

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.