



Bridging Asian Memory: Rethinking India's 'Act East'

Nirupama Rao

Summary

India's 'Act East' policy has matured into a key pillar of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Yet, its imagination remains largely strategic and continental, framed around balancing China and securing maritime interests. This paper proposes a deeper cultural and civilisational dimension – inspired by the Goa-Macau metaphor articulated by Vivek Menezes. By situating India's eastward engagement within the wider arc of the Indian Ocean world, India can revive its historic role as a plural, maritime connector rather than a reactive continental power.

Rethinking 'Act East'

When India announced its 'Act East' policy in 2014, it was meant to signal energy and intent – a shift from the cautious diplomacy of the 1990s 'Look East' policy toward deeper economic, strategic and cultural integration with East and Southeast Asia. Over the last decade, India's engagement has expanded across defence dialogues, infrastructure corridors and multilateral frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Yet the 'Act East' vision risks being tethered to a logic of containment rather than connection. It is often read in the region as a maritime extension of continental geopolitics – a hedging strategy aimed at China's rise rather than an affirmative articulation of India's own oceanic identity.

Vivek Menezes's recent writing introduces an evocative metaphor: the Goa-Macau bridge.¹ He suggests that these two former Lusophone enclaves, small in geography but vast in history, symbolise a forgotten Asian cosmopolitanism – one that might guide India's diplomacy in rediscovering its plural, maritime character.

The Indian Ocean World: Asia's First Globalisation

Before the European empires and the modern nation-state, the Indian Ocean connected diverse societies in a network of exchange. Monsoon winds carried not only trade but also ideas, art and belief systems – from Buddhism and Islam to architecture and cuisine. Goa and Macau emerged within this system as hybrid nodes. Goa, conquered by Portugal in 1510, became the capital of its Asian empire. Macau, founded in 1557 on the Pearl River Delta, was its easternmost outpost. Jesuit scholars, Goan physicians, African sailors and Chinese converts passed between them. Together, they linked the Indian and Pacific Oceans long before 'Indo-Pacific' became a strategic term. These cities embodied what historians

¹ Vivek Menezes, 'Look East (via Macau)', *O Heraldo*, Goa, India, 26 October 2025, <https://www.heraldgoa.in/edit/look-east-via-macau/450681/>.

such as Sanjay Subrahmanyam and K N Chaudhuri have called the ‘connected histories’ of the Indian Ocean world² – a system sustained less by empire and more by interdependence, linguistic diversity and pragmatic coexistence. In this sense, Menezes’s metaphor is not nostalgic but corrective. It reminds India that the ocean it overlooks was once its most natural sphere of influence – built on pluralism and exchange, not exclusion.

The Lusophone Cosmopolitanism of Goa and Macau

The Goa-Macau connection represents more than shared Portuguese heritage. It evokes a Lusophone cosmopolitanism that prefigured modern globalisation. Goan intellectuals such as Tristão de Bragança Cunha and José Pereira Coutinho, though products of empire, saw themselves as Asian internationalists – comfortable navigating between the Indian, European and East Asian worlds. This networked identity allowed Goans to serve as translators doctors, musicians and diplomats across Asia and Africa. -Similarly, Macau’s Chinese-Christian population developed an intercultural fluency that mediated between Europe and the Qing Empire.

Together, these communities embodied an idea crucial for the 21st century: that soft power lies in hybridity. In an age of renewed nationalism, such historical cosmopolitanism offers a moral counterweight to both Western exceptionalism and Asian authoritarianism.

The Strategic Gap: From Civilisation to Policy

The modern Indo-Pacific construct borrows geography from this earlier world but not its ethos. The Quad and the IPEF frame regional politics in terms of alignment and deterrence – an understandable reaction to China’s assertiveness but a limited one. By contrast, the Indian Ocean world offered a more balanced logic: trade as dialogue, not domination.

Menezes’s metaphor invites India to see its maritime engagement as a civilisational project, not merely a strategic one. For a country with one of the world’s most diverse coastal societies – from Gujarat to Kerala to Tamil Nadu and Bengal to Goa – this is not illusion but the rediscovery of the actual. India’s historical strength lay in its ability to absorb, reinterpret and transmit cultures across the seas. Recalling that role could give the ‘Act East’ policy an intellectual coherence it needs.

Policy Implications: Toward a Civilisational Indo-Pacific

To operationalise this broader vision, India could pursue three complementary approaches:

1. Repurpose ‘Act East’ through the arc of this history of engagement as a civilisational project. Promote the shared heritage of the Indian Ocean world through research, education and tourism. Initiatives could include the India-ASEAN maritime heritage networks, Lusophone cultural exchanges with Macau and Mozambique and a Maritime Studies Centre of the Indo-Pacific, anchored in Goa.

² Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 31, Issue 3, July 1997, Cambridge University Press.

2. Build cooperative maritime partnerships. Move beyond hard-security cooperation to include sustainable fisheries, port governance, climate resilience and digital connectivity across the Bay of Bengal and South China Sea. This aligns with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) principle of inclusivity and complements India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision.
3. Use Goa as a symbolic hub. Goa's hybrid identity and location make it ideal for hosting dialogues on Asia's oceanic history, soft power and the role of small states in big geopolitics. An annual 'Goa Dialogue on Maritime Asia' could institutionalise this cultural strand within India's foreign policy.

Singapore and the Straits: The Living Centre of Asia's Oceanic Order

No account of Asia's maritime imagination is complete without the Straits of Malacca – the narrow but vital passage that has, for over a millennium, connected the Indian and Pacific Oceans. From Srivijaya and the Malacca Sultanate to the British Straits Settlements, this region functioned as the hinge of Asia's commercial and cultural exchanges. Singapore, at its centre, remains the most successful heir to that oceanic heritage. Its rise as a maritime and financial hub reflects the same principles that once animated the Indian Ocean world: pragmatic openness, hybrid identity and the security of trade through trust. In a sense, Singapore is the living continuation of the cosmopolitanism that Goa and Macau once symbolised.

For India's 'Act East' policy, this is partnership validated by both history and geography. The Straits are where India's westward maritime traditions meet East Asia's dynamism. Deeper cooperation with Singapore – in maritime governance, logistics, sustainability and cultural exchange – would anchor India's civilisational Indo-Pacific vision in a living, functioning model of oceanic pluralism.

In practical terms, India and Singapore could co-develop initiatives such as an India-Singapore Maritime Civilisations Dialogue, focusing on heritage, security and blue-economy innovation. Singapore's pragmatism and connectivity complement India's civilisational depth, making the two natural co-architects of an inclusive Indo-Pacific order.

Strategic Payoff

The reframing carries both practical and symbolic advantages. It differentiates India's regional diplomacy from China's state-led connectivity and from Western securitisation of the Indo-Pacific. It provides a framework compatible with ASEAN's outlook, allowing India to act as a bridge power rather than a bloc member. It strengthens India's identity as a maritime democracy with historical depth – not just a continental balancer. In essence, the Goa-Macau lens provides a new orientation and momentum to the 'Act East' policy. As elaborated in my analysis in *The Straits Times* in April 2025,³ Asia now faces a fundamental need for equilibrium – a multipolar order in which India and China manage

³ Nirupama Rao, 'Asia needs a new road map as Trump tears up the old one', *The Straits Times*, 10 April 2025, <https://nus.edu.sg/newshub/news/2025/2025-04/2025-04-10/ASIA-st-10apr-pB3.pdf>.

their rivalry through dialogue, restraint and shared responsibility. Rather than a zero-sum contest of influence, the Indo-Pacific must evolve into a concert of powers bound by interdependence.

India's civilisational diplomacy can contribute to this balance by promoting a framework rooted in cooperation rather than containment, linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans through principles of mutual respect, freedom of navigation and inclusive growth.

Applying the Indian Ocean Ethos: Pathways for Culture, Trade and Diplomacy

To translate the Goa-Macau or Indian Ocean ethos into practice, India must recover the spirit of connectivity that once defined its maritime world, while avoiding the trap of sentimental nostalgia. The task is not to idealise the past but to update its cooperative logic for the twenty-first century.

In culture, India can advance living heritage initiatives that link old Indian Ocean ports – from Goa and Kochi to Muscat, Zanzibar and Jakarta – through exhibitions, research exchanges and creative industries. A network of 'Indian Ocean Dialogues' hosted in partnership with ASEAN and the African Union states could foster pluralistic identity-building rooted in shared memory.

In trade, India can apply this ethos by promoting sustainable blue economy corridors and digital connectivity projects that include the western and eastern rims of the Indian Ocean. Cooperation with Gulf, East African and Southeast Asian partners in maritime infrastructure, renewable energy and fisheries governance would echo the decentralised interdependence of the historical Indian Ocean world.

Diplomatically, India should expand the scope of 'Act East' to 'Act Across' – engaging East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and Japan as integral partners in a transoceanic Indo-Pacific framework. The Indian Ocean ethos, thus, becomes a bridge between regions, encouraging triangular partnerships that combine Indian innovation, Gulf capital and African markets. This broader conception aligns with the historical Indo-Pacific that stretched from Africa and Arabia to Japan – a space defined not by military blocs but by circulation, coexistence and exchange. In doing so, India can help shape a new Indo-Pacific architecture that mirrors the balanced, rules-based cooperation called for in my *The Straits Times* article.⁴

The Indian Ocean ethos offers not merely cultural continuity but a political grammar for multipolarity – one that replaces bloc competition with managed coexistence. Asia's future stability depends on cultivating restraint at sea and on land alike – peace in one theatre must reinforce peace in another.

Reclaiming this geography enables India to project influence through stewardship and trust, reaffirming its maritime heritage as a foundation for contemporary diplomacy.

⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion: Recovering the Oceanic Imagination

In the wake of shifting global power structures, Asia needs a new road map — one that is not dictated by the rivalries of the West but grounded in its own traditions of balance, exchange and self-reliance. The Indian Ocean world provides both the historical memory and strategic logic for such an order. Asia's peace depends on shared restraint between India and China and a commitment to a plural, multipolar equilibrium. Asia's future will be shaped as much by memory as by strategy.

The Indian Ocean once hosted a civilisation of circulation, not confrontation. Goa and Macau, in their layered hybridity, remind us that Asia has always been plural — a place where cultures flowed together more often than they clashed. For India, to 'Act East' effectively is to act from that memory — to engage the region not only through trade and security but through shared histories and values. The Goa-Macau metaphor, thus, offers more than nostalgia; it offers a compass for a more confident, connective and civilisational Indian diplomacy.

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Ambassador Nirupama Rao is a Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She was India's Foreign Secretary from 2009 to 2011. She can be contacted at nrao.01@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.