

## **India's Malacca Strait Move: Strategic Signal or Regional Overreach?**

Sandeep Bhardwaj

### **Summary**

*India's proposal to join the Malacca Strait Patrol made incremental progress last week after Singapore formally acknowledged it for the first time. However, the prospect of the Indian Navy patrolling the strait remains unlikely. New Delhi's push to join the patrol is a signal to Beijing that the recent Sino-Indian thaw must not be mistaken for capitulation. The Malacca Strait Patrol issue also highlights the fact that the Southeast Asian countries are not always comfortable with India's expanding security footprint in the region.*

Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong visited New Delhi from 2 to 4 September 2025, during which he announced the Roadmap for a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Among numerous new goals and promises listed in [the Joint Statement](#) was a sentence reading "Singapore acknowledges with appreciation India's interest in the Malacca Strait Patrol". This is the first time India's interest in joining the patrol has been officially recognised. [India's foreign ministry officials](#) later explained that they hoped India would participate in the patrol or establish "some kind of coordination" with it.

An estimated quarter of all the world's traded goods passes through Strait of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS). It is one of the busiest shipping lanes on the planet and, therefore, strategically critical to several countries. The Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) is a framework for the four littorals of the strait – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand – to cooperate to combat piracy in the critical waterway. It comprises coordinated sea patrols, combined maritime air patrols and intelligence exchange.

Over 55 per cent of India's trade moves through the SOMS. India is also a neighbour to the strait as its territory in the Andaman Sea shares maritime borders with Thailand and Indonesia that run up to the mouth of the SOMS. India has [offered to provide security](#) to the sea lane since as early as 2004. However, the littorals have repeatedly [turned down](#) its offers.

In the recent years, India has considerably increased its naval presence in Southeast Asia through ship visits and bilateral or multilateral exercises. However, its role as a security provider around the SOMS remains limited. The Indian Navy conducts coordinated patrols (Corpats) with Thailand and Indonesian navies along their maritime boundaries. Although [some Indian statements](#) hint that the Corpats operate within the Malacca Strait, it is highly unlikely. In a coordinated patrol, navies remain on their own sides of the border and under separate commands. So, the Indian Navy likely operates only up to the mouth of the strait. The Standard Operating Procedures for the India-Thailand and India-Indonesia Corpats were established in the early 2000s and apparently have not been refreshed since then. This

suggests that maritime patrolling cooperation between India and its two neighbours has not qualitatively changed in the last two decades.

Singapore's "acknowledgement" of New Delhi's interest in the MSP is a small step forward, although the prospect of India joining the patrol in the near future remains unlikely. The littorals have long asserted their sovereignty over the strait as most of it falls within their territorial waters. In the 1970s, the littorals established the legal principle giving them exclusive jurisdiction of the SOMS. When in 2004 the United States (US) suggested that it would start policing the strait to curb rising piracy, the littorals hastily established the MSP to forestall US intervention.

Although Singapore is amenable to the involvement of outside powers in securing the SOMS, other littorals are strongly opposed to the idea. They shot down Japan's proposal to create patrolling framework involving the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus Three countries. They are likely to remain just as reluctant to accept Indian involvement in the MSP even though it is a contiguous state unlike Japan or the US. Beyond the question of India's involvement, the littorals are likely to worry that it may open door for other powers to assert their claims to join as well. Furthermore, Indian participation in the MSP is bound to cause serious alarm in Beijing since the SOMS is a critical chokepoint for Chinese trade flow and oil supplies. In fact, Indian participation is likely to make even the US, Japan and South Korea uncomfortable since they too see the waterway as strategically vital.

Given all these complications, New Delhi's bid to join the MSP will probably remain stalled. Then why is India publicly pursuing it? Indian motivations are likely a combination of three objectives of differing time horizons.

In the short-term, New Delhi may be signalling to Beijing that its recent willingness to repair their relationship is not coming from a place of weakness. Even as it pursues reproachment with Beijing, New Delhi has undertaken several moves in the last month that may upset China: [strategic partnership](#) with the Philippines, condemnation of Chinese aggressive posture in the South China Sea and the first joint India-Philippine naval patrol in the contested sea. India's expression of interest to join the MSP can be read as another warning to China that its cordiality should not be mistaken for fecklessness.

In the medium-term, India does hope to arrive at some sort of arrangement with the MSP even if it is just a coordinated patrolling arrangement at the mouth of the SOMS. This fits well within India's larger goal of expanding its maritime presence in Southeast Asia as a way of developing a diversified network of security relationships in the region to balance the Chinese challenge.

In the long run, the argument that India belongs to the MSP as a contiguous state is another incremental step towards its assertion of its geographic identity as an integral part of the region (rather than a peripheral actor it is often perceived).

India's difficulties in joining the MSP also serve as refutation of the oft-touted claim that the Southeast Asian states want it to play a larger security role in the region as a counterweight to China. While it may be true of some ASEAN member countries, others would not

welcome expanded Indian naval presence in the region. After all, the ASEAN member countries are not a monolith.

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Dr Sandeep Bhardwaj is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at [sbhardwaj@nus.edu.sg](mailto:sbhardwaj@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.