UNDERSTANDING MARITIME SPACES:

INDIA'S IMAGINATION OF THE BAY OF BENGAL

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CERTIFIED THAT THE THESIS ENTITLED

UNDERSTANDING MARITIME SPACES: INDIA'S IMAGINATION OF THE BAY OF BENGAL

Submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of

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And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Finally, despite my revisions, I remain solely responsible for all the mistakes and errors that may have occurred.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AEP	Act East Policy
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASI	Archaeological Survey of India
BCIM	Bangladesh China India Myanmar
BE	Blue Economy
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CECA	Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
EAM	External Affairs Ministry
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zones
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoI	Government of India
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
ICBM	Intercontinental ballistic missile
IGNCA	Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts
IN	Indian Navy
IO	Indian Ocean
IOR	Indian Ocean Region

IOZOP	Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace
LEP	Look East Policy
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs
MSR	Maritime Silk Route
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PLA	People's Liberation Army
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organisation

ABSTRACT

How do states imagine maritime spaces, and what are their implications for such spaces? States engage with maritime spaces in myriad ways that are products of their imaginations. Imaginations are, simply put, how a state thinks about itself and the world around it. This captures the states' norms, beliefs, and values constantly shaped, not in a vacuum, but embedded in the environment – in this case, the maritime space. States' ideational factors produce different ideas about maritime spaces, and their policies are shot from those lenses. The study entails how these state imaginations can be theorised and their transformative effects on maritime spaces can be understood. It argues that state imaginations are products of history, intentions and capabilities of states that are mutually shaped by maritime spaces. It also highlights how maritime spaces are not 'open spaces' amidst the modern state order but are active zones of politicisation.

The research situates this broader question of state imagination of maritime spaces through the case study of India and the Bay of Bengal. It uses accounts of India's political elites, official and private communication, policy documents and interviews in the public domain across the timeline of 1947-2020 to ask two questions. First, what are India's imaginations of the Bay of Bengal, and what explains them? It uses three themes to portray India's imagination of the Bay of Bengal. These conceive the Bay of Bengal as a security, market, and cultural space. It employs Discourse Analysis to describe what entails these themes and what contexts explain them. Secondly, what is India's dominant imagination of the Bay of Bengal? It argues that India's predominant understanding of the Bay of Bengal is that it is a space of security. The security imagination has been consistent and prevailing across the timeline since independence. It has also trumped the imageries of the Bay of Bengal as a market and culture. In several cases, arguments of market and culture have been used instrumentally to attain security.

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INTRODUCTION

Research often commences with unresolved questions or areas requiring further exploration. However, curiosity often precedes the systematisation of inquiry. This work is no different. It started because of two broad points of curiosity. First, how do maritime spaces manifest in the contemporary international order? Second, what is the nature of states' interactions with these maritime spaces?

Unlike 'place', which has meanings attached to it, oceans are often read from a perspective of non-living geo-spatiality rather than being read as zones of social, cultural and political interactions.[1] This essentially results from how the international order is predicated on states as the primary actors. Traditional and several mainstream schools of thought in International Relations would toe this line. The state is the central agency in international relations and the container of community and civilisation. Maritime regions are, at best, external or adjacently carved out from where international politics occurs. For instance, the Law of the Seas denotes the maritime regions as partly governable and mostly free for all as global commons. Seas are reduced to connectors between regions or vast undefined regions not central to international politics. Much like its depiction, there is a void and an apparent neutrality to its theorisation.[2]

Maritime regions, contrary to popular belief, are not just geographical entities. They are vibrant spaces, pulsating with significant political dynamics.[3] Their role in the international order is far from insignificant. They are the epicentres of various global issues, from power projection to resource politics, energy security, and climate change. While these spaces may not have been

[1] For a discsussion on space and place, see Yi-Fu Tuan, Space And Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

[2] Philip E. Steinberg, 'Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions', *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (June 2013): 156–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2013.785192.

[3] Hester Blum, 'The Prospect of Oceanic Studies', *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 125, no. 3 (23 May 2010): 670–77, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.3.670.

fully theorised in the discipline, their integral role in international politics is undeniable.[4] The dynamic nature of these regions, constantly evolving and adapting to the changing world, underscores the critical need for ongoing research and analysis in this field.

How can we theorise maritime spaces in the international order, then? This study affirms that states are central actors in the international order, and their actions have an authoritative impact on shaping maritime spaces. Therefore, it contends that the state's engagements have transformative effects on maritime spaces. We take a broader view of state engagements, where engagements are subsets of state imaginations. Imaginations are, simply put, how a state thinks about itself and the world around it. This captures the states' norms, beliefs, and values constantly shaped, not in a vacuum, but embedded in the environment – in this case, the international order. States' ideational factors produce different ideas about maritime spaces, and their policies are shot from those lenses. As a result, the state policies also end up structuring maritime regions. States imagine maritime spaces through specific lenses and attempt to fill them with corresponding meanings. This is done through discursive practises like policies, norms and values generated towards a maritime region to enable such imaginations.

It is not to be believed that these imaginations are singular and constant. When a space is imagined, it can be imagined through multiple categories. Similarly, the importance of these categories also changes and alters with time. Categories emerge, decline and mutate over time. In any foreign policy, several imaginations sprawl, and the dominant ones are reflected in the policies. Therefore, when looking at state imaginations towards maritime spaces, multiple perspectives are kept open to interpret the multiple possibilities that the state can envision.

[4] Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, 'Beyond Seablindness: A New Agenda for Maritime Security Studies', *International Affairs* 93, no. 6 (1 November 2017): 1293–1311, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix174.

While the focus is on how the state structures maritime regions, it is not to argue that this is a unidirectional relationship; several changes that operate in such maritime spaces also enforce and influence how and what states imagine these spaces to be. As a result, state imaginations towards these regions also undergo a change. Take climate change, for instance. The alternations in the maritime areas can enforce a view of seeing the space as 'risk'. This can potentially alter policies ranging from budgetary allocations to multilateral engagements. Therefore, what goes into the making of the politics of maritime regions and how we can understand them is crucially dependent upon looking at this dually charged relationship between states and regions. It underscores the point that regions are not exogenously given or cartographically constant but are made and unmade by agents in international politics. As a result, regions rise and fall and emerge and disappear with time. In this study, we look at how states define maritime regions into existence and shape them with corresponding imaginations and policies. The work is envisioned as a dialogue between foreign policy analysis and political geography.

THE CASE STUDY

The study takes up the case of India and the Bay of Bengal Region. The immediate questions concerning the logic of the case study are: Why India? Why the Bay of Bengal region? To answer the first question, India remains understudied as a maritime state. Despite its historical engagements with the sea, its vast coastline and several dependencies, its engagements with the sea are not a core subject matter of study beyond the military domain. As a result, India's maritime engagements remain under-theorised as well. Consequently, this is not a study about India's rise as a naval power. This is instead a study to understand how India thinks about maritime spaces and how that translates into policy making. The timespan of 1947-2020 is particularly useful for understanding how India's engagement with ocean space changed parallel to the registers of its growth as a state.

The growing importance of the Bay of Bengal attached to India's policies and regional dynamics makes it imperative to examine this space. While there is an enormously rich history of the Bay of Bengal as a zone of migration and climate territory, it was reduced to inactivity by inward-looking postcolonial states who became predominantly occupied with the dialogues of their land borders.

The case study intends to provide a detailed analysis of India's imagination of the Bay of Bengal and its transformative effects on the maritime geography. Apart from this vertical detail, the horizontal generalisation stresses finding ways state imaginations toward maritime spaces can be theorised.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before delving into the case's relevant literature, this section begins by highlighting the works that argue against maritime spaces as socially vacuous and depoliticised spaces amidst the statist order of modern international relations.

The literature spanning political geography attempts to answer this gap to some extent. Philip Steinberg elaborates on this argument, stating that the ocean is a constructed space.[5] It was, and neither is it, politically, economically or culturally empty. Steinberg's master variable is territorial political economy. It is the interaction and political and economic forces, Steinberg contends, that had the primary impact in constructing the ocean into the type of space it became. He narrates how different imageries of the sea have been transcended throughout the different epochs of capitalism, including – non-modern, merchant, industrial and postmodern capitalism. In these epochs, the ocean spaces are not empty but laden with specific uses, regulations and discourses. Of these three, culture has most of the bearing on the nature of discourses. Steinberg turns to two registers for the intellectual foundations of this argument. One of these registers corresponds to sociologists and political geographers who have worked on the social construction of spaces. This includes the likes of Henri Lefebvre[6] and Edward Soja[7], along with Carl Sauer[8], who emphasised the nature-society relationship in the construction of spaces. Sauer's work directly relates to how cultural landscapes and geographies are constructed.[9] Another register of works corresponds to critical geopolitics, including the works of John

[5] Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[6] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).

[7] EDWARD W. SOJA, 'THE SOCIO-SPATIAL DIALECTIC', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 2 (15 June 1980): 207–25, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1980.tb01308.x.

[8] Carl O Sauer, *The Morphology of Landscape* (California: University of California Press, 1925).

[9] Ibid.

Agnew[10], Simon Dalby[11], and Gearoid Tuathail[12]. This body of works critiques the idea that the international system has pre-determined and pre-ordained geographies, such as the sovereign states, that we assume are timeless. Agnew, in particular, is known for his 'territorial trap' argument wherein he questioned three conventional assumptions about the world order that have led to this territorial trap.[13] These include states treated as fixed units of sovereign space, the domestic/foreign divide, and states considered as 'containers' of societies that have led into the 'territorial trap'. In this context, the third assumption distinguishes between land as the societal space and the empty sea.

The Bay of Bengal, as a maritime space, has sparked significant academic interest in recent years.[14] Despite its relative decline during the Cold War era, its strategic, economic, and cultural importance has not escaped the attention of contemporary International Relations literature. The Bay of Bengal, as an arena, is now a subject of widespread discussion across maritime affairs, area studies, foreign policy analysis, and policy studies.[15] This literature review commences by highlighting the academic scrutiny that has tracked the rising significance of the Bay of Bengal. Its increasing prominence is substantiated by the fact that this maritime space has been examined as a domain of interconnected security issues, economic complementarity, and cultural linkages. This has led to the Bay of Bengal assuming the status

[10] John Agnew, 'Borders on the Mind: Re-Framing Border Thinking', *Ethics & Global Politics* 1, no. 4 (23 January 2008): 175–91, https://doi.org/10.3402/egp.v1i4.1892; John Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory', *Review of International Political Economy* 1, no. 1 (March 1994): 53–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/09692299408434268.

[11] S Dalby, 'Critical Geopolitics: Discourse, Difference, and Dissent', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9, no. 3 (30 September 1991): 261–83, https://doi.org/10.1068/d090261; Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 1998); Simon Dalby, 'The Geopolitics of Climate Change', *Political Geography* 37 (November 2013): 38–47, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2013.09.004.

[12] Tuathail and Dalby, *Rethinking Geopolitics*.

[13] Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory'.

[14] Nitin Agarwala and Premesha Saha, 'Is the Bay of Bengal Regaining Its Lost Importance?', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 336–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1637572.

[15] David Brewster, 'Dividing Lines: Evolving Mental Maps of the Bay of Bengal', *Asian Security* 10, no. 2 (4 May 2014): 151–67, https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2014.914499.

of a region or sub-region. After outlining how the recent literature presents the Bay of Bengal as a significant maritime space, the review delves into India's understanding of the Bay of Bengal, which is the core domain of this research. It explores the secondary literature that provides in-depth insights into India's interactions with the Bay of Bengal, focusing on three key themes: security, economy, and culture. Besides being prevalent categories, these three themes also serve to systematise the existing literature in line with the overall structure of this research. The three categories are interdependent and interrelated in numerous ways, as the literature suggests.

The Bay of Bengal as a significant maritime space

Many factors are associated with the increasing significance of the Bay of Bengal in recent years. The string of events in this maritime space points to three broad factors. First, the Bay of Bengal is increasingly featured as a region in the foreign policy of littoral state actors. India's Look East Policy[16], now transitioned into Act East Policy, draws the Bay of Bengal into its neighbourhood and is a springboard for further east. Coupled with its growing relations with Southeast Asia and its ambitions to connect with East Asian states, the Indian Ocean is a declared priority for New Delhi, with the Bay of Bengal as a vital component. Similarly, the region has overlapped with Thailand's 'Look West' policy[17], gradually looking towards the vast markets of India and the sub-continent. The other regional actors, primarily Bangladesh[18] and Sri Lanka[19], are also becoming prominent players with their developmental and security needs taking the turn to the sea. Complemented with the rising economies of the Southeast Asian

[16] Shibashis Chatterjee, 'Conceptions of Space in India's Look East Policy', *South Asian Survey* 14, no. 1 (11 June 2007): 65–81, https://doi.org/10.1177/097152310701400106.

[17] Government of India PIB, 'Brief on India-Thailand Relations', n.d.

[18] Tariq Karim, 'The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific Region', *The Daily Star*, 11 May 2023.

[19] Chulanee Attanayake, 'Sri Lankan Perspectives on the Bay of Bengal', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 356–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1640582.

states[20], several mental maps are at a crossroads, and their policies are correspondingly playing out in the region where transnational interests are prevalent.

Secondly, China's inroads have severely impacted the rising profile of the region. In mitigating its over-dependency on the Straits of Malacca, China has been preparing for overland access to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar, making its oil access easier. This move made China a resident power in the Bay of Bengal and its burgeoning relations with the South and Southeast Asian states, except India. Hyphenated with its relatively opaque political functioning, growing energy needs, and evidence of equally growing military presence, New Delhi and Beijing have been locked in these waters and are in a security dilemma.[21] As China's prowess grows in the region, India's anxiety about its sphere of influence being undercut is on the rise. New Delhi's response is to delineate its neighbourhood and gradually organise and consolidate it to gain its neighbours' support and balance the growing inevitability of the Chinese presence.[22]

Thirdly, with the staggered growth of regionalism in the sub-continent due to the Indo-Pakistan rivalry and its effect on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bay of Bengal 'sub' region provides a space where regionalism can take shape. Over the past years, the failure of SAARC to address the long-standing issues of the region has led to a search for alternatives. India's official emphasis on the BIMSTEC over SAARC is a considerable hint of such a configuration of regionalism in Asia.[23]

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[20] David Brewster, 'The Rise of the Bengal Tigers: The Growing Strategic Importance of the Bay of Bengal', *Journal of Defence Studies* 9, no. 2 (2015).

[21] David Brewster, 'An Indian Ocean Dilemma: Sino-Indian Rivalry and China's Strategic Vulnerability in the Indian Ocean', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 11, no. 1 (2 January 2015): 48–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2014.994822; Suneel Kumar, 'Reinvigoration of BIMSTEC and India's Economic, Strategic and Security Concerns', *Millennial Asia* 11, no. 2 (14 August 2020): 187–210, https://doi.org/10.1177/0976399620925441.

[22] Darshana M Baruah and C Raja Mohan, 'The Emerging Dynamics of Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Bay of Bengal ', in *India-China Maritime Competition: The Security Dilemma at Sea*, ed. Rajesh Basrur, Anit Mukherjee, and TV Paul (London: Routledge, 2019); David Brewster, *India and China at Sea*, ed. David Brewster, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199479337.001.0001.

[23] Kumar, 'Reinvigoration of BIMSTEC and India's Economic, Strategic and Security Concerns'.

David Brewster highlights the Bay of Bengal's transformation into a strategic space, a shift blurring the once distinct lines between South and Southeast Asia.[24] Wagner's research illuminates the Bay of Bengal's evolution into an economic hub in the late 1990s and its subsequent shift towards a security orientation due to common non-traditional security issues.[25] Smruti Pattanaik's argument that the Bay of Bengal and the adjoining Andaman Sea are a 'single economically integrated region' hints at its potential to become an integrated economic and security zone.[26] Shantanu Chakrabarti's historical approach underscores the Bay of Bengal's significance as a sub-zone in the emerging landscape of the Indo-Pacific.[27]

In 2018, Seminar launched a special issue based on a symposium titled Connecting the Bay of Bengal.[28] An anthology of essays covering various perspectives sought to understand better what factors drive a new narrative on the Bay of Bengal and the opportunities and challenges it will face to emerge as a distinct region, economic community, and strategic space. C Raja Mohan argued that the political and economic cartography of the Bay is undergoing a churn and that we need to revisit how we understand and analyse the Bay of Bengal. The issue examined the Bay of Bengal from the perspective of several littoral actors like India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar and extra-regional actors like China and Japan. Apart from the perspectives of the actors, the special issue surveyed the Bay of Bengal's emerging significance through themes like regional organisations, trade and connectivity.[29] Around the same time,

[24] Brewster, 'Dividing Lines: Evolving Mental Maps of the Bay of Bengal'.

[25] Christian Wagner, 'Searching Common Security in the Bay of Bengal', *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*, 17 October 2023, 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2023.2270313.

[26] Smruti S. Pattanaik, 'Geo-Strategic Significance of Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea: Leveraging Maritime, Energy and Transport Connectivity for Regional Cooperation', *South Asian Survey* 25, no. 1–2 (22 March 2018): 84–101, https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523119835045.

[27] Shantanu Chakrabarti, 'The Bay of Bengal Subzone Within the Indo-Pacific: Historical Relevance and Present Orientation', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 80, no. 1 (4 March 2024): 72–85, https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284231225678.

[28] 'Connecting the Bay of Bengal: A Symposium on Enhancing Connectivity among the Bay States', *Seminar* 703 (March 2018).

[29] C Raja Mohan, 'Reimagining the Bay', Seminar 703 (March 2018). https://www.india-seminar.com/2018/703/703_c_raja_mohan.htm

Carnegie India launched a special project titled the Bay of Bengal Initiative to study the renewed engagements in the Bay of Bengal primarily through the lens of maritime security.[30]

The flagship journal of the Indian Ocean Research Group, Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, released a special issue on the "Maritime Order and Connectivity in the Indian Ocean: The Renewed Significance of the Bay of Bengal" in 2019.[31] As part of the issue, two articles delve deep into why and how the Bay of Bengal is geopolitically and geoeconomically becoming significant. Dennis Hardy points out how the region is being 'repositioned' because of its strategic redefinition of the Indian Ocean, which extends into the broader Indo-Pacific region, effectively moving the Bay eastward. Another factor is China's presence in the area, underscoring this transformation, while the littoral countries find themselves at the forefront of significant changes.[32] Nitin Agarwala and Premesha Saha delve deep into this element of Sino-Indian presence and how other littoral states are compelled to engage in cooperation, connectivity, and conflict resolution. The Bay has become a significant theatre as various bilateral, multilateral, regional, and sub-regional agreements have been forged.[33]

Apart from India, the other littoral states are also generating considerable research interest in understanding and locating the Bay of Bengal from their vantage points. Significant studies have emerged on Sri Lanka's strategic positioning and visions of the Bay of Bengal.[34] Several works have pointed out Bangladesh's interest in the Bay of Bengal from diverse points of view.

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[30] Bay of Bengal Initiative, Carnegie India, https://carnegieindia.org/specialprojects/bayofbengalinitiative/?lang=en

[31] Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Rakhahari Chatterji, 'Maritime Order and Connectivity in the Indian Ocean: The Renewed Significance of the Bay of Bengal', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 241–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1665823.

[32] Dennis Hardy, 'Repositioning the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Regional Change', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 265–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1640576.

[33] Agarwala and Saha, 'Is the Bay of Bengal Regaining Its Lost Importance?'

[34] Chulanee Attanayake, 'Why Do Small States Matter in Bay of Bengal Geopolitics? The Case of Sri Lanka', *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*, 6 September 2023, 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2023.2250609.

These include the themes of Bangladesh's maritime dimensions in its foreign policy, maritime connectivity, and climate change.[35]

Such significant changes have forced us to reconsider whether the Bay of Bengal is becoming a region. Anita Sengupta points out how the Bay of Bengal as a new region needs to be situated in the broader political relevance of oceanic spaces in contemporary times.[36] This line of thought is based on the constructivist reading of regions. In this reading, there are no fixed regions, and they are socially constructed. The region's contours remain contested, likely changing over time.[37]

The understanding of the Bay of Bengal as a space worthy of independent examination is seen beyond the traditional geopolitical approaches. Sanjay Chaturvedi and Vijay Sakhuja challenge the typically stated geopolitical factors highlighted for the renewed significance of the Bay of Bengal. This is essentially a perspective of the Bay of Bengal as a region from critical geopolitics. They advocate for reimagining the Bay of Bengal as a semi-enclosed sea within a vast marine ecosystem, guided by UNCLOS provisions that mandate cooperation among signatories at the regional level. This imaginative approach, rooted in hopeful geographies, should extend beyond official channels and engage grassroots awareness through regional public diplomacy. As a category emerging out of the maritime space, climate change can reorient the existing tenets of security and sovereignty in the Bay of Bengal. An Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) report titled "Climate Security in the Bay of Bengal" points

[35] Rudabeh Shahid and Rubiat Saimum, 'Navigating the Troubled Waters: "Maritimization" of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy"', *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*, 26 June 2023, 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2023.2228615; Delwar Hossain and Md. Shariful Islam, 'Unfolding Bangladesh-India Maritime Connectivity in the Bay of Bengal Region: A Bangladesh Perspective', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 346–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1646570.

[36] Anita Sengupta, 'The Oceans as New Regions: Emerging Narratives and the Bay of Bengal', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 16, no. 3 (1 September 2020): 229–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2020.1820690.

[37] Amitav Acharya, 'The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics', *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (13 July 2007): 629–52, https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2008.0000; Sanjay Chaturvedi and Vijay Sakhuja, *Climate Change and the Bay of Bengal: Evolving Geographies of Fear and Hope* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015).

out the relationship between climate change and security in the region and its challenges for policymakers.[38] It highlights how climate threats could intensify regional inter-state military competition and conflict. Furthermore, climate-induced migration can be a crucial driver of conflict in the future. Sanjay Chaturvedi and Timothy Doyle also raise the apprehensions of climate refugees in the Bay of Bengal from the perspective of Bangladesh.[39]

The renewed significance of the Bay of Bengal space has invited scholars to interpret it vis-à-vis India's foreign policy. C Raja Mohan points out how the Bay of Bengal's importance has grown, catapulting India to reimagine its orientation and engagements with the maritime space. The Bay of Bengal is also part of a more fluid and emerging interconnection between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.[40] The title of Suranjan Das and Anita Sengupta's edited volume is self-explanatory - Contiguity, Connectivity and Access: The Importance of the Bay of Bengal Region in Indian Foreign Policy. The collection of essays focuses on three broad themes of the Bay of Bengal's cultural history, its strategic present and regionalism potential. All of the themes have implications for India's policy options.[41]

The review follows in four segments. The three subsequent segments focus on India's engagements with the Bay of Bengal regarding security, economy, and culture. The final segment concludes with some observations that provide points not touched upon in the existing literature or areas that could be sufficiently explained further.

[38] Angshuman Choudhury et al., 'Climate Security in the Bay of Bengal', *IPCS*, 18 January 2022.

[39] Sanjay Chaturvedi and Timothy Doyle, 'Geopolitics of Fear and the Emergence of "Climate Refugees": Imaginative Geographies of Climate Change and Displacements in Bangladesh', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 6, no. 2 (December 2010): 206–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2010.536665.

[40] C Raja Mohan, 'The Bay of Bengal in the Emerging Indo-Pacific', Observer Research Foundation , 12 May 2023.

[41] Suranjan Das and Anita Sengupta, *Contiguity, Connectivity and Access* (London: Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003365020.

Security Perspectives

How can we locate the Bay of Bengal as a zone of security in the literature of India's foreign policy? There have been three segments of interrelated works in this regard. The first segment locates the Bay of Bengal in the writings on naval strategy and security. These are written mainly by the defence elites and naval experts who focus on the more military aspects of the Bay of Bengal security. Classical geopolitics has a considerable imprint on India's maritime thought, which has now diversified owing to the widening of maritime security and India's pursuits. The broader domain offers considerable work on traditional and non-traditional security dimensions.

In the second segment, we locate the Bay of Bengal as a subset of India's security engagements in the Indian Ocean. This draws on the literature on India's foreign policy by practitioners and academics. A perceptible change can be observed in how India's understanding of its immediate region has widened from South Asia to the Indian Ocean and now to the Indo-Pacific, with the Bay of Bengal at its centre.

The third segment considers the Bay of Bengal as a component of the security relationship between India and Southeast Asian states. This emerging literature is a product of India's Look East Policy since the 1990s.

The literature on security perspectives has been systematised using these three divisions. However, there are considerable overlaps between the three. Two of such themes can be pointed out. For instance, all three segments carry the themes of India's rise as a maritime power and its growing footprints. Simultaneously, there is an interlinked theme of India's regional role and leadership. The Bay of Bengal features a significant maritime space in such interlinkages.

The first segment comprises an elaborate domain of works on maritime power and India's naval thinking. The starting point in this case is the works of India's former diplomat and naval

historian KM Panikkar.[42] A discussion of Panikkar's work invariably draws on the ideas of classical geopolitics. This literature, however, begins with Panikkar, but contemporary studies of sea power and naval strategy draw beyond Mahan[43] and Corbett's[44] classical dictums and strategies.[45] There are many avenues which have now opened up that examine several themes: newer roles for navies due to the widening definition of sea power[46], the changing orientation of maritime security[47]; naval strategies of significant actors and powers in the modern world[48]; navies in diplomacy[49] are some of the key themes.

The predominant literature on maritime spaces as zones of security emerges from classical geopolitics[50] that concerns sea power and naval strategy. Modern sea power and naval strategy proponents primarily draw their ideas from two iconic figures – Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Corbett. Mahan's landmark work, "The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660–1783"[51], lays out four significant points. First, sea power is a crucial component of national power. He points out how sea power was the defining variable that allowed Britain to become

[42] KM Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1951); KM Panikkar, *The Future of India and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1945); KM Panikkar, *Problems of Indian Defence* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1960).

[43] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1890).

[44] Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Sussex: Naval Institute Press, 2003).

[45] Barry M. Gough, 'Maritime Strategy: The Legacies of Mahan and Corbett as Philosophers of Sea Power', *The RUSI Journal* 133, no. 4 (December 1988): 55–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071848808445330.

[46] Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[47] Joachim Krause and Sebastian Bruns, *Routledge Handbook of Naval Strategy and Security* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[48] Paul Kennedy and Evan Wilson, *Navies in Multipolar Worlds From the Age of Sail to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[49] Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 1977).

[50] Klaus Dodds, '1. What Is Geopolitics?', in *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198830764.003.0001; Klaus Dodds and Chih Yuan Woon, 'Classical Geopolitics Revisited', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2010), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.379; Zhengyu Wu, 'Classical Geopolitics, Realism and the Balance of Power Theory', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 6 (19 September 2018): 786–823, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1379398; Mackubin T. Owens, 'In Defense of Classical Geopolitics', *Orbis* 59, no. 4 (2015): 463–78, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2015.08.006; Phil Kelly, *Defending Classical Geopolitics*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.279.

[51] Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*.

a significant political, military and economic power in the Age of the Empire. The unmatchable sea power they possessed separated Britain from its European counterparts. Second, Mahan shows a complementarity between sea power's strategic and economic pursuits. His understanding of sea power was a combination of – first, command of the sea through naval superiority, secondly, a good hold over maritime commerce and overseas possessions and access to foreign markets. His two elements of sea power intertwine as he states that controlling maritime commerce through command of the sea is the primary function of navies[52]. Third, Mahan delivers a broader and more systematic understanding of what comprises sea power – he elaborates on elements like geography, demographics, and government that allow us to understand what it means and its tangible components.[53] Finally, Mahan's work outlines the plans and vision for conducting naval warfare and attaining sea power. He advocated for a strong merchant navy, battleship fleet, and naval bases to secure access to international markets. Furthermore, Mahan's emphasis on a "vigorous foreign policy" resonated with intellectuals and politicians worldwide who sought to enlarge sea power as a component of national power and attain economic and political superiority.

Corbett, Mahan's contemporary, extended the idea of sea power as a component of national power further. Corbett provides a detailed and meticulous account of naval strategy and how artillery can be used and managed on the sea.[54] Clausewitz's strategies on the land primarily influence Corbett's emphasis on command of the sea. Like Mahan, Corbett affirmed the idea of command of the sea. However, Corbett's understanding of what command of the sea meant and how to achieve that command differed from Mahan's. For Corbett, command of the sea is never absolute but relative. In his major contribution, "Some Principles of Naval Strategy", he

[52] Philip A Crowl, 'Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian', in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[53] Ibid. 463

[54] Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.

enumerates how the destruction of an enemy is difficult at sea. It is about ensuring tactical advantage over the enemy.

Classical geopolitics has its offerings for India's strategic thinking, most prominently in the writings of KM Panikkar. Panikkar, highly influenced by Mahan's thought, titled his book similarly, "India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History".[55] His core arguments remain that Indian sovereignty and autonomy were protected till Indians had control over the Indian Ocean. As a result, it remains pivotal not to lose sight of history and compromise on the security of the maritime space. Panikkar's other works extensively delve into the geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean and how India can always maintain its security.[56] He delves into several models ranging from ring-fenced security to collective security alternatives. In India's Naval Defence, Panikkar assiduously points to how India should structure its naval preparedness and artillery in the pursuit of defence.[57] Panikkar's works have significantly influenced India's maritime reawakening and naval policy. Several contemporary works have interpreted it as the broader vision that seeks to order the Indian Ocean Region.[58]

Although Panikkar was the most prominent voice, he was not alone. Keshav Balkrishna Vaidya pointed out the requirements and strategies through which India could arrange its naval defence.[59] Vaidya ambitiously advocated for 'blue water' naval projection for a newly independent India. He draws from Alfred Mahan and Brian Tunstall[60]. He argued for developing an "invincible navy" not only for the control and security of the coasts but also for

[55] Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*.

[56] Panikkar, *Problems of Indian Defence*.

[57] Ibid.

[58] David Scott, 'India's "Grand Strategy" for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions', *Asia-Pacific Review* 13, no. 2 (November 2006): 97–129, https://doi.org/10.1080/13439000601029048.

[59] KV Vaidya, *The Naval Defence of India* (Bombay: Thacker and Co Ltd, 1949).

[60] Brian Tunstall, *Ocean Power Wins* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1944).

distant seas. Vaidya puts forward the debate on India's emerging sea blindness after its post-independence years and the apathy towards its navy.

India's maritime past has been extensively used to project India's naval future. Admiral KK Nayyar, in his book "Maritime India", elucidates on the rich traditions of India's maritime past and its necessities for India's defence.[61] Rear Admiral K Sridharan provides a thorough account of India's modern maritime history since the turn of the 20th century.[62] Rear Admiral Satyindra Singh provides a thorough account of India's maritime history and the early years of the Indian Navy as it experienced transition for the British.[63] Singh's account is an empirical analysis of India's foundational naval doctrines and ideas that shaped India's naval policy for years to come. Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan and Captain Gurpreet Khurana provide a comprehensive study of India's naval power by elaborating on an Indianized understanding of the concepts, constituents and catalysts of national maritime power.[64] SN Kohli, former Chief of Naval Staff, articulates a Mahan-inspired theme about sea power and the Indian Ocean with particular reference to India. His work points out three elements – first, the strategic jostle of the Indian Ocean in the past owing to strategic and economic factors; second, the nature of the Indian Ocean's strategic competition during the height of the Cold War; and finally, deriving a naval strategy for India's interests.[65] Naval expert Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, in his work Sea Power and Indian Security, gives a similar exposition.[66] Roy-Chaudhury shows India's advancements in sea power and its correlation with security. Additionally, he surveys the evolving situation of

[61] KK Nayyar, Maritime India (New Delhi: Rupa, 2005).

[62] K. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1965).

[63] Satyindra Singh, *Under Two Ensigns: The Indian Navy - 1945-1950* (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publications , 1986).

[64] Pradeep Chauhan and Gurpreet Khurana, *National Maritime Power: Concepts, Constituents, and Catalysts* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2018).

[65] SN Kohli, *The Indian Ocean & India's Maritime Security* (New Delhi: The New Statesman Press, 1981); SN Kohli, *Sea Power and the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill, 1978).

[66] Rahul Roy-Chauhdury, *Sea Power and Indian Security* (London/Washington: Brassey's, 1995).

shipbuilding and shipping as security components. The most detailed work, considering the Indian Navy, is the two-part description of India's leaps in the maritime field since 1976, which GM Hiranandani compiled. The first volume, Transition to Eminence: 1976-1990, tracks the first defence plan and, thereafter, changes of the Indian Navy in its pursuits.[67] The next volume, Transition to Guardianship: 1991-2000, narrates how the Indian Navy secures its position as a preeminent force and the regional responder to security issues.[68] Painstakingly documenting the technical rise of the Indian Navy, Hiranandani also packs in the ideas that shape the rise of the Indian Navy and the people behind them.

The second segment highlights India's security engagements in the Bay of Bengal as part of the more expansive Indian Ocean. During the Cold War, India's sustained efforts were through the initiative of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IOZOP) to oust the Great Power Rivalry and the US presence. This attempted to maintain India's regional primacy and compensate for its lack of material power. This security stance has been interpreted as an Indianized version of the Monroe Doctrine.[69] However, as India's economic and political heft grew, its maritime security engagements were embellished[70]. David Brewster's works are prominent in the direction of India's security engagements in the wider Indian Ocean Region. Brewster, in his work, "Indian Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership", points to growing synergies between India's search for major power status and its increasing presence and

[67] GM Hiranandani, *Transition to Guardianship: The Indian Navy - 1991-2000* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2009).

[68] GM Hiranandani, *Transition to Eminence: The Indian Navy, 1976-1990* (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), Naval Headquarters, in association with Lancer Publishers , 2005).

[69] James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, 'India's "Monroe Doctrine" and Asia's Maritime Future', *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 6 (23 October 2008): 997–1011, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160802404539; James R. Holmes, Toshi Yoshihara, and Andrew C Winner, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[70] David Scott, 'India's "Extended Neighborhood" Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power', *India Review* 8, no. 2 (29 June 2009): 107–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/14736480902901038; David Scott, 'India's Aspirations and Strategy for the Indian Ocean – Securing the Waves?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4 (August 2013): 484–511, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.728134; David Scott, 'Strategic Imperatives of India as an Emerging Player in Pacific Asia', *International Studies* 44, no. 2 (26 April 2007): 123–40, https://doi.org/10.1177/002088170704400203.

influence in the Indian Ocean.[71] Brewster looks at three aspects: first, India's Indian Ocean policy as it gradually converts into a strategic arena; second, India's dealings with the major powers – the US, China and Australia – in the Indian Ocean; finally, a segmented inquiry into India's engagements in the Indian Ocean - Northwest, Northeast and Southwest Indian Ocean. The work discusses India's contrasting tendencies of seeking a hierarchical regional order and, at the same time, its strategic restraint that limits power projection. It points out that India's possible security measures are likely to revolve around two possibilities – first, the formation of multilateral security initiatives where India has a considerable regional role; second, a concert of Indian Ocean states that calls for a multipolar Indian Ocean World.[72]

A subset of India's regional security and foreign policy deals significantly with Sino-Indian relations in the Indian Ocean. In the recent past, apart from the land border issue between India and China, its maritime rivalry has been substantially analysed owing to significant contributions. The chief question examined in this segment was the nature of Sino-Indian competition in different fragments of the Indian Ocean. This has shed light on the Bay of Bengal as an emerging strategic theatre due to the Sino-Indian rivalry.[73] An emerging body of work mainly delves into the Sino-Indian security dilemma in the Indian Ocean.[74]

The third body of the work locates Bay of Bengal security into the broader dynamic of India-Southeast Asia relations. Since India's Look East Policy began, India and ASEAN developed security relations. This corresponds to growth in the literature on India's security engagements with the Southeast Asian states. While India and Southeast Asia have a long history of socio-

[71] David Brewster, *India's Ocean The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[72] David Brewster, 'Indian Strategic Thinking about East Asia', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 6 (December 2011): 825–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.627155.

[73] C Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington : Brookings Institution , 2012); C Raja Mohan, 'The Indian Ocean: The Changing Strategic Context ' (New Delhi, 1991); Baruah and Mohan, 'The Emerging Dynamics of Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Bay of Bengal '.

[74] Rajesh Basrur, Anit Mukherjee, and TV Paul, *India-China Maritime Competition The Security Dilemma at Sea* (London: Routledge, 2019).

cultural relations, the post-Cold War period drove the security and economic engagements. Mohammad Ayoob delineates Southeast Asia as a region in India's foreign policy thinking while explaining India's engagements with the region during the Cold War, leading up to the post-Cold War era.[75] Kripa Sridharan's work focuses on the early security developments between India and Southeast Asia.[76] GVC Naidu's The Indian Navy and Southeast Asia is a crucial addition to the literature on maritime security.[77] He delves into the apprehensions and fears that Southeast Asian states had about the Indian Navy's expansion. Sudhir T Devare's "India and Southeast Asia: Towards Security Convergence" focuses on maritime security as a vital issue for cooperation and how seas can serve as links between India and Southeast Asian states.[78] Grare and Mattoo's edited volume on India and ASEAN: The Politics of India's Look East Policy gives a detailed account of India's transitioning security relations between India and Southeast Asia from the Cold War to the present.[79] Frederic Grare, in "India Turns East", focuses on how balancing China was the primary goal of India's Look East Policy. India and US security and defence relations grew significantly because of a common threat in China.[80] This argument has been traced by Sunanda K-Datta Ray, who points out how a growing relationship with Southeast Asian states allowed India to develop relations with the US.[81] Growing India and US relations in the maritime domain have pushed the boundaries of imagining regions. The earlier connotation of the Asia-Pacific has led to more transoceanic imaginations of the Indo-Pacific, which now incorporates the Bay of Bengal as a part of this

[75] Mohammad Ayoob, *India and Southeast Asia (Routledge Revivals) Indian Perceptions and Policies* (New Delhi: Routledge, 1990).

[76] Kripa Sridharan, *The ASEAN Region in India's Foreign Policy* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1996).

[77] GVC Naidu, *The Indian Navy and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2000).

[78] Sudhir T. Devare, *India and Southeast Asia: Towards Security Convergence* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2005).

[79] Frederic Grare and Amitabh Mattoo, *India and ASEAN: The Politics of India's Look East Policy* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

[80] Frédéric Grare, *India Turns East*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190859336.001.0001.

[81] Sunanda K-Datta Ray, *Looking East to Look West: Lee Kuan Yew's Mission India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009).

broader inter-regional space. Recent additions to this domain focus on India-ASEAN relations in the broader context of the Indo-Pacific.

Economic Perspectives

The Bay of Bengal is situated within the broader Indian Ocean as a trade corridor in an evolving body of work. This follows two overlapping engagements: India's domestic liberalisation and its consecutive Look East policy. This combination generated several studies examining three contours – maritime trade, connectivity and Blue Economy. The first concerns the growing nature of India's trade in the region. While there are several essential studies on India's economic relations with ASEAN states, few consider the issue purely from a maritime trade perspective. Amitendu Palit has examined and analysed many aspects of India's regional economic policy and trade results. This includes several themes like reviewing India's foreign investment policy through its achievements and inadequacies[82], the impact of Act East on the Southeast Asian states[83] and situating India's economic policy as a component of its great power pursuits[84].

Discussing maritime trade and India's economic gains highlights the associated issue of maritime connectivity as a trade facilitator. This segment of work focuses mostly on the challenges and potential of maritime connectivity in forging greater economic linkages. Such linkages have not been possible mainly because of political deadlocks and logistical delays.[85]

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[82] Amitendu Palit, 'India's Foreign Investment Policy: Achievements & Inadequacies', *Asie Visions, Institut Français Des Relations Internationales (IFRI)*, 18, 18 (July 2009).

[83] Amitendu Palit, 'INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA', in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2016* (ISEAS Publishing, 2016), 81–92, https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814695671-009; Amitendu Palit, 'India's Economic Engagement with Southeast Asia: Progress and Challenges' (Singapore, 4 June 2009).

[84] Amitendu Palit, 'Will India's Disengaging Trade Policy Restrict It from Playing a Greater Global Role?', *World Trade Review* 20, no. 2 (18 May 2021): 203–19, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474745620000518.

[85] RIS, 'Future Directions of BIMST-EC: Towards A Bay of Bengal Economic Community (BoBEC)', *RIS Policy Brief* 12 (February 2004); Constantino Xavier, 'Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Toward a Stronger BIMSTEC', 2018; Constantino Xavier and Amitendu Palit, *Connectivity and Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal Region* (Centre for Social and Economic Progress, 2023).

Although various bilateral free trade agreements have boosted trade, China remains India's primary trading partner in East Asia. A section in Sumit Ganguly and Karen Stoll's edited volume, Heading East, specifically focuses on these challenges of connectivity and trade[86]. It points out that India has participated in several regional initiatives, such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor (BCIM), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiated by China. However, these initiatives have faced challenges due to delays, policy gaps, lack of interest from member states, corruption, regulatory issues, and inadequate infrastructure.[87] India's Look East focused on integrating Northeast India with the economies of Southeast Asian states. This created scope for multimodal interstate and intrastate connectivity. There have been several significant works highlighting the potential of better connectivity.[88] Most studies point out that the existing conditions of the Northeast, along with the conflictual situation in Myanmar, have not allowed its integration with Southeast Asia and the broader Bay of Bengal.[89]

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[86] Sumit Ganguly and Karen Stoll Farrell, *Heading East: Security, Trade, and Environment between India and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[87] Rani D Mullen, 'India and the Potential of Trade East', in *Heading East: Security, Trade and Environment between India and Southeast Asia*, ed. Sumit Ganguly and Karen Stoll Farrell (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[88] Harsh V. Pant and K. Yhome, 'India's Subregional Connectivity Initiatives: Re-Imagining the Neighborhood', *India Review* 19, no. 1 (1 January 2020): 33–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2019.1710082; P. V. Rao, '"Development through Connectivity": India's Maritime Narrative', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 245–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1640578; Mullen, 'India and the Potential of Trade East'; Amit Singh, 'Emerging Trends in India–Myanmar Relations', *Maritime Affairs:Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 8, no. 2 (December 2012): 25–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2012.742650.

[89] Pushpita Das, 'Challenges to the Development of the Northeast through the Act East Policy', *Strategic Analysis* 46, no. 5 (3 September 2022): 473–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2022.2119698; Sunniva Engh, 'INDIA'S MYANMAR POLICY AND THE "SINO-INDIAN GREAT GAME"', *Asian Affairs* 47, no. 1 (2 January 2016): 32–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2015.1130307; Renaud Egreteau, 'A Passage to Burma? India, Development, and Democratization in Myanmar', *Contemporary Politics* 17, no. 4 (December 2011): 467–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2011.619771; Pushpita Das, 'Security Challenges and the Management of the India–Myanmar Border', *Strategic Analysis* 42, no. 6 (2 November 2018): 578–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1557932.

Apart from trade and commerce, there is a growing literature on the Bay of Bengal through India's Blue Economy initiatives.[90] Blue Economy calls for judicious and sustainable use of marine resources. Ocean spaces have been interpreted as economic markets[91] since the legal regime has demarcated marine resources under state jurisdiction. An anthology of essays edited by Sudhir T. Devare elaborates on how the Bay of Bengal opens up as a market for energy resources.[92] Apart from the regional potential of being a trade hub, the volume's contributions meticulously highlight the nature of existing marine resources in the Bay of Bengal.[93] It adds how the renewable energy potential of the Bay of Bengal can be utilised from the perspective of multiple stakeholders.[94] Vijay Sakhuja's works have showcased different facets of India's Blue Economy potential.[95] This includes questions about the components of the Blue Economy and how the state infrastructure can deal with it.[96] In a significant contribution, Sakhuja and Banerjee painstakingly survey a sectoral factsheet of the potential and prospects of the Blue Economy in the Bay of Bengal.[97] They point out how the Blue Economy is the source of the cooperative regime in the Bay of Bengal. Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy has also reached similar conclusions on examining the nature and potential of the Bay of Bengal's marine geography.

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[90] Timothy Doyle, 'Blue Economy and the Indian Ocean Rim', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 14, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2018.1421450; Vasudha Chawla, 'Rethinking the Oceans: Towards the Blue Economy', *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 12, no. 2 (2 July 2016): 115–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2016.1239365.

[91] Sanjaya Baru, 'Indian Ocean Perspectives: From Sea Power to Ocean Prosperity', *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 5 (3 September 2019): 435–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1666519.

[92] Sudhir T Devare, *A New Energy Frontier : The Bay of Bengal Region / Edited by Sudhir T. Devare* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

[93] K Singh, 'Bay of Bengal: Awakening of a Potential Giant Area', in *A New Energy Frontier : The Bay of Bengal Region*, ed. Sudhir T Devare (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

[94] Tamiz Ahmad, 'Gas Potential at the Bay of Bengal and Implications for India's Energy Security', in *A New Energy Frontier : The Bay of Bengal Region*, ed. Sudhir T Devare (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008); Vijay Sakhuja, 'Energy Transportation Security in the Bay of Bengal', in *A New Energy Frontier : The Bay of Bengal Region*, ed. Sudhir T Devare (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

[95] Vijay Sakhuja, 'Harnessing the Blue Economy', *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 10, no. 1 (January 2015): 39–49.

[96] Vijay Sakhuja and Kapil Narula, *Perspectives on the Blue Economy* (New Delhi: Vij Books, 2017).

[97] Vijay Sakhuja and Somen Bannerjee, *Sea of Collective Destiny: Bay of Bengal and BIMSTEC* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2020).

He focuses on India's cooperative and regional efforts to safeguard and develop tools for the Blue Economy.[98]

Cultural Perspectives

The idea of the sea as a cultural space has been addressed in different disciplines. Examining the significant works before the literature, particularly on India and its cultural engagements in the Bay of Bengal, is essential.

Fernand Braudel[99] and his magisterial work on the Mediterranean are good starting points for this. Braudel used the ocean as a pivot to narrate the history of the Mediterranean.[100] Broadly, what came to be known as the Annales School depicted history not through protagonists and mere events but through a long view of processes.[101] In the long cycles of history, nature and social forces have shaped each other.[102] Nature is the central variable determining history in most of Braudel's work. When he is looking at the Mediterranean, Braudel keeps zooming in and out of the geographical scale and establishes that the natural physiography and the social world we often see in segregation are inherently interconnected and intertwined. The institutions, social practices and norms of the plateaus and the islands, like ports and inward villages, can be seen in segregated registers. Braudel's style established a commitment to showcase the interplay of economic and social forces beyond the confines of narrating history

[98] Rajeev Rajan Chaturvedy, 'Mapping India's Blue Economy in the Bay of Bengal: Opportunities and Constraint', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18, no. 2 (4 May 2022): 99–115, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2022.2118196.

[99] Georgi Derluguian, 'Braudel, Fernand (1902–1985)', in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Wiley, 2020), 1–3, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosb048.pub2; Eric R. Dursteler, 'Fernand Braudel (1902–1985)', in *French Historians 1900–2000* (Wiley, 2010), 62–76, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444323658.ch5.

[100] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Vol. I and II (Translated by Sian Reynolds)* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

[101] Stuart Clark, *The Annales School: Critical Assessments in History* (London: Routledge, 1999); Nicolas Lewkowicz, 'The Annales School – An Intellectual History', *Intellectual History Review* 21, no. 2 (June 2011): 250–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2011.574432.

[102] Cheng-Chung Lai, 'Braudel's Grammar of Civilizations', *The European Legacy* 3, no. 3 (23 June 1998): 80–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/10848779808579891.

through the scale of the nation-states. Due to their fluidity, Oceans came to be understood as the ideal starting point in narrating this connected history where the scale of nature is not limited to political boundaries.[103] This brings a key aspect - it is difficult to account for cultural history without accounting for the ocean. Oceans are the medium of flows that curate, connect, and sometimes break cultures to take the shape they do. A good counter exercise is to imagine culture keeping the role of oceans and seas out.

Directly relevant to the Indian Ocean Region are the historical works of Ashin Das Gupta, MN Pearson, KN Chaudhuri, Satish Chandra and Edward A Alpers.[104] These works exemplify the interconnectivity between the societies of the Indian Ocean. An often-used term is the 'Indian Ocean World' or the phrase 'Worlds in the Indian Ocean', which also depicts how life's cultural and societal realms are not outside of the sea but are driven and directed by it. These historians bring out two significant facets of Indian Ocean history. First, they point out the connections between the social and natural worlds in understanding societies in the Indian Ocean region. This is akin to the Braudelian approach to the Mediterranean. The focus is on a period before technological innovations like steam navigation in this region to show that trade and market in this enclosed ocean was driven by social connections. These societal connections drove the transactions of rituals, customs, and practices through the sea. Historians of the colonial period who have focused on the Indian Ocean as an arena, like Sanjay Subramanyam[105], Thomas R.

[103] Michael Harsgor, 'Braudel's Sea Revisited', *Mediterranean Historical Review* 1, no. 2 (December 1986): 135–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/09518968608569509.

[104] Ashin Das Gupta and MN Pearson, *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1999); MN Pearson, *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); KN Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107049918; Satish Chandra, *The Indian Ocean: Explorations in History, Commerce and Politics* (New Delhi: SAGE, 1987); Edward A Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[105] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Metcalf[106] and Sugata Bose[107], are united on looking beyond the nation-state to account for the history of communities around the sea's rim. Bose refers to the Indian Ocean as an 'interregional arena' that fits in between the narrow identification of states and regions on the one hand and the global system on the other. The economic web of the colonial power around the Indian Ocean also heightened the social interactions in this arena. The ocean is the platform that opens up diverse interconnections in this arena and allows us to describe the history of communities.

Sociology problematises the idea of the ocean as a cultural space. While mainstream sociology suffers from a similar problem to the 'territorial trap', relatively recent works have considered the maritime space in explaining and analysing societies. Maritime sociology mainly delves into the intricate relationship between human societies and oceans.[108] The sea is not just a geophysical entity but a dynamic social space shaped by human interaction and activity.[109] Its core argument centres on the multifaceted nature of human activity at sea. This brings into focus communities involved in activities like seafaring (commercial shipping, fishing), resource extraction (offshore oil rigs, deep-sea mining), maritime tourism (cruises, coastal resorts), and even marine conservation efforts like maritime heritage.[110] Much maritime sociology deals with the nature of social organisation and cultural practices that are part and product of these activities. A theme that ties in with the understanding of maritime sociology

[106] Thomas Metcalf, Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[107] Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of the Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[108] Arkadiusz Kołodziej and Agnieszka Kołodziej-Durnaś, 'Maritime Sociology in the Making', in *Maritime Spaces and Society* (BRILL, 2022), 3–24, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004503410_002.

[109] Arkadiusz Kołodziej, 'On Maritime Culture: Interpretations, Scope of Impact, and Controversies', in *Maritime Spaces and Society* (BRILL, 2022), 129–44, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004503410_008.

[110] Agnieszka Kołodziej-Durnaś, Frank Sowa, and Marie C. Grasmeier, *Maritime Spaces and Society* (BRILL, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004503410.

is its emphasis on the sea shaping human culture.[111] For instance, it looks at the influence and challenges of the marine environment on the communities, how the vastness, isolation, and inherent dangers of the sea can structure human behaviour, how the marine environment can lead to maritime languages, and the rituals and traditions practised by seafaring cultures. If that argument is taken further and critically analysed, it further leads to how marine health and communities are also twinned. The ever-increasing pressure on marine resources due to overfishing and extractive industries raises crucial questions about sustainability. Maritime sociologists examine the social consequences of environmental degradation, such as the displacement of fishing communities and the disruption of traditional livelihoods.

The third domain, which deals with maritime space as culture, emerges from literary studies. Ocean becomes an arena for understanding the comparative literary history of the countries of Africa and Asia. Works of Isabel Hofmeyr[112] provide a direction as to how the ocean is a valuable pivot to understanding culture when the term 'Indian Ocean as a method' was coined.[113] This is a broad field with various avenues to look at. One part of it examines the liminal space to account for colonial history and the public sphere. This involves questions like how were the port cities structured during coloniality and what the nature of interactions between the colonial and colonised tell us about the nature of these spaces. Another part of literary studies and maritime culture problematises the commonly held assumptions of

[111] William R. Rosengren, 'A Sociological Approach to Maritime Studies: A Statement and Example', *Maritime Studies and Management* 1, no. 2 (24 October 1973): 71–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/03088837300000009.

[112] Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Connections', *African Studies* 58, no. 2 (December 1999): 129–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/00020189908707910; Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Transnational Circulation: Region, Nation, Identity and the Material Practices of Translation', *Current Writing* 15, no. 2 (January 2003): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/1013929X.2003.9678155; Isabel Hofmeyr, 'The Globe in the Text1: Towards a Transnational History of the Book', *African Studies* 64, no. 1 (July 2005): 87–103, https://doi.org/10.1080/00020180500139080; Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Literary Ecologies of the Indian Ocean', *English Studies in Africa* 62, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2019.1629677.

[113] Isabel Hofmeyr, 'The Complicating Sea: The Indian Ocean as Method', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. 3 (1 December 2012): 584–90, https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-1891579.

sovereignty, slavery, internationalism, resistance and transnationalism.[114] The ocean is practical in critiquing several accepted binaries from a nationalist history approach. Hofmeyr states, "Much contemporary work on transnationalism operates on North-South axes and invokes older categories of empire and nation, of the dominating global and the resistant local. These categories— domination and resistance, coloniser and colonised— arise from post-independence revisions of colonial history. The Indian Ocean requires us to take a much longer perspective, complicating simple binaries." (Indian Ocean as a method, 589).[115] A critique of such concepts keeping the ocean space as central is found in the literary works of Amitav Ghosh[116] and Abdulrazak Gurnah[117], which provide us with fresh takes on diasporas and indentured labourers, mainly.

A pioneering contribution in portraying the Bay of Bengal as a cultural space remains the work of historian Sunil Amrith.[118] Amrith categorises the Bay of Bengal as a meaningful historical region. Despite lacking a single language or political coherence, it is a cultural region linked by people's mobility and circulation. However, the centrepiece of Amrith's work is how it was a connected region of ideas, norms, practices and capital. Amrith picked up the region during the colonial moment and pointed out how it became the heart of the imperial economy. As the British were charting for new profits at the forest frontiers of the archipelago, the Bay of Bengal became a connecting bridge between what we now associate with South and Southeast Asia.

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[114] Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Universalizing the Indian Ocean', *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 125, no. 3 (23 May 2010): 721–29, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.3.721; Philip Gooding, *On the Frontiers of the Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009122023; Debjani Ganguly, 'Oceanic Comparativism and World Literature', in *The Cambridge History of World Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 429–57, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009064446.024.

[115] Hofmeyr, 'The Complicating Sea: The Indian Ocean as Method'.

[116] Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New Delhi: Viking, 2008); Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoke* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2011); Amitav Ghosh, *Flood of Fire* (Lonodn: Hachette UK, 2015).

[117] Abdulrazak Gurnah, By the Sea (New York: The New Press, 2001).

[118] Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Mobility was governed by imperial law; borders were looser, and the advent of steamships helped cross the region more easily. This led to the tying up of the rim of the Bay of Bengal, where Burma, Ceylon, and Malaya became the triad of circular migration linked to the Indian landmass, particularly in South India. Amrith points out how, until the 1930s, circular migration comprised 80% of the entirety of migration in this region. What makes Amrith's work particularly relevant in this context is that he emphasises the cultural nature of the interconnectedness between people. For Amrith, beneath demographic and economic connections, the Bay of Bengal was an imaginative cultural space linked by worlds, ideas, and kinships. He points out three ways this culturally imaginative space can be put into tangible markers. First, he plots the Bay of Bengal as a cultural arena dotted with the matrix of printing presses across its rim. Very imaginatively, Amrith uses Benedict Anderson's idea of the press as a community-making instrument. Bay of Bengal's printing presses reflected tremendous diversity beyond the scale of the nation-state. Second, the Bay of Bengal became a sacred space with religious shrines and temples. The migrants across the sea sought to legitimise their claims on the land through these markers of spirituality. Amrith draws upon a third aspect to establish the Bay of Bengal as a space of culture: the interconnected ties of kinship. It is this that makes the migration fluent and possible across the rim of the Bay.

In his work, Belonging across the Bay of Bengal, Michael Laffan delves into this perspective by drawing attention to Buddhist and migrant connectivities across the Bay.[119] At a time when nationalism was brewing in the rim states of the Bay of Bengal, Laffan discusses the ideas of spirituality, religion and culture amidst this terrain. His significant contribution remains to introduce discussions of Ceylon, Burma, and the Straits Settlements, which later led to the region's burning and relevant refugee problems.

[119] Michael Francis Laffan, *Belonging Across the Bay of Bengal: Religious Rites, Colonial Migrations, National Rights* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Several studies highlight India's cultural relations in the region. However, they primarily focus on Southeast Asia rather than directly engaging with maritime space. Since the Look East Policy, there has been a revival of interest in looking at India's cultural past vis-à-vis Southeast Asia. Particularly engaging the naval space are the histories of naval expeditions during the Chola Empire, which Hermann Kulke, K Kesavapany, and Vijay Sakhuja historically documented.[120] Various scholars have interpreted India's recent maritime policies through the prism of identity and culture. Medha Bisht has argued how India's vision of Security and Development for All in the Region (SAGAR) can be translated as a networked identity of a maritime space.[121] Her work focuses on how India's policy can blend into connections, communications and relationality that signify a maritime space. Furthermore, this is associated with and integrated with sustainable development goals (SDGs) at an international level. Madhu Bhalla critically analyses India's Project Mausam, which seeks to revive the maritime space through cultural connections.[122] Bhalla notes that, as of present, the project lacks the historical nuance that it requires to become acknowledged by UNESCO and deliver on the promises that it started with. Himanshu Prabha Ray points out that India's Project Mausam aims to project a popular history.[123] While projecting popular history is not uncommon or new, it sidesteps much-needed depth in transnational nuance and research.[124] Her work suggests that

[120] Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany, and Vijay Sakhuja, *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2010).

[121] Medha Bisht, 'Towards a Networked Strategy: Framework for Maritime South Asia', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 16, no. 2 (3 May 2020): 182–201, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2020.1770950.

[122] Madhu Bhalla, 'Thinking About the Indian Ocean and the Mausam Initiative', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 3 (29 September 2020): 361–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928420936106.

[123] Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Mausam: Maritime Cultural Landscapes Across the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi: Aryan Books, 2014).

[124] Himanshu Prabha Ray, '"Project Mausam". India's Transnational Initiative: Revisiting UNESCO's World Heritage Convention', in *Travelling Pasts: The Politics of Cultural Heritage in the Indian Ocean World* (BRILL, 2019), 39–61, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004402713_004.

for this project to contribute substantially, it needs interdisciplinary research in premodern shipping and seafaring activity beyond the rhetoric of valorising national heroes.[125]

RESEARCH GAP

The surveyed literature posits two gaps that provide foundations for this research. First, there is insufficient theorisation of India's engagements in the Bay of Bengal geography. Existing studies mostly posit the Bay of Bengal as a part of the more expansive Indian Ocean or as contiguous with Southeast Asia. This is incoherent as the dynamics of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean are different. Much of the Indian Ocean is open, while the Bay of Bengal is an enclosed sea bordered by thickly populated states. The overall conditions of the Indian Ocean influence a part of what happens in the Bay of Bengal. However, the Bay of Bengal has its dynamics, irrespective of it. The focus on the Bay of Bengal through Southeast Asia reduces the centrality of the maritime space. Despite several maritime turns in India's recent foreign policy literature, there is a tendency not to break beyond the existing templates of South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. This research intends to bring the maritime space to the centre while examining policies. Secondly, there is scope for understanding India's engagements in the Bay of Bengal within the broader context of its political imagination. This adds to the growing body of work that explains India's policies through ideational factors[126]. It goes beyond situational factors and considers the role of state identity, ideas, norms and values to explain engagements and policy. It argues that state engagements in a maritime space are neither entirely reactionary nor unilaterally discharged. The state understands and mediates the

[125] Himanshu Prabha Ray, 'Sailing Ships, Naval Expeditions and "Project Mausam"', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 3 (5 September 2020): 411–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928420936133.

[126] Priya Chacko, 'Constructivism and Indian Foreign Policy', in *New Directions in India's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), 48–66, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108562850.004.

maritime space through its ideational prisms. The ideational prism determines state imagination. This study accounts for the multiple imaginations of India that denote the Bay of Bengal as a zone of possibilities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the various conceptions through which state imaginations of maritime spaces can be theorised?
2. What are India's conceptions of space for the Bay of Bengal Region, and what explains them?
3. What is India's dominant conception of space for the Bay of Bengal Region?

METHODOLOGY

The research employs Discourse Analysis (DA) as a method. A starting objective of the study is to capture how state-constructed meanings are used to define maritime spaces. The research examines how states use language to denote a specific meaning for the maritime space. This is revealed from the state's overall engagement through its policies, doctrines, ideas and communication of elites in the public domain. It underscores that states do not form policies in a vacuum but are comprised of certain ideas, values, norms and beliefs they engage with. Additionally, the maritime space is a social space, and states read it through several frames of reference. Therefore, any maritime engagement of the state is ultimately the result of its imagination, comprised of the interaction between its ideas and its reading of the space. On examination, state engagements reveal underlying meanings that come into play when determining policies.

The research follows the interpretive and constructivist foundations of Discourse Analysis. Discourse Analysis is interpretivist as it assumes that "people act on the basis of beliefs, values, or ideologies that give meaning to their actions; and that to understand political behaviour, we must know about the meanings that people attach to what they're doing. Consequently, its aim is to reveal the meanings that the political world has for agents who participate in it and that give people reasons for acting."[127] There is an attempt to understand these ideational factors that produce discourses that are termed as state imaginations. It asks why state policies denote a certain understanding of maritime spaces. This corresponds to the question: What beliefs and ideas give rise to these meanings that are communicated? Discourse analysis is also constructivist, affirming that meanings are socially and discursively constructed. For instance, there is no given meaning of a term like 'security'. What security means for a state and how it is portrayed is discursively created and constructed.

How is a discourse understood, and what discourses are examined in this work? Discourses are broadly understood as language through which reality is constructed. This language is driven by ideas through which a construction of reality is expressed. Discourses are also products of contexts, which is why they are constructed. When discourses are articulated, repeated and successfully projected, they tend to assume the status of being real. Basu refers to discourses as a "particular way of portraying and understanding the society or some of its aspects such as social identity or social relations".[128] Hardy popularly defines discourse as ''a system of texts that brings objects into being''.[129] Halperin and Heath have defined discourse to be "a system, or ensemble, of ideas, concepts, and categories, that is linked to, and functions within, a specific

[127] Sandra Halperin and Oliver Heath, '14. Textual Analysis*', in *Political Research* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 364–92, https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198820628.003.0014.

[128] Partha Pratim Basu, 'Discourse Analysis', in *Revisiting Qualitative Methods in Social Science Research* (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2019).

[129] Cynthia Hardy, 'Researching Organizational Discourse', *International Studies of Management & Organization* 31, no. 3 (September 2001): 25–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/00208825.2001.11656819.

context. Consequently, we can say that discourse analysis is an exploration of 'language in context'. It is not interested simply in how something is represented by language, but in how that thing is actually constructed by the ways in which it is intelligible and legitimate to talk about it in a particular time and place."[130] Stuart Hall mentions that "Discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way and also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed".[131] He states that, "it is impossible to gain access to universal truth; only 'truth effects' are created within discourses. Hence the task of the discourse analyst is not to pronounce upon the truth or falsehood of discourses, but to analyse the discursive practices through which meanings are generated – to determine how they produce the impression that they represent true (or false) pictures of reality."[132] Schneider also focuses on this nature of construction, where he notes, "the truths that we live by are not simply 'out' there but that we create those truths through our interactions."[133]

This work takes a view of discourses as broadly a combination of three aspects: (i) they are put into existence through a certain arrangement of language; (ii) they are products of specific contexts; and (iii) they are constructs that have underlying meanings. The study situates state imaginations of maritime spaces by studying three discourses used by the Indian state to engage with the Bay of Bengal: security, market, and culture.

Studying discourses involves a two-step process. In the first step, the objective is to understand what the discourse entails and the context. This is essentially a descriptive question about the components of a discourse—how we track the discourse from the literature. When we say

[130] Halperin and Heath, '14. Textual Analysis*'.

[131] Stuart Hall, 'Five The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power [1992]', in *Essential Essays, Volume 2* (Duke University Press, 2020), 141–84, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478002710-010.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Florian Schneider, 'Getting the Hang of Discourse Theory', *Politics: East Asia*, 5 June 2013.

India's security/market/cultural imagination of the Bay of Bengal, what does a security/market/cultural imagination comprise?

Establishing the context follows next. Discourse Analysis varies from linguistic analysis because of its socio-psychological introspection. It argues that the text is usually a product of the context. Texts are not produced in silos but are to be studied within the matrix of context. It tries to understand how these discourses of the Indian state–maritime spaces, such as security, market and culture, are generated and what meaning they produce. Lemke points out why contexts must be delineated; he notes that discourses construe aspects of the world in inherently selective and reductive ways. The question to ask, therefore, is: 'Why this particular selection and reduction, and why here and now?' Thus, discourse analysis 'produces its greatest insights when rich contextual information can be factored into the analysis of each text or episode'.[134] Halperin and Heath conclude that Discourse Analysis studies how discourse is associated with a context through an intervening covariance. This is to ask the question and verify whether the discourse is a product of the context or independent of it; does the discourse change with the change in context?[135]

This leads to the question of how we classify contexts. There is no fixed and standardised form of classifying contexts. Contexts have been classified spatially and temporally. They can be categorised as macro or micro. Similarly, they can be put into categories of immediate and long-term. This study considers regional and international contexts for each discourse on India's security, market, and cultural imagination of the Bay of Bengal. This is linked to the liminal and contiguous scale of maritime spaces. Maritime spaces are difficult to adjust to any scale. They are attached to a regional scale because of their geography. At the same time,

[134] Jay L. Lemke, 'Analyzing Verbal Data: Principles, Methods, and Problems', in *Second International Handbook of Science Education* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 1471–84, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9041-7_94.

[135] Halperin and Heath, '14. Textual Analysis*'.

maritime spaces within them are interconnected at a global scale as well. The research asks what constitutes India's security/market/cultural imagination and under what contexts these discourses prevail.

The second step of a discourse analyses the processes of articulation and interpellation. This studies how discourse is shaped and advanced until it becomes accepted and normalised. It highlights why certain discourses become popular while others wane away. Which discourses are backed by what kind of conceptual power? Discourses achieve synonymity with reality when they are powerfully articulated and popularised through usage, and they become almost like 'reality' rather than a construction. Statist imaginations of the maritime space are never singular. This is also because of the diverse possibilities arising from the sea. Therefore, the second stage of the discourse analysis questions whether or not there is a dominant discourse between the three Indian state imaginations of the Bay of Bengal. This tries to answer which discourses have more demonstrable effects that override or constrain other discourses.

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation addresses the research questions through three subsequent chapters. Each chapter analyses three categories of India's imagination of the Bay of Bengal: security, market and culture, followed by the conclusion. The chapters operationalise what maritime space, such as security, market, and culture, means before delving into India's imagination.

The second chapter studies the nature of India's security imagination toward the Bay of Bengal maritime space. It primarily asks two questions. First, what is the nature of the threat that India anticipates, and what drives the imperative to control this space? There is a traditional defence understanding owing to existential threats, power, and capability imbalances. India has linked its security at sea with its independence and sovereignty, irrespective of any active threat. Its

security claim and threat perceptions are constant throughout its post-independence era and, sometimes, irrespective of any existential threat. A defensive understanding guarantees credible defence security at the shores against any possible adversary, interference, or risk. However, India's security imagination is not just linked with its defence, nor can India's security engagements tend to attain security through maximising power. Its vision and search for security are also significantly aspirational and not a claim of power that pure realism can conveniently explain. The chapter explores how its security in the Bay of Bengal is interlinked with its civilisational exceptionalism, regional leadership, and economic growth trajectory. The combination of India's postcolonial identity and statecraft, along with the remnants of the British doctrines that have been absorbed into India's strategic culture, largely explains why pure realism or institutionalism alone cannot explain Indian security responses in the maritime space.

The third chapter examines India's understanding of the Bay of Bengal as market. It surveys two imageries of India's market imagination: the Bay of Bengal as a commercial corridor and the Bay of Bengal as a pool of marine resources. The two imageries are examined and analysed within the context of India's economy vis-à-vis the regional Asian market and global economy. Articulations of the Bay of Bengal in economic terms rose in salience owing to India's embrace of liberalisation and globalisation. The rising economic stature of the Southeast and East Asian states accompanied this. The Bay of Bengal also gradually became an intrinsic part of global arteries of commerce and sea lanes of communication. The changes in international regimes allowed the state's claim over marine resources to further another imagery of India's economic imagination. This propelled the visions and policies for utilising marine resources within and outside India's sovereign limits. The evolving idea of the Blue Economy and its associated debates are closely related to this imagery. Finally, the chapter addresses how India's market imagination is intertwined, often overridden by its security matters.

The fourth chapter examines India's cultural imagination of the Bay of Bengal. India's engagements are broadly interpreted using two frames of reference: culturalist and institutionalist positions. Culturalists believe the state needs a cultural foundation for political authority, whereas institutionalists argue that culture and political authority can be agnostic. As a result, institutionalists argue that multiple cultures can exist within a political authority. In the lead-up to India's independence, there is considerable evidence of India's deep-rooted culturalist claims. Its political elite understood India's culture extending into Southeast Asia along the Bay of Bengal. These culturalist arguments draw from diverse sources and readings of India's nationalism and civilisational heritage. Cultural markers across the Bay of Bengal were read through a notion of cultural unity and strengthening the foundations of India's exceptionalism and political authority. Indian historians appropriated the evidence of Hindu culture, language, and religious sites in the light of constructing India's ethnic nationalism and civilisational glory. This culturalist argument declined after decolonisation, along with the rise of an institutionalist argument by the Indian state. The cultural claims were toned down in favour of Pan-Asianism and Asian Unity, where the cultural claims were eschewed or, at best, subtle at bilateral and multilateral levels. While India's cultural arguments came back with its gradually increasing interest in the region since the 1990s, it remained instrumental in securing other economic and security interests.

The concluding chapter seeks to lay the generalisation out of the case study to show how states imagine maritime spaces and what they offer for the maritime spaces in turn. Furthermore, the conclusion would highlight the findings corresponding to the questions that this research investigates, predominantly – how India imagines the Bay of Bengal and what is its dominant imagination.

INDIA'S SECURITY IMAGINATION OF THE BAY OF BENGAL

Spaces acquire security dimensions when states deploy strategies to secure and control them. This chapter examines how states demarcate maritime spaces in security terms by examining India's security engagement in the Bay of Bengal. However, a preceding essential question is: What do states consider security? Furthermore, how does this spatialisation of security operate?

Much of realist literature, the traditional and pre-eminent school of thought in International Relations, provides critical answers to how states conceive and deal with security.[1] Realist theories primarily emphasise the state's national boundaries and its inhabitants. In that sense, realist security theories hold a 'narrow' approach to security, prioritising state security over the rest – for instance, human security or environmental security. According to realists, a state is considered secure if it can defend against or deter a hostile attack and prevent other states from compelling it to adjust its behaviour significantly or to sacrifice core political values.[2] This raises two further questions. First, what is the cause of the security problem for states? Second, what do states do to secure themselves? Realists broadly agree on two ideas: first, there is a lack of central authority - anarchy- in the international structure,[3] and second, states are rational actors who act on their interests. Despite these agreements, realism is a broad school of thought with several branches. For instance, if we take the first question – what causes the security problem for states - there are many answers from within realism. Classical realists, like

[1] For an overview of the Realist security theories, see Stephen M. Walt, 'Realism and Security' 1 (22 December 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.286.

[2] Stephen M. Walt, 'The Renaissance of Security Studies', *International Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (June 1991): 211, https://doi.org/10.2307/2600471.

[3] For a broad exposition of anarchy in the international realm, see Silviya Lechner, 'Anarchy in International Relations', Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies, 20 November 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.79.

Niebuhr[4] and Morgenthau,[5] believe that insecurity stems from human nature. States tend to manifest insecure and power-seeking individual tendencies. Classical realists borrow this trait from the works of earlier philosophers like Machiavelli to make their case about how conflict is inevitable because of the pursuit of power.[6] Realists like EH Carr held that insecurity is a product of the clash of interests between the states. Carr adds that apart from the insecurity of the human race, state interests are shaped by a larger paraphernalia of the state ideologies and institutions.[7] Therefore, differences within the states produce differing interests, and these interests collide in the absence of any centrally governed authority. Structural realists, prominently articulated by Waltz, tend to account for security owing to the anarchical structure and its effect on the state. In an anarchical order, states are seeking to survive. The quest for survival compels states to conjure up their security.[8] This is further complicated as states are unaware of each other's intentions, and even their defensive security measures can be perceived as offensive. This is commonly referred to as the security dilemma, where a spiralling set of reactions and counterreactions occur as states are shoved into taking security measures by the structure itself.[9] While anarchy is constant, the degree of anarchy fluctuates. Any structural impact on the changing international structure also leads to fluctuations in the security of the states. This can happen primarily because of changes in polarity and power transitions. There is a debate among realist scholars on the model of polarity that raises/reduces security concerns

[4] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, 2nd ed. (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2013).

[5] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York : Knopf, 1948); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1946).

[6] For a detailed analysis, see Marco Cesa, 'On Human Nature', in Machiavelli on International Relations, ed. Marco Cesa (Oxford University Press, 2014), 41–45, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199673698.003.0002.

[7] E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1946).

[8] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

[9] For a detailed analysis of the idea, see John H. Herz, 'The Security Dilemma in International Relations: Background and Present Problems', International Relations 17, no. 4 (22 December 2003): 411–16, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117803174001.

for states.[10] Similarly, when there are cycles of power transitions, an observed is on the security of the states.[11]

How can security be secured, according to the realists? This takes two routes – defensive and offensive realism.[12] Both these branches agree with the basic tenets of realism and argue that states should pursue power to solve the security problem. They ask how much power is enough for the states to be secure. Defensive realists believe states should have appropriate power to secure themselves from threats, but not beyond the level at which it provokes fear in other states. Beyond a threshold, power accumulation would be counterproductive as provoked states would now seek to react. The core argument is that incremental power accumulation tends to have diminishing marginal returns on security. The costs of the power accumulation outweigh the benefits. This forces states to keep their security measures at the most defensive level.[13] Offensive realists believe that a state can never surely know how much security is enough. Therefore, the most optimal strategy is power maximisation. Mearsheimer contends that states tend to feel secure when they can assume that they have enough power to hurt another state. Unlike defensive realists, offensive realists believe that conquest is much more feasible and that states should keep accumulating power. Perpetual power maximisation is the only way to

[10] For a discussion on polarity and state security, see Randall Schweller, Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy for World Conquest (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); John Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: WW Norton, 2001); Kenneth Waltz, 'The Stability of a Bipolar World', Daedalus 93, no. 3 (1993): 881–909.

[11] AKF Organski and J Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

[12] For a discussion on the defensive and offensive understandings of Realism, see Steven E. Lobell, 'Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism', International Studies 1 (22 December 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.304.

[13] For some key works in this domain, see Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', World Politics 30, no. 2 (13 January 1978): 167–214, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958; Stephen Van Evera, Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Jack Snyder, Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); JM Grieco, Cooperation Among Nations: Europe, America, and Non-Tariff Barriers to Trade (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Waltz, Theory of International Politics.

secure states, for no definite quantification of power can guarantee security. Even nuclear weapons did not prevent the possibility of further conflicts.[14]

Realists consider institutions to be largely ineffective in ensuring security. It credits the balance of power as a much more helpful tool to ensure the security of states. Much of the realist literature uses this concept to answer how states should structure their security engagements.[15] When states confront a more powerful state, they have two options. One is to confront the more powerful state through balancing; the second option is to join with the more considerable power itself – bandwagoning. Balancing can further take two forms. A state can build its strength to encounter the threat, i.e. internal balancing. It can also externally balance by siding with another state to form an alliance and counter the source threat. Bandwagoning is a relatively less costly strategy as the state can tag along with the source of the threat with a quid pro quo assurance of not being attacked and threatened.[16] Balancing, nevertheless, has been a remarkably contested concept within realism. The first contention is: What is the balance of what? Waltz emphasised the balance of power when he delineated the idea of structural realism.

[14] For an overview of some key works in this domain, see Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics; Randall L. Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?', Security Studies 5, no. 3 (March 1996): 90–121, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419608429277; Fareed Zakaria, From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role (Princeton: Princeton University Press , 1998); COLIN ELMAN, 'Extending Offensive Realism: The Louisiana Purchase and America's Rise to Regional Hegemony', American Political Science Review 98, no. 4 (1 November 2004): 563–76, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055404041358; Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (New York : Cambridge University Press , 1981).

[15] Some of the key works on Balance of Power include: Stephen M Walt, 'The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition', ed. I Katznelson and Helen V Milner (New York: WW Norton, 2002), 197230; John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, Realism and the Balance of Power: A New Debate (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003); Michael Sheehan, 'The Balance Of Power', 11 November 2004, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203344613; Barry R Posen, He Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984); TV Paul, James J Wirtz, and Michael Fortmann, Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century, ed. T. V., Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Fortmann Michael (Stanford`: Stanford University PRess, 2004); Daniel H. Nexon, 'The Balance of Power in the Balance', World Politics 61, no. 2 (18 April 2009): 330–59, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000124; Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, 'Hegemonic Threats and Great-Power Balancing in Europe, 1495-1999', Security Studies 14, no. 1 (January 2005): 1–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410591001465; Ernst B. Haas, 'The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda?', World Politics 5, no. 4 (18 July 1953): 442–77, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009179; Stephen M. Walt, 'Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power', International Security 9, no. 4 (1985): 3, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540.

[16] For a discussion on bandwagoning, see Randall L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In', International Security 19, no. 1 (1994): 72, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539149.

Stephen Walt put forward that states do not just balance against another power, but they balance against a particular power considered a threat.[17] Consider how the gun is not the problem, but who is wielding it, which creates the panic. The gun in the hands of police may secure someone, whereas the same gun in the hands of a criminal may be threatening.[18] Further variations include balancing interests as a more suitable framework to explain state behaviour.[19] Balancing has further been classified on the spectrum of what kind of strategies are being used. This includes TV Paul's concept of soft balancing, where he contends that states do not outrightly balance powerful states through military policies.[20] States can instead use institutions, concerted diplomacy, and economic sanctions to restrain the great power. This is evident in the context of post-Cold War when states tried to soft balance the US without directly seeking to challenge it through hard power.

While this chapter primarily tests India's security imagination according to realist security theories, it also acknowledges and considers the presence of other traditional IR theories about security—liberalism and constructivism. Liberal theories of security have a normative commitment to individualism. However, they also address how institutions like the state deal with security. Two points emerge from the liberal literature directly relevant to India's case. First, liberals argue that the global order inherently creates and relies on interdependence. States and non-state actors must cooperate and exchange because autonomous existence is not feasible. This perspective stems from the liberal focus on individuals as the fundamental unit of analysis. As individuals shape interest maximisation, cooperation becomes feasible when

[17] For an overview of Balance of Threat, see Walt, 'Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power'.

[18] Patrick James, 'Balance of Threat', in *Realism and International Relations* (Oxford University PressNew York, 2022), 386–416, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197645024.003.0013.

[19] Ramesh Thakur, 'A Balance of Interests' (Oxford University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199588862.013.0004; Patrick James, 'Balance of Interests', in *Realism and International Relations* (Oxford University PressNew York, 2022), 417-C14.P69, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197645024.003.0014.

[20] For an overview of soft balancing with illustrations, see T. V. PAUL, Restraining Great Powers (Yale University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5cg9s2.

they are relatively more beneficial than non-cooperation costs, causing insecurity. This interdependence builds trust and addresses freeriding challenges, ultimately contributing to security. The proponents of complex interdependence have identified this line of argument.[21] This bears on how India has identified cooperative security issues in the Bay of Bengal. However, cooperative security is often either sidelined or trumped by more traditional zero-sum ideation of security where cooperation is not very incentivised. A second line of argument emerges with the nexus between democratic governance and security. This emphasises how the structure of the democracies, with their focus on the peaceful resolution of conflict and internal checks and balances, contributes to the attainment of security.[22] This has implications for India's security behaviour as it has often translated its image as a responsible and rule-abiding power to resolve security issues within the Bay of Bengal. India accepted the verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), where Bangladesh was awarded 19,467 sq. km of the 25,602 sq. km sea area of the Bay of Bengal.[23] Both sides accorded it to resolve a lingering maritime border dispute for better cooperation on security issues.

Constructivism looks at ideational factors in a state's security behaviour. More than a theory, constructivism is a way of thinking that has also been foundational in this research.[24] Constructivist theories offer a social perspective on security issues and their functioning. Unlike realist and liberal paradigms, which emphasise structural and material explanations for

[21] Complex interdependence is elaborately explained in, Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Power and Interdependence (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

[22] For an exposition of the Democratic Peace Thesis, see John R. Oneal, Bruce Russett, and Michael L. Berbaum, 'Causes of Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations, 1885-1992', International Studies Quarterly 47, no. 3 (2003): 371–93, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2478.4703004; Bruce Russett, Grasping the Democratic Peace (Princeton University Press, 1994), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7rqf6.

[23] Haroon Habib, 'Bangladesh Wins Maritime Dispute with India', *The Hindu*, 9 July 2014.

[24] For key works in Constructivism and state security, see Peter Katzenstein, The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1996); Ted Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', International Security 23, no. 1 (July 1998): 171–200, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.1.171; Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics (Cambridge University Press, 1999), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511612183; Nicholas Onuf, World of Our Making (Routledge, 2012), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203722428.

state behaviour, constructivism focuses on ideational structures. These structures shape state responses to security challenges, emphasising the significance of identities, norms, and collective beliefs. Constructivists have three common arguments regarding how state security interacts with the ideational structures. First, State interests are not solely determined by material capabilities and power distribution. Instead, they are conditioned by who we are and how we perceive ourselves. Our identities play a crucial role in shaping our behaviour towards other states. For instance, a state may view nuclear weapons differently based on whether they belong to an ally or a competitor. Second, constructivists stress the importance of norms, collective beliefs, and political culture in understanding state behaviour. Even when strategic interests suggest otherwise, states often abide by international norms. Defying these norms is considered taboo. Finally, unlike realists who see timeless anarchy as the sole determinant of state behaviour, constructivists argue that states and the international structure mutually shape each other. Anarchy can take on different cultural forms, from conflict-based (Hobbesian) to interest-driven (Lockean) or cooperation-based (Kantian). This is best captured as Alexander Wendt famously put it, "anarchy is what the states make of it."[25]

Space as Security: Implications for Maritime Spaces

How do states spatialise security, and how does that work for maritime spaces? States only do not have security concerns extending from another state, but these security concerns are attached to spaces. What entails space as security can be seen from two perspectives. First, states can demarcate spaces as security from where they perceive or face threats or risks. In a conventional understanding of security, such threats, or the potential of it, can emerge from another state. On a broader connotation of security that includes non-conventional security, these threats can also emerge from non-state actors, for instance, terrorist outfits under no

[25] Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (22 May 1992): 391–425, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764.

particular flag. Second, states may desire to control a space to pursue their interests. These interests may range from the protection of borders to the flow of public goods. Such desire or aspiration of control is restricted to the defence of borders and a more comprehensive understanding of influence or hegemony. States, especially big powers, have historically sought to create spheres of influence. This was the case with the Cold War era when the US and USSR were trying to create their spheres of influence.[26] The desire to control a space is inherently linked with the strength of the state. Therefore, materially stronger states would translate control into hegemony of a space where it can also shape the rules for others.

States tend to view a space in security terms when requirements of defence or aspirations of control prevail. This is applied to maritime spaces on both accounts. States with coastlines and islands are invariably concerned about the defence of the sea and their shores. Similarly, states often associate the control of the sea as part of their influence or power capabilities. This was prevalent in the past when the British Empire sought to convert the Indian Ocean into a British Lake.[27] During the Cold War, the US sought to build its hegemony in the North Atlantic.[28] Simultaneously, it invested in the control of the Indian Ocean.[29]

Space as security means that other concerns of community or commerce are sidestepped or secondary. The security imagination compels states to perceive space in zero-sum terms, where

[26] For discussion on spheres of influence, see Paul Keal, 'Contemporary Understanding about Spheres of Influence', Review of International Studies 9, no. 3 (26 July 1983): 155–72, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500115876; Graham Allison, 'The New Spheres of Influence Sharing the Globe With Other Great Powers', Foreign Affairs, February 2020.

[27] H. V. Bowen, 'Britain in the Indian Ocean Region and Beyond':, in *Britain's Oceanic Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 45–66, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139096744.006; Ashley Jackson, 'Britain in the Indian Ocean Region', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 7, no. 2 (December 2011): 145–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2011.637422.

[28] Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, 'The American Hegemonic System in Theoretical and Historical Perspective', in *Exit from Hegemony* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 18–53, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190916473.003.0002.

[29] The US policy in the Indian Ocean has been historically analysed in, Robert D Kaplan, Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power (New York : Random House Publishing Group, 2011); Srinath Raghavan, The Most Dangerous Place: A History of the United States in South Asia (New Delhi: Penguin Allen Lane, 2018).

the gain of one state is the loss of another. It is difficult to operationalise maritime spaces as they are not particularly sovereign under any state. Also, maritime spaces include not just conventional threats but a host of non-conventional security issues to be dealt with.[30] Unilateral approaches by states are complex because many of the vexed non-traditional issues are transboundary and require collaborative action.

A vast amount of literature at the intersection of geopolitics and naval strategy looks into how states in maritime spaces operationalise security.[31] This literature has roots in the works of naval strategists Alfred Thayer Mahan[32] and Julian Corbett.[33] It establishes two aspects of states and ocean spaces viewed from a security perspective. First, it presents sea power as a national power and development component.[34] Mahan draws his case from the British Empire to show how the control of the seas resulted in the political supremacy of the Empire. A strong command of the seas enabled a state to pursue multiple objectives, including securing wealth through trade, controlling faraway territories, maintaining defence at shores and enabling potential attacks on enemy territories. Steinberg mentions that oceans have been historically seen as regions that need to be tamed by the states for two military purposes – to use the sea as a battleground and a surface for troop movements.[35] Second, states, especially superpowers, use maritime spaces to project power and dominate distant lands. Realist geopolitics emphasises controlling crucial points in the earth's geography that are considered pivotal when

[30] For a detailed interpretation of maritime security, see Christian Bueger, 'What Is Maritime Security?', Marine Policy 53 (March 2015): 159–64, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2014.12.005.

[31] The linkages between seapower and naval strategy has been explained in, Duncan Depledge, 'Navies: Military Security and the Oceans', in The Routledge Handbook of Ocean Space, ed. Kimberly Peters et al. (London: Routledge, 2022); Geoffrey Till, Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century (London: Routledge, 2018); Norman Friedman, Seapower as Strategy: Navies and National Interests (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2001).

[32] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1890).

[33] Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Sussex: Naval Institute Press, 2003).

[34] Barry M. Gough, 'Maritime Strategy: The Legacies of Mahan and Corbett as Philosophers of Sea Power', *The RUSI Journal* 133, no. 4 (December 1988): 55–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071848808445330.

[35] Philip E. Steinberg, The Social Construction of the Ocean (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). 15-18

competing for global power.[36] States often use words like ‘chokepoints’ to label significant positions on the geography. Maritime spaces are examples of anarchical zones, whereas nation-states are regulated spaces. These unregulated zones become centres of power competition between the states.

There are two problems with how realist geopolitics looks at security in maritime spaces. First, it assumes that the maritime space is bereft of history. It is akin to a blank space where states scramble for power. There is an attempt to plug this gap by arguing that states have historical contexts of maritime spaces that configure their policies. It is not automatic for states to want to secure maritime spaces and project power in them. Often, states associate historical episodes of threats and aspirations for power with the policies they are predicated on. This comes alive in the case of India and the Bay of Bengal, where concerns of the past actively shape India’s perceptions of threats despite any existential threats. There are continuities from the British period in shaping its control over the Bay of Bengal. This study argues that maritime spaces are not empty sites but are laden with state-deployed identities regarding how they view a space and its corresponding functions. How do states view a space, and what renders these imaginations? Statist perceptions or imaginations of space do not rest independently but are borrowed from the past. Specific episodes and events of the past seep into historical memory and transcend into a state's strategic culture. They are then selectively held relevant to be evoked in designing the policies of the present and the visions of the future. Strategic history stands for ideas, doctrines, and policies that emerge from the records of foreign and security policies in a state. It has a crucial role in developing state perceptions and, in turn, is the resource from which policies for the present and future are drawn. A legitimised version of this

[36] For a contemporary interpretation of Mahan’s ideas, see Jon Sumida, ‘Alfred Thayer Mahan, Geopolitician’, Journal of Strategic Studies 22, no. 2–3 (June 1999): 39–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437753.

strategic history takes the form of a strategic culture popularised by the elites as a "usable past".[37]

Second, the literature on sea power and naval security is much centred on maritime superpowers' behaviour. Existing studies take note of maritime powers like Britain and the US strategies to understand how naval strategies work, what consists of sea power and how states intend to achieve security in these spaces. It does not consider states that have visions of maritime security but are constrained with capabilities. India is a case study to point out how states, not necessarily superpowers, think about security in maritime spaces. The study shows how India's security concerns supplementing defence are also related to pre-eminence and leadership. India's maritime security extends its attachment to autonomy as a principle in foreign policy-making. The complex interaction of the legacies of colonial power and the visions of a postcolonial state also shapes its strategic culture. India's security problem demands a historicisation of India's pre-colonial and colonial past along with the realist reading. India's colonial past, its vulnerabilities from the sea, the imperative to control the space structure, security perceptions, and corresponding policies.

Bay Bengal as a Zone of Security

India's historical reading of the Bay of Bengal triggers an imperative of security that has defined the conversion of the space into a zone of security. India's official foreign policy stance and the strategic discourses by its political elites consistently demarcate the space in terms of security in traditional terms.[38] Based on the earlier discussion, this corresponds to how maritime spaces are viewed from a security perspective. To sum it up, these are zones where states face threats or risks or seek to establish control. The following segments of the chapter

[37] James R. Holmes, Toshi Yoshihara, and Andrew C Winner, Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First Century (London: Routledge, 2009): 6-15

[38] 'Indian Maritime Doctrine', Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), 2009.

are centred on two questions. First, what is the nature of the threat that India anticipates, and what drives the imperative to control the space? There is a traditional defence understanding owing to existential threats, power and capability imbalances. India has linked its security at sea with its independence and sovereignty, irrespective of any active threat. This insecurity is inherited from India's colonial capture, furthered by its territorial sensitivity as a postcolonial state. Nehru stated, "History has shown that whatever power controls the Indian Ocean has, in the first instance, India's sea-borne trade at her mercy and, in the second, India's very independence itself".[39] Its security claim and threat perceptions are constant throughout its post-independence era and, sometimes, irrespective of any existential threat. A defensive understanding guarantees credible defence security at the shores against any possible adversary, interference, or risk. However, India's security imagination is not just linked with its defence, nor can India's security engagements tend to attain security through maximising power. Its vision and search for security are also significantly aspirational and not a claim of power that realism can conveniently explain. India's security draws a requirement for defence from its colonial past, inheriting the geopolitical frames from British control in the Indian Ocean Region.[40] India's leadership claims envision the arc of Hormuz to Malacca, similar to how it was central to the British Empire.[41] Concomitant to this, India's aspirational claims in these waters have been associated with its rising power aspirations that refer to its civilisational exceptionalism, regional leadership, and economic growth trajectory.[42] Simultaneously, its autonomy mandates enough manoeuvre and flexibility in external balancing. It envisions an unrestricted and unhindered Indian Ocean region that is instrumental to India's energy security

[39] Quoted in, Brahma Chellaney, 'India Needs to Build Sufficient Naval Prowess in the Indian Ocean', Hindustan Times, 12 March 2015.

[40] Thomas Metcalf, Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[41] Jackson, 'Britain in the Indian Ocean Region'.

[42] For a discussion on India's regional prominence, see TC Schaffer and Schaffer HB, India at the Global High Table: The Quest for Regional Primacy and Strategic Autonomy (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2016).

and a vital neighbourhood central to India's claims of regional leadership. India's turn to these waters is validated using the historical presence and cultural maritime past that count on pre-eminence.

The second question concerns India's responses to the security problem in the Bay of Bengal. How does India intend to ensure security? India security engagements show a degree of suboptimality in balancing. Neither does it bandwagon with the threat. Its security engagements do not neatly fit into defensive or offensive realist prescriptions. At the same time, there is enough evidence of institutional and multilateral commitments like the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IOZOP)[43] and regional organisations like the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation).[44] India's reliance on institutional arrangements has been questionable as it has kept its balancing options open. This sub-optimality explains that alongside intentions to deter threats, acquire power or build capability as per realist considerations, there are also motivations and claims of autonomy, leadership and pre-eminence that have led India's policies. The combination of India's postcolonial identity and statecraft, along with the remnants of the British doctrines that have been absorbed into India's strategic culture, largely explains why pure realism or institutionalism alone cannot explain Indian security responses in the maritime space.[45]

The chapter follows in two sections discussing these two questions. The first section shows why India's strategic history shapes its conception of security in the Bay of Bengal maritime space. Pre-colonial and colonial antecedents are used to draw up and legitimise defensive and

[43] Lok Sabha Secretariat, 'Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace', January 1987; B. Vivekanandan, 'The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace: Problems and Prospects', *Asian Survey* 21, no. 12 (1 December 1981): 1237–49, https://doi.org/10.2307/2643882.

[44] Constantino Xavier, 'Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Toward a Stronger BIMSTEC', 2018.

[45] This is not to refute realist and institutional explanations for India's security engagements in the Bay of Bengal region. It is argued that, in several cases, these approaches need to be supplemented with a historical assessment to account for India's security engagements in the region.

aspirational dimensions of India's understanding of security in the Bay of Bengal. The second section highlights India's responses to security in the Bay of Bengal. It explains why there is a scope to supplement the standard realist reading to explain the approaches to India's security responses. India's responses showcase historical precepts that are difficult to accommodate within theories based on rational state behaviour. It also shows that for states like India, aspirational claims of exceptionalism have entered the discourses of security in the maritime space.

India's security outlook for the Bay of Bengal: Impact of strategic history

India's maritime identity and outlook bear a considerable imprint of its pre-colonial and colonial history. Indian foreign policy discourses, its naval doctrines, and accounts of its political elites showcase the primacy of the Bay of Bengal and its position in India's defence. As a corollary, the Bay of Bengal becomes a strategic arena to control and deter threats that might emerge toward India. India's perceptions of security in the Bay of Bengal can be broadly viewed through defensive and aspirational prisms. While they are interdependent, there are two broad differences. First, the objective of a defensive understanding is the security of India's land borders and immediate maritime interests. Its purpose of security in the Bay of Bengal is a means to an end and not an end in itself. The end is to secure the Indian coastline, islands, and maritime territories. An aspirational understanding goes beyond it to use the Bay of Bengal maritime space as a springboard to project power in an extended geography of the Indo-Pacific. While security in the first understanding is just the absence of threats to the Indian landmass, the second understanding takes a 'survival-plus' model.[46] It takes a more ambitious view of

[46] The term is borrowed from Booth, Ken (2007). Booth's reference can be broadly used to understand the categories of defensive and aspirational security dimensions from the Indian perspective. The defensive approach is about survival, and the aspirational model is 'survival-plus', whereas 'plus' refers to the "choice that comes from (relative) freedom from existential threats" (Booth, 2007, p.106). In other words, India's freedom from existential security threats allows it to pursue an aspiration of pre-eminence in the region.

India's need to control the Bay of Bengal maritime space linked with its expanding scope of interest, rising economic dependency, and pre-emptive strategic manoeuvre. Second, the approach of the defensive understanding is continental in outlook, while the aspirational model is maritime. Unlike being characterised as a void between South and Southeast Asia, the Bay of Bengal has acquired the symbolism of being a bridge of connectivity, prosperity, and security[47]. In the defensive model, the sea's control adds to the land's security. A naval profile will supplement the armed forces in strengthening the borders. Meanwhile, the aspirational model accounts for a more comprehensive understanding of sea power as a national power and development component.[48] India's rising volume of overseas trade, its naval modernisation and expansion,[49] and its overtures towards Southeast Asia and the Pacific[50] explain the aspirational security model in the Bay of Bengal. The security perimeter does not end at the periphery of land borders but extends to a larger circumference in which a ring-fencing approach to sea control is essential.

While there are claims of the Chola Empire's strides in Southeast Asia in the pre-colonial era,[51] British rule laid down the fundamentals of sustained power projection.[52] It enclosed defensive structures in the region, stretching from Indian shores to Singapore. The defensive model inherited the insecurities and desires of the British Empire but acknowledged that it did not bear the material and military capabilities that the British possessed. It and the immediate land

[47] PTI, 'India Envisages Free, Open, Inclusive and Peaceful Indo-Pacific Built on Rules-Based Order: EAM Jaishankar', *The Hindu*, 18 August 2022.

[48] Arun Prakash, *From the Crow's Nest: A Compendium of Speeches and Writings on Maritime and Other Issues* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2021).

[49] Harsh V (eds.) Pant, *The Rise of Indian Navy: Internal Vulnerabilities, External Challenges* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012).

[50] Walter C. Ladwig, 'Delhi's Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, "Look East," and India's Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific', *Asian Security* 5, no. 2 (5 June 2009): 87–113, https://doi.org/10.1080/14799850902886476.

[51] Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany, and Vijay Sakhuja, *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2010).

[52] Iskander Rehman, 'India's Aspirational Naval Doctrine', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 October 2012.

border conflicts considerably constrained India's maritime footprint. The aspirational model at sea blends with contemporary India's desire for a rising power status since the post-Cold War era. Both models consistently indicate that India's security in the Bay of Bengal is not just a raw claim to power but more of a claim to prominence and status in the region.

India's strategic outlook had to consider the complex realities of the post-empire situation in the Bay of Bengal theatre. The maritime space was now shared amongst new, sovereign, and independent states. While there were allusions to the Indian Ocean being 'India's Ocean',[53] a robust Indian presence reminiscent of the empire led to strategic and political complications in the neighbourhood. This fits the defensive realist predictions of how power accumulation can lead to diminishing returns on security. For a brief period during the 1960s, Indonesia challenged the Indian naval presence in the Bay of Bengal, especially in the Andaman Sea, as a case in point.[54] Besides India's recurring deficit in naval defence spending, this is overshadowed by the army.[55] India's naval expansion in the 1980s concerned the Southeast Asian states. During the initial years of the 'Look East' Policy, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao had to categorically dissuade these fears. In an address at the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in September 1994, Rao stated that "there is no cause whatsoever for the alarmist views propounded about India's alleged expansionist designs or its blue water Navy. On any basis of rational and impartial comparison, it will be crystal clear that India has not coveted any land or other asset belonging to any other country, leave alone having any expansionist design through military might".[56] He further adds, "Our interests lie in peace and harmony which will enable

[53] David Scott, 'India's "Grand Strategy" for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions', *Asia-Pacific Review* 13, no. 2 (November 2006): 97–129, https://doi.org/10.1080/13439000601029048.

[54] David Brewster, India's Ocean The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership (London: Routledge, 2014). 124

[55] Holmes, Yoshihara, and Winner, Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First Century. 80

[56] PV Narasimha Rao, 'India and the Asia-Pacific – A New Relationship – Speech at the Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore, September 8, 1994 ', in *Selected Speeches, July 1994 to June 1995*, vol. 4 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1995), 395–98.

us to improve our standards of living. Our intentions are also evident from our recent policies, as also the fact that in terms of per capita expenditure and as a percentage of GDP, our defence expenditure is perhaps among the lowest of any country that contains an armed capability even half our size. The Australian Senate Report (1991) has also concluded that India does not have the capability of sustained force projection far beyond its boundaries and capability reflects intention." Yet, Rao, in the same speech, lays out India's potential aspiration, "while India can be said to have been confined to its strategic defence, this does not detract from its ability and willingness to exercise its role in global affairs".[57]

Therefore, India's defensive understanding and a benign aspirational model constituted the official stance. India's growing naval profile and rising power aspirations gradually casts a maritime identity closer to the aspiration model.[58]

Defensive and Aspirational Dimensions in India's Security Outlook: Ideas and Imprints

India's defensive mindset was more officially argued in its post-independence years. It does not directly cater to the Bay of Bengal space independently as a region. Instead, the Bay of Bengal was analogous to the larger Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and South Asia. It can be broadly argued that maritime regions as distinct spaces did not evolve in the Indian understanding immediately post-independence. The dynamics of regions develop when political elites can domestically align the nation's identity within the milieu of a regional construct.[59] This alignment happens when states find spaces to be instrumental. India's use of the Bay of Bengal was limited during this period. India's dependency on the sea lanes of communications was relatively less as it had limited sea-borne trade and an inward-looking

[57] Ibid. 395-98

[58] Pratnashree Basu, 'Maritime India: The Quest for a Steadfast Identity', Observer Research Foundation, 29 November 2021.

[59] Sinderpal Singh, 'From "Asia" to " Asia-Pacific": Indian Political Elites and Changing Conceptions of India's Regional Spaces.', 28 September 2010.

economy for most of its post-independence years. Its disengagement with the Southeast Asian states was a corollary of decolonisation and the subsequent Cold War. Additionally, the naval service was dwarfed by the army in the face of no apparent threats from the sea.

Nehru, in many ways the architect of India's foundational foreign policy principles,[60] spoke on the interlinkages of the security between India and Southeast Asia during the late 1920s.[61] As the Second World War grew closer, Nehru highlighted the significance of British forward-looking bases in Singapore and Trincomalee, which aimed to secure threats against India.[62] Post-1947, several factors led to the withdrawal of Indian maritime presence.[63] Tied down by conflicts on land borders, Nehru had to dilute India's naval profile considerably. The Indian Navy was also an adjunct to the Royal Navy, which was supposed to perform the 'Cinderella Service' without direct military threats to play any commanding role.[64] Post-independence private papers of Nehru provide us a glimpse of his vision for India's defence in the postwar period. On February 5, 1947, he wrote in a secret note about the armed forces, "The present objective is to ensure internal and frontier security and concentrate on industrial development. The land forces for this purpose need not be greater than the pre-war level, the navy should not be expanded, and the air forces may gradually be expanded as it is the most efficient weapon today for immediate action either externally or in case of any aggression on the frontier. The land army will then consist of about 210,000 men with Indian Officers. The navy may be kept

[60] Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'Still Under Nehru's Shadow? The Absence of Foreign Policy Frameworks in India', *India Review* 8, no. 3 (13 August 2009): 209–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/14736480903116750.

[61] Jagat S. Bright, Important Speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru: Being a Collection of Most Significant Speeches Delivered by Jawaharlal Nehru from 1922 to 1945 (Lahore: The Indian Printing Works, 1945). 63

[62] Ibid. 156

[63] C Raja Mohan, 'Maritime Asia: An Indian Perspective', in *The Changing Maritime Scene in Asia: Rising Tensions and Future Strategic Stability*, ed. Geoffrey Till (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 49–58.

[64] Yogesh Joshi, 'Nehru's Navy: India's Tryst with Aircraft Carriers', Observer Research Foundation, Occasional Paper, 379 2022.

at its present low level. The air force, to begin with, will consist of ten squadrons with full maintenance units."[65]

Nevertheless, time and again, Nehru evoked the fearful imagery of India's colonial capture through the sea and an imperative to secure the oceans to remain stable on the land. Nehru evoked a variation of the American Monroe Doctrine to discard external interference and build India's prominence and status in the neighbourhood.[66] The defensive understanding availed a two-pronged strategy of institutional cooperation and simultaneous naval preparedness. India's first Field marshal, KM Cariappa, provided an account of this defensive strategy in 1958. He writes, "To India, the security of this region is of paramount importance, as oceanic routes across the ocean carry the bulk of her overseas trade. If these routes came under the control of countries not friendly to India, this would threaten very seriously her economic and industrial development, in fact, her very independence. Three sides of India's frontiers are bordered by – a serious matter. This cannot be lightly dismissed. India is progressively gaining ground as a coming Eastern power. As such, she has a big responsibility in taking active measures to remind her Asian neighbours of the need to provide jointly for the defence of this region for their mutual security. Her resources in material and manpower could certainly contribute impressively to this task. India, although committed to a policy of negotiated settlement and non-alignment, cannot possibly neglect her seaward defences. She has unquestionably got to think of having adequate naval forces to protect the miles and miles of her coastline, even though by herself she cannot guard her sea trade communications alone. This can be done only by understanding among the countries concerned and by joint action."[67]

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[65] Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Note by Nehru on "Armed Forces in India in the Postwar Period" (Secret), February 5, 1947 ', *Private Papers of Jawaharlal Nehru (Post - 1947)* (New Delhi: Manuscripts Division, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library , 1947).

[66] Holmes, Yoshihara, and Winner, Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First Century. 42-45

[67] Study group of the Indian Council of World Affairs, *Defence and Security in the Indian Ocean Area* (New Delhi: Asian Publishing House, 1958). viii

Institutional cooperation was essential to develop relations with regional states in the pursuit of defence. It was to dissuade the fears of the neighbouring states that India would inherit the hegemonic British position. This complimented India's support for decolonisation and Pan-Asianism as a virtue of its foreign policy. It partly compensated for the lack of military depth that was far less than required to deal with great power rivalry alone.[68] Both of these components were required to tackle the intruding great power rivalry that potentially threatened India's defence and its position in these waters. When the British withdrew from the East of Suez, India decided to restructure the order in the Indian Ocean region.[69] It sought to rally around the regional states behind cooperative security. It denied the 'power vacuum' as a ploy of the Americans and the Soviets to find new theatres for the Cold War. India's principled positions of anti-imperialism and non-alignment tout court denied the presence of any vacuum that needed considerable power interference.[70] From its inception, Nehru touted SEATO as an encirclement strategy.[71] In 1968, Defence Minister Sardar Swaran Singh "We do not accept the validity of the propaganda that a vacuum will be created in the Indian Ocean on the British decision to withdraw from the area east Suez. It is not our intention, firstly to accept the validity of this concept that any vacuum can be created, if any foreign power leaves any particular area, then it is for that area and for territory to take adequate steps to safeguard their own security and their own country".[72] Predictably, India extensively backed the proposal of IOZOP from 1971 at the international and regional levels. It pitched to convert the entire IOR within the non-aligned fold and rejected any external presence[73]. However, India did not wholly depend

[68] C Raja Mohan, 'The Indian Ocean: The Changing Strategic Context ' (New Delhi, 1991).

[69] William L. Dowdy and Russell B. Trood, *The Indian Ocean: Perspectives on a Strategic Arena*, ed. William L. Dowdy and Russell B. Trood (Durham: Durham University Press, 1985).

[70] Jawaharlal Nehru, India's Foreign Policy – Selected Speeches, September 1946 – April 1961 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1961). 194-95

[71] Ibid. 94

[72] 'Lok Sabha Debates, Vol XV', 3192-3202 (New Delhi, April 1968). 16

[73] Lok Sabha Secretariat, 'Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace'; Vivekanandan, 'The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace: Problems and Prospects'.

on institutional cooperation and disarmament. While India called for the rejection of the increasing militarisation of the Indian Ocean, it procured military assets at a higher rate, modernised its naval profile, and attained nuclear capabilities.[74] This also had to do with the increasing militarisation of the Indian Ocean Region. This compelled India to develop its military base. In 1982, India's Ambassador to the UN, AP Venkateshwaran, pointed out the situation before the Ad-Hoc committee on the Indian Ocean in Geneva, "The Indian Ocean has become another arena of global strategic confrontation recently with the introduction of nuclear missile submarines, ICBMs and long-range bombers. Military bases like Diego Garcia are being continuously expanded, and at the same time, reinforced mobile bases are being positioned, indicating clearly that the military presence is meant to be permanent and not just for the duration of a particular crisis. These developments have added a new dimension to the insecurity of the littoral and hinterland states, making external intervention and occupation a constant and real nightmare".[75] This complicated India's stance as defence procurement required better relations with Russia. Its selective engagements with the great powers proved detrimental to the institutional cause of IOZOP.[76] However, its designs of military upgrades considerably fell short of balancing against the adversarial powers asymmetrically. Therefore, India continued to pay lip service to such institutional mechanisms without altogether abandoning them. It was effectively a period where India bought time to build its military profile relative to the other littoral states and simultaneously reject possible interference that would undermine India's stature in the region.

[74] GM Hiranandani, *Transition to Eminence: The Indian Navy, 1976-1990* (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), Naval Headquarters, in association with Lancer Publishers , 2005).

[75] 'Foreign Affairs Record, India's Draft Resolution at U.N. for Prevention of Nuclear War' (New Delhi, 1982).

[76] Yogesh Joshi, 'Whither Non-Alignment? Indian Ocean Zone of Peace and New Delhi's Selective Alignment with Great Powers during the Cold War, 1964–1979', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 30, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 26–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2019.1557414.

The turn of the post-Cold War years led to a more aspirational view of security in the Bay of Bengal for India. It started having an official stamp of broadly three reasons. First, a paradigmatic shift in the economy meant that India's volume of overseas trade increased, mostly sea-borne. The Straits of Malacca, which connected the Indian and the Pacific Oceans at the mouth of the Andaman Sea, was crucial in terms of the Sea Lanes of Communications.[77] Second, the foundations of India's Look East policy meant it sought more durable and enigmatic partners in Southeast Asia who flourished financially.[78] The Bay of Bengal bridged the South and Southeast Asian gap for the diversification of foreign relations after the Cold War. Finally, China's growing presence was starting to undercut India's pre-eminence in the Bay of Bengal region.[79] Chinese burgeoning relations with Myanmar meant that the tides in the military balance of the Bay of Bengal were shifting. Against this backdrop, India's regional role was reinvigorated, and its maritime footprint grew. India's presence as a regional security force was justified by invoking the past. While the cultural links between India and Southeast Asia were drawn to rekindle relations with this region, British sources were cast to showcase India's maritime past and the need for a present role to overcome India's unfortunate sea blindness. The ideas of Indian centrality in the British system and the Indian Ocean, argued by George N. Curzon[80], were widely discussed by India's former Foreign Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh.[81] A modern interpretation of this policy is termed Neo-Curzonian, where India's centrality is used for multi-alignment and control ranging from East Africa to the

[77] Dhruva Jaishankar, 'Indian Ocean Region: A Pivot for India's Growth', Brookings, 12 September 2016.

[78] David Brewster, 'The Rise of the Bengal Tigers: The Growing Strategic Importance of the Bay of Bengal', *Journal of Defence Studies* 9, no. 2 (2015).

[79] C Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington : Brookings Institution , 2012); David Brewster, *India and China at Sea*, ed. David Brewster, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199479337.001.0001.

[80] George N. Curzon, The Place of India in the Empire Being an Address Delivered Before the Philosophical Institute of Edinburgh, on October 19, 1909 (Minnesota: J Murray, 1909). 9-12

[81] Swapan Dasgupta, 'Curzonian Foreign Policy', *OPEN*, 18 June 2021.

Pacific.[82] India's regional prominence and leadership aspirations are put forward by combining an India-centric benign leadership with a cooperative security approach. It is an order where littoral states are stakeholders in a shared conception of security space. India heads initiatives to be a net security provider, capacity-building initiatives, and distribution of public goods.[83]

The writings of India's most prominent maritime thinker, KM Panikkar, were drawn to argue for India's aspirational claims. His central argument remains that "whoever controls the Indian Ocean has India at his mercy".[84] Panikkar makes two pertinent points about the Indian defence and the Bay of Bengal in his works. First, keeping India at the centre of the Indian Ocean, geography, and the presence of powerful states made the eastern half more vulnerable than the west. Panikkar elaborates, "Japan's lightning conquest of Singapore and her consequent control of the Bay of Bengal on from the bases of Malacca and the Andamans and the harbours on the Burmese coast, have demonstrated that the challenge may come more easily from the East than from the West".[85] While the geographic vulnerability is historically established, Panikkar reminded us that this threat to India is not necessarily from only an aggressive power. Despite no power projection and intentions from China at the cusp of the Second World War, Panikkar prophetically argued, "the elimination of Japan from the ranks of naval powers will in no way solve the problem, for there is every reason to think that a victorious China will embark on a naval career. With her bases extending as far as Hainan, China is placed in even a more advantageous position than Japan".[86] India's prerogative for security is maintaining a constant vigil in the east.

[82] C Raja Mohan and Parag Khanna, 'Getting India Right Mutual Interests and Democratic Affinity', *Hoover Institution*, 1 February 2006.

[83] Anit Mukherjee, 'India as a Net-Security Provider: Concepts and Impediments', 2014.

[84] KM Panikkar, India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1951). 84

[85] Ibid. 85

[86] Ibid. 85

Second, India and Southeast Asia are inextricably linked in terms of security. India's vulnerabilities are directly related to controlling the chokepoints in the Bay of Bengal, prominently the Malaccan Straits. The Portuguese command in the Indian Ocean, as envisioned by Albuquerque, was complete with its control of the Malaccan Straits. The Dutch challenged the Portuguese by going reversely, starting from Batavia and extending to a forward base in Ceylon. The long British control took root "on the lands adjacent to the seaboard in Madras and Bengal".[87] Therefore, apart from the chokepoints, Panikkar envisioned a larger arc of defence encompassing the Bay of Bengal, which called for two strategies. One arm is a ring-fenced approach over the maritime space with additional control over the islands that would form the bulwark of defence. He argues, "However strongly organised on the mainland, the defence of the long and open Indian coastline, not to speak of the active control of the ocean, is possible only by having suitable island cover as advanced bases. The possession of the Andamans and Nicobars protects the East coast and secures adequate control of the Bay of Bengal."[88]. The fine print of this vision is acknowledged in the first naval doctrine published in the public domain in 2004, which emphasised India's primary area of interest, ranging from the Straits of Hormuz to the Malacca.[89] India consolidated its security positioning by militarising the Andaman and Nicobar Islands despite the ecological risks of these islands north of the Malaccan Straits.[90]

Panikkar's second arm of the policy was a collective security model in the region where the Indian Navy would lead and collaborate with regional actors in Southeast Asia, along with the US and Britain. Panikkar saw a broader and more independent role for the navy, not just as a

[87] Ibid. 67

[88] Ibid. 93

[89] 'Indian Maritime Doctrine'. 56-57

[90] Abhijit Singh, 'Andaman and Nicobar Islands: India's "Strategic Anchor" Holds Ground', Observer Research Foundation, 5 February 2019; Pratnashree Basu, Sohini Bose, and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Facilitating India's Connectivity in the Bay of Bengal', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 297–316, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1637553.

supplementary aid to the army. He maintained that "an exclusively land policy of defence for India will in future be nothing short of blindness".[91] The defence of these waters "must, therefore, be a cooperative effort of India and Britain and other Commonwealth units having interests on the ocean with the primary responsibility lies on the Indian Navy to guard the steel ring created by Singapore, Ceylon, Mauritius and Socotra" (Panikkar, 1951, p.95).[92] The traces of this vision can be tracked in political and tactical registers.[93] Politically, India's Look East (and Act East) policies, since the post-Cold War period, embarked upon an array of defence and strategic partnerships with the Southeast Asian states. Tactically, the Indian Navy has assumed a broader role in operations. The Indian Naval doctrine categorically mentions a diplomatic and benign role for the Navy, which is used as an arm of foreign policy.[94]

The aspirational understanding of security translates to two aspects that answer the nature of India's security understanding and imperatives. First, India has more than just raw claims of power or survival in this space; it also includes other motivations like regional leadership and pre-eminence. Since the turn of the new century, India has also taken the lead in working on non-traditional security issues. The 2004 Tsunami in the Bay of Bengal was a reminder of the turbulent transboundary regional effects.[95] This forced states to come together and pool their powers for cooperation. India saw an opportunity to legitimise its status as a forerunning naval force and a responsible power.[96] It assumed responsibility for being a 'net-security' provider

[91] KM Panikkar, India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1951). 93

[92] Ibid. 95

[93] David Scott, 'India's "Grand Strategy" for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions', *Asia-Pacific Review* 13, no. 2 (November 2006): 97–129, https://doi.org/10.1080/13439000601029048.

[94] 'Indian Maritime Doctrine'. 56-57

[95] 'Bridging the Ocean: India Leads Relief Measures in Tsunami-Hit Areas December 2004-January 2005' (New Delhi, n.d.).

[96] Ivan Lidarev and Harsh V. Pant, 'India and Maritime Governance in the Indian Ocean: The Impact of Geopolitics on India's Involvement in Maritime Governance', *Contemporary South Asia* 30, no. 2 (3 April 2022): 269–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2022.2059062.

in the region.[97] Shivshankar Menon, India's former foreign secretary, pointed out how India's regional stance has to consider reorienting the space, not just in zero-sum terms.[98] The Bay of Bengal cannot be reduced to a space of inter-state hostility. Secondly, internal and external factors have catapulted a latent aspirational vision to be wielded more visibly in the contemporary years. The external factors refer to the geopolitical changes in the Bay of Bengal region. The Bay of Bengal was no longer a dormant sea but a growing strategic theatre.[99] Rising dependency on the sea lanes of communication, growing Chinese footprints and the burgeoning economies of the Southeast and East Asian states have transformed the strategic landscape. India's internal factors considerably changed. Due to its trade dependency, India's uses of the Bay of Bengal were now instrumental.[100] Its naval prowess had grown to execute a more ambitious strategy. This points to how strategic imaginations are not static but contingent and shifting. When the opportune moment arrives, latent state imaginations are crafted to fulfil objectives.

India's security responses: Historical Claims and Sub-optimality

Reading India's security responses in the Bay of Bengal raises a few questions. First, what is India's perception of the threat from the Bay of Bengal? Earlier, we pointed out that states usually demarcate spaces in security terms when there are threats or possibilities of threats. There is no existential threat from the Bay of Bengal, as per the evidence. What is India seeking to secure, then? We need to take an expansive view of security beyond existential threats if we

[97] Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, 'From "Net Security Provider" to "Preferred Security Partnerships": The Rhetoric, Reality and Result of India's Maritime Security Cooperation', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18, no. 2 (4 May 2022): 87–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2022.2118191.

[98] Gathered from an unstructured personal interview with Dr Shivshankar Menon, Former National Security Advisor (2010-14), Foreign Secretary of India (2006-09), date of interview: June 10, 2023

[99] Nitin Agarwala and Premesha Saha, 'Is the Bay of Bengal Regaining Its Lost Importance?', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 336–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1637572.

[100] Isabelle Saint-Mézard, 'India's Act East Policy: Strategic Implications for the Indian Ocean', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 12, no. 2 (2 July 2016): 177–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2016.1226753.

were to account for India's security imagination. India envisions security not just from attacks and threats from other states but the security of its centrality and autonomy. The realist theories of security cannot explain how states can strategise to secure exceptionalism. Despite existential threats, India has consistently demarcated the Bay of Bengal as a security space and has developed its security capabilities incrementally. India's legacy as a British state, its postcolonial identity and its claims of regional prominence explain why it desires to attain a different notion of security.

During the Cold War, great power rivalry and the presence of extra-regional states could potentially undercut India's centrality. Even then, the superpowers did not pose an existential threat. A possible exception was the incident of the USS Enterprise sailing into the Bay of Bengal in 1971. The communications series, documented in PN Haksar's private files, between India's Ministry of Defence and Finance after the proposed plans of defence expansion reveal this dilemma over threat perception.[101] The Ministry of Defence proposed a more substantial role for the Indian Navy, particularly strengthing the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Govind Narain, Defence Secretary, wrote to Ministry of Finance explaining the defence expansion, "What looks like the size of a hand may assume the size of a cloud in no time. The possibility of the Malacca Straits becoming a centre of tension across the Isthmus of Kra linking the Andaman Sea with the Gulf of Siam would raise the strategic importance of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands and, along with it, our security problems regarding the islands. As the development of Navy takes time and requires large investments, adequate steps for building up our naval strength would have to be taken in good time. In view of the recent CENTO exercises in the Arabian Sea and the participation of Pak Navy in these exercises, the implementation of our Naval plan, which is essentially one of replacement and modernisation, assumes greater

[101] Collected from the Private Papers, PN Haksar, Manuscripts Division, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library

urgency."[102] Furthermore, Cmd. JS Bajwa, Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet, highlighted the sharp increase of territorial violations in the Bay of Bengal that must be countered with an increased role and allocation of logistics for the Indian Navy. Around this time, the Indian Navy was looking to expand while justifying a relevant role compared to the Army and the Air Force.[103] Admiral SN Kohli pointed out the need for an aircraft carrier for timely action and advantage over the other littoral states that have either acquired or are acquiring surface missiles of various capabilities.[104]

The Ministry of Finance critically questioned the relevance of the plans, considering that there is hardly any existential threat from the Bay of Bengal. Secondly, there were insufficient material resources to advance such expansions. In a scathing response, Abhijit Mozoomdur, Secretary (Expenditure), laid these arguments to PN Haksar, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission. He stated, "But the Navy's real argument (…) rest on the supposed need for India to become a major Naval power in the Indian Ocean. The so called potential threats from Iran and Indonesia, even the need to protect the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (from whose threat it is not clear) are simply justifications for India to have a substantial naval "presence" in the area. Can we really aim at a position which would enable us to claim equality with the superpowers when one of them chooses to send a fleet into the Indian Ocean? In what sort of contingency would the Indian Navy be protecting Indian merchant men from the Malacca Straits to the Red Sea? Against which enemy do we propose to deploy our growing strength of submarines? Against which country's submarines are we proposing to deploy three

[102] 'Comments of the Ministry of Defence on the Note Received by Ministry of Finance - Govind Narain, Defence Secretary, January, 1975 Annexure C', *Private Papers of PN Haksar (Subject File No. 296)* (Manuscripts Division, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library , 1975).

[103] 'Cabinet Secretariat, Department of Cabinet Affairs (Military Wing), No. CMW/JPC/5 - Security of Andaman and Nicobar Group of Islands, May 7, 1975 - JS Bawa, Commodore, IN, Dy Sec. to the Cabinet', *Private Papers of PN Haksar (Subject File 296)* (New Delhi: Manuscripts Division, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library , 7 May 1975).

[104] 'Chief of Naval Staff - Role of the Aircraft Carrier - SN Kohli (Admiral), 3 May 1975 ', *Private Papers of PN Haksar (Subject File 296)* (New Delhi: Manuscripts Division, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, 1975).

dimensional anti-submarine capability? I would submit that it is necessary for a country in India's economic position today to lower its sights and to concentrate on coastal defence and the defence of off-shore oil installations against possible attacks by the Pakistan Navy in the event of resumed Indo-Pakistan hostilities. Any longer term planning should be restricted to the building of survey ships, coastal patrol boats and the like."[105]

India conceives the Chinese intrusion into the Bay of Bengal during the post-Cold War years as the primary threat. However, there is no direct evidence of a Chinese attack on India along the sea. It would be counterproductive for the Chinese to wage an attack and control the Bay of Bengal, given the dependency on the sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean. It has been highlighted how cooperation is a possible avenue between India and China in the Bay of Bengal, given that both the rising economies are dependent on the steady flow of resources, particularly oil.[106] This does not refute the claims of defending against attacks or threats but adds another component to examining India's security understanding. This security variant has often been regarded as ensuring India's sphere of influence. However, India seeks to maintain a careful balance by not projecting overt displays of power or influence.

India shows sub-optimal behaviour on a realist scale. Its responses do not convincingly display balancing or bandwagon. Despite incremental internal balancing, India's defence procurement has been slow compared to its projections. It also has severe difficulties in developing a domestic defence industry complex. The recurring deficit in defence spending has furthered this. While India's absolute numbers in defence spending have grown, it is nowhere comparable to the defence budgets of major states that envision projecting their capabilities

[105] 'Ajit Mozoomdur (Secretary), Expenditure Writing to PN Haksar(Dy Chairman, Planning Commission) on 12.04.1976 Notes Regarding the Departures of the Defence Plan (1974-79) ', *Private Papers of PN Haksar (Subject File 298)* (New Delhi: Manuscripts Division, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, 1975).

[106] Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Pratnashree Basu, 'Meeting with China in the Bay of Bengal', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 12, no. 2 (2 July 2016): 143–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2016.1226751.

beyond their borders. India's external balancing has been suboptimal as well. We can take three instances across three timelines of bipolarity and beyond to point to this sub-optimality. First, there are reports that during the 1962 conflict with China, Nehru asked for US aid in the Bay of Bengal to deter another round of Chinese overtures in the Northeast.[107] However, this did not allow for an Indo-US alliance. A few years later, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri ruled out the presence of US forces in the Bay of Bengal for any strategic purpose when he addressed the Parliament. He was technically correct, as Nehru reportedly had asked for air aid, and the US had also sent naval aid. Furthermore, the Chinese ceasefire happened before US ships could enter India's coasts. However, they did stay in the Bay of Bengal vicinity for some time until there was an assurance that China would not attack again.[108] Considerable evidence shows Nehru's appeal to President Kennedy for "not merely the survival of India, but the survival of free and independent Governments in the whole of this subcontinent or in Asia".[109] The public denial was against any alignment with the US, which would have been a balancing state and favourable in the region for India considering its security threat.

Second, during the Bangladesh War, India considerably sided with the Soviet Union to offset the combination of the US support to Pakistan. The realignment of US-Pakistan-China pushed India to sign the Friendship Treaty with the Soviets in August 1971 as the war was setting in. Since 1968, the Indian Navy has shifted its procurement of military equipment from the British to the Soviet. However, the benefits incurred by the Soviets did not lead to a formal military alliance and remained limited to defence partnerships. India had to explicitly clarify the fears of its neighbouring littoral states, particularly Indonesia, who felt that while India was arguing

[107] PTI, 'Nehru Sought U.S. Help during 1962 Indo-China War: Book', *The Hindu*, 14 October 2014.

[108] Michael Brecher, 'Non-Alignment Under Stress: The West and the India-China Border War', Pacific Affairs 52, no. 4 (1979): 612, https://doi.org/10.2307/2757064. 620-21

[109] Anvar Alikhan, 'In 1962, India and US Were "That" Close to Becoming Allies in a War against China', Scroll, 23 January 2016. https://scroll.in/article/802276/in-1962-india-and-us-were-that-close-to-becoming-allies-in-a-war-against-china

against the arms race and big power rivalry in the Indian Ocean, it was giving access to the Soviets covertly for its benefits. Indian Foreign Affairs Minister Swaran Singh had to, on record, reject this claim of giving any access to the Soviets in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.[110] Even when the Soviet ships posed no apparent threat, India's official stance was critical of the Soviet presence, grouping it with the US. Regarding Soviet ships in the region, Indira Gandhi clarified in an interview stating, "The presence of warships is a symptom – not the cause of the disease. The cause is that powerful countries still think that power politics override the need for cooperation".[111]

Third, China's overtures in the Indian Ocean region are crucial. In cutting down its dependency on the Straits of Malacca, China's bridgehead strategy intends to link its Yunnan province and the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar. Investments in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka threaten India as China increasingly becomes a resident power. China's presence has invoked fears of encirclement and choking India's coastline. Beijing has gained a foothold over strategic points across South Asia, often called the 'string of pearls'.[112] India betrays any tendencies of bandwagoning as it does not partner with China in Chinese-led initiatives in the region. Even the regional fora where India and China, like the BCIM, are present also have constraints.[113] The deficit in arms is relatively high in achieving parity, and India's defence build-up has been relatively slow. India does not build a formal alliance with the US and its allies to balance against China. For instance, in the case of the Indo-Pacific, India has been categorical in being inclusive in its definition of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, unlike the US, which is clear about

[110] David Brewster, 'The Relationship between India and Indonesia', Asian Survey 51, no. 2 (1 March 2011): 221–44, https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2011.51.2.221. 225

[111] Indira Gandhi, In a Hurry for Progress – Interview Published in the US News and World Report, May 25, 1970, The Years of Endeavour – Selected Speeches of Indira Gandhi – August 1969 – August 1972 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 1975). 674

[112] R Vignesh, 'China's Growing Security Presence in the IOR and Its Implications for India' (New Delhi, 2022). https://parliamentlibraryindia.nic.in/lcwing/Chinas_growing_security.pdf

[113] Mahendra P. Lama, 'Another Failed India-China Platform', *Kathmandu Post*, 28 July 2020.

containing China.[114] India's strategy has been interpreted as 'evasive balancing' as it does not overtly balance China. However, it assures it of no such intention, even when visibly strengthening its engagements with the Quad.[115] At least, until the Galwan crisis, India simultaneously engaged with Beijing bilaterally while working with the Quad. The potential of a Chinese threat notwithstanding, India's official statements remain veiled and do not mention China directly. Nevertheless, an evasive balancing could not prevent hostilities between India and China. While post-Galwan, India's engagement and reliance on the Quad has increased, it has not meant a complete acceptance of the Quad on all registers. India continues to differ on several values and contest the nature of Quad's security narratives. [116]

Do the existing realist approaches convincingly explain India's security approach in the Bay of Bengal? According to the defensive realist logic, anarchy would shove states to form the balance of power. A state is unlikely to pursue grand power ambitions if the conquest is arduous and simultaneously balancing is optimal. Naturally, any great power aspirations of the balancers would upset the balance of power that ensures security in the first place. India's strategy cannot be explained in these aspects. India's balancing has been suboptimal. A defensive realist understanding would not have any hesitation in alliance-making as it is the instrument for guaranteeing a stable balance of power. India rarely brings hard security matters into state partnerships. At the same time, it has reservations against alliances. Even when balancing or bandwagoning helps counter the threats, India has other considerations of autonomy and prestige. This can be attributed to India's long-sustained doctrines like non-alignment and, later, strategic autonomy, which are domestically legitimised. In the 1980s,

[114] 'Bridging the Ocean: India Leads Relief Measures in Tsunami-Hit Areas December 2004-January 2005'. https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/185_bridging-the-ocean-tsunami.pdf

[115] Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Evasive Balancing: India's Unviable Indo-Pacific Strategy', *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (1 January 2020): 75–93, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz224.

[116] Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 'India and Order Transition in the Indo-Pacific: Resisting the Quad as a "Security Community"', *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 2 (4 March 2023): 378–405, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2160792.

India's naval expansion stroked fears among Southeast Asian states that were symptomatic of power accumulation, leading to diminishing returns on security.[117]

Soft balancing is not entirely trusted. As a result, we see sustained efforts of sub-optimal internal balancing. While India's behaviour shows hedging techniques of simultaneous cooperation and competition against the US and China, hedging cannot explain a component of India's engagements where it considerably invests beyond big powers in littoral states. Security here is not just about protection from big powers through hedging but also claiming a regional order where India can lead partnerships and institutions with littoral states. For instance, India's insistence on ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific is a middle path between the US and China's regional rivalry.[118] More importantly, there is an aspect of Indian pre-eminence in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Region. This borrows from its geographical and historical centrality in the ocean, which the other states do not enjoy. Balancing against the hegemon cannot potentially stand if there are differences within the balancing powers over intentions.

The aspirational security might look very close to the offensive realist understanding. Here, a state is either a hegemon or biding for hegemony. India's position for eminence and spearheading the Bay of Bengal security might look very close to what a state might pursue to bid for hegemony. According to offensive realism, a state stresses maximising power as it is unsure how much security is enough to secure a state. However, India's stance does not show this element of power maximisation in terms of intentions or capabilities in the Bay of Bengal. First, power maximisation is viable when the states can succeed or compete with its closest

[117] The fears were addressed by India's Prime Minister when the Look East Policy began, see PV Narasimha Rao, 'India and the Asia-Pacific – A New Relationship – Speech at the Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore, September 8, 1994 '.

[118] The Hindu Bureau, 'India Supports ASEAN-Centrality in the Indo-Pacific Region: Dhankhar'. The Hindu, November 11, 2022

opponent, the source of insecurity. Regarding intentions, India has never sought to outweigh the United States in the past or China in contemporary times. In terms of capabilities as well, this strategy is ruled out. Secondly, India's stance has been much towards being a net security provider or a first responder amongst the littoral states. When it comes to balancing China, India's strategy is well explained by the concept of 'zone balancing' where without directly challenging the rival, "the balancer seeks to harden other states against the adversary's coercion or inducements, thereby limiting the adversary's opportunities to build strategic influence".[119] Technically speaking, zone balancing may or may not maximise power as there is no guarantee that the states receiving benefits from one end would be bandwagoning. India's approach can best be a 'power legitimisation' rather than a power maximisation strategy. Constant efforts are to rationalise India's pre-eminence through definite indicators of power and by alluding to social and cultural history. India's rise as a maritime state has also been fashioned through a responsible power in these waters. Finally, power maximisation is dependent on domestic factors. Essentially, a state cannot depend on the fortunes of balancing to pursue hegemony. On this front, India's imagination has been severely constrained by its limited domestic defence infrastructure.

Three patterns linked to India's security responses characterise the model of states advancing an aspirational security claim. First, states making aspirational claims will likely avoid hard balancing and formal alliances. The Indian state has articulated this claim through doctrines like strategic autonomy. Unless the state making the claim can lead the alliance in that theatre of operations, it is unlikely to join an alliance as a less dominant partner to relinquish or dilute its position. India continues to resist alliances despite the possibility of threatening situations. In the absence of relative military strength, a component of India's Cold War strategy was to

[119] Arzan Tarapore, 'Zone Balancing: India and the Quad's New Strategic Logic', *International Affairs* 99, no. 1 (9 January 2023): 239–57, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac281.

lead the littoral states against big power rivalry through institutional mechanisms. Does that mean India is more likely to comply with soft balancing[120]? India's erstwhile support behind NAM against the militarisation of the Bay of Bengal and the contemporary support behind QUAD to counter China give the impression of limited or soft balancing strategies. However, the limits of institutional responses against the arms race have been acknowledged by the Indian state. Regarding the militarisation of Diego Garcia, despite the NAM countries arguing for IOZOP, Gandhi stated, "What we can do is very limited. However, we must continue to raise our voices. (...) It may take time but if you feel strongly about the issue, you just have to keep persevering and you hope that at some stage, more and more people will agree with you, and that can be a beginning of a change of outlook by the others".[121] As a result, India tried out measures of soft balancing or covert balancing with time to compensate for the weaknesses of an institutional strategy. When its military capabilities were relatively upgraded, India started asserting its regional security role in the Bay of Bengal in various ways. It took to position itself as a net-security provider, arranged biennial Milan exercises, floated platforms like the IONS, and kept institutional dialogues alive with regional instruments like the BIMSTEC.[122] All of them have in common the factor of India's centrality in its security measures.

Secondly, aid and partnerships are only acceptable if they supplement the status and positioning of the state rather than undercutting it. India has partnered with extensive powers and littoral states to survive against serious threats or develop its military capabilities. It is curious why Soviet aid was more officially acceptable and endorsed than the US support for India. Unlike the US, it did not press India to join an official alliance or forge a partnership on defence

[120] For a discussion on soft balancing, see Paul, TV (2018)

[121] Indira Gandhi, Dynamics of Non-Alignment – Transcript of Press Conference by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, 7th Non-Aligned Summit, March 12, 1983, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Statements on Foreign Policy, January - April 1983 (New Delhi: External Publicity Division, Ministry of External Affairs, 1984). 55

[122] Darshana M Baruah, 'Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal', Carnegie India, 1 March 2018. https://carnegieindia.org/2018/03/01/maritime-security-in-bay-of-bengal-pub-75754

matters. In the case of the US, India has also gradually welcomed its presence in this region and a willingness to engage in defence partnerships, as and when the US acknowledged India as a significant power and partner, despite no obligations of a formal alliance. The same warships that evoked sentiments of fear and threat during the Bangladesh War[123] (Singh, 2007, p.238) are now welcome in the Bay of Bengal because they do not undermine India's position but rather partner with it.[124] However, India and the US did not have an unquestionable embrace. Some years later, US patrols without consent in India's EEZ evoked anxiety among India's state elites about a significant power trying to undermine India in its backyard.[125] Accepting aid and support is inherently linked with the domestic roots of India's foreign policy. Governments take pride in upholding autonomy, showing strength to the domestic audience, and deriving respect through regional prominence. A partnership or assistance not respecting India's status in the Bay of Bengal becomes domestically challenging to sustain. China undercuts India's sphere of influence in the Bay of Bengal. Its investments in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka outweigh India's pre-eminence by throwing the space into a shared competition against a militarily and materially superior state.[126] The Chinese threat of undercutting India's regional influence is much more plausible than a direct offensive.[127] A territorial threat from China in these waters is rather unlikely for two reasons. First, India enjoys a better geographical advantage than China in the Bay of Bengal. China must depend entirely

[123] Jaswant Singh, In Service of Emergent India: A Call to Honor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). 237

[124] YP Rajesh, 'Bully to Pal; US Comes Full Circle in Bay of Bengal', Reuters, 10 September 2007. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-andamans-military-idUSKCN0PO2N120150714/

[125] Associated Press, 'India Objects to US Navy Ship's Patrol without Consent', Associated Press, 9 April 2021. https://apnews.com/article/india-international-law-3c8e48d4b88b3fa12317680646c65f9d

[126] Darshana M Baruah and C Raja Mohan, 'The Emerging Dynamics of Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Bay of Bengal ', in *India-China Maritime Competition: The Security Dilemma at Sea*, ed. Rajesh Basrur, Anit Mukherjee, and TV Paul (London: Routledge, 2019).

[127] Darshana M Baruah, 'TESTIMONY: HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE INDO-PACIFIC', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 April 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/04/18/surrounding-ocean-prc-influence-in-indian-ocean-pub-89608

on the littoral states' strategic access in a possible hostile situation. Second, it is in China's interest to keep these sea lanes of communication open for an uninterrupted energy flow. The Indian Ocean is a lifeline for both states.[128]

Finally, aspirational claims are contested as they are not unilaterally dependent on power but also on their acceptability by other actors in that space. In this case, India's security claims can be successfully executed if acknowledged by the littoral states in the Bay of Bengal. Brewster elaborates that "a key feature distinguishing a sphere of influence from the mere ability to project military power is an acknowledgement from other states of a hierarchical relationship where the larger power plays a leadership role and provides security to lesser powers".[129] Brewster highlights several ideational and material constraints that inhibit India from establishing a hierarchical order. These constitute China's growing predominance in the region, India's weak relations with middle powers, strategic restraint, and India's laggard performance.[130] However, India's claims of a hierarchy are likely to be contested in an enclosed maritime space like the Bay of Bengal. All the concerned littoral states have considerable stakes in the forms of coastlines, EEZs, and islands, which invariably draws them into the security architecture. This makes security a contested project where historical exclusivity claims are challenging to sustain. As a result, India's sea power strategies lack the continuity of a grand strategy.[131] It constantly shuffles between a desired India-centric order and a more official cooperative security stance. It finds the India-centric order a necessary argument for its historical claims but challenging to execute as India neither enjoys considerable military clout to structure an order nor overtly projects power to stamp its dominance. This has invited India's

[128] Chaudhury and Basu, 'Meeting with China in the Bay of Bengal'.

[129] Brewster, India's Ocean The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership. 35

[130] Ibid. 199-205

[131] Zorawar Daulet Singh, 'Foreign Policy and Sea Power: India's Maritime Role Flux', *Journal of Defence Studies* 11, no. 4 (2017): 21–49.

cooperation with littoral states on softer maritime security issues and institutional settlement of maritime borders with Bangladesh[132] and Myanmar[133]. However, at the same time, India has a track record of relying on bilateralism more than multilateralism to avail advantages of size and rank. It also leaves aside the traditional security issues in a multilateral setting in the apprehension of being unable to exercise strategic autonomy under institutional obligations.

Conclusion: Implications for the Bay of Bengal as a zone of security

This chapter has delved into the security imagination and responses of the Indian state in the Bay of Bengal and points out four aspects that seem to stand out. First, India's imperative and desire to control the Bay of Bengal space has been consistent across the timeline since its independence. The need to control is timeless, even sometimes, irrespective of threats. There are significant periods in India's independent history when it has not faced any discernible threats in the region. Despite that, it has defined ocean spaces primarily in terms of security. This deviates to some extent from realist precepts that security or the lack of it is triggered by either systemic factors or by power differential, threat, or intentions of another state. Second, India's security narrative is mainly historical. India's desire to control draws from lessons across pre-colonial, colonial, and post-decolonization timelines. It revisited the control of the precolonial period when the footprints of the Cholas ranged to Southeast Asia. There are references to Southeast Asia being referred to as 'Further India'[134]; hence, the zone mattered to India's safety. In the colonial period, they added lessons of vulnerability and command. The British overtures in the subcontinent were from the coastlines of the East. For the rest of their suzerainty, they maintained an Indian centrality in the IOR while controlling the chokepoints

[132] Rupak Bhattacharya, 'Delimitation of Indo-Bangladesh Maritime Boundary', MP-Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, 19 August 2014.

[133] Government of India and Burma, BURMA-INDIA: AGREEMENT ON THE DELIMITATION OF THE MARITIME BOUNDARY IN THE ANDAMAN SEA, THE COCO CHANNEL AND THE BAY OF BENGAL (23 September 1986).

[134] TCA Raghavan, 'Temptations of a Greater India', OPEN Magazine, 8 March 2018.

of the Malaccan Straits. The post-decolonization phase began with a mismatch of expectations and capability in the Bay of Bengal. However, as India's material and military power grows, it assumes a regional role. These constitute embedded elements in India's strategic history featuring the Bay of Bengal, which has subsequently been imprinted on its policies. Third, defensive and aspirational patterns exist in India's security engagements in the Bay of Bengal. Both models are consistent with the more extensive outlines of India's foundational foreign policy principles of non-alignment and later strategic autonomy. India's understanding of aspirational security in the Bay of Bengal is growing due to its material and military power. However, it has also couched its aspirations in more responsible terms of being a net security provider or a law-abiding state despite having a considerable advantage of size and resources in these waters.[135] However, at the same time, the Indian Navy is projected to take more ownership and intensify its drive to control if the fear of interference from extra-regional powers in its periphery grows.[136] Finally, a holistic understanding of India's security responses demands historicisation and a realist reading. We find that India's security engagements have rested on a sub-optimal set of responses where it has consistently rejected alliances so that it enjoyed full autonomy of action, conditionally accepted aid and support when it does not undercut prominence and engaged with littoral states to draw acknowledgement of its claims from more recalcitrant ones.

India's security engagements have two significant ramifications for the spatial imagery of the Bay of Bengal. First, it leads to an overall increase in the strategic jostling over the space by drawing in other state actors in the littorals. This leads to a conversation of the Bay of Bengal into a zone of security. Any historical claim of a state invites several possible complications in

[135] Mukherjee, 'India as a Net-Security Provider: Concepts and Impediments'; Vinay Kumar, 'India Well Positioned to Become a Net-Security Provider', *The Hindu*, 23 May 2013.

[136] James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, 'India's "Monroe Doctrine" and Asia's Maritime Future', *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 6 (23 October 2008): 997–1011, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160802404539.

a maritime space of counterclaims, resulting in a contested regional order. This is inherent in the character of a maritime space that is partly governed and partly regional or international.[137] In such cases, an absolute acceptance of the security provider's claims by other stakeholders is unlikely even if they are invested in cooperative security. Counter reactions from the other states are likely to take two routes. First, in cases where a predominant security provider's claims are tacitly accepted, it has to be institutionalised. There is an incentive of free-riding for which other states will allow the aspirational state to project power or dominate security engagements. However, they seek institutional guarantees so the predominant state will not become a security threat. Second, in cases where the claim of dominance is contested, littoral states are more likely to draw in extra-regional balancers as aids. The Bay of Bengal is witness to both these trajectories. India heads several capacity-building initiatives and takes an onus for security, especially on non-traditional issues, in which the littoral states gain.[138] As a result, there is an incentive to work with India in the region. However, China is an extra-regional balancer for security as a deterrent against India. In both cases, the zone is dominated by the language of control and security as states want to dominate, deter, or stand up to others.

Second, India's security imagination limits other possibilities that could have a more transformative effect on the Bay of Bengal. Since security is paramount and uncompromising, India only accepts economic and cultural gains when they advance security. When such countervailing imaginations compete, the security imaginations prevail. This effectively means that trade and economic gains, even materially beneficial, can only apply when they conform to India's security expectations. Similarly, the free movement of people across the Bay of Bengal is also read from the lens of security and is only accepted within the regulated norms

[137] Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, 'Beyond Seablindness: A New Agenda for Maritime Security Studies', *International Affairs* 93, no. 6 (1 November 2017): 1293–1311, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix174.

[138] 'Views from India's Smaller Maritime Neighbours', Centre for Strategic & International Studies, 18 June 2015. https://www.csis.org/analysis/views-indias-smaller-maritime-neighbors

of the state. India's security imagination of the Bay of Bengal is tied with concerns about its leadership and autonomy, where this maritime space is a historical extension of itself. The evolution of its security imagination has shown that it seeks to secure the space through strategies prioritising regional prominence.

INDIA'S MARKET IMAGINATION OF THE BAY OF BENGAL

States can visualise spaces as markets when they perceive economic gains irrespective of political and geographical borders. They can be driven by neo-liberal logic, where states visualise economic interdependence and absolute gains. The logic of market spaces is contrary to how security spaces operate in the traditional realist sense. In the case of security, one state's gain is another state's loss. Consider how border security is a zero-sum game. In sharp contrast, economic spaces are produced from economic interactions and interdependence. This is philosophically borne out of the liberal school of thought, where states are assumed to be more cooperative than conflictual. Liberal Internationalism examines how states can cooperate and sustain an international order when institutes can repeatedly interact in transparency and reduce transaction costs.[1] Institutions can create an avenue for states to cooperate when information sharing can reduce the gap between state intentions.[2] This leads to creating regimes that can stabilise international order despite the absence of a hegemon tasked with distributing public goods.[3] Such economic interactions are possible because of drivers like the liberalization of

[1] For an overview of liberal internationalism, see Beate Jahn, "Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 43–61, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix231; Tim Dunne, "6. Liberal Internationalism," in *The Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 103–14, https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198825548.003.0006; Stanley Hoffman, "The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism," *Foreign Policy* 98, no. Spring (1995): 159–77; "Liberal Internationalism and Its Critics," in *Grand Strategies of the Left* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 23–37, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009002080.004; Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[2] For a discussion on international regimes, see John Gerard Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (May 22, 1982): 379–415, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300018993; Robert O. Keohane, "Understanding Multilateral Institutions in Easy and Hard Times," *Annual Review of Political Science* 23, no. 1 (May 11, 2020): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050918-042625; G. John Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (January 1999): 43–78, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.3.43.

[3] For a discussion on Hegemonic stability Theory, see William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (July 1999): 5–41, https://doi.org/10.1162/016228899560031; Michael C. Webb and Stephen D. Krasner, "Hegemonic Stability Theory: An Empirical Assessment," *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2 (April 26, 1989): 183–98, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500112999; Carla Norrlof and William C. Wohlforth, "*Raison de l'Hégémonie* (The Hegemon's Interest): Theory of the Costs and Benefits of Hegemony," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (May 27, 2019): 422–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604982; Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*.

economies and globalization. Economic geographies negotiate with the territoriality principle of the modern world order. Globalization has made borders much more flexible and softer, if not completely unbundling borders. Under such circumstances, free trade is structurally much more lucrative in incentivizing the states. The free market has created the proliferation of multiple actors and their numerous interests beyond the idea of a predominant rational state actor with paramount military security needs. The free market encourages private actors that contest, compromise, and sometimes reduce the state's authority and enforcement capabilities. In such cases, states cooperate with other states through discursively created institutional arrangements. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye use the idea of 'complex interdependence' to point out how states are linked through vexed transnational actors and issues. This also explains how institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, can incentivise absolute gains and stabilise the international order[4].

Do states have imageries of market for maritime space? States can imagine maritime spaces as commerce in myriad ways. The maritime space can be treated as a surface on which the trade of goods and services occurs while connecting the rim states. A maritime space offers the use of the sea surface as a cheap and affordable means of transporting goods and services and connecting the state through long sea routes. Globalisation and trade liberalisation are the key drivers of this imagination. Despite Asia's stringent control of borders, globalisation has impacted the softening of state borders.[5] Liberalisation has allowed interdependencies between

[4] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Power and Interdependence," *Survival* 15, no. 4 (July 3, 1973): 158–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396337308441409; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Globalization: What's New? What's Not? (And So What?)," *Foreign Policy*, no. 118 (2000): 104, https://doi.org/10.2307/1149673; Thomas Oatley, "Toward a Political Economy of Complex Interdependence," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 4 (December 26, 2019): 957–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119846553.

[5] For an understanding of changes in Southeast and East Asia owing to Globalisation and Liberalisation, see Andy Green, "Globalisation and the Changing Nature of the State in East Asia," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 5, no. 1 (March 20, 2007): 23–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720601133041; "7. Borders, Globalization and Irregular Migration in Southeast Asia," in *International Migration in Southeast Asia* (ISEAS Publishing, 2004), 199–227, https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812306234-012.

states and possibilities of cooperation.[6] These triggers transformed the maritime space into a connecting bridge rather than a void between states. This has led to the formation of economic communities centred around the economic commonalities of states that merge around the oceanic space. The Bay of Bengal is where increasing economic activities since the 1990s led to emerging discourses within the Indian state, which visualise it as the core of a newly drawn economic community.[7]

Another way of the maritime space as market is where the sea is treated as a resource pool. This corresponds to how states treat living and non-living resources within the legally governable part of the sea. While the seas have served with resources since existence, the modern states started treating the ocean space as a market prominently since the landmark United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982[8], which provided the regulatory framework for using and conserving marine resources. The Law of the Seas demarcates a portion of the sea within the legal and jurisdictional ambit of the coastal states, and the rest are 'high seas' (64% of the world's ocean space)[9], which are common to all. The governable section includes the territorial waters, continental shelf and the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). The resources in this segment are fisheries, polymetallic nodules, petroleum and gas, minerals and alternative energy sources. The state uses these resources for its economic gains as the sea is akin to a domestic market with complete state jurisdiction over this. However, because of the contiguous nature of the sea, these resources are not segregated and compartmentalised to each state. Resources also flow into each other, so collective action is required. This again leads to the idea of absolute gains where states are supposed to cooperate.

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[6] For an overall discussion, see Marika Vicziany, "Introduction," *Asian Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (November 1993): 1–5, https://doi.org/10.1080/03147539308712919.

[7] For an account of the rise of the Southeast Asian economies, see David Brewster, "The Rise of the Bengal Tigers: The Growing Strategic Importance of the Bay of Bengal," *Journal of Defence Studies* 9, no. 2 (2015).

[8] Convention Agreement, United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982, https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

[9] "What Is High Seas Governance?," *Ocean Exploration*, n.d.

Market demands compel, sometimes incentivise them, to establish regimes and institutions to coordinate. This, in turn, provided ground for a collective imagination of security different from traditional security. This non-traditional and more holistic version of security draws on inherent commonalities of the ocean, like Maritime Domain (MDA), climate change, energy security, maritime piracy and terrorism.[10]

Bay of Bengal as a Geography of Market

The Bay of Bengal's economic history is well documented from the precolonial times.[11] Strategic imageries of the Bay were a historically late entrant. The predominant imagery of the Bay during the precolonial and colonial periods remains that of a space interlinked with trade and movement of people. Its rim has been embedded with historically bustling ports, enviable shipbuilding cultures and highly valued and tradeable commodities. The Bay of Bengal opened up to the larger Indian Ocean, an open sea where a host of economic stakeholders thrived. During the colonial period, the roots of these economic connections were predicated on exploitation and rent-seeking.[12] The Bay of Bengal then became a part of how regional capital

[10] Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Rakhahari Chatterji, "Maritime Order and Connectivity in the Indian Ocean: The Renewed Significance of the Bay of Bengal," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15, no. 3 (September 2, 2019): 241–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2019.1665823.

[11] The pre-colonial work on Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean is vast body of literature, some of the notable works are, Rila Mukherjee, "Ambivalent Engagements: The Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean World," *International Journal of Maritime History* 29, no. 1 (February 2, 2017): 96–110, https://doi.org/10.1177/0843871416679119; *The Sea, Identity and History: From the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2013); KN Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ashin Das Gupta and MN Pearson, *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1999); Om Prakash and Denys Lombard, *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500–1800* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999); Om Prakash, *The Trading World of the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800 CE* (Noida: Pearson Education, 2012); MN Pearson, *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Rila Mukherjee, *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism* (New Delhi: Primus, 2011); KS Mathew, *Mariners, Merchants and Ocean: Studies in Maritime History* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995); Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Muecke, *Cultures of Trade: Indian Ocean Exchanges* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107049918; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[12] Jayati Bhattacharya, "Connectivity across the Bay of Bengal in the 19th and 20th Centuries," in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History (Oxford University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.178; Thomas Metcalf, Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

was structured and how global capital functioned.[13] Historical works point out how the automobile industry of the West was planked on the Malayan rubber plantations in the East. These rubber plantations were built on the back of Southern Indian immigrants.[14] Such connections within the Bay of Bengal had global economic fallouts. However, the partition of the subcontinent and the unfolding decolonisation had a considerable impact on the economic transactions in the Bay.[15] Free movement of trade and goods became restricted owing to hard borders. The politics of citizenship and conflicts ensured less flexibility with society and borders. Gradually hardening borders meant economic transactions were less lucrative and far more costly as connectivities were fractured. Inward-looking states were much more favourable towards protectionist policies safeguarding their domestic industries. Despite the erstwhile interdependencies, states saw few economic opportunities in the Bay of Bengal. They also could not link the Bay amidst an integrated or potentially interconnected network of economic arrangements regionally or globally. Did the states have a market reading of the Bay of Bengal? What were the contextual changes that propelled this market imagination that was stunted at the sovereign moment in the Bay?

The chapter broadly asks these questions by examining the Indian state's market imagination of the Bay of Bengal. It unfolds in subsequent sections, surveying the two delineated imageries of the maritime spaces as market – maritime space as a corridor of commerce and maritime space as a pool of resources. In each section, the particular discourse is understood in two ways: first, what entails this imagination, and second, what are the contextual factors that propel these imaginations?

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[13] Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of the Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[14] Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[15] C Raja Mohan, "Reimagining the Bay," *Seminar*, March 1, 2018.

Bay of Bengal as a Commerce Corridor: India's imagination

This section looks at how the Indian imagination of the Bay of Bengal as a commercial community developed. To begin with, the Bay of Bengal, as a maritime, first acquired salience as a transport space and corridor of trade before it was perceived as a possible economic region. As earlier pointed out, an imagination of maritime spaces as the market can be that of a surface where the trade of goods and services is facilitated. While geography does not change, maritime spaces are associated with metaphors of distance and division when the states have no incentives for trade. The same geography assumes a metaphor of connector or sea bridge when states are willing to invest in trade owing to shared gains. This shows how economic factors can have transformative effects on the imagination of the sea. Geography remains contingent where the sea can have economic imagery deployed by the states, like strategic and cultural imaginations. However, these meanings are not automatic and are put into practice for several reasons. It is not inherent that a maritime space is seen as a transport surface, even though seas have provided a source of affordable transport since the inception of trade. It is imperative to ask two questions to understand this discourse of the ocean as a transport surface – what does this discourse entail, and under what context did it emerge within the Indian state's imagination?

Market imaginations of maritime spaces rest on how a state positions its economy vis-à-vis the regional market. Maritime spaces are liminal spaces.[16] Consider a maritime space like the Bay of Bengal. States on its rim surround it. Invariably, the economic structures of the rim states would impact how the Bay of Bengal shapes up. However, rim states and their economic activities are not the only causal explanations of how the economic salience of a maritime space

[16] For a contemporary discussion on maritime security, see Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, "Beyond Seablindness: A New Agenda for Maritime Security Studies," *International Affairs* 93, no. 6 (November 1, 2017): 1293–1311, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix174.

grows. The Bay of Bengal, owing to the geographical contiguity of the seas, opens up with the larger Indian Ocean. It forms a crucial segment of the Indo-Pacific. It is proximate to the sea lanes of communication that touch the vital Straits of Malacca. Irrespective of India's investments in the sea, its wider connections with the regional and global markets are partly responsible for the Bay of Bengal's economic importance, which has grown owing to its positioning vis-à-vis global economic chains.[17] States would calculate the benefits of economically tying up to the region. They would be incentivised only when these gains outweigh the risks of staying disconnected.

Two factors are primarily responsible for an imagination of maritime spaces as commerce. First, what are the state's economic interests that can be achieved through the maritime space? A part of the state's economic orientation is reflected in its use of ocean spaces. The state's domestic economic structure is the critical variable here. Inward-looking states with protectionist policies have little to gain from the regional market. They have little incentive to transform ocean spaces into trade zones and integrate them into the broader market networks. On the contrary, oceans serve as carriers of trade when a state depends on export-led growth and allows integration with the regional market. Therefore, whether or how market imagination of the sea would gain valence depends on the domestic economic policy of the state. Depending on the cost and benefits analysis of maritime space as a trade, the state decides to push for logistical factors like connectivity and infrastructure. Here, the state's planning and execution is the key variable. Economic transactions cannot happen without the nuts and bolts of trade - such as investment in connectivity and efficiency of ports to facilitate sea-borne trade. Developing maritime connectivity and infrastructure is not entirely a domestic operation. This

[17] Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, "Rediscovering the Bay of Bengal," *The Hindu*, September 29, 2022; Anu Anwar, "The Bay of Bengal Could Be the Key to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific," War on the Rocks, June 17, 2022; Tariq Karim, "Importance of the Bay of Bengal as a Causeway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans," East West Centre , May 12, 2021.

requires not only transnational projects but also the development of cooperative practices between states. Such projects also require adequate ideational and material investments in multilateral and bilateral platforms.

Second, what interests does the regional market offer to the state? Oceans are part of the larger regional or global market,[18] and they are transformed into active trade spaces when the regional market encourages and facilitates economic transactions by lowering costs. This includes whether or to what degree the regional market complements the state's financial needs and demands, how the ease of trade operates in the region, and what growth opportunities are served to the state. The dyadic relationship between globalisation and liberalisation is a key impact factor in furthering this cause of facilitating an active and growing market. The state should be able to answer positively when asked whether they will benefit by integrating into the regional market. This integration would take the domestic economy beyond the shores and bring the regional and global economy to home. The maritime spaces are crucial conduits in this integration. The Bay of Bengal, a case in point, becomes a critical space for India's liberalisation reforms and its integration into the wider Asian market.

Market prerogatives for India's imagination of the Bay of Bengal after independence had little salience during post-independence years.[19] Evidence suggests India's economic imagination of the maritime space grew in the late 1980s. This corresponds to the significant changes that were experienced in the two aspects that were discussed above – first, India's domestic economic policy changed from an erstwhile inward-looking centrally command model to a more open economy owing to the liberalisation reforms;[20] second, opportunities within the Asian market

[18] Oceans, Trade and Coastal Economies, World Bank, https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/oceans-fisheries-and-coastal-economies

[19] V. Srinivas, "India's IMF Programmes—1966 and 1981: An Analytical Review," *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 64, no. 2 (June 27, 2018): 219–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/0019556117750897; Rahul Mukherji, "India's Aborted Liberalization-1966," *Pacific Affairs* 73, no. 3 (2000): 375, https://doi.org/10.2307/2672025.

[20] For some of the key debates, see Sumit Ganguly and Rahul Mukherji, *India Since 1980* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511842283; Montek Singh Ahluwalia, *Backstage: The Story*

were significantly better as the Southeast Asian and East Asian economies were growing at a faster pace owing to their export-led growth.[21] This was India's chance to bandwagon with the Asian growth trajectory and not be left out of the Asian and global supply chains.[22]

Post-Independence Years

Did the maritime space feature in India's economic policies? After independence, India invested in an inward-looking domestic economic structure. It is beyond the merit of this discussion to explain why India chose its economic orientation.[23] Broadly, the state was seen as an institution to iron out glaring social and economic inequalities. India's economic system did not have much faith in the free market. Labour was domesticated for the new nation's cause, and the free movement of people was regulated. India's inward-looking stance gradually turned to protectionist policies, which meant that there was adequate scepticism of trade liberalisation. There was anxiety that free trade would bring competition from outside against the nascent domestic industries.[24] During the Nehruvian era, India's economic policies did not prioritise international trade as a driver of growth. The prevailing system also discouraged domestic and foreign investment, hindering India's economic potential. The nationalisation of financial

Behind India's High Growth Years (New Delhi: Rupa, 2020); Arvind Panagariya, "India in the 1980s and 1990s: A Triumph of Reforms ," *IMF Working Paper (WP/04/43)*, 2004; Biru Paksha Paul and Anupam Das, "Export-Led Growth in India and the Role of Liberalisation," *Margin: The Journal of Applied Economic Research* 6, no. 1 (February 21, 2012): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1177/097380101100600101.

[21] Gregg Huff, "Growth and Globalization Phases in South East Asian Development," in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 176–212, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316671603.008; Friedrich Wu, "The ASEAN Economies in the 1990s and Singapore's Regional Role," *California Management Review* 34, no. 1 (October 1, 1991): 103–14, https://doi.org/10.2307/41166686; Danny Quah, "Post-1990s' East Asian Economic Growth," in *The Rise of China and Structural Changes in Korea and Asia* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2010), https://doi.org/10.4337/9781849805292.00007.

[22] For a diverse account of India's foreign policy from a practitioner's perspective, see Shashi Tharoor, *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century* (New Delhi: Penguin House, 2012); S Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2020); Shivshankar Menon, *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present* (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2021).

[23] Tirthankar Roy, "Indian Economy after Independence," in *The Economic History of India, 1857-2010* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 317–42, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190128296.003.0013.

[24] Pulapre Balakrishnan, "Visible Hand: Public Policy and Economic Growth during the Nehru Era," *CDS, Working Paper*, November 2007.

institutions further emphasised this protectionist approach. Even India's participation in international trade institutions reflected a commitment to shielding the economy from foreign competition.[25] Therefore, India's economic interests out of the Bay of Bengal or the larger Indian Ocean remained minimal. India withdrew from trade around the Bay of Bengal because of its import substitution priorities. In 1950, the government cut down on rice imports from Burma because of its domestic food security targets by 1951. The Indian government stated that a crucial amount of money goes into foreign exchange and imports, which must be further subsidised. Nehru writes, "If we are to stop food imports by 1951, we have to reduce them proportionately during these two years. We have in fact reduced them greatly this year. We decided that rice imports should be reduced more than wheat imports to begin with, because rice costs us more. That was the reason why we fixed a maximum figure of 100,00 tons of rice for import during the current year."[26] India's domestic economic policy did not undergo a major shift until the Rajiv Gandhi years when some form of liberalisation was setting in. Until then, its primary engagements in the region, especially during Indira Gandhi's period, were strategic rather than economic. India mainly sought to counter the presence of great power rivalry in the region. India's strategy was dominated by an incremental naval build-up from the late 1960s, along with its emphasis on the proposal of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IOZOP).

Besides its domestic economic policy, India deliberately eschewed any overt show of economic interest in the region after its independence. This was under the broader rubric of the Pan-Asian Unity policy, which encouraged solidarity with decolonised states. In the case of South Asia and the Bay of Bengal, India had a fair share of economic advantage owing to its geographical size and the presence of a large and, in some cases, a wealthy diaspora. However, reaping

[25] Rashmi Venkatesan, "The Political Necessity of the Licence-Permit Raj," *The India Forum*, May 9, 2023.

[26] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Reduction of Rice Imports from Burma, March 22, 1950, in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Series 2, Vol. 14, November 1949 - April 1950, Part.1*, ed. S Gopal (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1992). 508-9

economic benefits stood against India's policy of developing cordial relations with its immediate Asian neighbours. India's relative advantage meant smaller states have often been apprehensive about the geographical asymmetry turning into economic asymmetry and creating a sphere of India's economic domination. As a result, economic and regional integration efforts were minimal. Even if India had a relative advantage in the region, it consciously toned it down to avoid accusations of economic domination. This parallels how India eschewed its civilisational claims in South and Southeast Asia during post-independence. In an interview with The Hindu in 1946, Nehru was explicitly asked about India's possible economic domination in South and Southeast Asian states. Nehru had to dissuade the fears of economic domination. He stated, "India's future policy will be opposed to any exploitation of the markets or resources of the people in other countries. Both my party and the National Planning Committee have made it perfectly clear that we are not going to encourage Indian capitalist elements in Burma, Ceylon, East Africa or elsewhere at the expense of the people of these countries".[27] The Indian diaspora and the returning economic benefits were curtailed as part of India's state policy in the region. In 1950, at a press conference in Singapore, Nehru stated, "If there is any discrimination between Indian merchants in any foreign country and other merchants, India will help in getting such discriminations removed. Apart from that, there is possibly no other direct way of helping Indians abroad economically. (...) India does not want Indians to go anywhere where they do not get equal treatment. Also, Indians cannot claim anything which might become a burden on the people of that country."[28]

[27] Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Concept of Asian Unity, Interview to B Shiva Rao, The Hindu, Jan 21, 1946 in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Series 1, Vol. 14, June 1945 - February 1946*, ed. S. Gopal (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund, 1981).

[28] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Indians Abroad, Press Conference in Singapore, 17 June 1950 in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Series 2, Vol. 14, November 1949 - April 1950, Part.1*, ed. S. Gopal (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund, 1992).

Secondly, although India threw its weight behind the Pan-Asian unity and Non-Aligned Movement under Nehru, he did not see much merit in the Asian market. Rather, India inherited the economic trajectory of the colonial period. Preet Malik, former Secretary at the Ministry of External Affairs, writes that "India's trade policy largely followed the traditional trends that it had acquired during the colonial period. This ensured that India continued to look on the markets of the industrialized countries to absorb its trade products, and in the hope that this would help reduce its aid and dependency for economic development."[29] As a result, South and Southeast Asia as a market had little significance from India's economic positioning. This was an era when the institutional capacity of the Bay of Bengal states was lower, and their economic clout was minimal. A decolonised Asia was also far more sceptical about trade liberalisation and much more concerned about securing its borders. Shashi Tharoor provides an account that, despite India's initial interest in Asian Unity and cultural linkages, the region beyond the Bay of Bengal hardly provided any attraction. Tharoor neatly sums up how India's domestic policy intertwined with Southeast Asia's lack of economic incentives. He writes, "Nor did the Southeast Asia of the early post-independence years encourage much interest for the most part, it was just as backward, diseased and conflict-ridden as the subcontinent itself, and slow to unveil its potential. India's own economic policies, shaped in reaction to the fact that the British East India Company had come to trade and stayed on to rule, were protectionist looking for the trade opportunities did not feature high on New Delhi's least of priorities. It did not help either that India's natural overland linkages to Southeast Asia were blocked by post-colonial politics. Myanmar shut itself off from the rest of the world in the early 1960s while India's natural land routes eastwards ran through the suddenly foreign-and hostile-territories of the East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). Neither was particularly inclined to provide transit facilities to Indian

[29] Preet Malik, "India's Look East Policy: Genesis," in *Two Decades of India's Look East Policy: Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity*, ed. Amar Nath Ram (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs and Manohar , 2012). 27

goods. Global geopolitics also intervened, with the countries of Southeast Asia clearly choosing a side during the Cold War, while India remained non-aligned, with a pronounced tilt towards the Soviet Union that was looked at askance by much of the region. India's closest Asian political relationship in the 1980s was with communist Vietnam rather than ASEAN."[30]

Nehru's later statements about Asia point to how he saw few complementarities within Asia as an economic market and its limited appeal to India. He explains, "Well, to begin with it is a phrase that at present has little meaning. It is natural for trade to develop between nearby countries. For instance, you might say the Southeast Asian countries should develop contacts on trade. I entirely agree. Or similar regions. Asia is too big a region, it differs too much. But apart from that, while we may aim at greater facilities for trade and, if you like, a common market in Asian countries, that is a desirable thing to aim at but it can only grow gradually. You must remember that many of the Asian countries, all of them excepting Japan, are developing countries, not developed countries, as the western countries are. Therefore, Asian countries, by and large, do not fulfil each other's wants. If I want or Ceylon wants, let us say, machinery, you can only get it from a country which produces the machinery. Small things can adjust between ourselves, raw materials, you may buy rice, you may sell rubber and all that. That is all right. These are raw materials and it will be a good thing if we, to some extent, came to agreement about those matters. But the real demands in developing countries is for capital goods and that is machinery, and the developed countries supply that till you yourself become developed."[31]

India saw limited interests and opportunities in Southeast Asian markets. Regarding trade, India attributed states like Thailand to being even less important than Burma, which indicates India's interest. In a confidential note to Ajit Prasad Jain, Minister of Food and Agriculture in 1956,

[30] Tharoor, *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century*. 185

[31] Jawaharlal Nehru, In Colombo: Press Conference - India House, Colombo, October 15, 1962 On the Asian Common Market, Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Series 2, Vol 79, October - November 1962 , ed. Madhavan K Palat (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund , 2018).

Nehru writes, "The only country you mention, apart from Burma, is Thailand. I think that we should always prefer Burma to Thailand in this or any other deal. This is both politically and from other points of view, a wise policy. Burma is a near neighbour and it is cheaper and simpler (cheaper from the point of view of transport) to deal with Burma than with a country further away. The price factor, of course, will always be considered. We can build up also other trade relations with Burma, which maybe of enduring character. So far as Thailand is concerned, politically speaking, it is not in a category of those countries with which we need to have special relations. That does not mean that we should not deal with Thailand but that it is not one of the countries to be preferred. On the political level as well as, I think, on the long term economic level, Burma is far more important to us than almost any other country."[32] India's lack of interest in getting economically involved in the region also stemmed from its scepticism of great power interference and domination. India perceived aid from great powers like the US as a means to dominate the newly independent Asian states. Political and economic incentives of great powers combined to form blocs like the SEATO. This would encourage rival superpowers to counter with similar blocs. This weaponisation of economic resources would take away the agency of the Asian states.[33] At multilateral platforms, Nehru pushed for economic freedom of Asia. He argued that what we see as liberalization and free trade can take perversive forms of great power and economic domination. Slow economic growth was more acceptable than surrendering to economic domination. While delivering the inaugural address at the 3rd Session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, in July 1948, Nehru elaborated, "No Asian country will welcome any such assistance if there are conditions attached to it which lead to any kind of economic domination. We would rather delay our

[32] Jawaharlal Nehru, *FL 431 - No. 665 PMH/56 Confidential Note from Nehru to Ajit Prasad Jain, Minister for Food and Agriculture, Private Papers of Jawaharlal Nehru, Post 1947* (New Delhi: Manuscripts Division, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 1956).

[33] Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy – Selected Speeches, September 1946 – April 1961* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1961).

development, industrial or otherwise, than submit to any kind of economic domination of any country. (...) But a long period of foreign domination has made the countries of Asia very sensitive about anything which might lead to some visible or invisible form of domination. (...) Political domination leads to economic domination, but an invisible or semi-invisible economic domination creeps in unless you are careful".[34] The Asian regional market did not fulfil adequate economic opportunities for India to integrate while dissuading its political and strategic fears.

Decolonization and the Partition of the subcontinent undid several of the erstwhile connections that had facilitated trade in the Bay of Bengal for centuries. A good case in point is the decline of bustling trade between Calcutta in India and Rangoon in Burma. When economic opportunities boomed after colonial capture, Britishers were eager to take advantage not only through the roadway and the railways but also through the sea route. The British India Steam Navigation services started thickening from the colonial capital, Calcutta. Ajay Kamalakaran writes, "Calcutta became one of the world's major shipping hubs by the 1870s. There were several new routes around the Bay of Bengal and beyond. Ships left four times a week from Calcutta for Rangoon via Port Blair and Kamorta (Nicobar Islands). There was also a fortnightly service to ports on the Malay Straits, such as Penang and Singapore, from Calcutta via Rangoon".[35] The Great Depression and the rise of the anti-colonial protests were the first dent in these economic networks. The rising nativist protests and the anti-colonial movements slowly undid these networks. The Great Depression of the 1920s opened up the cracks of colonial rent-seeking and economic exploitation on which this bustling economic trade

[34] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Economic Freedom for Asia, Inaugural Address at the 3rd Session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, July 1, 1948 in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Series 2, Vol 6, April 1948 - June 1948* , ed. S. Gopal (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund , 1987). 458

[35] Ajay Kamalakaran, "How a Steamer Service from Calcutta Transformed Rangoon from an Overgrown Village to a Boomtown," Scroll, March 30, 2022.

depended.[36] In several cases, wars and conflict meant the final straw in eradicating these connections. For instance, the regular India-Burma trade route through the sea was stopped after the coup of Burma in 1962.[37] Similarly, sea route multimodal connections between India and Sri Lanka were snubbed with the onset of the Sri Lankan Civil War.[38] In an era of avowedly territorial and inward-looking states, investments in furthering economic connections were not natural. While economic gains can create political peace, states around the Bay of Bengal used political conflict for economic divide and distance.

India emphasised a self-sufficient defence industry by building indigenous warships, but its port infrastructure, sea trade and shipping policy turned protectionist, much like its domestic economic policy. India's merchant shipping laws are a good example of how its shipping and trade policies were unfriendly to free trade.[39] The Merchant Shipping Act (MSA), 1958 established cabotage rules in India.[40] These rules required cargo moving from transhipment hubs in Sri Lanka to be transported first by Indian feeder services before being delivered between Indian ports. Additionally, foreign container ships faced restrictions on entering Indian waters. They could only operate within Indian terminals if no Indian ships were available, following a licensing process with the maritime regulator. This created enormous delays in trading because of the winding and complicated procedure of obtaining clearances. This protectionist policy was aimed to shield the Indian shipping industry from foreign competition. Naval experts point out that this compromising economic stringency had strategic roots. A

[36] Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and Fortunes of Migrants*.

[37] Kamalakaran, "How a Steamer Service from Calcutta Transformed Rangoon from an Overgrown Village to a Boomtown."

[38] Arun Janardhanan, "India-Sri Lanka Ferry Service Restarted after 40 Yrs: Opportunities, Challenges," *The Indian Express*, October 17, 2023.

[39] Nayanima Basu, "What Is Cabotage Law & Why India Plans to Restore the Sea Transport Rules It Scrapped in 2018," *The Print*, June 9, 2021.

[40] Press Information Bureau, "Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways Issues Draft Merchant Shipping Bill, 2020 for Public Consultation New Bill Aims to Repeal and Replace the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958," *Government of India* , November 26, 2020.

report from the National Maritime Foundation states that "cabotage laws were initially put in place to secure the coastline from foreign ships. The argument supporting these laws continues to be relevant. Allowing foreign ships, with foreign crews on them, to move close to the Indian coast is a security challenge for the agencies manning the coastline. India remains a major target of international terrorists. However, it backfired as other countries relaxed their cabotage laws to promote free trade, allowing them to develop into major transhipment hubs and create stiff competition for India's ambitions in sea trade."[41]

For the rest of the Cold War, India continued its trade in small to moderate quantities within the subcontinent and Southeast Asia without any grand change in positioning its economy vis-à-vis the regional trends and structures. This undergoes a radical shift in the post-Cold War years when these two factors undergo significant changes.

Post-Cold War Years

Since the 1980s, India's domestic economy and the Asian market have been changing. This combination has boosted India's market imagination of the Bay of Bengal. India's embrace of liberalisation at home and the widening opportunities to integrate with the burgeoning Asian market had a transformative impact on maritime space. The Bay of Bengal, once a forgotten economic transport corridor, was rediscovered after a hiatus of post-independence years, sparking a sense of commonality and potential.

In India, Rajiv Gandhi's government initiated a process of liberalization, albeit in a limited capacity, in response to a severe economic crisis that struck India in the late 1980s. However, with the turn of the decade, India's economic crisis intensified, forcing a complete embrace of

[41] Rajesh Soami, "India's Endeavour to Reboot the Shipping Industry: Rationale and Implications," National Maritime Foundation, March 12, 2019; Basu, "What Is Cabotage Law & Why India Plans to Restore the Sea Transport Rules It Scrapped in 2018."

liberalization reforms under PV Narasimha Rao in 1991.[42] The collapse of the Eastern Bloc with the end of the Cold War, a key trading partner, and the impending Gulf War profoundly impacted India's economy. Foreign exchange reserves plummeted to a critical low, making it challenging to finance even basic imports. The war further exacerbated the situation by disrupting oil supplies, leading to a price surge and widening the trade deficit. The government, burdened by debt, was on the brink of default. This dire situation necessitated a sharp devaluation of the rupee. India's economic crisis was further compounded by international credit rating agencies downgrading its status, making it difficult and expensive to borrow money. In a desperate bid to raise funds, India pledged a significant portion of its gold reserves as collateral to the Bank of England and the Union Bank of Switzerland. A New York Times report summarised India's economic crisis: "The immediate issue is India's struggle to avoid defaulting on loans. It has never defaulted since independence 44 years ago. India's foreign debt has climbed to about $72 billion, making it the world's third-largest debtor after Brazil and Mexico. In 1980, its foreign debt was $20.5 billion. At the moment, Western officials say, India has only $1.1 billion in its hard-currency reserves, enough for two weeks of imports. Policy Changes Required Government officials and Western diplomats say that to meet the emergency, India will seek anywhere from $5 billion to $7 billion from the International Monetary Fund. The IMF. pulls together packages of loans disbursed under conditions that often include altering policies viewed by the fund as mistaken or counterproductive". [43]

Under Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, India took significant steps to liberalize their economy. Shivshankar Menon, India's former National Security Advisor, narrates the immediate steps and their impact: "(…) over the first three days

[42] Ahluwalia, *Backstage: The Story Behind India's High Growth Years*.

[43] Bernard Weinraub, "Economic Crisis Forcing Once Self-Reliant India to Seek Aid," *The New York Times*, June 29, 1991.

of July drastically liberalized trade policy and dismantled the production licensing permit Raj for industry (but not the regulatory inspector Raj, unfortunately). Crisis had driven India forward. Over the next two years, the fiscal deficit dropped from 8.4% to 5.7% of GDP, foreign exchange reserves shot up from US$ 1 billion to $20 billion, and inflation declined from 13% to 6%. Foreign exchange reserves began to double every year from $ 150 Million in 1991 to $3 Billion in 1997. Custom duties were slashed from a peak rate of 200% to 40% by the mid-1990s. India was unbound."[44]

The story of India's economic reforms is well documented.[45] They drew positive comments owing to India's growth trajectory. Simultaneously, they were criticised, primarily by the Indian Left, as an assault on India's economic sovereignty and rising inequality in India. The assessment of India's liberalisation is beyond the merit of this discussion. What is relevant for this discussion is how the economic transactions between India and Southeast Asia and beyond created an economically determined imagination of the Bay of Bengal maritime space. At the turn of the 1990s, India's economic engagements started across the Bay of Bengal under India's 'Look East' Policy rubric. Prime Minister Rao's first destination was predictably Singapore – a state which has consistently shown interest in India's presence in Southeast Asia since its independence in 1965. Rao presented India as a lucrative market destination and a trading nation trying to rediscover its East. India's eastern coast was seen as a gateway to the growing economic opportunities of Asia-Pacific. He emphasised that "the Asia-Pacific region will be our springboard to the global marketplace".[46] Rao's government started developing the idea of

[44] Menon, *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*. 186

[45] Pranab Kumar Bardhan, The Political Economy of Development in India: Expanded Edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Stuart Corbridge, John Harriss, and Craig Jeffrey, "The Political Economy of Growth and Development in India," in The Oxford Handbook of the Politics of Development (Oxford University Press, 2017), 652–68, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199845156.013.18; Atul Kohli, "The Politics of Economic Liberalization in India," in The Political Economy of Public Sector Reform and Privatization (Routledge, 2019), 364–88, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429313707-16.

[46] Salil Tripathi, "Rao's Trip Opens up Investment Opportunities for India with Economic 'tigers' of East," *India Today*, September 30, 1994.

opening up the Indian cities to the economies of Southeast Asia and Asia-Pacific. Geographically, several complementarities existed between India's east coast and the Southeast Asian states. However, it was difficult to overcome the existing rigidities of lines drawn between South and Southeast Asia – the line which went through the middle of the Bay of Bengal. In 1995, standing at the Calcutta Airport's newly inaugurated terminal, Rao stated, "Calcutta is the gateway to the east, and the east is now better known in the world as the region of the Asian Tigers. This is the region of rapid growth in today's world and has the strongest potential for the future."[47]

Earlier, we pointed out that market imaginations combine a state's domestic economy and the opportunities received from the regional and international markets. The strategic timing of India's economic reforms coincided with the opportunities of the Asian market, primarily by Southeast Asian and East Asian economies. For India, both of these factors coupled in the 1990s. The growing economic overtures between India and Southeast Asia and beyond created marked economic interdependence around the maritime space. From the mid-1990s, India started perceiving the Bay of Bengal as an increasingly interregional space owing to these economic interactions. Commercial interactions in the Bay of Bengal are not new. Before the Bay of Bengal became a strategic theatre, it was a commercial space. Trade and cultural attributes had flown together in this region for centuries. A good example is how the Arab merchants and traders primarily led the spread of Islam around the Bay amidst a sprawling trade network from the 12th Century. During the colonial period, these economic interactions continued despite the exploitative nature of production, colonial rent-seeking and uprootedness

[47] PV Narsimha Rao, *Calcutta Airport – A Gateway to the East – Speech While Inaugurating the New Domestic Terminal Complex of Calcutta Airport, Calcutta, January 23, 1995PV Narasimha Rao – Selected Speeches – 1994-95 – Volume IV – July 1994 to June 1995* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1995). 69

of people. It was with the arrival of nationalism and sovereign states that the Bay of Bengal went into economic isolation.

As India's 'Look East' Policy gained steam, economic exchanges were renewed across India's east coast. India's renewed interdependencies created a sub-region from the Bay of Bengal borne out of contemporary economic transactions. This was predictably followed by the creation of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), where India took the lead. This is an institution dedicated particularly to the economic synergies of the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal. BIMSTEC first came into existence as BIST-EC (Bangladesh-India-Sri Lanka-Thailand – Economic Cooperation) through the Bangkok Declaration in June 1997. The aims and purposes of the BIST-EC narrate the economic incentives. The first point on the agreement mentions the objective of the agreement "to create an enabling environment for rapid economic development through identification and implementation of specific cooperation projects in the sectors of trade, investment and industry, technology, human resource development, tourism, agriculture, energy and infrastructure and transportation".[48] The second objective furthered, "to accelerate the economic growth and social progress in the sub-region through joint endeavours in a spirit of equality and partnership".[49] These objectives were also carried out in the BIMSTEC charter signed in 2022.[50] Bay of Bengal regionalism complimented India's search for a maritime identity. There is a sufficient connection between economically affluent states with wide maritime connectivities. India's seaward connections were attached to its global connectivity and footprint, which started from the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. The Bay of Bengal

[48] Declaration on the Establishment of the Bangladesh – India – Sri Lanka – Thailand – Economic Cooperation (BIST-EC), Bangkok, June 6, 1997 https://bimstec.org/images/content_page_pdf/1705915065_Declaration%20on%20Economic%20Cooperation%20-%2006.06.1997%20(Bangkok).pdf

[49] Ibid

[50] BIMSTEC Charter, https://bimstec.org/images/content_page_pdf/1696679710_BIMSTEC%20Charter.pdf

also allowed India to rethink regionalism beyond the moribund South Asia.[51] South Asia's regionalism, mainly embodied through SAARC, has been contested primarily because of the Indo-Pak rivalry and abysmal levels of intra-regional connectivity and trade.[52] Therefore, the changing context of India's domestic economic policies and Asia's changing market had transformative effects on imagining the Bay of Bengal's space as market.

When India opened its economy, Southeast Asian economies were examples of economic growth due to their export-led economic models. The economic growth was headed by Japan and the Asian dragons– Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea. The rise of the Asian economy created integrated markets further extended and joined by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand – states later known as 'Asian Tigers'.[53] Shivshankar Menon summed up the rise of Asian economic network, "For Southeast Asia as a whole, the 1980s were a decade of economic growth and prosperity (…) For Japan the 1980s were golden years. The economy was booming, and Japan was on the crest of an industrial wave that threatened to upend the post-war global economic order. In steel, automobiles, and electronics Japan was the world leader. Japan's success had different effects on its most important relationships with Asia as a whole. (…) This was also the decade when Japan led Asia into building global manufacturing and value-added chains and integrated manufacturing across borders, kickstarting globalization in Asia".[54]

This Asian market was remarkably different from the 1950s when India hardly found any integrating incentives. Sheel Kant Sharma, Indian diplomat and former Secretary General of

[51] P.V. Rao, "South Asia's Retarded Regionalism," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 8, no. 1 (June 2012): 37–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2012.683627.

[52] Bhumitra Chakma, "SAARC and Region-Building: Is South Asia a Region?," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 14, no. 2 (May 4, 2018): 189–205, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2018.1478272; Partha S. Ghosh, "An Enigma That Is South Asia: India versus the Region," *Asia-Pacific Review* 20, no. 1 (May 2013): 100–120, https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2013.788336; Smruti S. Pattanaik, "SAARC at Twenty-Five: An Incredible Idea Still in Its Infancy," *Strategic Analysis* 34, no. 5 (August 27, 2010): 671–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2010.501582; Smruti S. Pattanaik, "Indo-Pak Relations and the SAARC Summits," *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 3 (July 3, 2004): 427–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160408450146.

[53] Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*.

[54] Menon, *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*. 170-71

SAARC, points out the growing synergies between India and Southeast Asia, "Banishing the quota permit raj India was breaking into a new dawn of economic independence – an independence which, counter-intuitively perhaps, would spring from global engagement and interdependence rather than isolation. The isolationism of the past economic policies had, instead of engendering autonomy, led to impasses on multiple fronts breeding stagnation and alienating external economic players. Clear signals were emanating from Delhi about openness, reforms, and deregulation setting the stage for harnessing of compatibilities, if not synergies, on numerous counts – trade and investment, manufacturing, services – areas where progress in the next few years might not be rapid nor the gains even; but the message for Asia was unequivocal. Smarter economies in the region such as Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia were quick to grasp the significance of India's message while the others too would be joining as time progressed.".[55] Such compatibilities led to the growing economic partnerships between India and the Southeast Asian states. Out of 13 FTAs that the Indian state has signed[56] – five of them include states of Southeast Asia and East Asia – Singapore (Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, 2005), Thailand (Early Harvest Scheme, 2004), Malaysia (Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, 2011), South Korea (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, 2009), and Japan (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, 2021). Adding to this list is the India-ASEAN CECA - Trade in Goods, Services and Investment Agreement signed in 2009. India's other economic arrangements show its neighbourhood and maritime proclivities. This includes the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) signed in 2001, the India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) signed in 2022, and the India- Sri Lanka FTA, which has been operational since 2000.

[55] Sheel Kant Sharma, "India's Look East Policy: Initial Years1990-1994," in *Two Decades of India's Look East Policy*, ed. Amar Nath Ram (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs and Manohar, 2012). 41

[56] Ministry of Commerce & Industry, FTAs, April 6, 2022, https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1814151

The list of India's economic agreements has treaties with two other BIMSTEC states signed before India's liberalisation reforms. - The India-Nepal Treaty of Trade, operational since 1954, and the India-Bhutan Agreement on Trade, Commerce and Transit, signed in 1972 and revised in 2016. India's active engagements with the region did bear fruit in its overall relationship with ASEAN. India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992, advancing to a dialogue partner in 1996. In 2002, India achieved the status of summit-level partner. In 10 years, India-ASEAN ties were elevated to a strategic partnership in 2012.

India's trade agreements reflected growing numbers for exports and imports driven towards Southeast and East Asia. ASEAN is India's fourth largest trading partner, accounting for 10.6% of India's overall trade, with US$81.33 billion in total trade volume.[57] Interestingly, before liberalization reforms, India-ASEAN trade was at US$2.4 billion. Notably, 11.28% of India's exports go to ASEAN countries. Investment flows are also significant, with ASEAN contributing about 18.28% of foreign direct investment into India since 2000. From April 2000 to March 2018, FDI inflows into India from ASEAN reached US$68.91 billion, while India invested US$ 38.672 billion in ASEAN countries between April 2007 and March 2015.[58]

India started adding more importance to its eastern shores because of the rising economic salience and flows through its eastern coast. As the economic interdependencies solidified in this region, the Bay of Bengal was delineated as a space for regionalism. The political and diplomatic elite increasingly mentioned the Bay of Bengal as a space of common interests and potential. Its lack of achievements notwithstanding, the Bay of Bengal and BIMSTEC became a significant trajectory of the 'Look East' Policy at the turn of the new century. Rajiv Sikri, former Secretary at the Ministry of External Affairs, points out in a personal anecdotal account

[57] India-ASEAN Relations, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-ASEAN-Relations-August-2018.pdf

[58] Ibid

how the 'Look East' generated intense diplomatic activities since 2000 that branched out to strengthen the BIMSTEC and India's entry into the East Asian Summit. India's increased attention in this region was at the top of India's diplomatic priorities. He narrates, "It was clear that as India's Look East Policy acquired greater content and momentum, we needed more institutional back-up and creative thinking – in government, academic circles and think-tanks – to deal with the cascade of additional work and new challenges".[59]

What was at the heart of India's new economic imagination of the Bay of Bengal? The Bay of Bengal became a manageable and closer-to-home subset of India's economic opportunities from Southeast and East Asia. It could visualise its domestic economic interests extending into this maritime space. India sought to channel the development of its coastal states and landlocked Northeast through the economic opportunities that opened up in the Bay of Bengal. Constantino Xavier points out the domestic imperatives of India's economic interests in the Bay of Bengal and further Southeast Asia. India's four coastal states bordering the Bay of Bengal (Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal) house nearly 300 million people, a quarter of the nation's population. This highlights the critical need for improved connectivity to the Bay of Bengal for the 45 million residents of India's landlocked northeastern states, a connection that could significantly boost their development and well-being. He writes, "For both India's eastern coastal states and the northeastern region in particular, and for the Indian economy in general, growth and development are seen to hinge on the degree of connectivity with Southeast Asian markets. By fostering transnational connectivity around the region—in particular with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand—Indian policymakers expect that the country's exports will pick up, that more investments will flow in, and that regional integration will serve as a positive springboard for greater global economic interdependence.

[59] Rajiv Sikri, "A Personal Perspective on India's Look East Policy," in *Two Decades of India's Look East Policy*, ed. Amar Nath Ram (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs and Manohar, 2012). 161

In the words of two former Indian officials, BIMSTEC therefore represents "the only real bridge" or a "unique link" between South and Southeast Asia".[60]

India's understanding of the neighbourhood has also significantly shifted to a more maritime imagination. Under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, India's initiatives considerably stressed developing connectivity around the Bay of Bengal that could further economic relations. He emphasised the connections between India's maritime identity and economic development. In 2005, India launched the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project between the shores of India and Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Singh stated in his address, "All great nations and economies of the world have had a vibrant and prosperous maritime economy. Ship building, ports, global trade, each of these elements generates incomes, employment, new opportunities and new challenges. Maritime trade is a complex matrix of various players - shipping lines, port authorities, terminal operators, freight forwarders, inland transporters, all catering to transportation of goods through sea-transport. In this matrix, ports are the pivot as central node for modal exchange of cargo as well as hub of the port community. In more recent decades our maritime economy has not developed as much as it should have. Our Government is paying special attention to the development of our ports and to maritime trade. (…) Indian ports should assume a more proactive role as facilitator of trade along with a range of value-added services. In the 10th Five Year Plan, we have set new and higher targets for enhancement of port capacity. (...) Today India once again reconnects with the world around us. (...) The march to such an economic strength would definitely require a state-of-the-art maritime infrastructure, which is efficient, professionally managed to sub-serve the economic interests of the nation. I see the Sethusamudram Project as a step forward in strengthening the maritime infrastructure."[61]

[60] Constantino Xavier, "Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Toward a Stronger BIMSTEC," 2018. 12

[61] Manmohan Singh, "PM's Address at the Commencenment of Work on the Sethusamudiram Ship Channel Project," Prime Minister's Office (Archive), Government of India, July 2, 2005.

India intensified its connectivity arrangements with the ASEAN states. This had to consider the immediate gateway to India's east – Myanmar. Incidentally, Myanmar joined both ASEAN and BIMSTEC in 1997. For several years, Myanmar was isolated and shut down from the world. For India. Myanmar opened up the bridge to the developed economies of Southeast Asia. It allowed India's landlocked Northeast to find a passage into the sea. Northeast India is connected with the mainland by the slender Siliguri corridor. This turmoiled, economically laggard region had the antagonistic Chinese in the north and the conflict-ridden Myanmar to its South because of the accidents of geography. India's better ties with Myanmar and the other ASEAN states allowed partial scope of linking India's Northeast with the mainland and the developed economies of Southeast Asia.[62] Northeast does enjoy economic opportunities with Myanmar, which already has existing border trade agreements.[63] However, the turn of events allowed a push to integrate Northeast's economies with Southeast Asia further. In a few years to follow, India pushed a host of connectivity projects to extract the economic benefits around the Bay of Bengal through Bangladesh and Myanmar.[64]

The idea of a trilateral highway between India, Myanmar and Thailand was routed from Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. It was conceived at a trilateral ministerial meeting on transport linkages in Yangon in April 2002. 2004, an India-ASEAN car rally was mooted through India's northeast and Southeast Asia. Prime Minister Singh, flagging off the rally from Assam's Guwahati, emphasised the interlinkages between globalization, connectivity and prosperity. He stated, "In an era of globalisation, inter-connectivity, whether within a region or between regions, has to be comprehensive, covering all dimensions – human,

[62] Ambar Kumar Ghosh and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Situating India's Northeast in the Bay of Bengal Regional Architecture* (Observer Research Foundation and Global Policy Series (Durham), 2022).

[63] India-Myanmar Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/myanmar-july-2012.pdf

[64] Research and Information System for Developing Countries, *Expansion of North East India's Trade and Investment with Bangladesh and Myanmar: An Assessment of the Opportunities and Constraints* (New Delhi: RIS, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Government of India , 2011).

infrastructural, economic, technological and cultural. By building such bridges of understanding and interaction, we will increase and widen the circles of prosperity and growth."[65]

In 2003, India initiated an ambitious multimodal transport corridor, establishing a trilateral connection between Calcutta, Manipur and Sittwe. According to the government, the route plan aimed to "provide connectivity between India and Myanmar from Ports on India's eastern seaport to Myanmar's Sittwe Port, and further to North East India through Myanmar using sea, river and road transport modes. The project includes a waterway component of 158 km on Kaladan River from Sittwe to Paletwa in Myanmar and a road component of 109 km from Paletwa to Zorinpui on the India-Myanmar border in Mizoram."[66] The transport corridor was initially imagined as a comprehensive collection of economic objectives. Shyam Saran, India's former Foreign Secretary, points out the initial plans of the Kaladan Multimodal Corridor: "Originally, there was also a plan to construct a gas pipeline along the Kaladan River from Sittwe all the way up to Bonaigaon in Assam. This was envisaged at a time when India was looking at the possibility of exploring gas reserves offshore in the Bay of Bengal, in the same zone as Yadana and Yetagun".[67] Saran sums up the importance of Myanmar in India's policies: "One, Myanmar being a contiguous neighbour of India, became a gateway to ASEAN. Joining BIMSTEC, Myanmar also created a core of a Bay of Bengal economic community."[68] This was an attempt to imagine the Northeast as part of an economic geography wherein political borders

[65] Manmohan Singh, "PM's Speech at the Flagging off of Indo-Asean Car Rally," Prime Minister's Office (Archive), Government of India , November 22, 2004.

[66] Question No. 1411, Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project, Lok Sabha, Unstarred Question No. 1411, Answered on 28.07.2023, Ministry of External Affairs, https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/36922/QUESTION+NO1411+KALADAN+MULTI+MODAL+TRANSIT+TRANSPORT+PROJECT

[67] Shyam Saran, "Re-Engaging the Neighbourhood: A Personal Perspective on India's Look East Policy," in *Two Decades of India's Look East Policy: Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity*, ed. Amar Nath Ram (New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs and Manohar, 2012). 133

[68] Ibid. 132

do not constrain economic geographies that benefit from economic interdependence through connectivity. In this view, such geographies are sustained by absolute gains, where developmental growth provides the peace dividend.

Under Prime Minister Modi, India's contemporary policies aim for collective benefits through greater connectivity and absolute gains. Its 'Neighbourhood First' and Act East (a progressive renaming of Look East in 2014) policies geographically overlap. The Ministry of External Affairs highlights the core of both objectives: furthering human, physical, and digital connectivity for better trade and commerce.[69] India gradually shifted from SAARC to BIMSTEC as its preferred vehicle of regionalism. BIMSTEC held together several of India's goals in this region. It allowed India to brand itself as a maritime nation and reorient its neighbourhood to be tilted towards Southeast Asia. The Bay of Bengal became India's centrepiece for its neighbourhood and a springboard for its ventures further east. India's investments for better trade in the maritime space were further embellished.

In 2015, India's Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways launched its flagship initiative, Project Sagarmala, to overhaul its maritime sector and further port-led development. Project Sagarmala has five core areas – port-led industrialisation, coastal community development, coastal shipping and inland waterways, port modernisation and port connectivity. The project underlines that the "Maritime sector in India has been the backbone of the country's trade and has grown manifold over the years. To harness India's 7,517 km long coastline, 14,500 km of potentially navigable waterways and strategic location on key international maritime trade routes, the Government of India has embarked upon the ambitious Sagarmala Programme,

[69] Question no. 1456, India's Act East Policy, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question no. 1456, Answered on 28.07.2023, Ministry of External Affairs, July 28, 2023 https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/36927/QUESTION+NO1456+INDIAS+ACTEAST+POLICY

which aims to promote port-led development in the country."[70] The project has been interpreted along the lines of Rosentein-Rodan's model of the 'big push' that advocates government-led infrastructure investment for economic growth.[71] Naval expert Abhijit Singh points out the major economic objective of the project: "Sagarmala aims to obtain access to new development regions and enhanced connectivity with regional economic centres."[72] To boost the Sagarmala Project, India did away with its earlier stringent cabotage laws. They gradually receded in 2005 and finally moved away in 2016 to develop transhipment ports in India and reduce dependency on foreign ports like Colombo and Singapore. Maritime expert Vijay Sakhuja points out the rationale behind the removal of the cabotage restrictions, "In 2016, as the government put its focus on the Sagarmala project and sought greater maritime connectivity, a realisation dawned that the cabotage law too needed to be liberalised (…) it was liberalised keeping in mind the fact that India needs to modernise its ports and ultimately move into the concept of 'smart ports".[73] In 2021, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways developed a broader Maritime Vision that embarked on a 10-year journey to advance export-led growth and port modernisation.[74]

The economic significance of Southeast and East Asia incrementally gained importance in the global order. A popular shorthand to collectively denote the region at large has been the Indo-Pacific.[75] The Indo-Pacific as a mental map brings together the synergies between the Indian

[70] Introduction, Overview of Sagarmala Programme, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Government of India, http://sagarmala.gov.in/about-sagarmala/introduction#:~:text=To%20harness%20India%27s%207%2C517%20km,led%20development%20in%20the%20country.

[71] Rudra Prasad Pradhan, Chhavi Rathi, and Suraj Gupta, "Sagarmala & India's Maritime Big Push Approach: Seaports as India's Geo-Economic Gateways & Neighborhood Maritime Lessons," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18, no. 3 (September 2, 2022): 209–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2022.2114195.

[72] Abhijit Singh, "Ask An Expert:, MP-IDSA, https://www.idsa.in/askanexpert/sagarmalandmausamprojects

[73] Basu, "What Is Cabotage Law & Why India Plans to Restore the Sea Transport Rules It Scrapped in 2018."

[74] Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Maritime Vision 2030, http://sagarmala.gov.in/sites/default/files/MIV%202030%20Report.pdf

[75] For a discussion on the mental map of Indo-Pacific, see Timothy Doyle and Dennis Rumley, *The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Priya Chacko, ed., *New Regional Geopolitics*

and the Pacific Oceans. Furthermore, it emphasises imagining regions from a maritime perspective. There is no objective geography of the Indo-Pacific. Like every imaginative geography, the Indo-Pacific is a construct of contested interpretation, necessitating warring visions and constructs likely to be wrestled out between opposed strategic stakeholders in the region. Yet, a baseline of the idea of the Indo-Pacific includes the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. In the earlier understanding of the Asia-Pacific, Asia broadly ranged from the Southeast Asian states. In the newer interpretation of the Indo-Pacific, the western end extends to at least the Eastern Indian Ocean. Some interpretations consider the breadth of the Indo-Pacific from the shores of Africa. The Bay of Bengal is seen as central to these mental maps.[76] Apart from security, there are key economic interests in the region. The pandemic was a deep reminder to build and consolidate supply chains and reap the benefits of prosperity in times of conflict. India has integrated with the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity in 2022. The four pillars of the economic framework are trade, supply chain resilience, clean energy and decarbonisation, and taxes and anti-corruption measures. A joint statement suggests the framework intends to "advance resilience, sustainability, inclusiveness, economic growth, fairness, and competitiveness" in these economies.[77] Prime Minister Modi described the grouping as born from a collective desire to make the Indo-Pacific region an engine of global economic growth, calling for common and creative solutions to tackle economic challenges in the region. A government report stated, "India is committed to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region and believes that deepening economic engagement among partners is crucial for continued growth, peace, and prosperity. India is keen to collaborate with partner countries

in the Indo-Pacific (New York, NY : Routledge, 2016. | Series: Routledge contemporary Asia series ; 57: Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315677392.

[76] Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Harsh V Pant, *Anchoring the Bay of Bengal in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (Observer Research Foundation & Global Policy (Durham), 2024).

[77] Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity Agreement Relating to Supply Chain Resilience, November 14, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100581548.pdf

under the IPEF and work towards advancing regional economic connectivity, integration and boosting trade and investment within the region."[78]

At the 14th East Asia Summit (EAS), India floated an institutionalised policy in the form of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). The three pillars of IPOI were - enhancing maritime security, sustainable use of marine resources, and disaster prevention and management. India's economic approach to the region has been consistent in some key aspects.[79] Coming from the East Asia Summit (EAS) forum validates the ASEAN centrality that India has talked about when it comes to its Indo-Pacific outlook. There are no second thoughts on the fact that the thinking on the Indo-Pacific is anchored around an extension of India's age-old "Look-East" Policy. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative stands on the idea of a multipolar region.[80] It has maintained a balance in the region that seeks to be adversarial to none. This approach is non-confrontational and inclusive.[81] The nature of its footing helps India argue for a region devoid of hierarchical tendencies. This echoes the core foundations of spatial market imaginations where absolute gains are incentivised. An inclusive multipolar order is also a bulwark against the weaponisation of trade and services.

Bay of Bengal as a space of marine resources

Besides trade, India's imagination of the Bay of Bengal as a market considers the maritime space a pool of resources. Oceans have an abundance of marine resources. However, several factors—legal regimes about the governability of marine resources, technological

[78] Prime Minister's Office, Prime Minister participates in event to launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, May 22, 2023, https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1827595

[79] Prime Minister's Speech at the East Asia Summit, 04 November 2019, Media Centre, Ministry of External Affairs, November 4, 2019, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32171/Prime_Ministers_Speech_at_the_East_Asia_Summit_04_November_2019

[80] Premesha Saha and Abhishek Mishra, *The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative: Towards a Coherent Indo-Pacific Policy for India* (Observer Research Foundation, Occasional Paper, 2020).

[81] PTI, "Prosperous Indo-Pacific Hinges on Peaceful Maritime Domain: Navy Chief," *The Hindu*, November 23, 2022.

enhancements, and common threat perceptions owing to resources—have combined to make maritime geographies become geographies of the market as resources.[82]

India's estimation of the maritime spaces as resource pools is embedded in a global context. This vision picked up since the 1982 UNCLOS III when the states' legal rights on marine resources were defined. India took an active interest as it was a dual incentive: curating economic benefits from the sea and establishing control of the maritime space. Staking a legitimate claim over resources allowed India to have a maritime footprint. Unlike establishing a footprint through naval power projection, which required material capability and ran the risk of being provocative. With the turn of the 1980s, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi put this vision into policy. Addressing the 1983 Annual Science Congress in Tripura, Prime Minister Gandhi stated: "The adoption, by an overwhelming majority of nations, of the Convention of the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea is a major new development. Apart from territorial waters, national authority now stretches to an economic jurisdiction ranging from 200 to 350 nautical miles from our coastline. In this area we have the exclusive right to utilise living and non-living resources. The most prized resources of the continental shelf are hydro-carbons. India has now been recognised as a "pioneer investor" in ocean mining, giving it the exclusive right to operate in an area of up to 150,000 square kilometres in the high seas for the recovery and processing of polymetallic nodules. This is a direct result of our past oceanographic researches. Apart from this, the Indian Ocean makes our weather. Here it is that both the life-giving monsoon and cyclones that cause devastation arise. Meteorological studies over the Indian Ocean and an understanding of the interaction between the ocean and the atmosphere are thus of the greatest importance to our farmers and others. The bounty of food in the ocean is rich in protein. A

[82] Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511807763; Herman Prager, *Global Marine Environment: Does the Water Planet Have a Future?* (London: University Press of America, 1993); Stephen C. Young, *The Politics of the Environment* (Manchester: Baseline Books, 1993).

mere dozen or so countries, which have extensive technological capabilities to locate living marine resources and to understand physical, chemical and biological oceanography, monopolize more than three-quarters of the total global harvest of fish and operate major fishing fleets with storage facilities at great distances."[83]

A couple of years earlier, in 1981, Prime Minister Gandhi created the Department of Ocean Development (DoD) as a part of the Cabinet Secretariat under her direct charge. A year later, it became a separate department, and it started carrying out its activities in the field of ocean development. Gandhi took the opportunity to point out the changes in India's politico-administrative structure owing to the implementation of this vision: "We have undertaken a variety of oceanographic activities under the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Oil & Natural (p.2) Gas Commission, the Geological Survey of India, the Department of Space, the Indian Meteorological Department, the Ministries of Agriculture, Defence and Shipping & Transport and universities. The Department of Ocean Development will provide the focal point for coordinated progress and our Ocean Policy statement will guide their endeavour, harnessing this tremendous potential."[84]

India's policies were not restricted to its marine resources. It also staked a claim in exploring and researching global commons. In 1982, India decided to send a mission to explore marine resources in Antarctica. In the same address, Prime Minister Gandhi stated, "Antarctica, the deep oceans outside the exclusive economic zone of coastline nations and outer space are the common heritage of humankind. We feel strongly that they should not be subject to the rule of "first come, first served". A few countries have not signed the Convention of the Law of the Seas, blatantly refusing to recognise this common human right. We hope that they will

[83] Indira Gandhi, *Science and Technology – Speech at the 70th Annual Session of Indian Science Congress at Tirupati, January 3, 1983 in Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Statements on Foreign Policy, January - April 1983* (New Delhi: External Publicity Division, Ministry of External Affairs, 1983).1-3

[84] Ibid. 1-3

reconsider their stand but this makes it all the more necessary for us to build our own self-reliant capabilities. We are neither expansionist nor aggressive and we do not wish to go beyond our rights but those rights must be safeguarded."[85]

This was India's attempt to brand itself as an emerging maritime nation with an advanced scientific and economic incentive and a rich maritime past. In a personal interview, Shivshankar Menon, India's former National Security Advisor credits the individual leadership factor for this vision along with the changing global context, which increasingly emphasises ocean resources from an economic and scientific point of view. He mentions that behind visions to be translated into policy, the context has to be mediated by the leadership. He thinks that Prime Minister Gandhi could visualise the oceans not just from a security perspective but a more holistic perspective of ecology.[86] Gandhi stated, "We are the only country with the privilege of having an ocean named after us. We have a long coast and our maritime traditions go back to ancient times, yet because of our large land base we become accustomed to thinking of ourselves as, and are regarded by other as, landlubbers. The Indian Ocean has hardly been explored by those who live around it. Incursions by outside military powers have opened our eyes to the significance of the sea around us for our security and development. Our ancient books speak of Agni springing from the sea. Offshore wells have given reality to this allegory. Our literature calls the ocean a treasure-house of gems. We certainly hope that this also will become true for our economy. Treasure is not to be squandered but must be husbanded most carefully. Hence our insistence on the conservation of the marine environment. Too often has science exploited fragile and vanishing resources, careless of consequent scarcity and other results."[87]

[85] Ibid. 3

[86] Gathered from a personal unstructured interview, dated June 10, 2023

[87] Ibid.

India's emphasis since the 1990s has been on utilising marine resources. In its effort, it has attempted to bring about several reforms and institutions to facilitate the use of marine resources. This is evident in the government's use of the term 'Blue Economy' in contemporary times.[88] The Blue Economy is an evolving concept that considers how marine resources can be judiciously managed, given the sustainability concerns and the environment.[89] The World Bank has defined Blue Economy as the "sustainable use of the ocean for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems".[90] The Centre for Blue Economy associates three meanings with this term: first, the overall contribution of oceans to the economy; second, the need to address the environmental and ecological sustainability of the oceans; and finally, the ocean economy as a growth opportunity for both developed and developing countries.[91]

Blue Economy is not necessarily restricted to the state jurisdiction precisely because marine resources cannot be sized to the national scale.[92] As a result, the contiguous nature of the marine resources enforces certain restrictions on how states use these resources. Most marine resources are contiguous and agnostic to legal boundaries. Consider the case of fisheries. Recently, a dead sea fishing zone was reported in the middle of the Bay of Bengal.[93] This invariably impacts the

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[88] The Hindu Bureau, "Modi Unveils Long Term Blueprint for Blue Economy," *The Hindu*, November 17, 2023.

[89] S. Smith-Godfrey, "Defining the Blue Economy," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 12, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 58–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2016.1175131; Vasudha Chawla, "Rethinking the Oceans: Towards the Blue Economy," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 12, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 115–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2016.1239365; Sanjaya Baru, "Indian Ocean Perspectives: From Sea Power to Ocean Prosperity," *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 435–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1666519.

[90] For some key definitions, see Blue Economy definitions, United Nations, https://www.un.org/regularprocess/sites/www.un.org.regularprocess/files/rok_part_2.pdf

[91] Ibid

[92] For a discussion on Blue Economy and Political Economy, see Shailly Kedia and Priyanka Gautam, "Blue Economy Meets International Political Economy: The Emerging Picture," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 16, no. 2 (July 2, 2020): 46–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2020.1845457; Dinoj K. Upadhyay and Manoranjan Mishra, "Blue Economy: Emerging Global Trends and India's Multilateral Cooperation," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 16, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 30–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2020.1785087.

[93] PTI, "Huge 'dead Zone' Found in Bay of Bengal," *Deccan Herald*, December 19, 2016.

catch of the coastal states like India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Therefore, resource sharing at a regional level brings in the question of cooperative measures and joint action – stretching the Blue Economy to a regional scale. India's official policy deploys the scope of several institutional mechanisms to further resource cooperation. This involves institutions mainly through BIMSTEC. Among the chief sectors of BIMSTEC's agenda is agriculture and fisheries cooperation for regional food security.[94] Another sector of collaboration relates to science, technology, and innovation, which deals with oceanography, marine technology, waste management, and technologies to deal with climate change and disaster management.[95] India has also stressed the Blue Economy as a pillar of its recently launched Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. However, despite the push, regimes centred on oceanic resources have little achievements to show and have struggled to negotiate with security concerns. This is primarily because of the lack of cooperative habits between the states despite the presence of the institutions. A recent report jointly edited by Constantino Xavier and Amitendu Palit on Connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region points out similar political hurdles in economic engagements.[96] It states that while several institutions have been created for cooperation, cooperative practices are missing between states. Bay of Bengal, as a result, continues to suffer from low levels of intra-regional trade and laggard connectivity. This is despite a lot of political attention and economic investments in several projects to allow business to unfold. Several case studies point to how absolute gains have been denied because of the lack of cooperative habits between states where institutions have been rudderless.

Apart from the cooperation between states, using marine resources has deep implications with the community. Community, here, can mean transnational communities of the maritime space

[94] Fisheries and Livestock, BIMSTEC, https://bimstec.org/fisheries-livestock

[95] Science, Technology and Innovation, BIMSTEC, https://bimstec.org/science-technology-innovation

[96] Constantino Xavier and Amitendu Palit, *Connectivity and Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal Region* (Centre for Social and Economic Progress, 2023).

and not just residents of one particular state. The critical question remains: what is the state's role in managing these resources? While the state has a legal claim over the resources, there are traditional claims of the communities that precede the legal claim. Take, for instance, the traditional fishing grounds of several coastal communities.[97] In the Bay of Bengal, several coastal communities across India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have claims over fishing grounds where several past generations have exercised their livelihood. They do not agree or accept the modern state regime that indicates territorial limits on the sea. The problem is further complicated because living marine resources, like fish, travel beyond maritime borders. The fishers often cross maritime borders chasing a good catch and are detained in other states' prisons for trespassing borders. The India-Sri Lanka Palk Straits illustrates how state and community claims over resources clash.[98] Despite the maritime borders between India and Sri Lanka delineated in the 1970s, thousands of fisherfolks are arrested by the coastguards of either state every year. The state's enforcement capacity is also limited to stop such violations. The resources would arguably not be better managed if the state acts as a passive actor and leaves the resources entirely to the community. Free market economics over marine resources will possibly lead to indiscriminate use of resources by the community itself. A possible scenario is the tragedy of commons when neither the community nor the state will take up any ownership. A second possible scenario is that powerful communities can hierarchically claim resources. This power can be material or social power within the community. On the other end of the spectrum, the state cannot act as an owner of these resources bypassing the community to ensure just economic gains. These instances are prevalent when the state itself monopolizes control on resources.

[97]Rajni Gamage and Isha Gupta, "Resolution of the India-Sri Lanka Maritime Border Conflict and Fisheries Dispute," *ISAS Working Papers*, August 23, 2023; "Unending Woes: On Bottom Trawling and the Arrests of Indian Fishermen by Sri Lanka," *The Hindu*, February 5, 2024.

[98] Fateh Veer Singh Guram, "India, Sri Lanka, and the Fishers Caught in the Middle," The Diplomat, March 19, 2022.

Indian Government's recent bill on issuing licenses for fishing vehicles have stirred up protests from the fisherfolk. The fear of traditional fisherfolk is that they will be put out of the market by the corporates owing to the license regime. There may be scenarios when the state can mediate between the resources and the community. However, even then, there are no guarantees that there will be optimum usage of marine resources. Consider how primarily the Indian state has encouraged fishermen to take up mechanized trawlers for better catch in the sea.[99] The state, in such cases, gets the support of the community as the latter is involved and engaged. The community gets the incentives of livelihoods and access to resources. However, marine resources are threatened in the process. The state has to incorporate the scientific community to frame its policies. More than an adjudicator, the state has to be a nodal point. It has to aggregate policy inputs from several stakeholders and coordinate with several agencies within its structure. India's evolving policy of Blue Economy has tasks to aggregate and mediate interests at several levels and between multiple stakeholders.

India's blueprint for a Blue Economy was unveiled at the Global Maritime Summit in 2023 to bring these diversified issues together. At the outset, the vision emphasises three areas to cover in the next 25 years – enhancing port facilities and infrastructure, developing and promoting sustainable practices and facilitating international collaboration. This sought to establish a balance between maritime-led economic growth and sustainability. In some ways, the balance brings out the debate between economism and environmentalism. There were mentions of core economic growth prospects like Next Generation Mega Port, International Container Trans-shipment port, island development, inland waterways, and multi-modal hubs, which aim to lower business costs and minimise environmental impact.[100] Prime Minister Modi also stressed

[99] Ibid.

[100] IANS, "PM Inaugurates Global Maritime India Summit, Unveils Plan for Blue Economy," *The Times of India* , November 17, 2023.

the importance of dependable sea routes for international commerce, particularly for establishing a resilient global supply chain after the pandemic. At the same time, there was an attempt to infuse sustainability.[101] The choice of issues for the discussion indicated this balance: decarbonisation; coastal shipping and inland water transportation; shipbuilding; repair and recycling; finance, insurance & arbitration; maritime clusters; innovation & technology; maritime safety and security; and maritime tourism. It remains to be seen how these competing, sometimes contradictory tendencies unfold.[102]

Conclusion: Implications for the Bay of Bengal as a Zone of Commerce

The chapter surveys two market imaginations of the Indian state for the Bay of Bengal. The first tracks how and under what context India imagines the Bay of Bengal as a commercial community. Owing to India's liberalisation reforms and the structural changes in the Asian economy, India's economic engagements have assumed valence since the 1980s. This has fallouts for the imagination of the Bay of Bengal as a commercial transport surface and then as an economic community. The second section tracks India's imagination of the Bay of Bengal as a resource pool. This primarily depends on India's capacity for resource extraction and management and the changing regime of international law. This opened up the sea as not just a transport corridor for trade but also a means of using its resources as an extended surface of its territory.

Can the logic of mutual gains and prosperity alone explain India's market imagination? Contextual evidence suggests that the market imagination is not purely based on economic factors, but there is a strong presence of political and strategic factors. This does not refute the neo-liberal logic as the foundation in explaining India's market imagination. It argues that

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways brings Ocean of Opportunities for Maritime Sector of the Nation, Press Information Bureau, October 9, 2023, https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1965985

political and strategic factors supplement economic logic if the market imagination must be explained and examined.

Harmonising political and economic interests brings about India's market Imagination of the Bay of Bengal. When we account for the changes in contextual factors during the 1980s, a series of political and strategic factors pushed India's market imagery. It can be argued that the market imagination also fulfilled some of the political and strategic goals for India. Shashi Tharoor points to this complementarity of economic and political visions, "Initially aimed at improving relations with the member states of the ASEAN at a time when India had embarked upon economic liberalization, and indirectly at enhancing strategic cooperation with the United States ('looking East to look West, as the author Sunanda K Datta-Ray termed it), the policy has not just become an end in itself, cementing enhanced economic cooperation with a long-neglected region, but it signalled India's return - some might arrival - in a part of the world increasingly anxious about China's overweening influence."[103]

India never lost sight of the political and strategic gains in pursuit of economic gains. It can be argued that the economic imagination was pitched in a new region as it was less hierarchical or polarized. As and when India gained its foothold in the region, it started establishing its security arguments from the economic veneer. This best portrays how security relationships followed the economic charting horse with ASEAN. For India, Look East itself had two distinct phases: the first phase was avowedly about economics, and the second was strategic. Preet Malik, MEA Secretary, gives an account of the genesis of India's policies towards Southeast Asia in the 1990s: "The initial thinking which evolved out of discussions with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, his principal secretary and some of us, firmly established that the policy would be multi-faceted taking into account not only India's strategic and security interests but would

[103] Tharoor, *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century*. 183

have a very definite economic bias to it as well as a defence coordination bias. (...) However, the most important issue was the China factor and what would be a good way to bring greater sophistication to dealing with China by giving the approach not only a bilateral content but also moving the relationship into a greater regional context that would involve a closer relationship not only with the ASEAN countries but also far East."[104] Therefore, India's economic engagements instrumentally served three strategic goals since its renewed engagements began. First, it signalled a working relationship with the global hegemon, the US. Second, it was a counter to Chinese presence and, in some ways, balancing with ASEAN states against China when drawn into a regional context. Third, preparing a foundational ground for the security engagements with the ASEAN states.

The market logic did not compel the Indian state to relegate its relative-gains logic. Instead, the political and strategic factors were reflected, sometimes overshadowed in the economic engagements. The economic reasoning has remained subservient to the political dictates. India's market imagination somewhat carries its political and strategic imprint and constantly struggles to fit concerns that are not purely economic. The case of Northeast India's integration with the Southeast is a good exposition. It shows that despite immense economic complementarities and interests, politico-security concerns constrain economic integration. The logic of absolute gains of the market has not been able to bypass political hurdles and borders. If market gains are to be considered, then Northeast India has the most potential to tap into the markets of South China. However, such economic engagements are difficult because of political reasons. Economic reasons have not caused a reversal of this nor created any unbundling of territories or peace dividend. Journalist Subir Bhaumik points out how political geographies dominate over economic geographies: "Industries coming up with products for the

[104] Malik, "India's Look East Policy: Genesis." 35-36

Chinese market can be easily developed in Manipur and then transported to Yunnan across the Imphal-Mandalay and the Mandalay-Kunming highways. Other states can also develop such industries and use Manipur as the bridgehead for transporting products to China via Myanmar, while states like Tripura can do the same through Bangladesh. That is until such time the Indian government shed its inhibitions in linking up to China directly. Tapping the Chinese markets would be top priority for industries setting up manufacturing units in the Northeast."[105] A good case is how India's overtures in integrating into the Asian market are constantly overshadowed by the remnants of India's protectionist policies at home. Despite more than three decades of liberalisation reforms, India's hesitancy, particularly in agriculture sectors, tends to define its limitations on the sea in withdrawing from initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).[106]

India's market imagination is a product of several factors. We survey how India's imagination of the Bay of Bengal transitions from a transport corridor to assume a sense of an economic community bound by the sea. The changes in India's domestic economy policy and structural changes in regional and global markets are primarily responsible for this transition. India has gradually started viewing the Bay of Bengal from a perspective of resources. The changes in global regimes are mainly responsible for bringing about a structural shift in the Indian state that facilitated this policy. Yet, a common thread in this imagination is that India's political and security considerations constantly prevail. The economic imagination is not bereft of security considerations. In turn, the security and political considerations have limited the success of the economic imagination.

[105] Subir Bhaumik, "Conclusion: Relevance and Road to the Future," in *The Agartala Doctrine: A Proactive Northeast in Indian Foreign Policy*, ed. Subir Bhaumik (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016). 324

[106] Surupa Gupta, "India and RCEP: Challenges and Opportunities of Opening Up the Farm/Food Sector," in *Heading East: Security, Trade and Environment between India and Southeast Asia*, ed. Sumit Ganguly and karen Stoll Farrell (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

INDIA'S CULTURAL IMAGINATION OF THE BAY OF BENGAL

Do states have a cultural understanding of maritime spaces? If there is at all any cultural imagination of a maritime space, how can we trace it? To answer these questions, three clarifications are required. The first of these clarifications stands for what culture means in this context. Culture as a term has many interpretations.[1] When we use the term 'cultured', it can mean an intellectual or artistic achievement. Culture is also the whole way of approaching a person or community's life, including activities as diverse as poetry and political beliefs. In this context, we refer to culture as a product of shared ideas, beliefs, norms and values. Culture is a variable that forms collective identities in the study of politics.[2] It allows individuals and groups to answer, 'Who are we?' Collective identities based on culture can be formed when an individual relates to specific common markers within a group and simultaneously otherises other individuals and communities not part of these constructed shared markers. The reason why they are constructed is because the parameters on which a culture is constructed keep changing. As a result, the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are constantly shifting. Sterbling states that "a definition of the term collective identities would encompass every process of community formation and sociation that leads to clearly definable social units, although communicative processes of self- and other-identification and corresponding attitudes appear to be of constitutive importance."[3] Such collective identities based on culture can intertwine

[1] For a broad discussion on Culture and International Relations, see Christian Reus-Smit, "7. Culture," in International Relations: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2020), 102–18, https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198850212.003.0007.

[2] For an overview of Collective Identity, see Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and Bernhard Giesen, "The Construction of Collective Identity," *European Journal of Sociology* 36, no. 1 (May 28, 1995): 72–102, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975600007116; David A. Snow and Catherine Corrigall-Brown, "Collective Identity," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Elsevier, 2015), 174–80, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.10403-9; Esther Usborne and Roxane de la Sablonnière, "Understanding My Culture Means Understanding Myself: The Function of Cultural Identity Clarity for Personal Identity Clarity and Personal Psychological Well-Being," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 44, no. 4 (December 26, 2014): 436–58, https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12061.

[3] Anton Sterbling, "Collective Identities," in *The Handbook of Political, Social, and Economic Transformation* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 416–20, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198829911.003.0037.

with the imagery of a nation to form a national culture. However, culture as a foundation for collective identity might not necessarily be homogeneous.[4] It can also mean a matrix of several different cultural influences coexisting in a space with considerable affinity. In such cases, identifying a 'pure' culture can be tricky as the resultant shared culture has components of several blended influences. Culture is identified and expressed through tangible markers like language, icons, artefacts and practices. A second clarification is about what space as culture means. The understanding is partly borrowed from what we identify as cultural geography. It relates to how a place is rendered meaning and identity through cultural markers, including social and cultural practices, institutions and norms.

This rendering of culture in a particular geography has two connotations. First, it is essentially a dialectical process between social and natural units. Therefore, geography shapes culture as much as culture shapes geography. Second, from a critical perspective, there is a question of power inherent in constructing what kind of culture will prevail, dominate, or even subside within that geography. At any given time, the construction of cultural geography is a competing game of several agencies who would vouch for upholding their culture from within as the superior. Given the plurality of cultural interactions, cultural geographies can be fractious. The third clarification is understanding what entails a state's imagination of space as culture. When states imagine spaces as culture, it can lead to three broad possibilities. One, they can primarily envision culture not in contestation with the more authoritative political boundaries. Instead, cultural and political geographies may not overlap and yet coexist. States can allow culture to define a place because the cultural foundations are more robust than political ones.[5] For instance, community ties of culture and kinship or migration need not be restricted by political

[4] Zoë Corbyn, "How Geography Shapes Cultural Diversity," *Nature*, June 11, 2012, https://doi.org/10.1038/nature.2012.10808.

[5] Shibashis Chatterjee, "Territoriality, Sovereignty, and the State," in *India's Spatial Imaginations of South Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 1–45, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199489886.003.0001.

boundaries and borders. If political borders constrict the movement of people and ideas, we can safely say political geographies have overridden cultural spaces. A second possibility is when the state actively acknowledges, projects, promotes or curates cultural markers out of a space. States acting as patrons of culture can hierarchically assemblage cultures. This is evident in the case of how states build national cultures, which can use selective cultural markers deployed within the state's territorial boundaries. States hierarchically arrange which cultural symbols and practices will be prioritised and dominant in creating a national culture.[6] Furthermore, as the culturalist argument follows, states can project cultural geographies as foundations of political authority. A political expression of that is cultural nationalism. When a political agency represents a brand of culture, it requires political authority to preserve it. This culture becomes coterminous with the idea of the nation as a community. Culturalist understanding believes that a particular culture is the foundational basis for political authority. Politics as a social activity should be a product of culturally similar people. Therefore, political authority should be culturally ratified and sanctioned in the first place. Cultural and political boundaries are the same. Culturally, people have the ownership of organizing the rules under which they live, lending structures of political authority. In sharp contrast is the institutionalist understanding, which believes that several cultures can coexist under an agnostic or secular political authority. Multicultural societies can be governed by a single political authority in which cultural and political boundaries may or may not overlap or conflict. These frames of reference help systematise India's cultural imagination in the Bay of Bengal. India's cultural imagination oscillates between culturalist and institutionalist paradigms of interpreting culture and political authority.

[6] Peter Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1996).

Maritime Spaces as Culture: What consists of a maritime cultural imagination?

We can ask three broad questions to understand a state's cultural imagination of a maritime space. First, what cultural metaphors does a state use for maritime space? This corresponds to whether the state can find cultural uses of the sea as part of its history and national identity. In this imagination, a state looks at the maritime space by extending its borders where it has exercised historical engagements and control. Take, for instance, how a state identifies itself as maritime or land-oriented. In the case of a maritime state, there are linkages of cultural history depending on the sea. Another example can be the cultural appropriation of the sea. This is found when a maritime space is considered sacred or integral to the national identity or pride. A variation of this can be seen as maritime irredentism. This is evident in China's arguments for the South China Sea and, to a lesser extent,[7] India's historical exceptionalism applied to the immense Indian Ocean.[8] These claims are agnostic to the standardisation and demarcation of seas by International Law. This cultural ownership further becomes a plank of strengthening security and economic control.

Second, what cultural policies does the state envision and execute in the sea and around the rim states? This question can be further divided into two segments. First, a state's cultural policies tuned to a maritime space are aimed at people.[9] Maritime spaces are carriers of cultural

[7] For a discussion on China's irredentist claims, see Jonathan Dixon, "East China Sea or South China Sea, They Are All China's Seas: Comparing Nationalism among China's Maritime Irredentist Claims †," Nationalities Papers 42, no. 6 (November 20, 2014): 1053–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.969693; Denny Roy, "Assertive China: Irredentism or Expansionism?," Survival 61, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 51–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1568044; Maria Hsia Chang, "Chinese Irredentist Nationalism: The Magician's Last Trick," Comparative Strategy 17, no. 1 (January 1998): 83–100, https://doi.org/10.1080/01495939808403133.

[8] David Scott, *The Indian Ocean as India's Ocean*, ed. David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2010), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198743538.013.34; K.R. Singh, "India and the Indian Ocean," *South Asian Survey* 4, no. 1 (March 11, 1997): 145–62, https://doi.org/10.1177/097152319700400112.

[9] For a diverse discussion of some of the issues, see Theresa Klara Loch and Maraja Riechers, "Integrating Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Management and Research on Coastal Ecosystems in the Global South: A Literature Review," *Ocean & Coastal Management* 212 (October 2021): 105821, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2021.105821; Meg Parsons, Lara Taylor, and Roa Crease, "Indigenous Environmental Justice within Marine Ecosystems: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Indigenous Peoples'

engagements and transactions across its rim. Cultural transactions include the interactions of languages, religions, and kinships across the maritime space, which may facilitate a common or shared identity. Migration is the critical process of these cultural transactions. When a state visualises a cultural maritime space, it can construct a shared identity across the rim. Maritime cultural policies can also be aimed at people belonging to coastal communities and islands. How far a state is accepting of transnational culture and whether its policies encourage such tendencies is the question. Is the state open to cultural relations, kinship ties, and free movement accounting for this culture? If its policies reflect this, then that is one way of interpreting the sea as culture. Second, a state can target policies aiming at the cultural preservation of places.[10] This can be in the form of transnational heritage or underwater conservation. When a state finds the prevalence of cultural markers across the sea – such as its sacred sites or historical antiques categorised as cultural heritage,[11] there comes a question of appropriation and conservation. In both cases, cultural imaginations of maritime spaces are not restricted to the state's territories. This is typical of the fluidity of oceans in organising culture. The idea of oceans as pivots of culture is beyond the scale of the nation-state. As a result, when the states engage with a cultural imagination, their policies involve several stakeholders: citizens and people within the sovereign territory, the states on the ocean rim and beyond, the citizens of the rim states, and its diaspora. Simultaneously, apart from people, there are places beyond the state jurisdiction where this imagination is implemented. In other words, do the states stake cultural claims over spaces beyond their borders on which they have jurisdictional control?

Involvement in Marine Governance and Management," *Sustainability* 13, no. 8 (April 10, 2021): 4217, https://doi.org/10.3390/su13084217.

[10] Jon Henderson, "Oceans without History? Marine Cultural Heritage and the Sustainable Development Agenda," *Sustainability* 11, no. 18 (September 17, 2019): 5080, https://doi.org/10.3390/su11185080.

[11] Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Coastal Shrines and Transnational Maritime Networks across India and Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2021).

India's Cultural Maritime Identity and the Bay of Bengal

India's geopolitical positioning and engagement have been often criticised as 'sea-blindness'.[12] This alleged continental bias stems from primarily two arguments. First, India's maritime culture and heritage are mainly absent from its historical identity as a state. The sea is primarily sidelined in both registers of academic and public history. Despite a long coastline and a sizeable population dwelling and depending upon the sea, India's history is representative of the empires of the land and the life inward. India's history is representative of kingdoms like the Mauryas and Guptas, followed by the Delhi Sultanate. After that, the Mughals essentially left out the Cholas and Zamorins of South India, whose sprawling kingdoms were branching from the coasts. There is very little of India regarding the sea and modern history,[13] as most of it comprises the arrival of the Arab merchants in the Indian Ocean around the 12th and 13th centuries. After that, the colonial powers – British, Dutch, and Portuguese- obliviated the earlier pre-colonial Indian connections with present-day Southeast Asia and the Middle East. India's glorious years at the sea are in an oblivious pocket of the unknown. When India emerged as an independent state, its historical mould was inward-looking and sidelined the earlier connections with the sea. India's identity is predominantly that of a continental rather than a maritime state. Second, independent India has invested very little in its maritime development. This considers how the erstwhile cultures of seafaring and shipbuilding were not encouraged in independent India. On the other hand, the condition of our ports and coastline consistently stagnated. While there is no cultural rebuttal to this argument, how India prioritised the land over the sea is not

[12] For a discussion on India's sea-blindness, see Arun Prakash, "China Has Become a Maritime Power. It's Time India Caught up," *The Indian Express*, June 21, 2021; DK Sharma, "Fighting Sea Blindness," *The Hindu*, June 9, 2020; Pratnashree Basu, "Maritime India: The Quest for a Steadfast Identity," Observer Research Foundation, November 29, 2021; Shiv Shankar Menon, "Maritime Imperatives of Indian Foreign Policy," *Maritime Affairs:Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 5, no. 2 (July 2, 2010): 15–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/09733150903429460; C Raja Mohan, "Maritime India versus Continental Delhi," *The Indian Express*, February 9, 2016; Ranendra Sawan, "India's Maritime Identity," *National Maritime Foundation*, January 18, 2023.

[13] Himanshu Prabha Ray, "India's Maritime History Requires Greater Appreciation," *The Wire*, October 3, 2020.

difficult to rationalise. Consider that most of India's human security concerns travel through the land, not the sea. For instance, one of India's most consistent human security issues emerges from the Northeast. The lack of sync in cultural and political borders splattered with insurgencies has created pockets of human security concerns ranging from trafficking to weapons trade.

Nevertheless, neither the Indian state nor its political elites are oblivious to the maritime culture and history. Starting from India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru,[14] to the incumbent[15], there is a consistent invocation of India's cultural past and the sea. Such references are plenty within the policy and academic circles. KM Panikkar is one such proponent.[16] His argument coalesces the cultural and strategic domains. He broadly argues that India's strategic control over the Bay of Bengal was lost when it retracted culturally from the space. The awareness of India's historical connections in the Bay of Bengal was present in India's professional historical circles. Cultural markers across the Bay of Bengal were read through a notion of cultural unity and strengthening the foundations of India's exceptionalism and political authority. This was backed by the archaeological discoveries of Hindu colonies in parts of present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, which primarily French and British historians led.[17] Indian historians[18] appropriated the evidence of Hindu culture, language, and religious sites in the

[14] Nehru elaborately discusses this in Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India (Centenary Edition)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[15] PTI, "Long Period of Slavery, Indifference Made Us Forget Our Maritime Heritage: PM Modi," *The Hindu*, October 18, 2022.

[16] The chronology of maritime history is enumerated in KM Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1951); KM Panikkar, *The Future of India and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1945).

[17] I. W. Mabbett, "The 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Historical Sources," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (September 7, 1977): 143–61, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463400009310.

[18] TCA Raghavan, "Luminous Minds," *The Telegraph*, June 11, 2020.

light of constructing India's ethnic nationalism and civilisational glory. India's civilisation in such writings extended beyond India's geography into Southeast Asia.[19]

The study shows that the Indian state or the elite were never unaware of its sea traditions, heritage and connections. The argument that India ignored its maritime identity and only discovered it recently in contemporary years can be contested. This is because the Indian state has been invoking the cultural metaphors of the sea since its independence. Furthermore, its presence is packed within the Indian nationalist movement. It is a more feasible argument that this cultural imagination of the Bay of Bengal undergoes ebbs and flows owing to context changes. Defining the meaning of a space is an interpretive act by the state. It underscores that meanings are constructed and predicated upon long and short-range contexts. It is this changing context against whose backdrop the Bay of Bengal is intermittently used as a cultural arena by the Indian state.

The use of the Bay of Bengal as a cultural arena has been found in two distinct quarters. The first dates back to the 1920s and extends till roughly a few years after the independence. The culturalist argument during this period was brewed within the context of anti-imperialism and nationalism. States often couched their nationalist movements in universalist and civilisational terms. India was no different when it brought back ideas of its cultural and civilisational claims into these waters and beyond.[20] This aided the robust cultural consciousness of Indian nationalism as a historically dominant entity. India's cultural influence in Southeast Asia is often seen as a colonising force, but simultaneously, it is a civilising force. This restores the misery of the colonial subjugation in terms of cultural power. There was another instrumental utility of this argument. It was aimed at the Indian-origin people across the Bay of Bengal

[19] TCA Raghavan, "Temptations of a Greater India," OPEN Magazine, March 8, 2018.

[20] For a detailed exposition of the ideas and claims of the Greater India Society, see Jolita Zabarskaitė, *'Greater India' and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c. 1885–1965* (De Gruyter, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110986068.

region in parts of Ceylon, Burma and Malaya. This diverse population faced several issues from nationalist projects resurging in Southeast Asia. India's cultural claims legitimised the presence of this diaspora as a historical fact and not an intrusion.

However, this argument receded into the background after the immediate years of the independence as there were increasing complications of such extra-territorial claims received from the Southeast Asian states.[21] The underlying context also changed to a period where nationalist histories took over. Inward-looking economies and stricter control over borders stalled the age of free-flowing migration. The Bay of Bengal is India's imagination, which has slipped into the background of a void between the subcontinent and Southeast Asia. The Indian state made references to cultural transactions overseas, especially when dealing with their Southeast Asian counterparts. However, these references were few and marginal. They were mostly restricted to opening passages of a speech given by a state representative at the most. Even if specific cultural policies were taken up, like the reconstruction of Angkor Wat temple in the 1980s, it was not popularly advised. After a period of lull, this prevailing context changed in the 1990s. This change for India was both internal and external as well. Internally, its economy was going through a substantial transformation where it opened up to liberalisation. India's transformation reflected an institutionalist perspective, departing from its previous, fleeting culturalist assertions.

The end of the Cold War meant India had to diversify its foreign relations with more reliable partners of mutual growth. On the external front, the Southeast Asian economies were by then the booming benefactors of globalisation and export-led growth. This catapulted into India's famous 'Look East' Policy. Another wave of cultural imagination begins against this context

[21] For an excellent account of the sources and evolution of India's cultural and political engagement of Southeast Asia, see Amitav Acharya, "From 'Indianization' to 'Look East,'" in *East of India, South of China* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 31–57, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199461141.003.0002.

of liberalisation and economic incentives. The Indian state deployed the cultural imagination of the Bay of Bengal to make the point that Southeast Asia was never far away for India. It had always been culturally and socially connected to this part of the world. A reinvention of its cultural past was essential to provide a context for India's newfound strategic and economic potential in this region. This cultural imagination further grows with the identification of the Bay of Bengal as a sub-region pivoted by the BIMSTEC. India found a chance to discuss India's pre-eminence in a 'Bay of Bengal culture'[22]. 2014 saw the arrival of a majority government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party. Empathetic towards equalising Indian history with Hindu history, it found invocating the Bay of Bengal precolonial past much more convenient than the other regimes[23]. Unlike the other Indian regimes of the past, the BJP-led government did not have any inhibitions of holding back the use of a particular religion in wielding diplomacy. Instead, it blended very well with its more significant cause of rewriting history and undoing the wrongdoings of the earlier regimes, which did not propagate this into the public domain.[24] However, despite this domestic shift, official discourses of the Indian state's imagination show an institutionalist stance where it unilaterally does not claim the Bay of Bengal culture as synonymous with the Indian culture. The contemporary assertion of culture was aware of the pitfalls of the earlier culturalist stance. Therefore, India's official stance is that there are traces of Indian culture around the Bay of Bengal, but no claims are made for sole appropriation.

[22] V Suryanarayan, "Prospects for a Bay of Bengal Community," *Seminar* 487 (2000).

[23] Several statements have been made on this by India's political elites, see PTI, "India Restoring Angkor Wat Temple in Cambodia: Jaishankar," *The Hindu*, December 11, 2022; Special Correspondent, "India a Civilisation State Reappearing on Global Stage: Jaishankar," *The Hindu*, September 16, 2021; Divya A, "Ajit Doval: India Is a Civilisational State Where Languages, Ethnicities and Faiths Coexist," *The Indian Express*, May 23, 2022; "Bharat's Global March as a Spiritual & Cultural Powerhouse Under PM Modi," *NarendraModi.In*, February 24, 2024.

[24] For a brief discussion on BJP's attempts at rewriting history, see Romila Thapar, "They Peddle Myths and Call It History," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2019; Christophe Jaffrelot, "BJP Has Been Effective in Transmitting Its Version of Indian History to next Generation of Learners," *The Indian Express*, September 16, 2019; Audrey Truschke, "Hindutva's Dangerous Rewriting of History," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, no. 24/25 (December 14, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.6636.

India's Cultural Imagination of the Bay of Bengal: Early Years

The initial understanding of the Indian political elite was that Southeast Asia was an extension of the Indian Civilization. Indian diplomatic and academic circles frequently used terms like 'Greater India', 'Further India', 'Serindia', and 'India Minor' to denote Southeast Asia.[25] The Bay of Bengal is often called the 'Chola Lake' owing to the glories of the Cholas when they extended to parts of the Malayan peninsula and Java. There is indeed undeniable evidence of the Indian influence in Southeast Asia. From antiquity to the present, these regions have witnessed the spread of religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, to the flow of people, language, customs and ideas, creating unmistakable imprints in their polity, economy and society.[26] In his book, The Discovery of India, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, provides a thorough account of this civilisational expanse.[27] He narrates how the growing Indian influence in Southeast Asia since the first century graduated to establishing Indian colonies that captured several parts of Southeast Asia ranging across thirteen hundred years or more till the 15th Century. The same historical account is prevalent in KM Panikkar's work, The Future of India and Southeast Asia.[28]

This narrative largely corroborated their understanding from the historical and cultural scholarship of the Dutch and French historians at the time. As Amitav Acharya sums it up, three prominent theories explain Indian influence in Southeast Asia in this scholarship.[29] The first saw India's influence as a product of war and conquest. This directly relates to India's Southeast Asian colonisation.[30] Interestingly, the words 'colonies' and 'colonisation' are featured in

[25] Raghavan, "Temptations of a Greater India."

[26] G Coedes, *Indianized States of South East Asia* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1968).

[27] Nehru, *The Discovery of India (Centenary Edition)*.

[28] Panikkar, *The Future of India and Southeast Asia*.

[29] Acharya, "From 'Indianization' to 'Look East.'"

[30] RC Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonization In South East Asia* (Baroda: University of Baroda, 1955).

Nehru's early writings and communications in the context of Southeast Asia.[31] However, there is always an emphasis on how India's colonisation sharply contrasts with Western colonisation, as the former was peaceful and characterised mainly by cultural infusion. The second interpretation was that the Indian influence was a result of trade. As trade flourished, the flow of people, commodities, ideas, art and culture accompanied.[32] The third interpretation describes the rising Indian influence through the Brahmins, who were part of the royal circles in Southeast Asia and led to the spread of rituals and customs that were later incorporated into society.[33]

Parallel to this existing scholarship was a homegrown attempt at writing and discovering India's civilisational presence in Southeast Asia. In 1926, historians in Calcutta began what came to be known as the 'Greater India Society'. The society included some of the leading Bengali historians of the time - UN Ghoshal, Kalidasa Nag, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar and KA Nilakanta Sastri.[34] An affiliated journal by the society also began in 1934.[35] In several such writings, the Bay of Bengal is showcased as a cultural space that Indians used to spread their culture beyond the mainland. Since Southeast Asia was a part of Indian civilisation, the Bay of Bengal was neither culturally apart nor a void between two landmasses but a medium of these cultural flows. There was an earnestness to write a new history of faraway lands;[36] the Greater India Society fell into the trap of looking like an imperial project in itself. It took further the approach of their Dutch and French counterparts in showing how Indianization made and

[31] Nehru's preface to a book titled "India & Malaya through the Ages" by S Durai Raja Singhan Vaddukoddai, Jaffna Ceylon, 22 January, 1947, Collected from File 2, Personal Communication of Nehru, Post-1947 Private Papers of Jawaharlal, Nehru, Manuscripts division, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library

[32] Mabbett, "The 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Historical Sources."

[33] Jacob Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* (The Hague: W van Hoeve Ltd., 1955).

[34] For an account of the rise and fall of the Greater India Society, see P Das, "The Greater India Society and Historiography of India," *Economic & Political Weekly* 57, no. 46 (2022).

[35] Issues of the Journal of the Greater India Society (Archives), https://www.ideasofindia.org/project/journal-of-the-greater-india-society/

[36] Raghavan, "Luminous Minds."

unmade Southeast Asia. This left little scope for understanding the inherent cultures of Southeast Asia. It assumed that the Southeast Asian culture was barbarian and that the Indian civilising mission had transformed the region. As a result, it ruled out the possibility of identity formation through the interaction of cultures and civilisations. Greater India Society was a popular project, but it was not without its implicit objectives.[37] It was instrumental in invoking the pride and prestige of a fading civilisation amongst its community members. It had great nationalistic value as it provided a sense of a glorious and rich past for the people to connect to. Furthermore, it would mean a sense of historical rootedness for the Indian diaspora that was living in Southeast Asia. As nationalism was gathering steam in parts of Asia, Indian-origin people were at the receiving end of nativist upsurges in parts of Asia. A historical continuity of Indian influence, in some cases domination, helped make the point that Indian emigration is neither new nor unnatural. Secondly, these civilisational projects were cultural responses to Western colonialism. Apart from political and economic implications, colonisation was also a cultural project that racially fractured people along the lines of civilised and barbarians. An attempt was made to show how Indian civilisation was superior yet moral, and its reach was not limited to its political borders. These counter-projects sought to rediscover and narrate the heritage of pre-colonial times. However, they could not avoid the same glaring pitfalls of divisiveness and racial arrogance of the discourse they wanted to counter. A good case in point is historian RC Majumdar's colonisation thesis that claimed India to be a civilising force against the primitive cultures of Southeast Asia.[38]

India's cultural imagination beyond its borders in Southeast Asia underwent a significant change in the years to come. The changing political context primarily meant that such a civilisational project was untenable. India found it contradictory to stand with Asian nations on

[37] Zabarskaitė, *'Greater India' and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c. 1885–1965*.

[38] Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonization In South East Asia*.

decolonisation and simultaneously argue for a civilisational superiority that smacked of cultural hegemony. The governing principle of politics in Asia had changed to sovereign equality. Civilisational understandings had to be reconciled within legitimised state boundaries, or they stand as remnants of the past colonial order. India abandoned any chances of its civilisational claims being interpreted as extra-territorial arguments. In the new Asian order, New Delhi heavily invested in the cause of pan-Asian unity. Nehru considered mobilising Asian solidarity to counter great power rivalry that could fracture Asia.[39] India pitched itself as a potential leader in the new Asian order. It consistently deployed its weight behind organising the Asian Relations Conference in 1947[40], the Asian-African Bandung Conference in 1955, and a slew of Non-Alignment Summits.[41] For India, leading the Asian region was a contested issue. Civilisational and cultural superiority was a lucrative argument to claim India's natural leadership in Asia. This claim was not naturally unanimous amongst the new sovereign equals. A segment of states like China and Japan saw India as a colonially subjugated state. Another segment of Southeast Asian states was sceptical of India's hegemony replacing that of the colonial powers. The political elites of these states were wary of India's cultural arrogance displayed in bilateral and multilateral platforms.[42] A more profound anxiety for the Indian state was because of the negative perceptions of the Indian-origin people in these states. At the back of the Great Depression and then decolonisation, nativist struggles in South and Southeast Asia were breaking out that targeted the Indian-origin people.

[39] For a discussion on India's Asian stance, see Sinderpal Singh, "From Delhi to Bandung: Nehru, 'Indian-Ness' and 'Pan-Asian-Ness,'" *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 34, no. 1 (April 2011): 51–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2011.549084; Madhu Bhalla, "Nehru's Vision of Asian Identity," *South Asian Survey* 19, no. 2 (September 4, 2012): 283–301, https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523114539600.

[40] Vineet Thakur, "An Asian Drama: The Asian Relations Conference, 1947," *The International History Review* 41, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 673–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2018.1434809.

[41] Itty Abraham, "From Bandung to NAM: Non-Alignment and Indian Foreign Policy, 1947–65," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 46, no. 2 (April 16, 2008): 195–219, https://doi.org/10.1080/14662040801990280.

[42] Acharya, "From 'Indianization' to 'Look East.'"

As political lines were drawn and the question of territorial citizenship was raised, Indians who had migrated earlier owing to the colonial economy and loose borders found themselves on the wrong side. This was accompanied by a considerable degree of anti-India sentiment against these native Indians. As a result, India became increasingly careful of its cultural rhetoric in the years following its independence. The high-handed civilisational claims were toned down in favour of a more non-hierarchical argument of Pan-Asianism and Asian Unity. Arguments about the confluence and convergence of historical ties with Southeast and Far East Asia replaced references to India's colonising expeditions. A set of fresh perspectives in academic circles also backed this. While the Greater India Society was reflective of the historical scholarship of the 1930s and 1930s, new works on the history and culture of Southeast Asia started projecting different narratives. Increasingly, studies pointed out how Southeast Asian cultures adapted and localised the elements of Indian civilisation rather than ceding to them.[43] It criticised the view that the Southeast Asian culture was purely a product branching out of the Indian civilisation. There are deep imprints of Indian culture, but to claim that it is the sole influence is an act of cultural arrogance based on partial evidence. If Southeast Asia ultimately inherited Indian culture, then how is it that fundamental structures of Indian society, like the caste system, have no trace in this region? Southeast Asia's past could not be seen as a blank slate painted by only Indian influences, as other civilisational flows have significantly shaped it. Two major influences in this case are the advent of Islam and the flow of Chinese civilisational influences from the East. Terms like 'Indo-China' are helpful here as they show Southeast Asia as a meeting point of Indian and Chinese civilisations. However, they also risk completely absolving inherent originality in Southeast Asian cultures.

[43] O Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives (Revised Edition)* (Singapore: Cornell Southeast Asian Program; The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies., 1999).

The sovereign moment in Asia meant that nationalist histories took over civilisational histories. In India, writing history took a much more postcolonial and Marxist turn.[44] Prominent professional historians like Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib and DN Jha focused on a more materialist assessment of the past, challenging homogeneity and exploring more nuanced perspectives that challenged the monolithic ideas of Indian civilisation. The Greater India Society ceased to exist by the end of the 1950s, indicative of the following shift. Its historical credentials were put into question as hegemonising and parochial. The Hindu Right was sympathetic to the idea of a more remarkable Indian civilisation because much of this history stands on the glory of the Hindu empires of the past. This was a good foundation for their political project that focused on Hindus being the preeminent natives of this territory before being cornered by the Muslim invaders and the British colonisers. However, the Hindu Right could not muster political clout in the newly independent India that sidestepped this narrative both politically and academically.

In making state policy, culture became a domestic issue, and nationalism was reconciled with the borders. India's cultural claims beyond its borders have been eschewed, or at best subtle, at bilateral and multilateral levels with Southeast Asia. A possible argument is that owing to its secular thrust in post-independence years, India deliberately did not advertise religious elements as part of its diplomacy.[45] There is another question as to how effective the deployment of predominantly Hindu civilisational metaphors is in a region with a considerable Muslim population. Two themes dominated India's engagement with Southeast Asia during the post-independent years that hardly engaged with the civilisational arguments. First, India unequivocally supported decolonisation in Southeast Asia. This was a means to connect and

[44] Das, "The Greater India Society and Historiography of India."

[45] Sukhdeo Muni and R Mishra, *India's Eastward Engagement: From Antiquity to Act East Policy* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2019). 9

establish good relations with the newly independent states. India had to ensure it was not seen through the legacy of the hostile British system. The support for decolonisation blended well with the Pan-Asian unity argument and minimum great power interference.[46] The cause of Asian solidarity did not blend with civilisational claims. India's civilisational rhetoric shifted to an Asian scale, arguing that the West marginalised Asian civilisation. There was an initial romanticism about India's centrality in that order, which was taken back later. In the inaugural address of the 3rd Session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, Nehru elaborates on this fear of Indian centrality as a possible hindrance to Asian solidarity. He mentions, "People vaguely talk of India's leadership in Asia. I depreciate such talk. (...) If any country pulls more than its weight, well and good; if it can serve the common cause more than its share necessitated, I have no doubt that it will be patted on the back and will be a good thing. However, this business of any country thinking of itself as a leader of others smacks too much of a superiority complex, which is not desirable in organisations working together for the common good"[47]. Secondly, India had to work arduously to settle the vexed citizenship question. It is here that India's cultural claims were considerably toned down. The Indian state separated nationality and culture. A person can be of Indian origin but a Burmese national. In that case, the Burmese government owes political rights to that person. They are also advised to claim no additional favour from India apart from a sense of cultural belonging. In the long run, it proved difficult to disassociate with cultural belonging for two reasons.[48] One in several cases, many of such people were either deemed stateless or they were designated as Indian nationals by their host state owing to their origin. Second, India intruded

[46] Bhalla, "Nehru's Vision of Asian Identity."

[47] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Economic Freedom for Asia, Inaugural Address at the 3rd Session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, July 1, 1948 in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Series 2, Vol 6, April 1948 - June 1948* , ed. S. Gopal (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund , 1987).

[48] Raphaëlle Khan and Taylor C. Sherman, "India and Overseas Indians in Ceylon and Burma, 1946–1965: Experiments in Post-Imperial Sovereignty," *Modern Asian Studies* 56, no. 4 (July 14, 2022): 1153–82, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X21000263.

in some cases where it felt that humanitarian standards were denied to these people. These intrusions happened directly through the state and outside it. However, the diaspora was advised to absorb the community they were living in.

Re-interpretation of India's Cultural Imagination: Post-Cold War Years

After the end of the Cold War, when India refashioned its policies through the 'Look East', the cultural underpinnings provided a backdrop that India was not new to the region. India's Prime Minister, PV Narasimha Rao, under whom the Look East Policy started to take shape, manifested such reminders. In a speech made at the inauguration of a Maritime Heritage Gallery in 1992, Rao reminded of the rich maritime tradition of India, primarily south India, and its connections with Southeast Asia. He stated, "Throughout the ages, its people have sailed the oceans to distant lands both in the East and the West, engaged in commerce, exchanging ideas and cultures. The flotillas of the maritime, in terms of exchange of peninsular India, did not embark on expeditions of conquest but established bridges of peaceful interaction with peoples in different parts of the world. India's rich and varied culture today owes much to its maritime legacy just as the cultures of Southeast Asia and West Asia echo with the myriad sounds and reflect the different shades of Indian culture."[49] He further added cultural anecdotes like, "In the history of the South Indian literatures, you have a lot of material to show conclusively that the kingdoms, say until three hundred years ago, may be 250 years ago, even small kingdoms, had a strong presence on their shores and the Prabandha Kavyas of those days give you long descriptions of what was brought by businessman of that kingdom under that particular king, the kind of things they brought from outside, how our kingdoms flourished by these commercial deals with other countries. Very long descriptions of these would not have

[49] PV Narsimha Rao, "Our Maritime Heritage – Speech at the Inauguration of Maritime Heritage Gallery, New Delhi, January 6, 1992 ," in PV Narasimha Rao – Selected Speeches – 1991-92 – Volume I – June 1991 to June 1992 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1993), 72–73.

been possible unless they were rooted in truth. In other languages, where this culture is not there, you do not find these descriptions."[50]

When India was making its forays into Southeast Asia as part of its Look East, this had to be carefully deployed to avoid any form of cultural arrogance that was on display during the immediate independence years. This was also problematic as India's growing clout evoked fears among Southeast Asian states. In an address at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in 1994, Rao assuaged such fears and alluded to India's peaceful cultural presence in the region. He mentioned, "While India has been observing the Asia-Pacific drama objectively, we cannot ignore the fact that our civilisations are organically linked to those which have founded so many nation-states of East and South East Asia. The evidence lies in the temples of Java, Indo-China and Thailand, in the manifestations of the great religions of Buddhism and Hinduism that spread across this vast continent, and more aptly today, in the physical origin of ASEAN and other countries of the Asia-Pacific region. In these communities, living here in peace with others, we have a true example of Asian symbiosis."[51]. He continued, "India could well appear as large enigma located between an interactive Asia-Pacific and somewhat unclear West-Central Asian attempts at regional integration. (…) But there is no cause for the alarmist views about India's alleged expansionist designs, or its blue water Navy. On any basis of rational and impartial comparison, it will be crystal clear that India has not coveted any land or other asset belonging to any other country, leave alone having any expansionist design through military might. (…) Any country's strategic policy regarding its interests, intentions and infrastructure can be analysed. India's interests are patient.[52]

[50] Ibid.

[51] PV Narsimha Rao, "India and the Asia-Pacific – A New Relationship – Speech at the Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore, September 8, 1994," in *PV Narasimha Rao – Selected Speeches – 1994-95 – Volume IV – July 1994 to June 1995* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1995).

[52] Ibid.

Rao's statements indicated the cultural approach as part of India's Look East Policy. An underlying cultural connection was established to splatter over the geostrategic and geoeconomic concerns. This contextual change was evident as the era of inward-looking economic policies was contested by trends of liberalisation and globalisation. As a result, it became imperative for India to reach out to Southeast Asian states. The cultural arguments made it much easier for India to build a bridge. Naturally, the Bay of Bengal became a connecting bridge between these two regions from a backwater and a void between South and Southeast Asia. Increasingly, there were talks about connectivity and the revival of old links. From the mid-1990s, the idea of a sub-region around the Bay of Bengal existed.

At the inaugural summit of BIMSTEC in 2004, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh laid out the cultural underpinnings of approaching the Bay of Bengal sub-region. He stated, "We belong to a region with many natural complementarities. Our bonds run deep in time, strengthened by strong economic, cultural and civilisational links. The colonial intervention over the last two centuries may have weakened these links somewhat, but it has not diminished our people's yearning to revive them. We see BIMST-EC as a collective and effective forum for giving full expression to the widely rediscover the coherence of our region based on the commonality of many linkages around the Bay of Bengal". The sea gradually came to be seen as a uniting factor. Singh mentioned, "We consider our participation in BIMST-EC as a key element in our 'Look East Policy' and long-standing approach towards all our neighbours – by land and sea."[53]

A key element in India's cultural arguments at the bilateral and international level was its branding as a maritime state. India had to use the sea to reach Southeast Asia and East Asia. As

[53] Manmohan Singh, "BIMST-EC Summit – Building New Bridges of Friendship – Speech at the Inaugural Summit, Bangkok, July 31, 2004," in *Prime Minister Manmohan Singh – Selected Speeches – Volume I – May 2004 to May 2005* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2005).

a result, it was the opportune moment to build its foundation as a maritime power. Not only did the cultural traditions compensate for India's absence in relative material heft, but they also allowed the assuage of fears given India's peaceful precolonial overtures in the past. Historically, economic powers have always been maritime powers for India, too. At a commemorative event for Indian industrialist Walchand Hirachand in 2004, Indian Prime Minister Singh stated elaborately about India's sea-faring traditions on the east coast. "By the 1950s, India was at the forefront of Asian maritime activities. Yet, today, we lag far behind Japan, South Korea, and China. We must reverse this trend. I would like to see India emerge as a major trading nation. We must also be a major maritime power. To this end, we must modernise our maritime infrastructure, but we must also modernise our mindsets. The imperatives of trade, the requirements of maritime and energy security and the creative enterprise of our sea-faring people should once again make us a maritime nation of reckoning"[54] He continued, "India had a proud history of maritime engagement off the Coromandel Coast, the port of Bandar, for example, was a major trading port and a link between the empires of Peninsular India and East Asia. Our Look East Policy today is doing nothing but rediscovering that past, that glorious past of ours."[55] At the 3rd India-ASEAN business summit in 2004, Prime Minister Singh carefully linked the nature of India's coastal traditions, political culture and economic development. He stated, "It is interesting to note that the eminent maritime historian, Sinnappa Arasaratam, recalls in his classic work on 'Maritime India' how India benefited from the liberal regime that all Indian states permitted along the coast and the autonomy they gave to the communities that dwelt there. This enabled the littoral states to develop in a fashion complementary to the interior and to function with little interference from

[54] Manmohan Singh, "Harnessing Individual Creativity and Enterprise for Development – Speech at the Release of a Commemorative Postage Stamp Honouring Seth Walchand Hirachand, New Delhi, November 24, 2004 ," in *Prime Minister Manmohan Singh – Selected Speeches – Volume I – May 2004 to May 2005* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2005).

[55] Ibid.

groups that would not have understood the needs and demands of the predominant activity of commerce."[56]

Manmohan Singh's successor, Prime Minister Modi, has continued to forge more significant links with the Southeast Asian states and further India's identity as a maritime nation. Prime Minister Modi evoked India's maritime past to ensure better connectivity with the Southeast Asian states. While the early years of the Look East were about accruing economic incentives, the second phase of the Look East and after that, the Act East started incorporating the security angle. India's peaceful past was again drawn on the arguments of India's bid to be a net-security provider. The foundations of India, a responsible power and a security provider, are assembled from past references. India did not attack a state or colonise its people. The modern interpretation and continuation of this past is that it does not have any persistent tension with another state, nor does it have irredentist claims. India's engagements directly impacted the metaphors associated with the Bay of Bengal, which was neatly captured by Prime Minister Modi's critical statement at the 5th BIMSTEC Summit, "The time has come to make the Bay of Bengal the bridge of connectivity, prosperity and security. I call on all BIMSTEC nations to dedicate themselves to working with new enthusiasm to achieve the goals we achieved together in 1997."[57] S. Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs, portrays India's argument further by explaining the potential and challenges of social and cultural connection in the maritime space. He writes, "Then comes the real challenge – the revival of the Indian Ocean as a community that builds on its historical and cultural foundations. It is only by shaping cooperation across the Indian Ocean that India can hope to significantly influence events beyond it. How to make

[56] Manmohan Singh, "India-ASEAN: A Multi-Dimensional Partnership – Address at the 3rd India – ASEAN Business Summit, New Delhi, October 19, 2004," in *Prime Minister Manmohan Singh – Selected Speeches – Volume I – May 2004 to May 2005* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 2005).

[57] DH Web Desk, "Time to Make Bay of Bengal Bridge of Connectivity, Prosperity, Security: PM Modi," *Deccan Herald*, March 30, 2022.

the ocean a more seamless and cooperative space is not only a larger regional objective, but one that would enhance the centrality of India."[58] In short, India perceived a cultural component to its overall policy towards East where the Bay of Bengal was seen not just as a centrepiece but also as a springboard.

India's maritime identity and cultural presence in the Bay of Bengal are invoked in two contexts. The first is when the Bay of Bengal is considered an extension of India's cultural expanse during the anti-colonial movement. The culturalists argued that India's civilisational influence extended far beyond national borders. A second invocation of India's cultural presence in the Bay of Bengal was made as a tool for its foreign relations during the post-Cold War era. Cultural metaphors were used to show India's continuing presence in the region. It was also helpful to rekindle India's relations and establish its peaceful demeanour. However, in this case, the Indian state avoided overtly cultural claims and projected a more institutionalist stance. Indian culture was portrayed as a part of the Bay of Bengal or Southeast Asian culture. A significant reason for raising cultural claims in this case was India's maritime power branding. Raising cultural arguments remains a product of its context. It is precisely why India raises cultural arguments at certain junctures and not consistently.

India's engagements with the Bay of Bengal culture

Does the Indian state claim ownership or promote a Bay of Bengal culture through its policies? In other words, do India's engagements allow the ways and means through which a shared culture can develop? A significant step in unfolding interlinkages and discursive culture is to allow migration and relax stringent borders.[59] During the late colonial years, cultural ownership of a Bay of Bengal culture was a plausible argument for the Indian leadership. The earlier

[58] S Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2020).186

[59] Itty Abraham, *How India Became Territorial* (Stanford University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9780804791632.001.0001.

section established how the Greater India society and the political leadership were considerably under the impression that Southeast Asian culture was effectively Indian. The migration, through the sea or land, was considered natural and acceptable. Therefore, the native Indians who went to these parts of the Bay of Bengal rim were also lawful claimants. This understanding was corroborated by the Indian state's intrusion into the politics and society of these rim states. This was essentially a culturalist position taken by the then-Indian leadership.

India felt they could intrude around the Bay of Bengal because of several factors. First, since the ideas of sovereign territoriality and citizenship were not established, Indian culture was not seen as restricted to its political boundaries. Indian culture spread across the Bay of Bengal rim, and wherever it was present, it allowed Indian political authority to intervene and shape its politics. Around the late 1930s, Nehru's visits to the Bay of Bengal states are most telling of this.[60] In his visits, he discovered the anti-India stance in different parts of Burma, Ceylon and Malaya - the three states within which 80% of the circular migration of the Bay of Bengal used to happen. Indian natives in these states were seen as cultural outsiders. However, India's historiography and its nationalist leaders had different opinions. They rationalised India's age-old presence across the sea and how India's culture is part of these societies. It also gave India an implicit political stake to interfere in these parts. India's nationalist leadership, directly or through the state, started engaging with its political authority, emerging new political parties, diaspora networks and pressure groups. Nehru made two things clear in pressurising these states during those visits around 1939. First, these states cannot stand without India alone. Take the case of Sri Lanka. In 1939, Nehru wrote to Rajendra Prasad, "But it is clear that Ceylon cannot politically or economically stand by herself. A glance at the map is sufficient to demonstrate this. When the British Empire fades away, where will Ceylon go? She must

[60] During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Nehru went on several trips to Ceylon, Malaya , and Burma. He consistently engaged with the Indian diaspora on problems of labour and transit amidst a series of nativist protests. Several accounts are borrowed from his selected works (series 1), which are prior to independence.

associate herself, economically at least, with larger groups and India is indicated. (...) They do not seem to realise that while India can well do without Ceylon, in the future, Ceylon may not be able to do without India."[61]. Second, Nehru sought a policy to stop emigration, owing to the rightful treatment of Indians abroad. This intended to jolt their economies and pressure them to treat the Indian natives well. In the same letter, he extends, "One step is obviously indicated and this has already been taken by the Government of India in consultation with the Madras Government. This is the immediate and total stoppage of further labour emigration from India to Ceylon. This is not in the nature of retaliation and yet it is bound to bring considerable, though indirect, pressure on the Ceylon Government. For the present, there is no lack of labour on the plantations, and for a year or two or even more, the stopping of further emigration will not be felt. But psychologically the effect will be immediate. It will demonstrate that India is not prepared to put up with any ill-treatment of her children. (...) One immediate and desirable effect will be the betterment of Indian labour on the estates. As the fresh supply is cut off, the existing labour in the plantations will be treated better and will be in a stronger position to bargain."[62] This shows the tendency of the Indian leaders to intrude on cultural grounds into the other parts of the British Empire in the subcontinent.

This interference, owing to cultural factors, declines after independence. Neither does India take up ownership that the Bay of Bengal culture stems from, nor does it promote such shared interactions. With the dawn of territorial citizenship, the key to shared interactions and possible Bay of Bengal culture - migration - underwent several restrictions. The Indian state takes an institutionalist view of handling culture and political authority. First, it argued that several cultures may coexist under a political authority. In several subsequent communications and

[61] Jawaharlal Nehru, "To Rajendra Prasad, Wardha, August 9, 1939 ," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Series 1, Volume 10, July 1939 - March 1940* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund , 1987). 61

[62] Ibid.

official statements, Nehru distinguishes nationality and citizenship. On March 14, 1947, Nehru stated in the Legislative Assembly on the citizenship question, "In fact, every single Indian in Burma, Ceylon and elsewhere will have to decide this question, namely whether he wishes to continue as an Indian national or whether he wants to adopt the nationality of the country where he is. Naturally, even Indians who are Indian nationals, if they remain in Burma, must be treated properly and must have all the rights. That is a different matter. But if he is an Indian national, he cannot claim all the rights, voting etc. of the Burmese national. He has no right, if he is an Indian national, in that limited sense to claim the right to frame the constitution of Burma just as we would strongly object to non-Indians framing the constitution of India. That is an identical position."[63].

He further clarifies on April 30, 1947, in the Council of States, "There is a certain difficulty and it is going to increase in future over the question of nationality. We talk of Indians. What exactly do we mean by that? Is it in a legal sense or cultural, racial or various other senses? So far, legally we were all considered British subjects, whether in India or other parts of the British Dominions. So legally the question did not arise. Today it has arisen whether a person is an Indian National or not. It arises in Ceylon, it arises in Burma, it arises everywhere in the British Dominion, all over the place; and this question will have to be decided. That is to say, a definite definition of Indian nationality will have to be made, which will apply to India and wherever Indians are abroad. (...) An Indian in Burma remaining in India may choose to become a Burmese national. He may say "I am Indian but I choose to be a Burmese national" and thereupon he gets the rights of a Burmese national and seizes to have the rights of an Indian

[63] Jawaharlal Nehru, "Conditions of Indians Overseas, Speech in Legislative Assembly, 14 March, 1947 ," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Series 2, Vol. 2, February 1947 - May 1947*, ed. S Gopal (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund, 1984). 439

national in India. Though of course he will be culturally connected with India, he will remain so. We will help him culturally and otherwise."[64]

It is observable that despite the institutional tones, India does not completely renounce cultural responsibility.[65] It still keeps a situation open where it can intervene owing to humanitarian standards. However, this form of intervention later came to be associated not with cultural but with normative interventions for rights. Second, India sought not to raise any claims for its diaspora in different states. This was a renouncement of cultural claims beyond political jurisdiction. In the earlier quoted address at the Legislative Assembly, he stated, We should never demand any extraneous rights for Indians in any of these countries. (...) We are wholly convinced that it will be entirely wrong and objectionable for us to demand, say, in any African territory any rights which would be to the disadvantage of the Africans there. The rights of Africans must come first in Africa just as the rights of Indians must come first in India.[66] Simultaneously, the visa regimes were made stricter, and at the same time, services like steamships and artists' movements were also slashed. In response to Pandit Kunzru, Nehru stated that such flows of people are not the government's priority, apart from the lack of resources.[67] With Patel, Nehru's communications reveal how India is also unwelcoming of 'undesirable foreigners to come to India and add to our troubles'.[68]

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[64] Jawaharlal Nehru, "Appointment of Agents in British Colonies Speech in Council of State, 30 April, 1947 ," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Series 2 | Vol. 2 | February 1947 - May 1947*, ed. S Gopal (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund, 1984).

[65] Khan and Sherman, "India and Overseas Indians in Ceylon and Burma, 1946–1965: Experiments in Post-Imperial Sovereignty."

[66] Nehru, "Conditions of Indians Overseas, Speech in Legislative Assembly, 14 March, 1947 ." 441

[67] Nehru, "Appointment of Agents in British Colonies Speech in Council of State, 30 April, 1947 ."

[68] Jawaharlal Nehru, "Suggestions for a Visa Policy Personal Note to Sardar Patel, 26 April, 1947, External Affairs Department, File No. 202(15) - P/46 (Part I), 62-64, National Archives of India," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Series 2 | Vol. 2 | February 1947 - May 1947* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund, 1984).

However, this institutionalist positioning was much more challenging to execute than said. Despite Nehru's argument of dropping any claim for the Indian natives in these states, India could not cut its cultural ties.

Consider the case of Burma. When the Land Nationalization Act was implemented, it meant huge losses for the Chettiyar community, which owned 1/3 of the land but was originally from South India.[69] For Nehru and the Indian State, domestic pressure forced foreign policy positioning. New Delhi discussed the issue with the Government of Madras and advised to send a delegation to Burma to discuss and resolve the issue. Nehru wrote a cable to then-Indian Ambassador MA Rauf on November 10, 1948, stating that the "Government of India are greatly perturbed at the effect which the Burma Land Nationalization Act will have on the economy of South India. The landholders will lose practically all their assets in Burma and cannot meet their liabilities to banks and depositors who have advanced money on such assets."[70]. Simultaneously, India could not avoid intervening in Ceylon. Indian-origin people who had settled in Ceylon for generations on account of employment were disenfranchised. In some cases, they were tagged as Indian citizens despite them not fulfilling the criteria of Indian citizenship stated by the Indian Government. The Indian state painstakingly follows up on this issue to deal with the state, political parties like the Ceylon Indian Congress, and sometimes the people directly. It was hesitant, but Nehru put interference into words when he addressed a trade union rally in Delhi on May 1, 1952, stating, "Ceylon's culture and civilisation and language flower from India's culture and civilisation. Compulsions would not work with a younger brother. We have to make him understand through love and sometimes by formal

[69] The nativist struggles and Great Depression is well elaborated in Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[70] Jawaharlal Nehru, "Cable to MA Rauf, 10 November, 1948, File No. 9-6/48-OS-II, MEA & CR, NAI ," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Series 2 | Vol. 8 | October 1948 - December 1948*, ed. S Gopal (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund, 1989). 394-95

pressure and formal protest but not by fight".[71] Apart from India's intermittent interference, the Bay of Bengal's kinship ties also sometimes flow irrespective of the borders. It is evident when conflicts arise in these states that illegal and informal migration tends to flow along ethnic lines. Despite the state borders, a good measure of this is how informal trade operates in the region.[72] It is again a reminder that the remnants of the constitutive culture are not separated neatly by political boundaries.

Notwithstanding its cultural tugs, India officially maintains an institutional position. At the same time, the political context that prevailed since independence prevented shared ways of life in the region. Migration was stemmed. Whatever remained of it had to operate under the passport regime of the states. The states also had the power to illegalise migration if it deviated from rules and security norms. Even when India intensified its cultural connections post-Cold War, this positioning, owing to societies and people, did not change. We do not see India's policies advocating or promoting ways in which that sharedness can be operational. The unchanging position is evident if we see how little societies have been opened up despite connectivity projects after liberalisation. While liberalisation was expected to open up borders and allow cultures to operate freely beyond borders, such changes did not occur in the region. Neither India nor the other states dilute their distinctive understanding of culture, remaining a domestic issue. Hard borders, ideas of citizenship and nationally bound societies remain the norm in the Bay of Bengal.

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[71] Jawaharlal Nehru, "About Indians in Sri Lanka, Labour Day Speech at Pro-Congress Trade Union Rally, Delhi, 1 May, 1952 ," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Series 2 | Vol. 18 | April 1952 - July 1952* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Fund, 1996). 507

[72] Sanjib Pohit and Nisha Taneja, "India's Informal Trade with Bangladesh: A Qualitative Assessment," *The World Economy* 26, no. 8 (August 9, 2003): 1187–1214, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9701.00568; Nisha Taneja, "Informal Trade in the SAARC Region: Implications for FTAs," *Economic & Political Weekly* 39, no. 51 (2004): 5367–71.

Take the case of Northeast India in the broader cultural backdrop of the Bay of Bengal. India's Northeast was cut off from its hinterland and the sea owing to the Partition and independence.[73] It was also rigged with home-grown insurgencies and developmental deprivation throughout the last seven decades.[74] A core objective of the Look East Policy for India has been to connect Northeast India with the Southeast Asian states and, thereby, with the sea.[75] However, in this process, connectivity has been a parameter of economic and strategic gains rather than encouraging social ways of life across and beyond political borders.[76] For the people, connectivity should ideally add value to their lives by aiding the growth and modernisation of the transport sector. In other words, connectivity should mean something to the people, and they should have a role in creating connectivity projects. Indeed, the community-led imagination of connectivity is down-up[77]. It is when connectivity flourishes fundamentally and allows people to feel connected. This means connectivity for material gains and for ideas, customs, and practices to follow, akin to how the Bay of Bengal was once. However, the state-led imagination of connectivity is top-down[78]. There is no dearth of grandeur in the design of such projects, but they might not be planned as per the requirements of the community nor designed by them. The fate of connectivity in the Northeast is a statist project that is a plotted line that traverses the region but does not spread into tributaries and distributaries to connect

[73] For an account of the changing politics of Northeast India, see Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018).

[74] For an account of the conflicts of Northeast India, see Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation India and Its Northeast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

[75] Thongkholal Haokip, "India's Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India," *Studies in Indian Politics* 3, no. 2 (December 3, 2015): 198–211, https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023015601742.

[76] Thongkholal Haokip, "India's Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India," *Studies in Indian Politics* 3, no. 2 (December 3, 2015): 198–211, https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023015601742; Rubul Patgiri and Obja Borah Hazarika, "Look (Act) East Policy and Northeast India: Reimagining the Space Through Institutional, Physical and Social Connectivity," *International Studies* 60, no. 2 (April 28, 2023): 176–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817231167994; Rubul Patgiri and Dilip Gogoi, "Act East through India's Northeast: Limits of Neoliberal Strategies towards Developing an Underdeveloped Region," *South Asian Survey* 29, no. 1 (March 8, 2022): 23–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/09715231211069954.

[77] Shibashis Chatterjee, "The Look East policy and India's Northeastern States," RSIS Policy Report, 2014.

[78] Raile Rocky Ziipao, "Politicking Infrastructure Development in Northeast India," *Heinrich Boll Stiftung*, February 4, 2022.

other streams of people to it. The State-led imagination of connectivity does not want to risk getting into the region's intricacies but wants to use it to connect beyond borders[79].

Two offshoots of this statist imagination dominate at the national and regional levels. First, it certainly does not have many gains for social connectivity. Physical connectivity and local gains are not an automatic cause and effect. Connectivity should be designed in a way that serves the purpose of the local markets and people. For that to happen, the State must build trust and have an ear on the ground to source views from the people in planning connectivity[80]. Using local know-how and social connectivity mapping is essential to bring in multiple stakeholders. In an ecologically vulnerable region like the Northeast, community concerns regarding the environment must also carry pivotal weight, which can be only sourced from the people. Second, as there is not much conversation between the State and the communities in the making of connectivity projects, confusion exists at both ends. The State is apprehensive of the communities' intentions and the communities about the State's designs of connectivity.

India was closer to a culturalist position in the Bay of Bengal before the immediate years of independence. It did not restrict the interaction of culture across the Bay of Bengal. It further claimed much of the transnational culture originated from it. Because of its cultural footprints, it sought political interference. However, the political context changed India's course. With the arrival of sovereign territoriality and citizenship, India adopted a more institutionalised approach. It dropped its overtly cultural claims beyond its political borders. Culture became domesticated and nationalised. India was also apprehensive about experiments with society where such sharedness could potentially flourish. The era of globalisation and liberalisation at

[79] Taz (Tonmoy) Barua, "The Look East Policy/Act East Policy-Driven Development Model in Northeast India," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 1 (June 12, 2020): 101–20, https://doi.org/10.1177/0973598420908844.

[80] Sanjoy Hazarika, "Let Dialogue Redeem North-East," *The Indian Express*, June 27, 1997.

home did not transform its policies radically. This can be seen from how, despite rising connectivity projects, communities find shared interactions in the Bay of Bengal.

Conceptualising India's Cultural Spatialisation of the Bay of Bengal

States often claim cultural attributes of spaces beyond their borders. In several cases, India has staked a claim over cultural spaces in the Bay of Bengal region, where it finds its cultural imprints. These include sacred and religious places like Hindu and Buddhist temples. India primarily stakes a claim here as it sees itself as the source of this spread of cultural attributes. Historical routes and trails are appropriated to trace an ancient continuity of India's past. Similarly, cultural spaces like Angkor Wat are reminders of how Indian culture is not limited to its borders.[81] For the state, this linking of the past and the continuous exercise of repeating this linkage through popular culture serve two broad purposes. First, it serves the purpose of regime legitimisation by raising issues of cultural exceptionalism and national pride. Second, it provides an accessible backdrop for the state to situate its contemporary policies.

Linking to the past and practising the past as present serves as the benefit of regime legitimisation for the state.[82] Prasenjit Duara introduces the term 'regimes of authenticity' to explain how states tend to draw their authenticity by forming a linear history with the past.[83] Building on the works of Eric Hobsbawm[84], Duara portrays how states often vouch for a timeless and linear understanding of history. This sense of continuity gives the states a timelessness, and they do not seem like modern authorities. Instead, they absorb past cultural practices and perform them in societies. This connects them to societies and legitimises the

[81] PTI, "India Restoring Angkor Wat Temple in Cambodia: Jaishankar."

[82] For various interpretations of nation and traditions, see Anthony D. Smith, "The Nation: Invented, Imagined, Reconstructed?," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (March 23, 1991): 353–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298910200031001.

[83] Prasenjit Duara, "The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender, and National History InModern China," *History and Theory* 37, no. 3 (October 17, 1998): 287–308, https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00055.

[84] E Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge University Press, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107295636.

state as authentic. Once the state can carry out these practices of the past in the present, states validate their authority by being custodians of the authenticity of the past. States, therefore, can also 'invent traditions' to help them ideate and establish a continuity with the past. Invented traditions, according to Hobsbawm 'is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past'[85]. When these traditions are performed repeatedly in a space, the meaning of that culture is spatialised. This is how the meaning and performance of the tradition are attached to that of the space. As a result, when the state claims to own a culture, it is, by default, claiming ownership over the space in which it is performed. This is because that culture has no value if detached from that space.

In his work, Tansen Sen uses both concepts to study China's ideation and propagation of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR).[86] China strategically draws upon a selective historical narrative, emphasising peaceful and harmonious periods, to bolster national pride and legitimise its contemporary economic aspirations. It has also been likened to that of a geopolitical chronotope, which has facilitated its strategic claims, especially in the South China Sea. While historical trade routes existed, emphasising a unified China-centric "Maritime Silk Road" is a recent invention. China cherry-picks peaceful and prosperous periods in its maritime history, downplaying conflict and instability. This is particularly illustrative of how the reconstruction of Zheng He's voyages has been shown as peaceful whereas evidence of military ventures exists. This selective narrative fosters a sense of national exceptionalism, portraying China as a historical leader in global trade and fostering a sense of national destiny to reclaim its rightful

[85] Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107295636.001.

[86] Tansen Sen, "Inventing the 'Maritime Silk Road,'" *Modern Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (July 22, 2023): 1059–1104, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000348.

position. It also makes the Chinese state, in this case, particularly the PLA Navy as the custodian of the earlier Chinese expanses sprawling into maritime space. An interesting example in India's case is how there have been increasing efforts to portray a certain sense of linear historicity for the Indian Navy. The pre-colonial history is relied upon to frame the maritime heritage of India and show the Indian Navy as a custodian of a long-drawn maritime heritage.[87] It is also shown as a modern force in its execution but ancient in terms of its roots, whereby emphasis is given to India's ancient coastal communities and their shipbuilding cultures, valours of the navies of Cholas and the empire of Shivaji.[88] This also discards the cultural notion that Indians are not a seafaring community.[89] The Indian state has changed the symbolic ensigns of the British to turn them into signs inspired by the Maratha empire. In 2014, Tamil Nadu Governor K Rosaiah flagged a ship commemorating the 1000th year of Rajendra Chola's coronation on account of his sailing and conquering lands in Southeast Asia, including present-day Java, Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. Amar Mahadevan, who was the Naval Offer-In-Charge for Tamil Nadu and Puducherry stated, "It is to be noted that INS Sudarshini is now on its voyage around the world or circumnavigation and is on its way back to Kochi. It is only fitting that a circumnavigating ship is being involved in the celebrations of a king, whose navy has gone beyond boundaries even in those ancient times."[90]

Apart from alluding to national exceptionalism and pride in regime legitimisation, the politics of connecting to the past has several immediate benefits to serve. One can ask the question: Why is this cultural history popularised now? In most cases, the cultural history is floated

[87] Early History, Indian Navy, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/node/1402

[88] KK Nayyar, Maritime India (New Delhi: Rupa, 2005); GM Hiranandani, Transition to Eminence: The Indian Navy, 1976-1990 (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), Naval Headquarters, in association with Lancer Publishers , 2005); Satyindra Singh, Under Two Ensigns: The Indian Navy - 1945-1950 (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publications , 1986).

[89] TE Narasimhan, "The King Who Looked East 1,000 Years Ago," *Business Standard*, November 22, 2014.

[90] PTI, "Navy to Commemorate Tamil King Rajendra Chola's 1000th-Year of Coronation," *The Economic Times*, September 13, 2014.

deliberately as part of its larger policy conception. People understand culture, words, symbols, gestures, and acts. Therefore, the performance of cultural attributes serves as a precursor or an interlude to the state's present policies. These policies can be economic as well as strategic. Tansen Sen provides an example of how the Chinese understanding of MSR was within the larger backdrop of its economic modernisation and famous branding as a benign, harmonious and connected non-Western power of the world[91]. China's MSR was mainly popularised by the writings of Qing intellectual Ling Qichao in the early 20th century. Qichao picked up the heft of the Chinese migrant diaspora and Zheng He's voyages as the lynchpin of his portrayal of the MSR. When China opened up for economic modernisation, the idea of a peaceful and outwardly China was the perfect cultural backdrop. Effectively, since the 1980s, the discourse of the Chinese-led Silk Route became routed through the Chinese state and academia. This was adequately always popularised through popular culture. The MSR narrative provided a convenient framework for this new approach. China could justify increased foreign investment and trade partnerships by emphasising historical trade connections. Additionally, the MSR became a branding tool, attracting international attention and fostering tourism on routes associated with the historical Silk Road. When UNESCO started nominating and listing heritage sites, the "heritagization of the Silk Route" became a new agenda for China.[92] This was in the late 1980s before the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was formally announced.

It is imperative to ask what kind of cultural spatialisation the Indian state seeks in the Bay of Bengal region. Project Mausam stands out as India's exclusive cultural policy for the maritime space of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.[93] It is also a seemingly similar strategy to what China did with their MSR. Two questions are essential to assess Project Mausam's

[91] Sen, "Inventing the 'Maritime Silk Road.'"

[92] Ibid.

[93] STARRED QUESTION NO.*201, August 1, 2016, Lok Sabha, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/9/AS201.pdf?source=pqals

contribution to the Bay of Bengal cultural spatialisation. First, what are India's strategies leading to? This need not be confused with an evaluation of the project's performance but to understand why this project was put forward by India and, importantly, why now. Secondly, what cultural space does it seek to construct in the Bay of Bengal region? While the Indian government denies it as a counter to China's maritime silk route strategy, there are invariable parallels that cannot be denied. Similarly, India's divergences with China's understanding of the cultural maritime space must be pointed out. While China's cultural spatialisation uses a China-centric understanding that is much more authoritative, India tries to allude to a more confluence view of maritime cultural preservation. China's claims are much more contested than India's.

Project Mausam: India's Attempts at Cultural Spatialisation of the Maritime Space

In 2014, at the 38th Session of the World Heritage Committee meeting held in Doha, the Indian Government announced an initiative called 'Project Mausam'[94]. It is an initiative of the Ministry of Culture to be implemented by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) as the central nodal agency. The research support is supposed to be provided by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) with the National Museums as the associates. Project Mausam is a transnational initiative to portray three aspects of India's maritime positioning. First, it seeks to trace the cultural connections that span across East Africa to Southeast Asia. This is done through collating historical and archaeological research around the region. Second, it intends to portray the diversity of cultural, commercial and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean. Finally, its objective is to promote research on themes of maritime significance and historical trials through multidisciplinary seminars and conferences. India's Minister of State of the Ministry of Culture, Mahesh Sharma, in response to a question in the Rajya Sabha about

[94] Project Mausam, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, https://indiaculture.gov.in/project-mausam

the aims and objectives of Project Mausam, summed it up as 'it aims to encourage the production specialised works, as well as publications for the general public with an attempt at promoting a broader understanding of the concept of a common heritage and multiple identities.'[95]. A question discussed in the Parliament was whether Project Mausam aimed to counter the increasing Chinese influences in the Indian Ocean. The Minister denied this claim concern and argued that the project's purposes differed entirely.[96]

At the heart of India's vision behind this project is the idea that India's civilisational expanse is not limited to the borders of the Indian state. This is a consistent expression by the Indian government and its ambassadors. In a recent visit by India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, to Cambodia spoke about India's initiative in preserving and reconstructing the Angkor Wat Temple. He pointed out, "There are temples not only in India, the Indian subcontinent, but in many regions beyond. I had gone with the Vice President to see the biggest temple in the world — the Angkor Wat temple complex. Today, we are restoring and renovating the temples in Angkor Wat. These are contributions which we are making outside because the civilization of India has gone beyond India."[97]. He further stated, "So, today, when we are restoring, rebuilding, and re-energizing Indian civilization, our task is not only in India. Our task is all over the world. But it is not only where our civilization went, but it is also where our travellers went, but our traders also went, our people of faith went"[98]. Angkor Wat's case is directly relevant to the sea because these cultural confluences happened because of the Bay of Bengal. It might seem that temple construction is high on the government's agenda list because of the Hindutva leanings. However, Angkor Wat reconstruction has been a priority for India

[95] Unstarred Question 1313, Rajya Sabha, Parliament of India, https://rsdebate.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/657495/1/IQ_238_09032016_U1313_p122_p122.pdf

[96] Ibid.

[97] PTI, "India Restoring Angkor Wat Temple in Cambodia: Jaishankar."

[98] Ibid.

since the 1980s.[99] This shows India's consistent cultural leanings in this space. The intensity of investment has changed owing to India's growing heft.

The idea behind India's cultural claims in the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia is further established on similar lines through other government documents in the public domain. A recurrent theme is the usage of similar tropes associated with the earlier mentioned concepts like 'regimes of authenticity' and 'invented traditions' utilised for regime legitimisation. Simultaneously, the process of cultural spatialisation also accrues definite and immediate benefits. These include branding and financial gains that India seeks to derive from tourism. A detailed Working Group Report by NITI Aayog on Heritage Management, released in 2023, deals with several issues related to India's policies of preserving maritime cultural heritage.[100] Concerning Project Mausam, the report states, "India is a civilisational country with close historical links with East Asia, the Indian Ocean Rim and West Asia. The spice trade and the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism were central to these interrelations. While China has highlighted the "Silk Route", there is a need to focus on researching and propagating these relations through an overarching project like Mausam as intended by India. The status of Project Mausam, started in 2014, has not progressed even though UNESCO and other countries are looking at India for some actions on this count."[101]. A constant thread in the report is how tangible metrics of India's culture are beyond India's territory and should be the state's policy to preserve and advertise it. There is a sense of ownership as these tangible cultural markers branch from the Indian civilization. It is a matter of responsibility and pride for the state to protect them. It further states, "India has one of the largest geo-political expanses and one of

[99] Prashant Panjiar, "Indians Back at Angkor Wat in Kampuchea as Restorers to Bring It to Its Original Majesty," *India Today*, April 15, 1988.

[100] Working group report on Improving Heritage Management by NITI Ayog, Government of India, March 2023, https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-03/ImprovingHeritageManagement-in-India.pdf

[101] Ibid, 182

the greatest volume and diversity in heritage. This vast heritage repository of India is recognized globally as a significant part of its unique cultural identity. Even beyond India, a number of countries across the world, house some of the best specimens of our country's heritage in their museums, often narrating the glory of Indian culture along with the tales of colonial legacy; while others in Southeast Asia have extraordinary monuments standing as testimony to the spread of Indian culture."[102]

For postcolonial states, the ideas of cultural exceptionalism and national pride have been part of the state's playbook in mobilizing nationalist sentiments. This partly works because of the colonial subjugation and India's deprivations of being denied and forgotten of its heritage in the modern world order. With its rising heft, India's aspirational power has been growing. Cultural acts that link with past civilizational greatness give citizens a sense of identity and security. Similarly, it lends a divine power to the government as the protector and guardian of preserving India's national glories of the past and present. A good illustration of this civilizational exceptionalism is the term 'Vishwaguru', which translates to 'World Teacher' and has been an essential part of the contemporary lexicon of India's international engagements.[103] It revolves around this self-fashioned world teacher who intends to undo social hierarchies through its civilisational pedagogy. In turn, it also looks to leverage a combination of domestic consolidation and international prestige. India's cultural imagination picked up when its dependency on the sea lanes of communication began. To answer the question: why now? The cultural imaginations serve as a backdrop as India increasingly tries to undo its sea blindness. For years, the land borders kept India occupied as flashpoints of conflict. Simultaneously, it was an inward-looking economy that had little dependency and requirement of the sea. When

[102] Ibid, 8

[103] Kate Sullivan de Estrada, "What Is a Vishwaguru? Indian Civilizational Pedagogy as a Transformative Global Imperative," *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March 6, 2023): 433–55, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac318.

both of these slowly turned around during the 1990s, the Indian state and academia started paying more attention to appropriating the sea. Its cultural roots were discovered from the times of the Cholas to argue that India's landmass flourished the most when it was connected to the sea. It also served well that these connections created during the pre-colonial times were severed during the colonial period and after that. As and when India is turning to the sea, the cultural imagination forms the precursor of India's pivot.

However, the plan of action for Project Mausam is not bereft of branding and economic gains. The report states a detailed plan of action charting several points on how the state should proceed with cultural preservation. First, Project Mausam has to be used for transnational nominations of heritage sites. There is a mention of Mahabalipuram being shown as a part of the project. Mahabalipuram will be a centre for India-China cultural exchanges through sea voyages. This was also a venue for the meeting of India-China heads of the states in 2019. The report cites this instance with suggestions that the MEA and ASI should initiate establishing a cultural centre at this place.[104] While India's proposal to establish the UNESCO Cultural Centre has been pending for several years, aiming for accreditation is seen as a positive step[105]. Second, a clear roadmap for Project Mausam is needed that can be shared with other states. The report suggests a thematic paper that can be circulated with the other states. It also suggests that the project's conceptualisation should be in tandem with feasible transnational nominations to be taken up with other countries[106]. Third, it prepares the vision for several plans that can be executed as subsets of Project Mausam. This primarily includes the creation of thematic heritage circuits. A coastal route under Project Mausam linking the neighbouring Southeast Asian countries has been envisioned to increase tourism, research, and cultural exchanges and

[104] Working group report on Improving Heritage Management by NITI Ayog, Government of India, March 2023, https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-03/ImprovingHeritageManagement-in-India.pdf, 181

[105] Ibid, 181

[106] Ibid, 182

revive the older spice route[107]. An envisioned trail proposes to look at the old routes and passages that depict the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia through India. Another immediate proposal is to link the historical imprint of the Chola and the Srivijaya Empire that spanned the 10-15th Century CE and linked present-day countries from India to Indonesia along the Indian Ocean[108].

There are inherent similarities between India's Project Mausam and the Chinese strategy of institutionalising the Chinese MSR. First, these exercises allude to a specific idea of civilisational exceptionalism and linear historical continuity. Second, they both fall back on using the past in regime legitimisation. Third, the cultural backdrop interludes to broader economic and political gains. Finally, there is also the use of international institutions and platforms, like UNESCO, to brand itself and refashion it as a civilisational power of considerable prestige at the international level. However, there are several deviations that the Indian route also ends up with compared to that of the Chinese. First, while there are allusions to Greater India and the spread of Indian civilisation as culturally superior, India consciously avoids the pitfalls of China's unilateral approach to defining culture across the maritime space. Admittedly, to India's advantage, its cultural past in the region is less controversial than China's. In a way, India can make civilisational arguments in the region because that is feasible. However, given the states' nature and strong sense of nationalism in the region, its civilisational arguments are more likely to invoke a sense of cultural hegemony. As a result of which, India may deliberately eschew its cultural claims. India has made use of cultural arguments in the past. Despite a considerably higher display of cultural claims by the present government, it remains aware that sour regional ties may turn down perks of domestic legitimation. A second issue is the lack of coherence in strategising cultural claims. For China's domestic structure, it

[107] Ibid, 214

[108] Ibid, 183

becomes much more feasible to manufacture and project a certain kind of cultural heritage through the state and its machinery. This showcases how the Chinese build on the narrative of MSR through cultural programmes, academic publications, societal practices and iconography. In India, however, such coherence is lacking. There are severe logistical limitations to India's cultural stratification. Cultural strategisation has to deal with many departments and ministries, each with bureaucratic processes and delays. Apart from that, the capability of scale in projecting such cultural power is also limited. However, would India have gone the Chinese way in strategising cultural claims if it was logistically superior? That takes us to the third deviation, where India's regime legitimation[109] is not entirely drawn from strength but also from recognition[110]. A part of India's civilisational exceptionalism also indicates its peaceful and harmonising face in the world order. As a state, it falls back on recognition of status and prestige on abiding norms of the international order. This often leads to a dissonance between the conception of India's civilisational thought, which precariously balances virtues of cultural exceptionalism and accommodation, strength, and purity, yet is peaceful and diverse.

Conclusion: Implications for the Bay of Bengal as a Space of Culture

The chapter interrogates India's cultural imagination of the Bay of Bengal. It raises two questions. First, whether and what kind of cultural metaphors does India invoke for the Bay of Bengal? It provides that India consciously evokes a sense of cultural belonging with the Bay of Bengal, which is particularly embedded in two contexts. The first of these arises when India is articulating its anti-colonial movement. This movement saw cultural arguments of India's civilisation as a counter to the West. The Bay of Bengal was appropriated as a space within the

[109] For diverse interpretations of regime legitimation, see Marcus Tannenberg et al., "Claiming the Right to Rule: Regime Legitimation Strategies from 1900 to 2019," *European Political Science Review* 13, no. 1 (February 4, 2021): 77–94, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773920000363.

[110] David Brewster, *A Contest of Status and Legitimacy in the Indian Ocean*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199479337.003.0002.

network of India's culture. Cultural appropriation was instrumental for national pride and civilisational exceptionalism. At the same time, it had an immediate payoff in contributing to the Indian diaspora in the Bay of Bengal states. However, with the arrival of sovereign states and territorial citizenship, the arguments of Indian cultural superiority became challenging to sustain. As a result, the Bay of Bengal was dropped from India's cultural imagination as a void. The historiography became much more continental than maritime. This paradigm shifted during the post-Cold War years because of several underlying factors, primarily attributed to liberalisation. Bay of Bengal's cultural appropriation was now instrumental in foreign relations with the Southeast Asian states. However, this was unlike the earlier invocation of India's cultural past. Rather than a short-lived cultural superiority, India's cultural presence was shown as a part of the confluence of exchanges between India and Southeast Asia. India's identity as a maritime nation was a major exercise as part of this cultural imagination. A cultural past was used to show historical sea-faring traditions and how India's maritime past was peaceful and harmonious.

The second question concerns India's policies engaging with Bay of Bengal culture. If maritime culture is a shared way of life in and around the sea, migration becomes a major exercise in constructing this culture. Did India's policies allow the actualisation of such a culture? Existing evidence shows that the sovereign moment has led to a rupture of migration around the Bay of Bengal. India did have culturalist assumptions before its independence. However, since the formal decolonisation of the Bay of Bengal, India's position has been to domesticate culture, stem free migration and drop its cultural claims across borders. This proved difficult to maintain because cultural boundaries are much more fluid. In several cases, they trump the political boundaries, and India's engagements also show a similar dichotomy. Despite liberalisation, the institutional stance in dealing with culture does not change. That is primarily because of the prevailing context of hard-bound sovereign states, their anxiety with the societal

flows and the issues of citizenship legalities. This is shown by the symbolic conversation about connectivity and the Bay of Bengal culture, where its social and cultural impact is restricted.

This segment follows India's policies that attempt to spatialise culture in the Bay of Bengal. It shows that the Indian state has lately taken up the cause of projecting cultural spaces as part of its civilisation and cultural expanse. This is done primarily to pander to civilisational exceptionalism and national pride. The use of international platforms is also done to brand this further. India has been pursuing Project Mausam for this cause. This draws some invariable comparisons with China's Maritime Silk Route (MSR). Both regimes use a tendency of 'invented traditions' to claim authenticity. The exercise of cultural spatialisation is a practice of regime legitimation. However, India also considerably deviates from the Chinese vision and strategy.

Statist cultural imagination remains contextual and instrumental. It is pertinent to ask why and when states raise cultural arguments. Cultural imaginations of the sea are deployed for various uses like regime legitimation, national pride, and economic and strategic gains. However, because of the sea space's liminality and fluidity, it must be carefully deployed. Unlike the cultural imagination of land space, the sea is difficult to claim and monopolize culturally.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of state imaginations of maritime spaces and the factors that shape them is a crucial starting point for this work. This research aimed to fill this gap by asking how state imaginations of maritime spaces can be theorised and what explains them.

The research underscores two points concerning state imaginations of maritime spaces at the outset. First, the sea is a discursive and constructed space. It is not outside the realm of politics, economy or society. Second, states are pivotal actors in rendering meanings to the maritime spaces. This works like a triad – the states imagine maritime spaces through specific imageries – these imageries imprint how the states engage with the maritime space – these engagements have transformative effects on the maritime order. However, there is also a reciprocating relationship between the state and the maritime space. While state imaginations have a transformative effect on the maritime spaces, changes in the maritime spaces also influence state imaginations. The theoretical backdrop of the work tries to delineate how we make sense of state imaginations – what factors are associated with it, and how this relationship between the agent - the state and the space - the ocean, is reciprocal.

The state imaginations are never independent of what is unfolding or has unfolded in the past in that maritime space. States ideate and view these spaces through particular prisms, determining their approach and policies toward the region. At any point, states view maritime spaces through multiple possibilities, ranging from oceans being spaces of threats to opportunities. Statist imaginations of maritime spaces are neither monoliths. Within these wide-ranging imageries, some stand out, and some wane away. Particular imaginations prevail and are dominant amongst many. What explains this is that several factors – whether a state

has the will or capability to enact that imagination and whether they are feasible owing to the regional and international context of the space – are crucial elements.

Imaginations undergird policies and overall engagement. State perceptions are causal factors in determining policies, strategies, doctrines, and long-term visions. Imaginations are what make states' policies different from one another. Otherwise, all states would have ideally had similar policies toward a maritime space. This historical depth of state imagination, shaped by past experiences and aspirations, adds a layer of complexity and richness to our understanding of maritime spaces. States merely do not react to the events of the maritime spaces. They interpret these events and the unfolding processes through their past experiences, present capabilities and aspirations, significantly influencing their imaginations and subsequent policies.

The work intends to add to a growing body of literature that emphasises that maritime spaces are active zones of politics by the states. What makes state policies interesting in maritime spaces is that they are liminal zones. Maritime spaces are neither downright domestic nor entirely foreign. This makes imagination much more dynamic. States can enforce their imaginations within their territories with much more unilateral ease. However, oceans are adjacent arenas to the state and are also widely interlinked with politics on regional and international scales. This results in multiple possibilities and casts diverse images of the state of the ocean. Consider how states often project maritime spaces as zones of security and seek to maintain an armed presence in the waters. This is also closely aligned with their capabilities. If the state is militarily dominant, then it might turn to building an exclusive and enclosed space where force is instrumental. If it has viable security threats but less military capabilities, it is more likely to turn it into an insular space or look for more collaborative orders. Similarly, states might interpret spaces in terms of what economic opportunities they present and whether they align with state objectives and capabilities. States reaping the benefits of free trade would

find the sea a lucrative and cheap transport corridor. As a result, its policies would naturally argue for a robust regime of free seas and corresponding protection of free seas. States capable of extracting financial benefits from the resources of the sea bed would back a robust governance regime for the part of the sea that falls within the sovereign jurisdiction. On the cultural front, if the sea is seen as a cultural space, policies toward migration are likely to be more relaxed to facilitate greater people-to-people engagement. On the contrary, states that do not conceive of the sea as a cultural space would not like the sea rim to be a space of mobile human networks and connections and would rather see the ocean space as a void. This diversity of state imaginations paints a vivid and varied picture of maritime spaces.

It is imperative to look for the causal factors that lead to the formation of these state imaginations. Why does the state conjure up specific images? State imaginations are products of broadly three variables - the state's interpretation of history linked with the space, its intentions vis-a-vis opportunities and its material capabilities.

The state's interpreted history of the maritime space has crucial linkages with state identity. Statist perceptions or imaginations of space do not rest independently but are linked with the past. This starts with how a state imagines its identity vis-à-vis the maritime space. Selective memories are raked up in designing the policies of the present and the visions of the future. The reservoir of ideas, doctrines, and treatises serve as frames of reference for the present structure of policies. States find it convenient and legitimate to establish continuity with the desirable past through its policies. Similarly, it anticipates lessons from the past that inflict on its policies. However, much depends on how much and to what extent the history is interpreted and absorbed by the state's political elite. This history is also enacted and presented through practices before the populace.

Consider India's overtures in the Indian Ocean, where India's maritime past is evoked in multiple ways. India's security outlook toward the Bay of Bengal has considerable imprints on history. Its security comes with a reminder that India's independence was compromised when it lost its control of the sea. Earlier to that, India had an enviable maritime culture and presence. During the colonial period, British control in the region is depicted by several doctrines seeping into present Indian strategic culture. Even today, Curzonian imprints are evoked in India's aspirational security control.[1] Historical references to other states and their maritime experiences transcend this broad gamut of history. For instance, an Indianized 'Monroe Doctrine' was India's argument for non-interference in the Indian Ocean.[2] When India started to gain its maritime footprint, Mahanian visions became much more frequently used.[3] The doyen of Indian maritime thinkers, KM Panikkar, invokes India's past to justify the policy of a ring-fenced control structure in the Indian Ocean region.[4] He notes the Japanese incursions at the end of the Second World War as threatening imageries of India's East. This episode was raked up in the future recurrently to point out the need to maintain vigilance in this sector irrespective of any pressing or existential threat where possible adversaries from the East can be neutralised.

In years to come, Panikkar's ideas and recommendations heavily influenced the strategies and ideas of Indian maritime consciousness. India's maritime past has not been just used to evoke imageries of security but also of community and trade. The Bay of Bengal's centrality as a

[1] Swapan Dasgupta, "Curzonian Foreign Policy," *OPEN*, June 18, 2021; C Raja Mohan and Parag Khanna, "Getting India Right Mutual Interests and Democratic Affinity," *Hoover Institution*, February 1, 2006.

[2] James R. Holmes, Toshi Yoshihara, and Andrew C Winner, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2009); James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "India's 'Monroe Doctrine' and Asia's Maritime Future," *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 6 (October 23, 2008): 997–1011, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160802404539.

[3] David Scott, "India's 'Grand Strategy' for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions," *Asia-Pacific Review* 13, no. 2 (November 2006): 97–129, https://doi.org/10.1080/13439000601029048.

[4] KM Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1951); KM Panikkar, *Problems of Indian Defence* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1960).

space of commerce and culture predates its understanding as a zone of security. When India tried to push for its embrace of liberalisation and globalisation at the turn of the 1990s, the political elite evoked India's commercial past of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Its bilateral and multilateral relations begin with an intro of its cultural past that sprawled over these waters. India's Look East Policy consistently uses cultural metaphors to validate India's cultural reach, in cases of cultural claims, in the Bay of Bengal region. History, more importantly, the interpretation and the enactment of state practices are key variables of rendering state imaginations of maritime spaces.

Secondly, alongside history, state imagination is a product of intentions. What do state intentions consist of? States put policies in place to derive either material or ideational benefits. Material benefits range from achieving good levels of trade and commerce to security from threats. On the other hand, ideational benefits mean the likes of respect, status, and solidarity in the international order. However, the state intentions are structured along with the changing orientations of the space itself. Maritime spaces are liminal and interconnected with regional and global order. Therefore, state intentions must constantly negotiate in an environment beyond their sovereign control. Maritime spaces are further complex because a state does not have to deal with another state to frame its intentions. Instead, they must consider several stakeholders and processes simultaneously unfolding in the maritime space. For instance, the case study for this research looks at India's constantly evolving intentions in the case of the Bay of Bengal. At a time when India was looking to turn towards the region for strategic and economic gains, it was simultaneously becoming a geo-strategic theatre and an economic corridor. There was one reason for this shift. Local, regional and international factors collided to transform this space into where it stands.

The rise of Southeast Asian economies offered India the incentive of more significant economic linkages. This meant a renewed interest in connectivity across the Bay. This was reflected in

India's growing attention and fructification of the 'Look East' and later 'Act East' Policies. Southeast Asia was always proximate to India, but the rise of the Asian Tigers dovetailed the need to integrate and engage with these states across the Bay. Furthermore, as and when the fulcrum of global trade shifted to the Indo-Pacific from the Atlantic, the Bay of Bengal became akin to not only a centrepiece in India's ventures to the East but also a springboard for the Western Pacific. This imagery contrasted sharply with the immediate years after decolonization when India disengaged with this region. The rising opportunities of the Bay of Bengal and the constraints of South Asian regionalism also crossed paths. While the Indo-Pak rivalry turned SAARC dormant, the opportunities across the Bay allowed India to rejuvenate its maritime identity and seek sub-regional platforms like BIMSTEC. All of these cannot be disassociated with the strategic rise of China in India's neighbourhood. China has gradually developed good relations with the Bay of Bengal states and increased its presence in these waters. Apart from these geo-strategic and geo-economic factors, the Bay of Bengal is a vulnerable ecological space. Its marine geography is experiencing turbulent changes due to climate change and the exhaustion of renewable resources. This incremental change exemplifies statist intentions vis-à-vis the maritime space, which has to encounter many non-traditional security issues and actors.

History and intentions are tied up with a third variable that leads to state imagination - capabilities. Here again, capabilities can be further segregated into material and ideational categories. Both are essential to putting the imagination into practice and projection. State capabilities are correlational to how spaces are configured. States with higher material assets and power can carry out functions more coherently, project their intentions, and contribute to structuring spaces. A state must be ideationally capable of articulating and legitimising its vision for the maritime space. This articulation should not have rival imageries within. Similarly, this discourse should be presented and legitimised before a host of stakeholders like

other states, institutions and people. For instance, if a state articulates a security vision in a region, it must possess the ideational capability to articulate and legitimise that discourse to normalise and be accepted. This ideational enforcement is incomplete without material capabilities. Statist visions may exist without capabilities but will likely remain dormant and latent. Capabilities would allow the imagination to exist in expression. For example, India could project its security imagination of the Bay of Bengal when its material and ideational capabilities developed. In the early 2000s, it started discussing about being a net-security provider.[5] It could articulate the security concerns and a collective solution to them because its enhanced naval capabilities allowed it to project power as a regional net security provider. Enhanced naval capabilities meant that India could respond to common threats and risks that it could not fulfil earlier. This became evident from India's HA/DR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) responses when the 2004 Tsunami struck the region. New Delhi has built on its regional presence through growing naval diplomacy. This has led to several institutional mechanisms and their functions for the Bay. Institutions like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) allow India to spearhead an institutional order of navies in the region for collaboration. Similarly, the Indian Ocean Fusion Centre has implications for the region regarding data gathering related to Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).

These responses differ from India's line during the Cold War. With its limited material capabilities, burdened with great-power rivalry entering the shores, India rallied and argued that the Indian Ocean should be a zone of peace. This was India’s official stance through institutional platforms like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), particularly after the USS Enterprise was despatched for the Bay in the wake of the 1971 crisis in Bangladesh.[6] A complete disengagement of all powers from the region meant India’s security at the cost of

[5] Anit Mukherjee, “India as a Net-Security Provider: Concepts and Impediments,” RSIS Policy Brief, 2014.
[6] YP Rajesh, “Bully to Pal; US Comes Full Circle in Bay of Bengal,” Reuters, September 10, 2007.

minimum investments. The other option to compete with the rest of the powers would need adequate ammunition and investments. India was not in a position to fend for its security interests through material capabilities. Its historic anti-alliance stance meant balancing or bandwagoning with any major power was impossible. Institutional guarantees were much more feasible solutions to the security risk in these waters. The threat was then of the United States and now of China. However, the reactions are different. India's actions have turned toward multi-engagement rather than disengagement. One of the key variables that signal this shift is the aspect capabilities.

This research points out that theorising state imaginations about maritime spaces may require consideration of three factors vis-à-vis the maritime space– a state's interpretation of its history, its intentions and the nature of its capabilities.

The study uses the case of India's imaginations of the Bay of Bengal to situate the broader question of understanding state imaginations of maritime spaces. The research traces and examines India's imagination of the Bay of Bengal and what explains it.

States look at maritime space through multiple imaginations at any point. They also do not form policies keeping these categories intact. It is an analytical exercise through which these categories are interpreted from the existing available literature. This research uses three categories to situate India's imaginations of the Bay of Bengal maritime space: security, market, and culture. These three categories correspond to the strategic, economic, and socio-cultural aspects. For each of these categories, three questions were asked. First, what entails the Indian state's understanding of space as each of these three categories? In other words, what is understood as India's security, market or cultural imagination of the Bay of Bengal? Second, it tries to narrate India's imagination of these three categories through descriptive evidence. Third, it tries to explain the context against which these imageries of space arise. Each category

is a discourse the state puts under certain contextual conditions. It underscores these discourses as 'text' is not bereft of the context.

Maritime space as security refers to when states perceive or face threats or risks not from a particular actor but such concerns attached to the space. States can also spatialise security when they seek to control or influence the space that allows them to attain security. Maritime spaces can complicate security objectives for the states. The zero-sum game logic can drive a part of the state's perception of maritime security. However, maritime spaces also draw in non-traditional sources of security that incentivise states for collective security.

India's security imagination has been the most consistent of all imaginaries since independence. The study shows how the political elite has demarcated the Bay of Bengal in standard realist terms across the last seven decades. This security reading is despite any existential or impending threat or risk in the Bay of Bengal. India's concerns about security are interpreted by the Indian state owing to two varied factors. One is India's historical anxiety about losing control of the maritime space and, after that, weakened sovereign control. The state draws its interpretation primarily from colonial history. Political and defence elites remind us how India's independence was sacrificed once it lost its control over the sea. From a strategic point of view, ample sources highlight how, despite the best British controls in the Bay of Bengal, the Japanese incursions towards the end of the Second World War proved fatal. One of India's most prominent diplomats, KM Panikkar, has deliberated extensively about this security imperative and a desire to control the Bay of Bengal and the larger Indian Ocean at all times to attain security. Panikkar's visions not only found significant resonance in the Indian diplomatic circles but also policy imprints in India's naval doctrines. The second relates to India's security concerns about regional prominence dovetailed with its maritime resurgence. India is a British legatee state, and its geographical asymmetry and associated sense of exceptionalism are critical drivers of this understanding. This raises the question: what does India intend to secure

in the Bay of Bengal? This research finds that India's security policies aim to secure its autonomy, pre-eminence and leadership. The study shows that the historicisation of India's security concerns and policy can supplement pure realism in explaining India's security imagination.

Maritime space as the market can have two connotations. First, states can read maritime spaces from a commercial corridor perspective, which aids and allows the transport of goods and services. The state's use of the maritime space vis-à-vis regional and international trade is the fulcrum of this imagery. Second, maritime spaces also serve as resource zones within and beyond extended sovereign borders. The maritime space is a zone where a state's domestic economic policy interacts with the regional and international economic dynamics. What drives a state's market imagination of a maritime space is when both factors move in the same direction. A state will find economic uses of the maritime space through trade when it structures its domestic economic policy for export-led growth and, at the same time, finds its regional and international economy conducive to doing so. Market imaginations emphasise absolute and mutual gains. Unlike security imaginations that tend to focus on zero-sum games, market imaginations believe in economic interdependencies irrespective of and despite political borders.

For India, these directions did not emerge during the post-independence years. India's domestic economic policy prioritised an inward-looking economy with import substitution. Asia's economic market had few incentives for India to integrate. While India's political imagination was predicated on a pan-Asian unity vision, exemplified by its multilateral commitments, it went into economic isolation. This started changing in the 1980s when India's embrace of liberalisation overlapped with the growing opportunities of the Asian economic market. By then, the Southeast and East Asian states had started to reap benefits from their export-led growth model, which inspired economic interlinkages and exchanges across the Asian states.

India's economic modernisation dovetailed with its 'Look East' Policy, which sought more significant economic linkages with the Southeast Asian states. This unfolded an era of renewed interest in trade and had transformative effects on the Bay of Bengal's imagery as an economic corridor. As this trajectory progressed, the Bay of Bengal became a space of regional synergies through sub-regional integration. BIMSTEC had the goal of working towards a Bay of Bengal economic community. As the market imagination gained salience, India initiated connectivity projects that allowed better logistics for trade and its reawakening as a maritime nation. It simultaneously invested in resource extraction and utilisation, which gained ascendence after the UNCLOS (1982) demarcation of legal rights over marine resources for the states. India has stressed the Blue Economy (BE), which has raised several issues in the debate around how to use marine resources judiciously, distribute resources between the state and the community, and coordinate with the other coastal states that share the common pool of resources. India's market imagination of the Bay of Bengal has created several projects for connectivity and trade, but political and strategic factors often override them.

A state's cultural reading of the maritime space is when the sea is viewed as a carrier of cultural flows across its rim. A state claims the sea as a cultural space when its culture is transported across it, and traces of that are beyond the shores. Cultural imageries may be transnational and international, not bound by the present shape of political borders. States may have culturalist arguments that demand a cultural foundation for political authority. In sharp contrast, there is an institutionalist argument that many states put forward where culture is a domestic category and many cultures can coexist under culturally agnostic state authority.

Roughly till the 1950s, India's political elite understood the Bay of Bengal in culturalist terms. Its understanding was also broadly fuelled by the ideas of India's civilisational readings by

nationalist historians, including the banner of the 'Greater India' society.[7] This saw the Bay of Bengal as a carrier of India's civilisational attributes to Southeast Asia. Given India's cultural imprints in Southeast Asia, India was quick to showcase civilisational exceptionalism while appropriating it as India's cultural space. However, this culturalist understanding declined because of a change in contextual factors. India's political stance was in contradiction with this culturalist understanding. Decolonisation featured highly on its bilateral and multilateral agenda. It worked assiduously on several platforms to argue for Pan-Asianism. Culturalist arrogance smacked of hegemony and seemed untenable. The onset of territorial sovereignty had a structural impact on South and Southeast Asia. Officially, India leaned on the institutionalist imagination of the Bay of Bengal. It focused on culture as an interaction between Indian and Southeast Asian states. When India turned to the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia for renewed economic and political connections, it evoked cultural metaphors. Still, they were careful enough to avoid the pitfalls of cultural hegemony. India's cultural arguments were instrumental. Strategic and economic incentives drove its renewed engagements. Cultural metaphors helped India situate and historically project itself as part of this space. They became instruments for portraying India's soft image as preludes for better relations. In some more contemporary cases, India has sought to brand and develop its cultural footprints in the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia. This has a strain of old culturalist claims where India's civilization has been seen beyond its territorial borders. Projects have been to secure and develop a transnational heritage linked with India's state identity. However, much of this spatialisation of culture is aimed at a domestic audience for regime legitimation. These cultural references pander to civilisational pride and precursors to foreign relations and national branding. Political and economic incentives trump cultural gains for India in the Bay of Bengal.

[7] Jolita Zabarskaitė, *'Greater India' and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c. 1885–1965* (De Gruyter, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110986068.

While India's imaginations envision multiple possibilities, the question arises regarding how these imaginations are placed vis-à-vis one another. The third question is to analyse India's dominant imagination of the Bay of Bengal.

Maritime spaces are viewed from a zone of multiple opportunities. This research posits three such imaginations in the form of maritime spaces: security, market, and culture. The study employed discourse analysis as a method at two levels. First, a discourse is delineated, and its co-variance with the context is established. Second, it is answered which of these discourses has a demonstrable effect. Discourses begin with articulation, and the powerfully articulated ones assume acceptance over the rest through interpellation, where they almost assume synonymity with reality.

This research argues that India's security imagination is its dominant vision of the Bay of Bengal. There are several reasons to argue for that. First, the security imagination is the most consistent of all three imageries. Evidence suggests that while other imageries have fluctuated, India's security understanding has remained constant since its independence. While other imaginations depended on their covariance with regional and international contexts, India's security imagination is tied to its survival and territorial integrity as a state. This provides continuity to India's security logic, which is fundamental to states. India could further associate ideas of autonomy, leadership and pre-eminence as part of its security imagination.

Second, economic and cultural imaginations have often been instrumental to the security imagination. This means the economic and cultural arguments ultimately advanced the security imagination. There are several examples. The 1990s was pivotal for India's economic imagination as it was a turnaround for India's domestic economic policy and a simultaneously burgeoning Asian economy. The market imagination resulted from growing economic interdependencies between the Asian states where political borders were taking a backseat.

India's 'Look East' Policy had an economic orientation. However, several sources suggest that this move was not purely economic. It was done with strategic gains in mind. The market imagination was officially the predominant one that established credibility and advanced its ties with the Southeast Asian states. Soon, India turned to discussing political and security matters as part of Look East Phase II. The rising Chinese presence in the Bay of Bengal has been a concern in India's diplomatic circles since the 1960s.[8] There were several communications about developing relations with the Southeast Asian states. This would allow India two gains – a more prominent presence in the region and a chance to negotiate a collective security regime. The financial overlap between India's domestic policy and the growing regional market allowed India to renew its connections with the region. When a modicum of relations was on the upsurge, India put forward its security vision.

India's cultural imagination also affirmed its strategic goals in some form. First, the culturalist stance insinuates that as long as the Bay of Bengal was culturally owned and appropriated, it was also a strategically secure space for India. Culturalist and strategic history combine to frame this understanding that the advent of different cultures caused India's security to lose its footing. This corroborates with the idea of homogeneity translating to strength. This also builds the ground for arguing that India needs to secure this space because it is a culturally sacred space. Second, the institutionalist stance has been used by the Indian state to lay before the region its benign and non-aggressive image. It deliberately puts forward civilisational imagery, allowing India to claim a past of peaceful relations. Civilisational imagery is used as a trope to historicise India's past presence, which was peaceful and clear intentions of any present extraterritorial ambitions. This helps India fare better than their Chinese counterparts. Chinese civilisational arguments are troubled by its Tribute System. As a result, its present overtures in

[8] Several such accounts are collected from the Private papers of diplomats like Sudhir Ghosh, Triloki Nath Kaul and PN Haksar. Manuscripts Division, NMML

the South China Sea are always seen as a return to its hegemonic past. In contrast, India uses civilisational underpinnings to portray itself as a benign security partner and a more desirable collective security component.

Third, if there is a clash between the imaginations of the state, the security imagination prevails. Security considerations remain paramount despite the potential of growing economic interconnectedness and interdependencies. Economic gains have not always created political peace. Instead, political decisions have created economic distances. Take, for instance, India and China relations in the Bay of Bengal. There are immense possibilities for financial cooperation for both of the states. India's Northeast can explore the economic contiguity from South China in the north to Myanmar in the south. However, these economic complementarities are cut by political borders. Similarly, India and China can find ways to cooperate and boost trade in the Bay of Bengal. Much to their credit, the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) Economic Corridor was a starting point for this. However, economic gains neither incentivised relations nor bridged the gap when political tensions struck. India's preferred mode of regional interaction was BIMSTEC, as it did not have China in it. Cooperating with China was akin to ceding ground. This is an example of how zero-sum logic takes over absolute gains even in matters like trade, potentially allowing cooperation.

The economic logic has remained subservient to the political logic in the region. Unlike the impression of liberalisation undoing the state border and reducing its autonomy, the state dictates economic behaviour in the region. Excessive formalisation, bureaucratic hurdles and red-tapism remain considerable hurdles. The dismal state of connectivity is a significant constraint to flourishing trade. The fate of maritime connectivity is no different. Geographical contiguity notwithstanding, the severed links were not repaired but only worsened with borders that have, over the years, become sites of exclusion rather than convergence. For maritime connectivity and trade to complement the region, seas have to be seen alongside the inland

waterways as a unit. However, this is constrained as it involves a patchwork of domestic adjustments with borders and developing cooperative practices between states. While most borders are heavily militarized, the less militarised and even the most open state borders in the region have a dismal state of connectivity to support trade regularly. Furthermore, the initiatives to boost connectivity have been sluggish. Despite the potential for economic gains, borders have been challenging to mend, and security has been difficult to compromise. Mega road projects like the one proposed by India linking India-Myanmar-Thailand, touted as India's 'Gateway to ASEAN', have been under construction for more than 15 years and are yet to be completed because of several hurdles despite mutual interests and promise. Railways and air connectivity within the region are also abysmal. Structurally, lack of connectivity hampers the passage of goods and services and simultaneously increases transaction costs, making business less appealing. Paradoxically, the region has much better connectivity and trade with near and far away regions than within. There has also been a lack of enforcement and political will for cultural projects. Consider India's Project Mausam, which lacks a coherent strategy.

In contradiction to these limited advancements, India's security path has been incremental and much more uncompromising. It has embarked on a steady incremental arms build-up path in the Bay of Bengal. Its naval capabilities have only grown. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are a good case in point. Despite the ecological risks, the tri-services command on the island has only had an increased modernisation. Its security partnerships with the ASEAN states have been on the ascendance. India has furthered its relations with the broader Indo-Pacific.

A direct fallout of this dominant imagination is the conversion of the Bay of Bengal into a zone of security. Apart from the increased militarisation of the Bay of Bengal, even other issues like trade and connectivity have often become a zero-sum game. The predominance of security has limited other possible imaginations, like market and culture, to have transformative effects in the maritime space. As a result, despite the presence of economic and cultural imagination, the

Bay of Bengal is neither an unhindered economic space nor a space of unrestricted cultural flows. The significantly low levels of trade and connectivity show that the Bay of Bengal has not acquired the dimensions of an economic community where states are interdependent beyond borders to cooperate and incentivise absolute gains. It is neither a zone of unrestricted cultural flows where the cardinal logic of boundaries and zealously guarded sovereignty has reflected and applied to the maritime space. India's economic and cultural imaginations of the Bay of Bengal neither go back to the meta-regional connections of the pre-Partition era nor are they characterised by the interactional fluidity of the oceans in matters of trade and community. The search for appropriating and securing the sea has the potential to turn the sea into a contested space as the states look to draw lines on the water. They replicate and multiply a similar orientation of land territoriality put on the seas.

The research puts forward three imageries of the Indian state for the Bay of Bengal. A concluding note for this work is that no imageries are cast in iron but are temporal. Some conceptions gain salience over time, while others may not. Security, market, and culture are three imaginations that have been picked up as they are deemed fit to portray the evidence of the timeline for the research. There is a possibility that the Bay of Bengal will be perceived in terms of its marine geography in the future. Its turbulent geography and resources might dictate the formation of a state's imagination. However, we could not find traces of this as an independent imagination. Hence, this research concludes that India's imaginations of the Bay of Bengal straddle across security, market and culture – security being the dominant frame of reference.

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PERSONS INTERVIEWED

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