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The Bay of Bengal as Zone of Peace and Prosperity

Bay of Bengal connects India and Southeast Asia. The region is undergoing impressive economic transition with renewed focus on cross border connectivity which augurs well for the region. However, challenges continue to exist. This commentary discusses the current state affairs in the region and presents a set of recommendations to ensure that the Bay of Bengal emerge as a Zone of Peace and Prosperity.

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Historically, the Bay of Bengal has served as a link between the Indian civilisation and the Southeast Asian region. Because of robust historical interactions, India and Southeast Asia have developed distinct yet related cultures. For instance, in Southeast Asia, there are multiple versions of Ramayana. Further, Buddhism spread from India to many Southeast Asian countries. The advent of European colonialism disrupted the existing economic and cultural interactions and created new nodes of engagement. There was an increased movement of labour to meet the commercial interests of European colonialism. During the British colonial phase, the security apparatus radiated out of India and made its presence felt in distant parts of Southeast Asia. The Indian soldiers in the British army played an important role in liberating large parts of Southeast Asia from Japanese occupation.

In the decades following the end of World War II, interactions across the Bay of Bengal were subdued. There were four main reasons for constrained interactions between India and Southeast Asian countries abutting the Bay of Bengal. First, the socialist economic policies and focus on self-reliance ensured considerable inward focus in the policies of various nation-states in the Bay of Bengal region. As a result, some countries indulged in excessive nationalisation policies and hesitated to have robust external economic engagement. Second, because of the Cold War, the world was divided into the Capitalist and the Communist blocks. Despite the pressure to join one of the blocks, countries such as India remained non-aligned. The Cold War ensured that interactions between various countries were constrained, and such dynamic also impacted India-Southeast Asia interactions. Third, there were insurgencies in the Northeastern part of India as well. Further, large parts of Myanmar experienced significant political turmoil and persistent ethnic armed conflict over decades. Fourth, there were significant political shifts in the Bay of Bengal region. For instance, the eastern part of Pakistan experienced severe political turmoil resulting in the emergence of a new nation-state viz., Bangladesh. While

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Bangladesh was often referred to as a basket case at the time of its independence, its economic performance was impressive in the subsequent decades.

After the end of the Cold War, there were new opportunities for India and Southeast Asian countries to improve their economic and political interactions. India launched its Look East Policy (LEP) and sought to scale up engagement with its eastern neighbours. India started to engage with Southeast Asian countries through many regional frameworks, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Some of the countries in the Bay of Bengal region witnessed impressive economic growth. For example, in 2022, Bangladesh's GDP growth was over 7%.¹ Even, Bangladesh's per capita income of \$2,227 in 2020-2021 was higher than India's.² In 2021, Indonesia's³ GDP was around 1.19 trillion, and India's⁴ GDP was approximately 3.18 trillion. So, the Bay of Bengal has two economies with over a trillion dollars as GDP. Then, of course, there are countries such as Thailand with commendable economic performance.

Recently, countries in the Bay of Bengal region have been investing significantly in building connectivity infrastructure. In collaboration with Japan, Bangladesh is developing the Matarbari port project to host large vessels. Under the rubric of 'Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,' India and Indonesia are working towards improving "connectivity between Sabang Island and Port Blair" to promote tourism and related activities.⁵ Towards the end of last year, the 'second edition of the Joint Task Force meeting on the development of connectivity between Aceh province in Indonesia and Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India' decided to enhance interaction between business chambers and potential investors to improve trade and investment in the region.⁶

The Indian government has prioritised the upgradation of ports, such as Kolkata, Paradip and Visakhapatnam, on the eastern seaboard.⁷ The Indian government will make significant investments "to build new Western Dock and deepen the route at Paradip port to handle capesize vessels."⁸ There is considerable emphasis on improving the operational efficiencies of the ports under Project Unnati.⁹ In a significant development, the Indian government has announced its intent to develop a "Mega International Container Transshipment Port (ICTP) at Galathea Bay of Great Nicobar Island."¹⁰ To ensure holistic development of the Great Nicobar Island in the Bay of Bengal and spur the tourism sector, a host of other projects are also getting operationalised, such as a greenfield township, a power plant and an international airport.¹¹ The rapid economic development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India will have a significant impact on the prosperity of the Bay of Bengal region, which will also benefit countries in the neighbourhood, such as Myanmar, Indonesia and others.

Other major powers in the Indo-Pacific have prioritised building connectivity and infrastructure projects in the Bay of Bengal region. For instance, Japan is involved in the construction of Chattogram-Cox's Bazar highway and gauge conversion of "162km railway between Gazipur's Joydebpur and Pabna's Ishwardi."¹² Japan's involvement, specifically in the Matarbari in Bangladesh port project, will help landlocked Indian states access international markets.¹³ In the long run, the Matarbari port project will also have a positive spillover impact on Rakhine state in Myanmar.¹⁴ Further, news reports suggest that India, Bangladesh and Japan will collaborate to "lure investment towards Bangladesh and India's northeastern states" by developing connectivity projects.¹⁵

In addition to building connectivity projects, the Bay of Bengal littoral countries have demonstrated considerable political sagacity in addressing the maritime territorial disputes in the region. For instance, Bangladesh and Myanmar had a maritime dispute. The significance of the dispute can be gauged from the fact that the maritime territory under contention was around 150,000 square kilometres (sq km) of the Bay of Bengal, with significant energy resources.¹⁶ Both countries approached the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). In 2012, both countries resolved it by abiding by judgement¹⁷ of the ITLOS without recourse to violent methods. Similarly, two years later, India and Bangladesh resolved their maritime dispute as per the Permanent Court of Arbitration award.¹⁸ The resolution of these maritime disputes assumes importance given that there are significant energy resources in the region, which benefit not only South Asian countries but also Southeast Asian countries. For instance, the gas from the Yadana and Yetagun fields in the Andaman Sea gets exported to Thailand.¹⁹

Moving forward, it is crucial to address sensitive political issues to improve the overall climate for economic growth, investment and trade. There is a need for a collaborative response to violent political transition in some of the countries in the region. Further, there is a need to ensure a coordinated approach towards addressing non-traditional security issues such as forced migration and illegal fishing. More importantly, the countries in the region should declare the Bay of Bengal as a Zone of Peace by not granting permission to non-littoral countries to establish military bases. The countries in the region should also deny permission for the prolonged presence of military/dual-use vessels from non-littoral countries. After due consultations, the countries in the region should take coordinated political and economic measures for Bay of Bengal to emerge as a Zone of Peace and Prosperity.

Endnotes

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Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC works with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and undertakes evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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