

STABILISING DIVERSITY AT SEA: IPOI, CIVIL MARITIME STAKEHOLDERS, AND TAIWAN

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ABSTRACT

India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) reframes the Indo-Pacific as a functional, cooperative maritime space rather than a theatre of great-power rivalry. Translating SAGAR (now, MAHASAGAR) into seven deeply interconnected thematic spokes, it prioritises ocean governance, blue-economy centrality, and capacity building, along with capability enhancement to promote sustainability, connectivity, and inclusive development. IPOI thus re-theorises the region as a multi-layered governance domain where middle powers and stakeholders with varying capacities and calibre can shape agendas through issue-based, technically grounded, and mutually respectful cooperation. This creates room for partners to collaborate even amid wider constraints. For India–Taiwan ties, IPOI offers low-risk, non-military, civic pathways in science, technology, supply-chain resilience, ports, and climate-resilient coastal development.

THE INDO-PACIFIC AS PARADOX AND POSSIBILITY

A quiet yet enduring paradox lies at the heart of contemporary maritime geopolitics. Even as governments around the world proclaim the arrival of multipolarity— an era of world politics marked by partnerships, platforms, and overlapping webs of cooperation— the international system has still not reached a phase where it can ever necessarily guarantee fair counterparts. The architecture of cooperation has multiplied; yet the ethics of fair or equitable partnership remain conspicuously underbuilt. This distinction is akin to the oft-invoked difference between *courtesy* and *responsibility*— the former largely symbolic and easily extended, albeit essential, but the latter proves to be relatively substantive and binding. Yet, many may rightfully argue that geopolitics is no moral parlour game. It is shaped by a dense and often unruly interplay of forces of an entirely different order— a multitude of converging and diverging interests across nations— and therefore demands

greater analytical depth and far greater flexibility than simplistic analogies, like the former, are often prepared to concede.

The idea of an “Indo-Pacific” region itself remains as much a theoretical construct as a geographical one. Nations continue to define the region in differing — and sometimes deliberately ambiguous— ways, while some refrain from defining it at all.¹ These varying interpretations inevitably shape diplomatic behaviour and strategic posture, which is the organic result of the primacy of national interest in policy formulation. In the Indian context, that nation’s maritime interests are fundamentally linked to— and explicitly articulated as serving— the “*socio-economic and material well-being of its citizens*”.² The challenge at hand on the regional level, therefore, is to reconcile domestic developmental priorities with the external demands of regional engagement in a dynamic and tension-prone maritime environment.

The Indo-Pacific is a densely populated and structurally uneven region marked by pockets of conflict and inhabited by actors with widely varying degrees of influence, interests, and state capacity. While some states are well equipped to undertake demanding large-scale development within compressed time frames, others are compelled to prioritise investments either in human skill formation (capability-enhancement) or in physical infrastructure (capability-building), often in asymmetric configurations shaped by necessity, constraint, or geostrategic calculation rooted in their prevailing conditions. This animated disorder caused by varying national priorities is further compounded by the absence of any standardised metric to assess the regional contribution by individual nations. Ironically, this indeterminacy may be advantageous as it creates space to rethink what it means to be an “Indo-Pacific actor”, particularly amid a rapidly evolving strategic landscape.

A narrowly literal reading of the Indo-Pacific construct might frame it primarily as a response to immediate maritime aggression. A more realistic perspective, however, accommodates diverse national priorities and ground realities. Accordingly, several nations— and groupings— have articulated a range of open and cooperative strategies to clarify their interests and objectives in the region. The Indo-Pacific thus functions as an aspirational yet development-centric and collaboration-forward regional construct whose malleability is essential to sustaining a diverse collective.³ As per this framing, regional coherence ought to be guided less by rigid definitional consensus and more by its inherently maritime character— one that enables stakeholders to align their interests with the demands

of an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. What ultimately drives initiative in the Indo-Pacific, therefore, is not a shared definition but a shared vision.

The Indian understanding and vision for the Indo-Pacific region find their clearest expression within this theoretically flexible yet inclusive space, which respects democratic values unflinchingly while accommodating diverse views. If the region's collective purpose ultimately derives less from rigid definitions and alliance-driven rhetoric than from its maritime character and shared aspirations, then the value of any framework or initiative moulded for the Indo-Pacific region would lie in its ability to translate that openness into functional practice without collapsing into securitised logic. Therefore, the Indian approach is fine-tuned to the ground realities of the region and deliberately seeks the advancement of non-adversarial projection and articulation of the Indo-Pacific as a regional construct.

The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched in 2019 by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India⁴, was consciously conceived as a non-institutional framework which lent itself to flexible collaboration rather than a treaty-bound or alliance-driven architecture. Its emphasis on issue-based or theme-based cooperation, voluntary participation, and modular engagement allows it to emerge as a functional and pragmatic platform for maritime collaboration across the Indo-Pacific. On the strategic stage, it represents an effort to define the Indo-Pacific not as a theatre of inevitable contestation, but as a shared maritime domain whose primary logic is growth, connectivity, and collective stewardship. The IPOI provides first-order specificity to India's stated maritime policy, Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), now Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR).⁵

The regional framing motivated by the IPOI resists reducing the Indo-Pacific to a security dilemma even before it has gained broad acceptance across all tiers of stakeholders; instead, it positions the oceans as enablers of economic circulation, ecological interdependence, and institutional cooperation. In doing so, the IPOI re-centres maritime geography as a *facilitator* of opportunity rather than as a constraint-driven regional perception shaped solely by threat matrices and great-power rivalry.

CIVIL INDUSTRY COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION UNDER THE IPOI FRAMEWORK

At this juncture, the author advances the argument that such structural aspects also render the IPOI particularly conducive to engagement with actors that do not fit neatly into conventional diplomatic categories— including Taiwan. This argument, however, is laid strictly from an Indian perspective, and does not hold any other government(s) accountable or expectant towards the suggestion. (Nevertheless, the idea of tripartite or multi-party cooperation on non-military issues is explored later in the text, in keeping with the collective ethos of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and the Indo-Pacific region as a whole.)

While political sensitivities curtail formal government-to-government involvement between India and Taiwan, avenues introduced— and resulting opportunities pushed forth— by civil industry-led cooperation provide an effective and entirely productive pathway for engagement⁶, particularly within the IPOI ecosystem.

The matter of the initiative's openness to non-state stakeholders is central to this suggestion. The IPOI, as it is currently conducted, does not require uniform participation across all pillars, nor does it mandate formal recognition of participating entities. This statement is largely drawn through logical inference by parsing the terms associated with the IPOI— “non-treaty based”, “voluntary”, and “inclusive”; As also extracted from the Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's address at the East Asia Summit in 2019 at Bangkok, which constituted the inaugural articulation of the Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative—

“I suggest an Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative, in this context. In it, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 14— which calls on the world to “conserve and sustainably use” the maritime domain— we should make visible efforts to create a safe, secure and stable maritime domain. We should recognise the imperative for all States in the region, and those with interests in it, to work collaboratively to safeguard the oceans, including from plastic litter; build capacity and fairly share resources; reduce disaster risk; enhance science, technology and academic cooperation; and promote free, fair and mutually beneficial trade and maritime transport. Work in each sector could be led by one or two countries. This would help Governments align better with public opinion demanding cooperative solutions to global challenges. The initiative would be truly open, inclusive and cooperative. And it can develop institutional roots as partners wish, step-by-step.”⁷

In essence, the IPOI encourages institutional collaboration categorised into seven deeply interconnected spokes through one or multiple lead countries. It

prioritises project-based cooperation and thematic result-oriented working group arrangements owing to its guiding principles. This tangent allows industry, academia, and civil institutions an entryway alongside states, without expecting explicit political signalling; In doing so, politics may function as one of several enabling *conditions* rather than a central organising force, thereby affording greater agency and recognition to institutions that contribute substantively to regional growth and development in their respective capacities. Taiwan's international engagement strategy, which has long relied on economic diplomacy, industrial partnerships, and track 1.5 and track 2 mechanisms, aligns well with this structure. As a result, the Taiwanese civil industry stakeholders can be embedded within IPOI-linked activities through commercial channels without necessitating formal incorporation as a partner country in the political sense, thereby limiting the scope for misconstrued external commentary on developmental and cooperative undertakings.

One of the most promising areas for such engagement lies in maritime trade, connectivity, and supply chains. Taiwan occupies a critical position in global maritime commerce, particularly in container shipping, port management, logistics optimisation, and high-value manufacturing supply chains.⁸ Indian civil industries— including port operators, logistics firms, shipbuilders, and digital trade platforms— stand to gain considerably through potential collaboration with their Taiwanese counterparts. Cooperation in niche areas such as smart port technologies, automated cargo handling, AI-enabled logistics management, and supply chain resilience frameworks is particularly pertinent as India seeks to modernise its port infrastructure and integrate more deeply— and enhance its overall role— within Indo-Pacific production networks. Such collaboration can be pursued through industry associations, trade forums, and pilot projects under the relevant thematic spoke, namely 'Trade-Connectivity and Maritime Transport'. It is also interesting to note that the two lead nations (other than India) for the spoke at the moment— Japan⁹ and the USA¹⁰— also happen to be leading trade partners of Taiwan.¹¹

Beyond trade and connectivity, maritime technology and innovation offer another significant avenue for civil industry engagement. 'Technology' is too broad and essential an aspect to be designated as an isolated subject. It functions, in its ideal form, as a cross-cutting enabler across multiple spokes. Nevertheless, the spoke overseeing 'Science, Technology, and Academic Cooperation' could benefit by leveraging Taiwan's strengths in maritime electronics and technology, sensors

and device connectivity, port-based technology systems, among many others. These also complement India's eagerly expanding maritime startup ecosystem.¹² Joint programmes, co-development of civil-use maritime software, and venture capital collaboration focused on next-gen maritime applications could be neatly aligned with IPOI-derivative objectives. Framing such cooperation as industry innovation partnerships allows both sides to advance technological objectives while remaining insulated from political sensitivities.

'Capacity building and Resource Sharing' represents another domain where civil-led engagement is both viable and valuable. Taiwanese universities, maritime academies, and professional training institutes related to the maritime domain possess strong capabilities across a wide range of sub— port management education, maritime logistics training, and blue economy skill development, to name a few. Partnerships with Indian counterparts could take the form of industry-funded fellowships, joint certification programs, or digital training platforms aligned with IPOI priorities. In such arrangements, Taiwan functions as a knowledge and expertise provider, reinforcing IPOI's emphasis on capacity building and capability enhancement.

It is also pertinent to note that India–Taiwan civil maritime cooperation does not need to be imagined from scratch; it can be gradually constructed by incrementally leveraging the existing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between the two sides, particularly those covering industrial cooperation, science and technology, standardised objectives, MSMEs, and investment facilitation. While these MoUs are not maritime-specific in every case, their sectoral breadth could provide maritime activities with an opportunity to be embedded as supplementary developments and applications rather than leading objectives.¹³ Aforementioned themes— such as port digitisation tools, logistics software, ship equipment manufacturing, and marine electronics— can be framed as extensions of industrial and technological cooperation already agreed upon. Industrial cooperation MoUs, for instance, can support joint manufacturing of port equipment or green shipping components within India; Science and Technology MoUs can underpin the co-development of maritime software, digital compliance tools, or data-driven logistics platforms; and standards-related cooperation can be applied to port operations, environmental reporting, and logistics interoperability. None of these require new political agreements, yet together they produce tangible maritime outcomes. This steady development of engagement lies within agreed boundaries while allowing maritime collaboration to scale up to regional standards inherent to the IPOI; It also allows existing MoUs to function as enabling instruments rather than limiting ones.

Environmental cooperation under IPOI also provides an additional low-risk and fairly aligned entry point for India–Taiwan engagement. The initiative places strong emphasis on marine ecology, pollution control, and sustainable use of ocean resources—the spokes concerning these issues are aptly named ‘Marine Ecology’, ‘Disaster Risk Reduction and Management’, and ‘Marine Resources’. Taiwan has accumulated substantial experience and policy-backed expertise in coastal zone management, fisheries modernisation, marine pollution mitigation, and the advancement of circular blue economy practices over the past decade.¹⁴ These capabilities are not incidental, but the product of a deliberate legislative and institutional push to integrate ocean governance, environmental sustainability, and industrial development within a coherent national framework. A string of dedicated laws — including the Marine Pollution Control Act,¹⁵ the Marine Industry Development Act,¹⁶ and the Climate Change Response Act,¹⁷ among others — have progressively strengthened Taiwan’s regulatory architecture for marine environmental protection while simultaneously enabling innovation-led growth in ocean-based industries.

More recently, the approval of a draft *Marine Conservation Act*, passed by the Legislature in July 2024, has further consolidated Taiwan’s commitment to protecting ecosystem health, preserving biodiversity, and the sustainable use of marine resources.¹⁸ Together, these legislative instruments provide Taiwan with the authority to regulate marine activities, enforce pollution controls, designate protected areas, and guide long-term planning for coastal resilience—reflecting an expanding and systemic future-oriented approach to maritime and environmental concerns. Importantly, they also signal an understanding of the oceans as an economic and ecological asset, rather than merely being a regulatory domain. This institutional depth and regulatory maturity provide the necessary foundation for translating Taiwan’s marine governance experience into outward-facing, functional cooperation. Since these capabilities are rooted in practice rather than declaratory positioning, they lend themselves naturally to collaboration in applied and civil domains.

Accordingly, Indian civil industries involved in the fisheries sector, marine waste management, coastal infrastructure development, and other related areas could collaborate with Taiwanese firms and research institutions on sustainable value chains, plastic reduction technologies, and coastal resilience solutions. These initiatives can be hosted by Indian research bodies, non-governmental organisations,

or industry platforms operating under IPOI's environmental objectives, with Taiwanese participation framed purely in technical and commercial terms.

TRIANGULAR OR MULTI-NODAL FUNCTIONALISM WITHIN THE IPOI

Therefore, the question of whether Taiwan can be incorporated into the IPOI framework itself requires a distinction between formal and functional participation. Formally, Taiwan cannot be incorporated as an IPOI partner without introducing diplomatic complications. Functionally, however, IPOI's inclusive principles allow Taiwan to participate meaningfully through indirect but effective mechanisms.

Engagement can occur via spokes led by third countries, where Taiwanese firms and institutions join multinational project teams or industry consortia. Indian civil conveners—such as chambers of commerce, port authorities, think tanks, and industry associations—can also act as convening points by inviting Taiwanese participation in IPOI-branded initiatives.

Japan's role, for instance, merits closer examination in this regard. In domains such as maritime connectivity and disaster management, Japan could prove to be a crucial enabler to make this model of civil cooperation with Taiwan viable and resilient. Japan brings collaborative legitimacy, deep experience in civil maritime infrastructure, and a long track record of operating in diverse and sensitive environments without escalation.¹⁹ Japanese firms are already trusted partners in Indian ports, Southeast Asian logistics hubs, and maritime connectivity projects.²⁰ Japan also shares a historically rich connection with Taiwan, with relations which have changed in nature and stabilised over the years.

By structuring India–Taiwan cooperation as triangular or multi-party arrangements, wherein Japanese entities may act as lead integrators or financiers, Taiwanese industry players can participate without being singled out. This also aligns with Japan's preference for rules-based order, quality infrastructure, and further complements India's desire to position IPOI as inclusive rather than confrontational.

Taiwanese industry's existing footprint in Southeast Asia further strengthens another case for possible joint non-military collaboration under IPOI.²¹ Southeast Asia continues to navigate a delicate strategic balance—seeking to preserve autonomy within the Indo-Pacific while managing its complex economic and

political relationship with China. The fragility of this strategic equilibrium is widely acknowledged by regional scholars. One such assessment observes—

*“ASEAN’s unity does not lie in consensus, but in a shared instinct: stay out of the fight. But think-tanks are clear about the limits of this stance. A major Carnegie study warns that a full-scale conflict—especially one perceived as “unprovoked”—could force Southeast Asian nations to realign overnight. Neutrality under pressure has a way of fracturing. And ASEAN, built on soft norms and voluntary consensus, has little to withstand a geopolitical earthquake. A Taiwan conflict would pry open every seam in Southeast Asia’s strategic logic. For realists, the region is hedging—balancing between China’s power and the United States’ security guarantees with deliberate ambiguity. For liberal institutionalists, the immense flow of trade and investment is the best deterrent to conflict. For constructivists, ASEAN’s identity as a neutral convenor shapes its behaviour as much as power politics. But for policymakers in the region, theory is less important than survival.”*²²

India can leverage this reality by engaging Taiwanese-linked supply chains already operating in Southeast Asia through Indian-led or IPOI-aligned civil initiatives. In practice, this means cooperation occurs not as India–Taiwan projects per se, but as Indo-Pacific industry networks in which Taiwanese firms are already normalised participants. Such an approach also offers tangible benefits for Southeast Asia, such as supply-chain resilience, access to advanced maritime technologies, opportunities to improve port and logistics efficiency, and frequent opportunities for capability enhancement and environmental cooperation. At the same time, it allows the same political advantage to Southeast Asian states—the ability to deepen functional collaboration without being drawn into explicit geopolitical signalling, thereby reinforcing their preferred strategy of strategic autonomy through economic interdependence.

CONCLUSION

In sum, India–Taiwan interaction through the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative is both feasible and strategically advantageous when pursued through civil, industry-led channels. IPOI’s modular and non-binding structure enables Taiwan to be incorporated in practice across multiple areas of maritime cooperation. As the Indo-Pacific increasingly becomes shaped by supply chains, standards, and industrial ecosystems rather than formal alliances alone, such understated forms of engagement may prove far more consequential than overt diplomatic arrangements.

China's interference calculus also changes when cooperation is diffused across multiple civil actors and jurisdictions. For instance, projects that may involve Indian firms, Japanese integrators, and Taiwanese technology providers operating through Southeast Asian subsidiaries are harder to target without causing wider commercial fallout. This increases the cost of interference while reducing the possibility of Taiwan's role being leveraged for political narratives. Moreover, civil maritime domains— such as port efficiency, environmental compliance, or workforce training— offer limited justification for political retaliation, particularly when framed under sustainability and development objectives.

Within this ecosystem, IPOI functions as a soft coordinating framework rather than a rigid and imposing structure. India can encourage best practices, host industry dialogues, and promote pilot projects fully aligned with the IPOI spokes.

Ultimately, this collaboration model reflects a realistic adaptation to Indo-Pacific constraints. It recognises that formal inclusion is neither possible nor necessary at the present stage, yet it also rejects the notion that such limitations should impede economic interdependence, developmental momentum, or the gradual formation of meaningful cultural and societal bonds. By leveraging existing MoUs, embedding cooperation in civil industry networks, and utilising the Taiwanese industry's established presence, India can advance substantive maritime cooperation without crossing diplomatic red lines. This is not merely risking avoidance— it is a strategy for quietly shaping maritime norms in favour of diplomatic values, and developing technologies and supply chains in ways that endure beyond political cycles.

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