

The Dynamics of Bay of Bengal: Asian Geopolitics in the Future

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Abstract

Bay of Bengal is emerging as an important geopolitical, economic and strategic theatre in the twenty first century in parallel to the developments in the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Bay of Bengal was important for world trade till the close of the nineteenth century. This has led the Bay to acquire an importance that cannot be ignored. With the withdrawal of the colonial powers and the onset of the post-war state arrangement, Asia discarded the erstwhile networks and connections. Previously a highway of migration among nations, Bay of Bengal as an arena was mostly dormant in the latter half of the 20th century. The onset of citizenship norms restricted free migration, while the new states turned inward and did not trade frequently. Among the newly independent nations mistrust grew and weakened the bond of cohesiveness and unity, making the Bay to lose its identity. This was extenuated by the creation of regional identities of 'Southeast Asia' and 'South Asia'. While Southeast Asia restored their unity under ASEAN in 1965 and South Asia under SAARC in 1985, no real effort to revitalize the entire swath of the Bay as one entity was made until the initiation of India's 'Look East' policy in 1991 and later the formation of BIMSTEC in 1997 brought the Bay of Bengal further into focus. The Bay of Bengal as a region is presently going through a reorientation from a dormant sea to a hotbed of new opportunities and opened the gates of trade and exchange, laying greater emphasis on a region that was not prioritized previously. The result transformed the Bay of Bengal from a forgotten sea to a sea-bridge that would connect South with Southeast Asia. In the new millennium, the rise of China and India and their interest and focus on this region, has brought about forced cooperation, connectivity and conflict forcing bilateral, multilateral, regional and sub-regional agreements by littoral states. This has led the Bay to acquire an importance that cannot be ignored. As the Chinese footprint is growing across the Indian Ocean, the possibility of a Sino-Indian conflict at the sea is increasing as well. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing is encircling India with the so called 'string of pearls' around the neck of India's coastline. Beijing, through the 'bridgehead' strategy, plans to connect to the Bay of Bengal through an overland transport system through Myanmar. As the scramble for connectivity has peaked, India and other extra-regional states have also joined the bandwagon. For New Delhi, the Bay of Bengal is becoming important for its eastward ambitions and for countering China. The Bay of Bengal not only forms the centrepiece of India's Act East Policy but

it is also New Delhi's springboard to venture further east. The new geopolitical nomenclature of the Indo-Pacific, extending from the western shores of the United States of America to the eastern shores of Africa, also places the Bay of Bengal at the centre. The strategic factors for the resurgence of the Bay of Bengal are also supplemented by a host of conditions exclusive to the region, which has a trans-boundary effect. The Bay of Bengal oversees the most important trading routes owing to its proximity to the Malaccan straits. These routes are susceptible to threats ranging from maritime terrorism to piracy, drug trafficking to illegal migration. Further, the waters of the region have been witnessing one of the largest refugee movements in the recent past owing to the Rohingya crisis. The strategies of the regional and extra-regional actors as well as non-traditional security factors are reinvigorating the emergence of the Bay of Bengal. The dynamics of the region will determine the geopolitics of Asia in the years to come.

Keywords: *Bay of Bengal, ASEAN, Act East, geopolitics*

Introduction:

Bay of Bengal is the most significant spatial phenomena for South and South East Asia in political means. If its significance is condensed on geopolitical terms; it could reveal some very outstanding phases. One interesting thing is that, the Bay of Bengal is a major concern not only for India but also for Bangladesh, Myanmar and other Asian countries. Bay of Bengal is emerging as an important geopolitical, economic and strategic theatre in the twenty first century in parallel to the developments in the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Bay of Bengal was important for world trade till the close of the nineteenth century. This has led the Bay to acquire an importance that cannot be ignored. With the withdrawal of the colonial powers and the onset of the post-war state arrangement, Asia discarded the erstwhile networks and connections. Previously a highway of migration among nations, Bay of Bengal as an arena was mostly dormant in the latter half of the 20th century. The onset of citizenship norms restricted free migration, while the new states turned inward and did not trade frequently. Among the newly independent nations mistrust grew and weakened the bond of cohesiveness and unity, making the Bay to lose its identity. This was extenuated by the creation of regional identities of 'Southeast Asia' and 'South Asia'. While Southeast Asia reunited their unity under ASEAN in 1965 and South Asia under SAARC in 1985, no real effort to revitalize the entire swath of the Bay as one entity was made until the initiation of India's 'Look East' policy in 1991 and later the formation of BIMSTEC in 1997 brought the Bay of Bengal further into limelight (Das 2019). The Bay of Bengal as a region is presently going through a reorientation from a dormant sea to a hotbed of new opportunities and opened the gates of trade and exchange, laying greater emphasis on a region that was not prioritized previously. The result transformed the Bay of Bengal from a forgotten sea to a sea-bridge that would

connect South with Southeast Asia. In the new millennium, the rise of China and India and their interest and focus on this region, has brought about forced cooperation, connectivity and conflict forcing bilateral, multilateral, regional and sub-regional agreements by littoral states. This has led the Bay to acquire an importance that cannot be ignored (Bhattacharya & Lorea 2020).

Location:

The Bay of Bengal is a northern extension of the Indian Ocean, located between India and Sri Lanka in the west, Bangladesh to the north, and Myanmar (Burma) and the northern part of the Andaman-Nicobar to the east. It's approximately 1,000 miles (1,600 km) wide, with an average depth near 8,500 feet (2,600 meters). The maximum depth is recorded at 15,400 feet (4,694 meters). The Bay occupies an area of about 2,172,000 km². It is the largest bay of the world. The Bay receives inflows from many large rivers. A number of large rivers – the Ganges, Meghna, Jamuna, Ayeyarwady, Godavari, Mahanadi, Krishna and Kaveri – flow into the Bay of Bengal. As we can see in the picture, it is shaped like 'U'. Geographically it is a source of water, salt, energy, fish, minerals, transport, and business and so on. But if we look through the lens of International Relations; it is a very significant ground of power politics. As it is situated in the dead point of strategically rival countries, the geopolitical value of the Bay of Bengal is far beyond important than its esteemed values.

The International Hydrographic Organization defines the limits of the Bay of Bengal as follows. On the East: A line running from Cape Negrais (16°03'N) in Burma through the larger islands of the Andaman group, in such a way that all the narrow waters between the islands lie to the Eastward of the line and are excluded from the Bay of Bengal, as far as a point in Little Andaman Island in latitude 10°48'N, longitude 92°24'E and thence along the Southwest limit of the Burma Sea (5°32'N 95°12'E) in Sumatra to Poeloe Bras and on through the Western Islands of the Nicobar Group to Sandy Point in Little Andaman Island, in such a way that all the narrow waters appertain to the Burma Sea. On the South: Adam's Bridge (between India and Sri Lanka) and from the Southern extreme of a Dondr Head (South point of Sri Lanka) to the North point of Poeloe Bras. (5°44'N 95°04'E) (Britannica: 2024)

History:

Northern Circars occupied the western coast of the Bay of Bengal and is now considered to be India's Madras state. Chola dynasty (9th century to 12th century) when ruled by Rajaraja Chola I occupied the western coastline of the Bay of Bengal circa AD 1014, The Bay of Bengal was also called as the Chola Lake. The Kakatiya dynasty reached the western coastline of the Bay of Bengal between the Godavari and the Krishna rivers. Kushanas about the middle of the 1st century AD invaded northern India perhaps extending as far as the Bay of Bengal. Chandragupta Maurya extended the Maurya

Dynasty across Northern India to the Bay of Bengal. Hajipur was a stronghold of Portuguese Pirates. In the 16th century the Portuguese built trading posts in the North of the Bay at Chittagong (Porto Grande) and Satgaon (Porto Pequeno). The Bay of Bengal appears as Sinus Gangeticus or Gangeticus Sinus, meaning “Gulf of the Ganges”, in ancient maps. In the 10th century the explosion of Indian kingdoms, led by the Chola Empire, resulted in the Bay of Bengal being known as the Chola Lake. It later came to be known as Bay of Bengal in after the region of Bengal.

Basin Countries: India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka.

Sea Ports: Some of the biggest ports in the world Kolkata and Chennai are in the bay. Chittagong in Bangladesh and Yangon, the largest city and former capital of Burma, are also important ports on the bay. Other ports on the bay include, India: Port Blair, Kakinada, Pondicherry and Vishakhapatnam; Bangladesh: Mongla, Payra; Myanmar: Sittwe (Agarwala: 2020).

Geopolitical significance of Bay of Bengal:

The Bay of Bengal, spanning a vast expanse of 2.17 million sq-km, is the world’s largest bay. Positioned as the central bay within the expansive “Great Middle Bay” of the Indian Ocean, it occupies a pivotal role in the region’s geography. The Bay of Bengal countries have a population of 1.7 billion and a GDP of USD 7 trillion. Geopolitically, the Bay of Bengal is surrounded by key nations on its western and northwest shores, including India, while Bangladesh borders it to the north. To the east, Myanmar and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India define its boundaries. The southern limit is marked by an imaginary line stretching between Sangaman Kanda in Sri Lanka and the northeastern most point of Sumatra, Indonesia (FAIR Team: 2023).

Geo political significance of Bay of Bengal is many. The Bay of Bengal is strategically crucial for India since it is a natural extension of its sphere of influence. Secondly, because of the presence of outlying islands, namely, Andaman islands and Nicobar islands and most importantly several major ports such as Kolkata, Chennai, Visakhapatnam, and Tuticorin along its coast with the Bay of Bengal. India with its population of about 1,441,719,852 in a land territory of 32, 87, 263 sq.km needs to explore and exploit the living and non-living resources of the adjacent to sea. The full extent of marine resources is yet unknown to us. Some experts consider that mineral deposits are greater in sea than those in land territory. The oceans are without doubt the most important resources on the planet. Maritime states can boast of their fortune having economic, political, strategic and social advantages over other states in reaping benefit from those resources while their interests are manifest in a variety of activates including shipping of goods, fishing, naval mission and scientific research. India is too bestowed with the same geographic endowments with 7516 km coastline. So, significance and importance of the Bay of Bengal are huge for the south Asia and south East Asian region.

Seas help rather than obstruct interrelations among the peoples who surrounded them. South Asian power India compounded by seas on its three sides, has always looked upon the seas for contacts with the outside world. Indeed due to a continental mindset, the policy makers try to realize the geographical endowments and rich maritime importance of the Bay of Bengal. The Bay of Bengal is much more than the eastern segment of the Indian Ocean. The maritime region surrounding the countries around the coastal, always maintained a thriving contact through movements of trade, people, religious, cultural and political missions, which gave the region an autonomous character. The six coastal countries including India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia have their outlet in this region. These countries have been associated with the Bay of Bengal since ages. Given its centrality, the emerging multifaceted influences will continue to converge and will be further catalyzed by the strategic sea lines and the significance of region that remains volatile and unstable due to presence of extra-territorial countries and non- state actors in the region. Bay of Bengal has played an important historical role because of its deep inland penetration. The vast sea is facilitating communication with them. It has been argued that the conceptual division of the Bay of Bengal region between South Asia and Southeast Asia may no longer be appropriate and that the rise of India as a major power may lead to a new mental mapping of the Bay of Bengal as a coherent strategic region (Islam: 2023).

Strategic Importance of Bay of Bengal:

The strategic importance of a location or an area is dependent on some variable and non-variable factors. One needs to recognize and understand the ways how these factors tend to influence a country's geo-strategic strength or its vulnerability. The elements are as follows:

1. Geographic setting of state and region.
2. Resources,
3. Population,
4. Military History, and
5. Military ability

The Bay of Bengal is centrally located in the region from the Middle East to the Philippine Sea. Even from aviation's strategic aerial position it lies at the Centre. It lies at dead center of two huge economic blocks, the SAARC and ASEAN. China's southern landlocked region in the North and major sea ports of Bangladesh and India. Both rising economic though with chaotic democracies China and India have forged naval cooperation agreements with Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia to increase its cooperation in checking terrorism in the high seas. The Bay of Bengal is strategically crucial for India since it is a natural extension of its sphere of influence. Secondly, due to the presence

of outlying islands, namely Andaman islands and Nicobar islands and most importantly several major ports such as Kolkata, Chennai, Vizag, and Tuticorin along its coast with the Bay of Bengal.

China has recently made some efforts to project influence into the region through tie-ups with Myanmar and Bangladesh. The United States held several major exercises with India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The largest ever war exercise in Bay of Bengal, known as Malabar 2007, was held in 2007 and naval warships from US, Singapore, Japan and Australia took part in it. India was also a participant.

For a long time, the Bay of Bengal was a backwater and isolated from world concern. The importance increases in the 20th century approximately in 1980 when Myanmar opened its contribution to the world community. Over the years influence now that changed shape to compete in between India, Myanmar, China, USA, Bangladesh, and southeast Asian Neighbor country. There are some factors behind the competition among the regional and global power in the Bay of Bengal (Anwar: 2022).

Economic Significance:

Despite their generally large populations, the Bay of Bengal countries have relatively small economies. In terms of GDP, none of them ranks among the world's top ten. All Bay of Bengal nations have experienced rapid growth over the past two decades – particularly in the Industry and Service Sectors - this has led to increasing levels of industrial development in the coastal zones surrounding the Bay of Bengal. Much of the industry has centered on transforming raw materials into steel, paper, chemicals, paints, plastics and textiles; also important are leather tanning, oil refining, and electricity generation, fishing and tourism.

One of the first trading ventures along the Bay of Bengal was The Company of Merchants of London Trading into the East Indies more commonly referred to as British East India Company. Gopalpur was one of their main trading centers. Other trading companies along the Bay of Bengal shorelines were English East India Company and French East India Company. BIMSTEC Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) supports free trade internationally around the Bay of Bengal between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

The main shipping route passing through the Bay of Bengal runs along the south of Sri Lanka and across the Bay of Bengal before entering the Straits of Malacca. The strait is the main shipping channel between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, linking major Asian economies such as India, China, Japan and South Korea. Over 50,000 vessels pass through the strait per year, carrying

about one-quarter of the world's traded goods including oil, Chinese manufactures, and Indonesian coffee.

The ascent of Asian economies started with the Chinese movement to neighboring Asian nations in the sixteenth century achieving its peak in 1949. Chinese policy has a great impact on the basin country of The Bay of Bengal. If we see, in the ongoing years' Japan put a ton of cash in the development of infrastructure and technological advancement and modern division around the bay basin countries, that makes this area financially more grounded. After individual nations had picked up their autonomy, present-day ventures followed in oil, car plants, and telecoms driving the economies of the countries exceptionally India and Bangladesh. The accompanying ASEAN part nations are the significant movers in the locale's economy. Then again BIMSTEC, SAARC, ASEAN have increased two-sided exchange, and financial collaboration, mutual trust, among the country. If we break down the financial state of Southeast Asian Country-we see that China is the country that has turned into the primary merchant of crude materials, is one of the greatest assembling countries all around, and is irrefutably the biggest purchaser showcase on the planet. India and the littler littoral nations have likewise expanded fares and reciprocal exchange with South and Southeast Asian nations. Bangladesh likewise assumes a fundamental job with regards to the Southeast Asian Economy (Jony & Nomani 2021).

Energy:

Most of the Asian nations have growing energy demand because of industrialization in this region. Asian superpower China is expected to surpass the USA in terms of energy demand by 2015. China and India are the highest net oil importers among all the developed country (World Energy Report-2015). China and India have now become heavily dependent on oil imports, which are expected to rise to 75% and 95% respectively of their total oil consumption by 2030. India mainly imports its oil from Iran and middle-eastern countries. In terms of natural gas, their imports are also expected to increase to 40% (China) and 50% (India) (HCSS 2010). This will make the two nations (China, India) alliance on vitality imports over land and via ocean. Therefore, the significance of the Bay of Bengal as a traveled area will continue expanding, as it will observe the development of SLOCs and increase of maritime nearness for the two powers India and China. Because of its vital area, the Bay of Bengal not just serves the littoral countries around the Bay yet, in addition, other significant performing artists like China and Japan, which through the Malacca Strait, get to it for exchange merchandise and vitality.

Large deposits of natural gas also incited a serious up for grabs urgency by India. Disputes over rights of some oil and gas blocks have caused brief diplomatic spats between Myanmar and India with Bangladesh. The Bay of Bengal is a source of huge natural resources for its locational reason. The

Bay of Bengal and the adjoining sea like Andaman and Nicobar Sea and Malacca straits are the link between south east and south Asia. They are known as major source of oil and natural gas producing area. It is one of the least explored or extracted offshore or onshore regions. It is a home to a number of energy. In recent years there have been discoveries of natural gas in the offshore areas of Myanmar, inland and offshore of Bangladesh and knavery Godavari and Krishna basins on the east coast of India. They can be described as a hub for oil and natural gas for the countries of south and Southeast Asia. As well as north coast Asia. Countries of the Bay of Bengal region may leverage their energy endowment on policy relationship with other as well as major Asian neighbors like china and India in realm of energy security. India Bangladesh relationship in the field of energy, Myanmar with India or china in the oil and gas sector could get overall political relationship.

Hydrocarbon resources in the Bay of Bengal generally located in deep areas, as compared to those in the Arabian Sea. There are placer deposits of titanium off northeastern Sri Lanka and rare earths off northeastern India. Heavy mineral sands occur around Nagapatnam in Tamilnadu state on the southeastern Indian coast, near Chennai, and in coastal areas around Vishakhapatnam. Coastal regions bordering the Bay of Bengal are rich in minerals. Sri Lanka is also known as Serendib or Ratna Deep which means Gem Island. Amethyst, beryl, ruby, sapphire, topaz, and garnet are just some of the gems of Sri Lanka. Garnet and other precious gems are also found in abundance in the Indian states of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh (Ahmad 2018).

Politics:

Southeast Asian countries' politics are now more stable. Now India is the world's biggest democratic country. In the 20th century, the political condition of South Asia is not stable. The assassination of political leaders in this period happened rapidly. The politics of South East Asia especially in India and Bangladesh has controlled by family politics. Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman killing is the result of the political instability of the 20th century in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, the politics of China is controlled by one-party rule and their Chinese communism has a big influence over Chinese people. This political stability makes China now the world superpower, economical giant. Now the political stability and democracy make south Asia the world rising political power. India now plays as a regional power (Rajamohan, C. 2020).

Connectivity:

South Asian countries' connectivity through BIMSTEC, SAARC and ASEAN plays an important role. South Asian countries signed (SAFTA) South Asian Free Trade Area through SAARC and growing connectivity in the development and technology sector through BIMSTEC. Now we see that bilateral connectivity increasing among the nations, Indo-Bangla, Indo-China, Bangladesh-China bi-lateral

trade relations, and trade agreements are signed. Chinese investment in the Bay of Bengal region also increases connectivity among the nation.

Marine transit:

Geographical location of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands near to Malacca strait gives ample scope for free port, transshipment port, ship repair base and offshore bunkering facility for International Sea Lanes. To create potentially a very strong maritime power and facilitator in the region and to eliminate the sea piracy, drug trafficking and gunrunners in the region, the Andaman and Nicobar Command formed recently, playing decisive role and promoting cooperation among littoral countries of Bay of Bengal. The important ports are Cuddalore, Ennore, Chennai, Karaikal, Pondicherry, Tuticorin, Kakinada, Machilipatnam, Vishakhapatnam, Gangavaram, Krishnapatnam, Paradip, Kolkata, Mongla, Chittagong and Yangon (Chaudhuri & Chatterji 2019).

Regional significance:

India being situated in South Asia, its importance, because of its geopolitical location is increasing day by day with the increasing importance of South Asia and broadly Asia in International Politics. The geographical location of India is a prevalent fact that influences the decision making process in making foreign policy. Because of the various elements in the formulation of foreign policy of a country, geographic location occupies a significant position. Not only India has interest over the geopolitical location but also countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, China, and USA and even courtiers like Japan and Australia are showing their interest considering the geo political importance of the Bay. Nepal and Bhutan being land locked and not having sea access very much interested to use Bangladeshis sea ports to foster their trade. As china has competing relationship with India always seeks opportunities to contain India geo-strategically where Bangladesh becomes one of the perfect positions to her intention. Though USA has its biggest naval base in Andaman and Nicobar Islands it intended to use Chittagong Sea port to strengthen its strategic position in South Asia considering the importance of the region in World politics. More clearly in terms of any dispute with India and china Chittagong port is the better place to contain two nuclear power and which are growing as a super power in international system. Japan and Australia also for their national interest maintain good relations with India and Bangladesh and where Australia has different projects and aids. No state regulates its foreign policy without being motivated by its national interest. Again India's North East, Bangladesh and Myanmar are important for transit way, Asian highway. The Bay of Bengal is strategically crucial for India because of the presence of outlying islands, namely Andaman and Nicobar and several major ports such as Kolkata, Chennai, Vizag, and Tuticorin along its coast with the Bay of Bengal. Much of the naval operations of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War took place in the Bay of Bengal.

The growing influence of China due to support provided by Myanmar has created geopolitical implications for India. India has held several major naval exercises with friendly countries, especially United States, to counter increasing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. This exercise was widely viewed as “strategic encirclement of China”. India has forged naval cooperation agreements with Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia to increase its strategic reach in the region. India also established Far Eastern Naval Command off Port Blair to increase surveillance in the adjoining Andaman Sea (Brewster 2014).

The potential of natural gas exploitation also makes the Bay of Bengal important for India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Disputes over rights of some oil and gas blocks have caused brief diplomatic spats between India and Bangladesh. The disputed maritime boundary between Bangladesh and Myanmar has twice resulted in military tension, in 2008 and 2009 and currently they are pursuing a settlement to the boundary dispute through the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea, while India and Bangladesh are working towards a settlement using an arbitrator (Brent 2018).

Recent Significance:

Once upon a time, Andaman and Nicobar Island were known as Kalapani. People participating in the anti-British movement were sent there in exile. The islands are connected with the names of many legendary figures and are still discussed. On November 16, 2018, John Allen Chaouk, the American Christian missionary was killed by indigenous Sentinelese. He tried to land on North Sentinel Island for the promotion of Christianity. But the indigenous people did not want him to land there. That island is a talked of the US priest. But there is a big story behind the scenes of Andaman, and how modern geopolitical problems arise. In the remote islands in the middle of Southeast Asia and the Indian sub-continent, India is now building sophisticated and highly decorated bases. India is now seeking to conduct surveillance of Chinese submarines in the Malacca Route adjacent to Andaman and Nicobar Island and developed its first and only Tri-service command. Its headquarters in the main city of Port Blair and Nicobar has its own boat station. In the context of China’s expansion of its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, Andaman became the land of the geopolitical competition for two Asian giants (Devnath 2016). India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Andaman on December 30, 2018 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the hoisting of the Indian National Flag at Port Blair and the Azad Hind Government Declaration, which was a temporary government established in 1943 with assistance from Japan and Germany during World War II. During the war, the Japanese captured Andaman and Nicobar. At that time the allies of Japan were Indian National Army chief Subhash Chandra Bose. He was fighting alongside with Japanese forces (PIB: 2018). Modi and then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe signed a treaty that in a short time, the ships of the Japanese Navy will

appear in Port Blair. Both aim to resist China in the Indian Ocean. Apart from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japan and India are also made coalition. The decision to set up military command in Andaman with the assistance of USA was made before the BRI, in 1995 at a closed-door meeting between then Prime Minister of India Narseema Rao and US President Bill Clinton, because it was clear that China wants to establish its presence in the Indian Ocean. The plan was finalized during Clinton's visit to India in 2000. The US naval ship was anchored in Port Blair. India has opened its naval fleet to the US in 2016, in exchange for the benefit of arms to reduce the military technical gap with China. In particular, India is getting US assistance to identify Chinese submarines. But during the Donald Trump period, India is not getting assured support as usual. That is why they are going to Japan. During the visit of Modi to Japan last October, the two countries agreed on various military assistances. Especially the advantage of surveillance is that India has the advantage of getting more. There are logical reasons for the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. Most of the country's trade is on this route, with most of its energy being imported here (Brewster: 2018). In the Sea Lane Strategy, China is engaged in acquiring port facilities through its "String of Pearls" strategy around the neck of India's coastline which is now being called "Maritime Silk Route". This will enable the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and navy to operate in the seas around India. It has already built ports in Gwadar of Pakistan, Myanmar's Kyauk Pyiu, and Sri Lankan Hambantota and is operating Kra Canal in Thailand and Cambodia. The Gwadar port on the Makran coast of Pakistan has been leased to China for 40 years. China has also upgraded ports in Chittagong, Bangladesh; Lamu in Northern Kenya and Djibouti in East Africa. These ports have converted to naval bases. India therefore concentrated on gains while dealing with China on trade and security issues (Ghosh 2015). In this context Narendra Modi's Andaman tour was actually an attempt to make relations between Japan and India closer. But the rest of the world knows, the new Cold War is beginning on the horizon of the Indian Ocean, and this battle is going to be the important center for the Andaman Islands. But who will benefit? The islands area is now turned into a land of horrific competition.

A Multi-layered Geopolitical Competition

The geopolitical maneuvering of the regional powers and competition among extra-regional powers will further accelerate the geostrategic significance of the Bay of Bengal. The competition will take place in two tiers — both conflicting and converging in nature. The first tier is among regional powers, primarily between India and China and among the mid-size states of the Bay such as Bangladesh and Myanmar, whose relations largely remain competitive and conflictual in nature. The second tier of this competition will be between and among extra-regional powers such as Australia, European countries, Japan, and the United States. In this tier, competition is more complementary with each

other, but more in conflict with China. These countries are building new types of security architecture such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Australia, the US and UK nuclear propulsion technology (AUKUS), and are strengthening of bilateral ties throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Under such frameworks, the division between the United States and its friends with China will sharpen further.

While the United States may seem like the leader or driver of this competition, in fact, the traditional rivalry between India and China may become far more prominent. India is the traditionally dominant regional power in the Bay of Bengal. The influence of China, however, is rising rapidly, driven primarily by the massive financial support it offers and its proactive infrastructure programs under the Belt and Road Initiative. India and China both view the Bay of Bengal as a crucial frontier in their competition over energy resources, shipping lanes, and cultural influence. The competition stemming from the two countries expanding their regional spheres of influence in each other's backyards may result in skirmishes over energy and sea lanes of communications, not to mention confrontation over political influence in the more fragile states such as Myanmar and non-Bay of Bengal littoral state Nepal.

So far, the strongest manifestation of Sino-Indian rivalry in the Bay of Bengal has been situated in Myanmar, where both countries need overland transit to connect their economically weaker regions, namely India's northeast and China's Yunnan province, with the Bay of Bengal. However, between 2011 and 2021, Myanmar opened its economy to the Western world after the United States and Europe lifted sanctions, creating more partnership options as the reforms attracted a wave of foreign investors. This in turn reduced Sino-Indian competition by making space available to new actors, creating more balance in the previously polarized scenario. However, after military coup in 2021, the country has now taken backslide to the status quo ante as Western investors are leaving and the regime is under strict sanctions, leaving Naypyidaw at the mercy of Beijing.

Competition in the security realm is greater than ever. In recent years, the only multilateral military exercise of this region, the naval Malabar Exercise held among India, Japan, the United States, and more recently Australia, has also taken place in the Bay several times. China, the largest supplier of military hardware to Bangladesh and Myanmar, provided two Ming-class submarines to Bangladesh's navy, which aims, under its "Forces Goal-2030" plan, to modernize its armed forces. In response, India gave a submarine to Myanmar. Under the rubric of Beijing's "Look South" strategy, the PLA Navy has increased its deployment of warships in the Bay of Bengal and Chinese vessels have even entered India's special economic zone. Chinese submarine patrols in the Indian Ocean have also increased, particularly near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which are considered critical to New Delhi's regional intelligence and monitoring operations. To counter China's increasing presence

in the Bay of Bengal region, India is setting up coastal surveillance radar systems in its neighborhood, such as in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In short, China and India are doubling down on their efforts to reshape the strategic security environment of the Bay of Bengal in their own favor (Samaranayake 2012).

Domestic Politics as Underlying Factors

The domestic political constraints on Bay of Bengal states such as political instability, ethno-religious tensions, urbanization, and the coronavirus pandemic will have a knock-on effect on this sub-region. To tackle these emerging challenges and establish a rules-based order in the region, the United States, along with its regional allies and partners and international organizations, will need to provide technical, financial, and humanitarian assistance to the Bay countries. Leadership succession in domestic politics in both Myanmar and Bangladesh further complicates the prospect of a sound resolution. Sri Lanka poses the highest risk, as it is currently facing an unprecedented economic crisis in addition to its decade long ethno-religious and political impasse. India's responses have been instrumental in ameliorating the recent crisis in Sri Lanka. However, a collective regional response of major Indo-Pacific proponents — India, Japan, and the United States could change the trajectory of the Bay of Bengal. The Rohingya issue is a major political problem for Bangladesh and Myanmar, with spillover effects on Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and thus has significant geopolitical consequences. It is also a humanitarian priority for the international community, due to the human suffering involved, the tensions it provokes between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and the long-term security implications for the region. Bangladesh hosts millions of refugees despite its limited capacity, but as the solution is beyond its control, there should be strong support from United Nations Security Council members, especially from regional countries that may have some leverage over the Burmese military junta.

China and India are on the top of that list, but considering their own national interests in Myanmar, the role they play in resolving this issue has been rather limited. Bangladesh also had high expectations of Japan, its long-time development partner, but it, too, is prioritizing its own national interest. The United States, Europe, and international organizations, however, have a critical role to play in this crisis, from providing assistance to pressuring Myanmar, which resonates with the spirit of the Indo-Pacific vision of establishing a rules-based order for all (Bhadrakumar: 2013).

Nontraditional Security is Also Significant

While traditional security concerns are mostly along or around national boundaries, nontraditional security issues pertaining to the Bay such as climate change, natural disaster, terrorism, refugees, drugs, piracy, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing transect boundaries and affect the region as a whole. The negative impacts of climate change, especially rising sea levels and an alarming level

of salinity, pose existential threats to several Bay states, including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Two-thirds of Bangladesh is less than five meters above the sea level rise. The latest projection says that if there is a 50-centimeter rise by 2050, 11 percent of Bangladesh might be underwater, making millions homeless. Thus, the issue of potential climate refugees is more silent in the Bay of Bengal region than anywhere else in the world. This demands cooperation, as well as assistance from Indo-Pacific promoters such as the United States. This is particularly critical as the Biden administration made tackling climate change a top priority an area where the Bay of Bengal could play a leading role, which would ultimately yield stronger ties between Indo-Pacific promoters and the countries in the region. While strategic interests often dictate conflicting positions, a consensus over the principle of *mare liberum* (free seas for everyone) as one of the four global commons is required for the protection of marine resources. Since the Indo-Pacific vision aspires to establish international rules and norms, these nontraditional security concerns in the Bay of Bengal could give impetus to other regional organizations, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical Economic Cooperation, to bring countries to work together on common challenges (Anwar 2023).

Conclusion

For decades, the significance of the Bay of Bengal remained under appreciated due to the absence of great powers' interest and lack of economic vitality, but this has changed as strategic competition in the area intensifies according to its own dynamic. The Bay of Bengal now has considerable and growing strategic importance for Asia, and for the world as a whole. In many ways, the Bay of Bengal lies at the core of the Indo-Pacific region, a centerpiece of the broader Indo-Pacific concept and the place where the strategic interests of the major powers of East and South Asia intersect. The new geopolitical nomenclature of the Indo-Pacific, extending from the western shores of the United States of America to the eastern shores of Africa, also places the Bay of Bengal at the centre. The strategic factors for the resurgence of the Bay of Bengal are also supplemented by a host of conditions exclusive to the region, which has a trans-boundary effect. The Bay of Bengal oversees the most important trading routes owing to its proximity to the Malaccan straits. These routes are susceptible to threats ranging from maritime terrorism to piracy, drug trafficking to illegal migration. Further, the waters of the region have been witnessing one of the largest refugee movements in the recent past owing to the Rohingya crisis. As the Bay will become a test case for a nascent multipolar world order, it is of the utmost importance to establish governance frameworks that can facilitate the integration of rising powers in regulating this order and upholding the principles of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. The strategies of the regional and extra-regional actors as well as non-traditional security factors are

reinvigorating the emergence of the Bay of Bengal. The dynamics of the region will determine the geopolitics of Asia in the years to come.

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