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# 124

Maritime Geopolitics  
of the Pacific and Indian Oceans:  
A View From Moscow

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# About the Author

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Until recently, Russia's interests in the Asia-Pacific did not go beyond maintaining a status quo there, with a focus on the principle of ASEAN's centrality and taking part in ASEAN events. Therefore, expanding political, economic and cultural ties with this association was a priority for Russia. However, the conflict in Ukraine affected its presence in the Asia-Pacific in terms of both its goals and exposure.

Targeted by a salvo of Western sanctions in 2022, Moscow hastily made an eastward policy U-turn by placing its bets on forging closer ties with Asian countries. Its trade with China surged, and Russia-India trade increased six-fold in a matter of two years. Japan with its harsh anti-Russia stance ceased to be Russia's partner, becoming the only country from this region to impose sanctions across the board.

This turn to the East helped Russia reinforce its economic ties with Asian countries, which received access to cheaper oil. This also paved the way to a new global economic architecture in which Asian countries operate as intermediaries by ensuring that trade flows between Russia and the West do not dry up completely, while also filling in the niches vacated by Western suppliers on the Russian market. Both Russia and ASEAN stand to gain from this kind of cooperation.

## Background

A marginal theatre of great-power rivalries up until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Asia-Pacific took centre stage in this competition over the past 120 years. Two major naval powers, Japan and the United States, emerged in the Pacific in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During World War II, this ocean became one of the main naval theatres alongside the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and went on to offer a stage for the rivalry opposing the USSR and the United States during the Cold War.

As for the Indian Ocean, it is becoming increasingly connected and integrated with the Pacific Ocean as Asia-Pacific countries expand their trade with Europe. India's emergence as a great power has also played its role. All this, in turn, enhances the role of Southeast Asia as the central axis for the vast region covering both the Pacific and the Indian oceans. Their waters bathe four out of the world's five biggest economies, and this region is home to three fourths of the global population. It also holds rich minerals deposits. Meanwhile, while the region enjoyed relative calm until recently, enabling all its country to promote mutually beneficial development, its political and economic structure is now rapidly coming apart. Once based on recognising mutual interests, its regional security framework is also deteriorating. In fact, the speed with which these processes unfold and the direction they take will largely define the future of global politics and economics.

## Economics and security as the key tenets of maritime geopolitics

Maritime geopolitics emerged in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the world had already put the great geographical discoveries behind it, while technical progress enabled it to build iron steamers which could navigate the seas in any weather and regardless of any winds or currents. There was also the telegraph, which made it possible for people from the most distant parts of the world to send messages to one another that would reach their destination almost instantly. All this upended the existing strategies. From that point, any war opposing great powers would inevitably become a world war.

Amid growing nationalist sentiment and the emergence of nations, coupled with efforts to develop economic theory, there was a growing awareness that economic activity can be used to project state power

on par with the military might. The following decades brought technical and institutional progress. Offensive and defensive capabilities became increasingly sophisticated, people invented the radio and aviation, as well as started building submarines and using radars to detect them, mastered diesel powertrains and then went on to adopt nuclear propulsion. There were also the so-called container and port revolutions, as well as the signing of treaties and conventions forming the law of the sea. All these developments contributed to making maritime activities more rational, and also made it possible for actors to better control their military assets and to be able to anticipate the possible actions by their adversaries, dispelling what used to be known as the fog of war. These shifts also changed the relative value once attached to specific sites, routes and regions. The building of the Suez Canal enhanced the strategic importance of the Mediterranean and Red seas, while the adoption of petroleum oil engines led to great power rivalries to secure access to the oil riches of the Middle East.

Among other factors, there is a direct correlation between national economic development and access to seaports enabling countries to move shipments in and out of their territories in the most cost-efficient way, i.e., by sea. This equation also includes several modifiers: the level of port infrastructure development and ability to process all kinds of shipments, the availability of ship repair and maintenance facilities, whether the country has its one merchant fleet or controls it indirectly with the ability to mobilise it for its own purposes. Only pirates and terrorists, as well as local wars or emergencies affecting the bottlenecks and narrow passages along these maritime trade routes, such as the Panama and Suez canals, can undermine the stable operation of these sinews of economic power. In fact, all great powers use their navies to provide for the stable operation of these routes by guarding and escorting commercial ships sailing through waters prone to piracy risks, demining waters affected by local conflicts, and undertaking rescue missions whenever the need arises.

But any major conflict instantly upends this logic. This is when all efforts tend to focus on undermining the adversary's economy and hindering its economic development. In a cold war, this paves the way to sanctions, but if the confrontation evolves into an open conflict, the enemy's maritime assets tend to become a primary target.

Depending on the balance of power, these attacks can rely on a wide range of means and methods. Countries enjoying maritime supremacy over their adversaries and acting from the position of strength tend to rely on a Mahanian strategy,<sup>1</sup> which consists of defeating the enemy's main forces, destroying its maritime assets and blocking its ports. However, when facing a stronger adversary, countries tend to rely on various asymmetrical approaches inspired by the *Jeune École*, the naval petty warfare theory, or Admiral Tirpitz's risk theory.<sup>2</sup> All these methods provided for using artillery and coast-based launchers, air forces and so-called Mosquito Fleets<sup>3</sup> to prevent the adversary from blocking its coast, while also seeking to undermine the enemy's navigation by using cruiser assets, including both surface vessels and submarines. In this logic, the possibility of losing naval pre-eminence when attacking a defended coastline is expected to hold back the stronger adversary and prevent it from fighting a war.

Following the two world wars, the Mahanian logic emerged as a dominant, if not an exclusive, naval theory. It provided for building a powerful navy with big vessels well suited for carrying all kinds of weapons, including the most powerful ones.

However, the Ukraine conflict, as well as the operations carried out by the Houthis in the Red Sea signalled the Mosquito Fleet approach's revival,

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<sup>1</sup> Read Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan was an American military and naval theorist and historian. He created the theory of sea power, which views maritime supremacy as the main law and goal of war for winning over an adversary and achieving global dominance.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz was a German naval officer who drafted a plan for building a powerful navy for establishing Germany's maritime authority. This plan went down in history as the Tirpitz Plan.

<sup>3</sup> The term Mosquito Fleet means a fleet of fast and agile small gunboats. This term originated during World War I when gunboats were tasked with operating in quite substantial groups.

at least for specific sea basins. In terms of its sea area, Southeast Asia can be described as a system of shallow seas with narrow straits between them. This maritime revolution can therefore have a major bearing on this region.

## Main actors and their interests

Uncontested in its status as a hegemon of the World Ocean, the **United States** has the most powerful and technically sophisticated fleet, as well as developed port and shipbuilding capabilities. Washington is interested in preserving this dominating role, but has been wary of China's growing strength. The US leadership has been reluctant to openly confront the People's Republic of China considering the interconnected nature of the two economies, as well as the fact that a confrontation of this kind can cause exhaustion and attrition for the United States. Therefore, the country's leadership has opted for, first, promoting a gradual decoupling process, i.e., reducing its economic dependence on China, and, second, creating a network of unions and alliances for shifting some of the burden in terms of containing China to its partners. These alliances include the Quad, AUKUS, the Five Eyes alliance, as well as the ANZUS Security Treaty.

India is viewed as one of the potential allies considering its dominant positions in the Indian Ocean, which results from its advantageous geographic location and high economic growth rates. In fact, it was India which put forward the concept of Indo-Pacific and suggested devising an Indo-Pacific strategy, while Washington supported it in order to win India's support. Just like during World War II, the United States views the Pacific as its key military theatre with the only difference that China has replaced Japan as the main adversary. To hold off China, there are the so-called island chains or island clouds. Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines form the first defensive line. There is also the second one which goes through Japan, Guam and New Guinea, as well as the third one, spanning Hawaii, Tonga Islands and New Zealand. The United States also views Southeast Asia as

a major economic powerhouse and hopes to rely on its capabilities in order to constrain China's economy. Another factor explaining why the United States is interested in this region is because it can potentially become a military theatre.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, **China** operated a relatively small fleet. Having lost the Sino-Japanese War, China sunk into internal strife with various opposing cliques and parties tearing the country apart. Against this backdrop, building a navy was not viewed as a priority, even if even back then there were visionaries who dared to dream about a large fleet, for example, Admiral Chen Shaokuan. In fact, China was able to start building its green-water navy<sup>4</sup> only after overcoming the civil war. Over the following decades, China's economic might was built up, and the People's Liberation Army's Navy also became stronger in the process. Having succeeded in putting the country on a high GDP growth trajectory and produce the Chinese economic miracle, as well as focus its capital and create the shipbuilding and port infrastructure it needed, China embarked on an effort to build its blue-water navy, just as Admiral Liu Huaqing wanted it.

Today, China has the world's fastest growing navy. Its main objectives include defending the coastline, affirm China claims to disputed areas in East China and South China seas, as well as guarantee the safe passage of Chinese merchant ships through high-risk areas for piracy. China's power in terms of maritime geopolitics rests on its big merchant fleet, which ensures uninterrupted exports of Chinese goods and enables the country to maintain its status as the world's factory, as well as a fishing fleet. In addition to this, China uses its soft power by selling warships to friendly countries, or delivering them for free in an effort to strengthen their navies while also increasing the dependence of these countries on China.

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<sup>4</sup> The term green-water navy is used to describe a maritime force that is capable of operating in its state's littoral zones and has limited competency to operate in the surrounding marginal seas. It is a relatively new term, and has been created to better distinguish between two long-standing descriptors: blue-water navy (deep waters of open oceans) and brown-water navy (littoral waters and near to shore).



A British colony until 1947, **India** could not pursue its national interests on the foreign policy front. Having won its independence, the country had to build up its industrial capabilities and address urgent social challenges, forcing it to focus on domestic development. In fact, India had quite a modest economic and political presence in the region until 1971, and its rivalry with Pakistan held back its regional ambitions. However, its victory in the Third Indo-Pakistani War paved the way to India emerging as a local hegemon.

In early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Delhi launched a major shipbuilding programme to create a powerful and advanced navy. During the following decades, India got several air carriers, many destroyers, frigates and corvettes, and carried out a programme to build SSBNs all by itself<sup>5</sup>. India is committed to maintaining constructive and friendly ties with all the external actors, except China. In fact, the PRC ticks all the boxes as an ideal rival for India: its regional presence is too weak to pose a serious threat to India, but visible enough to serve as a constant irritant for the Indian elite and its people.

India views the Indian Ocean as its natural sphere of influence. It is now building an entire network of navy bases and radar stations across its own territory, as well as in small island states such as Mauritius and the Seychelles. Blocking the passage from the Andaman Sea to the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Islands have become a key element of India's defences. Indian politicians and its military have been focusing on the Indian Ocean's eastern part, which, first, created a growing vacuum in its western areas, creating an opening for China to exploit this fact. Second, it made India more inclined to work with Southeast Asian countries covering the eastern flank of India's sphere of influence. India proceeds in its maritime planning concepts from the premise that it can use its advantageous geographical position as leverage in case any conflict escalates and influence China's foreign policy by posing a threat to its main export route

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<sup>5</sup> SSBNs - nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines.

towards Europe, as well as China's hydrocarbon imports from the Gulf. It is obvious, however, that this would mean a real war between the two, which somewhat diminishes the importance of the geographical factor, especially considering that China has increased oil imports from Russia, as well as the fact that Russia has been making great strides in expanding the transit capacity of its railways and the Northern Sea Route. India has launched the SagarMala<sup>6</sup> programme to build up its civilian maritime geopolitical influence. This initiative provides for developing ports and promoting infrastructure connectivity within the country.

Unlike the preceding historical periods, European countries have a very modest presence in this region. **France** is probably the only exception from this rule, since its overseas territories are located in the Indian and the Pacific oceans. France has been trying to use them to build a partnership network in the region and be part of major economic programmes there. There is also the **United Kingdom** with its commitment to maintaining close cultural and, to an extent, economic and military ties with the countries of the Commonwealth<sup>7</sup>. **Italy's** exposure to the Red Sea is quite limited. **Germany** has recently become proactive in this region in an effort to expand its trade ties and support its NATO allies seeking to contain China. The European Union's presence in the Pacific and Indian oceans is quite weak. Its most noticeable contribution to regional security consisted of carrying out Operation Atalanta in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>8</sup>

**Japan** is a key partner for the United States in the Pacific. It is also an important element of the two island chains designed to contain China's expansion. How did it get this status? Having lost in World War II, Japan has never fully recovered its sovereignty and has had to follow the US

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<sup>6</sup> *Sagarmala Programme* is a programme of India's Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways to promote port-led development in the country. For more details, go to <https://sagarmala.gov.in/about-sagarmala/introduction#>

<sup>7</sup> The Commonwealth of Nations is an international association of 56 sovereign states, consisting of Great Britain and almost all its former dominions, colonies and protectorates.

<sup>8</sup> Launched by the European Union in December 2008, *Operation Atalanta* was a response to the increasing piracy risks along the Somalian coast.

lead. But this is only part of the answer. Territorial disputes opposing Japan to China also play a role here. Today, Tokyo's geopolitical interests come down to containing the potential Chinese threats, as well as expanding its economic presence and cooperation with South Asian, Southeast Asian and African countries. In addition, Japan has been stepping up its efforts lately to build up the military capabilities of the Self-Defence Forces through gradual remilitarisation. It is quite obvious that Japan is set to further increase its strategic influence in the foreseeable future.

**Australia** has always remained within the Western sphere of influence, even if China continues to be its main trade partner, just like for Japan and India. Still the Australian political establishment prioritises cooperation with the United States and the United Kingdom. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd did try to craft a more balanced foreign policy, but his attempt remained an exception. Today, Australia camps on an openly anti-China position, takes part in all the initiatives designed to counter China and is viewed as a valuable US ally with a mission to cover the southern flank in case of a regional Indo-Pacific conflict. The Australian government has placed the Chinese threat at the centre of its narrative in order to secure popular support.

## The Malay Barrier as a major geopolitical asset

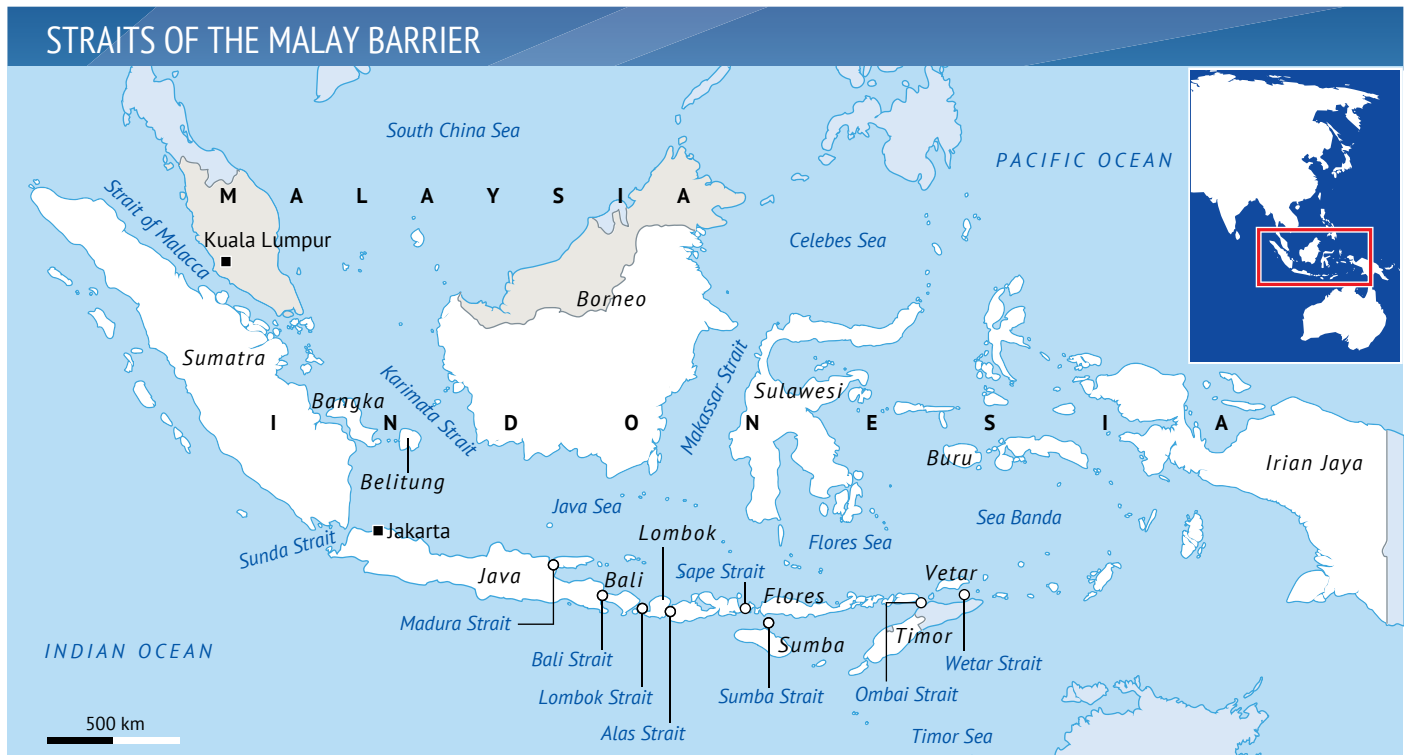
ASEAN focuses on economic cooperation, which means that any escalation in regional tension invariably causes discomfort. In fact, this association has yet to create its own military component. This could make it vulnerable amid the growing great-power rivalry. It may seem a paradox, but taken together, the armies of ASEAN countries form quite an impressive force. However, they lack coordination and can only be used for fighting pirates, terrorists, and rebels.

From a strategic perspective, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia play a central role, considering that they all can make it harder to navigate the Strait of Malacca or block it off completely, in one way or another, while this is the main navigation route linking the Pacific and the India oceans. In this regard, Singapore with its commercial port and military base has the most privileged position in this regard.

Building a canal through the Isthmus of Kra could offer, at least in theory, a path to resolving the so-called Malacca Dilemma, i.e., China's potential vulnerability in the face of a possible blockade of the Strait of Malacca, as long as there is no logistics alternative. This would undermine the influence Singapore and Malaysia currently enjoy, while giving a much bigger role to Thailand. However, in this case, Indonesia will still control most of the straits linking the Pacific to the Indian oceans. Apart from the Strait of Malacca, there is also the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra, the Makassar Strait between Kalimantan and Sulawesi, the Bali Strait, which separates Java and Bali, the Karimata Strait connecting Kalimantan and Belitung, the Molucca Strait connecting Sulawesi and Halmahera, and several others.

ASEAN countries have maintained their neutrality both in time of peace, as well as during the Cold War. In fact, foreign policy tension remained rather low in this region. The United States, China and their partners have all benefited to a comparable degree from the economic potential of ASEAN countries. Therefore, any attempt to pressure them or force them to give up their neutrality by threatening to impose far-reaching sanctions could force them to pick the opposing side, since they know how important they are.

In case of a serious conflict opposing the United States and China, the two adversaries will inevitably turn their sights to ASEAN countries, primarily Indonesia, in order to secure control over routes within the Malay Barrier. In fact, Indonesia's position in this potential confrontation would define its outcome. If Indonesia wants to retain its agency and avoid being drawn into a conflict, or to fight it on its own terms, it must take specific steps to reinforce its navy.



This is a peculiar theatre of operations as far as military action is concerned with its plethora of large, medium-sized and small islands, straits and miniature seas with their carved coastlines and multiple bays. This could actually have a cost-cutting effect by enabling actors there to focus on their littoral navies. Today, Indonesia has quite a balanced navy capable of patrolling its waters, fighting piracy and carrying out counter-terrorist operations. However, this balance would be inadequate in case of conflict opposing the United States and China, since the Indonesian navy would have to be able to inflict maximum damage on any fleet trying to cross its straits without Indonesia's permission. This means operating a large fleet of seagoing and aerial drones, mobile shore-launched anti-ship systems, quiet, short- and medium-range high-endurance military submarines, torpedo stations for countering submarines and surface vessels, a network of sensors and various detectors across its straits, as well as covert remote mining systems. One thing to understand here is that the power seeking to sail through Indonesia's straits without permission would try to secure its safe passage by destroying all the obstacles it could face, which entails the need for reserve capacity. Russia could well assist Indonesia in building a system that would effectively seal its straits.

## Russia interests in the region

Faced with the growing pressure from the West and the disruption of its usual logistics chains, coupled with the fact that the centre of gravity in the global economy is increasingly shifting to the East, Russia is interested in deepening its cooperation with ASEAN countries. In several sectors, this effort could benefit both sides.

### ***1. Ensuring uninterrupted shipments between Russian and regional ports***

This matter goes beyond guaranteeing safe navigation for vessels transporting Russian goods and deals with whether the regional ports are ready to receive them. In fact, Russian shipping companies have already faced situations when their ships were detained in European waters for carrying sanctioned products, as well as situations when ships designated on a US sanctions list were not allowed to enter ports in Bangladesh and India. To avoid these situations from repeating, Russia must reinforce its naval presence along the entire route its ships use, except for sections where its friendly nations can do this job. Moreover, Moscow is interested in taking part in infrastructure projects to develop port facilities, including by building terminals. This would resolve the issues related to the sanctioned ships. Efforts to improve logistics connectivity in the region and promote infrastructure development would make it easier for goods and people to travel between states and would attract more tourists to ASEAN countries.

### ***2. Reinforcing Russia's military and economic potential in the Pacific***

Until recently, there was a relative calm in the Far East in terms of security. However, Moscow had no other choice but to focus on strengthening its Pacific Fleet amid rising tension with the United States, between China and the US, as well as Japan's continuing militarisation. In this

new geopolitical landscape, Vladivostok has emerged as one of the most promising hubs for handling Russia's imports and exports, taking on the role of a Russian gateway to the Pacific. This, in turn, calls for upgrading port and shipbuilding infrastructure in and around Vladivostok, as well as developing transport routes linking Russia's European and Pacific parts. In addition to this, Russia's commitment to developing its Far East could create new business opportunities and attract new foreign investment, including from Southeast Asia.

### ***3. Stepping up economic and political cooperation with ASEAN and doing everything to reinforce ASEAN's potential, including military capabilities***





Moscow is interested in forging more partnerships in the east. It is also committed to preserving ASEAN's status as an independent centre of gravity. In the current uneasy environment, this calls for more intra-ASEAN cooperation on security matters. Efforts to reinforce the ASEAN-based security architecture could make ASEAN-centric mechanisms even more effective when countering regional challenges and threats. Russia needs ASEAN to be neutral and strong as a way to get away from the China-US divide and freeing up more space for its political manoeuvres, while guaranteeing that an inclusive and mutually beneficial regional structure remains intact. It can be assumed that in order to deliver on this objective, Russia would be ready to work with ASEAN and, in particular, with Indonesia on selling or developing new weapons for the navy, including drones, detection and surveillance systems.

In 2024, Russia marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of joining the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. Based on their past cooperation, and by building on their ongoing mutually beneficial projects, Russia and ASEAN countries could well join efforts in building a safe future with better justice for all within a foreseeable horizon.



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