

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

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## SYNOPSIS

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. 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.

Maritime regions, contrary to popular belief, are not just geographical entities. They are vibrant spaces, pulsating with significant political dynamics. 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 fully theorised in the discipline, their integral role in international politics is undeniable. 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.

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

## 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. 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 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. 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.

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 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.

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,

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.

Following the Introduction, 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. 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.

## FINDINGS

- (1) What are the various conceptions through which state imaginations of maritime spaces can be theorised?

State imaginations are products of three variables: the state's interpretation of history linked with 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.

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.

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.

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.

(2) What are India's conceptions of space for the Bay of Bengal Region, and what explains them?

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 through three imageries of security, market, and culture, as well as what explains them.

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 ascendance 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. 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 civilisation has been seen beyond its territorial borders. Projects have been conceived 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 legitimisation. 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.

### (3) What is India's dominant conception of space for the Bay of Bengal Region?

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 synonymy 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. 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 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. 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. 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, 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 faraway 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.

Signature of Supervisor

Dated

Signature of Candidate

Dated