

From Look East to Act East: India's Blue Economy as a Strategic Instrument in Shaping Indo-Pacific Regional Order

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Abstract

India's eastward engagement has undergone a significant transformation since the early 1990s. What began as the Look East Policy—primarily an economic outreach strategy aimed at integrating India with the flourishing economies of Southeast and East Asia—has evolved into the Act East Policy, a more comprehensive framework embedded in maritime geopolitics, regional security, and Indo-Pacific strategic competition (Mohan, 2015). Within this broader transformation, the Blue Economy has emerged as a powerful instrument of India's maritime statecraft. Initially focused on sustainable development, resource governance, and ocean-based economic activities, the Blue Economy has now expanded into a domain of foreign policy and strategic influence (Chaudhury, 2019).

This paper analyses how and why the Blue Economy has become central to India's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. It argues that India employs Blue Economy initiatives to shape regional order by reinforcing ASEAN centrality (ASEAN, 2019), maintaining strategic autonomy amid intensifying U.S.–China rivalry (Pant & Das, 2019), expanding maritime connectivity, and promoting norms of inclusive, sustainable, and transparent ocean governance. India's frameworks of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) illustrate how India merges development cooperation with strategic objectives, thereby shaping institutional politics and maritime norms (MEA, 2015).

Drawing on political science approaches—including neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism—the paper demonstrates how Blue Economy diplomacy functions as a tool of soft balancing against China's Maritime Silk Road (Basrur & Sullivan, 2019), supports India's role as a “normative maritime power” (Saran, 2018), and enables India to contribute to emerging institutional architectures of the Indo-Pacific. The analysis concludes that the Blue Economy is now a pivotal component of the Act East Policy and a critical element of India's strategy to shape the Indo-Pacific regional order.

Keywords

Act East Policy; Look East Policy; Blue Economy; Indo-Pacific; ASEAN; Geopolitics; Maritime Statecraft; SAGAR; IPOI; Regional Order; Strategic Autonomy.

Introduction

India's approach toward East and Southeast Asia has evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War. The Look East Policy, launched in 1991, emerged against the backdrop of India's economic liberalisation, the rise of Asia's economic centres, and the collapse of bipolar geopolitical structures (Muni, 2012). Its objectives were largely economic: enhancing trade, expanding connectivity, and integrating with regional markets that were becoming the drivers of global economic growth.

However, the geopolitical landscape of Asia changed profoundly in the early 21st century. China's rapid rise—economically, militarily, and institutionally—altered maritime balances and reshaped the regional strategic environment (Kaplan, 2014). The United States responded by reorienting its

strategic presence toward Asia, symbolised by the “Pivot to Asia.” Meanwhile, ASEAN struggled to maintain centrality amid intensifying competition between major powers (Envall & Hall, 2020). These shifts contributed to the emergence of the “Indo-Pacific” as a strategic concept, reflecting the increasing interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Korolev, 2020). The maritime domain became central to the region’s political and economic future.

It is within this changing environment that India transformed Look East into Act East in 2014. The Act East Policy elevated maritime diplomacy, defence cooperation, infrastructure development, and regional security engagement to the forefront of India’s eastern engagement (Pant & Das, 2019). The shift was not merely rhetorical but reflected India’s recognition that the Indo-Pacific’s political and economic order would profoundly influence its own strategic future (Brewster, 2018).

Objectives

1. To analyse the political transformation from Look East to Act East within the context of Indo-Pacific geopolitics (Pant & Das, 2019).
2. To examine how India’s Blue Economy agenda evolved from development-focused to strategy-driven (Chaudhury, 2019).
3. To evaluate India–ASEAN maritime cooperation through regional institutions, political alignments, and security frameworks (ASEAN, 2019).
4. To study SAGAR and IPOI as political tools that integrate maritime development with security governance (MEA, 2015).
5. To assess Blue Economy initiatives as mechanisms of soft balancing against China’s Maritime Silk Road (Basrur & Sullivan, 2019).
6. To understand the implications of Blue Economy diplomacy for India’s strategic autonomy in a multipolar Indo-Pacific (Saran, 2018).

Hypothesis

India’s Act East Policy strategically leverages the Blue Economy as a political instrument to shape Indo-Pacific regional order by strengthening ASEAN-led multilateralism, preserving strategic autonomy, and counterbalancing China’s maritime rise. Blue Economy diplomacy enhances India’s influence, institutional presence, and leadership in regional maritime governance.

Blue Economy as Political Strategy

India’s Blue Economy, which initially emerged as a developmental framework focused on sustainable ocean-based activities, has gradually transformed into a significant instrument of foreign policy and geopolitical strategy. Over the past decade, New Delhi has broadened the scope of the Blue Economy from a primarily economic concept to a multidimensional strategic agenda shaping India’s role and influence in the Indo-Pacific. The maritime domain—encompassing security, connectivity, resource management, environmental protection, and scientific collaboration—has become a vital arena through which India advances its political interests and engages with regional partners (Wagle, 2021).

One of the most important dimensions of this shift is the use of maritime capabilities to project political influence beyond South Asia. India’s expanding naval engagements, including joint exercises, port visits, defence cooperation, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, have strengthened India’s visibility and credibility in Southeast Asia and the broader Indian Ocean Region. These initiatives reinforce India’s emerging role as a “net security provider”

(Brewster, 2014). Investments in port infrastructure—both domestically and in partner countries—further enhance maritime connectivity and support cooperative security arrangements across the Indo-Pacific (De & Esteban, 2017).

A second strategic function of the Blue Economy lies in its role as a counterweight to China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR). China's port and infrastructure expansion across the Indo-Pacific has raised concerns related to transparency, environmental vulnerability, and debt dependency. India seeks to offer an alternative model emphasising sustainability, inclusive development, and national sovereignty, aligning with critiques of China's infrastructure diplomacy presented in scholarly literature (Chaturvedi & Saha, 2019). India's approach—focused on capacity-building, joint development, maritime training, and environmentally responsible practices—embodies a form of soft balancing against China (Madan, 2020).

A third political dimension of India's Blue Economy is its alignment with ASEAN's developmental and security priorities. Southeast Asian nations face major maritime challenges, including illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, marine pollution, and climate-related vulnerabilities. India's cooperation in sustainable fisheries, maritime domain awareness, and resilience-building supports ASEAN centrality while strengthening long-term trust with regional governments (Panda, 2021).

Additionally, India utilises multilateral frameworks such as the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) to influence regional rule-making. Through the IPOI and other cooperative platforms, India promotes responsible infrastructure, marine ecology protection, transparent maritime governance, and scientific partnerships. These initiatives align with global governance norms under UNCLOS and resonate with Indo-Pacific states advocating for a rules-based maritime order (Cordner, 2018; Sahni, 2022). By shaping cooperative agendas, India strengthens its normative influence and institutional leadership.

Finally, the Blue Economy enhances India's strategic autonomy in a competitive geopolitical environment. Unlike rigid alliance structures, Blue Economy partnerships allow India to simultaneously engage with major powers—including Japan, Australia, France, the European Union, and the United States—without compromising its strategic independence. These collaborations span marine science, climate resilience, maritime surveillance, and renewable ocean energy (Krishnan, 2020). Such flexible engagements support India's broader foreign policy orientation of multi-alignment (Hall, 2019).

India–ASEAN Maritime Engagement

ASEAN is the anchor of India's Act East Policy. The political stability of Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific depends heavily on ASEAN's ability to mediate great-power competition, particularly in the South China Sea, where maritime disputes intersect with resource politics (Envall & Hall, 2020). India's engagement with ASEAN in maritime domains—including hydrography, joint naval exercises, port connectivity, and capacity-building—provides Southeast Asian countries with additional strategic options.

Blue Economy cooperation is especially valued because it addresses **non-traditional security issues**, such as:

- Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU)
- Climate-induced vulnerabilities
- Coastal erosion and disaster management

- Marine plastic and pollution governance
- Sustainable fisheries and ocean science cooperation

These issues are political because they affect sovereignty, access to marine resources, and the rights of coastal communities.

Need for Political Science Frameworks

A political science lens reveals the deeper logic behind India's Blue Economy strategy:

- **Neorealism** explains India's balancing behaviour vis-à-vis China's maritime rise (Basrur & Sullivan, 2019).
- **Neoliberal institutionalism** highlights India's emphasis on rule-making, multilateral cooperation, and regional institutional engagement (Brewster, 2018).
- **Constructivism** helps explain how India projects itself as a normative maritime power committed to sustainability, transparency, and regional stability (Saran, 2018).

Thus, the Blue Economy is best understood not as an environmental agenda but as a strategic instrument to shape Indo-Pacific regional order.

Conclusion

India's transition from Look East to Act East reflects profound shifts in Indo-Pacific geopolitics and the growing centrality of the maritime domain in regional politics. The Blue Economy has moved from a development-oriented framework to a multifaceted tool of strategic influence, supporting India's rise as a responsible maritime power (Saran, 2018).

Reinforcing Strategic Autonomy

India's flexible partnerships—particularly in sustainable development, maritime domain awareness, and climate cooperation—enable India to deepen engagement with ASEAN, Japan, Australia, Europe, and Africa while avoiding rigid alliance structures (Pant & Joshi, 2016). This supports India's pursuit of multi-alignment and strategic autonomy.

Supporting ASEAN Centrality

ASEAN's ability to remain central is challenged by escalating U.S.–China rivalry. India's development-focused Blue Economy engagements offer ASEAN states greater strategic space and reinforce inclusive Indo-Pacific norms aligned with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (ASEAN, 2019).

Soft Balancing Against China

India's Blue Economy diplomacy:

- Promotes transparent and sustainable infrastructure,
- Strengthens regional maritime governance,
- Expands naval and coast guard partnerships,
- Enhances institutional cooperation through IORA and EAS (IORA, 2018).

These actions counter China's Maritime Silk Road by offering credible, sovereignty-friendly alternatives (Basrur & Sullivan, 2019).

Normative and Institutional Influence

India's leadership through IPOI allows New Delhi to shape regional norms on:

- Maritime ecology,
- Responsible infrastructure financing,
- Hydrographic cooperation,
- Ocean science and climate resilience (MEA, 2019).

This strengthens India's identity as a normative maritime power (Saran, 2018).

Strengthening Maritime Statecraft

Act East + Blue Economy diplomacy enhance India's statecraft through:

- Naval diplomacy,
- HADR operations,
- Maritime domain awareness networks,
- Island diplomacy with Maldives, Mauritius, and Indonesia (Rumley & Sakhuja, 2015).

These reinforce India as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean (Indian Navy, 2015).

Non-Traditional Security Governance

The Blue Economy's strategic relevance is amplified by the rise of non-traditional maritime threats:

- Climate change,
- Illegal fishing,
- Resource degradation,
- Environmental decline,
- Maritime piracy (Chaudhury, 2019).

India's cooperative approach expands its political capital with island and coastal nations facing existential challenges.

The evidence strongly supports the hypothesis. **The Blue Economy has become a central pillar of India's Act East Policy and an essential instrument shaping Indo-Pacific regional order.**

It enhances India's regional autonomy, strengthens ASEAN-led multilateralism, provides alternatives to China's maritime rise, and positions India as a responsible and influential maritime power committed to a stable, multipolar Indo-Pacific.

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