FEATURE

Positioning the Bay of Bengal in the Great Game of the Indo-Pacific Fulcrum

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Abstract

As it has across the entire Indo-Pacific, geopolitical competition has intensified in the Bay of Bengal. There is, indeed, a competition between and among major powers; India competes with China, US-led allies challenge China's assertiveness, and the Bay of Bengal—situated at the intersection between South and Southeast Asia—is a divider, a connector, and a battleground. To set out the trajectory, this article starts by identifying the strategic geography of the Bay of Bengal in the Indo-Pacific fulcrum, one prism through which to view the evolving international relations of the region. In doing so, the article discusses the factors that drive the evolving significance of the Bay for its littoral states and great powers. Then the focus shifts toward another prism—the non-traditional security issues including economy, ecology, and connectivity, which are of deep interest to all the littoral states. These factors can drive cooperation. This review of the hard and soft elements of the strategic environment of the Bay of Bengal suggests strong cohesion of the regional states is the key to mutual prosperity. But can this be achieved when the forces of division have become so much greater?

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Roughly three-quarters of the Indo-Pacific region's entire surface is water.[1] Yet apart from the South China Sea, the great majority of geopolitical studies concern not those maritime spaces—including vast oceans such as the Pacific and the Indian—or mention critical bays such as the Bay of Bengal (hereafter, BoB), but rather land areas that cover a much smaller share of the whole. For most of the past century, if not longer, the worlds of politics and diplomacy have been conceptualized in terms of land borders and self-contained regions. Yet history has demonstrated repeatedly that the location, political--economic role, and security structure of water bodies, as well as the relationships of rimland nations along their shores, and of islands within them, can be highly consequential for international affairs.[2]

Yet remarkably little work on such questions, save a small number of exploratory studies, has ever been done.[3] The BoB lies astride the sea lanes that connect China, Japan, and Korea with suppliers in the Persian Gulf, as well as Africa, through which the bulk of their oil imports and many other raw materials must pass. One of the major actors of Indo-Pacific—India—is also highly reliant on the BoB in a wide variety of areas ranging from energy to traditional security. The future of the BoB, thus, has important security implications for all of them, as well as for global powers such as the United States.

The securing of these energy and trade routes drives geopolitical calculations in the BoB, and this links the BoB to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (hereinafter, FOIP) strategy espoused by the United States and its allies. In recent years, China's increasing presence in this region under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an attempt to avoid the 'Malacca Dilemma'[4] and to create alternative overland routes to strategic ports securing China's supplies through the Indian Ocean. From a Chinese strategic point of view, the BoB and its adjacent states form a critical region to which China must have a significant degree of access. But this creates concerns for the United States and its allies and partners, especially for India, in securing the BoB from being dominated by a single actor, thus warranting action for ensuring plurality. As China's BRI and US FOIP Strategy continue to evolve, geostrategic presence of great powers and their geopolitical maneuvering are likely to intensify in the BoB region.

The BoB is not only a theater for a great power game; the livelihood and economic vitality of the countries surrounding it are highly dependent on this body of water. Domestic dynamics in each of these states, interstate conflict, nontraditional security threats, climate change, and ecology are also critical factors shaping the Bay with significant consequences for the broader Indo-Pacific. The article first depicts the origin of Indo-Pacific concept and the geostrategic significance of the BoB in relation to the concept. In the subsequent section, it identifies the key drivers that are likely to foster the BoB's significance and its relevance for Indo-Pacific.

The strategic importance of the BoB will considerably increase in the coming years. The nations involved are major and rising powers, the power plays in the theater will inevitably reshape the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific beyond the Bay. However, the article argues that cooperation and competition is in all the nations' best interests, as any conflict in the Bay region could augment political, economic, and energy insecurity affecting all the concerned countries.

A Vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific:

The origin of the term 'Indo-Pacific' is traced to German geopolitical scholar Karl Haushofer who used it in the 1920s in his work, *Deutsche Kulturpolitik im Indopazifischen Raum*.[5] Indian historian Kalidas Nag referenced the term in the

1940s.[6] In recent years, the term gained momentum after former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's speech in the Indian parliament in August 2007. Abe, then, remarked, "We are now at a point at which the Confluence of the Two Seas is coming into being. The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and prosperity."[7]

It was a clear indication that not only the Pacific Ocean but also the Indian Ocean are important bodies of water and the "confluence" of the two oceans has become more critical than ever. The speech became relevant at the time, when preceding frameworks such as the "Asia-Pacific" were proving to be limited in their scope, failing to meet emerging geopolitical realities. The Indo-Pacific is, in effect, a proposed new conceptual map that would transcend the traditional mental divisions between the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region.[8]

Figure 1. Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific. (Source: Bharath Gopalaswamy and Aditya Ramachandran, "The Shifting Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific," China-US Focus, 19 Dec 2017, https://www.chinausfocus.com/.)

With the rise of China and Asian tigers,[9] the global strategic and economic center of gravity began shifting toward the Asia-Pacific region in the late twentieth century. The Obama administration's "Rebalance Asia"/"Pivot to Asia" policy was a remarkable recognition of this geopolitical shift and became a blueprint of America's Indo-Pacific vision. Then–Secretary of State Hilary Clinton later authored a seminal article in *Foreign Policy* to articulate America's stake in the Indo-Pacific.[10] Japan was among the first countries to use the phrase "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" in its official discourse. In the following year of 2013, when the Australian government became the first to officially redefine its region according to this two-ocean framework, the term was still a novelty.

In late 2017, the United States adopted the concept and translated it into the three pillars of security, economics, and governance. The 2017 *National Security Strategy*,[11] 2018 *National Defense Strategy*,[12] and 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Re-*

port[13] marked an inflection point in the evolution of the concept. In the US definition, the Indo-Pacific region comprises 36 nations—from the west coast of the United States to the west coast of India—that are home to more than 50 percent of the world's population, three largest economies, five of the ten most populous countries, and four of the top five largest Muslim-majority nations.

The region is a vital driver of the global economy and includes the world's busiest international sea lanes and nine of the ten largest container ports. The Indo-Pacific is also a heavily militarized region, with seven of the world's ten largest standing militaries and five of the world's declared nuclear nations.[14] It is relatively rich in natural resources, especially hydrocarbons, which fuel the industrial engines of the world's economies and encourage competition not only among the established powers but also push the emerging powers to scramble for scarce resources as well. Given these conditions, the strategic complexity facing the region is unique.

However, the concept of the Indo-Pacific is not a new idea, nor is it narrowly American; rather, it has triggered a renewal of the region's enduring maritime and multipolar character. The vision to establish a "rule-based order" denotes an international environment in which every country—regardless of its size or power—will be able to exercise sovereignty and will be free from coercion and that international behavior conforms to established law and norms. At the national level, this means good governance and the assurance that citizens can enjoy their fundamental rights and liberties.[15] The FOIP concept also does not exclude or contain China, though it does dilute China's influence. Moreover, the region's scale, ambiguity or "duality," and apparent diversity of national approaches to FOIP are more advantages rather than liabilities.[16] Like any geopolitical construct, the Indo-Pacific region has its ambiguities and limitations. The Indo-Pacific labeling, however, does resonate with the aspiration of a multipolar region in which middle and smaller powers can survive and exercise their full sovereign rights, free of coercion or intimidation.

The Bay of Bengal in the Indo-Pacific Fulcrum:

After decades of being regarded as an international backwater, the BoB is fast becoming a key area of economic and strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. It is the largest bay in the world, bookended by India on its western side and Thailand to its east, with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka as its prominent littoral states. Together they host fully one-quarter of the world's population with sustained gross domestic product growth currently of $3 trillion.[17] The BoB depends on the ability of states to enhance subregional cooperation.[18] A quarter of the world's traded goods cross the Bay, including huge volumes of Persian Gulf oil and liquefied natural gas, providing energy-scarce countries with a corridor to securing resources.[19] Some of the world's most important trading routes also run through the BoB. The BoB itself

contains vast, mostly untapped natural resources of oil, gas, mineral ores, and fishing stocks, encouraging investments and economic as well as strategic interest from China, Japan, and the United States. As a result, it has the potential to positively contribute to the economies of littoral states.[20]

Unlike the contested South China Sea, this subregion is free from maritime boundary disputes making it an integral building block for the FOIP vision. It lies at the border line of two major geopolitical blocs: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). These regional efforts to provide a framework for international economic cooperation for the BoB that predates the BRI by at least a decade. In addition, key nations of South and Southeast Asia joined in establishing BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) in 1997, inspired by India's "Look East" and Thailand's "Look West" policies.[21]

However, the BoB was long ignored by great powers, characterized by an image of poverty, natural disasters, and political instability. Even now, few perceive the BoB as constituting a region for significant geopolitical calculations. In contrast to previous centuries, since the end of World War II, geographers, academics, and diplomats preferred to divide the Bay into two distinct halves, drawing a sharp line between what came to be called "Southeast Asia" and "South Asia."[22] As the concept of the Indo-Pacific continues to surge and become operationalized, the area is likely to gain much greater prominence in coming years and may even be poised to become a new epicenter of economic development in Asia.

Countries around the BoB, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar (at least before the 2021 coup), are experiencing high growth rates. Much of that economic growth is currently being driven by internal reforms and remains fragile. But the region's long-term economic prospects will likely be driven by the ability of countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka to take advantage of the opportunities presented by their huge neighbors, China and India, and most critically by the growing interest of extraregional powers such as the United States.

The Bay is also assuming a new strategic importance. It is located close to the geographic center of the Indo-Pacific region (at the intersection of the expanding zones of strategic interest of China and India). The BoB (like its Pacific "twin," the South China Sea) is also a key transit zone between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the main route for trade in energy to East Asia. The region's strategic centrality, just as much as its promising economic prospects, drives the unprecedented jostle for influence by the major powers, including China, India, Japan, the United States, and even Russia.[23]

Despite its seemingly bright economic prospects, the region still suffers from an array of politico-security issues, many of which are transnational in nature. These

include political instability, separatist insurgencies, communal and religious conflicts with cross-border implications, and maritime security challenges such as piracy, gun-running and human trafficking. The region also suffers from considerable environmental security problems—a possible inundation of large parts of the littoral states due to rising sea levels that could lead to the displacement of millions.

That all means that the BoB will likely assume increasing geostrategic importance in the Indo-Pacific vision in the coming decades. In some ways, it is also the epicenter of the Indo-Pacific concept—the place where the strategic interests of the major powers of East and South Asia intersect.[24] The importance of the BoB as a new frontier for development and confrontation and its relevance to key regional and extraregional players will continue to grow as geopolitical competition intensifies. The BoB not only physically connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans but has the potential to act as an economic hub for the East Asian and Indian Ocean economic systems' interaction. As political scientist Akihiko Tanaka, the former head of Japan's International Cooperation Agency, commented:

> . . . the Bay of Bengal is centrally located within this tectonic change as it can function as a key junction between the two oceans. Unfortunately, we are often bound by outdated geographic divisions. We still draw a dividing line at the Arakan Mountains to separate South Asia from Southeast Asia . . . perhaps it is high time for the Bay of Bengal to be considered as a coherent strategic region within the broader framework of the Indo-Pacific.[25]

Drivers of the Bay of Bengal's Growing Importance

Economy at the Heart and Center

The heyday of the British Empire—from roughly 1850 to 1940—was a broad period of integration, both within the Bay and with other regions. All the littoral countries, save for marginal Thailand, were part of the British Empire from the late nineteenth century up until the outbreak of World War II. The ensuing decades of war, independence, and reconstruction (1940–1980) were an era of autarky and isolation, with the countries pursuing import substitution strategies of economic development. Since the early 1980s, driven in large part by the success of the outward-oriented East Asia development model, the BoB has grown more intertwined with Asia as a whole.[26] The primary drivers for integration such as growth, energy, and trade have accelerated markedly over the past decade and likely to intensify rapidly in coming years.

With the exception of Thailand, the BoB countries largely missed the economic miracle that took place in Asia in the latter part of the twentieth century. This,

however, is now changing: prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, South Asia had experienced the world's fastest growth of 7.3 percent on average per annum throughout the last decade.[27] Many of these states, such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, are located around the Bay, while India is the largest economy among the BoB states. Low-cost, labor-intensive, export manufacturing industries such as garments, coupled with rapid urbanization, has been the driver of this fast growth.

Just as industrial economies such as China, Korea, and Japan moved toward high-tech, capital-intensive growth models, the BoB countries have the potential to benefit from offshoring labor-intensive industries from developed countries. With relatively young workforces, for example—in Bangladesh, 20 percent of its population falls between age 15 and 24,[28] labor-intensive industries will likely continue to flourish in the coming decades. An important factor in the growing strategic importance of the area is the relatively bright economic prospects of many BoB states. Bangladesh, once regarded as a "basket case,"[29] is an outstanding example of economic transformation in this region.

The BoB is also believed to have significant gas reserves. Some unofficial estimates have put Bangladesh's reserves alone at 200 trillion cubic feet, which would make it the largest source of supply in the Asia-Pacific.[30] Another BoB state, Myanmar is also a significant natural-gas producer and consumer.[31] Myanmar has the fourth--largest proven natural-gas reserves in the Asia-Pacific, and currently the highest reserves-to-production ratio in the region, at 63 years.[32] It exports petroleum gas to both Thailand and China, customers accounting for 75 percent of its production.[33]

The two Asian giants, China and India, have become major consumers, among the top five oil importers in the world in 2018. China's and India's dependency on oil imports are expected to rise to 75% and 95% respectively of their total oil consumption by 2030. Japan and Korea are also highly dependent on energy imports, particularly oil and gas—importing primarily across sea lanes passing through the BoB. In addition to energy, the BoB region is also critical for commercial shipping routes. About half the world's container traffic passes through this region, and its ports handle approximately 33 percent of world trade, thus becoming the "economic highway of the world."[34]

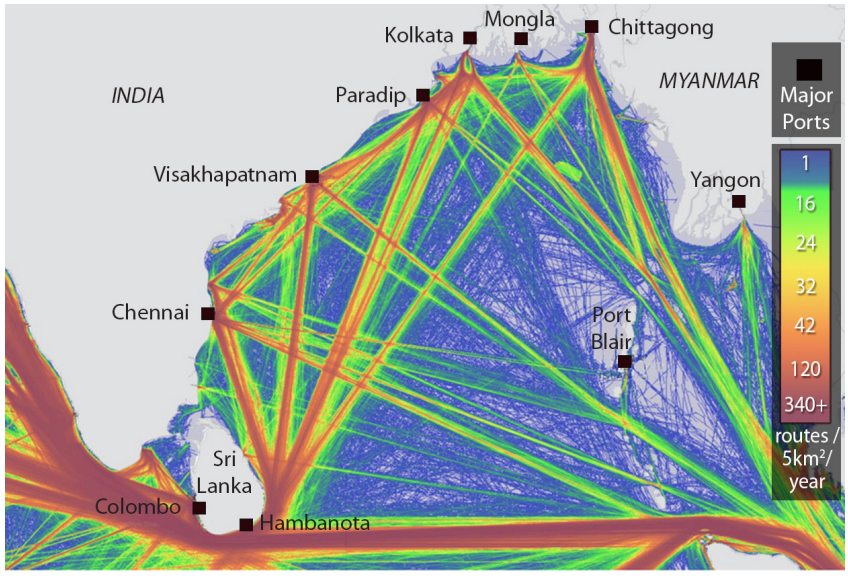

Figure 2. Major ports and shipping destiny in the Bay of Bengal Region. (Source: Shipping density imagery, Maritime Traffic, http://www.maritimetraffic.com/.)

Its global significance is further reinforced as one of the world's largest fishing grounds, providing approximately 15 percent of the world's total fish catch (approximately nine million tons per annum). Exploring these ocean-related potentials could further enhance littoral states' "Blue Economy" aspirations as a major economic driver for the region.[35] However, the full economic potential of the region is currently constrained by the low level of regional economic integration and a dearth of infrastructure, especially transport connections within those countries, to neighboring states and the rest of the world. For example, intraregional trade in Southeast Asia is 25 percent, while it is only five percent in South Asia.[36] Also, obviously, its fishing supplies must be strictly managed to prevent degradation, which currently is not the case.

Infrastructure and Connectivity

The ever-growing economic activities around the BoB have prompted efforts to build new ports, roads, pipelines, and railways throughout the region, largely sponsored by China and Japan. Some of these are intended to connect the landlocked part of the region with coasts and others to better connect one subregion to another. These projects have been accompanied by considerable competition for political and strategic influence over the BoB states as these powers seek to structure infrastructure connections and production chains to benefit their own economies. In broad terms, this competition might be seen as reflecting the intersection of growing areas of strategic influence of major powers in Asia: China, Japan, and

India, and extraregional powers such as the United States. This competition concerns but also benefits the infrastructure-hungry countries around the Bay.[37]

South Asia clearly illustrates the pressing infrastructural needs that economic growth is generating within the Bay, and the potential dangers that procuring needed capital investment can entail. According to the Asian Development Bank report, in South Asia, the gap between existing infrastructure investments and the need is $160 billion per year.[38] These needs include physical infrastructure such as ports, bridges, highways, railways, airports, as well as digital infrastructure.

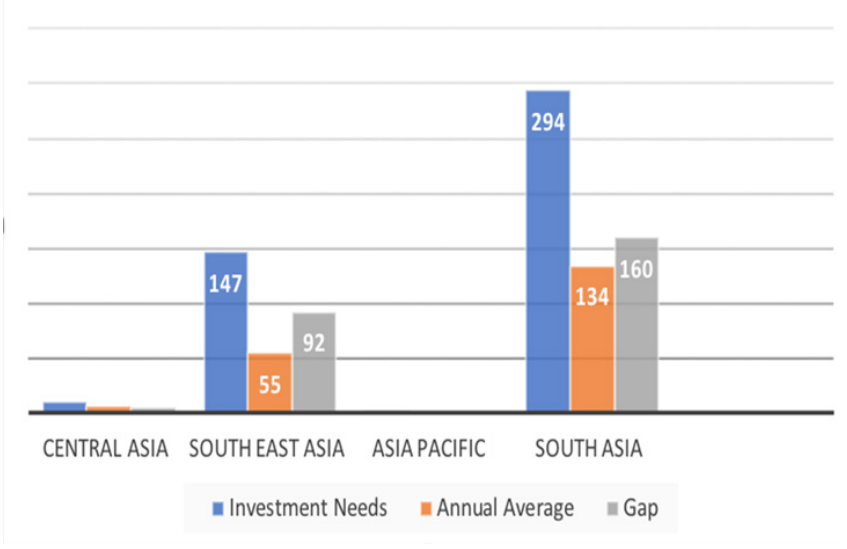

Figure 3. Regional Infrastructure Deficit Forecast from 2016 to 2030[39]

For example, even though Bangladesh has become the second-largest clothing and apparel exporter in the world in recent years, with potential to be the largest producer,[40] it has yet failed to complete a single deep-water port in its 50 years of independence. As much as the lack of foresighted nation-building policy is to blame, regional geopolitics have also been in play. The construction of Sonadia deep seaport has long been in national agenda but the absence of consensus among development partners regarding funding sources scrapped the project altogether.[41] Recognizing geopolitical realities, Bangladesh is currently building a deep seaport in Matarbari funded by Japan.[42] The government has made it a fast-track project aiming at completion by 2025. This has tremendous potential to change the sub-regional economic trajectory. Bangladesh, much like other BoB states such as India and Thailand, is also developing several special economic zones (SEZs) to complement port developments.

Figure 4. Major port and special economic zones on the Bay of Bengal[43]

Myanmar, stagnant and isolated throughout over half a century of military rule, has begun to develop new industrial parks, incentivized as SEZs, that have the potential to support transnational supply chains. Explosive growth in China's Yunnan Province to the northeast is generating demand in Myanmar for transit infrastructure in the pipeline, road, and rail sectors, with the Kyaukphyu-Kunming gas and oil pipelines already completed. Meeting those transit needs would substantially deepen Myanmar's interdependence with China's southwest, especially Yunnan. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor—one of the six BRI economic corridors—is a testimony to this and reflects a potential for BoB connectivity on an even greater scale. However, Myanmar's economic attractiveness is currently clouded by last year's military coup and continuing public resistance.

Exports westward across the BoB to the booming Indian economy are clearly a magnet. Traditional colonial-era ports at Penang and Chennai are being refurbished. There continue to be plans to build a canal across the Kra Isthmus in Thailand, which would link the BoB to the Gulf of Thailand, and to Southeast Asian ports further east. The most dynamic areas of infrastructural development in the BoB over the past five years have had a strong geopolitical flavor inspired by China's BRI, unveiled in the fall of 2013.[44] The BRI's specific applications in the BoB, especially two important projects in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and aspiration for a Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor is critical. All nations bordering the Bay except India have joined the BRI, and it holds great potential to significantly transform the political economy of the region—not least by deepening economic interdependence with China.

Domestic Politics as Underlying Factors

The domestic political constraints on BoB states such as political stability, ethno-religious tensions, urbanization, and the COVID-19 pandemic will have a knock-on effect on this subregion. The changing circumstances within Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and northwestern Indonesia along these dimensions threaten regional comity in the Bay. The responses of China and India, together with the efforts of extraregional powers such as Japan and the United States, will change the trajectory of the BoB.

The Rohingya issue is a major political problem for Bangladesh and Myanmar with spillover effects on Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and thus has significant geopolitical consequences.[45] It is also a humanitarian priority for the international community, due both to the human suffering involved, the tensions it provokes between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and the long-term security implications for the region. This crisis primarily erupted from Burma's domestic ethno--religious tensions. Despite Bangladesh's limited capacity, it hosts millions of refugees but as the solution beyond its control, there should be strong support from UN security council members, especially from regional countries that may have some leverage over the Burmese military junta.

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

Leadership succession in domestic politics in both Myanmar and Bangladesh further complicates the prospect of a sound resolution of this crisis. Sri Lanka is another BoB country with considerable political risk, also closely related to its ethnic-religious division. The island nation of 20 million people is three-quarters Sinhalese, with 90 percent of the Sinhalese also being Buddhists. Sri Lanka also has roughly three million predominantly Hindu Tamils, and nearly two million Muslims.[46] Although a distinct minority within Sri Lanka itself, the Tamils are part of a broader community of more than 60 million, most just across the Palk Strait in southeastern India. Thus, Sri Lanka's internal politics also play into that of multi-ethnic, multi-religious India.

As Robert Kaplan points out, "Like the Serbs in the former Yugoslavia and the Shiites in Iran, the Sinhalese are [thus] a demographic majority with a dangerous minority complex of persecution."[47] They feel surrounded by Hindus, and defen-

sive about the influence of neighboring India. As a vulnerable majority in an island nation, with a distinctive language and culture, the Sinhalese feel distinctly isolated, and thus are in quest for distant allies. The regional phenomenon of "quest for distant allies"—although a foreign policy choice—is primarily driven by domestic forces of each of the Bay States and propels the vision of the Indo--Pacific into further complication, as well as complicating prospects to establish an order based on basic human rights.

While the Rohingya and Sri Lanka Tamil situations may be the internationally prominent cases of ethnic issues in the BoB region, it should be remembered that the land borders are often inhabited by minority groups that are often looking for support for their aspirations of autonomy or even independence. This includes India's northeastern borders in Myanmar, China, and Bangladesh as well as the Thai–Myanmar border where various ethnic groups including Shans, Kachins, and Karenni have long been regarded as troublesome by the Burman ethnic majority and where substantial ties exist between the minorities and various groups within Thailand. Complex relationships exist in the "golden triangle" area where China, Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand have borders, and Islamic Malays also are a majority population of four southern Thai provinces and have been regarded by the Buddhist Thai majority as "restive." This last has been a source of some mostly contained Thai-Malaysian tensions.

Geopolitics—The Great Game

The geopolitical calculations of regional and extraregional powers will remain one of the key drivers of the BoB's significance for the foreseeable future. The competition will take place in two tiers—both conflicting and converging in nature. The first tier among regional powers—primarily between China and India and among mid-size powers of the Bay states such as Bangladesh and Myanmar, which largely remain competitive and conflictual in nature. The second tier of this competition will be between and among extraregional powers such as Australia, European countries, Japan, and the United States. In this tier competition is more complementary with each other, but more in conflict with China. They are building new types of security architecture such as Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, AUKUS, and some strengthening of bilateral ties throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Under such frameworks, the division between the United States and its friends and China will sharpen further, potentially taking on a "cold war" tone.[48]

While the United States may seem the leader, in fact, the traditional rivalry between India and China may become far more prominent. India is the traditionally dominant regional power, and its role was enhanced by its prominence in supporting—and militarily assuring the success of—Bangladesh's independence in 1971.

The influence of China, however, is rising rapidly, driven primarily by the massive financial support it offers and its proactive initiatives under the BRI framework. Historical mistrust between China and India has encouraged mutual suspicion regarding each other's intentions. India and China both view the BoB as a crucial frontier in their competition over energy resources, shipping lanes, and cultural influence. The competition stemming from the two countries expanding their regional spheres of influence in each other's backyards may result in skirmishes over energy and sea lanes of communications, not to mention confrontation over political influence in the more fragile states such as Myanmar and non-BoB littoral state Nepal.

So far, the strongest manifestation of Sino-Indian rivalry in the BoB has been sighted in in Myanmar where both countries connect through Myanmar to their economically weaker regions, namely India's northeast and China's Yunnan province. However, between 2011 and 2021, Myanmar opened its economy to the Western world after the United States and Europe lifted sanctions, creating more partnership options as the reforms attracted a wave of foreign investors. This in turn reduced Sino-Indian competition by making space available to new actors, creating more balance in the previously polarized scenario—which has now taken a backslide after last year's military coup in Myanmar.

Competition in the security realm is greater than ever. In recent years, the only multilateral military exercise of this region, the naval Malabar exercise held among India, Japan, the United States, and recently Australia also taken place in the BoB several times in recent years.[49] China, both Bangladesh and Myanmar's largest military hardware supplier, provided two Ming class submarines to Bangladesh's Navy,[50] which boasts for Forces Goal-2030 to modernize its armed forces as a three--dimensional warfighting force. In response, India provided a submarine to Myanmar.[51] While China has built ports in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, Bangladesh is building its deep seaport with Japanese assistance. As a result, geopolitical competition among regional powers and the balancing game among Bay states continue to intensify.

Nontraditional Security—No Less Significant

While traditional security concerns are mostly along or around national boundaries, nontraditional security issues pertaining to the BoB such as human security and natural disaster relief issues including climate change, natural disaster, terrorism, refugees, drugs, piracy, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing transect boundaries and affect the region as a whole. The BoB is a lucrative passageway for notorious drug smuggling routes such as the "Golden Crescent" and "Golden Triangle." Human trafficking—a typical nontraditional security threat—also has started to emerge in the BoB in the last decades.[52]

The negative impacts of climate change, especially rising sea levels and an alarming level of salinity pose existential threats to several Bay states including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.[53] Two-thirds of Bangladesh is less than five meters above the sea level rise. The latest projection says that if there is a 50-centimeter rise by 2050, 11 percent of Bangladesh might be underwater, making millions homeless. Even barring this extreme, the costs of seawalls, dikes, and other forms of adaptation will be enormously expensive for a new middle-income country. Adjacent parts of India's heavily populated Bengal state around Kolkata are equally threatened. Thus, the issue of potential climate refugees is more salient in the BoB region than anywhere else in the world. This demands cooperation, as well as assistance from Indo-Pacific promoters such as the United States.

In 2016, a multinational team of scientists reported an alarming finding that a "dead zone" of significant size has appeared in the bay. Apart from sulfur-oxidizing bacteria and marine worms, few creatures can live in these oxygen-depleted waters.[54] This zone already spans some 60,000 square kilometers and appears to be growing.[55] The dead zone of the BoB is now at a point where a further reduction in its oxygen content could have the effect of stripping the water of nitrogen, a key nutrient. The scientists who identified the Bay's dead zone warn that this stretch of ocean is approaching a tipping point that will have serious consequences for the planet's oceans and the global nitrogen cycle. This poses serious risks to the region's fishery and human security—millions of people could lose their livelihoods, which will create vast streams of new migration across the Bay.

Figure 5. Approximate location of the dead zone. (Source: Jay Benson, "Stable Seas: Bay of Bengal," Stable Seas (website), January 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.18289/OEF.2020.044.)

The BoB is also a region prone to natural disasters such as heavy monsoon rain, cyclones, floods, and many others that take thousands of lives every year. Ocean pollution and depleting marine resources, as well as overfishing, are also threatening the natural ecology of the Bay. While strategic interests often dictate conflicting positions, a consensus over the principle of *mare liberum* (free seas for everyone) as one of the four global commons is required for the protection of marine resources.[56] Since the Indo-Pacific vision aspires to establish international rules and norms, these nontraditional security concerns in the BoB could give impetus to further regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC to bring countries to work together on this common challenge. The key issue, however, will remain on the question of how states could set aside their myopic national interest and cooperate toward achieving global common goals.

Conclusion

For decades, the significance of the BoB remained underappreciated due to the absence of great powers' interest and lack of economic vitality, but this has changed as strategic competition in the area intensifies according to its own dynamic. The BoB now has considerable—and growing—strategic importance for Asia, and for the world as a whole. In many ways, the BoB lies at the core of the Indo-Pacific region; a centerpiece of the broader Indo-Pacific concept—the place where the strategic interests of the major powers of East and South Asia intersect. As the Bay will become a test case for a nascent multipolar world order, it is of the utmost importance to establish governance frameworks that can facilitate the integration of rising powers in regulating this order and upholding the principles of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. ✪

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Notes

1. "How much water is there on earth?," Water Science School, US Geological Survey, 13 Nov 2019, https://www.usgs.gov/.

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