

The Bay of Bengal in Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

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Abstract

The resurgence of state-centric geopolitics challenges optimistic narratives surrounding the fifth wave of globalisation, refuting thereby, the expectation of a geo-centric global politics that pivots on free markets and open lines of communication sans the costs. In this era of strategic turbulence, nations prioritise rational planning to safeguard their interests that often paradoxically snowball into the weaponisation of the once-glorified ways of economic interdependence: interaction, connectivity and access. This is particularly evident in the maritime domain. The Indo-Pacific, surpassing the Atlantic in strategic importance, has become the focal point for global geostrategic competition, with the Bay of Bengal playing a crucial role therein. This analysis explores the geopolitical significance of the Bay in the context of the contemporary maritime power competition in the Indo-Pacific, emphasising in the process, China's rise and the associated threat perceptions of South and East Asian countries. Additionally, it delves into the strategies of 'conengagement' practiced by India and its regional and global partners towards China, thereby assessing the efficacy of such approaches in alignment with India's broader foreign policy goals in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: *Bay of Bengal; China; East Asia; Geopolitics; India's Maritime Strategy; Indo-Pacific; South Asia*

Introduction

In so far as India's national security, the geostrategic significance of the Bay of Bengal has been a fact recognised even before the country gained independence. Since the Second World War, it was argued that in the conceivable future, with waning British control over the Indian Ocean, the entire defence of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal will fall on India; not least, India's possession of strategic bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands shall convert the Bay of Bengal into a secure area (Panikkar 1951:96). Whereas, geopolitically minded thinkers of today identify that with the gradual transformation of narratives, the Bay has emerged as a critical arena of strategic competition not only for India and other littoral states, but also the extra-regional powers having stakes within the larger Indo-Pacific region (Majumdar 2023). To fathom the geostrategic and tactical utility of the Bay of Bengal, it is therefore, essential to identify the evolving geopolitical trends appertaining to the Indo-Pacific in

general and the Bay in particular. Such trends emanate from the dialectic of a post-historical, *global* politics with an imagery that is cardinally sensitive to historical power struggle and zero-sum competition.

This paper aims to present four arguments across dedicated sections. The initial section examines the origins and attributes of a post-historical, geocentric global politics, focusing on the ramifications of optimistic narratives concerning economic interdependence within the global maritime sphere. It subsequently evaluates the influence of the contemporary ‘return of geopolitics’ on such optimistic portrayals, contending that amidst strategic tumult, the prioritisation of rational planning often paradoxically transforms erstwhile celebrated mechanisms of economic interdependence into tools of geopolitical contention, notably within maritime domains. The second section elaborates on the understanding that while the maritime realm is geopolitically unified, the world’s oceans concurrently exhibit both interconnected and segmented characteristics. With the eastward tilt of geo-economics, the Indo-Pacific region has supplanted the Atlantic as the foremost economic corridor, assuming prominence as the primary arena for global strategic competition. Emphasising the strategic centrality of the Bay of Bengal within the Indian conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific and broader East Asian access, this section underscores its pivotal role in contemporary geopolitics. Subsequently, the third section assesses the implications of global geopolitical transformations, including perpetual crises, on the Bay of Bengal. It examines the functionality of the Bay as a geostrategic theatre within the context of on-going maritime power competitions in the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the ascent of China and attendant security concerns among South and East Asian nations. Finally, the concluding section delineates strategic scenarios pertinent to the Bay and elucidates strategic choices confronting India and its allies to safeguard against undue Chinese encroachments therein. It evaluates the efficacy of India’s current strategy of ‘congaging’ China within the broader framework of its Indo-Pacific foreign policy objectives, ultimately advocating for measures that may enhance the future viability of conengagement.

The end and the return of geopolitics: implications on the maritime

Following the end of the Cold War, the prevailing notion suggested the ‘end of history’, marked by the global triumph of liberalism over collectivist ideologies. The West, purportedly victorious, propagated liberalism and capitalism worldwide through the narrative of globalisation. The epistemological shifts in international relations scholarship also underscored a concomitant transition from state-centric to geocentric perspectives, epitomised by the substitution of ‘global politics’ for ‘international politics’. The impact of globalisation unhinged international politics from territorial moorings, thereby re-establishing the significance of maritime dynamics, including freedom of

navigation, secure sea lines, and maritime connectivity in fostering economic interdependence. This transformation reflected a departure from ideological and geopolitical struggles towards concerns of global governance, such as trade liberalisation, nuclear non-proliferation, human rights, and climate change (Mead 2014:69). Consequently, the conceptualisation of global politics signified not only the end of ideological and geopolitical tensions, but also a renewed emphasis on maritime interactions as pivotal in the fifth wave of globalisation.

The initial challenge to the liberal paradigm arose from the ‘revenge of the revisionist states’, namely, Russia, Iran, and China (Mead 2014) and subsequently from within liberal factions attempting to counter systemic adversaries. Despite the global challenges posed by the pandemic, traditional security concerns have persistently tested conflict management agencies worldwide. The resurgence of geopolitics has been a global phenomenon: evident in North Korea and Iran’s nuclear pursuits, the crisis in the Indo-Pacific, China’s ‘war by other means’ against the US and the liberal international order, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Simultaneously, the US has sought to mitigate the destabilising influence of revisionist states through strategic interventions by employing a blend of geoeconomics, counter-proliferation efforts, and alliances with liberal democracies beyond Eurasia. Paradoxically, these measures have exacerbated global crises, instead of fostering conflict resolution. China, Russia, and Iran have perpetuated their concurrence on American power being the primary obstacle to their objectives, and have strived to reshape the present; US led global order, even at the cost of competing with states supportive of the liberal international order.

The effects of the return of geopolitics and the attendant strategic turbulence have been felt across the global maritime. The oceans, considered free, open and accessible in liberal narratives, have been securitised and militarised. With nations prioritising rational planning to safeguard their interests there has been the resultant weaponisation of globalisation’s hallowed ways and means. These trends have become stark in the Indian Ocean, which carries roughly 75% of the world’s maritime trade and 50% of daily global oil consumption.

The Indian Ocean’s militarisation is globally significant due to its strategic trade routes. Although it began in 2007 to counter maritime piracy, militarisation has evolved into a semi-permanent geopolitical presence of regional and extra-regional powers, viz., the Chinese establishment in Gwadar, Djibouti and the Horn of Africa, the INFRUS agreement among India, France and the US to counter Chinese presence, not least, India, Afghanistan and Iran’s participation in the Chabahar Port Development Project (Rana 2023). Chinese and Indian SSBNs have also nuclearized the Indian Ocean. For countering Chinese influence, the US has been expanding its naval presence, thereby potentially triggering alliances and tensions. Trends portend that the region’s militarisation is expected to advance and take more complex forms. The major powers are likely to increase their naval presence and

control strategic bases to protect maritime interests and secure key SLOCs. Not least, establish listening posts for maritime reconnaissance, and deploy unmanned systems and cyber capabilities to be in an advantageous position in future resource wars.

Corollary to militarisation of the oceanic space, there has been the weaponisation of supply chains, chokepoints and even multilateral initiatives. With economic factors driving geopolitical competition today, China has emerged as the world's leading practitioner of geoeconomics. Nations that have become dependent upon Chinese exports and markets have become particularly vulnerable when their geopolitical interests collide. In such cases, China follows the tactic of blocking exports and delaying imports. Notable cases include the abrupt cessation of Chinese export of rare metals to Japan; blocking salmon purchases from Norway; and even banana shipments from the Philippines (Allison 2018:20-21).

Further, as the 'Ever Given' episode has adduced, the busiest maritime trade routes are most vulnerable at their chokepoints. This vulnerability might manifest in future not only in the Suez, but also the adjacent Bab al-Mandeb Strait, where Djibouti hosts a formidable Chinese presence as well as the Malacca Strait, the Bosphorus Strait, and the Strait of Hormuz. With the return of geopolitics, "it is becoming ever more likely that states will weaponise these choke-points to coerce others into certain forms of behaviour" (Medunic 2021). Moreover, as regards multilateralism, Beijing's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) projects have been developing ports in the Indo-Pacific with civilian-military dual-use functionality. These 'strategic strongpoints' are equipped to help the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N) "secure critical maritime chokepoints, safeguard SLOCs, and expand the range of support that can be provided to Chinese citizens and PLA forces operating abroad" (Russel & Berger 2020:23).

Recent reports also suggest that Beijing's global maritime operations double as intelligence-gathering outposts. With the use of "China's logistical software system, LOGINK, to track a wide range of trade, market, and maritime information, including vessel and cargo status, customs information, billing and payment data, geolocation data," Beijing's systematic information gathering activities could help it identify "critical Western trade and supply chain vulnerabilities, as well as track the shipping of military supplies, equipment, and components" (Dezenski & Rader 2023).

The West, Japan and India have variously responded to the MSR through bolstering the narrative of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and by reviving the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). Through the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF) and the Blue Dot Network, the US has envisaged an alternative economic and developmental framework to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region; while, India and Southeast Asian states have re-invigorated the BIMSTEC towards similar

ends (Lintner 2021). Moreover, to provide better security against Chinese coercion there has been the formation of the AUKUS pact.

These developments, however, have not necessarily enunciated a coherent policy for the Indo-Pacific. Neither could a fragmented approach by the supporters of the liberal *status quo* successfully counter Chinese influence therein. Instead, the dialectic of the MSR with the FOIP has only cemented the maritime security dilemma as the lasting bequest of the return of geopolitics upon the Indo-Pacific region. This statement needs unpacking to evaluate the impact of the dilemma upon the Indo-Pacific in general and the Bay of Bengal in particular.

Locating the Bay of Bengal within the Indo-Pacific

Although the maritime is one, particularly as a geopolitical entity, the world's oceans are at once connected and separate. The maritime geopolitical realm, comprising of the world's oceans are considered as a part of the global commons. The Indian Ocean, as a case in point, is one of the world's most shared water resources. Being rich in natural resources, it bears the potential for a thriving blue economy. As the Indian Ocean was becoming a hub for economic exploration and relentless global commercial activity during the past decade, two geopolitically significant developments have occurred: first, the conflation of the eastern reaches of the Indian Ocean with western Pacific Ocean through the Southeast Asian littoral states, thereafter encapsulated as the 'Indo-Pacific'; and, consequent to the narrative, the region has witnessed an increase in great power competition and regional geopolitical rivalry. For one analyst,

[T]he Indo-Pacific region has six nuclear weapon states—the United States, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea; five chokepoints—Suez, Hormuz, Malacca, Lumbok, Sunda; four major players—India, U.S., China, Japan; three rogue, pariah, failed, or seriously troubled countries—North Korea, Iran, Pakistan; five disputed land and maritime borders—India-China, India-Pakistan (in Kashmir), China-ASEAN states in the South China Sea, China-Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the post-Second World War-related Russia-Japan tussle over the Kurile Islands; two hotly contested stretches of water—the South China Sea and the Senkaku Islands... and innumerable sources of sub-regional terrorist action... (Karnad 2015:89).

The Indo-Pacific is, in effect, “a new mental map that transcends some of the mental divisions between the ‘Asia-Pacific’ and the ‘Indian Ocean’ regions. The concept reflects the growing economic and strategic interdependence of states right along the Asian littoral between the Korean peninsula and the Persian Gulf” (Brewster 2020). India adopted the Indo-Pacific outlook after the expansion of its economic and strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific—as reflected in its Look East/Act East Policy.

India's stakes in the security of East and South Asia have also augmented for the not-so-peaceful rise and consequent revanchism of China. By 2000, India was clear that its 'legitimate areas of interest' stretched from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca. In 2004, the Indian Naval Doctrine endorsed this point and strategized on the future course of naval expansionism (Majumdar 2018:76).

Since China's rise, it has inculcated imperial/classical geopolitical doctrines within its foreign policy, and has been expanding its tentacles through the MSR towards the South China Sea, the Gulf of Thailand, the Andaman Sea, and the Bay of Bengal. The expansion of the MSR close to its territorial waters in the Bay has put India on a collision course with China. Consequently, India's Indo-Pacific Vision (2018) has expanded the ambit of the geopolitical space from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas—conceptualising it a free, open, and rules-based region that embraces all in common pursuit of freedom, progress and prosperity (Ministry of Defence, Government of India Press Release 2022).

Prior to the geopolitical formation of the Indo-Pacific, the conceptual division of the Bay of Bengal had led to the creation of the 'Asia-Pacific' narrative. It also helped in establishing the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), *sans* the participation of India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. With the new mental map of the Indo-Pacific, however, the conceptual bifurcation of the Bay has ended. Since 2013, the Bay has been propelled from the periphery of Southeast Asia to close to the centre of the broader Indo-Pacific region. Concomitantly, the Bay has emerged as a coherent geopolitical region for a multiplicity of reasons encompassing its geographical attributes.

The Bay of Bengal not only physically connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans, it also acts as an economic hub for interaction between the Indian Ocean economic system, on the one hand, and East Asia, on the other. A quarter of the world's traded goods are carried through the Bay, which include huge volumes of Persian Gulf oil and liquefied natural gas, thereby providing energy-scarce countries in East Asia with a corridor to securing resources. Since the Japanese pitch for the Indo-Pacific in 2013, the conceptual reunification of the 'Bay of Bengal Crescent' has emphasised shared developmental and security issues along with the intra-regional dynamics among littoral states (Brewster 2020). For Akihiko Tanaka, the former head of Japan's International Cooperation Agency,

...the Bay of Bengal is centrally located within this tectonic change as it can function as a key junction between the two oceans. Unfortunately, we are often bound by outdated geographic divisions. We still draw a dividing line at the Arakan Mountains to separate South Asia from Southeast Asia... perhaps it is high time for the Bay of Bengal to be considered as a coherent strategic region within the broader framework of the Indo-Pacific (Tanaka 2014).

In contemporary times, however, the Bay has become an entrenched theatre of geostrategic competition featuring littoral as well as extra-regional states. The Bay has been perceived by such actors as crucial for the protection and promotion of interests, whereby its geographical attributes can be leveraged to actualise and achieve such interests (Majumdar 2023:65). Upon this understanding, durable geopolitical narratives of the Bay have been created. As the geostrategic centrality of the Bay within the Indo-Pacific region is perceived on its geoeconomic heft, including trade volume, infrastructure and connectivity and geopolitical importance, as regards domestic politics of South and East Asian states, and traditional and non-traditional security concerns, intermeshed narratives of challenges and opportunities have been created. Moreover, since the geopolitics of the Bay shall continue to transform in tune with changes in the larger Indo-Pacific region and, vice versa transactional narratives shall, arguably, remain intact. Such narratives have implications for the ‘great game’ in the Bay.

Transactional narratives of the Bay of Bengal

The transactional narratives of the Bay of Bengal may either extol interaction and connectivity, or highlight competition and advice caution among states. The dramatis personae of the ‘great game’ in the Bay are India, the South and East Asian states, China, Australia, and Japan; whereas, the US, the UK, and France are the extra-regional participants. Each state has a narrative surrounding the Bay, but only a few among the plethora of contending narratives having direct bearing upon the present inquiry shall be evaluated.

Firstly, the narratives of interaction and connectivity are taken into consideration. Such narratives of the Bay pivot on India’s geo-location for a plethora of reasons. Among the basin countries, India has the longest land border along the Bay, and also the greatest share of territorial waters by virtue of its size in comparison with Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Besides the very etymology of the Bay, the opportunities provided by its geography have often tempted India to view it as South Asia’s ‘gateway’, which in geopolitics alludes to regions serving as bridges between different geopolitical regions or realms to East Asia. This has entailed a shift of focus institutionalised through the Act East policy to the immediate eastern neighbourhood, the Far East, and even beyond towards the Western Pacific.

The Bay shall continue to remain India’s most vital sea. It is within this maritime space and conceptual gateway that India’s Act East policy coalesces with its larger Neighbourhood First policy (Majumdar 2023:65-66). The erstwhile BIST-EC (now BIMSTEC) was founded in 1997 on the recognition of the Bay as a self-determining geostrategic theatre. India, as a founding member of the BIMSTEC, has recently incentivised the formation of a shared security infrastructure encompassing

disaster management, counterterrorism and transnational crime, and energy. This goes well with India's intentions of becoming the 'net security provider' in the Indo-Pacific, whereby it has amped up frequent ship deployments, large-scale training support, assistance in various disasters/crises in littoral areas, and increased maritime connectivity with Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia (Basu Ray Choudhury, et al. 2019; Upadhyaya 2020:52, 59).

With the recognition of the Bay as an inter-regional space and a security complex that is amenable to both crises and convergences within the Indo-Pacific, India has also launched the Project Mausam in 2014. It aims at engaging and connecting the Indian Ocean littorals on the basis of shared history, cultural identity, and economic interests. In 2015, the Mission Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) in the Indian Ocean was launched towards the fulfilment of economic and security cooperation. Together with the BIMSTEC, if Mausam and Mission SAGAR become effective, these may lead the Bay littorals to constitute a security community, with the add-on effect of securing India's maritime interests (Majumdar and Sen 2023:7).

Such optimistic narratives aside, there is always the possibility that mechanisms of regionalism shall fail to deliver. India's past experiences reveal incremental progress with several insurmountable roadblocks placed in its way by actors external to the region. Not least, any narrative of interaction and connectivity engenders, inexorably, its own antithesis: competition. Since all states participating within ventures of regional integration neither sacrifice their sovereignty in the process, nor subscribe to similar visions of a shared future, they often end up pursuing interests which are specific to their nationality. Ergo, an admixture of competing futuristic visions and particularistic national interests engender zero-sum narratives, whereby plurilateralism or bilateralism often supersedes multilateral regionalism. Moreover, the Bay also reveals a set of challenges to freedom of navigation and maritime security with changing power dynamics largely pivoting upon the rise of China and the concomitant security concerns of South and East Asian nations. Such narratives, however transactional, are complementary to the return of geopolitics.

Insofar as competitive multilateralism among the Bay littorals, membership and sectors of cooperation often overlap. To wit, the BIMSTEC is basically the SAARC minus Afghanistan and Pakistan; whereas, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) overlaps with the BIMSTEC, the SAARC, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Also, these initiatives, originating from within India's neighbourhood have been founded on conceptions of minimal multilateralism and non-institutionalised cooperation which have, heretofore, posed tremendous challenges to their operational success (Michael 2015). Challenges to these organisations have also been issued externally: through the BRI—including the proposed MSR—Beijing has sought to wed the whole of South Asia, including the Bay of Bengal, firmly to its 'Chinese Dream'.

The resultant scramble for connectivity in the Bay—realised through competing Chinese, Indian, and Japanese ventures of building ports, roads, pipelines, and railways throughout the region (Brewster 2014) has often worked to the detriment of multilateralism, fomenting instead, a spirit among the Bay littorals for leveraging bilateral channels of development within multilateral frameworks. In this regard, Myanmar has become an entrenched arena of Sino-Indian competition pursued through the China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), on the one hand, and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP), on the other (Cameron 2023; Bhattacharjee 2024). Further, given the trajectory in which the Maldives is moving, it may soon fall prey to similar patterns of competing bilateralism, or a debt crisis largely engineered by China.

The same spirit can be witnessed amongst the Bay littorals which are either fearful of the security ramifications of the BRI or have already fallen prey to the Chinese ‘debt trap’. Notable cases include Sri Lanka, where the government continue to bear the debt for the commercially unviable Hambantota Port, “despite restructuring it and handing it over to a Chinese entity for 99 years” (Gupta 2022). Although not a Bay littoral, Nepal has had a similar experience with the BRI. Akin to the Hambantota case, China has been claiming Nepal’s Pokhara airport, by “using economic losses at the airport as a pretext” (Roy Chaudhury 2024). Further east, port and resort development around the Koh Kong province of Cambodia offers another example of Beijing translating its economic influence into military use. The port has been designed to support the docking of PLA-N vessels, and the nearby Dara Sakor airport is hosting a Beijing-backed construction of an air-force length airstrip. Both projects are on 99-year leases to Chinese entities (Cameron 2023). Not least, to circumvent its ‘Malacca Dilemma’, China has been instigating Thailand to expedite the construction of the fabled Kra Canal, a vast waterway envisaged to pass through the Kra Isthmus via loan offers under BRI schemes. Although the project has not taken off for a plethora of geopolitical, economic, technical, and environmental concerns; if ever realised, shall greatly benefit China while negatively impacting India’s island exclave on the Bay of Bengal (Gokhale 2023).

The proposed Kra Canal is indicative of the perpetual turbulence in the Bay of Bengal, triggered by strategic competition. Given competing national interests enunciated through divergent narratives of major powers in the Indo-Pacific, the very ideas of interaction, connectivity, and access have been problematized. This has snowballed further in the wake of the pandemic, whereby, defying the sway of globalisation, States have become more insular. The vapidness of international organisations has also been revealed, with concomitant degradation of America’s global leadership, and damage to China’s moral authority to replace the former (Majumdar 2023:70-71).

Since the pandemic, the risks associated with the BRI have only become starker: attendant corruption, the practice of debt diplomacy, and the violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity

of participating countries have been revealed (Singh 2023). Ergo, the BRI's stock has been falling: ostensible from the dip in capital exports, construction contracts, and the disastrous consequences of the Health Silk Road (The Economist 2023). Not least, Beijing's involvement in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the FTA in the Indo-Pacific is likely to be affected due to its notoriety in the Asia-Pacific (Majumdar 2023:71). Nevertheless, as it is imperative for China to continue accessing the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal nominally, for meeting burgeoning energy needs that Beijing maintains its regional assertiveness through an admixture of persuasion and coercion. These factors have entailed a set of challenges for India, and turn the analysis toward the future of zero-sum narratives of the Bay and India's strategic responses to fend off China.

Coda: strategic futures of the Bay

An influential publication on the Indo-Pacific had proffered three potential outcomes for ordering the protean region: the likelihood of a cooperative security edifice comprising major and littoral powers; the formation of an Asian concert in the European model; and, the development of a balance of power system comprising Japan, China, and India (Mohan 2012:216-234). When transposed to the Bay, not a single of these ideal formations could, however, inform its future. Meanwhile, zero-sum narratives and micro-strategic formations have gained currency: cooperative security has been mired in competitive multilateralism; Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has negated the possibilities of an Asian concert; not least, the viability of any regional balance of power system has receded due to multiple, contradictory efforts by extra-regional powers to order the Indo-Pacific. In all likelihood, therefore, strategic futures of the Bay shall be informed by an admixture of the 'security dilemma' and the 'cooperation dilemma' for the ostensible durability of zero-sum narratives. Such narratives largely emanate from entrenched Sino-Indian competition, underscored by the United States' lasting influence in the Indo-Pacific.

In the early 2000s, there were competing narratives of the 'String of Pearls', denoting China's quest for military modernisation to extend naval presence from South China Sea to the Arabian Gulf, and the acquisition of naval bases in the Indian Ocean and the consequential 'Necklace of Diamonds' or the Indian counter to Chinese encirclement through arrangements of port access, fuelling facilities, and regular joint military exercises with the navies of East and Southeast Asian states, operational coordination with the US, and the creation of naval and listening posts across the Indian Ocean littorals (Majumdar 2022:16-17). Essentially an American narrative, the 'String' was perceived by Washington and New Delhi as a threat to the freedom of navigation. These narratives, however, have been superseded by China's MSR and India's counter-formulations through the QUAD.

As Beijing's aggressive 'Wolf Warrior' style of diplomacy began to unravel in the Asia-Pacific, not least, India's profile consequently rose higher. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi dubbed the QUAD as the 'Asian NATO'. He accused the US of using its global clout upon regional allies to suppress Beijing's rise by staging a '5 4 3 2' posture: where 5 refers to the Five Eyes Intelligence Sharing Network, 4 refers to the QUAD, 3 refers to the AUKUS, and 2 refers to bilateral military alliances (PTI 2022). Accusations despite heavy economic interdependence, frequent brinkmanship, and crisscrossing naval footprints in the Bay of Bengal not only exacerbate the Sino-Indian security dilemma, but also engender the mutual cooperation dilemma: denoting the willingness to cooperate for economic prosperity, but the tendency to compete for securing legitimate spheres of influence.

In fine, what are the strategic options open to India for ensuring its preponderance over the Bay? Given its imperatives of 'strategic autonomy' and maritime connectivity in the post-cold war oligo-polar world order, India is likely to continue with the strategy of multi-alignment with multiple states across a plethora of issue-areas. Since 2014, India has endeavoured to establish a security structure in the Indo-Pacific by synthesising elements of cooperative security, Asian concert, and the balance of power system.

Insofar as the Bay littorals, India has extant strategic partnerships, multilateral dialogues and fora, such as the QUAD, BIMSTEC, IORA, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) to nurture; not least, having extended the defence lines of credit to Vietnam and Bangladesh, among others, it has infrastructure development in South and East Asia to buttress. With the BRI falling and China's RCEP stock also in decline, the moment is opportune for India to reinforce its narrative of the Bay through direct involvements in the BIMSTEC's cooperative security framework; also, for preventing the PLA-N's numerical superiority, east of the Andaman and Nicobar to have a spill-over effect upon the Bay.

As the Bay moves increasingly to the center of the Indo-Pacific, it shall become *the* geostrategic theatre for testing the efficacy of India's maritime capability enhancement plans and diplomatic outreach. The first ranges from India's intentions of becoming the 'net security provider' in the Indo-Pacific to the dissemination of the Maritime Domain Awareness through the Information Fusion Centre, and the promulgation of the Maritime Capability Perspective Plan. Besides, India holds regular trilateral dialogues with France, Australia, Japan, Indonesia, and the US. With India maintaining the strongest navy in the Bay, in the foreseeable future, the cumulative impact of such plans and outreach activities may ultimately snowball towards the creation of an India-led Asian concert, with the Bay as its epicentre.

Since any such concert cannot be sustained by discounting China, India and the US have variously deployed the strategy of 'conengagement'. In international politics, conengagement is a portmanteau of simultaneous strategies of 'containment' and 'engagement' towards a perceived adversary. As both

countries also have their respective economies heavily linked to the Chinese manufacturing juggernaut, India and the US have variously engaged China to participate in extant institutions of global governance, not least, respect laws and treaties. While simultaneously, attempting to 'contain' Chinese maritime adventurism and expansionism with fresh alliances and alignments. By implication of the 'Chinese Dream', the balance, however, needs to be readjusted towards containment without any overt bias towards gradualist engagement, as the latter would not be enough in the face of Chinese irredentism.

Insofar as the Bay, the future viability of congaing China shall ultimately depend upon the operation capability of the Indian Navy, not least, the tactical and geostrategic significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) chain. These islands provide India with immense strategic advantage in the Indo-Pacific region and have been regarded as India's 'springboard' into the Pacific, and, in the obverse, the reason for China's so-called 'Malacca dilemma'. Following the announcement of India's Look East Policy, the Andaman and Nicobar Tri-Service Command was created in 2001, as India's first operational theatre command. However, since the beginning, the ANC was mired in ideational and logistical issues. These issues are being addressed, as the Indian government has come to understand the Navy's role vis-à-vis its larger foreign policy interests in the Indo-Pacific.

As India has every intention of policing the Bay, a strong naval presence in the ANI chain would deter not only attacks emanating from the east, but also promotes counterterrorism and anti-piracy operations. Moreover, even if the Kra Canal materialises, a strong ANC would inexorably reinforce China's chokepoint dilemma, since the proposed Kra route would bring Chinese ships directly to the eastern seaboard of the ANI chain. Recent naval modernisation, including the placement of defense mechanisms comprising Barak 1 and Barak 8 missiles, and regular Milan and Malabar multilateral naval exercises in the wake of China's deployment of unmanned submarines in the IOR, are therefore, undoubtedly calibrated towards the realisation of India's strongman intent and capacity to project power through the Bay. A fledging ANC shall also enable the Indian Navy to have a forward presence in the Bay for protecting SLOCs, preventing piracy, interdicting terrorists and other unwanted elements, not least, for undertaking a host of goodwill missions.

Ultimately, as India's augmented operational and strategic interventions in the Bay shall be perceived negatively by China, the Indian leadership would have to be wary of countervailing naval build-up especially since Beijing's long-term plans entail the establishment of a unipolar Asia with the concomitant subjugation of India and Japan. As this element of Chinese grand strategy would trigger commensurate Indian response, strategic futures of the Bay of Bengal are likely to be anything but peaceful.

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