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The Bay of Bengal: A New Locus for Strategic Competition in Asia

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It is possible that the Bay of Bengal may soon be joining the South China Sea as a major locus of competition between China and its neighbors. Both are the key transit zones between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and, some would argue, the pivot points for maritime security across the Indo-Pacific littoral. Like the South China Sea, the Bay of Bengal is now coming under the strategic spotlight.

David Brewster, Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defense Studies Center, Australian National University, explains that “India has long been anxious about a possible Chinese military strategic presence in the Bay of Bengal.”

Indeed, this body of water is beset by a host of security problems which may even dwarf those in other regions of Asia. These include separatist insurgencies and religious violence in most of the littoral states; major concerns over the energy trading routes through the Malacca Strait; maritime boundary disputes relating to oil and gas; widespread piracy and smuggling; and many environmental security problems, not least the possible inundation of large parts of the littoral by rising sea levels. To these problems can be added strategic competition among India, China and the United States.

There are however surprisingly few attempts by strategic analysts to take a coherent view of security problems around the Bay of Bengal. Indeed, analysts rarely even see it as a “region,” usually drawing a sharp dividing line through the middle of the bay, between “South Asia” and “Southeast Asia.” Perhaps it is now time to better understand the Bay of Bengal as a coherent strategic region within the broader framework of the Indo-Pacific.

India has long been the biggest naval power in the Bay and last year announced that it should henceforth be seen as a “net security provider” to the region. India’s National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon announced in March the establishment of a new maritime security arrangement among India and the island states of Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius. Menon also foreshadowed that the arrangement may be expanded to encompass the Bay of Bengal or that a similar arrangement could be replicated with other littoral states around the Bay. If implemented, such an arrangement would represent a major strategic development for India and for the region.

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The main driver for these developments is China. India has long been anxious about a possible Chinese military strategic presence in the Bay of Bengal. Delhi fretted about the purchase of Chinese arms by Sri Lanka during its civil war. The close military links between Myanmar and China have also long worried India, including a supposed Chinese listening post on Myanmar’s Great Coco Island—which if it ever existed, is no longer there. More recently there have been concerns about Bangladesh-China military links, including the purchase of two Ming-class submarines by Bangladesh from China.

India has also long been building its military power in the Bay, including new naval and air facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands that run north-south through the Bay. These would allow India to potentially dominate the western end of the Malacca Strait and much



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of the surrounding waters. The Indian Navy is also gradually being “rebalanced” towards the Bay through the expansion of its Eastern Fleet on India’s east coast—among other things, India’s new aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines will be based there. India has growing security relationships with all of its Bay of Bengal neighbors and is keen to demonstrate its credentials as a provider of public goods in such areas as maritime policing, counter-terrorism and humanitarian and disaster relief.

For years, India has hosted its premier multilateral naval exercise, *Exercise MILAN*, out of the Andaman Islands. This year’s event, held in early February, was the largest ever with 16 guest navies represented, including all the Bay of Bengal states and other navies from the Pacific to Africa. The cooperative and multilateral nature of India’s *Exercise MILAN* stands in stark contrast to a unilateral naval exercise which was conducted in late January by China in the eastern Indian Ocean—between the Indonesian island of Java and Australia’s Christmas Island.

These developing security relationships have been accompanied by an increased focus on building political and economic ties across the Bay. Recently, New Delhi has been giving renewed focus to BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), the regional grouping of Bay of Bengal states, with an emphasis on developing improved transport connectivity across the Southern Asian littoral. Some see BIMSTEC as representing an important opportunity for India to break out of the “stagnant regionalism” of the Indian subcontinent—where India is frequently constrained by its rivalry with Pakistan.

Raja Mohan, a prominent Indian strategic commentator, argues that India’s sluggishness is allowing China to seize opportunities which are enabling it to develop regional infrastructure in and around the Bay. These include the construction of road links and gas and oil pipelines that essentially extend “vertically” from southern China through Myanmar to the Bay of Bengal. According to Mohan, New Delhi’s dithering means that India risks being marginalized in the region—while India talks, China builds.

Certainly the BIMSTEC grouping has had few concrete achievements to date. This largely reflects the internal political turmoil and violent insurgencies that have kept members such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand internally focused. Plans for the development of “horizontal” road infrastructure connecting major manufacturing areas in eastern India with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and even to Vietnam have been under discussion for years. India’s Congress-led government did little to create any sense of urgency in implementing these projects.

This is not, however, just about India and China. Washington is also playing a delicate balancing act in the Bay. It wants to see a reduction in China’s relative economic influence and to encourage countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to avoid becoming too reliant on Chinese weapons or military assistance. The United States also wants to be able to counter or contain any new Chinese maritime presence. These objectives are consistent with India’s, but India is also extremely sensitive towards the military presence of *any* outsiders in the Bay.

This means that Washington needs to build security relationships and capabilities in the Bay of Bengal in a manner that pays proper regard to India’s perspectives. This includes avoiding or minimizing any overt US military presence that could be perceived as impinging upon India’s core interests in the Bay. An understanding about respective security objectives and responsibilities in the Bay of Bengal needs to be part of a more cooperative overall strategic relationship that Washington should be seeking to develop with the new government in New Delhi.

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