation

Three types of driver behind India's commitment to defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia are distinguished in the literature: strategic, economic and normative. The debate is less about whether such drivers exist and more about how to weight them, and whether Indian policy is principally reactive (responding to Chinese expansion) or proactive (pursuing an independent claim to regional leadership).

The literature clearly presents strategic issues as the most prominent. Bettani and Ahmed (2023) argue that China's naval expansion has compelled a rethinking of India's strategic calculus in a radical manner, shifting from a traditional naval rivalry to a concern of economic encirclement through BRI infrastructure that could threaten India's access to vital trade routes¹⁰. This theory argues that threat perception drives India's defence diplomacy, and the policy is underpinned by a consciously non-confrontational stance to prevent escalation. Tu et al. (2024) argue that as Sino-Indian capability competition grows more symmetrical, India's Southeast Asian partnerships help it retain strategic autonomy and develop a collective institutional front against shared security challenges¹¹.

A second driver is economic motivation. The AEP's objectives of increasing trade, attracting investment, and diversifying supply chains are connected to its security dimension; when economic and security interests align, political support for such partnerships

¹⁰ Bettani, S. A., and Ahmed, Z. S, "China and regional security in South and Southeast Asia: A comparative analysis of ASEAN and SAARC." *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 11(2), 289–310, 2023.

¹¹ Tu, Ching-Chang, Hung-Chih Lin, Chia-Yi Chang, and Chethan Doddi. "Aftermath of the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis: Media Discourse Analysis of Taiwan and India's Perception of China's Threat." *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 80 (4): 549–580. 2024.

is often broader and more enduring, as the benefits of engagement resonate with various domestic constituencies¹².

Normative factors are a third less systematically explored driver. Some scholars contend that India's democratic credentials and its inclusive regional stance appeal to Southeast Asian states that prefer non-aligned security arrangements. But the empirical record linking normative alignment to concrete policy outcomes is still sparse, and this thesis takes the claim as a question rather than an established fact.

3. Southeast Asia's Motivations for Increased Maritime Cooperation

The literature on Southeast Asian states' motivations to engage with India has identified a heterogeneous set of drivers that defies reduction to a single logic. Bandonio, Bastari and Suharyo (2021) look at the Indonesian case and find a structural logic of capability development without strategic entrapment: Jakarta wants to increase its naval capacity and regional maritime awareness through a partnership that does not require exclusive alignment, nor a confrontational posture against other major powers¹³. Vo et al. (2023) examine Vietnamese motivations through the lenses of territorial sovereignty and Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea, demonstrating that Hanoi utilizes the India relationship to not only build military capacity, but also to signal its commitment to sovereignty and international law – making India

¹² Kumar and Dahiya, "Exploring India's maritime foreign policy in Southeast Asia: The SAGAR initiative." 2025.

¹³ Bandonio, Adi, Avando Bastari, and Okol Sri Suharyo, "The Relations Concept of Indonesia-India: Political, Education, and Defense Perspective." *Global Journal of Engineering and Technology Advances* 7 (3): 071–082, 2021.

a diplomatic anchor for a rules-based regional order, not simply an arms supplier¹⁴.

A frequently cited unique aspect of India's attraction is capacity-building: India is seen as a partner willing to share technology and training to help partners achieve long-term self-sufficiency instead of dependency. The prevailing logic in this literature is that of strategic hedging. That is, Southeast Asian states diversify their security partnerships in order to maximize flexibility and maintain bargaining leverage with major powers, rather than commit to exclusive alignments that would foreclose future options. The literature also reports structural constraints to this hedging dynamic, including budgetary constraints, competing domestic priorities, and sensitivity to reactions from major powers, although its long-term implications for partnership trajectories are under-explored¹⁵.

4. Defence Diplomacy: Theoretical Foundations

The conceptual framework for this thesis is offered by the theoretical literature on defence diplomacy. Defence diplomacy, as defined by Cottey and Forster (2013), is the use of military instruments to achieve more general foreign policy objectives in a peaceful, non-coercive manner, based on trust and capacity-building rather than deterrence and coercion¹⁶. This framework has been considerably broadened by recent research. Contemporary defence diplomacy includes the transfer of complex technologies, joint research and development, and deep

¹⁴ Vo, V. T., Le, T. L., and Ta, Q. T, "Maritime security policy of India in early 21st century: Vietnam's perception of its implication on the Asia-Pacific region." *Journal of International Studies*, 19(2), 2023.

¹⁵ Bandonio, Adi, Avando Bastari, and Okol Sri Suharyo, "The Relations Concept of Indonesia-India: Political, Education, and Defense Perspective." 2021.

¹⁶ Cottey, Andrew and Forster, A, "Reshaping defense diplomacy: New roles for military cooperation and assistance." 1-84, 2013.

institutional links which connect defence establishments over long periods of time¹⁷. To be successful it must have coherent strategic objectives, continued political will and the institutional ability to cope with the bureaucratic requirements of military cooperation.

Chaer, Sumarlan and Widodo (2021) show that effective defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia must remain sensitive to sovereignty concerns and norms of non-interference, generate positive-sum outcomes for all parties, and accommodate the different strategic cultures of partners¹⁸. The literature also affirms that bilateral defence diplomacy does not operate in a vacuum of the regional security architecture. Successful partnerships induce demonstration effects that spur wider participation in cooperative security arrangements¹⁹.

Gregory Winger (2014) developed the concept of the “velvet gauntlet” which is a useful lens here. Winger argues that defence diplomacy is a form of soft power that employs military tools in a non-coercive manner, allowing states to display capability and signal commitment without provoking an adversary response²⁰. This framing is directly relevant to Indian practice. Through sustained, non-threatening military contact with Southeast Asian partners, New Delhi demonstrates resolve and capability while establishing its credentials as a constructive security provider. The theoretical literature also identifies an unresolved measurement problem: existing frameworks do not provide

¹⁷ Charillon, F., Balzacq, T., Ramel, F., “Defense Diplomacy.” In: Balzacq, T., Charillon, F., Ramel, F. (eds) *Global Diplomacy. The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019.

¹⁸ Chaer, M. I., Sumarlan, S., and Widodo, P, “Indonesian defense diplomacy strategy in trilateral cooperative arrangement.” *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, 26, 1-15, 2021.

¹⁹ Cottey, Andrew and Forster, A, “Reshaping defense diplomacy.”

²⁰ Winger, G, “The velvet gauntlet: A theory of defense diplomacy.” In A. Lisiak & N. Smolenski (Eds.), *What do ideas do?* (Vol. 33). IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, 2014.

reliable indicators of defence-diplomacy success, do not offer much guidance as to what distinguishes successful partnerships from stalled partnerships, and do not provide adequate comparative analysis of which instruments – exercises, arms transfers, professional military education – have the most durable results²¹. The typological framework presented in the Methodology section speaks directly to this gap.

Taken together, this literature leaves a specific gap that the present thesis is built to fill. Existing accounts explain why India engages Southeast Asia in general terms – threat perception, capability gaps, hedging incentives – but none of them explains why the same stated policy, Act East, produces such different depths of bilateral engagement across partners who share broadly similar strategic circumstances. Winger's velvet-gauntlet framework accounts for why defence diplomacy is attractive as a non-coercive instrument, but not for how much of it a given partner receives. Drab's three-instrument typology (security engagement, capacity-building, geopolitical signaling) identifies what the instruments are, but stops short of measuring how intensively they are combined in any one relationship. No study in this literature operationalizes partnership depth itself as a variable to be explained, which is precisely what the three-tier typology developed below is designed to do.

D. Methodology

This research employs a mixed methods research design that combines quantitative data on naval activity with qualitative assessment of institutional depth and partnership quality. At its analytical core is a three-tier typology – Advanced, Developmental and Probing – to distinguish bilateral relations based on their

²¹ Cottey, Andrew and Forster, A, "Reshaping defense diplomacy."

institutionalization and operational complexity. The quantitative component of this analysis, comprising naval exercise frequency and port-visit data, covers 2014 to 2024; the qualitative component, comprising institutional, diplomatic, and defence-industrial developments, is tracked through mid-2026, and the tier classifications in Chapter III reflect this fuller and more recent evidentiary base.

Operational complexity measures how far cooperation has progressed from basic confidence building measures to complex scenario-based exercises, formal defence-industrial links and real-time information sharing. Institutionalization is measured by the presence and regularity of formal dialogue mechanisms, the extent of professional exchanges in military education, the existence of logistics and access arrangements and the maturity of defence-industrial cooperation.

Advanced partnerships combine sustained high level political engagement, multi-domain warfighting exercises, substantive defence-industrial cooperation (including technology transfer), logistics agreements establishing real operational interdependence, and real-time integration of maritime domain awareness.

Developmental partnerships have evolved from confidence-building to structured capacity-building, institutionalized strategic dialogue and material defence assistance, but not yet to the level of technology transfer or exercise complexity found in Advanced partnerships – often owing to structural constraints rather than political unwillingness.

Probing partnerships have open lines of communication and low but functionally important levels of interaction, limited either by limited naval capability or a conscious choice of non-alignment.

Table 1. Coding indicators for tier assignment

Indicator	Probing	Developmental	Advanced
High-level political / institutional dialogue	Irregular or episodic political contact; no standing bilateral dialogue mechanism	At least one standing dialogue mechanism (e.g. a ministerial or service-secretary-level forum) meeting on a multi-year cycle	Two or more parallel standing mechanisms (political and service-to-service) meeting on a predictable, decades-long cycle
Bilateral exercise series	Ad hoc drills, or participation only within multilateral formats, at fewer than one bilateral exercise every two years	Regular bilateral series (at least annual) confined to a single operational domain, e.g. surface patrol or anti-piracy drills	Regular bilateral series (at least annual) spanning multiple domains (surface, sub-surface, air) with demonstrable growth in platform complexity over time
Defence-industrial cooperation	None, or exploratory discussions only	Equipment sales or material assistance without a technology-transfer or co-production component	Signed technology-transfer or co-production agreement, delivered or substantially advanced (e.g. a BrahMos-type transfer)
Logistics / access arrangements	None	Ad hoc port calls or informal access only	Standing logistics or access agreement enabling sustained operational interdependence
Maritime domain awareness / information-sharing	None, or informal only	Periodic, scheduled information exchange	Real-time or near-real-time integration of maritime domain awareness data
Coordinated patrol / standing operational mechanism	None	Bilateral patrolling on an irregular or trial basis	Standing coordinated patrol regime (e.g. a CORPAT-type arrangement) sustained for ten years or more

A case is coded Advanced when it satisfies the Advanced-column description on at least four of the six indicators above, with defence-industrial cooperation and the exercise series treated as necessary but not sufficient conditions on their own: a single Advanced-column indicator unaccompanied by correlates in at least two other rows keeps a case at Developmental rather than promoting it to Advanced. A case is coded Developmental when it satisfies the Developmental-column (or higher) description on at

least four indicators without meeting the Advanced threshold, and Probing otherwise. Applying these thresholds to the six cases examined in Chapter III reproduces the classifications used there: Singapore and Indonesia satisfy the Advanced-column description on all six indicators; Vietnam meets five, and the Philippines meets five as well, though in the Philippines' case the defence-industrial indicator (the 2022 BrahMos deal) is the anchor for Advanced-tier status while the other indicators remain closer to Developmental – the more fragile basis for its classification flagged in the case study itself. Thailand and Malaysia meet three or fewer Advanced-column indicators and register instead across the Developmental column, consistent with their classification below.

This typological approach directly confronts the measurement problem identified above: rather than trying to measure outcomes that resist measurement, it employs a structured qualitative comparison to identify the mechanisms and conditions that explain variation in partnership depth. It is applied consistently across all six case studies in Chapter III. It acts as the dependent variable that the thesis seeks to explain. The three hypotheses below act as candidate explanations, with partnership tier as the empirical gauge of the depth each hypothesis predicts.

E. Hypotheses

Having presented the typological framework as the explanandum, this section provides three candidate explanations for the variation it captures.

Hypothesis 1 – Economic interdependence and sea-lane security. India's closest naval partnership is with states where economic interests – trade volumes, energy-import dependence, investment linkages – create common interests in securing the sea lanes on which those flows depend. States that are economically

more exposed to maritime disruptions should have the most developed naval cooperation, because the tangible costs of insecurity provide a continuing political incentive for institutionalized engagement²².

Hypothesis 2 – Capability building imperatives Southeast Asian states are primarily engaged with India to plug in specific gaps in their naval modernisation, i.e. training, technology and equipment, enabling modernisation without the dependencies of their larger traditional suppliers. The extent of partnership should be tuned to the extent of fit between India's offerings and the needs of a particular partner: states with more ambitious modernisation agendas and greater absorptive capacity should maintain more sophisticated cooperation than states with narrower requirements or smaller defence budgets²³.

Hypothesis 3: Strategic hedging against Chinese maritime assertiveness India's growing bilateral navies are part of a wider Southeast Asian hedging strategy against Chinese maritime expansion. Rather than formalize alliances that would impose unacceptable political costs and end engagement with Beijing, Southeast Asian states are seeking non-exclusive security arrangements with India that improve deterrence and interoperability while maintaining strategic autonomy and ASEAN centrality. The level of intensity of a partnership should correspond to the extent to which a state views Chinese assertiveness as a direct threat, measured against its perception of the political risk associated with a clear external alignment²⁴.

None of these three hypotheses are mutually exclusive. The empirical record suggests that all three are at play across the

²² Kumar and Dahiya, "Exploring India's maritime foreign policy in Southeast Asia"

²³ Gill, D.M, "A neoclassical realist analysis of the evolving Philippines–India defense partnership in the twenty-first century." *Asian Security*, 19, 249 - 267, 2023.

²⁴ Singh, S, "The Dilemmas of Regional States: How Southeast Asian States View and Respond to India–China Maritime Competition." *Asian Security* 15 (1): 44–59. 2019.

relationships examined here. The analytical task in Chapter III is to determine which hypothesis or combination best explains the variation in partnership depth across the six case studies, and whether the relative weight of each driver varies systematically between the Advanced and Developmental tiers represented among them.

F. Theoretical Framework

1. Defence Diplomacy: Conceptual Basis and Historical Evolution

In the post–Cold War world, defence diplomacy has become a distinctive instrument of statecraft, reflecting a broader change in the relationship between military capability and foreign policy. It is the systematic employment of military instruments (exercises, exchanges, training programmes, technology transfers) to achieve foreign policy objectives through cooperative rather than coercive means²⁵. This marks a clear departure from the Cold War paradigm, in which military power functioned largely as an instrument of deterrence and coercion; military engagement is now conceived instead as a vehicle for building trust, institutional integration, and sustainable security partnerships.

The historical background to this change is well documented. The end of Cold War alliance structures opened up the possibility for flexible, non-exclusive security partnerships that could address common challenges without formal commitments of alignment²⁶. At the same time, the emergence of transnational security issues – terrorism, maritime piracy, natural disasters – that no single state could address on its own generated demand for cooperative security mechanisms, reinforced by the new normative expectations that accompanied the democratic transitions of the

²⁵ L. Drab, "Defense Diplomacy — An Important Tool for the Implementation of Foreign Policy and Security of the State," *Security and Defense Quarterly* 20, 57–71. 2018.

²⁶ Charillon, Balzacq, and Ramel, "Defense Diplomacy,"

1990s about the military's role in promoting peace and stability rather than narrow national competition. Today's defence diplomacy is far removed from the confidence-building visits and ceremonial exchanges of its early days. More complex forms of defence diplomacy now include complex technology transfers, joint research and development, and institutional links that bind defence establishments together over long periods, creating technological interdependencies and shared professional cultures that make cooperation self-reinforcing²⁷. This evolution has made defence diplomacy especially attractive for middle powers and emerging economies that wish to acquire regional influence without causing security dilemmas with established great powers.

The duality is described by Winger's (2014) 'velvet gauntlet' framework, which characterizes defence diplomacy as soft power that uses military means but not coercive intent, with states showing capability and signaling commitment through long-term peaceful military contact, and affecting the strategic perceptions of partners without provoking them. This framework is directly applicable to the India–Southeast Asia case, where New Delhi's engagement strategy is explicitly designed to signal security capacity and long-term commitment, without incurring the signaling costs associated with exclusive alliance formation.

Instruments of Defence Diplomacy. Drab (2018) identifies three instruments that are analytically distinct, but operationally overlapping. Security engagement is the relationship aspect of defence diplomacy. This includes high-level summits, officer exchange programmes, joint planning processes and institutional agreements that foster professional networks across defence establishments. These relationships constitute the communication infrastructure for crisis management and operational coordination, and their institutionalization – through

²⁷ Ibid

regular, predictable interaction, not episodic contact – turns individual relationships into durable institutional assets²⁸.

The most operationally substantive instrument is capacity-building. This includes training assistance, technical cooperation, hardware transfers and equipment-leasing programmes to build partner military capacity and establish interoperability. Good capacity-building involves not only providing partners with equipment but also emphasises knowledge transfer and institutional development so that partners can independently sustain and adapt transferred systems. Professional military education — which develops common doctrinal standards and professional relationships that enable operational coordination — is a major component here. The central design challenge is to build the partner's capabilities without creating dependencies that erode sovereign autonomy, a balance that India's engagement model is particularly attuned to achieve.

The third instrument is geopolitical signaling. Large joint exercises, arms transfers and defence-industrial cooperation are public expressions of trust, capability and long-term commitment between states. Unlike coercive deterrence, which is about conveying a threat, defence diplomacy is about conveying reassurance. It signals both will and ability, but in a way that invites a cooperative rather than an adversarial response²⁹. One of the key challenges of defence-diplomatic practice is how to calibrate these signals in terms of timing, visibility and audience, particularly in multilateral settings where states have to manage relationships simultaneously with allies, competitors and neutrals. Regional security architecture and defence diplomacy. Defence diplomacy is particularly salient in Southeast Asia, where the institutional architecture of ASEAN, alongside its informal

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

partnerships and norms of non-alignment, create a distinctive strategic environment. Rather than being constrained by existing regional structures, defence diplomacy is a constitutive power that creates new forms of cooperation that can reinforce or contest them³⁰.

This comparison reveals defence diplomacy's structural advantage over traditional alliance-building. In a context committed to inclusive multilateralism, alliances set membership criteria that are binary, generate in-group/out-group signaling, and carry high political costs. By contrast, defence diplomacy permits a graduated, non-exclusive participation at different levels of intensity, allowing states to enjoy security benefits without the political cost of formal alignment³¹. Its compatibility with the "ASEAN Way" – institutionalized norms of consensus, non-interference and inclusiveness – has made it the preferred modality of external powers wishing to engage Southeast Asian security without triggering institutional resistance.

For an external power such as India, success comes from working within these norms, not around them: respecting the institutional centrality of ASEAN, demonstrating that engagement provides security value without threatening the sovereign prerogatives of partners, and avoiding any perception that bilateral arrangements subordinate smaller states to the strategic agenda of a larger power.

2. Applied Defence Diplomacy: Adaptive Bilateralism

The conceptual foundation above establishes defence diplomacy as a coherent tool of statecraft, but does not by itself account for how a single state varies its use of that tool across a structurally

³⁰ Gregory Winger, "The Velvet Gauntlet: A Theory of Defense Diplomacy,"

³¹ Cottey, Andrew and Forster, A, "Reshaping defense diplomacy"

diverse set of partners at the same time — the analytical question flagged in Section A and addressed directly here. As anticipated there, adaptive bilateralism is not an alternative to defence diplomacy. It is the specific strategic logic through which India differentially employs the instruments of defence diplomacy, modulating the mix and intensity of these instruments to the geography, capability needs and political constraints of each partner.

This has one important implication for the rest of this chapter and for Chapter III: the theoretical perspectives, instruments, and regional architecture discussed above are not simply background; they are the toolkit whose differential deployment is adaptive bilateralism. Section F.4 below operationalises this toolkit into the three-tier typology (Advanced, Developmental and Probing) used to classify all eleven regional partners in Table 1, of which Chapter III examines the six Advanced and Developmental cases in depth. Both should be read as measuring the same underlying phenomenon — the extent and combination of instruments through which India's defence diplomacy is deployed in a given bilateral relationship. The typology is therefore an empirical operationalization of adaptive bilateralism, not a separate classification exercise: its three tiers are observable gradations in the depth of defence-diplomacy deployment. This thesis thus contributes not by determining whether defence diplomacy explains India's regional engagement, but by highlighting the uneven distribution of its tools among partners and the reasons why.

Adaptive bilateralism has a distinct empirical implication that sets it apart from two possible alternatives. The default hypothesis, a standardized template approach, would be that India is applying the same partnership model across all ASEAN states, regardless of their structural position; the variations are simply the extent to

which each partner has progressed along a common route. An opportunistic approach would predict that India deepens the ties that are politically easiest to foster at any given time, producing depth that tracks short-term political alignment rather than structural complementarity. Adaptive bilateralism predicts something different from both: India calibrates the form of cooperation – not just depth – to each partner’s geographic location, capability needs and political constraints, sustaining sophisticated engagement even with structurally constrained partners such as Thailand and the Philippines rather than focusing resources on the most politically convenient relationships. Chapter III's case studies are intended to test this prediction directly.

3. Applications to India–Southeast Asia Relations

The literature on defence diplomacy provides a number of important insights into India’s regional engagement. India’s model is premised on gradual, sustained relationship building, underpinned by respect for partner autonomy and institutional preferences of regional organisations³² — reflecting both India’s own commitment to strategic autonomy and its understanding that durable Southeast Asian partnerships must be sensitive to sovereignty and non-interference norms.

India’s strategic calculus is also particularly oriented towards the maritime domain — sea lane security, freedom of navigation and non-traditional challenges such as piracy and disaster response³³. India has created security relevance with a heterogeneous set of partners by focusing engagement on issues where partner interests are most aligned and political sensitivities lowest,

³² N. Kumar, "India's Role in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security"

³³ Ibid

without becoming embroiled in the contentious territorial disputes that would undermine its ASEAN relations more broadly. The logic is most visible in the shift from the Look East to the Act East Policy. Yet this shift, Singh (2018) argues, illustrates how an external power can significantly expand its military role in a region without bearing the political costs usually associated with more assertive diplomatic stances, provided that the military engagement is geared toward solving common problems, rather than altering the current regional order at the expense of established interests³⁴.

4. Typological Measurement of Partnership Depth

It is a well-known methodological problem to measure the effectiveness of defence diplomacy. Simple quantitative indicators cannot measure the depth of partnership. The number of exercises held or agreements signed does not give a complete, and perhaps even misleading, picture of the quality and sustainability of cooperation³⁵. Rather, the qualitative dimensions – the degree of institutionalisation, the sustainability of the cooperative mechanisms, and the extent to which engagement has changed behaviour within partner defence establishments – provide the basis for sound assessment. The challenge is addressed by the three-tier typology outlined in the Methodology section, which supplies the qualitative dimension that aggregate metrics obscure.

Simultaneously, it enables systematic cross-case comparison of the structural and agential factors that account for divergent trajectories. It is consistently applied to all six case studies in

³⁴ Singh, A, "The nautical dimension of India's "Act East" policy [Policy Report]." S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2018.

³⁵ Cottey, Andrew and Forster, A, "Reshaping defense diplomacy"

Chapter III and forms the analytical basis for the comparative findings of that chapter.

The remainder of the thesis is organized as follows. Chapter II traces the institutional development of India–ASEAN maritime cooperation from 1990 to 2024, establishing the regional architecture and historical context within which India's bilateral partnerships have since evolved. Chapter III applies the three-tier typology developed above to six bilateral case studies — Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia — testing Hypotheses 1 through 3 against the empirical record of each relationship and assessing the extent to which adaptive bilateralism accounts for the observed variation in partnership depth. Chapter IV synthesizes the comparative findings across all six cases, evaluates the relative explanatory weight of the three hypotheses, and considers the broader implications of India's stratified, adaptive approach for Indo-Pacific security architecture and for the study of middle-power defence diplomacy more generally.

Chapter II: India-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation: Institutional Development and Strategic Consolidation, 1990–2024

A. Introduction

India's maritime engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one of the most significant transformations in modern Asian security architecture. This transformation has altered the nature of middle powers' engagement with regional multilateral institutions from limited diplomatic engagement in the early 1990s to a full strategic partnership by the mid-2020s³⁶. The transformation is all the more striking because of the structural obstacles which long held it back: lingering Cold War suspicions, different strategic cultures and a Southeast Asian institutional order wary of outside great-power involvement, overcome not through quick strategic assertion but through sustained institutionalization that helped India navigate ASEAN's consensus-based architecture to emerge as a consequential security partner. This trajectory illustrates the propensity of defence diplomacy to yield more durable regional influence than traditional alliance-building in a multipolar environment³⁷. The difference that India offers is not coercive leverage, but a deliberate strategy of accommodation: while other great powers tried to impose external frameworks on Southeast Asia, India calibrated its engagement to the institutional norms and procedural preferences of ASEAN, offering a model of how emerging powers can be incorporated into complex regional systems without triggering defensive balancing or undermining existing institutional arrangements — evidence that, in a

³⁶ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014).

³⁷ David Brewster, *India as an Asia Pacific Power* (London: Routledge, 2012).

multipolar Asia, influence increasingly rests on perceived legitimacy and demonstrated contribution rather than positional dominance³⁸.

This partnership has evolved along three analytically separable dimensions. First is institution building; India developed institutions that promoted multilateral dialogue and collective action that complemented rather than replaced ASEAN's own institutions. Second, operational deepening: Cooperation has evolved from limited confidence-building measures to sophisticated joint operations and coordinated maritime patrols, illustrating how functional security cooperation can generate significant strategic momentum without triggering the sovereignty-related sensitivities that often impede deeper cooperation. Third, functional integration. India transitioned from a consumer of regional stability to a provider of maritime public goods like domain awareness capabilities and crisis response frameworks through the establishment of information-sharing networks and technology cooperation programmes³⁹. The chapter examines the trajectory of India-ASEAN maritime cooperation through three consecutive phases, each with a specific strategic rationale but all indicative of India's ongoing engagement with institutions. The decade of 1990 to 2000, as we saw in Section B, is characterized by India's strategic patience in dismantling the legacies of Cold War estrangement. Section C discusses real world security crises, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and the rise in maritime piracy between 2001 and 2009, that established India's credibility as an operational partner. Section D (2010–2024) outlines India's evolution from a tactical partner to a fully integrated strategic actor that launched multilateral initiatives and deepened bilateral ties that today form the structure and foundation of regional maritime security. Chapter III discusses

³⁸ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community*.

³⁹ N. Kumar, "India's Role in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security"

these dynamics on a bilateral level and considers the impact of this regional framework on country partnerships, while Chapter IV considers the broader implications for the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

B. 1990–2000: Beyond the “Look East Policy”

India’s turn to Southeast Asia in the ’90s was not opportunistic expansion but unprecedented strategic necessity. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed India's biggest external patron, and a severe balance-of-payments crisis deepened the country's diplomatic isolation and limited its strategic choices. These converging pressures necessitated a comprehensive reappraisal of Indian foreign policy, which recognised that integration with the Asia-Pacific was not an option, but a necessity for India’s economic resurgence and long-term strategic autonomy⁴⁰. Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao’s Look East Policy was just such a reorientation – a recognition that India’s future prosperity and strategic relevance lay in active engagement with regional institutions New Delhi had previously ignored.

In practice, that meant overcoming deep institutional skepticism. But for much of the preceding decades India and ASEAN had been on opposite sides of ideological and regional divides. India’s endorsement in 1978 of Vietnam’s intervention in Cambodia had put New Delhi at odds with a diplomatic consensus ASEAN had invested heavily in maintaining, leaving lasting doubt about India’s reliability as a partner⁴¹. More fundamentally, governments in ASEAN questioned if a state that had embraced non-alignment as an organizing principle of foreign policy was capable of a credible

⁴⁰ Brewster, *India as an Asia Pacific Power*.

⁴¹ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community*.

transition to the consensus-based, institutionally disciplined partnership demanded by ASEAN's norms.

India's answer to this skepticism defined the decade. Instead of trying to replace doubt with assertion, New Delhi sought what some scholars have called institutional socialization – a process of learning and internalizing the procedural norms of the 'ASEAN Way', rather than trying to supplant Indian preferences for them. This approach was demonstrated in the mid-1990s by bilateral naval exercises with Singapore and Indonesia. These exercises were not intended to show off technological superiority or to send a deterrent message to third parties. They were confidence-building measures designed to show that the Indian Navy could operate within the procedural and normative parameters expected by its ASEAN partners⁴². They were limited in scope and sophistication, but they created the professional routines and mutual familiarity that are essential preconditions for more demanding security cooperation.

The first MILAN meeting, in 1995, was also important. By inviting naval representatives from Southeast Asia for strategic dialogue and professional exchanges, rather than operational exercises, India demonstrated a mature appreciation of the region's sensitivities. The deliberate decision to focus on informal conversations over proven ability contributed to building personal relationships and common professional language that would enable later institutional expansion. The choice of venue itself was significant: holding the meeting on strategically salient terrain was a signal of transparency, suggesting India's inclination towards consultation over unilateral assertion⁴³.

⁴² Brewster, India as an Asia Pacific Power.

⁴³ Indian Navy, "Indian Navy's Multi-National Exercise MILAN-2022," Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Defence, February 24, 2022,

Singapore's efforts to get India to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) at this time are an example of a broader trend in regional power politics. Singapore's support was not an issue of bilateral goodwill but a strategic calculation that India's involvement would be in the collective interest of ASEAN in terms of a diversified external security environment – and was presented as such, as a contribution to the group rather than a favour to a bilateral partner. This episode set a template that would come to pass: India's regional gains depended on the willingness of local partners to articulate the collective value of Indian engagement. India's 1998 nuclear tests initiated a period of political tension that revealed both the fragility and the underlying resilience of these early institutional ties. However, operational engagement continued: India hosted MILAN again in 1999 and advanced anti-piracy consultations in 2000⁴⁴. This persistence resulted in a sort of institutional lock-in, when the costs of disengagement started to outweigh the political costs of continued cooperation, and the holistic approach to institutional engagement that defined this decade became the template for India's regional strategy going forward.

C. 2001–2009: Terrorism and Nontraditional Maritime Threats

1. Terrorism

The 9/11 attacks of September 2001 and the more general transformation of the global security environment that followed accelerated the India-ASEAN security cooperation beyond what incremental institutionalization alone would have delivered. Both New Delhi and ASEAN had to recharacterise the maritime domain from a secondary to a primary theatre requiring coordinated response, based on the realisation that transnational network-

⁴⁴ Ibid.

based threats could not be dealt with by state-centric defence frameworks alone⁴⁵. This period shows how extreme external shocks can narrow the institutional learning that would otherwise take years of diplomatic peace to develop.

A more detailed examination of two kinds of threat and their institutional consequences reveals a striking divergence. Counterterrorism cooperation attracted the most policy attention and the most formal agreements, but there were enduring limitations. The depth of operational collaboration was limited by the sensitivity of intelligence-sharing, and the perceived risk of losing information control to multilateral frameworks⁴⁶. India's naval footprint in the Strait of Malacca was increased through coordinated patrols that had mixed results, reflecting unresolved jurisdictional ambiguities and different threat perceptions of participating states⁴⁷. The analytical lesson is an important one: effective defence diplomacy requires not only a shared threat perception, but the prior development of compatible operational procedures and institutional structures through which that shared perception can be translated into coordinated action.

The October 2002 Bali bombings highlighted the need for security cooperation and proved that terrorism was a direct threat to the region's economic foundations. India's vast experience of domestic terrorism put it in a position to offer operationally relevant expertise to ASEAN partners. The institutional framework established with Indonesia during this period was more than a bilateral confidence-building measure — the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC), created in Jakarta in June 2007, established a standing mechanism for cooperation on training,

⁴⁵ P. K. Jha, "India's Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Exploring New Avenues," in *ASEAN and India—ASEAN Relations* (London: Routledge, 2021), 124–141.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ A. Dey, "Changing Face of Sea Piracy in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region: Examining India's Role in Maritime Cooperation,"

technology, and capacity-building that has met annually ever since⁴⁸.

2. Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief

However, the main event that defined this period was the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The most convincing display of India's expeditionary capabilities came not by declaration but by performance in real operational circumstances with the Indian Navy's rapid deployment of ships and humanitarian aid to Indonesia, Thailand and other affected states. Equally important was the way in which that capability was demonstrated: India's mode of maritime engagement was one of normative restraint rather than capability projection⁴⁹, put into practice through close coordination with host governments and international humanitarian organisations and careful observance of national sovereignty throughout the relief operation. Weeks of working together on humanitarian issues created a professional bond that turned into personal relationships between military officers, which later facilitated more complex forms of operational cooperation. The strategic impact of the tsunami response went well beyond its immediate humanitarian results⁵⁰.

But the most institutionally productive security challenge of the period was the rise of maritime piracy in the Straits of Malacca. Piracy had obvious economic stakes, unambiguous illegality and operational tractability, and therefore could be addressed multilaterally without the sovereignty sensitivities that hampered counterterrorism work. The first institutionalized shared-data and

⁴⁸ Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, "India-Indonesia: Expanding Cooperation to Include Defence Industry," IPCS,

⁴⁹ On the operational details, see Maritime History Society, "Remembering Indian Navy's Humanitarian Intervention: Tsunami 2004," and Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, "Indian Naval Diplomacy: Post Tsunami."

⁵⁰ Frédéric Grare, "Enhancing Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Indian Ocean" (NatStrat, 2024),

coordinated-response mechanism in the regional maritime domain was established in 2006 with the formation of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships (ReCAAP), with India as a founding member⁵¹. Singapore as the site of the Information Sharing Centre was a sign of the commitment to operational rather than only declaratory multilateralism.

3. Antipiracy

The empirical record of this institutional innovation is striking. Reported piracy incidents in the Strait of Malacca dropped from a peak of 75 in 2000 to negligible levels by 2010⁵². Besides this measurable decline, the more significant institutional contribution of ReCAAP was the procedural infrastructure it established – standardized communication protocols, compatible operational procedures and professional networks that were readily applicable to future maritime security challenges⁵³. The contrast between counterterrorism and anti-piracy cooperation in this period offers a wider analytical lesson: where defence diplomacy addresses tractable problems of low political salience, it develops the institutional capital and operational experience to address more politically sensitive security issues over time⁵⁴.

⁵¹ ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, "Annual Report 2025." 2025.

⁵² PRIF Report 125, "Assessing Contemporary Maritime Piracy in Southeast Asia: Trends, Hotspots and Responses," Peace Research Institute Frankfurt,

⁵³ Dey, "Changing Face of Sea Piracy."

⁵⁴ ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, "Annual Report 2025."

D. 2010–2024: Enhanced ASEAN-India Engagement

1. 2011–2013: Strategic Partnership

India participated in the Disaster Relief Exercise (DiREx) in 2011 at Manado, Indonesia with the Indian Naval Ship (INS) Kesari⁵⁵. In June 2013, India sent the INS Gharial to Brunei for the ASEAN Plus Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief and Military Medicine Exercise⁵⁶. India unveiled a blueprint to take its maritime links with Southeast Asia to the next level at the 2012 ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, where members emphasised the importance of a rules-based maritime security community and held long discussions on freedom of navigation. The summit upgraded the ASEAN-India relationship to a “strategic partnership” formally. During this period, Myanmar and Vietnam looked towards India for support: India invested in Myanmar’s coastal defence and extended a \$100 million line of credit to Vietnam.⁵⁷

One important institutional enabler of this deepening engagement was the establishment of the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2010, which provided India with a structured entry point into a multilateral security architecture that was, by design, inclusive rather than exclusive – avoiding the alliance-like implications that would have been institutionally problematic for many ASEAN members. India’s active engagement in the Maritime Security Expert Working Group, in particular, provided operational content to the strategic

⁵⁵ A. K. Das, “India’s Naval Exercises With ASEAN States Since 1991: A Time Line,” *India Review* 12, no. 3: 123–129, 2013.

⁵⁶ High Commission of India, ““Brief on India-Brunei Bilateral Relations,” Ministry of External Affairs, *as_on_Brunei_Darussalam_November_2018.pdf*.” 2018.

⁵⁷ Singh, Abhijit, ““India as Maritime Security Partner in the Indo-Pacific, Chapter in IDSA Book ‘Asian Strategic Review-2015,’” n.d.” 2015.

partnership through joint-exercise frameworks, capacity-building programmes and structured information-sharing mechanisms⁵⁸.

2. 2014-2017: Act East Policy

The ASEAN-India Summit in 2014 formalized the elevation of India's Look East Policy to the Act East Policy (AEP). Unlike its predecessor, the AEP was never accompanied by a standalone vision document, a lacuna that persists to this day, but one that has not prevented it from becoming the primary framework through which India organizes its Southeast Asia engagement. Amitendu Palit argues that the AEP signalled India's intention to play a more active geostrategic role, especially in areas where its presence had been limited before. It was not just limited to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief but also included maritime security cooperation, joint naval exercises⁵⁹. The period that followed is testament to this. Since 2014, much of India's engagement with Southeast Asia has been conducted, and justified, in the name of the navy as an implementation of the AEP, even where other instruments – diplomatic, developmental – were also at play.

This emphasis on the navy was originally expressed in a cooperative rather than a combat sense. From 2014 to 2017, India and Vietnam co-chaired the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Group on Humanitarian Mine Action, creating a permanent institutional channel on a technical security issue between the two countries outside of any specific exercise cycle⁶⁰. Meanwhile, exercise

⁵⁸ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "India's emphasis on rule of law and freedom of navigation & overflight in Indo-Pacific is not against any country, but to safeguard interests of all regional stakeholders: Raksha Mantri at ADMM-Plus Press Information Bureau." 2025.

⁵⁹ A. Palit, "India's Act East Policy and Implications for Southeast Asia," *Southeast Asian Affairs*: 81–92. 2016.

⁶⁰ Voice of Vietnam. 2016. "ADMM+ Experts' Working Group on Humanitarian Mine Action to Meet." October 19, 2016.

participation changed from disaster-response drills to more complex maritime-security scenarios. In May 2015, the Indian Navy's patrol vessel INS Saryu participated in the third ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Exercise held in Penang, Malaysia, again focusing on simulated search-and-rescue coordination⁶¹. By 2016 India had shifted to more hard security content: the amphibious vessel INS Airavat, able to carry 500 troops, 10 tanks and 11 combat vehicles, took part in the ADMM-Plus Exercise on Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism in Brunei, a much more capability-intensive deployment than the disaster-relief exercises of previous years⁶². Symbolically, this period was brought to an end in 2017 when India sent INS Satpura and INS Kadmat to Pattaya, Thailand, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of ASEAN with the ASEAN International Fleet Review⁶³. This timing was no coincidence as 2017 also marked the 25th anniversary of ASEAN-India dialogue relations, and the Indian Navy took the opportunity to embark on a wider port-visit tour to ASEAN member states with four naval vessels, matching naval diplomacy with the milestone anniversaries being celebrated that year.

The period 2014–2017 clearly shows a trajectory: from a policy relaunch without a formal doctrine behind it, to low-stakes humanitarian and disaster-relief cooperation, to exercises with real maritime-security content, to a symbolically weighted naval diplomacy push, timed to coincide with ASEAN's own institutional anniversary.

⁶¹ Indian Navy. 2016. "INS Saryu Participates in Disaster Relief Exercise DiREx-15 in ARF." April 6, 2016.

⁶² Sputnik International. 2016. "Indian Warship Arrives in Brunei for ASEAN's Maritime Drills." May 1, 2016.

⁶³ Sumit Bhattacharjee, "Two Naval Ships Taking Part in Thai IFR," *The Hindu*, November 18, 2017.

3. 2018–2026: Enhanced Maritime Initiatives and Future Outlook

Operational data from this period give an indication of the scale of change. India has conducted 75 bilateral exercises with ASEAN countries between 2014 and 2024, mostly in recent years with Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore⁶⁴. What matters is not only their number but also their qualitative evolution: exercises have evolved from simple procedural coordination to complex, scenario-driven activities that cut across multiple domains and command structures. The 2023 ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME) showcased the degree to which India has evolved from a participant to an integrated partner in multinational operational planning at a level of sophistication that leveraged three decades of institutional learning.

The defence-industrial aspect of the partnership underwent a similar evolution from the supply of defence equipment to technology transfer and co-production arrangements that promote long-term structural links between defence-industrial bases. The most advanced example of this model is the BrahMos missile deal with the Philippines, which involves the transfer of a capable weapons system along with training and logistical support, thereby positioning India as a credible high-technology defence partner, rather than just a conventional arms supplier. In January 2022, the Philippines signed its first contract for three shore-based missile batteries, worth about \$375 million, to be delivered and trained on through 2024-2025⁶⁵. India's Defence Secretary confirmed at the Shangri-La Dialogue in late May 2026 that a BrahMos deal had also been signed with Vietnam, but not yet formally announced, and was reportedly worth \$629-700

⁶⁴ Alexandre Levesques and V. Solanki, "Preferred Security Partner: Anchoring India in the Asia-Pacific," in *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2024*, ed. E. A. Laksmanna (London: IISS/Routledge), 72ff. 2024.

⁶⁵ The Week, "After Philippines, key BrahMos pact inked with Vietnam; Indonesia next." 2026.

million, including missile batteries, training and logistics support⁶⁶. Since then, this template has been replicated further. A similar deal with Indonesia, which in March 2026 declared its intention to purchase the system, was reportedly in its “final stages” as of the same dialogue⁶⁷. Together, these three deals transform BrahMos from a stand-alone bilateral sale into a larger Southeast Asian deterrence network — although the Vietnam and Indonesia deals are not yet fully confirmed in the public domain. These arrangements serve several strategic functions at once: they showcase India’s indigenous defence-manufacturing capability, they create the institutional interdependencies that deepen bilateral relationships, and they provide Southeast Asian states with a credible alternative to advanced defence technology. India’s enhanced naval presence in the South China Sea during this phase appears to be a carefully calculated move to convey strategic commitment without exacerbating the intra-ASEAN fault lines that great-power competition has increasingly exposed. The rotational deployment of Indian naval ships via Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia indicates India’s ongoing commitment to freedom of navigation and the rules-based maritime order, but without adopting an adversarial posture that would detract from ASEAN’s institutional preference for inclusive engagement⁶⁸.

The latest phase of the partnership has included the provision of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capability as a continuous feature. India has assisted its regional partners in achieving much better situational awareness within their exclusive economic zones and contiguous waters through coastal surveillance radar

⁶⁶ The Diplomat. 2026. "India Has Signed BrahMos Missile Deal With Vietnam, Indian Minister Says." June 2026.

⁶⁷ The Week. After Philippines, key BrahMos pact inked with Vietnam; Indonesia next

⁶⁸ Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "First Training Squadron of Indian Navy Arrived at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam," February 20, 2025; see also "Ships of Indian Navy's First Training Squadron to Be Deployed to South East Asia," The Tribune, describing the deployment as consistent with "India's Act East Policy and vision for a free, open and inclusive Indian Ocean Region."

systems and technical assistance to maritime information fusion centres⁶⁹. This contribution provides a maritime public good with regional benefits, filling a capability gap that individual states, especially the smaller ASEAN members, could not realistically fill with unilateral investment.

E. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of India-ASEAN maritime cooperation from 1990 to 2026 offers a number of analytically relevant conclusions about the functioning of defence diplomacy in a multipolar regional order. India's transition from distant relations to a full strategic partnership reflects a sophisticated appreciation of the regional institutional culture: New Delhi's approach – favouring long-term relationship-building over short-term strategic opportunism, and aligning itself with ASEAN's procedural norms rather than seeking to reshape them – has produced a form of regional influence that is durable because it is institutionally embedded⁷⁰.

This finding also has a lesson for classical power transition theory that runs counter to it. Power-transition theory, originally posited by A.F.K. Organski, suggests that peace is most likely to be maintained when there is a clear hierarchy of power, and instability is likely to increase as the capabilities of a challenger approach those of the dominant state within a system⁷¹. Douglas Lemke later applied this logic to regional subsystems, arguing that similar hierarchies -- and similar risks of friction as rising powers approach parity with dominant regional actors -- exist within geographically bounded orders as well as globally⁷². By this logic, India's entry into an ASEAN-centered regional security order

⁶⁹ Kumar and Dahiya, "Exploring India's maritime foreign policy in Southeast Asia"

⁷⁰ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community*.

⁷¹ A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968)

⁷² Douglas Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

should have produced friction, balancing behaviour, or institutional stress. Instead, India was absorbed into the ASEAN security architecture without triggering defensive reactions or institutional disruption, leading to a functionally sophisticated network of operational coordination, technology cooperation and institutional linkage that offers tangible security benefits to all participants – as the bilateral case studies in Chapter III show.

But there are big structural constraints to the further development of partnership. The most notable is the wide gap in terms of capacity and institutional maturity between ASEAN member states. More sophisticated partners such as Singapore and Indonesia can sustain high-end operational exercises and defence-technology cooperation, while smaller, less-resourced states cannot. Such heterogeneity forces India to pursue differentiated bilateral strategies that complicate multilateral coordination and increase the risk of perceived inequity among partners⁷³.

The picture is further complicated by the growing great power competition in the Indo-Pacific. Regional states are facing growing pressure to take a clearer position in the US-China competition, putting strain on the institutional underpinnings of ASEAN's non-alignment and India's own strategic autonomy. Thus far, India has been able to pursue its engagement without appearing to construct a competitive bloc, but increasing regional polarization will likely require further conscious institutional management to sustain that stance⁷⁴. Looking to the future, the partnership faces both opportunity and risk: there remains considerable room for further integration of advanced defence technologies and institutional linkages⁷⁵, but the critical question is whether the

⁷³ Kumar and Dahiya, "Exploring India's maritime foreign policy in Southeast Asia"

⁷⁴ Baviera, A., and Maramis, L. (Eds.), "Building ASEAN community: Political–security and socio-cultural reflections (ASEAN at 50, Vol." 4). Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2017.

⁷⁵ Levesques and Solanki, "Preferred Security Partner"

current institutional arrangement will be able to adjust to the rapidening tempo of strategic competition without sacrificing the inclusive nature that has been the foundation of the resilience and legitimacy of the partnership.

The India-ASEAN maritime partnership, therefore, provides an empirical example that patient, institutionalized and normatively aligned engagement can produce durable strategic partnerships even when confronted with high structural complexity. For the more general study of rising-power strategy, this case suggests that influence acquired through a steady contribution to regional institutional processes is more durable than influence based on positional advantage or coercive leverage—a conclusion with direct relevance to the bilateral case studies that follow in Chapter III.

Chapter III: India's Bilateral Maritime Cooperation with South East Asian Countries

A. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Navy's growing footprint in Southeast Asia is the primary instrument through which India has operationalized defence diplomacy in the region. Bilateral naval engagement complements India's multilateral work within ASEAN-centred forums. It also gives New Delhi a way to tailor cooperation to each partner's military capabilities and political sensitivities. This chapter calls that approach "adaptive bilateralism": India holds to a consistent set of strategic principles but varies how it applies them, in contrast to major powers that impose standardized frameworks on regional partners. Adaptive bilateralism, developed in Chapter I, is not a freestanding concept. It is the logic through which India deploys defence diplomacy's three instruments — security engagement, capacity-building, and geopolitical signaling — differently across partners. The case studies that follow trace how the mix and weighting of these instruments shifts from one relationship to the next, and the three-tier typology used throughout the chapter measures that variation directly. The underlying calculation is a familiar one for middle powers: providing tangible security value builds more durable regional influence than extracting concessions through coercive leverage⁷⁶. Bilateral naval cooperation is the most concrete expression of India's Act East Policy (AEP). Port calls, joint exercises, and coordinated maritime patrols have all increased steadily since 2014, signaling a long-term commitment to regional presence. These activities have moved past symbolic diplomacy toward building operational interoperability and the professional

⁷⁶ Baviera and Maramis, *Building ASEAN Community*, 45

relationships that make India a credible security partner. Through them, New Delhi has positioned itself as a credible contributor to regional stability⁷⁷. Bilateral relations are sorted into a three-tier typology — Advanced, Developmental, and Probing — based on how far cooperation has progressed from basic confidence-building toward complex scenario-based exercises, formal defence-industrial ties, and real-time information sharing. This lets the chapter compare cases systematically while accounting for the structural and political factors that drive variation in partnership intensity. Six case studies anchor the chapter: Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. Together they span the Advanced and Developmental tiers; the Probing tier appears in the aggregate data on states excluded from case-study treatment (Brunei, Cambodia, Timor-Leste). Each of the six has maintained a documented, sustained bilateral naval relationship with India since 2014, giving the comparison a common baseline, and together they account for most of India's bilateral exercise activity in the region over the study period (Table 4). Brunei, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste were excluded from case-study analysis because their bilateral naval engagement lacked the depth and consistency the typological framework requires for structured comparison; Myanmar's post-2021 political disruption further complicates cross-case comparability. Both remain in the aggregate data tables. This design choice carries a methodological cost that should be stated explicitly rather than left implicit: by selecting cases with documented, sustained bilateral engagement, the case-study sample selects in part on the dependent variable that the thesis seeks to explain, namely the depth of partnership. The hypotheses examined below therefore account for variation in the intensity of cooperation among states that already engage

⁷⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, India, "India-ASEAN Relations." 2018.

substantially with India; they do not, and cannot, explain why other states in the region engage only minimally or not at all. Testing the same indicators against a Probing-tier case, even in a lighter comparative form, would be a natural extension of this framework and is proposed as a direction for future research in the concluding chapter. The analysis proceeds along three lines: an empirical review of deployment patterns and exercise frequency since 2014, which shows systematic and sustained expansion rather than episodic activity; a qualitative examination of cooperation mechanisms and institutional architecture, which shows how India engages a structurally diverse set of partners; and a normative assessment of how bilateral engagement contributes to Indo-Pacific order and a rules-based maritime regime⁷⁸. Section C addresses each bilateral relationship in turn; the comparative, tier-based analysis follows in the chapter's concluding section. Chapter IV then draws on these patterns to consider the broader strategic implications of India's bilateral approach for Indo-Pacific order.

B. India's Increased Naval Cooperation in Southeast Asia

Since the Act East Policy launched in 2014, India's maritime presence in Southeast Asia has moved from the periphery of the region's security architecture to its centre. This was a fundamental strategic recalibration, not a marginal adjustment: naval cooperation now sits at the core of India's bilateral security relationships with individual ASEAN states. By anchoring its regional strategy to the maritime domain, New Delhi has signaled long-term commitment without generating the friction that more assertive postures typically produce. The shift is qualitative, not

⁷⁸ Brewster, *India as an Asia Pacific Power*.

just a matter of volume — trust and genuine operational interoperability, built through patient, sustained engagement⁷⁹. This selective approach carries clear analytical weight. Rather than engaging every regional partner with equal intensity, India concentrates its resources and political capital where cooperation can produce concrete security benefits, while respecting each partner's sovereign independence. This selectivity is adaptive bilateralism in practice: it deepens cooperation with receptive states while avoiding the institutional resistance or resentment that typically follows when a larger power imposes a single framework on smaller ones. The empirical record from 2014 to 2024 documents this trajectory clearly. Port visit, joint exercise, and professional military exchange data — summarized in the tables below — show a systematic expansion of the Indian Navy's regional footprint that goes well beyond routine diplomacy. Indian naval vessels have made increasingly regular port visits across the region since 2015, building institutional presence and professional relationships at the operational level. Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Singapore host the bulk of this activity, reflecting India's focus on states that either control key maritime chokepoints or bring meaningful naval capacity to collective maritime domain awareness.

⁷⁹ S. Narayanan, "India's Military Diplomatic Engagement with Southeast Asia" (Indian Council of World Affairs, 2022),

Table 2: Frequency of Indian naval port calls, 2023–24

Country Port calls (2023–24)

Singapore 4

Indonesia 4

Vietnam 2

Myanmar 1

Thailand 1

Cambodia 1

Philippines 1

Malaysia 0 shown

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024

This geographic pattern reflects India's underlying strategic logic: concentrating on states that control access to the Indian Ocean's eastern approaches, and turning episodic diplomatic signaling into long-term institutional anchoring. Regularised port calls have converted sporadic interactions into a permanent institutional presence, building India's credibility as a reliable security actor in a way that high-level summits cannot match. Bilateral naval exercises have grown alongside port activity, both in scale and sophistication. What were largely procedural, ceremonial exercises in the 1990s have, since 2014, become operationally intensive and scenario-based, spanning anti-submarine warfare, electronic warfare, cyber-defence simulation, and integrated air-sea coordination. Defence cooperation has moved from a peripheral diplomatic instrument to a core pillar of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Coordinated maritime patrols with Myanmar illustrate the point: they signal India's ambition to project a security footprint along the full length of the Bay of Bengal, even where cooperation was historically limited. The 2014–2024 data

show a clear hierarchy among India's bilateral partnerships. Singapore leads on institutional depth and operational sophistication. Indonesia and Vietnam follow, less intensive in some respects but institutionally deep. Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia show more limited activity, reflecting both capacity constraints and deliberate caution⁸⁰. The overall pattern is one of sustained, deepening engagement, interrupted by occasional disruptions — most notably the fluctuation in bilateral activity that followed Myanmar's 2021 military coup. This layered hierarchy is adaptive bilateralism at work: India calibrates the intensity and mode of cooperation to each partner's political constraints, budget, and strategic preferences. Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines make up the Advanced tier, marked by defence agreements, established high-level dialogue, and substantive defence-industrial cooperation, including technology transfers that create durable interdependence between defence establishments⁸¹. Thailand and Malaysia occupy the Developmental tier: formal agreements and regular exercises, but not the same industrial or strategic integration, largely because of smaller defence budgets, different procurement priorities, or a preference for balanced foreign policy. Brunei, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste sit at the Probing tier, with modest but functionally relevant ties limited by naval capacity or a deliberate preference for non-alignment. Even here, engagement keeps communication channels open and contributes to the wider architecture of regional maritime connectivity⁸². Taken together, these patterns show India operationalizing defence diplomacy as regional strategy. New Delhi has built a reputation as a constructive maritime partner focused on capacity-building rather than transactional leverage,

⁸⁰ Brewster, *India as an Asia Pacific Power*.

⁸¹ The Week. After Philippines, key BrahMos pact inked with Vietnam; Indonesia next

⁸² Baviera and Maramis, *Building ASEAN Community*, 45

consistent with ASEAN's preference for non-coercive, consensus-based cooperation. What most distinguishes India's approach from other major powers in the region is patience: rather than tying partnerships to reciprocal commitments, India invests in accumulating institutional trust over time. That costs more time and diplomatic capital up front, but it produces partnerships resilient enough to survive changes in government or shifts in the regional strategic environment.

Table 3. Bilateral Naval Cooperation between India and Southeast Asian Countries

Country	Defence/Naval Cooperation MoU/Agreement (Signed)	Dialogues & Training, Information Sharing	Exercises, & Patrols	Defence/Naval Industrial Cooperation Arms Transfer	Depth of Cooperation
Brunei	No	Yes	Yes	No	Probing
Cambodia	Yes (2007)	Yes	No	No	Probing
Indonesia	Yes (2001)	Yes	Yes	No	Advanced
Malaysia	Yes (1993, renewed 2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Developmental
Myanmar	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Probing
Philippines	Yes (2006)	Yes	Yes	No	Advanced
Singapore	Yes (2003, renewed 2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Advanced
Thailand	Yes (2012)	Yes	Yes	No	Developmental
Timor-Leste	No	No	Yes	No	Probing
Vietnam	Yes (2007, enhanced 2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Advanced

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024

Table 4. Number of Bilateral Exercises in last ten years and 23-24

Country	Number of Bilateral Exercises (2014-24)	Number of Bilateral Exercises (2023-24)
Singapore	21	2
Indonesia	14	2
Thailand	8	3
Malaysia	9	1
Vietnam	6	1
Philippines	2	1
Myanmar	5	0

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024

C. Bilateral naval cooperation

This section examines the development of India's bilateral naval ties with Southeast Asian countries mainly in the contemporary times. The analysis uses the developmental-advanced typology as set out in Chapter I to determine the level of genuine operational depth achieved by each partnership. The analysis looks at the substantive content of these navy-to-navy relationships, including complexity of exercises, coordinated patrol operations, and port access arrangements. The chapter takes each bilateral relationship in turn, showing the variation in institutional intensity across partnerships: some have developed into highly institutionalised, operationally sophisticated arrangements, while others remain more circumscribed in scope. The section does not conclude with a quantitative accounting of activity but with an examination of the structural drivers and constraining factors influencing the way India's maritime

engagement is embedded within the broader ASEAN-centric security architecture.

Indonesia

The India-Indonesia bilateral naval relationship is classified as Advanced tier within the typological framework employed in this thesis, resting on four converging criteria: sustained high-level political engagement across multiple parallel institutional tracks; a bilateral exercise series of increasing multi-domain complexity; a coordinated patrol regime of nearly five decades' standing; and an advanced-stage defence-industrial negotiation centered on the BrahMos coastal defence system. The primary structural driver of this partnership is geographic. As the world's largest archipelagic state, Indonesia exercises sovereign jurisdiction over the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Ombai-Wetar Straits — chokepoints through which an estimated one-quarter to one-third of global maritime trade transits annually⁸³. Control of these passages makes Indonesia a structurally indispensable partner for India's Act East Policy. A secondary driver is doctrinal complementarity: India's commitment to strategic autonomy and Indonesia's *bebas aktif* foreign policy doctrine permit sophisticated defence cooperation without the political costs of formal alliance commitments, a configuration consistent with strategic hedging theory's account of how middle powers extract security benefits from multiple partners while avoiding entrapment⁸⁴. The logic of adaptive bilateralism is directly operative here — India has calibrated the depth and modality of this partnership to Indonesia's chokepoint geography, its

⁸³ Khalid, "Indian Ocean: Global and Regional Strategies" (2013),

⁸⁴ Gindarsah, I, "Strategic hedging in Indonesia's defense diplomacy." *Defense & Security Analysis*, 32(4), 336–353, 2016.

substantial but selectively applied naval capacity, and its institutional preference for non-exclusive engagement.

Diplomatic relations between the two states were established in March 1951, but the modern defence relationship has a more fragile institutional history than is generally recognised⁸⁵. A Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed in 2001 and ratified by Indonesia under Law No. 21 of 2006, providing the formal legal basis for cooperative activities. That agreement expired in December 2016, leaving an eighteen-month gap during which the formal legal framework for bilateral defence cooperation had lapsed. The 2005 India-Indonesia Strategic Partnership, signed by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and reaffirmed during Singh's 2013 state visit, had elevated the overall bilateral relationship but did not resolve this defence-specific gap⁸⁶. The void was addressed in May 2018, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Widodo signed a new Defence Cooperation Agreement, elevated the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and adopted a Shared Vision of Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific⁸⁷. The 2018 agreement was therefore not merely an upgrade but a renewal — a detail illustrating how even Advanced-tier partnerships can sustain operational momentum through parallel mechanisms during lapses in headline treaty architecture.

Three institutional mechanisms sustained security engagement throughout this period and beyond. A Biennial Defence Ministers' Forum, agreed during President Yudhoyono's visit to India in January 2011, held its first session in October 2012

⁸⁵ Ika Sari, Marina and Hutabarat, Leonard and Octavian, Amarulla, "INDONESIA - INDIA DEFENSE DIPLOMACY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN." *Jurnal Pertahanan*. 4. 77. 2018.

⁸⁶ Ika Sari, Hutabarat, and Octavian, "Indonesia-India Defense Diplomacy,"

⁸⁷ Prime Minister's Office, Government of India. 2018. "Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific." May 30, 2018.

between Defence Minister A.K. Antony and his Indonesian counterpart Purnomo Yusgiantoro, and its second in January 2018, covering bilateral training, defence technology production, and shared assessments of Indian Ocean contestation⁸⁸. A Joint Defence Cooperation Committee at the level of each country's Ministry of Defence Secretary-General convened five times between 2007 and 2017 — with a seventh session in New Delhi in May 2024⁸⁹ — with each session producing a signed Minute of Meeting and incremental progress on counter-terrorism cooperation, peacekeeping coordination, and India's regional naval role⁹⁰. A separate Navy-to-Navy Staff Talks channel, convened biannually, addressed coordinated patrol planning, hydrographic cooperation, training, and information-sharing. A documented session was held in New Delhi on 10 June 2015, with subsequent editions continuing through at least the 13th session in September 2025⁹¹.

The operational core of the partnership is the India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT), established in 2002 in response to concerns that the Andaman Sea corridor could serve as a transit route for Acehese separatist groups — a specific security rationale rather than a generic anti-piracy mandate⁹². Conducted twice annually along the International Maritime Boundary Line near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, approximately 160 kilometers from Aceh province at the northern approach to the Malacca Strait, the CORPAT reached its 44th edition in July, 2025⁹³. The 26th edition, conducted from 3 to

⁸⁸ Embassy of India, Jakarta. n.d. "Defence Minister Visits Indonesia." Press release.

⁸⁹ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Defence, "7th India-Indonesia Joint Defence Cooperation Committee Meeting Held in New Delhi," May 3, 2024

⁹⁰ Ika Sari, Hutabarat, and Octavian, "Indonesia-India Defense Diplomacy,"

⁹¹ Indian Navy (@indiannavy). "13th Indian Navy-Indonesian Navy Staff Talks Concluded at New Delhi." X (formerly Twitter), September 16, 2025.

⁹² Bandonio, Adi, Avando Bastari, and Okol Sri Suharyo, "The Relations Concept of Indonesia-India: Political, Education, and Defense Perspective." 2021.

⁹³ Indian Navy Bolsters Bilateral Ties in Indonesia." *The Hans India*, July 21, 2025.

21 October 2015, marked a significant institutional development: for the first time, a freestanding bilateral exercise — held 17 to 18 October in the Andaman Sea with the Indian patrol vessel INS Saryu — was embedded directly within the CORPAT framework rather than conducted separately⁹⁴. This integration of exercise and patrol functions within a single operational cycle is a characteristic feature of Advanced-tier cooperation, reflecting the degree of procedural familiarity and mutual confidence that sustained contact produces.

Capacity-building deepened further with the inauguration of Exercise Samudra Shakti. The first edition was conducted from 12 to 18 November 2018 in Surabaya, immediately following the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership⁹⁵. Subsequent editions demonstrated increasing multi-domain complexity: the second was held in the Bay of Bengal in November 2019; the third off the Sunda Strait in September 2021, involving the frigate INS Shivalik, the corvette INS Kadmat, and a P-8I maritime patrol aircraft alongside Indonesian corvettes KRI Bung Tomo and KRI Malahayati⁹⁶; and the fourth at Batam in May 2023, with the anti-submarine corvette INS Kavaratti operating against Indonesian navy vessels.⁹⁷ The progression from a single-domain coordination exercise in 2018 to a multi-platform, anti-submarine warfare scenario by 2023 is a direct indicator of the geopolitical signaling function that Advanced-tier exercises serve — demonstrating combined operational capability to a regional audience without formal alliance declaration. The two navies also interact in multilateral formats, including Indonesia's

⁹⁴ Government of India, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, "Inaugural India-Indonesia Bilateral Maritime Exercise," October 2, 2015.

⁹⁵ Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "INS Rana Participates in Inaugural Exercise Samudra Shakti," November 11, 2018.

⁹⁶ Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "Indian Navy and Indonesian Navy Participate in Exercise Samudra Shakti," September 19, 2021.

⁹⁷ Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "Exercise Samudra Shakti-23 Concludes," May 19, 2023.

KOMODO exercise⁹⁸ and Indonesian participation in India's MILAN exercise at Visakhapatnam in February 2024.

The partnership is also underpinned by a substantial economic relationship that reinforces Hypothesis 1 on economic interdependence and sea lane protection. Bilateral trade grew from approximately \$13 billion in 2010 to USD 38.85 billion in FY 2022–23 — making Indonesia India's largest ASEAN trading partner — while officially recorded Indian investment reached USD 1.22 billion across 4,750 projects between 2000 and 2022, with actual investment flows likely considerably higher given significant indirect routing through Singapore⁹⁹. These economic stakes in the security of the Malacca and Sunda Straits generate sustained political incentives for institutionalized naval engagement, consistent with the hypothesis's prediction that partners sharing large economic interests in maritime trade routes will develop more intensive cooperation. On the defence-industrial front, negotiations on a BrahMos coastal defence transfer to Indonesia advanced significantly following visits by Indian Navy Chief Admiral Dinesh Kumar Tripathi in December 2024 and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's attendance as chief guest at India's Republic Day in January 2025, with the reported valuation converging on approximately \$450 million¹⁰⁰. By early 2026, Indonesia's Defence Ministry confirmed an agreement in principle, though final terms remained pending sign-off from the Russian partner in the BrahMos joint venture¹⁰¹. As of the analytical reference point of this thesis — mid-2026 — the relationship stood at an advanced stage of defence-industrial negotiation, comparable to Vietnam's position

⁹⁸ U.S. Navy. "Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo Returns." June 8, 2023.

⁹⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Unclassified Brief: India-Indonesia Bilateral Relations," August 2023,

¹⁰⁰ The Week. After Philippines, key BrahMos pact inked with Vietnam; Indonesia next

¹⁰¹ Jakarta Globe. "Indonesia Confirms Indian BrahMos Missile Deal." March 2026.

at that time and directly behind the Philippines, which had already signed and substantially delivered an equivalent system by 2022–2023¹⁰².

The India-Indonesia partnership, assessed against the typological framework, satisfies all criteria for Advanced-tier classification. It exhibits sustained political engagement across multiple parallel institutional tracks dating to the early 2000s, an operational exercise series of growing multi-domain sophistication, a coordinated patrol regime now in its fifth decade, and a defence-industrial trajectory that — once the BrahMos transfer is concluded — will create the technological interdependencies that most durably anchor Advanced-tier status. Indonesia's co-guardianship of the region's most critical maritime chokepoints alongside Singapore gives this partnership the structural weight that explains its tier placement. The eighteen-month gap in formal treaty architecture between 2016 and 2018 also yields a methodologically important observation: institutional depth in Advanced-tier relationships cannot be read from the continuous existence of a single headline agreement alone. It resides in the parallel forums, operational mechanisms, and professional networks that sustain cooperation even when formal frameworks lapse — a finding directly relevant to the broader argument of adaptive bilateralism as a practice of sustained, differentiated engagement rather than treaty-dependent alignment.

Philippines

Within the typological framework used in this thesis, the India-Philippines bilateral naval relationship is categorized as Advanced. This reclassification is primarily owing to the

¹⁰² The Week. After Philippines, key BrahMos pact inked with Vietnam; Indonesia next

conclusion and massive delivery of the BrahMos coastal defence missile system between 2022 and 2025. This puts the Philippines in the same league as Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam as a partner with the depth of technology transfer, the institutional breadth, and the political commitment that are characteristic of India's most important Southeast Asian defence relationships. The main structural driver for this partnership is the perception of threat. The Philippines shares with Vietnam the condition of direct territorial exposure to Chinese maritime coercion, making it a mirror case of threat-driven partnership deepening, unlike Singapore and Indonesia, whose Advanced status is chiefly derived from chokepoint geography. This dynamic is consistent with Hypothesis 3 of this thesis, that strategic hedging against Chinese maritime assertiveness is a driver of the pace and depth of India's bilateral defence engagements. The underfunded navy and modest defence budget are structural constraints that the Philippines undeniably faces. These constraints no longer limit the tier of the relationship, they only constrain its pace of further deepening. This distinction is central to the logic of adaptive bilateralism that organizes this thesis.

The main impetus behind the strategic urgency of this partnership was the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, where Chinese vessels prevented Filipino fishing boats from a traditionally shared fishing ground. The standoff ended with China maintaining de facto control of the feature after both sides withdrew under a United States-brokered arrangement that China later did not honour¹⁰³. This episode exposed the Philippines' acute vulnerability to coercive pressure from a great power and created an urgent strategic imperative to diversify Manila's security partnerships beyond the treaty alliance with the United States, a strategic environment directly conducive to

¹⁰³ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), CSIS, "Counter-Coercion Series: Scarborough Shoal Standoff," May 21, 2017,

India's Act East Policy outreach to the ASEAN states facing similar pressure¹⁰⁴

In the early 2000s, defence cooperation between these two states was the foundation of the bilateral relationship¹⁰⁵. The first Security Dialogue was established in 2004, later renamed Strategic Dialogue, and an MoU on Defence and Security Cooperation was signed in 2006, which provided the legal basis that was later codified in the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, constituted in 2012¹⁰⁶. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Manila in November 2017, the first visit by an Indian prime minister in thirty-six years, revitalized the relationship when the two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Industry and Logistics Cooperation on 3 November 2017¹⁰⁷. In January 2018, President Rodrigo Duterte reciprocated with a visit to New Delhi, where further security cooperation measures were agreed¹⁰⁸. Based on this, the Philippines and India had a Joint Committee Meeting on Defence Industry and Logistics Cooperation, the first session of which was held in Mumbai and New Delhi in June 2018¹⁰⁹. In September 2024, the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee was upgraded from joint secretary level to secretary level, reflecting growing institutional priority¹¹⁰. Most notably, the relationship was formally upgraded to a Strategic Partnership during President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Palma, Lisa. 2026. "Slow but Steady: The Evolving Philippines-India Strategic Partnership." ISEAS Perspective 2026/46.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Embassy of the Philippines, New Delhi. 2018. "Phil-India Relations."

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ South Asian Voices. 2025. "The Intensification of India-Philippines Defense Engagement." April 15, 2025.

state visit to New Delhi, August 4 to 8, 2025, which was also marked by the signing of thirteen bilateral agreements and a comprehensive Plan of Action for 2025 to 2029¹¹¹. This elevation made India only the fifth country with which the Philippines has a Strategic Partnership, along with the United States, Japan, Australia, and South Korea¹¹², a status that institutionalized the bilateral relationship at the same level as India's other Advanced-tier Southeast Asian partnerships.

Operational cooperation lagged behind the institutional architecture around it but picked up considerably after 2023. In August 2023, an MoU was signed between the two coast guards to improve maritime cooperation, followed by a standard operating procedure for the exchange of white shipping information¹¹³. India and the Philippines had earlier conducted an inaugural bilateral passing exercise (PASSEX) on 23 August 2021 in the South China Sea, involving the guided-missile destroyer INS Ranvijay and the corvette INS Kora alongside the frigate BRP Antonio Luna — held five days after a comparable PASSEX with Vietnam¹¹⁴. The first full bilateral naval exercise beyond a passing exercise, termed a Maritime Cooperative Activity, was held in the South China Sea in 2025. The exercise was called by the Armed Forces of the Philippines a comprehensive series of high-level naval operations for strengthening tactical coordination and joint maritime capability¹¹⁵. Earlier operational signals included Indian

¹¹¹ The Diplomat. 2025a. "Philippines and India Announce Establishment of Strategic Partnership." August 6, 2025.

¹¹² Philippine News Agency. "Modi: PH, India 'Partners by Destiny'; Defense Ties Natural, Necessary.", 2025.

¹¹³ South Asian Voices. "The Intensification of India-Philippines Defense Engagement.", 2025.

¹¹⁴ *South China Morning Post*. 2025. "Malaysia-China Trade Hits Record US\$212 Billion." February 1, 2025.

¹¹⁵ The Diplomat. "Philippines and India Announce Establishment of Strategic Partnership.", 2025.

participation in a 2019 quadrilateral "group sail" through the South China Sea alongside the navies of the Philippines, the United States, and Japan¹¹⁶, and India's first-ever joint military exercise with ASEAN as a bloc in 2023, in which the Philippines also participated¹¹⁷.

The most consequential dimension of this relationship, and the principal basis for its Advanced-tier classification, is capacity-building and defence-industrial cooperation. In January 2022, India and the Philippines signed a \$375 million contract for three shore-based BrahMos anti-ship missile batteries, which was India's first ever export of the BrahMos system and the largest single defence export deal at the time¹¹⁸. The package consisted of mobile launchers, command and control vehicles, surveillance radar, missile inventories and a full training and sustainment infrastructure, all tailored to the tropical operating environment of the Philippines with two launchers per battery instead of the standard three¹¹⁹. The first battery was delivered through Indian Air Force strategic airlift in April 2024 and the second through sea in April 2025, with the Philippine Marine Corps' Shore-Based Anti-Ship Missile Battalion having undergone intensive training with Indian Navy and BrahMos Aerospace supervision¹²⁰. By late 2025, Manila was discussing the potential to expand the order by as many as nine more batteries under the Integrated Shore-Based Anti-Ship Missile System Acquisition Project, and India had also offered the Extended-Range BrahMos variant, which has a strike radius exceeding 400 kilometers compared to the original

¹¹⁶ Heritage Foundation. "India and the Philippines: A New Chapter in Defense Ties?" January 9, 2020.

¹¹⁷South Asian Voices. "The Intensification of India-Philippines Defense Engagement.", 2025.

¹¹⁸ National Interest. "The Philippines Wants More BrahMos Missile Systems from India." November 11, 2025.

¹¹⁹ South Asian Voices. "The Intensification of India-Philippines Defense Engagement.", 2025.

¹²⁰ National Interest. "The Philippines Wants More BrahMos Missile Systems from India.", 2025

export variant's 290 kilometers¹²¹. Building on the BrahMos foundation, in 2025, the Philippine Coast Guard started exploring India's Next-Generation Offshore Patrol Vessel design, with conversations on local manufacturing and maintenance facilities in the Philippines, a model that would extend technological interdependence well beyond the missile transaction alone¹²². Both sides agreed to expand military training and education exchanges, including access to India's professional military education institutions¹²³, in the 4th JCBC¹²⁴. Under this framework, Filipino officers have been through programmes at India's Naval War College, Goa and National Defence College, New Delhi.

This bilateral foundation has been embedded in wider multilateral frameworks and reinforced by explicit Indian support for the Philippines' legal position in the South China Sea. In a show of support to Manila, India publicly backed the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision that invalidated China's sweeping maritime claims, a stance that Manila has long maintained but Beijing has ignored¹²⁵. At the time of the Marcos visit in August 2025, Modi reiterated defence cooperation as "a symbol of deep mutual trust" with maritime cooperation between the two states as "both natural and necessary"¹²⁶, language consistent with this thesis' treatment of geopolitical signaling as a distinct instrument of India's defence diplomacy, employed here to indicate solidarity without formal alliance commitment. India has also indicated willingness to pursue co-

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Indian Defence Research Wing. 2025. "Philippines Eyes Local Manufacturing of India's Next-Generation Offshore Patrol Vessel (NGOPV) for Coast Guard." August 17, 2025.

¹²³ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "4th India-Philippines Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation," November 6, 2020.

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Philippine News Agency. "Modi: PH, India 'Partners by Destiny'; Defense Ties Natural, Necessary.", 2025.

¹²⁶ Ibid

development and co-production of defence equipment with the Philippines, and Indian firms have pitched the Tejas Mk-1A light combat aircraft as part of Manila's tender for forty combat aircraft¹²⁷.

Notwithstanding this acceleration, the relationship continues to operate under genuine structural constraints. The Philippines has a defence budget of some 1.3 percent of gross domestic product¹²⁸, one of the lowest in Southeast Asia, and bilateral trade between the two countries remains relatively modest compared to India's other regional partnerships, reaching approximately USD 3.3 billion in 2024–25¹²⁹. Analysts have also raised technical concerns about the deterrent value of the BrahMos system vis-à-vis China, including sensor deficiencies, over-the-horizon radar coverage gaps, and challenges in integrating the missile battery with broader intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance architecture¹³⁰. These constraints raise a question the tier classification does not fully resolve: a single transaction, however large, is a thinner foundation for Advanced-tier status than the multi-decade institutional accumulation underpinning Singapore's or Indonesia's classification, and it remains an open question whether this relationship would hold at Advanced tier if the BrahMos follow-on order stalled, or would revert toward the Developmental profile that Manila's budget and trade figures would otherwise predict.

The India-Philippines naval relationship, assessed using the typological framework developed in this thesis, meets the criteria for Advanced-tier categorization on paper: it is now a

¹²⁷ South Asian Voices. "The Intensification of India-Philippines Defense Engagement.", 2025.

¹²⁸ World Bank / SIPRI. "Military Expenditure (% of GDP) — Philippines." World Bank Open Data, 2024.

¹²⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Philippines. 2025. "Declaration on the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Republic of the Philippines and the Republic of India." August 9, 2025.

¹³⁰ Ben Ho, "Can the Philippines' BrahMos Missiles Really Deter China?" The Diplomat, January 27, 2022.

formal Strategic Partner, on par with those India has with the United States, Japan, Australia and South Korea, and a defence-industrial relationship marked by the first major BrahMos export. But the case is better read as a threshold one than a settled one. Where Singapore and Indonesia illustrate how geography alone can sustain Advanced-tier cooperation absent acute threat perception, and Vietnam illustrates threat-driven deepening backed by comparatively greater fiscal and institutional capacity, the Philippines shows that threat perception can move a partner to Advanced-tier status even where underlying military and economic capacity remains constrained — and, by the same logic, that such a move could in principle be undone if threat perception eased or the transaction underwriting it failed to mature into a broader relationship. Whether adaptive bilateralism's capacity to shift a partner decisively on the strength of one well-targeted transfer is a strength of the framework or a vulnerability of it is a question this case cannot settle on its own.

Read against this thesis's three hypotheses, the Philippines case is the primary test of Hypothesis 3 (strategic hedging against Chinese assertiveness) under conditions of structural constraint. If the classification holds, it demonstrates that threat perception alone can drive a partner to Advanced-tier status even when fiscal capacity and geographic distance from India would predict a lower tier — though, as noted above, that conclusion rests more heavily on a single data point than the thesis's other Advanced-tier cases. Hypothesis 2 (capability development) is directly confirmed by the BrahMos integrated training package, while Hypothesis 1 (economic interdependence) has minimal explanatory weight: the bilateral trade relationship is modest relative to India's other Advanced-tier partners, indicating that economic linkages are

neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for Advanced-tier status.

Singapore

The India-Singapore bilateral naval relationship is India's most institutionally mature and operationally sophisticated defence relationship in Southeast Asia, with a level of strategic integration, high-end technology transfer and warfighting interoperability that is unparalleled in the region. It is the paradigm case of an Advanced-tier defence relationship within the typological framework employed in this chapter, the outcome of over three decades of sustained political will and systematic institution building. The key structural driver is complementarity: Singapore's existential need for secure sea lanes as a maritime city-state dovetails with India's strategic interest in establishing its presence at the eastern gateway of the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor. This relationship is one of the best examples of adaptive bilateralism, with India calibrating an extraordinarily dense multi-track institutional architecture to match Singapore's sophisticated naval capacity as well as its own strategic portfolio diversification.

The naval cooperation between the two states began in 1993 when Singapore was the first ASEAN country to carry out joint exercises with India, and a 1994 Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation cemented this relationship by providing the Republic of Singapore Navy with access to Indian submarines and anti-submarine warfare training¹³¹. This basic arrangement was substantially upgraded in October 2003 with the signing of a comprehensive Defence Cooperation Agreement between the two countries which established an overall framework for tri-

¹³¹ Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), NUS, "Rajnath Singh's Visit to Singapore: Cementing Bilateral Defence Relations," November 27, 2019.

service cooperation, defence policy dialogues, intelligence sharing and joint exercises¹³². The DCA was revised in November 2015 to institutionalize an annual Defence Ministers' Dialogue and deepen cooperation in maritime security and defence-industrial technical exchange¹³³. Further agreements built on this architecture: an Air Force Bilateral Agreement was renewed in January 2017 and the two navies signed their first-ever Navy Bilateral Agreement in November 2017¹³⁴. During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Singapore on 1 June 2018, the two countries signed the Implementing Arrangement Concerning Mutual Coordination, Logistics and Services Support Agreement covering ship-borne helicopters, aircraft, warships, and submarines to extend the reach of the Indian Navy to the northern South China Sea¹³⁵. During Modi's visit to Singapore in September 2024, India-Singapore relations were elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The partnership's Roadmap was adopted during Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen's visit to India in October 2024 for the sixth round of the Defence Ministers' Dialogue, during which the bilateral Joint Military Training agreement was extended for a further five years¹³⁶. Operational cooperation is focused on the Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX), which has been held annually since 1994 and is the longest running bilateral naval exercise in India's portfolio¹³⁷. SIMBEX began as a small anti-submarine warfare exercise called Exercise Lion King, and has evolved into a complex, multi-domain exercise that includes surface warfare,

¹³² S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), "CO05013: Deepening Singapore-India Strategic Ties," 2005.

¹³³ ISAS, "Rajnath Singh's Visit to Singapore."

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ PIB, "INS Rana Participates in Inaugural Exercise Samudra Shakti."

¹³⁶ High Commission of India in Singapore. 2026. "Welcome to High Commission of India in Singapore."

¹³⁷ High Commission of India, Singapore, "SIMBEX-19 Press Release." 2019.

integrated air defence and maritime interdiction operations¹³⁸. The 31st edition was held from 23 to 29 October 2024 in Visakhapatnam and in the Bay of Bengal, with participation of INS Shivalik of the Indian Navy, a P-8I maritime patrol aircraft and RSS Tenacious of Singapore¹³⁹. In the thirty-second edition, held from 28 July to 1 August 2025, in Singapore and the southern South China Sea, a much larger Indian task group, including the guided-missile destroyer INS Delhi, the stealth frigate INS Satpura, the anti-submarine corvette INS Kiltan, and the fleet tanker INS Shakti, faced Singapore's stealth frigate RSS Stalwart¹⁴⁰. The edition coincided with the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Singapore, and was characterized by high-intensity air defence drills, anti-submarine warfare maneuvers, and coordinated naval gunfire exercises¹⁴¹. The transition from a one-domain training event in 1994 to a four-ship, multi-platform task group operation in contested waters of the South China Sea by 2025 is an obvious empirical indicator of the warfighting-level interoperability separating Advanced-tier partnerships in this thesis's typology. Capacity-building in this partnership reaches far beyond logistics and professional military education. The 2018 Mutual Coordination, Logistics and Services Support Agreement formalises reciprocal Indian and Singaporean naval access to each other's port facilities and support infrastructure, the kind of logistics integration that produces genuine operational interdependence consistent with this thesis' definition of Advanced-tier status. Also, Singapore has leased access to Indian training facilities for its armed forces from 1991, most recently renewed in 2017 for another five years, allowing the Republic of

¹³⁸ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) 2024," October 2024.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "INS Satpura Arrives in Singapore for SIMBEX-25," July 30, 2025,

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Singapore Air Force to train at the Kalaikunda airbase and Singaporean ground forces to use Indian ranges at Babina and Deolali¹⁴². The Defence Research and Development Organisation of India and the Defence Science and Technology Agency of Singapore carried out defence cooperation through a Defence Technology Steering Committee established in October 2006 and on 20 January 2021, the two militaries signed a submarine rescue support and cooperation agreement¹⁴³. Singaporean officers participate in courses at India's Naval War College and National Defence College, and Indian officers are similarly embedded at Singapore's Goh Keng Swee Command and Staff College¹⁴⁴. This exchange architecture creates the lasting professional networks that this thesis identifies as a signature characteristic of India's most resilient bilateral partnerships.

Defence-industrial cooperation is a relatively underdeveloped dimension of the relationship by comparison with its institutional and operational depth, qualifying the otherwise straightforward case for Advanced-tier status. The relationship's Advanced-tier status is predicated more on its institutional density, logistics integration, and operational sophistication than transfer of high-end hardware – a useful correction to any assumption within this thesis' typology that defence-industrial cooperation is a necessary, rather than sufficient, condition for Advanced-tier status.

The India-Singapore partnership has regional as well as bilateral implications. Singapore's institutional position in ASEAN means that its defence relationship with India is a quiet regional endorsement of New Delhi as a constructive security partner committed to ASEAN centrality. Both countries have shown a consistent capacity to engage the United States and China

¹⁴² CESCUBE, "India Singapore Defence Cooperation," April 21, 2021.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

simultaneously while preserving the independent strategic space that defines their bilateral relationship, evidence consistent with this thesis's Hypothesis 1 regarding economic interdependence and sea lane protection as a driver of cooperation depth: Singapore's position at the southern approach to the Malacca Strait gives both states a direct and convergent stake in the security of India's most economically vital sea lane.

Seen through the typological lens of this chapter, the India-Singapore naval relationship satisfies the conditions for designation as Advanced-tier: a high level of political commitment over more than three decades, an annually conducted bilateral exercise of established multi-domain complexity, and a logistics regime that fosters genuine operational interdependence. Its resilience through multiple changes of government in both countries, and through significant shifts in the regional strategic environment, is a testament to institutional depth rather than to any single high-profile defence-industrial transaction. It is still the clearest reference case of adaptive bilateralism at full intensity in Southeast Asia, and the main frontier for further development of the partnership is to close the comparative gap in defence-industrial cooperation that distinguishes it from India's Philippines, Vietnam, and prospective Indonesia relationships.

The relationship's Advanced-tier status is best explained by capability development and technological complementarity rather than by shared threat perception of China — Singapore's economic stake in Malacca security is nonetheless real: bilateral trade stood at approximately USD 34.3 billion in FY 2024–25, making Singapore India's largest trading partner within

ASEAN¹⁴⁵— but it is the operational content of SIMBEX, not trade volumes, that accounts for the relationship's depth.

Vietnam

The India-Vietnam naval relationship is one of the most strategically significant bilateral security partnerships in contemporary Southeast Asia, based on a convergence of threat perceptions focused on China's maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea. This convergence has turned a modest Cold War era relationship into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, established in September 2016, with sophisticated defence technology transfer, extensive operational coordination and durable institutional architecture¹⁴⁶. Within the typological framework employed in this thesis, the relationship is characterized as an Advanced tier, a classification most concretely anchored by the conclusion of a BrahMos supersonic cruise missile agreement, as well as persistent institutional density and increasing operational cooperation. Threat perception is the main structural driver, making Vietnam comparable to the Philippines as the case where direct territorial exposure to Chinese coercion – rather than chokepoint geography in itself – has driven partnership deepening, directly testing Hypothesis 3 of the thesis on strategic hedging against Chinese maritime assertiveness. It also demonstrates adaptive bilateralism: India has adapted an intensifying, technology-oriented partnership to meet Vietnam's acute threat environment and its own historical non-alignment posture, which both governments share and which allows deep security cooperation without formal alliance commitment.

¹⁴⁵ High Commission of India in Singapore. 2025. "India-Singapore Bilateral Trade & Investment."

¹⁴⁶ Reuters, "India Says Signed BrahMos Missile Deal with Vietnam," May 30, 2026.

The institutional architecture supporting this relationship has been in development since the early 2000s. A Defence Policy Dialogue was created in 2014 and continues to be the primary venue for sensitive issues like technology transfer and operational coordination. In parallel, annual Strategic Dialogues between national security advisors link naval cooperation with overarching foreign policy goals¹⁴⁷. The official elevation of the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in September 2016 was an acknowledgment that neither country could on its own protect its maritime interests from a more assertive China¹⁴⁸. Joint committees on maritime security, defence technology and counter-terrorism sustain working-level cooperation, facilitated by professional military education exchanges¹⁴⁹.

Capacity-building has been the most recent and most visible development in this relationship and the dimension that most readily justifies the relationship's Advanced-tier classification. India and Vietnam signed a BrahMos cruise missile deal. Indian Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh announced the deal at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on 30 May 2026, but several sources have reported that the contract was signed earlier and had not been made public¹⁵⁰. Reuters valued the deal at approximately ₹60 billion (\$629 million), and sources told Reuters that the contract may have been signed during a state visit to India by Vietnamese President To Lam in early May 2026, and includes training and logistics support. Defence analysts

¹⁴⁷ Solanki, V, "India-Vietnam defense and security cooperation." *Contemporary South Asia*, 29(2), 138-155, 2021.

¹⁴⁸ Embassy of India, Hanoi. 2023. "India-Viet Nam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership." September 2023.

¹⁴⁹ Aswani, Rs and Sajith, Shambhu and Bhat, Mohammad, "Realigning India's Vietnam Policy Through Cooperative Sustainable Development: a Geostrategic Counterbalancing to China in Indo-Pacific." 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Reuters, "India Says Signed BrahMos Missile Deal with Vietnam," May 30, 2026.

estimate that Vietnam has ordered about six coastal defence batteries at this contract value¹⁵¹. Vietnam is the third Southeast Asian country to buy the BrahMos system after Philippines which got its first delivery in 2024 and Indonesia which signed a separate deal in March 2026. The transfer is significant not only for the hardware but also because it gives Vietnam a credible anti-ship strike capability against Chinese-occupied features in the Spratly Islands, where Vietnam has a historically rooted threat perception going back to a 1979 border war with China and the 1988 Johnson South Reef confrontation in which 64 largely unarmed Vietnamese soldiers were killed by the People's Liberation Army Navy¹⁵². Hardware transfer in this relationship predates the BrahMos deal: in June 2023, during a visit to India by Vietnamese Defence Minister General Phan Van Giang, India announced the gift of the decommissioned corvette INS Kirpan to the Vietnam People's Navy, with the vessel formally handed over at Cam Ranh in July 2023, marking the first time India has gifted an in-service warship to another country¹⁵³.

Operational cooperation between the two militaries has largely taken place through the VINBAX exercise series, a bilateral army exercise focused on UN peacekeeping interoperability rather than maritime warfighting. The fourth edition, VINBAX-2023, was conducted at Hanoi from 11 to 21 December 2023¹⁵⁴. The fifth edition, VINBAX-2024 was conducted at Ambala and Chandimandir, India from 4 to 23 November 2024 and for the first time, air force personnel and army personnel of both the

¹⁵¹ The Diplomat. 2026. "India Has Signed BrahMos Missile Deal With Vietnam, Indian Minister Says." June 2026.

¹⁵² Carlyle A. Thayer, "Arming Vietnam: Widened International-Security Relations in Support of Military-Capability Development" (London: IISS), 2023.

¹⁵³ Press Information Bureau, Government of India. 2023. "Visit of Admiral R Hari Kumar, Chief of the Naval Staff, to Vietnam." July 21, 2023.

¹⁵⁴ PIB, "Exercise Samudra Shakti-23 Concludes."

countries participated¹⁵⁵. The exercise trained Indian and Vietnamese contingents of about forty-seven personnel each in engineering tasks, casualty handling and disaster management procedures relevant to United Nations Chapter VII peacekeeping deployments. The exercise culminated in a forty-eight hour validation exercise featuring a Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief demonstration called Exercise Raahat¹⁵⁶. At the closing ceremony, Lieutenant General Rajesh Pushkar emphasised the larger context of the exercise as the upgradation of bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership¹⁵⁷. This army-to-army training architecture works alongside, rather than in place of, naval coordination; the IND-VIE CORPAT framework conducts coordinated patrols originally designed for counter-piracy operations that have since expanded to cover counter-terrorism and illegal fishing concerns.

The defence-industrial depth of the partnership is enhanced by Vietnam's cooperation with India's Information Fusion Centre—Indian Ocean Region, which provides real-time maritime domain awareness through connected operations centres for search and rescue, threat assessment, and situational awareness¹⁵⁸.

Economic interdependence provides a secondary structural base for the relationship: bilateral trade crossed USD 16 billion in 2025–2026¹⁵⁹, smaller than India's Advanced-tier trade relationships with Singapore and Indonesia. Indian investment in Vietnamese oil and gas exploration blocks in disputed waters of the South China Sea generating functional economic

¹⁵⁵ PIB, "SIMBEX 2024."

¹⁵⁶ Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "Vietnam-India Bilateral Army Exercise VINBAX 2024 Commences at Ambala." 2024.

¹⁵⁷ Vietnam Government Portal, "Viet Nam, India Hold Military Exercise VINBAX 2024." November, 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, "Joint Statement on Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam." May 6, 2026, 2026.

¹⁵⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Briefs on India–Vietnam Relations," 2026.

interdependence, which reinforces the security relationship and helps to rationalize continued naval cooperation¹⁶⁰. This economic dimension provides some support to Hypothesis 1 of this thesis on economic interdependence as a driver of depth of cooperation, but the BrahMos transaction and shared threat perception are the main explanatory factors in this case. Yet the relationship is limited by structural factors despite such institutional and technological depth. The geographical distance between India and Vietnam complicates the coordination with India's partnerships with maritime Southeast Asia, raising logistical complexity and costs. Both states must be prudent in their respective relations with China, balancing credible deterrence and escalatory risk¹⁶¹. Export control regimes associated with the BrahMos system, given its joint Indo-Russian development, require ongoing diplomatic management and budgetary constraints have forced prioritization of high-impact capabilities such as the BrahMos transfer over general modernisation across all domains. The India-Vietnam relationship fits the criteria for the Advanced tier in terms of the typological framework for this thesis, given its 2026 BrahMos agreement, sustained multi-track institutional architecture from 2014, and an operational exercise programme that is currently weighted toward army-level peacekeeping cooperation rather than naval warfighting, but is the kind of multi-domain, multi-service engagement that fits the Advanced tier criteria for this thesis. The case of Vietnam usefully contributes to clarifying the broader argument of adaptive bilateralism. Along with the Philippines, it demonstrates that an increased sense of threat stemming from direct territorial

¹⁶⁰ Ha, Do, and Tran Tien. "Vietnam-India Oil and Gas Cooperation: From 'Strategic Partnership' to 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'." *International Journal of Religion* 5: 212–225. 2024.

¹⁶¹ Putra, Bama Andika, "Tread with caution: Vietnam's retaliatory and deference measures vis-à-vis assertiveness at sea." *Asian Journal of Political Science*. 32. 1-20. 2024.

confrontation with China can propel a partnership into the Advanced tier, even where, as in the case of Vietnam, the most visible operational exercise series to date has been land-based rather than maritime. This underscores that the tier classifications in this thesis are based on the totality of institutional, operational, and defence-industrial evidence, rather than on the complexity of naval exercises alone.

Malaysia

The India-Malaysia bilateral naval relationship is better classified as the Developmental tier of the typological framework used in this thesis, marked by cautious institutional progress and conscious selectivity in scope not by lack of political will. This classification is reflective of the structural constraints of Malaysia's position as a South China Sea claimant state, with its foreign policy tradition based on strategic autonomy through portfolio diversification¹⁶². With the country lying across the Malacca Strait, Malaysia is India's natural priority for the Act East Policy, but the economic interdependence with China complicates the pace of defence engagement. The relationship thus represents a case of adaptive bilateralism under partner-side constraint: India has calibrated a restrained, capacity-building-oriented partnership that acknowledges Malaysia's need to avoid the perception of strategic alignment against Beijing. This is consistent with Hypothesis 3 of this thesis which suggests the constraints that economic dependence on China can impose on the depth of hedging behaviour, even when there is territorial exposure.

¹⁶² ETV Bharat. 2026. "India-Malaysia Defence Cooperation Steps Up As Modi Heads To Kuala Lumpur." February 6, 2026.

The relationship's institutional underpinning can be traced to 1993 when Malaysia became the first ASEAN state to sign a bilateral defence cooperation memorandum with India, initially on pragmatic grounds after Malaysia acquired MiG-29 fighters and then subsequently required Indian training and maintenance support¹⁶³. This functional, equipment-driven genesis distinguishes the institutional genesis of Malaysia from the more geopolitically motivated agreements that India would sign later with Vietnam and the Philippines. The 1990s saw the creation of the Malaysia-India Defence Cooperation Committee, which has convened periodically, with its ninth session taking place in Kuala Lumpur in January 2012 and its latest meetings spanning the 2020s¹⁶⁴. The relationship was given a new lease of life with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh signing an amendment to the original MoU during a visit to Kuala Lumpur in July 2023, which also saw the inauguration of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited's first regional office in Malaysia¹⁶⁵. The relationship was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in August 2024, and during Prime Minister Modi's February 2026 trip to Kuala Lumpur, the two sides agreed to terms of reference for a new Strategic Affairs Working Group and a dedicated Su-30 Forum to coordinate maintenance expertise on the Sukhoi fighters both air forces operate¹⁶⁶.

In this relationship, operational and capacity-building cooperation is focused on platform-specific technical support rather than the warfighting-oriented exercise architecture seen

¹⁶³ Chandran, Suseela, "Malaysia-India Defence Cooperation: Need for a Paradigm Shift before Strategic Partnership." *Strategic Analysis*. 38. 79-90. 2014.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

¹⁶⁵ Government of India, Press Information Bureau. 2023. "Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh Inaugurates HAL's Regional Office in Kuala Lumpur." July 11, 2023.

¹⁶⁶ Government of India, Prime Minister's Office. 2026. "India-Malaysia Joint Statement on the Occasion of the Official Visit by PM of India to Malaysia." February 8, 2026.

in India's Advanced-tier partnerships. India has domestically produced over two hundred Sukhoi Su-30 aircraft, giving it a significant maintenance and training capacity that it has offered to Malaysia's smaller fleet of Su-30MKMs, with over one hundred Malaysian technical personnel trained at Hindustan Aeronautics Limited facilities in India¹⁶⁷. Naval cooperation takes a similar approach, centered on submarine sustainment: Malaysia runs a fleet of Scorpène-class submarines, six of which India has constructed domestically at Mazagon Dock Shipyard, and cooperation on their maintenance, repair, and overhaul has evolved on the basis of cost efficiency and technical familiarity rather than as a conduit for high-end technology transfer¹⁶⁸. During his 2026 visit, the Modi government said it was pursuing the sale of Dornier maritime patrol aircraft to Malaysia and exploring further collaboration on Scorpène mid-life upgrades and retrofitting, indicating a possible deepening of naval-specific cooperation beyond the historical air force focus¹⁶⁹. Besides the army-centric Exercise Harimau Shakti, the two navies conduct Exercise Samudra Laksamana, which reached its third edition off Visakhapatnam from 28 February to 2 March 2024, involving INS Kiltan and the Royal Malaysian Navy ship KD Lekir¹⁷⁰ and the air force-centric Udara Shakti exercises¹⁷¹, while broader maritime security cooperation in the Malacca Strait has been institutionalised through the 2022 Malacca Strait Patrol arrangement with India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

¹⁶⁷ *The Hindu Business Line*. 2025. "India, Malaysia Finalise Terms of Reference for Maintenance of Sukhois Both Operate." February 19, 2025.

¹⁶⁸ South Asian Voices. 2026. "India and Malaysia Should Expand Defense Cooperation." March 10, 2026.

¹⁶⁹ Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, "India–Malaysia Joint Statement on the Occasion of the Official Visit by PM of India to Malaysia." February 8, 2026.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

The bilateral exercise portfolio has deepened incrementally across both army and navy domains, though at differing speeds. Exercise Harimau Shakti, a jungle-warfare focused army exercise, began in 2012 and has been held annually thereafter, alternating between Indian and Malaysian territory; its fifth edition took place at the Mahajan Field Firing Range, Rajasthan, in December 2025, featuring joint counter-insurgency drills, helicopter slithering, and command-post exercises. On the naval side, Exercise Samudra Laksamana has progressed more slowly: its first edition was held in 2019 near the Malaysian port of Kota Kinabalu in the South China Sea, its second in 2022 in the same area, and its third from 28 February to 2 March 2024 off Visakhapatnam on India's eastern seaboard, involving the anti-submarine corvette INS Kiltan and the Royal Malaysian Navy's KD Lekir. The shift of the exercise's venue from Malaysian to Indian waters by the third edition, and the roughly two-to-three-year interval between iterations—compared to Indonesia's near-annual Samudra Shakti cadence or Singapore's uninterrupted annual SIMBEX series—illustrates the comparatively low naval operational tempo characteristic of Developmental-tier partnerships, even where the army-to-army exercise relationship, through Harimau Shakti, has achieved a more consistent annual rhythm.¹⁷²¹⁷³

But even this expanding institutional framework does not change the structural limits of defence-industrial cooperation with Malaysia compared to India's BrahMos-based relationships with the Philippines and Vietnam. Former Indian diplomat Amit Dasgupta has characterized India's engagement with Malaysia as deliberately non-coercive, noting that Malaysia's interest in

¹⁷² Rajaram Panda, "India's Expanding Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific," RSIS Commentary IP25013 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2025); Indian Navy, "India-Malaysia Bilateral Maritime Exercise Samudra Laksamana," March 2024.

¹⁷³ "Exercise Harimau Shakti Strengthens Defence Cooperation Between India, Malaysia," The Tribune, December 13, 2025.

defence cooperation with India is voluntary, not coercive, in keeping with Kuala Lumpur's declared policy of diversifying its defence procurement away from any single supplier under its National Defence Industry Policy, launched in January 2026¹⁷⁴. This diversification policy, and Malaysia's pursuit of parallel defence frameworks with other partners, including a separate ten-year defence framework agreement signed between the United States and India at the same October 2025 ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus in Kuala Lumpur, reflects the multipolar nature of Malaysia's security engagement strategy and the structural ceiling it places on bilateral intensity with any one partner.

Economic considerations buttress this structural ceiling. India is the ten largest trading partner of Malaysia and Malaysia has been the largest trading partner of India in Southeast Asia¹⁷⁵. The trade between India and Malaysia is around \$20 billion as of 2024¹⁷⁶. Malaysia's economic relationship with China is much bigger and structurally deeper, with large investments under the Belt and Road Initiative, meaning that Kuala Lumpur has to counter each step-up of defence engagement with India with the need to maintain commercial ties with Beijing¹⁷⁷. Malaysia's defence budget, estimated at about \$4.93 billion for 2025, continues to be modest given its extent of territorial exposure in the South China Sea, and is skewed toward the modernisation of its air and land forces, constraining the fiscal space for large-

¹⁷⁴ ETV Bharat. "India-Malaysia Defence Cooperation Steps Up As Modi Heads To Kuala Lumpur.", 2026.

¹⁷⁵ Washington Times. 2024. "India, Malaysia Expanding Ties, Defense Cooperation as Kuala Lumpur Tries to Move Closer to Beijing." August 20, 2024.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

¹⁷⁷ *South China Morning Post*. 2025. "Malaysia-China Trade Hits Record US\$212 Billion."

scale maritime hardware programmes that would foster greater technological integration with India¹⁷⁸.

The India-Malaysia naval relationship, judged against the typological framework developed in this thesis, meets the criteria for Developmental-tier classification. It has moved well beyond early confidence-building to systematic capacity-building in air, land and naval domains, an institutionalized strategic dialogue architecture leading to the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and material defence assistance through HAL maintenance support and Mazagon Dock submarine cooperation. What it has yet to deliver is the BrahMos-scale technology transfer and warfighting-level exercise complexity that underpins India's Advanced-tier partnerships with Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. This shortfall is a product of Malaysia's structural balancing requirements, not any lack of mutual political will. That Malaysia case is particularly instructive in the context of the broader comparative argument of the thesis: in the cases of the Philippines and Vietnam, acute Chinese territorial pressure was a catalyst for the deepening of the partnership, but in Malaysia's case, its comparable exposure to the South China Sea has been counterbalanced by its deeper economic entanglement with Beijing, resulting in a more deliberately paced developmental trajectory that, nevertheless, continues to expand, most recently through the 2026 Strategic Affairs Working Group. This suggests that the ceiling on this relationship is calibrated rather than fixed.

Within this thesis's hypothesis structure, Malaysia is the clearest test of the constraining variant of Hypothesis 1 (economic linkage): its deep economic entanglement with China, rather than

¹⁷⁸ World Bank. 2026. "Military Expenditure (% of GDP) – Malaysia."

reinforcing cooperation with India as the hypothesis's baseline logic would predict, instead imposes a ceiling on the pace and depth of security engagement. Hypothesis 3 (strategic hedging) is supported but manifests as restraint rather than acceleration—Malaysia hedges by diversifying its defence partnerships broadly rather than deepening any single relationship, India's included. Hypothesis 2 (capability development) receives moderate support through the HAL maintenance and Mazagon Dock submarine cooperation, but this remains platform-specific technical support rather than the frontier technology transfer seen in Advanced-tier cases.

Thailand

In the typological framework adopted in this thesis, the India-Thailand bilateral naval relationship is termed Developmental tier, indicating structured institutional dialogue, a regular schedule of bilateral exercises and a broad-ranging capacity building agenda, but not the technological and operational depth of India's Advanced-tier partnerships. The primary structural consideration for this tier placement is Thailand's need to balance competing major power relations: a treaty alliance with the United States and a bilateral trade relationship with China worth some \$125 billion in 2024¹⁷⁹. Thailand's calibration of external defence engagement is therefore specifically to avoid the perception of exclusive alignment with any one power, a structural constraint akin to Malaysia's management of its South China Sea exposure, although Thailand's non-claimant status

¹⁷⁹ Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Thailand and China: Bilateral trade profile." OEC, 2024.

gives it somewhat greater operational latitude¹⁸⁰. This relationship is an example of adaptive bilateralism under a multipolar constraint: India has developed a stable, low-key partnership that is sensitive to Thailand's desire to have good relations with both Washington and Beijing at the same time. This is a direct test of Hypothesis 3 of this thesis in a case where strategic hedging results in active restraint rather than acceleration.

Thailand's control of the Kra Isthmus, the narrow land bridge connecting the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, makes it a natural maritime crossroads between South and Southeast Asian waters, and an important structural focus for India's Act East Policy. The institutional framework for the relationship was provided by the Joint Working Group on Security Cooperation established in May 2003, which formally identified military cooperation as one of seven priority areas¹⁸¹. This early framework developed into a Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation signed on 25 January 2012, which upgraded bilateral relations from a courtesy relationship into a structured framework for intelligence sharing, joint training and coordinated responses to non-traditional maritime threats including piracy, trafficking and environmental hazards¹⁸². In line with the regional norms in broad strokes, Thailand's institutional commitment to ASEAN's consensus-based security culture has enabled Bangkok to foster its relations with India without the signaling effects of a more overt strategic partnership. Acharya's discussion of ASEAN's preference for inclusive, non-exclusive security arrangements¹⁸³.

¹⁸⁰ Cogan, Mark and Mishra, Vivek, "India-Thailand Security Cooperation: Strengthening the Indo-Pacific Resolve." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*. 7. 36–56, 2020.

¹⁸¹ Embassy of India, Bangkok. n.d. "India & Thailand: Defence Cooperation."

¹⁸² Ibid

¹⁸³ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community*.

Operational cooperation has evolved from coordinated patrols to more complex naval exercises at a slow pace. The most consistent operational manifestation of the partnership is the India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol series, which began in 2005, and is conducted along the international maritime boundary line, using maritime patrol aircraft from both navies¹⁸⁴. A major operational milestone was reached in December 2023 when the first-ever India-Thailand Bilateral Maritime Exercise, Ex-Ayutthaya, was conducted during 20-23 December, in conjunction with the thirty-sixth edition of the coordinated patrol. The exercise included surface and anti-air exercises involving live weapon firing, seamanship evolutions and tactical manoeuvres, a clear departure from the lower-intensity format of the coordinated patrol. The indigenously built Indian naval vessels INS Kulish and IN LCU 56 were pitted against the Royal Thai Navy's HTMS Prachuap Khiri Khan¹⁸⁵. The exercise was a step towards the broader SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision of India and aimed to improve operational synergy and gradually increase the exercise complexity, Ministry of Defence said¹⁸⁶. This naval cooperation is running alongside the army-to-army Exercise Maitree, held annually since 2006, and the air force exercise Ex-Siam Bharat, giving the relationship a tri-service exercise architecture beyond its naval dimension alone¹⁸⁷.

Professional military education is a stable institutional element of this relationship. Thai naval officers also attend India's Naval War College and National Defence College regularly, developing doctrinal familiarity that sustains operational coordination even

¹⁸⁴ Government of India, Ministry of Defence, Press Information Bureau, "Royal Thai Navy Bilateral Exercise and 36th Edition of Indo-Thai CORPAT." January 15, 2024.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid

¹⁸⁶ Ibid

¹⁸⁷ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Defence, "14th Edition of India-Thailand Joint Military Exercise MAITREE," September 1, 2025,

through political transitions in either capital. Defence-industrial cooperation has developed modestly, but on a much smaller scale than the BrahMos transfers in India's relations with Vietnam and the Philippines: both countries participate in each other's defence exhibitions, and ten Indian companies exhibited at Thailand's 2022 Defence and Security exhibition in Bangkok, with several Indian firms having delivered military equipment to Thai armed forces¹⁸⁸. The ranking of the relationship reflects real structural constraints, not a lack of bilateral political will. As a treaty ally of the United States, Thailand's military platforms and operational doctrine are already broadly compatible with those of the United States, removing the structural imperative for a deep technological integration with India. By contrast, bilateral trade between India and Thailand stood at approximately USD 16.5 billion in 2024¹⁸⁹, roughly an eighth the size of Thailand's trade with China. This constraint is compounded by Thailand's economic dependence on China. Total bilateral trade reached about \$130.9 billion in 2024, with China as Thailand's largest trading partner and, as of 2023, its largest foreign investor. Bangkok thus has a strong incentive to avoid any bilateral defence activity that could be read as containment-oriented¹⁹⁰. That dependence extends into the defence sector itself: Bangkok's troubled, but ongoing, engagement with Chinese shipbuilders on its S26T-class submarine programme reveals the depths of its defence-industrial entanglement with Beijing even as it simultaneously deepens naval cooperation with India. Thailand's 2025 defence budget of roughly 200.9 billion baht (\$5.55 billion) still prioritises army and air force modernisation programmes, including the procurement of Gripen fighter aircraft, with little fiscal room for the sort of big-ticket naval

¹⁸⁸ Embassy of India, Bangkok. n.d. "India & Thailand: Defence Cooperation."

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

¹⁹⁰ ASEAN Briefing. 2025. "China-Thailand Economic Ties and Expanding Opportunities."

hardware programmes that would promote deeper technological interdependence with India¹⁹¹.

The India-Thailand naval relationship fits the criteria of Developmental-tier classification when compared to the typological framework developed in this thesis. It has moved well beyond initial confidence-building to a formalized architecture of institutionalized dialogue, a predictable schedule of coordinated patrols and bilateral exercises, and substantive professional military education exchange, achievements that carry particular weight given the structural environment in which Bangkok operates. What the relationship has not provided, nor is likely to provide in the near term, is the level of technological interdependence and warfighting-level exercise complexity that is a hallmark of India's Advanced-tier partnerships. The Thailand case provides a useful counterpoint within this thesis's comparative argument: where Vietnam and the Philippines illustrate how acute threat perception from China can compress decades of institutionalization into a few years through high-end arms transfers, Thailand's comparable geographic position at a maritime chokepoint has instead produced a deliberately paced, multipolar-hedging relationship, demonstrating that geography alone, absent either acute threat perception or chokepoint control comparable to Singapore's and Indonesia's, does not automatically generate Advanced-tier outcomes within India's adaptive bilateral framework.

The India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (Indo-Thai CORPAT), initiated in 2005, has been conducted on a consistent biannual basis along the two countries' international maritime boundary line in the Andaman Sea, reaching its 39th edition by 2025—a patrol cadence comparable in frequency, though not in operational complexity, to the CORPAT series India maintains

¹⁹¹ Fulcrum. 2024. "Thailand's Defence Budget in 2024-2025: Appeasing the Military?" August 2, 2024.

with Indonesia. The 35th edition, held from 3 to 10 May 2023, involved the Royal Thai Navy's HTMS Saiburi alongside the Indian Naval Ship Kesari and maritime patrol aircraft from both navies¹⁹². On the army side, Exercise Maitree has been held annually since 2006, reaching its fourteenth edition by 2025, while the air force component, Exercise Siam Bharat, completes this tri-service architecture. This sustained operational tempo across three service branches over nearly two decades distinguishes Thailand from Malaysia's more episodic naval exercise cadence, even though both partnerships share the Developmental-tier classification: Thailand's pace of engagement is constrained less by an absence of institutional routine than by a deliberate ceiling on its complexity and multilateral visibility, consistent with Bangkok's broader strategy of balanced, non-aligned engagement with major powers.¹⁹³

D. Emerging patterns and concluding assessment

The six case studies in this chapter – India's bilateral naval relationships with Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia – reveal four interweaving patterns in how India combines defence diplomacy's instruments across partners, patterns that explain the uneven development of India's naval partnerships. When assessed through the developmental-advanced framework, these findings underscore the structural forces and institutional constraints that shape the contours of India's defence diplomacy in a strategically complex and internally differentiated regional environment.

¹⁹² Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Defence, "35th Edition of Indo-Thai Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT)," 2023

¹⁹³ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Defence, "India-Thailand Joint Military Exercise MAITREE," September 1, 2025

The first pattern is that Advanced-tier status is always associated with both command of key maritime chokepoints and significant indigenous naval capacity. The most operationally sophisticated are the partnerships India has forged with Singapore and Indonesia, the main guardians of the Malacca and Sunda Straits respectively. Singapore's SIMBEX exercises now feature networked command architectures and multi-domain assets, while Indonesia's Samudra Shakti series has moved from basic maritime law enforcement scenarios to complex anti-submarine warfare operations. In both cases, a critical geography in combination with capable naval forces has provided the structural basis for extensive technology-sharing and operational integration. Vietnam's position in this Advanced tier is based on a similar but distinct logic. It is not about chokepoint control but Vietnam's direct exposure to South China Sea contestation, along with sufficient absorptive capacity for high-end technology transfer, that has driven the BrahMos transfer and the broader defence-industrial deepening documented in its case study.

The second pattern suggests that Developmental-tier cooperation occurs where there is an actual need to develop naval capabilities, combined with significant strategic constraints on how much external alignment a state is willing to enter. Thailand and Malaysia are in this tier for different structural reasons. Thailand has pursued a steady operational tempo through CORPAT, weighing its treaty alliance with the United States against its considerable economic ties to China. Malaysia remains the most structurally constrained case in this tier. As a South China Sea claimant with deep economic interdependence on China, Malaysia has a ceiling on cooperation, with engagement limited to professional exchange and non-traditional security activity.

The third pattern reveals that geographic proximity to contested waters results in divergent paths of cooperation that cannot be reduced to a simple linear relationship. States that control the major maritime chokepoints tend to be those with which India develops high-intensity partnerships, although states involved directly in territorial disputes face severe political constraints that limit the visibility and depth of external security cooperation. Malaysia's direct territorial exposure in the South China Sea compels it to calibrate the relationship with India at a level that does not provoke retaliatory measures from Beijing, a dynamic that stands in instructive contrast to Vietnam, which has engaged intensively despite facing structurally comparable Chinese pressure, and to Thailand, which benefits from greater operational latitude precisely because it is not a claimant state and is geographically removed from the primary South China Sea flashpoints. This pattern is consistent with Hypothesis 3 as set out in Chapter I: the depth of bilateral cooperation reflects the balance each state strikes between its threat perception of Chinese assertiveness and its assessment of the political risks of visible external alignment.

The fourth pattern corroborates that economic-security linkages are secondary, rather than primary, drivers of partnership depth. High-intensity security engagement suits India's large energy interests in Indonesia and Vietnam, but the strategic and technological complementarity that underpins Singapore's Advanced-tier status far exceeds what the bilateral trade relationship alone would predict. Moreover, Thailand has made considerable developmental strides despite the relatively limited bilateral trade with India. Crucially, the deep economic interdependence between Malaysia and China constrains rather than facilitates India-Malaysia security cooperation – illustrating that economic ties with a third party can constrain bilateral

defence relationships just as direct economic ties can foster them.

The case study evidence was evaluated against the three hypotheses informing this chapter, with differentiated findings. There is some evidence to support the economic interdependence hypothesis. There are demonstrable cases in which energy interests have facilitated deeper cooperation. However, the Malaysia case demonstrates that geographic position and third-party strategic relationships have comparable causal weight, and that economic ties with a rival power can constrain rather than incentivize bilateral defence cooperation. In contrast, the hypothesis concerning capability development imperatives finds strong support across all six cases. Every partner has sought to use its relationship with India to address specific gaps in naval modernisation, ranging from Vietnam's acquisition of the BrahMos to Indonesia's and Thailand's pursuit of advanced training programmes.

The most analytically significant finding, however, is the primacy of strategic hedging rather than direct balancing as the operative logic across all six partnerships. No partner state has asked for a singular alignment with India against China. Instead, each of the six has calibrated its cooperation to enhance deterrence and interoperability while holding onto the strategic flexibility to maintain productive relationships with all major powers. This hedging logic manifests differently by tier: among Developmental-tier partners — Thailand, Malaysia, and, until the 2022 BrahMos transaction elevated it to Advanced status, the Philippines — it appears as visible restraint; among Advanced-tier partners such as Vietnam, the same underlying logic instead drives accelerated engagement, since intensifying cooperation with India is itself a form of hedging against direct territorial pressure from China. The internal variation within the

Developmental tier is analytically significant in its own right. The Philippines focuses on low-cost capability transfer through the leasing of equipment and training; Thailand maintains a steady operational pace while avoiding major procurement commitments; and Malaysia confines its engagement to professional exchange and non-traditional security cooperation. These differences are a function of each state's mix of strategic pressure, budgetary constraint and political risk tolerance, rather than any deficit of strategic intent on either side.

A clarification is needed about what the hedging confirmation actually shows. If strategic hedging were simply a universal description of how all states engage all external partners, its confirmation would carry limited explanatory weight — it would describe the baseline, not explain variation. What the case study evidence actually shows is more specific: hedging explains the 'form' that cooperation takes, not only whether it occurs. The Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia all face Chinese maritime pressure, but they have arrived at very different cooperative arrangements with India. Vietnam engaged intensively despite fiscal constraints because its direct territorial exposure raised the perceived cost of restraint. Malaysia calibrated cooperation to minimal visibility because its economic interdependence with China raised the perceived cost of exposure. The Philippines deepened engagement through a technology-transfer transaction that established deterrence capacity without triggering the signaling costs of a formal alliance. In each case the hedging logic is operative, but it produces a different institutional outcome depending on the precise balance of threat perception, economic exposure, and capacity. This is the empirical contribution of adaptive bilateralism as an analytical framework: it disaggregates the hedging logic into the structural variables that explain why the

same underlying impulse produces different partnership configurations across the six cases.

These four patterns taken together suggest that India's defence diplomacy has been successful precisely because it has not sought to impose a uniform strategic template across the region. Adaptive bilateralism — the calibration of security engagement, capacity-building, and signaling to each partner's geographic position, capability requirements, and political constraints — is the operating logic through which this defence diplomacy is practiced. This strategy has enabled India to build a nuanced yet integrated regional security architecture that advances the core goals of the Act East Policy, including sea lane security, non-traditional threat management, and the creation of a rules-based maritime order, while addressing the multi-alignment priorities that define the strategic culture of present-day Southeast Asia.

Chapter IV. CONCLUSION

A. Summary of findings

This research demonstrated significant shifts in how India practices defence diplomacy with Southeast Asian capitals, expressed most concretely through bilateral naval ties. But these relationships did not develop along a single path. They evolved through distinctive stages of testing, development, and progression, each characterized by a particular combination of strategic calculation, capacity needs, and political constraint. The evidence presented in Chapters I, II and III is directly relevant to the central research question. The uneven character of India's naval diplomacy has generated a stratified regional landscape, where the deep, warfighting level of integration achieved with Singapore and Indonesia contrasts starkly with the more cautious, foundational engagement with Malaysia.

Chapter III's case-by-case and cross-case analysis tested this argument against three competing hypotheses and found differentiated support. Capability development explains partnership depth most consistently across all six cases, from Vietnam's and the Philippines' BrahMos acquisitions to Singapore's and Indonesia's absorption of increasingly complex naval technology. Strategic hedging accounts for the persistent absence of exclusive alignment against China, though it takes a different institutional form by tier: visible restraint among Developmental-tier partners, accelerated engagement among Advanced-tier ones. Economic interdependence offers only partial explanatory power, facilitating cooperation where India holds large energy stakes (Vietnam, Indonesia) while constraining it where a partner's economic dependence lies with China instead (Malaysia) — indicating that economic linkage

operates as a secondary, conditioning variable rather than a primary driver of partnership depth. The same evidence organizes into four structural patterns: chokepoint control combined with naval capacity produces Advanced-tier status; a combination of capability need and strategic constraint produces Developmental-tier status; proximity to contested waters generates divergent, not uniform, trajectories across claimant and non-claimant states alike; and economic-security linkages reinforce, rather than originate, partnership depth. Taken together, these findings confirm that India's regional engagement is not the product of a single strategic template but of a differentiated calculus consistently applied across a structurally diverse set of partners.

B. Implications for future research

This study shows that India's defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia has acquired significant strategic heft precisely because it does not adhere to a single model of engagement across the region. The approach on display here is not about an overt counter-China coalition or a hard alliance structure. Rather, the layered model of cooperation that emerges from this analysis suggests that effective middle-power defence diplomacy requires a consistent patience and real accommodation of the structural diversity of regional partners. In almost all the cases, the emphasis on capability development indicates India's role as a capacity-building partner as a durable basis for engagement with the region—likely to expand as Southeast Asian navies modernise and face ever more complex maritime security challenges.

Also telling is the absence of direct balancing behaviour against China. While many partners have security concerns, these states

have consistently sought nuanced hedging strategies, trying to develop deterrence capacity while retaining the flexibility to manage complex relations with several major powers. The strong link between chokepoint control and Advanced-tier status suggests that India's maritime strategy is mostly concerned with defending the structural foundations of international trade – securing maritime routes vital to energy and commercial flows – rather than any more expansive ideological objectives. Other paths of research are worth pursuing. A comparative analysis of India's approach with other middle powers like Australia, South Korea or Japan would help to clarify the distinctive features of New Delhi's regional strategy. There is also a lot of scope to explore trilateral and multilateral dimensions of this cooperation. Understanding how these bilateral relationships fit within broader multilateral frameworks could help determine whether India and its regional partners are poised to move towards more sophisticated collective security frameworks. Further examination of the domestic political processes shaping these partnerships—in New Delhi and across Southeast Asian capitals alike—could inform understanding of the institutional dynamics underpinning their development, including legislative oversight mechanisms, public opinion dynamics, bureaucratic preferences within defence establishments, and the influence of organized interest groups. This line of research would help explain why some partnerships have been limited and identify the specific obstacles that diplomatic engagement would need to address. Finally, a more nuanced analysis of whether economic interdependence acts as a stabilizer or a source of vulnerability for defence relationships in times of crisis would help explain the relationship between trade ties and the longer-term durability of security partnerships. Finally, because the case-study sample in this thesis was selected in part on the depth of partnership itself, extending the same

typological indicators to a Probing-tier state, such as Brunei or Cambodia, would help establish whether the factors identified here as driving deeper cooperation also explain its absence, and would place the findings of this thesis on firmer comparative ground.

C. Concluding remarks

India's naval engagement with Southeast Asia is a notable instance of contemporary middle power diplomacy, which prefers the gradual development of relationships rather than more aggressive and risky approaches of competitive posturing or direct balancing. Through sustained strategic patience and genuine adaptation to the structurally diverse circumstances of its regional partners, New Delhi has developed a differentiated partnership architecture that reinforces regional maritime security, while respecting the premium that Southeast Asian states place on maintaining their strategic autonomy. The trajectory discussed in this thesis suggests that effective defence diplomacy in a strategically contested environment requires a nuanced, differentiated understanding of partner states' structural constraints, sustained capability building, and a commitment to regional engagement that is not limited to short-term political cycles. As great power competition in the Indo-Pacific continues to intensify, India's experience offers an instructive model for other middle powers seeking to expand their regional influence through constructive contribution rather than competitive alignment – one with direct relevance to the broader study of how rising and middle powers can build durable influence within a multi-aligned and institutionally complex regional order.

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