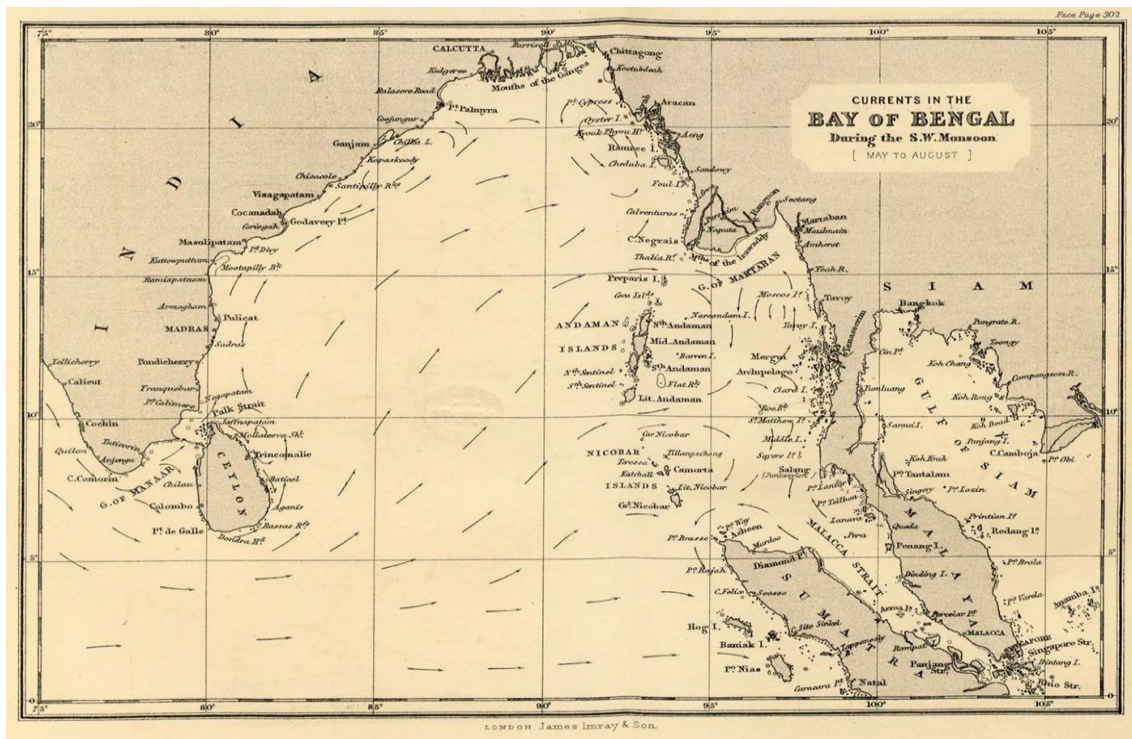


Regional Indifference and Maritime Diplomacy in the Bay of Bengal

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Introduction

The Bay of Bengal is transitioning from indifference to immense strategic importance. As a global power shift is occurring, a competitive diplomacy is developing in this region because of its geoeconomic and geopolitical importance. This transition is from the littoral states' inward-looking approach to a coherent maritime identity development to secure sovereign maritime interests.

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The regional indifference is driven by an absence of regionalism and conscious evaluation of the region's strategic importance. The Bay has historically been a natural connector of civilizations. It has been a vibrant highway for the movements of goods, people, ideas, and values.² The imperial contestation and European maritime capitalism disrupted this indifference and made it the fulcrum of imperial power play.³ But there is an oscillation between regional indifference and geo-strategic importance of this region. Following the process of decolonialization, the littorals in this region were more focused on internal consolidation.⁴ However, India's Look East policy and China's rapid industrialization have been fostering a transition from this indifference. It is heightened when the Bay has become a fulcrum of global power play because of the Indo-Pacific focus, naval buildup, and infrastructure wars. This transition necessitates institutionalizing maritime diplomacy to secure the littoral states' sovereign interests and possession of maritime resources.

The transition is facilitated as the Bay is the geo-economic highway of the globe. It is the transit ground of the maximum share of the global supply chains of resources, as it is responsible for the movement of over sixty percent of crude oil and thirty percent of global trade.⁵ And the competing strategic visions from the great powers and regional powers resort to the immense geostrategic importance of this region. The Bay of Bengal is considered a solution to China's Malacca dilemma, and its strategic vision is to secure the Malacca Strait from the US blockade.⁶ The US considers the Bay as part of the broader Indo-Pacific vision to counterbalance the Chinese footprint. India's Act East policy and SAGAR resonate to its ambition in positioning itself as a net security provider to the small littoral states adjoining the Bay.⁷ Amid this situation, a competitive diplomatic effort is overseen among the littorals in the Bay and the great powers. So, to what extent is this transition responding to global maritime power play and securing the sovereign interests of the littorals?

² Anwar, *Positioning the Bay of Bengal in the Great Game of the Indo-Pacific Fulcrum*.

³ Lee-Brown, *Navigating Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal* | *East Asia Forum*.

⁴ Mahmud, "Great Power Competition in the Bay of Bengal."

⁵ Anwar, *Positioning the Bay of Bengal in the Great Game of the Indo-Pacific Fulcrum*.

⁶ Abb, "The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the Limits of China's BRI Agency."

⁷ Garg, "India's Maritime Diplomacy"; Das, "India's Maritime Diplomacy in South West Indian Ocean."

Infrastructure Arms Race and Port Diplomacy

The infrastructure development projects in the Bay are no longer economic development assets. Rather, these projects are strategic anchors that serve to facilitate geopolitical competition. So the rationale of these projects has shifted to anchoring hegemonic influence.

Case Bangladesh

Bangladesh has successfully obtained 118,813 square kilometer maritime territory and delimited its maritime boundary with its neighbors. But it is struggling in pursuing a balanced diplomacy in dealing with great power rivalry.

The Matarbari Deep Sea Port development project demonstrates the dilemma of the country in managing the interests of the geopolitical actors.⁸ Though China initially proposed to build a port in Sonadia, the country had to decide to award the contract under the Japanese Big-B because of India and the US's concerns. However, this project is beyond the simple utility calculation of becoming a regional transshipment hub. Rather, this project is anchoring hegemonic influence, as there are debates regarding the suitability of the location and the necessity. The expected regional integration through the project is becoming a threat to the country's sovereignty. This case demonstrates a successful diplomacy of not aligning with either the US, India, or China. But the implication is not a sign of success.

Case Myanmar & Sri Lanka

Myanmar's Kyaukphyu port is another example where it remains the center of China's BRI. This project is designed as per the extension of China's Malacca Strait dilemma.⁹ But since the Arakan Army's possession, foreign investors are forced to deal with non-state actors. For the purpose of continuing the project, the Private Security Service Law was enacted by the Junta to ensure that private companies can protect the approved BRI projects in Myanmar.¹⁰ This, in a broader sense, challenges Myanmar's autonomy despite the country's engagement in a civil war. Again, the 99-year lease of Hambantota port to China altered security perception and notion regarding infrastructure diplomacy.¹¹ This case emphasizes the loss of sovereign control of Sri Lanka's own territory.

⁸ Naha et al., "Strengthening South Asian Ties."

⁹ Kobayashi and King, "Myanmar's Strategy in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor."

¹⁰ Abb, "The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the Limits of China's BRI Agency."

¹¹ Zeidan, "Hambantota Port | Sri Lanka, Construction, Loan, Debt, Lease, & Facts | Britannica."

Collective Maritime Security Focus

Unlike traditional security, non-traditional security issues provide mutual ground for cooperation. It is a path toward collaborative engagement among the littoral nations in the Bay rather than pursuing competitive diplomacy. The non-traditional security issues, like human trafficking, piracy, drug trafficking, illegal fishing, and climate resonates the necessity to have a common ground for the littorals' collaboration. Major power intervention in that regard is benefiting the nations to have resilience against these common threats. Bangladesh's success in reducing piracy through shared technology and high-performance patrol vessels is a prime example. Again, enforcing maritime law enforcement through integrating AI and advanced satellite-based monitoring systems is necessary but not possible without shared knowledge and equipment. The crimes at sea and common concerns of the littoral nations in the Bay necessitate a swift response without being entangled with traditional zero-sum interests.

Limitations of Institutional Frameworks

Regional organizations are the flag bearers of this spirit of coexistence. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) are the crucial platforms for littoral cooperation. But the lack of institutional depth of the organizations hinders the integration of the common interests. For example, the strategic disagreements among the members showcase BIMSTEC's lack of a formal conflict resolution mechanism.¹² And the region is one of the least integrated in the world, where the mobility of goods and people is constrained. So it is difficult to integrate the littorals in the Bay without acknowledging the traditional security concerns.

It must be taken into consideration that competitive diplomacy is facilitated as the common non-traditional security issues intersect the traditional security issues. IORA's focus on non-traditional security issues allows a scope for collaboration. And the BIMSTEC-IORA partnership can mitigate the zero-sum trap in converging traditional and non-traditional security issues.¹³ But the way geopolitics shapes non-traditional security issues leaves a grey area in distinguishing them from traditional security priorities. Prioritizing the agenda that

¹² The Financial Express, "Is BIMSTEC Failing?"

¹³ admin, "BIMSTEC AND MARITIME SECURITY"; The Financial Express, "Is BIMSTEC Failing?"

serves the common interests of the states must be addressed by ensuring the institutional strength of these regional bodies and the intentions of the member states.

Great Power Rivalry Undermining Littoral Sovereignty

Great power competition undermines littoral states' autonomy. The ability to secure the small littoral states' autonomy is getting difficult.¹⁴ The dual-use dilemma regarding the deep-sea port development has dual implications for economic connectivity and military utility. This is critical as a grey zone has evolved, with the risk of losing control over the respective waters and falling into high debt scenarios.

The impact of this infrastructure arms race has political implications of being dependent on pursuing an autonomous foreign policy stance and possessing sovereign decision-making power. This asymmetric financial and material leverage leads to the entanglement of subjugation that needs to be managed through strong diplomatic manoeuvres.

The great powers' conflicting strategic visions resonate with the littorals in the Bay to think outward and pursue navigation strategies amid the geopolitical developments. While Beijing is seeking a direct access route to bypass the Malacca Strait, the US is pressuring the littorals to subscribe to the FOIP. For example, Bangladesh is being pressurized to subscribe to ACSA and GSOMIA like defense information-sharing agreements, while China has invested over 40% of the foreign investment in Myanmar on the CPEC which shows Chinese concern over making close allies in the Bay.¹⁵

The increased presence of great power submarines and survey vessels with the intent to gather seabed naval intelligence undermines the coastal control on the one hand and the exclusive rights over the economic zones of the littoral states on the other. Within this scenario, India's self-claim as the regional security provider increases the concern over militarization, thereby heightens like likelihood of sovereignty of the small littoral states.

The outcome is shrinking the policy options as the nations in the Bay must resort to the implications. This entangles the countries in a zero-sum competitive diplomacy that provides very few options for the littoral nations to practice their autonomy. Resultantly, the regional bodies like SAARC and BIMSTEC possess little relevance to the great power as they are dealing bilaterally with the nations. So there remain questions in institutionalizing intra-

¹⁴ Mahmud, "Bangladesh's Strategic Alternative."

¹⁵ Nicastro, "U.S. Defense Infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific"; Abb, "The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the Limits of China's BRI Agency"; Lee-Brown, *Navigating Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal* | *East Asia Forum*.

regional multilateralism, as the relevance of the regional institutions are being eroded. This generates a volatile situation where littoral states' strategic decisions are highly dependent on the great power relations.

This illustrates that there persists an effort to overcome the regional indifference because of great power rivalry and India's self-proclaimed hegemony in the Bay of Bengal regional security complex, where the small littoral states are striving to come up with a multidomain strategy that would open up the scope for establishing a regional maritime coherence with a vibrance of multiple voices.

On the Future of Maritime Diplomacy

The outcome of the great power contestation in the Bay of Bengal possesses a level of volatility that threatens the littoral autonomy. To deal with the emerging risks, the littoral states in the Bay must shift their stance from passive observers to active performers in developing a rules-based world order. This necessitates institutionalizing diplomatic cooperation through the regional frameworks to give a voice to the littoral states.

The future depends on the littoral states possessing autonomy while preserving their sovereign interests. The littorals in the Bay need not be sidelined as the great power politics dominate the agenda. And the multilateral frameworks need to function to ensure the geoeconomic trajectory in the Bay serves the collective interests of the region. Making the interests of the nations relevant necessitates developing a diplomatic bridge that can not be overruled by the dominance of great power politics. Non-traditional security issues might be prioritized in the trust-building process among the nations in the Bay. This, in turn, might qualitatively transform the diplomatic process in dealing with traditional military confrontation as well.

The Bay is responsible for facilitating over 30 percent of global trade.¹⁶ This is why the littoral nations in the Bay should possess the legal capacity and diplomatic position to secure their exclusive economic zones. Their protection of the respective Blue economies and the free navigation in the high seas requires an urgent proactive maritime stance. This proactiveness cannot necessarily be derived from their balancing strategy on dealing with the great powers; rather, their conscious measurement of the internal balancing capacity needs to be kept in mind. It is the maritime diplomacy on which their geo-strategic success depends. And the success depends on the mutual trust among the subjects and contested parties in the region. This trust-building process is the practice among the parties to accommodate themselves within institutional frameworks, which is possible when non-traditional security issues are given

¹⁶ Lee-Brown, *Navigating Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal* | *East Asia Forum*.

sufficient attention. This is the transition from the absence of regionalism and the inauguration of a coherent regional identity in the Bay of Bengal.¹⁷

But the question is whether this transition sufficiently addresses the small littoral states' interests in the reality of amity and enmity in the regional security complex. The rules-based order is an imagination without active participation in the regional affairs and without taking the others into confidence. The major responsibility in trust building resides with the stronger littorals in the region, who share larger portions of geoeconomic responsibility and, at the same time, are accountable for violating the terms of consensus because of prioritizing narrow interests instead of the collective good.

Conclusion

The competitive diplomacy in the Bay of Bengal is the transition from a period of regional indifference. While the region was once characterized as inward-looking, the geoeconomic importance of the Bay makes it the center of geopolitical contestation. The great power contestation undermines local sovereignty, and non-traditional security issues resort to coming up with a consensus on cooperation. This necessitates an urgency of institutionalizing maritime diplomacy. So the interests of the littoral nations in the Bay need to be protected through the functionality of the collective frameworks amid this strategic transition.

¹⁷ Lieberman, "From Nationalism to National Indifference"; Kobayashi and King, "Myanmar's Strategy in the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor."