

RE-READING INDIA–SINGAPORE MARITIME INTERDEPENDENCE

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Relations between India and Singapore are frequently narrated along two familiar axes. At one end lies the empirical comfort of trade tables, FDI flows, port investments, and institutional agreements, each acting as evidence of a mature economic partnership sustained by decades of consistent policy-driven engagement. At the other lies the language of civilisational familiarity, diasporic embeddedness, and diplomatic warmth. This narrative situates the relationship within longer arcs of historical exchange and cultural affinity. Neither portrayal is inaccurate. Yet, when treated as self-contained narratives— economic pragmatism on one end, symbolic continuity on the other— they fail to capture the structural transformation underway in the maritime domain.

The purpose of this article is to situate India–Singapore bilateral relations within a secure and stable analytical frame that does not oscillate between these two extremes. Temporally narrow trade statistics alone cannot explain why long-term capital continues to flow into port infrastructure, logistics ecosystems, and regulatory convergence. Nor can civilisational memory by itself account for the increasingly technical forms of cooperation now unfolding. To isolate these dimensions from one another is to misconstrue the strategic foundation. Economic embeddedness and political familiarity are no longer parallel tracks; rather, they are mutually reinforcing layers of maritime interdependence.

This re-reading becomes particularly necessary against the backdrop of a shifting Indo-Pacific order. The roles of stakeholders across the region are in flux. Established hubs confront strategic compression; emerging powers confront the responsibilities of scale. Sea lanes are securitised, supply chains recalibrated, and energy transitions accelerating. In such an environment, relationships anchored solely in transactional trade or ceremonial diplomacy are exposed to volatility. Stability demands something deeper: institutionalised interdependence— where infrastructure, standards, security routines, and policy coordination operate as a single architecture.

By examining this transition, the article argues that India–Singapore maritime interdependence should be read neither as a chart-driven commercial story nor as a diplomatic inheritance, but as a deliberate effort to stabilise bilateral foundations amid systemic uncertainty. The sea, in this framing, is not merely the medium of exchange; it is the infrastructure through which economic confidence and strategic reassurance converge.

It is within this context that the idea of “currency” in bilateral relations must be expanded. Value in international relations is not confined to monetary exchange; it is constituted through

multiple reinforcing dimensions.¹ Civilisational familiarity, for instance, operates as a form of trust currency not because of abstract cultural affinity, but because it lowers transaction costs in cooperation.² Shared historical reference points and diasporic continuity reduce uncertainty in negotiation, facilitate informal communication channels, and enable quicker dispute resolution while equipping structures with socio-cultural sensitivities. While institutional trust is largely based on the ability (or inability) to build through repeated compliance or ideological alignment, which often imposes conformity, civilisational familiarity works through pre-existing cognitive comfort—an ability to anticipate behaviour without necessitating formal signalling.³

Human capital deepens this further. India's embedded workforce within Singapore's economy creates a form of structural interdependence that cannot be easily replicated. Such embeddedness generates continuity in operational practices, and a stable bridge between regulatory environments. Alternative partners may provide capital or technology, but replicating this depth of human integration would require generational presence, not transactional engagement. Democratic predictability without ideological export further distinguishes India's positioning. For Singapore, this reduces the risk of political conditionality while retaining confidence in rule-based interaction.

Strategic restraint reinforces this equation. India's prudent approach to refrain from operating within alliance structures or coercive strategic postures translates into a non-threatening presence in the region. For Singapore, this has tangible benefits. It allows engagement with India without anxieties of triggering potential counterreactions from other major powers, thereby preserving its unique centrality within a contested geopolitical space even as it engages with a structurally larger power. India's posture offers to expand Singapore's diplomatic manoeuvrability rather than constraining it, particularly in an environment where great-power competition often forces binary alignments.

Conceptualising the sea as essential infrastructure also increasingly shifts focus from passive geography to active enablers of trade, security, and sustainability. Maritime connectivity, in this sense, is not movement alone but the orchestration of flows—goods, capital, energy, and information—through predictably governed, and resilient systems. This is where the distinction between “depth” and “agility” becomes analytically useful. Depth refers to the density of integration such as long-term investments, regulatory alignment, hinterland connectivity, and institutional linkages that anchor continuity. Agility, by contrast, refers to responsiveness, that is, the ability to reroute cargo, adapt to disruptions, digitise processes, and recalibrate operations in real time. Singapore's hub function, for instance, depends not on one or the other, but on their coexistence.

¹ Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan on “An Overview of India's Maritime Geopolitics”, Lecture during the Internship Teaching Capsule at the National Maritime Foundation, 23 February 2026

² Lena Le, “The Re-emergence of Non-material Factors in International Relations”, *VNU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol 1, No 1 (2025): 133-151

³ Arvind Gupta, “India's Civilisational Diplomacy: Heritage and Archaeology”, *Vivekananda International Foundation*, 12 September 2025, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2025/september/12/India-s-Civilisational-Diplomacy-Heritage-and-Archaeology>

See Also: Tamas Dudlak, “The Rise of Civilizational States: Civilizational Discourse in International Relations”, *Sylff Association*, 20 December 2022, https://www.sylff.org/news_voices/30725/

Singapore's position, however, remains strategically complex. Its role as a global hub is anchored in the Malacca Strait, one of the most critical maritime chokepoints in the world. This geography has enabled its rise, but it has also exposed it to strategic compression. As great-power rivalry intensifies, the same advantages which sustain Singapore also render it vulnerable to external pressures.⁴ The challenge, therefore, is not decline but compression—the shrinking of strategic space within which it can operate autonomously.

In this context, India emerges as a stabilising partner. Its geographic reach, and strategic autonomy complement Singapore's efficiency and logistical sophistication. This creates a natural division of labour wherein India provides scale, hinterland connectivity, and market depth, while Singapore offers digitalised standard-setting and hub efficiency. Crucially, this asymmetry does not generate competitive friction because it is underpinned by mutual dependence rather than rivalry.

This cumulative interaction— across civilisational familiarity, human capital, democratic predictability, strategic restraint, and maritime connectivity— produces a layered form of interdependence that is both resilient and adaptive. The challenge, however, appears with the observation that the market and state appear aligned in recognising this trajectory, while intellectual and policy communities lag behind. The operational logic of the relationship is advancing faster than its conceptual articulation.

Singaporean capital is already deeply embedded across Indian port infrastructure, logistics systems, and associated maritime networks. These investments are neither speculative nor short-term; they represent long-duration commitments that generate institutional familiarity. In effect, the bilateral relationship has already progressed into an advanced stage of integration. Policy discourse, however, continues to operate at a comparatively slower tempo. Its language remains anchored in earlier formulations centred on “access,” even as the material reality reflects a transition toward “architecture”. This is not indicative of misalignment between market and policy, but rather of the inherent deliberative nature of policy processes, which prioritise stability, consensus, and procedural rigour over speed. This temporal lag carries analytical implications. If policy continues to describe the relationship in access-oriented terms, it risks understating both the depth of existing interdependence and the complexity of managing it. The issue is no longer one of enabling entry or facilitating coordination, but of sustaining, refining, and scaling an already embedded system of cooperation.

For instance, Singapore's port operator PSA is not making speculative bets in India— it is undertaking 30-year commitments that embed it within the structural evolution of India's maritime infrastructure. The expansion of Bharat Mumbai Container Terminal (BMCT), now moving into its second phase and currently India's largest container terminal, represents the most significant Singaporean infrastructure investment in the country to date.⁵ This is not

⁴ Liang Fook Lye, “Singapore's Strategic Positioning amid US-China Rivalry”, *World Geographic Insights*, 23 October 2025

⁵ PSA International, “PSA Inaugurates Phase 2 of PSA Mumbai – India's Largest Container Terminal”, 05 September 2025, <https://www.globalpsa.com/psa-inaugurates-phase-2-of-psa-mumbai-indias-largest-container-terminal/>

portfolio capital seeking short-term returns; it is patient capital that presupposes continuity. Ports, by their very nature, lock in behaviour. They generate routines, standardise practices, and produce long-term interdependence between actors and systems.

This reality complicates a familiar line of inquiry within policy and academic settings. Much of the analytical discourse continues to be framed through the lens of competition. Yet, empirical developments suggest a different trajectory. Track 1 actors and industry stakeholders appear increasingly comfortable allowing competitive logic to recede in favour of embedded cooperation. The scale and duration of investments indicate confidence not in outcompeting one another, but in co-developing systems that are mutually sustaining.⁶ This certainly raises a necessary recalibration in how the relationship is discussed.

If competition is no longer the organising principle of interaction at the operational level, then analytical frameworks that privilege it risk mischaracterising the entire nature of engagement. The operative proposition the author then presents is this— when trade sits at the centre of bilateral relations, strategy learns to behave. Economic interdependence imposes its own discipline. It reduces the space for rhetorical positioning and redirects attention toward predictability. Where two nations are already predisposed towards integration, and where industry demonstrates a sustained capacity to embed itself within bilateral structures, the foundational questions of “access” and even the necessity of coordination lose their analytical centrality. These conditions are no longer being negotiated; they are already in effect. What emerges instead is a more demanding inquiry— how effectively do systems communicate once the tools for integration are already in place?

This engagement is not only economic in character but fundamentally maritime in its orientation, bringing into focus the concept of maritimity— and, crucially, the uneven ways in which it is internalised across the two nations.

In the Indian context, maritime consciousness has only recently entered mainstream discourse, largely through an execution-oriented and deliberately coordinated top-down approach. While scholarly engagement with maritime history, culture, and strategy is not new, its consolidation into a cross-sectoral and policy-relevant framework has been comparatively recent, driven by sustained attention from the highest executive levels of government. This has enabled a more integrated appreciation of the maritime domain, though the process remains ongoing.

Singapore presents a contrasting case. As a maritime city-state whose economic survival is intrinsically tied to the sea, it has long maintained a clear and consistent understanding of its maritime identity.⁷ Maritime consciousness, in this sense, is not cultivated— it is foundational. India, by contrast, despite being bounded by seas on three sides, has not fully internalised the maritime dimension of its identity within public consciousness. This condition is not reflective

⁶ The Times of India, “Trade to Tech: India, Singapore Plan Strategic Partnership; Nations Chart Road Map to Boost Ties”, 05 September 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/trade-to-tech-india-singapore-plan-strategic-partnership-nations-chart-road-map-to-boost-ties/articleshow/123707462.cms>

⁷ MINDEF Singapore, “Fact Sheet: Republic of Singapore Navy – Securing the Sea, Securing Singapore, Securing the Singaporean Way of Life”, 12 November 2019, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/12nov19_fs/

of deliberate neglect, but rather of limited exposure and insufficient integration of maritime perspectives within mainstream academic and policy discourse. As a result, societal engagement with the seas remains uneven.

This gap carries direct implications for policy. Policy, whether declarative or operational, represents the highest refinement of national priorities. Where maritimacy is not sufficiently embedded within the broader conception of national interest, it is correspondingly underrepresented in the articulation of policy objectives and instruments. The challenge, therefore, is not only strategic but cognitive, to ensure that maritime consciousness is internalised to a degree that it naturally informs and shapes national policy frameworks.⁸

Circling back to policies concerning India-Singapore bilateral relations, one of the functional mechanisms in this regard are Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), which must be understood not as a static diplomatic instrument but as a working document. In the context of India-Singapore economic relations, the operational character is grounded, in strategic terms, within the Eight-Pillar Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) Roadmap (2025).⁹ The CSP provides the broader architecture within which such MoUs acquire meaning and direction. Covering domains such as connectivity, sustainability, digitalisation, skills, and economic cooperation, the CSP reflects a deliberate transition from transactional engagement toward a long-term, structured partnership. Rather than treating these domains as discrete areas of cooperation, it integrates them into a coherent framework that supports sustained interdependence.

Furthermore, the CSP is fully aligned with the earlier identified currencies, but its significance becomes particularly visible when examined through the lens of climate. Climate is no longer a supplemental consideration within maritime cooperation; it has become intrinsic to maritime economics itself. The transition is not about appending sustainability to existing systems, but about reconstituting those systems altogether. In this sense, economies are not merely adapting— they are being consciously “blue-ing.”

The Green and Digital Shipping Corridor MoU (2025) is particularly illustrative.¹⁰ It moves beyond the traditional emphasis on trade facilitation and instead focuses on the co-development of joint, port-linked infrastructure that integrates a multitude of factors such as decarbonisation and digitalisation, among others. This transformation is systemic. Ports, shipping routes, fuel ecosystems, insurance frameworks, and certification regimes are being reshaped simultaneously. For Singapore, this transition is existential. Its economic model is inseparable from maritime

⁸ Arun Pratap Singh, “Sea-blindness Led to Colonisation of India: Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd)”, *Keynote Address by Admiral Arun Prakash at the Welham Boys’ School Military History Seminar, Garhwal Post, 13 October 2024*. <https://garhwalpost.in/sea-blindness-led-to-colonisation-of-india-admiral-arun-prakash-reted/>

⁹ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, “Joint Statement on the Roadmap for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between India and Singapore on the occasion of the Official Visit of His Excellency Mr. Lawrence Wong, Prime Minister of the Republic Of Singapore, to the Republic of India”, 04 September 2025, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/40094/India_Singapore_Joint_Statement_September_04_2025#:~:text=4.,Agreement%20\(ATIGA\)%20in%202025;](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/40094/India_Singapore_Joint_Statement_September_04_2025#:~:text=4.,Agreement%20(ATIGA)%20in%202025;)

¹⁰ Government of India, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Press Release, “Green & Digital Maritime Corridors Dialogue’ at JNPA Sets Stage for India Maritime Week 2025 in Mumbai”, 12 August 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2155845®=3&lang=2>

flows, and therefore highly sensitive to disruptions arising from climate, regulation, or technological shifts. For India, by contrast, the transition represents a scale opportunity— an ability to absorb, deploy, and expand emerging systems across a vast and growing maritime landscape. This asymmetry produces complementarity, and it is precisely this convergence that sets the stage for the Green and Digital Shipping Corridor. The challenge, yet again, lies not in announcing cooperation but in sustaining it. MoUs signal intent; habits determine outcomes. Without mechanisms that translate agreements into routine practice, even well-designed partnerships risk remaining ceremonial.

It is at this juncture that Track-1.5 and Track-2 mechanisms become indispensable. Their comparative advantage lies not in authority, but in horizontal vision— the ability to operate across sectors and interrogate the operational realities that formal policy frameworks often abstract away from. They engage with questions that governments, by virtue of their institutional constraints, cannot easily pose: what constitutes “green” at the level of berth operations? Where do digital documentation systems encounter friction across jurisdictions? Which ports are corridor-ready, and which remain aspirational?

By addressing such questions, these platforms convert hidden abstractions into application. They integrate sustainability, connectivity, skills, and standards into a coherent sequence, thereby transforming MoUs from statements of intent into sustained habits of cooperation. When applied to the Green and Digital Shipping Corridor, this logic becomes particularly evident. Security is another reinforcing pillar of the bilateral engagement. In maritime contexts, security is a precondition. All maritime activity is sensitive to perceptions of stability. Insurance premiums, freight rates, and myriad other factors respond immediately to disruptions. Capital, in this domain, is acutely risk-averse, that is, it withdraws at the first sign of instability.¹¹ Therefore, routine naval cooperation, coordinated patrols, and operational familiarity do not merely serve defence objectives; they function as signals of economic reassurance.

On 15 January 2026, India’s first training squadron— comprising INS *Tir*, INS *Shardul*, INS *Sujata*, and Indian Coast Guard Ship *Sarathi*— arrived at Changi Naval Base.¹² The significance of this development lies not in the visit itself, but in what it represents within the broader logic of maritime cooperation. Training interactions such as this squadron visit contribute to that process in concrete ways. They build interoperability between maritime forces, establish shared operational routines, and enhance coordination across naval and coast guard systems. Over time, these repeated interactions accumulate into institutional familiarity, which in turn underpins trust and effective maritime governance.

In conclusion, economic interdependence imposes discipline, narrowing the space for rhetorical positioning and redirecting focus toward continuity and operational coherence. Within this framework, security, connectivity, and standards no longer compete for primacy. Instead, they

¹¹ Noor Zainab Hussain and Manya Saini, “Maritime insurance premiums surge as Iran conflict widens”, *Reuters*, 06 March 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/maritime-insurance-premiums-surge-iran-conflict-widens-2026-03-06/>

¹² Government of India, Ministry of Defence, “Indian Navy's First Training Squadron Arrives at Changi Naval Base, Singapore”, 17 January 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2215591®=3&lang=1>

function as mutually reinforcing instruments of reassurance. In the maritime domain, where investment is deeply sensitive to risk, this reassurance becomes foundational. It is not alignment alone, but the management of uncertainty, that ultimately determines the durability of cooperation.

India and Singapore appear increasingly aware of this structural imperative. The evolution of their maritime engagement— from port investments and trade agreements to green and digital shipping initiatives and routine security cooperation— suggests a gradual shift from access to architecture. The relationship is no longer best understood as one between a rising continental-maritime economy and a nimble global hub. Rather, it is moving toward a partnership model in which both states co-design the operational conditions of maritime order.

Additionally, the designation of 2026 as the Year of India–Singapore Maritime Cooperation¹³, alongside India’s current leadership of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)¹⁴, provides an enabling institutional framework through which such operational familiarity can be translated into sustained regional outcomes.

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¹³ ASEAN, News, “ASEAN and India Reinforce Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Priorities”, 13 February 2026, <https://asean.org/the-26th-meeting-of-asean-india-joint-cooperation-committee-convenes-at-asean-headquarters-asean-secretariat/>

¹⁴ Government of India, Ministry of Defence, “IONS Maritime Exercise (IMEX) TTX 2026 Held at Southern Naval Command, Kochi”, *Press Information Bureau*, 29 March 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=2246627®=3&lang=1>