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Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics
Düsternbrooker Weg 120
24105 Kiel (Germany)
E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)
<https://www.zbw.eu/>

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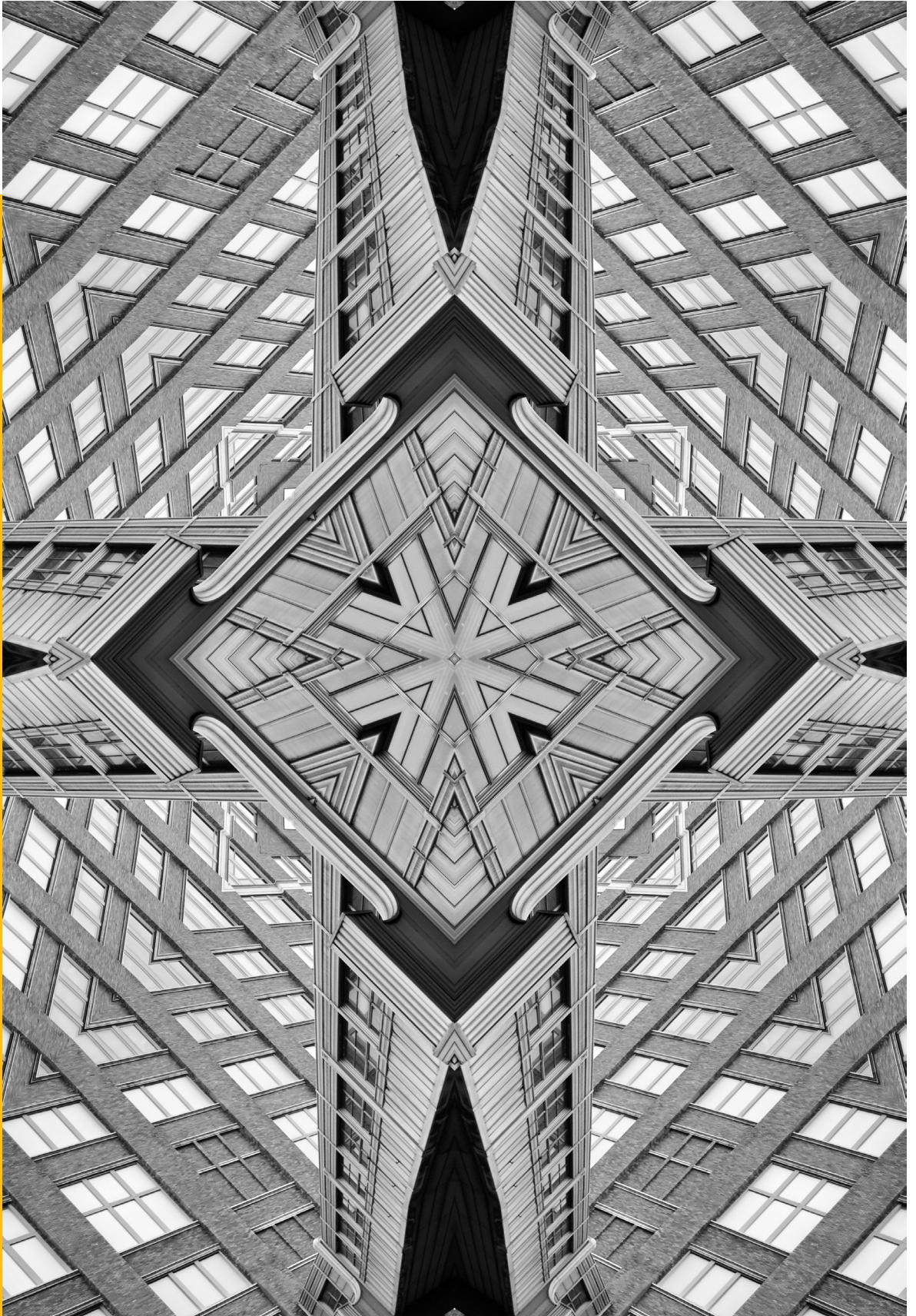
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Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Obstacles and Opportunities

Abhijit Singh

Abstract

This paper examines security collaboration in the Bay of Bengal. It argues that despite increased cooperation in the maritime domain, the security perceptions of Bay states differ significantly, arising primarily from disagreements associated with China's presence in the region. Crucially, the Bay states are wary of being seen as siding with India to counterbalance China. Even in nontraditional security areas where cooperation is readily possible, Bay states prioritise different issues, leading to limited collaboration focused on a narrow set of common goals.

The Bay of Bengal has long been viewed as a region with dual characteristics: it is both a vital socio-economic hub for neighbouring countries and a focal point of intense geopolitical rivalry, carrying significant implications for regional and global stability.¹ Countries bordering the Bay—including India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka—are heavily dependent on it for maritime trade, fishing, and offshore resources such as oil and gas. The Bay littoral has fostered the development of industries, sustained livelihoods, and facilitated economic growth throughout the region.

However, the region represents a complex geopolitical landscape, characterised notably by intense competition between India and China.² Both countries view the region as strategically critical, given its proximity to vital sea lanes and potential as a gateway to wider Indian Ocean access. The competition between India and China extends beyond mere economic interests to encompass broader geopolitical and security concerns.³ This rivalry has significant implications for maritime security, especially since India and China's pursuits of strategic interests have led to increased naval presence, coastal infrastructure development, and diplomatic engagements with Bay states.⁴ This competition is not limited to economic or military realms but also includes soft power diplomacy and efforts to shape regional institutions.

The Bay of Bengal's strategic significance is amplified by broader geopolitical dynamics, including the Indo-Pacific framework and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁵ The region's importance as a geopolitical battleground underscores the interconnectedness of maritime security, economic development, and political stability. The approach of the Bay states has been to balance the region's socioeconomic importance with managing geopolitical tensions and fostering a spirit of peaceful coexistence.⁶ Regional countries have also sought to forge consensus by prioritising non-traditional goals, such as securing key trading routes, enhancing connectivity, and fostering economic cooperation. The common objective of combating irregular threats has helped construct a positive narrative.

India plays a crucial security role in the Bay of Bengal region, with the Indian Navy serving as the primary security provider and partner for regional cooperation.⁷ The Indian Navy actively engages with neighbouring navies to enhance maritime security capabilities, maintain stability, and safeguard the vital sea lanes. However, India faces increasing challenges from China's growing maritime presence in South Asia, leading New Delhi to expand naval surveillance and strengthen bases along the eastern coast.

The key challenges in the Bay include resource-related and human security issues such as illegal fishing, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and armed robbery.⁸ The littoral is also vulnerable to natural disasters such as cyclones, flooding and erosion, and water insecurity, highlighting the need for effective coastal management.⁹ India's security efforts have focused on marine governance and crisis response, but progress in many areas has been slow, particularly in the fight against illegal fishing, where flawed regulations and limited law enforcement capabilities have hindered the provisioning of effective security.¹⁰ The issue is compounded by inadequate data collection and cross-border tensions between neighbouring coastguards.¹¹

Illegal migration is another area of concern. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of Rohingya refugee boats from Myanmar seeking safe havens in Southeast Asia. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in 2023, nearly 4,500 Rohingya took boats across the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, fleeing crowded refugee camps in Bangladesh or persecution in their native Myanmar.¹² Reports indicate that approximately 569 individuals perished or vanished at sea, marking the highest number since 2014.¹³ Drug smuggling in the region has also surged, originating from the Golden Triangle and funnelling drugs into South Asia, challenging multilateral efforts like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) to address these issues effectively.¹⁴

This paper seeks to assess the obstacles that hinder effective security collaboration in the Bay of Bengal. It argues that the essentialist notions of maritime security cooperation are inadequate to understand the realities of the Bay, where maritime challenges are complex and the priorities of regional states vary significantly. While they are willing to leverage partner strengths to make cooperation more enduring and sustainable, the Bay countries remain divided over China's expanding presence in maritime South Asia. The level of collaboration among regional states in three key areas—capacity building, burden sharing, and maritime domain awareness (MDA)—remains limited and primarily focused on specific issues.

“While they are willing to leverage partner strengths to make cooperation more enduring and sustainable, the Bay countries remain divided over China's expanding presence in maritime South Asia.”

Understanding Maritime Security: Three Viewpoints

From a policy perspective, there are three ways of viewing the Bay of Bengal. The first is to view the region as a self-contained strategic system with unique dynamics, interplay, and interconnections.¹⁵ In this reading of security dynamics, maritime security in the Bay depends largely on institutional mechanisms to counter non-traditional human security challenges such as terrorism, trafficking, the environment, and climate change. Proponents argue that addressing illegal fishing, forced migration, marine conservation, and environmental security requires collaboration among regional governments.¹⁶ This perspective tends to downplay contentious state challenges—not with a view to deny state conflict but rather to focus on shared human security challenges. Analysts view the Bay as a coherent maritime space with organic interconnections facilitating connectivity, growth, and economic development.¹⁷ In this assessment, commerce, connectivity, and culture are the driving factors for regional cooperation in the Bay region; geoeconomics takes precedence over all else, with proponents highlighting the region as a ‘bridge’, a ‘link’, and a ‘gateway’ to prosperity.¹⁸ The objective of this approach is to minimise conflict over contentious matters and maximise cooperation in areas where regional states agree to engage.

The preference for a developmental approach is especially strong in policymaking circles, where leaders and government officials underscore BIMSTEC’s founding principles of “political independence, non-interference in internal affairs, non-aggression, peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and mutual benefit”.¹⁹ However, many Bay states offer no pretext for their reliance on China for growth and investment. The reluctance to oppose Chinese presence in the Bay region stems from the seeming dependence of regional states on Beijing for economic development. Focusing on non-traditional threats in the Bay region also allows for better governance of the maritime commons.²⁰

Nonetheless, coordination between regional security agencies is not entirely smooth. Some Bay states are reluctant to undertake joint patrolling with foreign navies and coastguards within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs), with regional policymakers believing that granting foreign agencies access to the littoral is geopolitically risky. Additionally, sporadic

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and uneven information-gathering across large portions of the maritime domain creates challenges for law enforcement agencies. For example, data related to marine pollution, including oil spills and illegal dumping in the Bay, is often suboptimal, making it difficult to assess the extent of the damage and implement appropriate response measures.

The second way of understanding maritime security in the Bay of Bengal is to situate the region within a larger strategic framework. Some scholars view the Bay as an important subsystem in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), where strategic contacts between regional governments serve the common security aim of safeguarding sea lines of communication (SLOCs) through strong security partnerships.²¹ This view holds that Bay of Bengal interactions should not be assessed in isolation, as several of the strategic players in the region are extra-regional powers.²² Proponents view China as having considerable leverage in the Bay region, with many regional countries dependent on Chinese aid and investments for infrastructure building.²³ In this approach, although analysts recognise the challenges posed by Chinese maritime presence, they do not consider China's military capacity-building efforts or naval deployments in the eastern Indian Ocean as a serious threat to India. They believe that some aspects of China's outreach, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), fill a critical void in infrastructure financing in South Asia. Consequently, they believe that regional states have a case to declare the Bay of Bengal as a 'zone of peace'.²⁴

The third perspective views the Bay as a strategic buffer between the eastern IOR and the Western Pacific. Proponents of this view say that security dynamics in the Bay drive a larger contest between China and the United States (US).²⁵ Analysts argue that the Bay's strategic location—at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia—makes it a catalyst for strategic contestation between Asia's powerful navies; therefore, the Bay, like its Pacific 'twin' (the South China Sea), becomes a key battleground in maritime Asia.²⁶ Some see the Bay as straddling two major geopolitical blocs—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and BIMSTEC—thus becoming a potential flashpoint for military conflict.²⁷ In contrast to the first viewpoint, which is concerned mainly with development and prosperity in the Bay, and the second perspective, which prioritises

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the balance of economic power, this third understanding of the Bay places geopolitics and power rivalry at the heart of maritime security.

From a policy standpoint, it is relevant that most Bay nations subscribe to the geoeconomic framing of the Bay, though some states are unwilling to take decisive steps to combat common security threats. India, which leads the BIMSTEC's security grouping, recognises strategic challenges in the Bay but seeks to balance the interests of regional states. New Delhi's principal dilemma is that Beijing remains a development partner for other Bay states. While these states benefit from Indian assistance in the maritime domain, they remain unwilling to discuss the threats posed by China and have different perspectives regarding tackling irregular threats in the littorals.

Not unexpectedly, BIMSTEC remains focused on trade, connectivity, and geoeconomics. Since its revival in 2016, initiated by India during the joint BRICS–BIMSTEC Outreach Summit in Goa, discussions within the group have centred around law enforcement, intelligence sharing, and maritime security. Despite the emphasis on these issues, Bay leaders have continued to prioritise development concerns such as free trade, power grid interconnectivity, and transport connectivity.²⁸ As the principal regional player, India has urged member states to prioritise connectivity, food security, health, energy security, and technology solutions.²⁹ However, Bay countries have independently emphasised economic goals, with BIMSTEC advocating for a “prosperous, resilient, and open” Bay region that fosters sustainable growth.³⁰

Despite this shared vision, Bay states differ in their approaches to maritime security cooperation. India, for instance, focuses mainly on maintaining regional dominance, safeguarding SLOCs, and protecting coastal interests. In contrast, Bangladesh prioritises combating non-traditional security challenges like illegal fishing and human trafficking, particularly in its expansive deltaic region.³¹ Myanmar's focus on managing internal conflicts often diverts attention and resources from external maritime security concerns.³²

Understanding Maritime Security: Three Viewpoints

Sri Lanka, meanwhile, has sought to leverage its geostrategic location to diversify economic interactions and balance the interests of influential players. Colombo granting permission to Chinese research and survey vessels to dock at Hambantota despite Indian objections indicates an ambivalent stance on security in Sri Lankan waters.³³ Thailand has adopted an open approach to China, as demonstrated by the Thai president attending the 10-year commemoration ceremony of the BRI in Beijing in October 2023. Evidently, Thailand prefers consensus-based decision-making within BIMSTEC,³⁴ as does Indonesia, another influential ASEAN member with significant interests in Bay of Bengal security.³⁵ These divergent perceptions within the group inadvertently impede progress in maritime security collaboration.³⁶

“From a policy standpoint, it is relevant that most Bay nations subscribe to the geoeconomic framing of the Bay, though some states are unwilling to take decisive steps to combat common security threats.”

Critical Elements of Maritime Security

Notwithstanding their differing approaches to maritime security, the Bay states remain eager to collaborate in three crucial areas: capacity building, burden sharing, and MDA. Capacity building remains a priority, particularly in coastal patrolling, surveillance, and disaster relief. Indian assistance in patrolling, reconnaissance, and maritime infrastructure development has benefited the region. For instance, efforts to establish coastal radar stations in the Bay region, supported by India, are in advanced stages. These radar stations will form part of a surveillance network in India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and the Seychelles, providing real-time ship movement data in the IOR for use by friendly navies.³⁷

New Delhi also plays a vital role in facilitating security coordination in the Bay of Bengal. The Information Fusion Centre Indian Ocean Region in Gurugram is a hub of maritime security information, enabling a coordinated response to security challenges in the Bay and the wider IOR.³⁸ Additionally, a series of maritime security exercises involving India and its regional partners have led to a high level of security cooperation in the Bay region (see Table 1).

Table 1: Maritime Engagements in the Bay of Bengal

Exercise	Participants	Description
MILAN	India, Various regional navies	Biennial multilateral naval exercise hosted by the Indian Navy, promoting cooperation in the Indian Ocean.
AUSINDEX	Australia, India	Bilateral naval exercise aimed at enhancing maritime security and interoperability between the two countries.
SLINEX	India, Sri Lanka	Bilateral naval exercise focused on improving naval cooperation and interoperability.
Bongosagar	India, Bangladesh	Bilateral naval exercise conducted to enhance naval cooperation and the capability to address common maritime security challenges.

Critical Elements of Maritime Security

Exercise	Participants	Description
CARAT Bangladesh	United States, Bangladesh	This exercise is a part of the larger Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise series, which focuses on maritime security and cooperation.
SIMBEX	Singapore, India	A bilateral exercise that focuses on enhancing mutual naval cooperation and interoperability.
Exercise Dosti	India, Sri Lanka, Maldives.	Coast Guard exercises to strengthen capabilities and cooperation. Bangladesh was an observer in the last iteration held in February 2024.
ADMM- PLUS Maritime Security Field Training Exercise	ASEAN countries, Plus Countries (including India)	Multilateral exercise aimed at improving coordination and response to maritime security threats in the region.
MALABAR	India, United States, Japan, Australia	Quadrennial exercise involving the navies of India, United States, Japan, and Australia, addressing a wide range of maritime security challenges.

Source: Author's own

Notably, not all countries in South Asia view foreign military assistance similarly. Littoral states value their maritime sovereignty and strategic autonomy, and are unwilling to compromise on their interests. They are prone to view foreign military assistance as conditional, with the potential to curtail their own strategic choices.³⁹ As such, the intensified Sino-Indian rivalry is a worrisome development for many regional states that seek to balance their relations with the two Asian giants.⁴⁰ Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand have close ties with India and China and are loathe to choose between the two.

Critical Elements of Maritime Security

Importantly, for South Asian countries, some kinds of foreign military support are more political than others.⁴¹ The gift of a frigate or submarine, for example, is seen to convey a different political signal than an offer for patrol boats for coastal security. Gifting a maritime patrol aircraft implies more geopolitical intent on the part of the donor than a gift of small boats for humanitarian aid. Similarly, an airfield with foreign assistance will likely cause more concern in the recipient country than a radar station.⁴²

The opinions of regional countries on burden sharing also seem to vary considerably. Despite their broad willingness to collaborate, regional states have different viewpoints on security cooperation. For some countries, military interactions are a way of developing operational synergy but are not necessarily intended to counter a common traditional enemy.⁴³ Others see security engagement between the Bay states as a means of efficiently administering the littorals and as a way of evolving norms to enforce a rules-based order in a common security space.⁴⁴ Consequently, the Bay states are reluctant to allow foreign navies and coastguards to access their EEZs. Notwithstanding their preference for “security pluralism”, some Bay states are wary of geopolitical competition in the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁵ Notably, the political elite in many Bay nations are even sceptical of Japan and Australia—which, together with India and the US, form the Quad — playing a more prominent security role in the Bay littorals.⁴⁶

It is not surprising that the Bay states hold distinct perspectives on maritime security needs, given their vastly differing priorities. Bangladesh, for instance, views itself as heavily reliant on maritime resources for trade and economic growth because of its export-dependent economy.⁴⁷ In addition to ensuring safe sea lanes, Dhaka prioritises sustainable development in the Bay area.⁴⁸ Its efforts focus on bolstering surveillance systems and fostering regional cooperation to integrate maritime security into broader national security frameworks, effectively addressing traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Given its past experiences, particularly the significant arms seizure in April 2004 originating from the sea,⁴⁹ Bangladesh understandably emphasises addressing constabulary difficulties, and has sought to fortify the coastal security architecture.

Critical Elements of Maritime Security

Sri Lanka's approach centres on enhancing capabilities and coordination among key agencies. Colombo has sought to modernise its navy and coastguard, acquiring advanced equipment, such as patrol vessels and surveillance aircraft.⁵⁰ The island nation has also invested in training programmes to enhance the skills of its personnel, enabling them to tackle diverse maritime threats with proficiency and increase coordination with regional navies and coastguards. Even so, Colombo has achieved less than desired. The presence of Indian fishing trawlers and fishers in Sri Lankan custody points to a lack of coordination between Indian and Sri Lankan maritime law enforcement agencies, underlining the need for improved regional cooperation and communication.⁵¹

Thailand's priority is marine governance. A comprehensive white paper released in 2023 details the need for a marine governance architecture that involves functional cooperation between multiple agencies.⁵² However, Thailand remains primarily focused on economic challenges. Bangkok is keen to mitigate its key vulnerability—the lack of a port on its Andaman coast—and has been pushing the idea of a 'land bridge' that could potentially create a regional commercial and logistics hub in South Thailand.⁵³ Currently, maritime security focused on strategic challenges is a low priority for Bangkok.

“The opinions of regional countries on burden sharing also seem to vary considerably. For some Bay states, military interactions are a way of developing operational synergy but are not necessarily intended to counter a common traditional enemy.”

Maritime Domain Awareness: A Work in Progress

Despite differences in how they perceive maritime security, the perspectives of Bay states seem to align on MDA. Bay countries agree that to understand the global maritime domain effectively, it is crucial to understand the potential impact of regional developments on countries' security, safety, economy, and environment. They concur that MDA must go beyond detecting and tracking ships to identifying and attributing specific maritime activities.

However, MDA in the Bay is a complex undertaking. The aim is not limited to expanding situational awareness but extends to generating information in a broad swath of sea space without investing excessively in surveillance assets. This means not having to constantly deploy warships and planes on patrol, saving valuable engine hours and cutting expenditures. MDA signifies greater utility for naval fleets, which is necessary in the current fiscal scenario. Yet, barring India, Bay states have not invested in MDA to render the information gathered actionable.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the regulatory frameworks in Bay countries are not well aligned, which sometimes prevents them from sharing information.⁵⁵

MDA in confined spaces such as the Bay of Bengal differs significantly from surveillance in open waters. The Bay region is a dynamic space where threat scenarios evolve rapidly, requiring security agencies to expedite information collection, processing, and dissemination. However, many law enforcement agencies lack the necessary information-processing capability to facilitate an efficacious and agile response. On occasion, information collected and exchanged is not actionable—not owing to laxity on the part of agencies, but because many Bay states lack expert systems to spot anomalies and, in some cases, are unwilling to share data, as in the case of illegal fishing.⁵⁶

As the lead country for security within BIMSTEC, India has been driving the joint MDA effort. Since the November 2008 terror strikes, New Delhi has supported data-collection initiatives such as the National Maritime Domain Awareness project, which connects all maritime agencies, coastal states, and union territories into a single network.⁵⁷ Data pooling via interfaces with additional data sources, such as those from the shipping

Maritime Domain Awareness: A Work in Progress

and fishing industries, has aided in the development of a tactical picture. White shipping agreements with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka have enabled the exchange of commercial shipping information.⁵⁸ India has responded swiftly to the security needs of the Bay states. In August 2023, for instance, when a Dornier-228 maritime surveillance aircraft gifted by India to Sri Lanka was undergoing yearly maintenance, New Delhi was quick to provide a substitute.⁵⁹

Even so, law enforcement agencies in the Bay of Bengal have been less than successful in tracking activities of strategic interest in the Bay region, with navies and coastguards unable to develop a real-time picture of Chinese movements.⁶⁰ Bangladesh has been reluctant to implement a 2019 agreement that allows India to set up a network of surveillance radars along its coastline.⁶¹ India is aware that many South Asian countries remain vulnerable to domestic political shifts. For instance, the Maldives skipped a December 2023 meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave—in which Bangladesh is an observer—after a change in government.⁶² Male's decision reflects concerns about perceived Indian efforts to counter Chinese influence in its maritime domain. Notably, this is an issue of concern for most Bay states.

Another concern is the non-usage of commercial satellite services. There has been a move towards space-based surveillance in recent years, with the increased use of earth observation satellites, radio frequency satellites, and synthetic aperture radars. In 2018, ICEYE, a Finnish startup natively known as ICEYE Oy, demonstrated the capability of small satellites to collect radar data and pictures.⁶³ Commercial providers also began offering the services of small synthetic-aperture radar (SAR) satellites, which can capture ground images even through cloud cover.⁶⁴ There has been a rise in interest in SAR data in defence, intelligence, and trade. HawkEye 360, a US-based company capable of identifying and monitoring ships through the compilation of radio frequency data, has made its service affordable, helping many Indo-Pacific states better monitor and manage their EEZs.⁶⁵

However, many South Asian countries refuse to use these commercially available services. This reluctance to use private-sector services in national security is, to some degree, a matter of state practice. While governments in

Maritime Domain Awareness: A Work in Progress

the region are not against using private services for maritime surveillance, the bureaucracy in some countries is wary of working with non-government entities. Often, it can be attributed to a government's unwillingness to use externally developed software. For instance, while Pacific Island countries have signed a monitoring deal with HawkEye 360—a space-based radio frequency data analytics company and a leading provider of geospatial information—Indian Ocean littoral states have not.⁶⁶ The acceptability of commercially available technologies in security areas seems to differ by country.

To be sure, space-based commercial services can be expensive.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding their value and utility for maritime security, such services are often deemed unaffordable by governments with constrained budgets. In some cases, the authorities lack the necessary technological infrastructure and expertise to utilise the services effectively. Setting up and maintaining private information systems requires advanced technical skills and knowledge, which some Bay countries lack. For others, privatising security services represents a shift in control from the government to the private sector, which federal agencies cannot officially endorse.⁶⁸ To add another layer of complication, most small fishing boats in the region do not have transponders, making surveillance in the littorals more difficult.

Many countries believe that foreign commercial satellite services infringe on national autonomy as they involve third-party access to sensitive data. While collaborative information-sharing among Bay countries has never been the norm, littoral countries hesitate to share sensitive maritime data or cooperate with foreign entities, as doing so could feed geopolitical rivalries. There is also concern over how the data shared with neighbouring states could be used. Many believe using commercial services makes sovereignty concerns in the Bay states more urgent.⁶⁹

Crucially, not all Bay navies have interoperable tactical data link systems that enable them to integrate naval communications on manned and unmanned platforms. Many navies are only now beginning to procure tactical communications systems used by more advanced navies, such as the Indian Navy.⁷⁰ The absence of tactical data links hinders seamless data flow between regional navies and coastguards during missions at sea.

Maritime Domain Awareness: A Work in Progress

Two other difficulties limit intelligence collection and sharing between states: dissimilar information platforms, which slows efforts to share and fuse data, and national classifications of intelligence products, which prevent the aggressive and rapid distribution of information.⁷¹ Together, these two issues corrode trust between nations, creating gaps in the communication network.⁷²

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Security in the Bay of Bengal is vital for India. Security challenges in the region have multiplied in recent years, even as New Delhi has sought to build on its strengths in the region. India has pushed for a coastal shipping agreement between the Bay states that would reduce the time and costs involved in moving goods between countries by eliminating the need for cargo to be routed through distant third-country ports.⁷³ New Delhi is also working closely on developing an ocean-based blue economy framework for the Bay of Bengal and charting ways for future security cooperation.⁷⁴

Other Bay states, however, appear to be approaching Indian proposals with caution. At the Goa Maritime Conclave in October 2023, the Indian Navy put forward four principles to guide future relations in the Indian Ocean.⁷⁵ One of the proposed principles is establishing a working mechanism centred on common maritime priorities, such as maritime law, information sharing, strategy formulation, protocols, and training and capacity building. The Indian Navy expressed its readiness to lead the development of the training and capacity-building aspect by leveraging its expertise in maritime law, combating sea-borne narcotics trade, maritime surveillance, and environmental stewardship. However, regional delegates were sceptical of the proposal.

This response is not surprising. Bay states remain hesitant to engage in extensive military cooperation with India since they do not align politically with India as extensively as some in New Delhi may assume. For instance, Bangladesh maintains significant relations with China, which has constructed a submarine base at Cox Bazaar.⁷⁶ Inaugurated in March 2023, BNS Shiekh Hasina is a potential basing facility for Chinese submarines. The Bangladesh Navy also enjoys close ties with the US Navy, and the two regularly conduct the CORPAT exercises. Similarly, Sri Lanka has accommodated Chinese interests, allowing Chinese research and surveillance ships to dock at Hambantota.⁷⁷ Myanmar also maintains close relations with China and has reportedly established a surveillance post at Cocos Island, raising suspicions of Chinese involvement.⁷⁸ The naval drills conducted by Myanmar and China in November 2023 also raise concerns.⁷⁹ Additionally, India has yet to resolve the longstanding issue related to fishers with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. While the Bay states acknowledge

the importance of regional security collaboration, they are cautious about not jeopardising their relationships with other major powers, particularly China. The lack of security capacities and a political reluctance to enforce maritime regulations in common areas restrict cooperation in select non-traditional security areas.

China's broader strategic encroachment in the IOR, aimed at expanding its influence and presence in areas traditionally considered to lie within India's sphere of influence, is worrying enough. More concerning is the effort of some Bay states to diversify their regional partnerships. The absence of an invitation to India to participate in the first Russia-Myanmar naval exercise in November 2023, despite the exercise being held in India's vicinity and featuring a significant strategic ally (Russia) and a BIMSTEC partner (Myanmar), is especially troubling. This suggests the possibility that Bay states are looking to deprioritise India in favour of other capable partners.⁸⁰ Notably, there has been a seeming decline in Myanmar's maritime security engagement with India. Whether this stems from New Delhi's lack of support for the military junta or its reservations regarding Naypyidaw's close ties with Beijing is debatable. What is clear is that Bay states are exploring security partnerships beyond India, indicating a shift in their security priorities.

These developments coincide with the challenges faced by BIMSTEC in scaling up its response to regional security issues. Despite a focus on maritime security and efforts to address terrorism and transnational crime through collaborative working groups, progress has been slow. The absence of BIMSTEC military drills since 2018 (when Nepal withdrew from the first such exercise) and the discontinuation of the India-Singapore-Thailand Trilateral Maritime Exercise (SITMEX) since 2021 reflect the state of regional maritime cooperation.⁸¹ Participation in India's MILAN exercises at Visakhapatnam by the Bay of Bengal states primarily reflects India's diplomatic efforts rather than a robust operational response to regional security challenges.⁸²

Despite Indian efforts, security arrangements in the Bay region remain subpar. The Bay states are keen to leverage partner capabilities to improve security responses but remain wary of too much strategic cooperation with India. In particular, Bay states have been reluctant to join India in counteracting Chinese activities in the region. They also have seemingly different priorities for tackling non-traditional security challenges. Despite New Delhi's attempts to balance partners' interests with its security priorities, the task remains challenging.

One way to increase the tempo of security cooperation is to make security exercises more purposeful in developing the capabilities to tackle common needs. The regular drills between navies and coastguards must facilitate a depth of understanding that supports decision-making and improves strategic trust. Maritime security activities in the Bay region are deeply intertwined with economic, environmental, and other factors. It would, therefore, be fitting for maritime security agencies to tackle the barriers to cooperation frontally by seeking better interoperability. Regional navies and coastguards must secure the necessary funding, technology, and expertise to expand maritime cooperation and render joint operations more effective.

A shared picture of the maritime domain is the starting point for improving trust. A more networked and persistent domain awareness capability can create a deeper sense of community in the Bay region. A comprehensive, real-time picture of activities in the Bay region could also act as a baseline for more coordinated efforts in the maritime commons. Maritime security agencies need to discuss the limitations of existing arrangements, particularly the lack of operational synergy in critical areas. Capability creation is equally vital. Bilateral and multilateral information security agreements must aim to develop the collective capacities to refuel, resupply, and repair maritime assets at short notice. Regional security agencies must also establish a system of local data links that improves communication.

Conclusion

Ultimately, maritime security cooperation is about unity of effort. A common operational grid and a set of agreed-upon rules will help expand cooperation in the Bay region. A unified approach can also help partner states generate enormous power to modify behaviour in the maritime domain. In a region with dual characteristics, security agencies must aim for a more flexible approach. [ORF](#)

Abhijit Singh is Senior Fellow and heads ORF's Maritime Policy Initiative.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA

Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005

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Website: www.orfonline.org