

Geostrategic Significance of the Bay of Bengal in India's Maritime Security Discourse

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—In the Indian Ocean Region, the Bay of Bengal is re-emerging economically and strategically. The region has become a theater of strategic power play due to its strategic relevance, the presence of critical SLOCs, and the strong economic prospects of several adjoining states. India is the region's largest naval power, and it strives to maintain a rule-based maritime order. In this regard, this research aims to investigate possible strategies for India for becoming a regional net security provider.

Design, Methodology, Approach—The content analysis approach has been used to prepare the paper.

Findings—As key forces in the region fight for strategic and economic initiatives, the Bay of Bengal's strategic importance will only increase. As a result of these advantages, rival states' naval capabilities and presence in the Indo-Pacific will be enhanced. Along with a pervasive sense of competitiveness in the region, there are more opportunities for friendly nations to collaborate. India must be willing to try new things and let go of old inhibitions when it is needed. It must pursue principles like burden-sharing and fully utilize the friendly navies eager to assist India's position in the area. India would have to manage its relations with China as it continues to construct a bay community. The Sino-Indian dynamic will have a profound impact on the region's growing security architecture in the maritime sphere. India must work on building trust, strengthening, and diversifying its engagement with partner countries, and continue its HADR role to further calibrate its position in the region. By strengthening its engagements, India would be able to shift from a reactive to a proactive policy.

Practical Implications—This paper argues that India may consolidate its influence

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and position in the Bay of Bengal area through concentrated efforts to cooperate with like-minded partners, further enhancing its maritime diplomacy through the use of soft and hard power, and effective coordination with BIMSTEC.

Keywords: Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Bay of Bengal, BIMSTEC, India, Japan

I. Introduction

The Bay of Bengal, as the world's largest bay, is very important to the countries that surround it. More broadly, the region's demographic, economic, and security trends have significant ramifications for Asia and the global order.¹ While definitions differ, the Bay is characterized as a "triangular basin" spanning west to east between Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. The Bay is rich in natural resources, such as natural gas reserves and other seabed minerals, as well as nutrient input from the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, ensuring that the Bay's waters have large fishing stocks. As a maritime link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Bay plays an important role in global economic flow. As a vital passageway to the Malacca Straits, the region has grown in strategic importance. One reason for this is the relatively good economic prospects of India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, which are boosting their economic significance in Asia and beyond. Given these countries' ability to significantly grow into low-cost, high-quality manufacturing, the Bay is widely recognized as not only the key physical connection between the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, but also as a vital economic traverse.

For ages, the Bay has been a vital thoroughfare for India in Asia's maritime domain. It was known as the "Chola Lake" during the era of Chola king Rajendra I.² Trade in the region reached new heights under the Cholas, with Indian traders leaving their imprints as far as Java, Indonesia. Explorers like Ibn Battuta, Niccolo De Conti, and Admiral Zheng He of imperial China traversed the Bay of Bengal in the 14th and 15th centuries.³ The Portuguese empire, the Second Burmese Empire, and the Kingdom of Mrauk U were the primary powers in the Bay of Bengal during the 16th century. Because of the region's popularity, nautical charts for the Bay were originally made by the Portuguese in the 16th century and then revised by the English and Dutch in the 17th century with the help of theoretical mathematicians and practical knowledge from mariners. By the 18th century, several European trading corporations had established themselves across the region, culminating in Crown supremacy in the subcontinent and the collapse of the region's traditional maritime networks in the 19th century. What evolved was a British goal of securing trade routes to China and the Pacific while demonstrating military, economic, demographic, and political supremacy over the Bay of Bengal.⁴

In the period from 1600 to the 1800s, the Bay witnessed an intensification of trade primarily by the Portuguese and the Dutch. By the 1820s, it was the British Empire that had a substantial grasp over the region and reduced the Bay to a strategic backwater in the early 19th century.⁵ The Imperial German Navy's SMS Emden raids and following naval battles during World War I highlighted the Bay's geostrategic significance. During World War II, the Bay was once again a raging sea. This highlights both the region's allure and its vulnerability to outside influences. The most significant single element affecting the strategic

dynamics of the region was India's independence in 1947. Also, the decolonization of this region, as well as India's shift away from Western nations, separated the region into two parts: South Asia (pro-communism) and Southeast Asia (anti-communism).

The Asian monsoon, which animates the Bay by bringing fresh water to lessen salinity and allow greater biodiversity to thrive, has governed every aspect of human society, culture, and sustenance of life in the Bay since time immemorial. While the ensuing aquatic life provides a vital source of energy for the populace living along the beaches, the monsoon provides the necessary water resource for the hinterland's everyday subsistence and agriculture. However, due to prolonged neglect and global warming, the Bay's coastal regions have become the world's most vulnerable to climate change, especially since more than half a billion people live immediately on the coastal rim that surrounds them. Natural resource exploitation puts the ecosystem at risk since dependency comes with vulnerability.

Furthermore, because it connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans via the Malacca Strait, which roughly one-third of global trade passes through, the Bay's geographical location offers it a unique strategic position. As a result, the Bay's shipping channels are used by many of the world's most powerful economies for commerce with the energy-rich Persian Gulf and resource-rich Africa. It is no surprise that India and China, the world's two fastest-growing economies, are battling for supremacy in the Bay.

The Bay was once at the center of global history, linked by kinship, commerce, and cultural exchange; however, the Bay was forgotten in the second half of the 20th century, and was divided for control over trade and migration due to a lack of a political structure to knit the region together.⁶ Nations in the region have signed a slew of sub-regional agreements throughout the years in an attempt to re-connect the region and assure their growth and development. These efforts have largely been limited to countries within the South Asian and Southeast Asian frameworks over the years. It is only now, through the BIMSTEC program, that any effort to link countries across these structures is taking shape.

II. Review of Literature

In recent years, research on several themes such as migration, logistical development, blue economy, HADR, and Indo-Pacific strategic constructions has gained traction in the Bay. C. Raja Mohan's work *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*⁷ digs into the tense atmosphere that pervades the maritime region from the Bay of Bengal to the Indian Ocean and beyond. Tensions and a state of potential warfare persist, with both India and China suspicious of each other's motivations and advances, thereby investing heavily in upgrading their respective naval capabilities. Pradeep Kaushiva and Abhijit Singh edited *Indian Ocean Challenges: A Quest for Cooperative Solutions*,⁸ which examines a variety of issues concerning the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), including the need for security architecture, maritime threats in the region, the impact of climate change, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief, etc. Robert Kaplan in his book *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*,⁹ explores the strategic convergences and divergences in and around the Bay. According to Kaplan, the Indian Ocean is poised to take center stage in global politics, signaling a substantial change away from

the Atlantic Ocean's traditional geopolitical focus in the preceding century. Amid these geopolitical changes, the author notes that India is poised to take the lead in the Indian Ocean maritime area, with the U.S. serving as a counterbalance. He notes, "It is here that the fight for democracy, energy independence, and religious freedom will be lost or won."¹⁰ Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Pratinashree Basu, and Sohini Bose, in their article "Exploring India's Maritime Connectivity in the Extended Bay of Bengal,"¹¹ provide an account of the geostrategic and geo-economic forces shaping the connections between India's east coast and the Southeast Asian countries of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. It discusses a variety of opportunities and risks that arise in India's maritime interactions with its major partners. Furthermore, by incorporating disaster management and cooperation over help, the paper aims to provide a new perspective to the connection discussion.

III. Background

India, as a strong proponent of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism in the early years after independence, showed little desire to follow in the footsteps of its colonial master in the broader Bay of Bengal strategic framework. The Bay was thought to be little more than backwaters. New Delhi's involvement was restricted to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, which were its immediate neighbors. Following the Nehruvian era (1947–65), however, India has consistently wished to be recognized as the dominant force in the Bay of Bengal, and any competing large power in the Bay was viewed as a security threat and illegitimate encroachment—regarded as India's "Monroe Doctrine" by some strategic experts.¹² This shift in Indian policy was evident in the final days of the Bangladesh Liberation War when India fiercely criticized the USS *Enterprise's* maneuver in the eastern Bay of Bengal. In today's geopolitical landscape, when India and China are considered close adversaries, the latter's economic and political presence along the Bay's littorals has become a source of anxiety for New Delhi.

The expansion of maritime cooperation in the IOR has been a crucial component of India's Act East Policy (AEP). This renewed focus on maritime security and regional stability has been articulated by the former Indian Foreign Minister (Late) Sushma Swaraj as, "Our vision for the region is one of cooperation and collective action.... We cannot tap the bounty of the Indian Ocean without ensuring maritime peace and stability. Economic prosperity and maritime security go hand-in-hand."¹³ On the other hand, Prime Minister Modi emphasized the SAGAR doctrine as the foundation of India's Indian Ocean strategy and outlined a set of goals under this doctrine that include, "...a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime security issues; and increase in maritime cooperation."¹⁴

While India's presence in the Bay has long been more "rhetorical or aspirational than real,"¹⁵ the country's rise as a significant regional force is allowing it to progressively transcend the limitations of South Asia and stretch its strategic influence further throughout the Bay of Bengal. Several strategic thinkers believe that this represents a partial restoration of British India's foreign policy.¹⁶ Others, on the other hand, believe that increasing

strategic space is important to New Delhi's long-term economic objectives. India's diverse interests in the Bay are influenced by several factors.

First, the Bay is a critical area of defense against security threats emanating from or channeled through the Southeast Asian region. Controlling the sea lines of communication that span across the Bay of Bengal and travel through the Strait of Malacca would provide India with significant geopolitical advantages.

Second, India has by far the most powerful military in the Bay of Bengal region, and it is now bolstering its military resources committed to the region. Previously, India's Western Fleet, based in Mumbai, was the country's largest naval fleet, but resources are now being "rebalanced" to the country's Eastern Fleet in the Bay of Bengal.¹⁷ In the Bay, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) are a valuable strategic asset. Since the 1980s, there have been voices demanding the development of ANI as a strategic military hub. This was realized in 2001 when New Delhi converted the ANI into a tri-services military theater command. In the Andaman and Nicobar Command's (ANC) influence zone, India is developing several strategic ports, including the Port of Chittagong in Bangladesh, which has rail connectivity to Tripura, the Port of Mongla in Bangladesh, the Sittwe Port in Myanmar, which is part of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project¹⁸ and the Sabang deep-sea port, which is part of the India-Indonesia strategic military and economic partnership.¹⁹ The upgrade of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands into a military hub also allows India the opportunity to cooperate with friendly powers like Japan, France, Australia, and the U.S. in the development of maritime and strategic capabilities to combat Chinese assertive presence. In 2016, for example, New Delhi and Tokyo explored a collaborative initiative to modernize ANI infrastructure, which included a plan to build a sound surveillance sensor (SOSUS) network to boost India's underwater domain awareness. The goal was to connect India's undersea sensor network to the existing U.S.–Japan Fish Hook SOSUS network, which was designed to track PLAN submarine activity in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean Rim.²⁰ The Japan International Collaboration Agency (JICA) signed a grant agreement with India to contribute roughly US\$133 million for a power supply project in India's ANI to further boost cooperation in the IOR. The investment is critical for India's intentions to transform the islands into a well-equipped zone where military assets may be stationed efficiently.

Third, at a time when China has made its military and economic presence significantly felt all along with the IOR, India is making considerable attempts to strengthen defense ties in the Bay. New Delhi has established close maritime ties with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, as well as assisting smaller littorals such as the Maldives in ensuring maritime security. Since 1991, the Indian and Maldivian coast guards have held combined naval drills known as DOSTI. Since 2012, the Sri Lankan Coast Guard has also taken part in the joint exercise, turning it into a trilateral maritime exercise and a key step in "cementing friendship, interoperability, trust, and collaboration."²¹ India regularly conducts bilateral joint naval exercises with Sri Lanka (Exercise SLINEX) and Bangladesh (Exercise BONGOS-AGAR). In addition, India and Singapore have developed significant defense ties. SIMBEX has been an annual naval exercise between India and Singapore since 1994. In 2018, the two countries signed a Bilateral Agreement for Naval Cooperation, giving India access to Singapore's Changi Naval Base, which lies near the disputed South China Sea.²² At the 5th Defense Ministers' Dialogue in 2021, India and Singapore also inked the Agreement on

Submarine Rescue Support and Cooperation' Since 2019, India, Singapore, and Thailand have been participating in the SITMEX trilateral naval exercise. India and Indonesia maintain a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership following the signing of a Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2018. They hold Coordinated Naval Patrols along the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL). India has also participated in the inaugural edition of the Multilateral Naval Exercise "Komodo" (2014) in Indonesia. There is also ongoing negotiation between India and Indonesia over the export of Made-in-India BrahMos cruise missiles to Indonesia.²³ India and Indonesia, along with Australia, conduct trilateral naval drills in the Indian Ocean. Badan Keamanan Laut and the Indian Coast Guard signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Maritime Security Cooperation, which institutionalized training cooperation, capacity building, joint exercises, and coordinated patrols.²⁴

Fourth, another significant projection of India's interest in the Bay region is projected by the hosting of a biennial multilateral naval exercise, MILAN, hosted by the ANC since 1995. The navies of Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand attended the inaugural edition. The MILAN exercise is conducted off the coast of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with participation from several countries of South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, the USA, etc. MILAN 2022 is projected to be the largest edition of the event, with countries including the United Kingdom, Israel, Iran, France, Japan, South Korea, Brunei, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Kuwait, Maldives, Mauritius, Oman, Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, and others having been invited to attend. India has invited its QUAD partners, the United States, and Japan, to participate in the exercise (Australia has been participating since 2003). This will be the first time that Japan and the United States will participate in Ex. MILAN. This would also be a powerful demonstration of India's expanding "soft military power."²⁵ With an initial focus on the Bay of Bengal, India aims to pursue a coordinated strategy for defense and commercial cooperation throughout the Indian Ocean.²⁶

Finally, apart from various defense collaborations, India is also attempting to play a big role in the Bay region's economic development. Strategic experts like C. Raja Mohan view India's anxiousness to develop a strong economic and connectivity partnership with the littorals of the Bay indicates New Delhi's nervousness about losing the region to China. To him, India must understand that the Bay of Bengal "is no longer a backwater but a strategic hub connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans as well as China."²⁷ The Trilateral Highway Project (India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway), which would connect Moreh, India, with Mae Sot, Thailand, via Myanmar, is one of the most important projects being advocated by New Delhi. In the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area, the route is projected to enhance trade and business. India has also suggested that the route be extended to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.²⁸ This roadway will also connect to the river ports being built along the Chindwin River at Kalay and Monywa. Bangladesh has expressed interest in participating in the project. India tested the feasibility of building a rail link parallel to the trilateral highway in 2018. Japan has shown interest in cooperating with India on the proposed train link and funding it.²⁹ One of the most significant achievements of India's Look East Policy (now Act East Policy) has been the construction of this trilateral highway. The initiative, once operationalized, will change the development trajectory of India's landlocked northeastern states. For many, this project is seen as a counter to China's north-south linkages between Yunnan province and the Bay of Bengal. Furthermore, India is attempting to

revive colonial maritime connections that connected India to the Bay's littorals via rivers such as the Ganges, Kaladan, Brahmaputra, and others. Trade would be more cost-effective if these old maritime routes were resurrected. The Indian state-owned shipping company began direct connections between Chennai, Colombo, and Yangon (Rangoon) in October 2014.³⁰ India has also completed the construction of a new port and accompanying road links in Myanmar's Sittwe, which will allow items to be transshipped up the Kaladan River to India's Mizoram state. PM Modi and PM Sheik Hasina launched the "Maitri Setu" in 2021, which would provide India's Northeast access to the Chittagong port. This port has the potential to become a crucial component in India's Southeast Asian outreach.³¹ In March 2021, the Sri Lankan Government has allowed India and Japan to develop and operate the crucial West Container Terminal at Colombo Port. The Adani Group of India signed a deal in September 2021 to construct and operate the important Colombo Port's Western Container Terminal. Adani Group will own a 51 percent stake in the port's Western Container Terminal, making it the first Indian port operator in Sri Lanka.³²

IV. India's Humanitarian Role in the Bay

In terms of size and maritime capacity, India is the strongest power in the Bay of Bengal region. As a result, neighboring Bay littorals frequently seek its assistance in the event of a crisis. Before the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, which killed thousands of people, India's disaster response was mostly *reactive and ad hoc*.³³ As a result, the Indian Parliament passed the Disaster Management Act in December 2005, establishing the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) as the primary coordinating authority for both civilian and military disaster response. The Indian military has a long history of disaster relief, both at home and abroad, where they have served as the backbone of recovery efforts. Because of its subcontinental size, geographic location, and vulnerability to natural disasters, India has kept its forces ready to respond promptly.

The root of India's HADR assistance stems from its cultural and spiritual ideals, which have been passed down through the years and are also reflected in Nehru's exposition of the principle of non-alignment. In the words of Meier and Murthy,

The Indian government uses the terms "humanitarian assistance" or "disaster relief" for activities that assuage human suffering caused by natural disasters like cyclones, droughts, earthquakes, or floods. This definition is narrower than the Western donors' conception of humanitarian assistance, which also includes helping civilian populations affected by armed conflicts.³⁴

Even though India does not have a formal HADR policy, it has supplied humanitarian aid and participated in relief efforts both within and outside of its borders. Humanitarian aid has also been used by India as a political tool to strengthen bilateral ties and reinforce its claim to regional and global leadership. A fundamental difference in India's approach, according to some commentators, has been its emphasis on respecting the sovereignty of the impacted state. Indian officials also want to emphasize that it helps its neighbors based on "their priorities" rather than "requests made to the Indian government."³⁵ The argument for providing HADR aid is based on the idea of building and sustaining amicable ties, and it views support as "reaching sympathy" to those impacted by the tragedy or as a "goodwill

gesture.”³⁶ It also demonstrates India’s capacity to employ soft power to gain recognition as a responsible nation.

India’s expanding presence in the field of humanitarian aid corresponds to the country’s emergence as an economic power in recent decades, as well as its desire to assume regional and global leadership.³⁷ Following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the Indian Navy launched a massive HADR effort to assist not only its states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Andaman and Nicobar (Operation Madad and Sea Waves), but also Sri Lanka (Operation Rainbow), the Maldives (Operation Castor), and Indonesia (Operation Gambhir).³⁸ Over 20,000 military soldiers were deployed in relief operations around the world, including 40 ships, 42 helicopters, and 35 aircraft. Three survey ships were modified into hospital ships with a capacity of 46 beds and transported to the devastated areas. Aside from providing immediate relief, the harbor survey, evacuation, debris removal, road repairs, water supply, power, and communications were all critical responsibilities completed. In addition, the Indian government had pledged US\$500,000 in relief help to Thailand in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. After Cyclone Sidr hit Bangladesh, wreaking havoc on lives and livelihoods, India launched Operation Sahayata, which delivered medicine, ready-to-eat food, tents, and blankets. Forty thousand metric tons of rice, 10,000 metric tons of wheat, 1,000 metric tons of powdered milk, and US\$22 million in cash aid were also provided as additional relief.³⁹ Cyclone Nargis wreaked havoc on Myanmar in 2008, becoming the country’s worst natural disaster ever. Over 140,000 people were killed, according to estimates. The Indian Navy dispatched the INS Rana and INS Kirpan to Myanmar for the HADR operation. In addition, during the floods caused by Cyclone Komen in 2015, India was prompt in aiding Myanmar.⁴⁰ In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan devastated the Philippines. As part of the HADR mission, India launched a naval ship from Vishakhapatnam with relief supplies. When the Indonesian government requested aid following the Palu tsunami in 2018, India was one of the first to contribute. Operation Samudra Maitri was initiated by the Indian Navy in response. INS Tir, INS Sujatha, and INS Shardul were deployed to Indonesia with relief supplies. Two IAF planes—the C-130J, and the C-17 were also dispatched, bringing medical personnel and relief supplies.⁴¹ India has continued to provide humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka. India recently provided a US\$100 million credit line for capital goods, consumer durables, consulting services, and food. Following severe landslides in Sri Lanka in 2014, India supplied relief goods worth US\$40 million.

India, for its part, frequently refuses to receive disaster aid from foreign countries. The Tsunami of 2004, the Uttarakhand floods of 2013, and the Kerala floods of 2018 were all examples of this. India’s reluctance to accept foreign help has been attributed to a “policy precedent” set in 2004 by then-PM Manmohan Singh. He commented, “We feel that we can cope with the situation on our own and we will take their help if needed.”⁴² The draft National Disaster Management Plan (2018) also articulates, “As a matter of policy the Government of India does not issue any appeal for foreign assistance in the wake of a disaster.”⁴³ According to India’s National Disaster Management Plan, it would supply HADR whenever necessary and is eager to play a big role in disaster resilience building in the Asia-Pacific region through long-term regional cooperation. The fact is that India’s projection as a regional “net security provider” hinges on its ability to “self-sufficiency” and its role as the “first responder” during a humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, regional stability will be established spontaneously if neighbors are pleased and peacefully coexist. India is a

rising global force with aspirations to become a superpower. To be acknowledged as a globally responsible authority, regional acceptance is primarily required. As Lincoln observed, “To soothe another’s grief is to forget one’s own.”⁴⁴ A nation-state is no different. The values of humanitarianism, respect for sovereignty, and political neutrality are at the heart of India’s HADR role.

The Indian government’s response to the COVID outbreak illustrates the country’s growing commitment to humanitarian assistance. It has emerged as a doyen in the global fight against the pandemic because of humanitarian aid and diplomatic initiatives like the Vande Bharat Mission, Mission Sagar, and Vaccine Maitri. India offered food and medical aid to countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, as well as Latin America, Caribbean Island states, Africa, and countries in the IOR, in the early stages of the pandemic. India, which is also known as the *World Pharmacy*, supplied hydroxychloroquine pills (HQC) and paracetamol tablets to countries all over the world. The Maldives, Seychelles, Bangladesh, Mauritius, and other Indian Ocean littorals were among the first to get vaccine dosage as humanitarian aid from India under its Vaccine Maitri Initiative. The World Health Organization and leaders of numerous nations and multinational corporations have praised India for delivering vaccines to countries that previously feared “vaccine nationalism.” Among the littorals of the Bay region (as of December 31, 2021), Bangladesh received a total of 22.59 million supplies of vaccine, Myanmar received 18.6 million supplies of vaccine, Bhutan received 0.55 million supplies of vaccine, the Maldives received 0.312 million supplies of vaccine, Mauritius received 0.4 million supplies of vaccine, Sri Lanka received 1.264 million supplies of vaccine, Seychelles received 0.05 million supplies of vaccine, Indonesia received 9.008 million supplies of vaccine, etc.⁴⁵ At the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group and CARICOM have heaped accolades on India’s generous role during the pandemic. On a geopolitical level, many perceive India’s vaccine diplomacy as an effort to raise the country’s global profile in the face of an aggressive China. As Professor Chaulia pointed out,

It’s about image and soft power. India wants to be recognized as a global leader. India would like to make a point that in this area, unlike in some others where China usually overshadows India in terms of military and economic might, in this field, in pharmaceuticals, in affordable health care, India has a comparative edge and advantage over China.⁴⁶

V. Strategic Importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands

India has shown a significant interest in developing the ANI under PM Modi’s leadership. Amid China’s growing assertiveness, the current government’s enhanced focus on the ANI aims to help India maximize its economic benefits while also offering a crucial platform for strengthening India’s force projection capacity in the IOR. The ANI, which is 22 nautical miles from Myanmar and 90 nautical miles from Indonesia at its southernmost point, is frequently regarded as one of the world’s most “strategically positioned island chains.” It accounts for 30% of India’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The archipelago gives India a great strategic upper hand over Duncan’s Passage, Preparis Channel, Six Degree Channel, and Ten Degree Channel in the region. The Six Degree and Ten Degree

channels in the Andaman Sea that traverse into the Strait of Malacca are crucial trade routes connecting Asia, Africa, and the Pacific region. It is a geostrategic bridge between the Indian and the Pacific Ocean region. After years of “benign neglect”⁴⁷ post-independence and an increasing economic and strategic interest to partner with the Southeast Asian nations, the ANI is finally getting the desired government attention that would promote the economic development of the archipelago, persevere its rich flora and fauna, and realize its geostrategic potential.

As the Andaman Sea, like the ANI, is vital to global commerce, protecting freedom of navigation in these seas is essential. The sea, which is located at the convergence of the Bay and the Malacca Strait, serves as a “geostrategic gateway” for India to expand its reach into the eastern Indo-Pacific. Other powers, on the other hand, may utilize it as a launching pad for simultaneous ventures into India’s territorial waters. This creates a unique strategic situation in which India’s efforts to establish prominence in the Indo-Pacific through collaborative growth must be balanced against efforts to preserve regional stability.⁴⁸

The importance of connecting links has been emphasized to make the ANI more relevant to India’s development aspirations. For example, the government announced intentions to build a transshipment port on Great Nicobar Island in August 2020.⁴⁹ The port will be strategically placed between the Malacca Strait and the East-West trade route that connects Europe and Africa to East Asia. The administration is also exploring global collaborations to improve the island chain’s connection and prominence. Under the banner of the “Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” India and Indonesia established a special task group in 2018 to improve connectivity between the ANI and the port of Sabang in Aceh to encourage trade, tourism, and people-to-people contacts.⁵⁰ PM Modi inaugurated the first-ever undersea optical fiber cable project for the ANI, bringing high-speed connectivity to the archipelago online with mainland services.⁵¹

Aside from the economic realm, India is trying to strengthen the ANI’s defense capabilities in the face of China’s growing strategic footprint in the IOR. As China’s economic and strategic interests in the Indian Ocean have increased, so has the need to protect these interests. The fact is that China’s presence in the Indian Ocean is relatively new, and as a result, it is viewed as potentially disruptive. This has increased concerns regarding the freedom of navigation in these areas. Over the last decade, China has steadily increased its maritime presence in the Indian Ocean littoral by “deployment of its naval forces, arms sales, creating bases and access facilities, ramping up military diplomacy, cultivating special political relations with littorals, and lavishly disbursing developmental finance for strategic ends.”⁵² Beijing’s “Malacca Dilemma,” the development of Sino-Myanmar pipelines, bilateral and multilateral naval operations in the Andaman Sea and Malacca Straits, and allegations of Chinese submarines discovered near the ANI have all raised new security concerns for India.

India has sought to leverage the islands’ potential to secure its interests and polish its image as the region’s “net security provider”⁵³ to maintain a check on Chinese maneuvering and recurrent hovering in its maritime backyard. As a result, India has pledged to enhance the ANC, which is in charge of monitoring vessels traveling through the Ten Degree and Six Degree Channels and ensuring free navigation via the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok straits.⁵⁴ To improve combat efficiency, the Indian Air Force (IAF) announced in 2018 that combat aircraft and other equipment would be permanently stationed at the ANC. The

ANC opted to station fighter jets and combat platforms at the Command in the same year. IAF fighter bases have also been identified in Car Nicobar and Campbell Bay.⁵⁵

India has pushed to carry forward with plans to deploy extra soldiers, cruisers, planes, and missile systems in the ANI following the May 2020 confrontation with China in Ladakh. The navy airstrips at INS Kohassa and INS Baaz have been completely turned into fighter bases.⁵⁶ The ANI has a naval base in Campbell Bay and an airbase at INS Kohassa.⁵⁷ The airstrip in Agatti, Lakshadweep, would also be rebuilt for military operations to protect the Arabian Sea, as this will complete an arch of maritime dominance from the west coast to the east coast. In the words of a Tri-Service commander, “The two Island territories will be like the new aircraft carriers for India, extending the navy’s reach in the region far from the mainland. Both the Islands sit on the busiest sea lanes of the world with more than half the world trade going through this route.”⁵⁸ This urgency in rebuilding the ANI’s infrastructure stems from China’s efforts, much of it behind the scenes, to persuade Thailand to begin construction on the Thai Canal, also known as the Kra Canal. It would let ships avoid the congested Malacca Strait, which connects the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. As a result, this infrastructure development of the ANI would serve two purposes: it would allow India to maximize economic gains while also increasing its military presence in the IOR.

The ANC also conducts combined maritime exercises with Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia to promote strategic cooperation. These include the Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercise and Coordinated Patrols; the Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX), or the Malabar Exercises, between India, the U.S., and Japan; CORPAT Exercises with Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia; and other bilateral and multilateral exercises with Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia. Exercise MILAN, a biennial multilateral naval exercise, is also held to foster friendship across the seas. There have been some suggestions for using the ANI and Australia’s Keeling (Cocos) Islands to coordinate surveillance of the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Ombai Wetar Straits. Similarly, several recommendations have been made about joint anti-submarine warfare (ASW) activities in the Indian Ocean, in which the ANI might play a key role.

India is a member of the BIMSTEC, the Mekong Ganga Economic Corridor, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the IONS, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation on an institutional level. Additionally, in recent years, India has negotiated logistics-sharing agreements with the U.S. and Australia, as well as France, Singapore, and South Korea. A similar logistics-sharing deal is also being negotiated with Japan. Progress on these essential cooperative agreements, particularly with countries that are members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) or QUAD Plus, such as South Korea, will assist to solidify India’s strategic node in the Indo-Pacific. There are also suggestions for significant strategic ASW collaborations involving India, Japan, Australia, and the United States in the Bay region and the wider IOR.

VI. Strategic Collaboration with Japan

The strategic dimension of India and Japan’s relationship has evolved with increased convergence of vision to the next step of congruence in their strategic response to regional

and global security challenges from shaky beginnings after the Cold War. Uncertainty about China's ascent to hegemony and the Indo-Pacific power shift has fueled this strategic convergence.⁵⁹ Japan is a major factor in both economic and strategic competition in the Bay. Japan's role in the development of the Bay is akin to China's Maritime Silk Road initiative. In India, Japan's position in the Bay is mainly seen as helping the region's growth and acting as a good counterbalance to Chinese influence. In the words of PM Modi,

Japan is India's valued partner. We have a Special Strategic and Global Partnership. Our ties with Japan, both economic and strategic, stand completely transformed in recent years. It is today a partnership of great substance and purpose. It rests on the strong pillars of India's Act East Policy, and our shared vision and commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.⁶⁰

India and Japan have similar strategic objectives when it comes to ensuring maritime security and navigational safety in the Bay. Maritime security is a crucial topic of discussion in the security dialogue between Tokyo and New Delhi, given that both countries' economies are heavily reliant on sea-based shipping and the supply of oil from the Persian Gulf. As a result, securing energy supply channels in the Bay of Bengal is a top priority for both countries.

Two factors contribute to Tokyo's growing synergy with India in the area of maritime cooperation—these include India's locational significance in IOR and, India's proximity to the two important “choke points” for global oil supplies—the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz. Moreover, India has established itself as a leading force in anti-piracy operations in the region, thereby, making itself a trusted power in a rapidly deteriorating regional security framework. India's close relationship with Japan, on the other hand, arises from the country's desire for foreign direct investment to upgrade its maritime infrastructure and its search for sophisticated technologies to strengthen its HADR capabilities. In addition, given the developing power imbalance in the Indo-Pacific, India sees Japan as a like-minded partner that does not want the IOR to be dominated by a single state.

As India and Japan strengthen their maritime security cooperation in the IOR, they are wary about Beijing's rising strategic naval presence near key choke points. In terms of maritime security and regional stability, China poses a threat to both India and Japan in the Indian Ocean, particularly in the Bay of Bengal subregion. Both India and Japan are concerned about China's revival of the Maritime Silk Road, believing it serves two purposes: commercial ports created by China along the Bay's littorals might be utilized as military bases to offset the region's geographical limitations and to increase China's naval footprint. Following China's creation of a naval base in Djibouti and the docking of submarines in Pakistani and Sri Lankan ports, this fear has further escalated. China's strategic aspirations to become the region's unchallenged hegemon are revealed in the MSR endeavor, posing a danger to India and Japan's strategic goal of regional stability and power balance.

Japan has increased its footprint in the region since the turn of the century. Regular joint maneuvers between the Japanese Sahyog-Kaijin and the Indian Coast Guard are held to strengthen cooperation. Japan and India conduct annual naval exercises in the Bay since 2013, known as JIMEX. Along with India and the United States, Japan has become a permanent participant (2015) in the Malabar exercise. Apart from joint exercises, bilateral mechanisms such as the Japan-India Strategic Dialogue (Track II); the Annual Defense

Ministerial Dialogue; the India-Japan Act East Forum; the India-Japan 2+2 Dialogue; and the new Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), will increase the strategic depth of bilateral security and defense cooperation in the region. India and Japan are also cooperating in regional multilateral forums like the BIMSTEC, the IORA, ReCAAP, etc., to combat the issues of piracy, sea terrorism, blue economy, HADR, etc.

India and Japan's proactive approach to improving connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region will improve regional security. The littoral states that occupy strategic locations in the Bay have been the focus of the two countries' efforts to improve capacity and infrastructure. Japan, for example, has invested in the development of Sri Lanka's Trincomalee port, Yangon's new container port, and Dawei's (Myanmar) proposed new port and special economic zone. In Matarbari, Bangladesh, Japan has invested \$3.7 billion in a port and power facility.⁶¹ In the ANI, Japan is investing in infrastructural upgrade and modernization of the ANC. According to reports, Japan, India, and the United States are proposing to deploy a submarine detection sensor system along the Bay's coastline.⁶² Japan is installing optical fiber cables and developing essential communication infrastructure in ANI. This will help India build up naval and air assets in the islands, as well as an undersea monitoring system to track submarines.

VII. Using BIMSTEC for Regional Integration

BIMSTEC has emerged as a leading proponent of regional cooperation around the Bay, aiming to bridge the gap between South and Southeast Asia. The organization's main goal is to encourage development and connectivity to promote integration and mutual reliance. As the region becomes a geopolitical hotspot, the BIMSTEC countries, led by India, resolve to work together and stress that "geographical contiguity, abundant natural and human resources, rich historical linkages and shared cultural heritage provide BIMSTEC the ideal platform to promote peace, stability, and prosperity in our region."⁶³ Today, India too recognizes the relevance of BIMSTEC in consolidating its regional power. This was reflected in PM Modi's remarks in 2017,

BIMSTEC not only connects South and South-East Asia, but also the ecologies of the Great Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal. With shared values, histories, ways of life, and destinies that are interlinked, BIMSTEC represents a common space for peace and development. For India, it is a natural platform to fulfill our key foreign policy priorities of "Neighborhood First" and "Act East."⁶⁴

Growth and development for both India's eastern coastline states and the N-E region in particular, as well as the Indian economy in general, are regarded to be dependent on the degree of connectivity with Southeast Asian markets. The Indian government hopes that by promoting regional connections, notably with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand, the country's exports would rise, more investments will flow in, and regional integration will serve as a positive springboard for further global economic interdependence. As a result, in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank, a BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan was developed, which identified 167 projects to improve regional connectivity. This included: SAARC Corridor 4 and 8; the Asian Highway 2; to create a North-South corridor for Bhutan, Meghalaya, and Assam; the Kaladan multi-modal transit transport

project, etc. The Kaladan project also includes several associated projects such as the Bairabi-Sairang-Hmawngbuchhuah railway, Sittwe Special Economic Zone, Sittwe-Gaya gas pipeline, Tha Htay Chaung Hydropower project, India-Myanmar-Thailand highway, Agartala-Feni-Chittagong highway, Zokhawthar-Rihkwadar-Kalemmyo highway (between India & Myanmar), Paletwa-Chika-India highway project, and the lane expansion of Aizawl-Tuipang national highway.⁶⁵

India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand are four key littorals in the Bay with a total coastline of 12,000 km. The southern tip of Thailand reaches the Malacca Strait, a vital gateway that connects the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, by engaging with several global powers like the U.S., Japan, France, etc., India and other BIMSTEC nations can secure their strategic and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

In a fast-changing geostrategic landscape, India must also see the Bay of Bengal as a critical theater for restricting a more capable and assertive China. BIMSTEC has become a focal point for displaying India's intentions and capabilities in the Bay of Bengal area as a result. The organization enables India to pursue three core policies: *Neighborhood First*, which prioritizes India's immediate neighbors; *AEP*, which aims to connect India with Southeast Asia; and an economic development policy for India's N-E states, a gateway to Southeast Asia. The geographical proximity and economic complementarities of the member states are the most prominent advantages of this organization. In this sense, India's unwavering commitment to regional integration with its neighbors, as evidenced by intensified efforts and support for BIMSTEC, must be considered.

VIII. Conclusion

As the Indo-Pacific gained traction in the second decade of the 21st century, its geographical reach grew to include the entire stretch of the ocean from Africa's east coast to the Western Pacific. The Bay has the potential to become a new battleground for global powers. India, which had hitherto disregarded the littoral, has now prioritized it. To promote regional connectivity, prosperity, stability, and security, New Delhi is showing a greater willingness to engage with other powers such as the United States, Japan, France, and Australia.⁶⁶

Various regional and subregional initiatives have been undertaken in the region over the last few decades to establish synergies between the countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The key concern is how existing and emerging gaps will be addressed to meet the region's changing challenges and opportunities, particularly given the region's huge size and diversity of economic demands, as well as the diverse interests of its constituent nations. The task now is to make any viable solution as complementary, feasible, and intersecting as possible to meet the aspirations of all of the region's states.

Increasing maritime connectivity among the Bay's littorals is another area where trade and confidence could be improved. In this context and in keeping with SAGAR's ethos, India can play a critical role by supporting and investing in the littoral countries' infrastructure development initiatives. As a result, India may be able to provide financial assistance to Indonesia's "sea-toll highway," which aims to modernize some of the country's older and more vital ports on the islands of Sumatra and Java. This will improve

connectivity with the Aceh region's ports (which are near India's ANI), Kuala Tanjung (on the Malacca Strait's border), and Tanjung Priok (at the Sunda Strait's border).

BIMSTEC can play an important role by supporting regional connectivity; non-economic activities such as easy movement of vehicles across the border with easier rules of Motor Vehicle Act and Customs, easier access of ports through the Coastal Shipping Agreement, e-commerce, digital connectivity; cooperation to check security threats such as smuggling, human trafficking, fake currency, drugs and piracy, etc.; which eventually would create an environment of mutual trust thereby ensuring economic growth for all. Furthermore, given that the littoral countries of the Southeast Asian region are realizing the importance and relevance of the Bay as an important trading route, efforts should be made to include countries like Indonesia and Singapore within the gambit of BIMSTEC.

As the Bay's strategic importance as a pivot in the Indo-Pacific region continues to increase in the global maritime landscape, India, and Japan's proactive approach to enhancing the safety and security of the Bay, through existing bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral frameworks of cooperation, is likely to have a decisive impact in shaping the emerging security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. The regional stability of the Bay has important ramifications for India and Japan; therefore, they will strengthen and broaden their strategic partnership to secure energy security and regional stability. Given the deterioration of the region's maritime security situation, India and Japan are anticipated to step up their existing maritime security cooperation to keep the IOR's power balance intact.

As a result, one must accept that strategic competition among big countries is unavoidable, as is evidenced in the Bay of Bengal between India and China. As the Sino-Indian dynamics in this region are likely to reshape the Bay of Bengal community, India must assess the parameters of participation and pursue collaboration where possible while competing where necessary. It is thought that such an effort is necessary to strengthen the region.

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