

MARITIME SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES AND EMERGING TRENDS



EDITED BY
SUKHVINDER KAUR MULTANI

Maritime Security and Geopolitics in Southeast Asia

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Maritime Security and Geopolitics in Southeast Asia: Challenges, Strategies and Emerging Trends

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing Limited, New Era House, 8 Oldlands Way, Bognor Regis, West Sussex, England PO22 9NQ

First edition 2027

Editorial Matter and Selection © 2027 Sukhvinder Kaur Multani.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83742-571-6 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83742-570-9 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83742-572-3 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Foreword by Gurpreet Singh Khurana

'Le roi est mort, vive le roi!'

(The King is Dead, Long Live the King!)

This famous ecstatic contradiction may best describe India's *Act East* policy launched a decade ago in 2014. The *Act East* may have now been subsumed into India's 'Indo-Pacific' vision, as least in terms of New Delhi's geopolitical outreach to its eastern maritime neighbours across the Indo-Pacific region. Nonetheless, the essential underlying objectives and guiding principles of 'Act East' remain intact. These include 'inclusiveness' and 'ASEAN centrality' in Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

India's Indo-Pacific ideation is more than only that. Unlike for the major powers of the West, it is not a strategy for India linked to 'hard' military security. Rather, it is a 'vision' of prosperity of the supra-region enabled through multi-faceted cooperation to achieve 'holistic maritime security.' This is a comprehensive approach to maritime security, which was articulated in August 2021 by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, when India held the Presidency of the UN Security Council (UNSC). In thematic terms, therefore, the Indo-Pacific construct relates to multifarious aspects including and beyond traditional national security issues. These include human safety, disaster mitigation and good order at sea; freedom of navigation; infrastructure for economic connectivity and resilient supply chains; and sustainable harvesting of maritime resources to preserve the marine environment and ecology.

It is well-known that the nomenclature of 'Southeast Asia' emerged from an artificial construct conceived during the erstwhile colonial era. The sub-region is indeed contiguous to the Indian subcontinent, and much of the littoral waters of many of Southeast Asian countries, including *Timor L'este*, are integral to the Indian Ocean. In any case, India's maritime and overseas interests have now expanded beyond the Indian Ocean to the maritime and littoral spaces of the western Pacific. Therefore, New Delhi would need to leverage all tools of national power to preserve, protect and promote these interests within its expanded geo-strategic frontiers. Much of these national tools will manifest in India's holistic maritime power. This translates into immense maritime security convergences between India and Southeast Asia, and therefore, into the high potential for security cooperation across the maritime-configured Indo-Pacific

region. In any case, engaging Southeast Asia is critically essential for India since its countries represent the core of Indo-Pacific region, not only in spatial terms but also in terms of ASEAN-led multilateralism, which has stood the test of time and prevented any major war since the end of World War 2.

However, the conceptual core of the Indo-Pacific has bedeviled Southeast Asia, at least on two counts. The first is the US Indo-Pacific Strategy that implicitly seeks to contain China *versus* the 'softer' Indo-Pacific vision of India and the ASEAN that seek greater inclusivity and cooperation, without limiting it to the military dimension. This has also pushed the reluctant Southeast Asian countries to choose sides between the United States and China. Secondly, the Indo-Pacific concept is premised on a rules-based maritime order that is underpinned by international law and codified in the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS), 1982. However, the universal adherence to such order has remained merely aspirational due to the 'clash of two titans', viz. the United States and China. The countries of Southeast Asia may have avoided the hard choices between depending on one or the other superpower. However, they still need to navigate between the United States on the one hand, which is not a party to UNCLOS and yet undertakes *Freedom of Navigation Operations* (FONOPs) to 'discipline' the regional countries against their excessive maritime claims; and on the other hand, China, which ratified UNCLOS as long ago as in 1994, but is now feeling aggrieved of having been forced to adhere to the treaty since the time when it was a weak developing country, but is now strong enough to flout international law.

In this broader context, I found the chapters in this book to be a collation of some valuable, topical and policy-relevant papers on various dimensions of maritime security and cooperative partnerships, authored by eminent scholars and practitioners based on their profound insights and rigorous research. The editing and collation of these papers has been done so well by the editor that the academic worth of the edited book is now much more than the cumulative value of the individual chapters. I compliment and commend all those involved with the publication of this book.

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Foreword by W.Lawrence S.Prabhakar

Maritime Security in contemporary times has been both momentous and turbulent globally and in various regions. If there is one region that has a kaleidoscope pattern of momentous changes and turbulence, that region could be Southeast Asia. Given the new patterns and dynamics of maritime order and security in the Indo-Pacific, the Southeast Asian region forms a critical hinge to the vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific.

In this edited volume of essays on Maritime Security in Southeast Asia, Sukhvinder Kaur Multani has well delved into the various intricacies, issues and challenges in the region associating the ASEAN as a regional actor to the Southeast Asian maritime ecosystem. The region's complex topography is resident to various territorial disputes, piracy, illegal fishing, maritime terrorism and the role of regional and global actors in maintaining security and stability.

ASEAN's Centrality is thus the epicentre for the all the maritime security dynamics in the region. Southeast Asia's Maritime Geopolitics is also intertwined with economic regionalism, technological advancements and various legal frameworks like the Law of the Sea.

Southeast Asia continues since the Cold War era to be the pivot of Great Power rivalry from the US–Soviet to the present US–China power rivalries witnessing shades of power transition that is quite evident due to the military and strategic modernization of the regional powers and the extra-regional powers in the region, portraying a complex interdependence and interplay of alliances in the region.

South China Sea emerges as the theatre of rivalling deployments of extra-regional navies such as the US Navy along with the PLA-Navy of China along with Southeast Asian navies given the various island contestations of the island disputes between China and the Southeast Asian nations like Philippines, Indonesia, etc. replete with claims and counterclaims and the new zest of the Trump Administration in this issue with China.

Aside the Great Power rivalry and the traditional maritime security dynamics, the new trend of asymmetric conflict in the maritime domain of Southeast Asia has emerged prominent with maritime terrorism and piracy that has been highly disruptive of the vast and colossal maritime borne trade in the region. The crafting of various regional frameworks in the mitigation of these threats has been well in progress. The seminal importance of the ASEAN-led initiatives such as the Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP), the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement

(TCA) and the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) has been quite viable along with UNCLOS, SUA Convention and the ISPS Code.

Yet another interesting dimension of Southeast Asia's Maritime Security has been the sensitive border and boundary disputes and the common threats and insecurities that Southeast Asia's nations face in the region. These common insecurities are well addressed by various means of arbitration in the region, especially the South China Sea island disputes. Southeast Asia has well developed various viable means of Arbitration to settle these insecurities and challenges affirming the ASEAN Centrality principle.

Freedom of Navigation and military exercises in the International waters is a vital concern of Southeast Asia's maritime matrix. The Freedom of Navigation Patrols by the US Navy in the region and the various bilateral multilateral exercises that the US navy conducts with its Southeast Asia allies is quite prominent in the region. The Freedom of Navigation Patrol could also be viewed from the perspective of enforcement of International Law in the maritime domain Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia's archipelagic geography features dense traffic of international trade of energy, raw materials and manufactured goods plying in the region. The sea lanes of communication are closely intertwined with strategic rivalry and regional disputes. ASEAN has been able to well map these challenges with the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) besides China's Belt Road Initiative of infrastructure build up and connectivity has resulted in boosting of international trade, maritime infrastructure and along the prospects of heightened regional rivalries.

Technological advances in Maritime security in Southeast Asia have been quite catalytic in the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and various platforms that are automated in the maritime domain. Southeast nations are working out on quantum technologies that are redefining the maritime security paradigms of the region. The challenges of their dual use technological significance export control challenges and governance issues constitute a complex matrix in Southeast Asia's Maritime security.

The emerging and future vistas of Southeast Asia's maritime security are complex with various issues in patterns of strategic competition between the United States and China to various alliance dynamics in the region. The role of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is quite significant as it addresses various non-military issues in the region and adds enhanced stability in the region. Besides, Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) contribute to maintaining order at sea.

Transnational maritime crimes and its discontents continue to plague Maritime Southeast Asia. The most alarming issues are the prevalence of drug trafficking, particularly through the Golden Triangle, which serves as a primary route for opiate smuggling. This area, which intersects parts of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, is dominated by a sophisticated transnational smuggling network. These criminal operations not only endanger the safety and health of communities regionally but also undermine the maritime security infrastructure essential for fostering economic stability and cooperative international relations.

This edited volume is an eclectic collection of essays that has detailed analysis and has covered a wide swath of issues. Its academic scope is intensive and salient; its policy analysis is wide ranging and pragmatic. The editor and the authors have been able to analyze the varied issues with comprehensiveness with contemporary insights.

W. Lawrence S. Prabhakar, PhD
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Preface

The maritime domain has emerged as one of the most critical arenas shaping contemporary international order. In the 21st century, the oceans are no longer viewed merely as channels of trade and communication; they are also strategic spaces where geopolitical competition, economic interdependence, technological transformation and security challenges are seen intersecting. Nowhere is this more evident than in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region, where vital sea lanes of communication, rich natural resources and competing territorial claims have made maritime security a central concern for both regional and global powers.

This edited volume brings together a diverse group of scholars, strategic analysts and practitioners to examine the evolving dynamics of maritime security and geopolitics in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. The chapters explore a wide range of issues including the geopolitical significance of key maritime chokepoints, strategic competition in the South China Sea, maritime terrorism, emerging technological dimensions of maritime security and the growing importance of regional cooperation in addressing transnational threats. By situating these issues within broader debates on international relations and strategic studies, the volume seeks to provide both analytical depth and policy relevance.

Contributions in this book highlight how the region's maritime geography continues to shape global economic flows and strategic interactions. The Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea and other strategic waterways remain indispensable for international trade and energy transportation making their stability crucial for global economic security. At the same time, growing naval capabilities, maritime disputes and grey-zone strategies have heightened geopolitical tensions. These developments highlight the need for better maritime governance with stronger institutions and greater cooperation in security.

The volume also addresses emerging challenges that go beyond traditional naval rivalry. Issues such as piracy, illegal and unregulated fishing, maritime terrorism, environmental degradation and climate-related vulnerabilities illustrate the complex and multidimensional nature of maritime security. The contributors examine how regional organizations, particularly ASEAN along with extra-regional actors such as the United States, China, India, Japan and Australia, are shaping the evolving strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

Another important theme explored in the book is the role of technological change in maritime security. Advances in surveillance systems, AI, unmanned

maritime platforms and satellite-based monitoring are transforming how states manage maritime domains and protect critical sea routes. These developments present both opportunities and challenges for regional stability and strategic balance.

This volume, therefore, aims to contribute to the growing scholarship on Indo-Pacific maritime security by offering interdisciplinary perspectives and policy-oriented insights. The aim is to highlight the importance of cooperation, adherence to international law and the strengthening of maritime institutions to ensure a stable and secure maritime order.

The editor would like to express sincere gratitude to all contributors who generously shared their expertise and research for this volume. Their diverse perspectives have enriched the academic and policy discussions presented in these pages. It is hoped that this book will serve as a useful resource for scholars, policymakers, students and practitioners interested in understanding the evolving maritime geopolitics of Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

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Acknowledgements

"Whoever rules the waves rules the world."
— Alfred Thayer Mahan

The maritime domain has long played an important role in global trade, security and geopolitical interaction. Southeast Asia occupies a central place in the Indo-Pacific due to its strategic maritime routes, geopolitical importance and role in regional cooperation.

This book was developed out of an academic interest in understanding how maritime security dynamics in Southeast Asia are evolving in the context of increasing geopolitical competition, economic interdependence and regional cooperation. The volume brings together diverse scholarly and policy perspectives to examine key developments, challenges and policy responses shaping maritime security in the region.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the distinguished scholars and practitioners who contributed chapters to this volume. Their rigorous research, insightful analyses and commitment to advancing scholarships in the field of maritime security have greatly enriched this work. They are experts in their respective domains and have been working extensively on issues of maritime security, strategic affairs and regional cooperation which has significantly strengthened the quality and depth of this volume.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to Captain (Dr) **Gurpreet S. Khurana** and **Dr Lawrence Prabhakar** for graciously contributing Foreword to this volume. Their thoughtful reflections and longstanding engagement with issues of maritime strategy and regional security add immense intellectual value and depth to this book.

I am also grateful to **R. Srinivasan**, Editor-in-Chief at *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, for his valuable guidance and thoughtful encouragement during the preparation of this volume. His support has been deeply appreciated.

My thanks are also due to the editorial and publishing team at Emerald Publishing for their guidance, professionalism and continued support throughout the review and production process. I further acknowledge the broader community of scholars, policy practitioners and research institutions

whose engagement with issues of maritime governance, regional cooperation, and ocean sustainability continues to shape the evolving discourse on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.

Finally, I extend my gratitude to all those who offered encouragement and support during the preparation of this book.

Sukhvinder Kaur Multani
Editor

Chapter 1

Maritime Security and Geopolitics in Southeast Asia: An Overview

Sukhvinder Kaur Multani

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Abstract

Southeast Asia is at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, making it one of the most important regions in global geopolitics and maritime security. This introductory chapter looks at the geopolitical environment of Southeast Asia by examining its complex maritime geography and the varied interests of global and regional powers. The region's maritime space is shaped by key sea lines of communication, especially the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea and the Sulu-Celebes Sea. Together, these waterways are essential for global trade, energy supplies and naval movement. They are not only economically vital but also areas of geopolitical competition and cooperation.

This chapter discusses the strategic importance of these maritime routes, focusing on how control, access and freedom of navigation in these areas affect broader regional security. It identifies the main stakeholders, including Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China, the United States, India, Japan and Australia, and explores how their strategic goals, economic interests and security policies interact and often conflict in the Southeast Asian maritime space.

Additionally, this chapter examines ASEAN's role and the difficulties it faces in maintaining regional unity amid growing rivalries among major powers. It also highlights the effects of China's assertiveness, the US Indo-Pacific strategy, India's Act East policy and the increasing maritime activities of Japan and Australia. By analyzing these dynamics, the chapter prepares the way for later discussions in this volume about new maritime security threats, regional partnerships and strategic collaboration.

In summary, this chapter offers a basic understanding of Southeast Asia's maritime geopolitics, highlighting why this region will remain crucial in shaping the balance of power and strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific. It also

Maritime Security and Geopolitics in Southeast Asia, 1–14
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Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited
doi:10.1108/978-1-83742-570-920261002

outlines the thematic and analytical direction of the volume by identifying the main maritime issues that will be discussed in later chapters. This establishes a foundation for understanding Southeast Asia's broader maritime security environment.

Keywords: Maritime security; Southeast Asian geopolitics; Indo-Pacific strategy; sea lines of communication (SLOCs); great power competition; South China Sea disputes

Introduction

Southeast Asia holds a crucial place in global politics, mainly because of its unique geography. The region includes vital sea routes like the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait and the South China Sea. These routes link the Indian and Pacific Oceans and support nearly one-third of global trade (Kaplan, 2010; Till, 2013). These maritime pathways are not just geographical chokepoints, but they act as essential channels for global commerce and energy. Therefore, the geography of Southeast Asia plays a significant role in trade security, energy needs and strategic influence. Moreover, Southeast Asia has become one of the most contested geopolitical areas in the 21st century. The region is a battleground for major power rivalry, especially between the United States and China, but also involving India, Japan and Australia. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its strong claims in the South China Sea have increased tensions, leading to responses from both regional and outside players (CSIS, 2020; Medcalf, 2020).

This security dynamic reflects not just disputes over sovereignty and maritime borders but also deeper conflicts over the norms and institutions that shape the Indo-Pacific order. This changing situation strengthens Southeast Asia's role as a strategic crossroads where major power competition is most evident. This blend of geography, trade and power competition is the main focus of this book. It places Southeast Asia at the intersection of these elements. The introduction presents the region not only as one impacted by maritime insecurity but also as a strategic area where global economic ties and geopolitical rivalry come together. Maritime security, in this case, has many aspects, including traditional naval competition and non-traditional issues like piracy, illegal fishing, environmental harm and climate-related vulnerabilities (Bateman, 2016). The following chapters build on this framework. They explore Southeast Asia's maritime security from various angles, including historical context, strategic challenges, regional responses and emerging trends. By showing the region as both a geopolitical hotspot and a trade lifeline, this book offers a thorough understanding of how maritime security challenges are influenced by great power strategies, regional cooperation and also by global economic needs.

Scope and Contribution of the Volume

This volume seeks to:

- provide a comprehensive understanding of maritime geopolitics in Southeast Asia by linking geography, strategy, economics and security;

- explain how key maritime flashpoints, especially the South China Sea, shape regional order and international responses;
- assess the evolving roles and strategic behaviour of major and middle powers including China, the United States, India, Japan and Australia;
- highlight non-traditional maritime security challenges such as piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, environmental risks and climate impacts;
- offer policy-relevant insights and future directions for strengthening maritime governance, regional cooperation and stability.

This section explains the purpose of the volume and shows how the chapters that follow build on the ideas introduced here.

In essence, this volume seeks to contribute to both scholarship and policy by unpacking how Southeast Asia's maritime dynamics will influence the future of the Indo-Pacific region. As such, the introduction serves as a starting point for the book's central argument that maritime security in Southeast Asia is best understood through the interplay of its geography, trade connectivity and great power rivalry, which is a nexus that will define both regional stability and the global order in the decades ahead.

Theoretical Perspectives on Maritime Geopolitics in Southeast Asia

To understand maritime geopolitics in Southeast Asia, it is necessary to situate the discussion within broader theoretical debates on state behaviour, strategic rivalry and the changing nature of the maritime order. This chapter draws on neorealism, liberal institutionalism, complex interdependence and critical geopolitics to explain the region's maritime dynamics and the competing interests of both major and middle powers. From a neorealist standpoint, particularly as articulated by Waltz (1979), the international system is anarchic, compelling states to prioritize survival through self-help and power accumulation. This logic is clearly visible in the growing maritime rivalry between China and the United States, where each side tends to interpret the actions of the other as potential threats (Mearsheimer, 2001). China's construction and militarization of artificial islands, alongside the United States' Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), reflect classic balance-of-power behaviour. For smaller Southeast Asian states such as Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia, this environment creates difficult strategic dilemmas. These countries must navigate between maintaining economic engagement with China and strengthening security ties with external partners such as the United States, India, Japan or Australia (Kuik, 2008). Even measures that are essentially defensive – such as military modernization or the expansion of coast guard capabilities – are often perceived as provocative, thereby intensifying mistrust and reinforcing a regional security dilemma (Glaser, 2011).

Liberal institutionalism offers a contrasting perspective by emphasizing the role of institutions, norms and cooperative frameworks in reducing conflict and promoting stability (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Nye, 1977). In Southeast Asia,

this approach is reflected in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the EASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), which are designed to encourage dialogue, transparency and confidence-building (Acharya, 2001). At the international level, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides the primary legal framework governing maritime rights and dispute settlement (United Nations, 1982). In addition, regional initiatives such as ReCAAP and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) have contributed to improving maritime domain awareness (MDA), information sharing and capacity building (Murphy, 2016). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these institutional arrangements remains limited. ASEAN's emphasis on consensus often constrains its ability to respond decisively to major power pressures in the South China Sea, underscoring the persistent tension between institutional ideals and geopolitical realities (Busse, 1999; Ganesan, 2017).

The notion of complex interdependence further helps explain Southeast Asia's strategic landscape by drawing attention to the dense economic linkages that bind regional states together (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Despite ongoing political and security tensions, countries in the region remain deeply connected through trade, supply chains and infrastructure networks. Competing connectivity initiatives, including China's BRI, Japan's Quality Infrastructure Partnership and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative illustrate how major powers seek influence through economic engagement as much as through strategic positioning. This has produced a pattern of competitive cooperation, where states simultaneously depend on one another economically while seeking to hedge against strategic risks. As a result, economic engagement often continues even in the presence of strategic rivalry, forcing Southeast Asian states to balance economic interests with security concerns.

Critical geopolitics adds another layer of analysis by shifting attention away from material power alone and towards the role of ideas, identities and narratives in shaping geopolitical space. Maritime Southeast Asia is not only contested through territorial claims but also through competing representations of history, legitimacy and regional order. China's invocation of 'historical rights' through the Nine-Dash Line, the United States' promotion of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', and ASEAN's emphasis on 'centrality' reflect different efforts to frame and legitimize regional leadership (Dodds, 2007; Ó Tuathail, 1996). From this perspective, the South China Sea is not merely a zone of resource competition or strategic manoeuvring but also a space where sovereignty, identity and historical memory intersect. Maritime disputes, therefore, are shaped as much by perceptions and narratives as by material interests.

Taken together, an integrative analytical approach that draws on these theoretical traditions provides a more comprehensive understanding of maritime geopolitics in Southeast Asia. Neorealism helps explain persistent strategic rivalry and security dilemmas involving both regional and external powers (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). Liberal institutionalism highlights the potential, as well as the limitations, of institutional and legal frameworks such as

ASEAN mechanisms and UNCLOS in managing conflict (Acharya, 2001; Keohane, 1984). At the same time, complex interdependence draws attention to how economic ties create both constraints and opportunities for cooperation amid ongoing competition (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

Finally, critical geopolitics emphasizes how identity, narratives and imagined areas influence state behaviour (Dodds, 2007; Ó Tuathail, 1996).

Together, these ideas illustrate that Southeast Asia's maritime geopolitics is not driven by a single logic of power. Instead, it is shaped by the interaction of security needs, economic interdependence and ideational forces.

This interplay will continue to evolve as the Indo-Pacific strategic environment changes. Overall, these theoretical perspectives show that Southeast Asia's maritime geopolitics is influenced by the interactions of power politics, economic ties, institutional norms and conflicting geopolitical narratives. This integrated framework sets the groundwork for the coming sections that will look into geography, chokepoints, stakeholders and new security dynamics. These historical connections highlight the region's longstanding maritime orientation, which continues to influence its current strategic and economic importance.

Maritime Geography of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is fundamentally maritime in both geography and history. As Jennifer Gaynor pointed out, the region is 'maritime all the way down', emphasizing the importance of the sea over land in shaping its human past (Gaynor, 2014). This view helps us see key waterways not just as modern chokepoints but as essential parts of ancient sea routes. Gaynor also highlights that Southeast Asians used large ships to navigate Indian Ocean trade networks long before European incursions (Gaynor, 2014). The region's interconnectedness is clear in the transfer of natural materials. Archaeologists have traced worked jade artefacts across the South China Sea, linking them to mines as far away as eastern Taiwan. This shows how natural resources supported maritime exchange (Gaynor, 2014).

Importance of Maritime Chokepoints in Southeast Asia

The maritime chokepoints of Southeast Asia, particularly the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait, the Lombok Strait, and the South China Sea, are among the most strategically significant waterways in the world. The Strait of Malacca is one of the world's busiest maritime corridors, linking the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. It serves as a critical route for the movement of crude oil, liquefied natural gas (LNG), manufactured goods, and other commercial cargo, carrying a substantial share of global seaborne trade and energy shipments (Till, 2013; U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2023). Owing to its strategic location, the Strait has become indispensable to the economies of East Asia, South Asia, and the wider Indo-Pacific region.

Although the Sunda and Lombok Straits carry comparatively lower volumes of maritime traffic than the Malacca Strait, they serve as important alternative routes, particularly for larger vessels that cannot safely transit the narrower and shallower Malacca Strait. As maritime trade continues to expand and concerns over congestion, navigational risks, and piracy increase in the Malacca Strait, these waterways have assumed greater strategic importance within the Indo-Pacific maritime network (Till, 2013).

Meanwhile, the South China Sea functions both as a major international shipping route and as one of the world's most contested maritime spaces. It connects Southeast Asia with Northeast Asia and the Pacific Ocean while supporting significant fisheries and hydrocarbon resources. Control over this maritime domain remains central to regional security and has become a focal point of strategic competition among major powers as well as overlapping territorial claims by coastal states (Kaplan, 2010; Till 2013). These maritime chokepoints therefore serve not only as economic gateways facilitating global commerce but also as strategic instruments through which states secure sea lines of communication (SLOCs), project maritime influence, and shape the evolving balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Their significance extends beyond economic value, making them indispensable components of the region's security architecture and geopolitical landscape.

In addition to its strategic position, Maritime Southeast Asia is rich in natural resources that enhance its geopolitical significance. The South China Sea is believed to hold around 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, making these reserves appealing for regional powers seeking energy security and less dependence on external supplies (RAND Corporation, 2015, p. 9). For China, these resources provide a chance to diversify its energy sources and support its assertive maritime actions. The fishery in the region is also crucial. They provide livelihoods for more than 3.7 million people in coastal states and are an important protein source for local communities (RAND Corporation, 2015, p. 9). However, overfishing, environmental stress and unresolved maritime boundaries have turned fisheries into a flashpoint for disputes. This often leads to confrontations between fishermen, coast guards and naval forces. The battle over hydrocarbons and fisheries involves more than just economic resources. It touches on sovereignty, national security and influence. The competition for these resources raises the stakes in maritime disputes in Southeast Asia, ensuring that the region's waters remain key to both regional stability and great power competition. Thus, competition for resources connects with questions of sovereignty, national identity and long-term strategic security for regional countries. Southeast Asia plays a vital role in global maritime trade by linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The region's waterways, especially the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, are among the busiest sea lanes worldwide. In 2023, about 37% of global maritime petroleum shipments passed through the South China Sea. Earlier estimates valued the goods passing through the area at $3.4 trillion annually, nearly 21% of global trade (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA, 2023], 2023). The Strait of Malacca is one of the world's busiest commercial routes. The importance of these maritime routes grows from their role in ensuring energy security. The importance of these maritime routes grows from their role in

ensuring energy security. The South China Sea is a critical channel for crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments to major Asian economies.

In 2023, approximately 18 million barrels of oil per day travelled through the South China Sea, making up nearly 43% of global maritime oil trade. The main beneficiaries are China (50%), South Korea (14%), Japan (12%) and India (9%), highlighting their reliance on uninterrupted access to these pathways (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA, 2023], 2023). Disruptions to these routes would significantly impact the energy security and economic stability of the wider Indo-Pacific. In addition to their economic and energy importance, these pathways face new challenges that threaten their stability. Piracy and armed robbery continue to be major issues. The ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (2023) noted a 15% increase in incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships across Asia, with Southeast Asia accounting for a significant proportion of reported cases. Moreover, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing remains a serious challenge, causing substantial economic losses while threatening marine biodiversity and the livelihoods of coastal communities in the South China Sea and the wider Indo-Pacific region (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2022). These illegal activities are further complicated by grey-zone tactics, including the use of maritime militias and coast guard vessels to assert sovereignty claims, thereby blurring the distinction between commercial maritime activities and state-sponsored strategic operations (Bateman, 2016; RAND Corporation, 2015). Climate change presents additional risks, as rising sea levels, increasingly intense storms and changing ocean conditions disrupt shipping reliability, damage coastal infrastructure and increase the operational costs of maritime trade (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2023). The interplay of trade dependence, resource pressures, maritime crime and environmental change makes these strategic waterways particularly vulnerable to coercion, disruptions, and geopolitical competition. In summary, the maritime routes of Southeast Asia are not merely channels of trade. They are critical lifelines for global commerce, regional energy security and the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Their vulnerability to piracy, grey-zone activities, illegal fishing and climate related risks further reinforces their significance within the contemporary maritime security architecture.

Together, they emphasize the geopolitical importance of Southeast Asia's maritime geography. Their strategic value comes not only from their economic functions but also from their roles as power and influence tools in the Indo-Pacific.

See Table 1.1 for a comparative overview of major maritime chokepoints and their strategic significance.

Major Stakeholders and Their Interests

The strategic environment of Southeast Asia is influenced not just by geography and trade but also by the interests and policies of key players, both regional and external. Each actor views the region through the lens of its own security, economic and geopolitical goals. This creates a complex mix of cooperation, competition and rivalry.

Table 1.1. Major Maritime Chokepoints in Southeast Asia and Their Strategic Importance.

Chokepoints	Location	Strategic Importance	Key Security Concerns
Strait of Malacca	Between Malaysia–Indonesia–Singapore	Global trade, energy transit	Piracy, congestion, naval rivalry
Sunda Strait	Indonesia	Alternative route to Malacca	Navigational hazards
Lombok Strait	Indonesia	Deep-water route for large vessels	Strategic military transit
South China Sea	Central Southeast Asia	Trade, energy, fisheries	Territorial disputes
Sulu–Celebes Sea	Philippines–Indonesia–Malaysia	Regional connectivity	Terrorism, piracy

Source: Author's synthesis based on publicly available maritime data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) on global shipping routes and chokepoints, official navigational information from the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and secondary academic literature on Southeast Asian maritime geography and security.