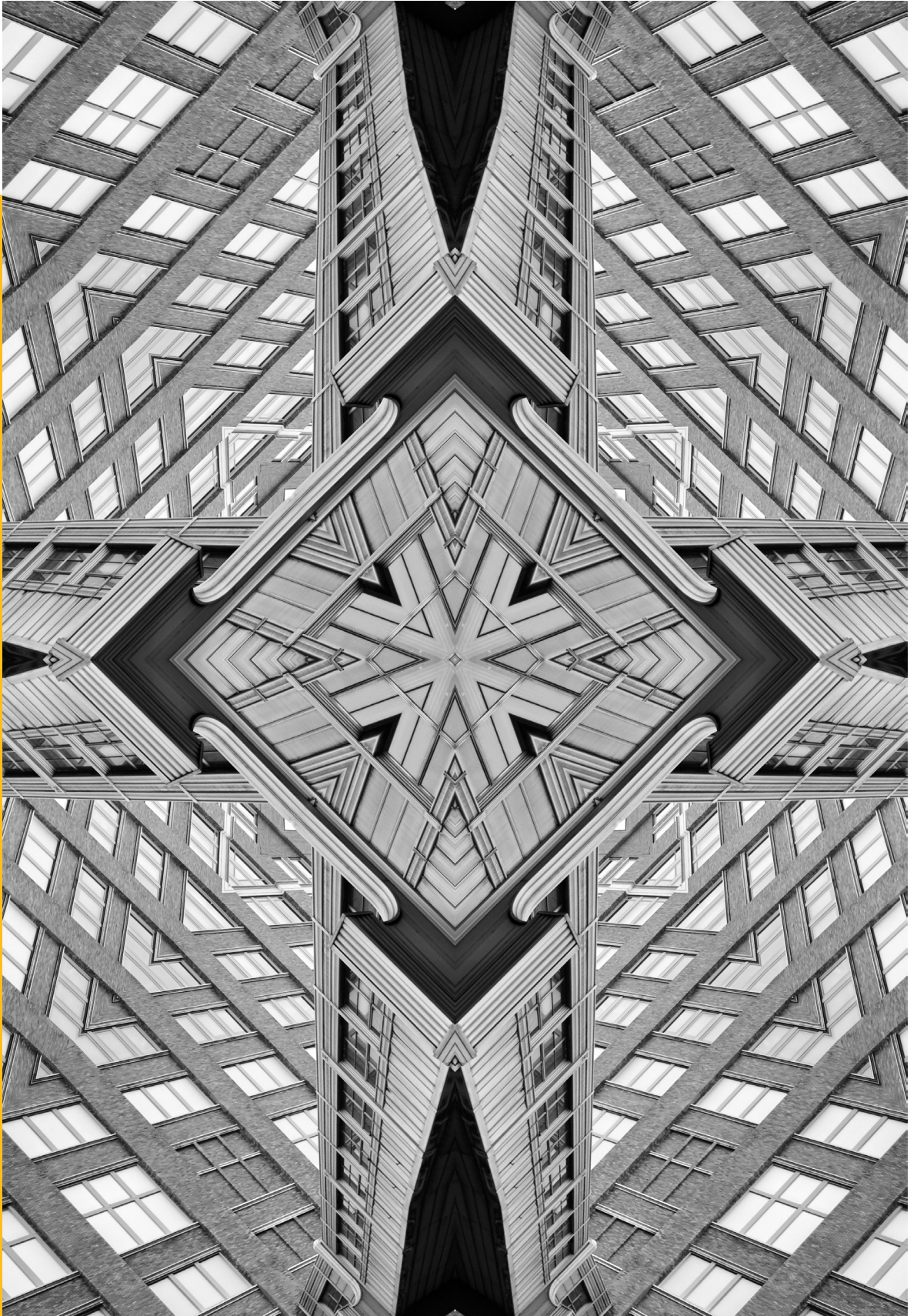


# Occasional Paper



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# India and a Stable Indo-Pacific: Managing Maritime Security Challenges in the Bay of Bengal

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## **Abstract**

India has the longest coastline in the Bay of Bengal, making it critical for the country to manage maritime security challenges in this space. However, given the transnational nature of most maritime threats, India must cooperate with other Bay littorals and the major powers to address these issues. The Bay of Bengal is a vital part of the Indo-Pacific geostrategic construct, and a secure Bay is fundamental to a stable Indo-Pacific. By addressing security challenges in the Bay, India can safeguard its maritime interests and also promote greater stability in the Indo-Pacific. This will enhance India's standing in the region, bolstering its prominence beyond its immediate maritime neighbourhood. This paper assesses how India manages security threats in the Bay and its impact on the wider Indo-Pacific.

According to US naval officer and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, often referred to as the ‘father of sea power’,<sup>a</sup> certain conditions, such as the concept of ‘national character’ (or how a nation identifies itself), help determine the power of a nation at sea. In the context of maritime affairs, for instance, this would mean whether a country considers itself to be a maritime nation. Naval prowess does not necessarily translate to having such an identity; instead, it is forged by a nation’s dependence on the sea and the value it attaches to the oceans.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, India has cultivated a ‘maritime mindset’, prioritising its oceanic neighbourhood to secure national interests. Indeed, India’s ‘maritime identity’ is evident in the reference to Mahan’s works in the bibliography of the Indian Navy’s 2015 strategy document titled ‘Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy’.<sup>2</sup> At the core of India’s evolving maritime foreign policy is its dependence on the Indian Ocean for trade, security, and foreign policy aspirations, especially in the context of a rising Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific conceptually embodies the expanse and confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, spanning from “the eastern shores of Africa to the western shores of America”.<sup>3</sup> The Bay of Bengal and the adjoining Andaman Sea are at the heart of this geopolitical construct, forming the northeastern offshoot of the Indian Ocean as it merges with the Pacific Ocean. For the Indo-Pacific to prosper as a coherent whole, it is crucial for the smaller regions that are a part of it, such as the Bay of Bengal region,<sup>b</sup> to develop. Geographically, the Bay is a bridge between South and Southeast Asia, making multidimensional maritime cooperation necessary between the countries of both blocs for regional growth.

The Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea<sup>c</sup> have strong economic potential. The countries outlining the Bay (India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) have experienced exponential economic growth

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a Alfred Thayer Mahan is known for his seminal work *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, which explained the importance of naval power in the historical supremacy of nations. His views remain relevant for maritime nations to formulate a geopolitical perspective of their natural advantages and understand how these may be utilised to secure their national interest.

b For this paper, the Bay of Bengal region will be taken to mean the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, unless specified otherwise. Its littorals are India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand. Although Indonesia’s Sumatra region also opens into the Andaman Sea, it is essentially a littoral of the adjoining Strait of Malacca, along with Malaysia and Singapore.

c With surface areas of 2.172 million square km and 797,700 square km, respectively.

over the last decade, with the South Asian states witnessing the world's fastest growth of an average of 7.3 percent per annum.<sup>d,4</sup> Several shipping routes pass through the Bay, carrying resources such as oil from West Asian countries to South and Southeast Asia. The Bay sits at a strategic halfway point along the East-West shipping lane as it enters the Malacca Strait,<sup>e</sup> connecting North America and Western Europe with Asia.<sup>5</sup> It is also home to almost 40 percent of the world's hydrocarbon reserves,<sup>6</sup> including 324 billion tonnes of coal, 664 million tonnes of oil, 99 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 11 billion tonnes of biomass and potential (328 GW of hydropower (large) and over 1000 GW of renewable energy).<sup>7</sup> India has a substantial share of hydrocarbons in the Bay, with the latest discovery made in January 2024. Two significant reserves of natural gas were found in the Mahanadi basin deepwater block in the Bay as the country tries to shift from a reliance on coal to natural gas through, for instance, high-risk deep-water exploration.<sup>8</sup>

The Bay also hosts a wealth of marine living resources, accounting for six million tonnes of fish a year, or nearly 4 percent of the value of the global catch. The fishing industry is a significant source of food and livelihood in the region, feeding almost 400 million, employing 460,000 fishing trawlers, and offering livelihood options to nearly 4.5 million people.<sup>9</sup> As such, the Bay of Bengal is a vital part of the littoral countries' blue economies, but the space remains underutilised due to inadequate infrastructure and collaborative initiatives.

Peninsular India has the longest (at about 2,500 km) and one of the most densely populated coastlines along the Bay.<sup>10</sup> Most of the coastal population depends on the sea for livelihood and food security. Over 95 percent of India's international trade by volume and 77 percent by value moves through sea transport.<sup>11</sup> The Bay is the primary passageway for India's connectivity with some of its top trading partners<sup>f,12</sup> and is a vital link with the countries of Southeast Asia, which are central to its vision of a free and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, geographically, the Bay is also

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d The South Asian countries in the Bay of Bengal region are India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

e The Malacca Strait, a 550-mile-long narrow chokepoint, is a primary trade route linking Asia and Europe, with approximately 40 percent of global trade passing through the channel yearly.

f Such as the US, China, South Korea, Indonesia, and Singapore, which trade with India via the Malacca Strait and through the Bay of Bengal or the Bay directly.

# Introduction

poised to emerge as India's gateway into the broader waters of the Indo-Pacific, where it is seeking a more prominent position. However, prevailing security concerns in the Bay could potentially hinder India from utilising this maritime space to realise its aspirations. Security challenges in the Bay are traditional (concerns arising between states) and non-traditional (including environmental and humanmade threats).<sup>g</sup> As most of these challenges are transnational, India needs to engage in security cooperation with other Bay littoral countries and relevant powers to combat the threats. This allows India to utilise collaborative security to strengthen its ties with these countries and contribute towards a stable Indo-Pacific.

This paper analyses India's role in a stable Indo-Pacific by addressing maritime security concerns in the Bay of Bengal. It has three objectives: to understand how the Bay fits into India's vision of the Indo-Pacific, to identify the traditional and non-traditional security concerns prevailing in the Bay, and to analyse how India deals with these concerns.

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<sup>g</sup> Traditional security challenges threaten a country's sovereignty or territorial integrity by another, while non-traditional security challenges comprise a wide spectrum of environmental and humanmade challenges that can threaten state and human security. Moreover, while traditional security challenges are confined within political boundaries, non-traditional concerns transcend such demarcations.

# Locating the Bay of Bengal in India's Indo-Pacific Vision

India has not articulated a vision for the Indo-Pacific, but it can be pieced together from various government policy documents and leaders' speeches over the years. This paper assesses certain documents and speeches<sup>h</sup> that provide a comprehensive overview from which the broad tenets of India's Indo-Pacific vision—and the importance of the Bay of Bengal and maritime security cooperation—are surmised as follows:

- **A Natural Region**

Geographically, for India, the Indo-Pacific is a free and inclusive 'natural region' with several global opportunities and challenges. It includes all countries in this geography and those with a stake in it. Home to over 64 percent of the worldwide population, it contributes to over 60 percent of the world's GDP.<sup>13</sup> Almost half of all global trade is through the shipping routes in this region, and there is strong and sustained economic development across the Pacific Rim, Southeast Asia, parts of South Asia, the Gulf region, and the East and Southern coasts of Africa. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is at the core of India's Indo-Pacific vision, as it can integrate the region (with its 10 member countries connecting the Indian and the Pacific Oceans).<sup>14</sup> The Bay gains strategic precedence within this natural region as the shared maritime space between India and ASEAN. Thus, the significance of the Bay largely contributes to the maritime connotation of India's vision of the Indo-Pacific based on ASEAN centrality.<sup>15</sup>

- **The Eastern Thrust**

The focus on ASEAN establishes the eastern thrust in India's Indo-Pacific vision and builds upon its 'Act East' policy. India is keen to connect its eastern and northeastern territories with Southeast Asia via land or sea. The Bay is vital for India's bilateral engagements with Southeast Asia and participation in eastern multilateral forums, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC),

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<sup>h</sup> These include Prime Minister Narendra Modi's keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018; External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's address on 'India's Vision of the Indo-Pacific' at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, in August 2022; and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's speech at the Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue in New Delhi in November 2022.

# Locating the Bay of Bengal in India's Indo-Pacific Vision

ASEAN, and the East Asia Summit. In recent years, India has engaged with the Quad<sup>i</sup> to address opportunities and challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Within the Quad's area of action, the Bay of Bengal is significant as India's immediate maritime space that reflects many of the grouping's security concerns, such as natural disasters and illegal unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. It is also a strategic space where the Quad countries are keen to preserve their interests.

- **Security and Growth for All in the Region**

India does not view the Indo-Pacific as a strategy or grouping of limited members, nor does it seek to dominate the region or target a specific country. Instead, it wants to ensure that “all have equal access as a right under international law to the use of common spaces on sea and in the air that would require freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes by international law.”<sup>16</sup> This extends from India's vision of ‘security and growth for all in the region’ (SAGAR). A foundational concept for India's understanding of the Indo-Pacific, the SAGAR vision prescribes security as a collective pursuit based on shared interest and a framework of morality that respects the “legitimate strategic imperative of all civilised nations”.<sup>17</sup> India is thus intent on building collective security through value-based partnerships to prevent maritime crimes, preserve marine ecology, protect against disasters, and ensure sea lanes remain “pathways to prosperity and corridors of peace”.<sup>18</sup> As the shared maritime space with ASEAN, the Bay is a natural platform for India to undertake such collaborative security efforts.

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i A diplomatic grouping comprising India, the US, Australia, and Japan, working towards a free, open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

# Security Challenges in the Bay of Bengal

The Bay of Bengal region faces traditional and non-traditional security threats, although not all challenges have a pan-Bay impact. The critical threats to the region are:

## Traditional Security Concerns

A key reason for India to 'Look East' in the 1990s to strengthen ties with its eastern neighbourhood across the Bay of Bengal was the lack of political instability in this region compared to its troubled western frontiers.<sup>j</sup> While some areas in the Bay of Bengal region still face political instability, separatist insurgencies, and communal and religious conflicts with cross-border implications,<sup>19</sup> most of these issues do not have a sea dimension. The primary traditional maritime concern is the growing geopolitical competition in the Bay, which can potentially impact the state security of the Bay littorals and the major powers involved in these waters.

- **Interstate Competition in the Bay**

The Bay of Bengal's strategic significance and vibrant economic prospects have created an "unprecedented jostle" for influence by the major powers, primarily China, India, Japan, the US, and Australia.<sup>20</sup> Notably, China, India, Japan, and the US rank among the world's five largest economies.<sup>21</sup> Beijing's interest in the region is driven by its energy needs to cater to its large economy and substantial population. China suffers from the 'Malacca Dilemma,' a term coined by former Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2013 to refer to the country's apprehension that blockages in the Malacca Strait will disrupt its oil imports, and so wants to secure a foothold in the Bay to ensure an uninterrupted fuel supply independently.<sup>22</sup> Maintaining a presence in the Bay region will also allow China to utilise better the oil and gas pipeline that runs from the Kyaukphyu port in Myanmar to Kunming in China, designed to reduce the travel time of oil imports from Africa or West

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<sup>j</sup> Notably, when India adopted the 'Look East' policy, it still faced the problem of an unresolved maritime boundary with Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal. However, both governments were careful not to let this impact the goodwill in the bilateral relationship. The issue was resolved in 2014, and the international maritime boundary was delimited as per the verdict of the International Court of Arbitration.



# Security Challenges in the Bay of Bengal

Asia to China by 700 miles (about 30 percent).<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, investing and creating economic dependencies in the Bay littoral countries can help China benefit from the untapped hydrocarbon reserves in the sovereign waters of these countries.<sup>24</sup>

While the US is also drawn to the Bay for its energy requirements,<sup>25</sup> it is apprehensive of China's rise in the region and the impact on its influence. Therefore, the US wants to maintain an active presence in the Bay. Japan also has an important stake in the Bay of Bengal as almost 80 percent of its oil imports from West Asia are ferried through this maritime space.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Tokyo seeks access to the markets of the rapidly growing Bay littoral economies and has begun investing in developing their maritime connectivity infrastructure. For Australia, the Bay is the key transit zone between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, and it has economic interests in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.<sup>27</sup> As such, stability in the Bay and the Northeast Indian Ocean is a matter of national interest.<sup>28</sup>

The Bay of Bengal has become an important aspect of the co-existing—but often competing—policy imperatives of each of these countries.<sup>k,29</sup> India was once the primary strategic partner for the Bay countries and a leading provider of development aid, but China's assertive rise and engagements with these states can potentially challenge the former's security and overshadow its prominence.<sup>l,30</sup> India's apprehensions are shared by the US, Japan, and Australia, who want to protect the status quo in the Bay, given their economic and geopolitical interests. Consequently, these countries have undertaken bilateral and multilateral initiatives with the Bay countries to ensure maritime security, such as India's SAGAR initiative. However, with most Bay littorals and the major powers, including India,

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k Such as India's 'Act East' and 'Neighbourhood First' policies, China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' and 'New Maritime Silk Route Initiative', the US's 'Pivot to Asia', Japan's concept of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', and Australia's 'Look West' policy.

l China is building monitoring and surveillance facilities in Myanmar's Coco Islands, reportedly to track India's missile launches off the Balasore test range in Odisha and its first nuclear submarine at the Rambili naval base on India's eastern seaboard. Notably, the Coco Islands are just 55 km north of India's far eastern naval base at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay. China has also helped Bangladesh build a submarine base, the BNS Sheikh Hasina, for its Chinese-supplied submarines, at Cox's Bazaar. The base will also be used by vessels traversing the Bay, including ships from China. This gives China a further platform to observe developments in India's Eastern Naval Command. Beijing is also reportedly trying to form a China-Myanmar-Bangladesh corridor and project dominance in the Bay and the wider Indian Ocean.

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heavily dependent on China for trade, military security collaborations that might disconcert Beijing are challenging to undertake. Notably, interstate competition in the Bay is not only between China and democratic major powers; there have also been mild tensions between like-minded powers (such as India and the US over the issue of freedom of navigation).

- **Freedom of Navigation Issues**

In April 2021, a US Navy guided-missile destroyer, USS John Paul Jones, conducted a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) inside India's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) near the Lakshadweep Islands in the Arabian Sea without New Delhi's permission.<sup>31</sup> The US justified the operation by stating that the exercise was to challenge India's excessive maritime claims in these waters. The Indian government responded by saying that, according to its maritime law, "Other countries are not allowed to carry out in the EEZ military exercise and maneuvers, in particular those involving the use of weapons or explosives, without the consent of the coastal state."<sup>32</sup> This situation highlights the differences in how the countries that are signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS),<sup>33</sup> such as India, and those that are not (the US) perceive sovereign and international waters.<sup>m</sup> It shows that different interpretations of the rule of law, even between allies, can potentially create traditional security threats.

Notably, since 1992, the US has directed six FONOPs at India's maritime claims as, despite their maturing strategic partnership, India and the US diverge on several matters related to the UNCLOS maritime agreement.<sup>34</sup> However, given the strength of the partnership, such rifts are not allowed to aggravate. This may not be the case for a situation involving China. China, a more assertive power, has often been accused of flagrantly

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<sup>m</sup> According to the UNCLOS, a country has some specific rights over its EEZ (in addition to complete rights to its territorial sea (12 nautical miles from its coast). A baseline is normally measured in the low-water line along the coast as indicated on large-scale charts officially approved by the coastal state. The EEZ lies adjacent to and beyond the territorial waters and can expand up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline. Consequently, as long as they are compatible with the Convention, states must have due regard for the rules and laws of the 'coastal state' to which the EEZ belongs. The US FONOP's disregard of Indian maritime law violates the UNCLOS—the US understands EEZs to be a part of the international waters and subjects them to prevailing norms of freedom of navigation or overflight, as they apply to the high seas.

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violating international law in its claims over the South China Sea while also crafting a “vener of legal legitimacy for its position.”<sup>35</sup> Although China has no such claims in the Bay of Bengal, subjective interpretation-led violations of UNCLOS could occur, which may trigger conflicts with India and other major powers such as the US.

## **Non-Traditional Threats**

The Bay region faces many non-traditional threats, from illegal activities to environmental challenges. The key issues impacting India are:

- **Illegal and Undocumented Migration**

The Rohingya issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar is a long-standing problem in the region. Stripped of their citizenship, denied fundamental rights, and persecuted by the Myanmar army, the Rohingya from Myanmar’s coastal Rakhine State use the Bay to flee to refugee camps in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazaar.<sup>36</sup> Many Rohingya refugees are marooned for months on “unseaworthy boats, falling prey to abuses by smugglers, becoming gravely ill through insufficient food and water, and enduring the harsh conditions at sea, including both searing heat as well as treacherous waves and storms.”<sup>37</sup> Currently identified as a festering crisis, the problem of illegal migration in the Bay’s waters has also deteriorated bilateral relations between the two countries.<sup>38</sup> India is impacted, with many Rohingya escaping into its territory through land and riverine-maritime routes of the Bengal delta.<sup>39</sup>

- **Human Trafficking**

A substantial portion of global human trafficking originates in South Asia; victims, mainly from Bangladesh and India, are trafficked to Southeast Asian countries across the Bay.<sup>40</sup> India’s coastal district of Sundarbans in West Bengal is particularly prone to trafficking as frequent cyclones leave its people in poor living conditions, increasing their vulnerability to human traffickers.<sup>41</sup> People in Bangladesh’s Chittagong are often lured by the prospect of better jobs in Malaysia, while in Sri Lanka, the lure is employment and better living standards in Australia. In both instances, the Bay is a vital conduit for the crime.<sup>42</sup>

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- **Drug Trafficking**

More stringent border controls since the pandemic have resulted in the increased use of sea routes for drug trafficking, particularly along the coast of southern Thailand.<sup>43</sup> Seaborne drug trafficking originates from Myanmar along the Andaman Sea and Malacca Strait, transporting methamphetamine to Southeast Asian countries, Australia, and Japan.<sup>44</sup> Seaborne trafficking routes from West Asia through the Bay of Bengal are also emerging.<sup>45</sup> In 2020, India and Myanmar acknowledged that drug trafficking via maritime routes in the Bay was a “new challenge” and the “high prevalence of drug abuse in the northeastern states abutting the Myanmar border is a major cause of concern for India”.<sup>46</sup>

- **Coastal Armed Robberies**

Instances of coastal armed robbery and the kidnapping of fishermen for ransom have dwindled, but the problem persists in a few pockets, such as the Chittagong vessel anchorages and the Sundarbans mangroves of Bangladesh. But these are often the work of petty criminals and not organised syndicates, with poverty, population density, and a shortage of livelihood opportunities identified as the primary causes for such activities.<sup>47</sup>

Between 2007 and 2019, among the highest incidents of armed robberies at sea in India, 15 were reported at Visakhapatnam (home to the Port of Visakhapatnam, a transshipment site) and 14 at Haldia (which houses the Haldia Dock Complex and Sagar, an upcoming deep-sea port). However, by 2020, such incidents at major ports declined, with none reported from these locations.<sup>48</sup> This may be due to the stringent border controls applied during the pandemic.

- **Maritime Terrorism**

Many Bay littoral countries are either victims of terror attacks or are terrorist breeding grounds.<sup>49</sup> Money laundering and the drug trade boost the illegal purchase of arms, ammunition, and terror financing.<sup>50</sup> Several Bay littorals feature in the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, which measures the impact of terrorism on countries worldwide. Ranked in order of the

# Security Challenges in the Bay of Bengal

decreasing intensity of the impact, the countries are Myanmar (9), India (14), Thailand (28), Bangladesh (32), and Sri Lanka (33).<sup>51</sup> In India, Maoist groups operate in the eastern, central, and southern parts; Islamic terrorism continues in Jammu and Kashmir; and violent terrorist groups (such as the United Liberation Front of Asom) remain active in the Northeast. In Bangladesh, the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh and Ansarul Islam are key terror groups. The military junta government in Myanmar recognises several ethnic groups as terrorist outfits. Thailand is a transit point for al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah, and Hezbollah.<sup>52</sup>

- **Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing**

Problems such as IUU fishing persist across India and Bangladesh's contiguous waters for want of a better catch due to incongruous fishing bans and because fishers in both countries share familial, cultural, and linguistic bonds. They face hefty penalties and prolonged imprisonment, impacting their lives and livelihoods if caught. The problem can emerge as a severe bilateral concern, as has been the case with Sri Lanka.<sup>53</sup> The India-Sri Lanka dispute has three aspects: (i) fishing rights near the island of Kachchatheevu in the Palk Strait, (ii) Indian fishers poaching in Sri Lanka's waters, and (iii) their use of trawlers, which is substantially depleting catch for Sri Lankan fishers. Notably, during the Sri Lankan civil war, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam members disguised themselves as Indian fishers to attack the Sri Lankan navy. Consequently, the navy adopted a 'shoot first, question later' policy, due to which many Indian fishers lost their lives.<sup>54</sup> Indian fishers continue to transgress into Sri Lankan waters, catalysed by commercial demand, even at the cost of their life or imprisonment. Sri Lankan fishermen have also ventured into India's EEZs near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for fishing.<sup>55</sup>

Additionally, India and Bangladesh share a grey zone 200 nautical miles off the latter's coast but within 200 nautical miles of the former's coast, where they have shared maritime rights. Myanmar also has claims over a portion of it.<sup>56</sup> Bangladesh has rights over the continental shelf in this zone, while India and Myanmar have rights over the EEZ water columns. This distinction is difficult to implement as their rights exist in the same space geographically, leaving room for potential interstate disputes.

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- **Natural Disasters**

The Bay is situated along the ‘world hazard belt’<sup>n,57</sup> and is turbulent due to its triangular shape, low flat coastal terrain, shallow depth, and easterly waves.<sup>58</sup> In addition to the cyclones that originate in its waters, cyclonic winds from the Pacific Ocean are also drawn to the Bay due to the absence of any large landmass at the intersection of the two waters. Tsunamis occur intermittently as the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea confluence lies in the Andaman-Sumatra Subduction Zone, with intense seismic activity along the jostling European and Indo-Australian tectonic plates. The recurrent earthquakes generate tsunamis. The entire coast of the Bay, with a population of 1.4 billion people, is exposed to frequent cyclones and tsunamis (in some parts). The Indian east coast, forming the Bay’s western shores, witnesses an average of three cyclones yearly. The northern and southern parts of the east coast are vulnerable to tsunamis. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are particularly vulnerable to cyclones and tsunamis as they lie almost parallel to the subduction zone.<sup>59</sup> Sea-level rise is also a concern, especially along the deltaic parts of the Bay’s long coastline, shared by India and Bangladesh. Several shallow islands already suffering from river-water erosion are gradually “vanishing” under the steadily rising sea, leading to a loss of home and livelihood for its residents, who are compelled to migrate to the mainland.<sup>60</sup> Rising sea levels and receding coastlines further escalate the destructiveness of cyclones and storm surges, compounded by land subsidence in many parts of the littoral countries.<sup>61</sup>

- **Marine Plastic Pollution**

Ninety percent of the global input of plastic from rivers to oceans comes from 10 river systems, eight of which are in Asia.<sup>62</sup> Rivers carry plastic debris (comprising microplastics) from land-based sources to the oceans.<sup>63</sup> The Bay littorals that share transboundary rivers (India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar) are developing states with high population counts, poorly designed product and waste management practices, and insufficient

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n The Indian Ocean region is sometimes called the ‘world’s hazard belt’ as it is prone to disasters, both natural and humanmade.

# Security Challenges in the Bay of Bengal

capacity for recycling. As many countries in the region are experiencing rapid economic development, the volume of waste generated will likely increase.<sup>64</sup> Almost 15,343 tonnes of waste are dumped daily in the seas of South Asia, and they originate from 60 major Indian cities.<sup>65</sup> As such, its marine debris crisis is threatening its rich marine biodiversity. Although the Bay littorals have undertaken national-level measures to implement proper waste management strategies, these are yet to evolve into regional initiatives. Littered with plastic waste along its shorelines, on the seabed, and suspended in the water column, the Bay is becoming a plastic ‘hotspot’, more polluted than the Indian Ocean gyre. This impacts the Bay region’s fishing and tourism potential, compromising the littoral economies.<sup>66</sup> However, the problem of marine pollution is not yet well understood in the Bay region, and there is no uniform method of analysing and comparing the challenges created by such litter and the ways to dispose of it,<sup>67</sup> with no multilateral initiatives undertaken.

“Subjective interpretation-led violations of the UNCLOS can trigger conflicts in the Bay of Bengal, even between like-minded countries.”

# Ensuring a Stable Bay: Efforts and Challenges

**A**s the Bay of Bengal has become a foreign policy priority, India is taking several measures to boost its defence capabilities in these waters and ensure freedom of navigation along the sea lines of communication:

- **Tapping into Andaman and Nicobar Islands’ Strategic Potential**

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which separate the Bay of Bengal from the Andaman Sea, are considered among the world’s most strategically located island chains, given their proximity to the East-West shipping route and as the first land connect from Malacca Strait. The islands serve as India’s far eastern command in the Bay and host the only integrated tri-service command of the armed forces. The Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) is responsible for maritime surveillance of shipping routes passing through the island chain and the Malacca Strait. In recent years, India has sought to leverage the islands’ potential to protect its interests in the Bay. In 2019, India passed a US\$682 million military infrastructure development plan for its naval and air force bases.<sup>68</sup> Efforts were expedited after the Ladakh stand-off with China in May 2020, with India stationing additional forces, warships, aircraft, and missile batteries on the islands.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, amid China’s expanding footprint in the Indo-Pacific, India is pushing to upgrade its military bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands,<sup>70</sup> not to stir conflict with Beijing but to enhance its presence so that a conflict can be prevented through deterrence.

At the same time, “observers maintain that regional countries could still be cynical of the heavy militarisation of the islands.”<sup>71</sup> India is thus keen to engage its eastern neighbourhood and select major powers in developing the islands. For instance, India and Indonesia are assessing ways to boost connectivity between Port Blair (Andaman and Nicobar Island) and Port

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o In the 1980s, Indonesia and Malaysia interpreted India’s efforts to develop the ANC as a move to project power beyond the Malacca Strait. Although ties with these countries have improved, such a scenario remains possible.



# Ensuring a Stable Bay: Efforts and Challenges

of Sabang (in Indonesia's Aceh province).<sup>72</sup> In March 2022, India signed a grant agreement with the Japan International Cooperation Agency of up to approximately US\$133 million for a power supply project on the islands.<sup>73</sup>

- **Bolstering Eastern Naval Defences**

India is also deploying deterrence capabilities in the Eastern Naval Command to enhance its underwater surveillance capabilities by adding more submarines and anti-submarine warfare vessels.<sup>74</sup> The Indian Navy is poised to become a 175-ship force by 2035<sup>75</sup> as part of a plan to make the country self-reliant by 2047.<sup>76</sup> Currently, 41 of the 43 ships under construction are being built in Indian shipyards, and proposals have been approved to build 49 more ships and submarines.<sup>77</sup> The focus is on developing advanced capabilities and devising plans to overcome complex security challenges in the maritime domain. However, the pace of ship construction is still not streamlined to meet India's strategic needs. The Indian Navy has the lowest budget of the three military wings despite now being at the forefront of India's geostrategic planning. India is building warships at a much slower pace than China, and the deficit is glaring in the undersea domain.<sup>78</sup> Still, efforts are underway to adopt technological advancements in warship construction.<sup>79</sup>

- **Enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness**

Beyond militarisation, maritime domain awareness (MDA) is needed to devise effective strategies to protect the Bay. MDA is "the effective understanding of any activity associated with the maritime environment that could impact upon the security, safety, economy or environment."<sup>80</sup> MDA is intrinsic to the information-decision-action cycle as it allows a nation to assess threats from its waters. India has been trying to develop MDA, particularly after the November 2008 terror attacks, via projects such as the National Maritime Domain Awareness Centre that links all maritime agencies, coastal states, and union territories on one network. India's MDA is enhanced by the Coastal Surveillance Network (a chain of coastal radars monitored by the Coast Guard) and the National Automatic Identification System.<sup>81</sup>

# Ensuring a Stable Bay: Efforts and Challenges

The Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established in December 2018 and hosted by the Indian Navy, is vital for providing critical information by tracking shipping traffic and other developments. It collaborates with 25 countries, 12 of which have deputed international liaison officers (ILOs), and 40 organisations.<sup>p,82</sup> Among the partner countries, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar are Bay littorals, each with an ILO in the organisation.<sup>83</sup> To enhance MDA, India also has white shipping agreements with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, allowing the exchange of commercial shipping information. New Delhi is also helping Bangkok with an advanced navigation system and Naypyidaw with radar and sonar equipment for better surveillance capabilities.<sup>84</sup> India is also expediting the implementation of the BIMSTEC Information Sharing Centre,<sup>85</sup> a first step towards building regional MDA, but ensuring gap-free electronic surveillance remains a challenge.<sup>86</sup> Importantly, MDA is necessary to identify security challenges, illegal activities, and environmental threats in the Bay.

## • Protecting the Coastline

Following the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, India began focusing on coastal security based on the fundamentals stressed by the International Maritime Organization and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia<sup>q,87</sup>—interagency coordination; procedures for information sharing; integrating strategies with existing methods for making the most of limited resources; swift operational response; enhanced surveillance and patrol;

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p The IFC-IOR has 25 partner countries, including India, 12 with ILOs. These are Australia (ILO), Brazil, Bangladesh (ILO), Comoros, France (ILO), Italy (ILO), Japan (ILO), Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives (ILO), Mauritius (ILO), Myanmar (ILO), New Zealand, Nigeria, Oman, Philippines, Seychelles (ILO), Singapore (ILO), Spain, the US (ILO), Tanzania, Sri Lanka (ILO), and South Africa. The 13th ILO is from the UK, although it is not a partner country. The IFC-IOR collaborates with organisations such as the International Maritime Organization, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

q The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia was formalised on 11 November 2004 and is the first and only regional government-to-government agreement to promote and enhance cooperation to suppress piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia. The agreement entered into force on 4 September 2006, and an Information Sharing Centre was established under it in Singapore on 29 November 2006. Currently, 21 countries (14 Asian and seven non-Asian states) are its contracting parties. The agreement aims to enhance regional cooperation by preventing maritime incidents involving merchantmen and crew and combating piracy and armed robbery against ships through its three pillars: information sharing, capacity building, and cooperative arrangements. In doing so, it brings together the contracting parties, the shipping industry, and international partners.

# Ensuring a Stable Bay: Efforts and Challenges

and arrest and prosecution to curb armed robbery and piracy.<sup>88</sup> India's navy is tasked with overall maritime security (including coastal security), and the Coast Guard is responsible for coastal security in territorial waters along with the state marine police (SMP).<sup>r,89</sup> The security of India's major and private ports is also strengthened as per the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code<sup>s</sup> and the Indian Home Ministry's guidelines for non-major ports.<sup>t</sup> The Central Industrial Security Force is responsible for security in all major ports, select non-major ports, and Indian Custom Ports.<sup>90</sup> The Coast Guard, SMP, customs and port authorities, and other agencies coordinate their responses to armed robberies. Notably, strengthening coastal security is crucial as India progresses with its plans for port and port-led development.

- **Domestic Legislation and Cross-Border Negotiations**

In 2019, India passed the Anti-Maritime Piracy Bill (although it is still awaiting presidential assent), which criminalises maritime piracy and allows authorities to ensure safer international transit and domestic operations in the region, and aims to strengthen international cooperation and regional partnerships to combat piracy.<sup>91</sup> The Marine Fisheries (Regulation and Management) Bill (also to be passed) seeks to prohibit fishing by

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r In 1957, a Police Coast Guard was created by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as an adjunct to the Andaman and Nicobar Police. The unit was restructured in 1968 and became known as the Police Marine Force. The Andaman Model for Marine Police was recommended by the 2001 Group of Ministers report to strengthen maritime border and island security. Subsequently, the marine elements of the state police were formed in all coastal states and union territories in the second half of the 2000s. It gained significance with the 2005 Ministry of Home Affairs Coastal Security Scheme and the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Currently, the State Marine Police are the inner tier of three-tiered architecture, with the Indian Navy and the coast guard as the outer and intermediate layers.

s The Code, developed in response to the perceived threats to ships and port facilities after the September 2001 attacks, provides measures to enhance the security of ships and port facilities.

t In 2016, India's home ministry circulated a 'Compendium of Guidelines' on the security of non-major ports. It was based on the 2014 recommendation of the department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs on the need to effectively utilise the Vessel Traffic Management System to strengthen coastal and port security in non-major ports.

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foreign vessels in India's EEZs.<sup>92</sup> India has also signed a memorandum of understanding with Bangladesh on the blue economy (2015) and to combat transnational illegal activities at sea to refrain fishers from crossing boundaries and address any instances of inadvertent crossings by fishers, although both documents await formalisation (a delay that can be ascribed to the low number of reported transgressions).<sup>93</sup>

## • Joint Naval Exercises

Under its SAGAR initiative, India engages in patrols and naval exercises with the navies of the Bay littoral states and the major powers. These include the Malabar exercise (with Japan, Australia, and the US), the India-Thailand-Singapore exercise, the Japan-India maritime exercise, and coordinated patrols with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Thailand. These exercises aim to enhance interoperability between the participating navies and target illegal activities such as maritime terrorism, IUU fishing, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and armed robbery.

## • Utilising Multilateral Platforms

As the lead country for BIMSTEC's security priority sector,<sup>u</sup> India has urged the grouping to address security concerns in the Bay. Accordingly, the grouping has adopted a few legal instruments. The BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime, and Illicit Drug Trafficking,<sup>v</sup> as well as the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, are in force.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, the BIMSTEC Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, the BIMSTEC Convention on Transfer of Sentenced Persons, and the BIMSTEC Convention on Extradition are being negotiated.<sup>95</sup> In 2005,

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u The sector is divided into three sub-sectors: counterterrorism and transnational crime, disaster management, and energy.

v Entered into force in March 2021, it seeks to address illegal activities through cooperation between law enforcement agencies and a review of the implementation of its provisions. However, the convention includes a right to 'refusal of request,' allowing any country to withhold requested information if the disclosure could endanger its national security.

# Ensuring a Stable Bay: Efforts and Challenges

BIMSTEC also established a joint working group on counterterrorism and transnational crime.<sup>96</sup>

- **Addressing Environmental Concerns**

India began developing its disaster management capacities after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In 2005, it passed a Disaster Management Act, a National Disaster Management Policy in 2009, and a National Disaster Management Plan in 2016, which was updated in 2019. It also established the National Disaster Management Authority to monitor disaster management efforts nationwide and decentralised the system to form state and district disaster management authorities.

During peacetime, the Indian Navy is involved in providing relief assistance and has been deployed for several humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions (for instance, after the 2004 tsunami, India deployed three simultaneous relief operations to disaster-struck Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Indonesia). India's assistance is acceptable because it is non-intrusive, follows a government-to-government approach, and conforms to the principle that the 'right to protect' should not be a pretext for humanitarian intervention.<sup>97</sup> This has enabled India to develop HADR as a diplomatic tool to strengthen ties with its neighbourhood. To be sure, Indian aid has also declined, such as in 2007 when Bangladesh restricted India's assistance to the Port of Chattogram (Chittagong) and Dhaka airport and refused the deployment of its helicopters for rescue operations in the more remote areas during Cyclone Sidr.<sup>98</sup>

Although the BIMSTEC sector on 'disaster management' under India was active in the years following the 2004 tsunami, it eventually became dormant until 2016, when efforts were made to reinvigorate it as a 'natural platform' for disaster diplomacy.<sup>99</sup> BIMSTEC has now begun to conduct HADR exercises, which were last held in 2021.<sup>100</sup> The first meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Maritime Security Cooperation held in 2022 finalised the Concept Paper on Maritime Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and identified five focus areas to expand cooperation (maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, oil pollution response, blue economy, and maritime security cooperation).<sup>101</sup> In

# Ensuring a Stable Bay: Efforts and Challenges

October 2023, the Draft BIMSTEC Guidelines for Maritime Component of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief were updated to provide a common understanding and framework for HADR operations in the Bay.<sup>102</sup> This is a manifestation of India's efforts to cultivate regional disaster preparedness, inspired by the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, to which all Bay littorals are signatories. However, BIMSTEC still suffers from a lean budget and institutional weaknesses, which need to be overcome to establish effective measures of regional disaster management.<sup>103</sup>

“Establishing a robust and collaborative system of maritime domain awareness is imperative for India to craft effective strategies to safeguard its various interests in the Bay of Bengal.”

A secure and stable Bay of Bengal region has the potential to foster greater stability across the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, safety in the Bay is indispensable for the holistic development and welfare of the surrounding regions, thereby enhancing prosperity across the Indo-Pacific. India, the predominant power in the Bay, has the opportunity—and the obligation—to collaborate with littoral states and major powers to foster a more stable Indo-Pacific.

However, collaborative measures to address state security concerns arising from aggressive powers such as China are challenging to undertake in the Bay as all littorals, including India and the major powers, depend significantly on Beijing for trade. For instance, the Quad had to diversify its objective beyond what China perceived as its containment to other areas of security, such as IUU fishing, HADR, and MDA.<sup>104</sup> This indicates how India should cultivate security cooperation in the Bay.

In addition to bolstering its eastern defences and tapping into the strategic potential of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India must also engage with the other littoral countries and the major powers for effective security in the Bay. This can be accomplished by enhancing cooperation to combat criminal challenges and environmental concerns. As these are human-centric challenges and do not target any state, other countries will likely be keen to collaborate with India on these fronts without risking China's ire. This will create an inclusive environment for security cooperation among the stakeholders in the Bay and will work to strengthen ties between India and other like-minded nations involved in this maritime space.

India must focus on a few key areas to improve cooperative endeavours in the Bay. To establish a consistent 'rule of law', India and the other powers involved in the Bay must interpret the UNCLOS in a similar manner. India must settle the IUU fishing dispute with Sri Lanka with due regard to diplomatic sensitivities and community-based concerns. At the same time, it must address the currently nascent IUU fishing issue with Bangladesh. India must also focus on enhancing MDA cooperation as it is intrinsic to

# Conclusion

improving collaboration in the Bay. India must also further its efforts to collaborate in disaster preparedness to usher in a culture of disaster risk resilience and proactiveness in the Bay. Finally, it must encourage greater awareness of the dangers of marine plastic among the Bay littorals and urge concerted action to curb the threat. [ORF](#)

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