

India-Indonesian defence ties: Countering China's 'string'

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By binding their security architectures together through defence-industrial integration and maritime infrastructure alignment, India and Indonesia are ensuring that the sea lanes connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans remain multipolar, transparent, and entirely free from single-power hegemony.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi is photographed with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto during the ceremonial welcome at Istana Merdeka, Djakarta, on July 7, 2026. (Photo: X/PMO India)

The geopolitical architecture of the Indo-Pacific region is experiencing a profound transformation as major powers vie for influence over critical sea lanes. At the centre of this strategic friction is China's 'String of Pearls' strategy, a calculated network of military, logistical, and commercial facilities stretching from mainland China across the Indian Ocean to the Horn of Africa.

By securing footholds in strategically vital ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, Beijing has effectively established a multi-directional maritime encirclement around India. This network of naval nodes threatens to bottleneck New Delhi's operational manoeuvrability within its own traditional sphere of influence and secure China's trade corridors at the expense of regional security. To dismantle this geographic

containment, India has pivoted from a historically reactive defence posture toward an assertive, forward-leaning maritime strategy, choosing to cultivate deep, kinetic partnerships with key archipelagic states.

At the absolute vanguard of India's counter-encirclement framework is a rapidly intensifying defence-industrial relationship with Indonesia. For decades, defence cooperation between New Delhi and Jakarta was limited to low-stakes joint military exercises, goodwill port calls, and basic institutional capacity building. However, under the direct guidance of India's Act East policy, the bilateral relationship has transitioned from abstract diplomatic alignment into a hard-nosed defence manufacturing and export partnership.

This strategic evolution has now reached a historic milestone during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Jakarta, where he met with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto to finalise a landmark \$630 million strategic defence agreement. The crown jewel of this multi-million-dollar pact is a \$200 million contract for India to supply Indonesia with two advanced batteries of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile system, alongside an overarching agreement to export indigenous Astra Mk-1 beyond-visual-range air-to-air missiles.

This massive influx of advanced Indian weaponry into the Indonesian armed forces directly disrupts China's maritime calculations by weaponizing the primary chokepoints of global trade. Geographically, Indonesia is the ultimate gatekeeper of the Indo-Pacific, sitting atop the world's most critical maritime corridors, including the Sunda, Lombok, Makassar, and Malacca straits. The Malacca Strait alone acts as the primary artery for global commerce, through which more than twenty-three million barrels of oil and trillions of dollars in trade transit annually. Crucially, over eighty percent of China's crude oil imports flow directly through this narrow corridor, creating a severe strategic vulnerability that Beijing frequently refers to as its 'Malacca Dilemma'.

By equipping Indonesia with land-based, anti-ship variants of the supersonic BrahMos missile — which travels at blistering speeds of up to Mach 3.0 and features an operational range of nearly 300 kilometres — New Delhi is granting Jakarta an undeniable anti-access and area denial capability. These highly lethal coastal defence batteries give the Indonesian military the hard power required to monitor, deter, or

completely bottleneck hostile naval movements through its territorial waters during a crisis, transforming China's economic lifeline into an acute tactical bottleneck.

Beyond the transfer of missile hardware, the strategic synchronisation between India and Indonesia is anchored by a shared vision of forward-deployed infrastructure, most notably exemplified by the joint development of the Port of Sabang. Located on the northernmost tip of Sumatra in the Indonesian province of Aceh, Sabang occupies a position of unparalleled strategic value directly overlooking the western entrance to the Malacca Strait. Strikingly, Sabang sits a mere 90 nautical miles from India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where New Delhi has steadily built up its own integrated tri-service military command.

Under recent bilateral infrastructure agreements, India is actively funding and developing a deep-sea port and naval logistics hub at Sabang. This cooperative project effectively establishes an interlocking defensive canopy between the Andaman archipelago and Sumatra. By securing access to Sabang, the Indian Navy gains an invaluable forward-deployed logistics, refuelling, and maintenance base right at the mouth of the world's most critical naval chokepoint. This proximity ensures that Indian surface combatants and maritime patrol aircraft can operate in tandem with Indonesian coastal defences, creating an impenetrable layer of maritime domain awareness over the eastern gateway to the Indian Ocean.

This combined bilateral framework shifts the regional balance of power by dividing strategic labour according to the unique strengths of both nations. India acts as the primary kinetic core and defence-industrial engine of this relationship, providing the advanced missile technologies, technical assistance, and capacity building necessary to fortify regional defences. New Delhi has also opened up slots for Indonesian military cadets and officers at its prestigious National Defence Academy and Defence Services Staff College, while simultaneously stationing an Indonesian Liaison Officer at the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region to facilitate real-time intelligence sharing.

Indonesia, on the other hand, leverages its sovereign status as a 'global maritime fulcrum' and its expanding naval fleet to actively patrol the vital archipelagic sea lanes, ensuring that any external power attempting to project hostile force through the region is met with a highly prepared, well-armed local deterrent. This integration

is further augmented by comprehensive cooperation in counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, and the secure sourcing of critical minerals like nickel, copper, and bauxite, which isolates regional supply chains from coercive foreign monopolies.

Ultimately, this robust Indo-Indonesian axis completely deconstructs the operational logic behind China's String of Pearls encirclement by turning Beijing's forward bases into severe operational liabilities. The success of China's maritime containment strategy relies entirely on the premise that the People's Liberation Army Navy can project power across the Indian Ocean rim completely unimpeded. However, the defensive architecture created by New Delhi and Jakarta acts as an unbreakable kinetic and structural padlock on the eastern gateway to the ocean. If China attempts to project power from its forward 'pearls' in Pakistan or Sri Lanka during a geopolitical conflict, it must be able to safely reinforce, resupply, and protect those assets via lines of communication running back to the Chinese mainland.

By placing a formidable bilateral wall across the Malacca and Sunda straits, India and Indonesia possess the collective capability to completely sever China's sea lines of communication at a moment's notice. Rather than successfully encircling India, China's naval forces operating west of Southeast Asia would find themselves entirely isolated, trapped behind an Indo-Indonesian barrier with no secure route for retreat or logistical replenishment.

The concurrent execution of the BrahMos and Astra missile sales alongside the joint development of Sabang Port marks a definitive departure from India's traditional geopolitical timidity. New Delhi is no longer passively waiting to be encircled within its own backyard; instead, it is actively exporting hard power to arm the sovereign gatekeepers of the Indo-Pacific's most vital chokepoints. By binding their security architectures together through defence-industrial integration and maritime infrastructure alignment, India and Indonesia are ensuring that the sea lanes connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans remain multipolar, transparent, and entirely free from single-power hegemony.

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