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Safe and Unimpeded: India Presses Maritime Security at the 21st East Asia Summit

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Safe and Unimpeded: India Presses Maritime Security at the 21st East Asia Summit

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar addressed the 21st East Asia Summit in Manila on July 23, 2026, stating that global waterways must remain safe and unimpeded and that attacks on seafarers, civilian shipping and infrastructure cannot be countenanced. India reaffirmed support for a substantive, effective and legally binding Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, and announced it will host the 7th EAS Maritime Security Conference in Kochi.

WHAT INDIA SAID

Jaishankar travelled to Manila on July 22 and 23, 2026 for the series of ASEAN-led ministerial meetings, which include the ASEAN and Quad foreign ministers' engagements alongside the East Asia Summit.

India's intervention rested on three propositions.

Freedom of navigation is a shared economic interest, not a partisan position. The formulation that international waterways "must remain safe and unimpeded" deliberately avoids naming an adversary and frames the issue as a common good.

Attacks on seafarers are attacks on civilians. By foregrounding seafarers, civilian shipping and civilian infrastructure, India shifted the debate from abstract **sovereignty** claims to the human and commercial cost of maritime insecurity. This has direct salience for India, which supplies a large share of the world's merchant marine crews.

A Code of Conduct must bind, and must not exclude. India backed early finalisation of a Code of Conduct (CoC) that is substantive, effective and legally binding, compliant with the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982**, and which does not prejudice the legitimate rights and interests of all users of the sea, including states that are not parties to the negotiation.

That last clause is the analytically important one. The CoC is being negotiated between China and the ten ASEAN states. India is not a party. The insistence that it must not prejudice the rights of non-signatories is a defence of third-party access to a waterway through which a substantial share of Indian trade moves.

The Code of Conduct Question

ELEMENT	POSITION
Parties negotiating	China and the ten ASEAN member states
Legal anchor sought by India	UNCLOS 1982
India's requirement	Substantive, effective, legally binding
India's caveat	Must not prejudice rights of non-signatories and other users
Origin	Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, 2002

The 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties was a political statement rather than a binding treaty. The move from a declaration to a code is precisely the move from political commitment to legal obligation, which is why the adjective “binding” carries the weight in India’s formulation.

THE EAST ASIA SUMMIT AS A PLATFORM

FEATURE	DETAIL
Established	2005; first summit at Kuala Lumpur, December 2005
Membership	18 members: the 10 ASEAN states plus India, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Russia
India's status	Founding member, from the first summit in 2005
Later entrants	The United States and Russia joined in 2011
Organising principle	ASEAN centrality; chaired by the ASEAN chair
Character	Leaders-led forum for strategic dialogue on political and security issues

The EAS is one of the few Indo-Pacific formats where India, China, the United States, Russia and Japan sit at the same table. Its value to Indian diplomacy is that it allows positions to be placed on record in a [multilateral](#) setting without the bilateral friction those positions would generate elsewhere.

The Kochi Announcement

India announced it will host the **7th EAS Maritime Security Conference in Kochi**. Hosting a maritime security conference under the EAS umbrella advances three Indian objectives at once: it demonstrates commitment to ASEAN-centred architecture, it positions India as a provider of maritime security discourse

rather than a consumer of it, and it locates the conversation physically in the Indian Ocean rather than the Pacific.

WHERE THIS FITS IN INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC POLICY

India's maritime posture is built from several overlapping frames.

- **Act East Policy**, upgraded from the Look East Policy at the ASEAN-India Summit in 2014, making engagement strategic and security-oriented rather than primarily economic.
- **SAGAR**, Security and Growth for All in the Region, articulated in 2015 as India's Indian Ocean doctrine.
- **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)**, announced at the East Asia Summit in 2019, structured around pillars including maritime security, maritime ecology and capacity building.
- **ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)**, adopted by ASEAN in 2019, with which India has repeatedly affirmed [convergence](#).

The through-line is that India frames itself as a supporter of ASEAN centrality rather than an alternative pole. At a summit where competing visions of regional order are on display, that is a [deliberate](#) positioning choice.

The Structural Tension

ASEAN's consensus rule means the grouping moves at the speed of its most reluctant member, and several ASEAN states have deep economic dependence on China. This is the standing critique of ASEAN-led formats: they generate declaratory outcomes more readily than enforceable ones. India's repeated emphasis on a **legally binding** code is an implicit acknowledgement of exactly this weakness.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood; [bilateral](#), regional and global groupings and agreements involving India or affecting India's interests; effect of policies of developed and developing countries on India's interests.

Prelims pointers:

- The 21st East Asia Summit ministerial engagement was held in Manila, Philippines, in July 2026.
- The EAS was established in 2005, with its first summit at Kuala Lumpur; India is a founding member.
- The EAS has 18 members; the United States and Russia joined in 2011.
- UNCLOS was adopted in 1982 and is the legal framework India cites for the South China Sea Code of Conduct.
- The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea dates from 2002.
- India will host the 7th EAS Maritime Security Conference in Kochi.

- The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative was announced by India at the East Asia Summit in 2019.

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

21ST EAST ASIA SUMMIT, JULY 2026:

Venue: Manila, Philippines; EAM S. Jaishankar in Manila on July 22 and 23, 2026

India's position: international waterways must remain safe and unimpeded

India condemned attacks on seafarers, civilian shipping and civilian infrastructure

India backed a substantive, effective and legally binding South China Sea Code of Conduct, compliant with UNCLOS 1982

India stated the Code must not prejudice the legitimate rights of all users, including non-signatories

India announced it will host the 7th EAS Maritime Security Conference in Kochi

EAST ASIA SUMMIT:

Established 2005; first summit Kuala Lumpur, December 2005

18 members: 10 ASEAN states plus India, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, United States, Russia

The United States and Russia joined in 2011

Built on the principle of ASEAN centrality; chaired by the ASEAN chair

SOUTH CHINA SEA LEGAL FRAMEWORK:

UNCLOS adopted 1982; the reference framework for maritime entitlements

Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, 2002, politically binding but not legally binding

Code of Conduct negotiations are between China and the ten ASEAN states

INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC FRAMEWORKS:

Act East Policy, upgraded from Look East at the ASEAN-India Summit, 2014

SAGAR, Security and Growth for All in the Region, 2015

Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, announced at the East Asia Summit, 2019

ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, adopted by ASEAN in 2019

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

ASEAN was founded in 1967 by the Bangkok Declaration; it has ten member states and operates by consensus.

India became an ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner in 1992 and a full Dialogue Partner in 1996.

Sources: Ministry of External Affairs, The Hindu, PIB

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