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The Bay of Bengal in the Emerging Indo-Pacific

C. Raja Mohan

ABSTRACT This brief looks at the growing strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal within the emerging and increasingly contested geography of the Indo-Pacific. In three parts, the brief outlines the historic evolution of the littoral, examines the implications of its strategic location at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, and ponders the unfolding challenges to regionalism in the Bay of Bengal. It concludes with a call on India to intensify its efforts to construct a more secure and cooperative Bay of Bengal littoral.

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THE BAY OF BENGAL: A BRIEF HISTORY

At first look, the Bay of Bengal seems a placid sea, but for the seasonal cyclones that disturb life in the littoral. It is almost a closed sea with just three countries bordering its northern reaches—Burma, Bangladesh and India. The northern waters of the Bay are also far from the main sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean that connect the dynamic economies of East Asia with the traditional markets of Europe via the oil rich Gulf and rapidly growing Africa. The region has not seen any serious great-power rivalries nor major conflicts in the recent past. Over the last decade, however, this sense of calm in the waters of the Bay of Bengal has begun to erode. It is poised to become, once again, a zone of geopolitical rivalry among major powers and of regional conflict.

Throughout the ancient times, the Bay of Bengal was the natural bridge between the Subcontinent and the abutting regions to the east right up to the southern coast of China. The movement of people, goods and ideas across the Bay of Bengal was extensive and enriched all civilisations along the littoral. Its hinterland included the vast Gangetic Plain and the trans-Himalayan spaces of inner Asia, as well as the remote northern regions of Burma. The spread of Hindu and Buddhist influences across the littoral was later followed by the spread of Islam, both of which were helped by the movement of trading communities along the Subcontinent's coast. The interaction across the littoral gained greater intensity in the modern era as European powers arrived in the East and began to connect the littoral to global markets.[1] There was intense competition among the European powers for the resources and markets of the region, eventually leading to the colonisation of the Bay of Bengal territories and beyond.

In the early 19th century, the rivalries among the European great powers ended after the Napoleonic Wars with the triumph of Great Britain. Its Dutch and French rivals accepted British primacy and arrived at territorial accommodations in the littoral of the Bay of Bengal and, more broadly, in the region now known as the Indo-Pacific. The 19th century, however, saw the political and administrative integration of the Subcontinent into a coherent territorial entity under the British Raj. The Raj anchored in Calcutta annexed Burma and extended its sway over the Malay Peninsula. To the north, it continued to probe trans-Himalayan regions, including Tibet and Yunnan, and test the Qing empire's control of these regions.

On the maritime side, the entire Bay of Bengal littoral—from Ceylon to Singapore—came under the political and commercial hegemony of the Raj. This, in turn, allowed the more purposeful political and strategic direction of the subcontinent's massive material and manpower resources all across the littoral. The political hegemony of the Raj also facilitated the integration of the littoral into the framework of economic globalisation that reshaped the Indian

Ocean and broader Asia. It paved the way for the movement of Indian capital and labour through the Bay of Bengal and beyond in the Indian Ocean.[2]

The primacy of the Raj in the littoral was threatened briefly during the First World War, when the German cruiser *Emden* spread mayhem in the waters of Bay of Bengal. That brief interlude presaged the kind of challenges that would eventually undo the Raj. That threat was key in the Second World War, as a rising Japan ousted Britain from Malaya and Burma and reached the eastern land gates of the Raj, occupied the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and set up a provisional government of India in Port Blair. The Raj needed all the resources of the Subcontinent and assistance from afar to reverse the Japanese occupation of South East Asia and its ingress towards India.

If the Indian Army swelled to more than two million soldiers in the Second World War, nearly 800,000 troops had to be deployed to the so-called Burma-China-India (BCI) theatre. The Allied triumph in the Bay of Bengal, at great cost, and the enormous sacrifices of the people of the Subcontinent would soon fade from memory amidst the shifting great-power alignment, the wave of decolonisation, and crucial internal changes in key nations of the littoral. The massive battles in the BCI theatre were called, by then, the 'forgotten war'.[3] The anti-Japan alliance forged in that war—between the Raj, Britain, United States and Nationalist China—is a reminder that the actors shaping the Bay of Bengal today remain mostly the same.

Notwithstanding the success of the Raj in ousting Imperial Japan from the littoral, the Bay of Bengal would not return to its status as the "the British lake". It would simply disappear from the geopolitical and geo-economic view in the second half of the 20th century. It was only at the turn of the new millennium that the Bay would regain some of its strategic significance.

THE INDO-PACIFIC FULCRUM

While the decline of the Raj—and in parallel, the decolonisation of the subcontinent—partly explain the decline in the importance of the Bay of Bengal, three factors rooted in the politics of the littoral itself proved more crucial. One was the partition of the Subcontinent that resulted in the fragmentation of the region's energies. The Undivided India that was key in shaping the politics of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific in the 19th century found itself having to cope with internal conflicts. If the military energies of the Raj were focused outward, those of its successor states were, unfortunately for India, directed at each other. The territorial disputes between India and Pakistan and the enduring conflicts they generated helped diminish the standing of the new states. This tragic turn was further complicated by the impact of the Cold War power politics among the United States, Soviet Russia and China.

The second development of consequence was India's refusal to partner with Great Britain and other Western nations in moulding the post-War regional order. India's determination to pursue a non-aligned foreign policy meant that New Delhi would have nothing to do with the new security arrangements, including the Cold War alliances such as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Pakistan, for its part, decided to join these alliances—underlining the sharp divergence in world views of the two successor states to the Raj. It also dampened any prospects for nurturing a cooperative relationship between India and Pakistan.[4]

CENTO and SEATO, however, could not survive the vicissitudes of post-Cold War regional politics in the Indian Ocean and beyond. With the breaking up of the 'India Centre' that provided the basis for regional security until the middle of the 20th century, there was no easy way of supplanting it without an effective participation of independent India.[5] In any event, the focus of geopolitical contestation during the Cold War was riveted on Central Europe and North East Asia. Although the great powers did challenge one other in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War, its waters were not the primary theatre of these contestations.

A third factor that completed the marginalisation of the Subcontinent related to the choice that most countries in the littoral made on the economic paths they wished to take. As the ideas of economic autarky gained ground in South Asia and South East Asia after the Second World War, the commercial significance of the Bay of Bengal began to diminish. As Partition erected new borders within the Subcontinent, the emphasis on economic self-reliance hindered engagement. The political fascination with state socialism within the Subcontinent, for example, resulted in the disruption of multiple trade and financial links that were forged during the globalisation of the region under the Raj.

To be sure, the South East Asian nations changed course from the 1970s and abandoned state socialism, and began reconnecting with the global markets. As the Subcontinent and Burma persisted in their isolationist ways, the interest of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in the late 1960s, in looking west to the Bay of Bengal began to diminish. If, under the Raj, South Asia and South East Asia were seen as part of a commercial continuum, they became increasingly different regions with little economic engagement. The deep disconnect between the two regions inevitably led to the marginalisation of the Bay of Bengal.

The situation began to change only at the turn to the 21st century. China's dramatic economic transformation, initiated under Deng Xiaoping, heightened Beijing's interest and influence in the regions beyond its borders, including in the maritime domain. India's economic reforms launched at the turn of the 1990s

began to produce substantive growth by the turn of the new millennium. India, however, was not unique. Barring Pakistan, which was mired in domestic instability and regional conflict, other countries in the region, including Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka were on their growth trajectories and making South Asia one of the fastest growing regions by the early 2010s. (Growth across the region began to slow down in the second half of the decade and has been severely hit by the covid-19 pandemic in 2020).[6] The opening up of Burma across the littoral and its integration into South East Asian structures has provided the basis for the reimagination of the Bay of Bengal as a connector sea between different regions in the eastern Indian and western Pacific Oceans.

Meanwhile, the major powers began to show interest in the Bay of Bengal littoral. China, for example, has long sought ocean access for its south-western provinces such as Tibet and Yunnan, and it is the Bay of Bengal that is the closest sea to these two. As part of its West Region development strategy announced in 2000, Beijing has promoted connectivity within and across China for these provinces. These projects have included building new road and rail corridors and trans-border energy pipelines. China has also developed new institutional mechanisms like the so-called BCMI Initiative to promote regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal littoral among China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and India. Complementing the search for overland connectivity is the growing significance of the southern waters of the Bay of Bengal, which host significant maritime traffic from China to the Indian Ocean through the Malacca straits. Owing to its fears of vulnerability of its Sea Lines of Communication, Beijing puts greater stress on naval presence in the Indian Ocean, including in the Bay of Bengal.

Yet, China is not alone in its reliance on the Malacca Straits for energy and commerce. The other leading economies in the east—Korea and Japan—are similarly dependent on the few channels connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Japan, which has historic links to Burma and has invested in the modernisation of infrastructure in many South East Asian countries, is now keen to promote sub-regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. Meanwhile, India's growing commercial engagement with East Asian countries has raised New Delhi's stakes in the partnership with the region. As it saw the steady expansion of China's economic and strategic influence in the Bay of Bengal, India began to pay greater attention to the littoral.[7]

Even as the United States dominated both the Indian and Pacific Oceans for a long time, it tended to see these spaces as disconnected. Today, amidst the growing strategic integration of the two regions, Washington has adopted the Indo-Pacific as a coherent strategic geography.[8] Like China and Japan, the US too, has embraced the urgency of promoting connectivity across the Indo-Pacific. As Japan realised the scale and intensity of China's Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI), it promoted the idea of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'; for its part, the US has talked about an 'Indo-Pacific Corridor' stretching from the east coast of Africa to the western Pacific. The US and Japan were quick to draw Australia and India into this new multilateral debate on regional connectivity. After the Quad (or the Quadrilateral Dialogue of the US, Japan, Australia and India) was revived in 2017, the four have also begun to discuss coordination in the development of regional infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific including the Bay of Bengal. While India continues to engage with the Quad on issues of regional infrastructural development, the US, Japan and Australia have created the Blue Dot Network to offer an alternative framework to China's BRI.[9]

REGIONALISM AND RIVALRY

As the new spatial concept of the Indo-Pacific gains traction, it is not difficult to see the re-emerging geographic centrality of the Bay of Bengal. Coupled with the new outward orientation of the littoral and its rapid economic growth, the Bay of Bengal is overcoming its fragmentation in the second half of the 20th century and finding ways to reconnect. Fortunately, the littoral has not had the kind of intense territorial disputes that have roiled the waters in the adjacent South China Sea. Owing to Dhaka's initiatives, the maritime territorial disputes between India, Bangladesh and Burma have been addressed through international arbitration. This has created a positive environment for building a regional community in the Bay of Bengal. This opportune moment, however, appears to be slipping away amidst the renewed rivalry among the major powers and their competing visions of regionalism.

The historic possibilities to link the disconnected spaces of Western China, Eastern India, northern Burma and the archipelagic territories in the Bay of Bengal and adjacent waters are being overshadowed by the growing political mistrust and strategic tensions in the region. As the era of economic integration and geopolitical harmony between Washington and Beijing drew to a close in the second decade of the 21st century, much of Asia and the Indo-Pacific find themselves in between.[10] The Bay of Bengal is no exception. Meanwhile, the era of political stability and mutual trust between New Delhi and Beijing has ended, too. The Bay of Bengal is now very much part of the increased geopolitical contestation between India and China in their shared neighbourhood.[11]

Second, until a couple of years ago, it was possible to visualise the complementarities between the multiple initiatives for regional infrastructural development of China, Japan, India and the US. Today these are increasingly seen as competitive. Although the abundance of regional connectivity options does increase the bargaining power of the littoral, the political overload from major-power rivalry constrains the region.

Third, the prospects for regionalism in the last many decades were buoyed by widespread international consensus on economic globalisation. As trade wars between major powers begin to take root, the danger of regional economic fragmentation grows. Finally, the geopolitical and geo-economic rivalries are straining many regional institutions, including the five-decade-old ASEAN. The attempts to construct new regionalism in the Bay of Bengal through the BCIM have yet to takeoff, given India's reluctance to embrace the initiative from China. While the Government of Prime Minster Narendra Modi has sought to revive BIMSTEC that had been dormant since its founding in 1997, the forum is yet to acquire real traction.[12] Intra-regional conflicts such as that between Bangladesh and Burma over the Rohingyas, has also dampened the hopes for a rapid revitalisation of the BIMSTEC forum.[13]

CONCLUSION

As the Indo-Pacific acquired traction in the second decade of the 21st century, its geographic scope has expanded to cover the entire stretch of waters from the East Coast of Africa to the Western Pacific. The Bay of Bengal is at the heart of this vast body of water that promises to be the new theatre of contestation among the major powers.

India, which neglected the littoral in the past, has now elevated it to a higher priority. New Delhi is showing more willingness to collaborate with other powers like the US, Japan and Australia in promoting regional connectivity, prosperity, stability and security. Yet India remains a considerable distance away from fully aligning its economic and security policies and bringing greater coherence and purpose to the pursuit of its declared strategic goals in the Bay of Bengal.ORF

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof. C. Raja Mohan is Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. He is the contributing editor on international affairs for the *Indian Express*. He has taught International Relations at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

ENDNOTES

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2 Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial connections: India in the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

3 Chirs Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

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5 For the discussion of the concept of "India Centre' see, Peter John Brobst, *Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's Independence and the Defence of Asia* (Akron: University of Akron Press, 2005).

6 World Bank, "Growth in South Asia slows down; Rebound Uncertain", October 13, 2019.

7 Jayati Bhattacharya and Roshni Kapur, "India's New Geopolitical Paradigm and Reintegration of the Bay of Bengal", *ISAS Working Paper* (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies) No. 296, June 4, 2018.

8 See White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: December 2017)

9 Jagannath Panda, "India, Blue Dot Network, and the Quad Plus Calculus", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 3, Fall 2020, pp. 1-22.

10 Kai He and Li Mingjiang, "Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific: US-China Strategic Competition, Regional Actors and Beyond", *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 1, January 2020, pp.1-7.

11 Rajesh Basrur, Anit Mukherjee and T.V. Paul, eds, *India-China Maritime Competition: The Security Dilemma at Sea* (London: Routledge, 2019); See also C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation was set up in 1997 and now includes five members from South Asia—Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka—and two members from South East Asia—Myanmar and Thailand.

13 For background see, Sreeparna Banerjee, "The Rohingya Crisis and its Impact on Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations", *ORF Issue Brief*, August 2020.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005.
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