



Examining India's Maritime Policy With A Focus On The Bay of Bengal

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Abstract

This paper explores India's maritime policy with a focus on SAGAR using the Bay of Bengal as a case study.

The study starts with a highlight on the key features of SAGAR. It then goes on to shift focus towards the Bay of Bengal, which has been touted as the "Next Theater for Power Play in Asia"

(Kabir, Ahmed 2015).

The paper **uniquely** approaches the power struggle in the Bay from the perspective of 3 super-powers, namely, the Republic of India, People's Republic of China, and the United States of America. Through the research of scholars from all 3 countries, we aim to cover the **central argument** of the paper, which is, to display the differences and similarities in the 3 point-of-views and attempt to bridge research gaps in the existing literature. The **scope** of our study will be limited to matters that may directly or indirectly affect India's position, with respect to, having control of vital trade channels. A focus will be made on China's ambitions in this region and the US's approach to quelling these ambitions. The countries have identified the political and economic importance of the Bay and therefore have redirected their attention from land to sea.

The **conclusion** this paper comes to is that mutual trust and cooperation is the best strategy to mitigate any crisis in the region.

Keywords: Bay of Bengal (BoB), SAGAR, India, China, U.S, Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Quad

Introduction

“Our goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other’s interests; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation.”

These were the words used by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the 12th of March 2015 in an address at Port Louis in Mauritius when he first introduced SAGAR, India’s maritime framework under the Modi government. As India exported its very first home-made warship, it was a fitting occasion to introduce SAGAR and set the tone for the coming years. **SAGAR** or **Security and Growth For All in the Region** is the Hindi word for ‘ocean’ or ‘sea’, and was referenced to by PM Modi when he chaired the UN Security Council’s debate on maritime security and international cooperation, in a historic first for an Indian Prime Minister.

India is blessed with a highly advantageous geographical position, with its peninsular tip piercing right into the center of the Indian Ocean, supervising some of the world’s most crucial maritime routes. However, this gives rise to some serious vulnerabilities as more than 90% of India’s trade happens through sea. As India aims to achieve its goals of \$5 trillion in the next 3 years and \$10 trillion in the next 10 years, security and stability in India’s oceans will be of paramount importance.

India, in the 21st century, has a renewed maritime outlook due to its emergence as a potential superpower and fast-growing economy. India’s overhauled maritime outlook and its increased emphasis on international harmony have opened new avenues to explore collaborations beneficial both economically and strategically, between like-minded countries. New Delhi is particularly keen on increasing collaborations with Colombo and Dhaka and with Southeast Asian nations. To facilitate a better understanding of each other’s concerns and challenges, thereby forming the foundation of a stable Bay of Bengal.

A key factor in the evolving geopolitics of the Bay is the emergence of new players in the region and the rise of China with its growing naval ambitions. The deepening engagements between China and other neighboring nations of the bay is extending the Sino-Indian maritime competition in the region. The Indian government is increasingly concerned about China’s initiatives around its neighboring waters.

Literature Review

1. Revisiting SAGAR: India’s Template for Cooperation in the IOR by G. Padmaja

To secure its position as a major power in the region, India aims to play a constructive role by instilling a greater sense of community among the region’s littorals. The nation serves as the primary net security provider in the region and regularly patrols and monitors the Sea Lines of

Communication (SLOC).

Prime Minister Modi asserted that modernization of defense forces was necessary to promote an atmosphere of peace and harmony, thereby justifying his decision to ascertain it to be a top priority for the nation. India included new policies such as Counter-Terrorism and Anti-Piracy missions.

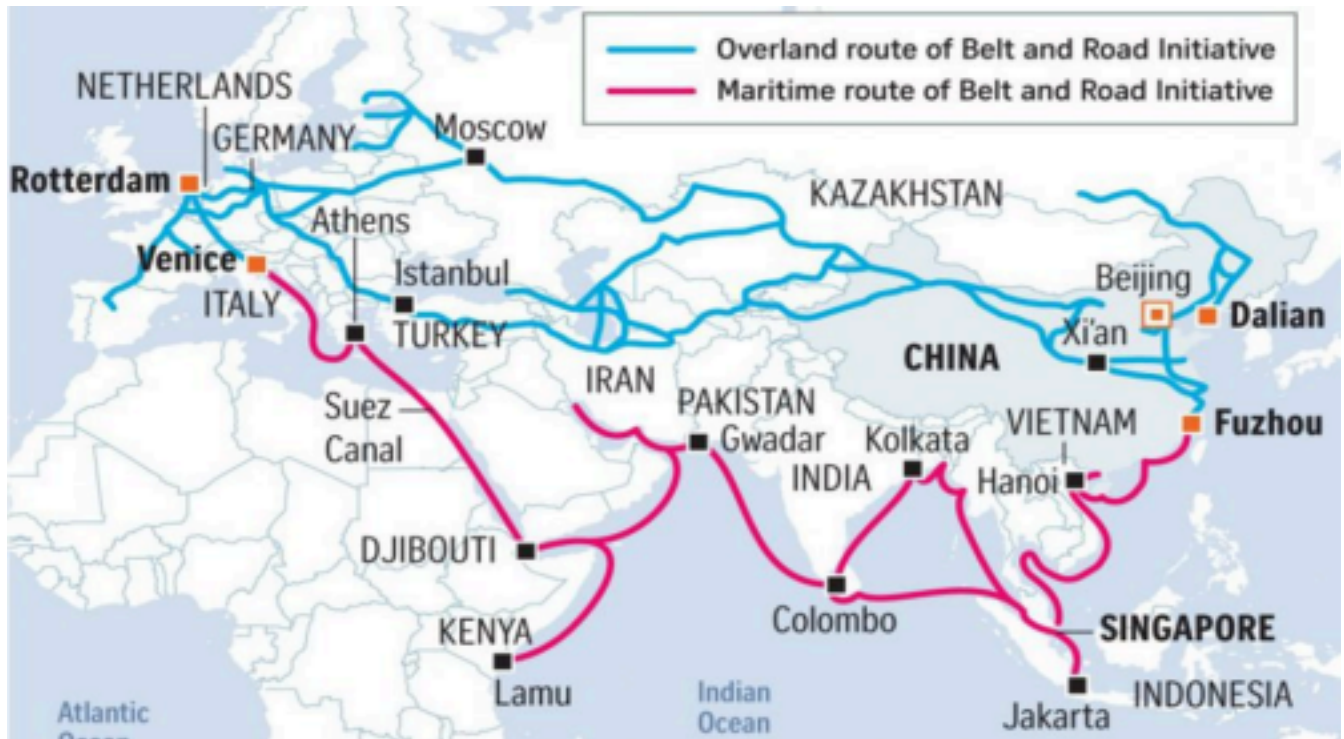
In 2015, in Mauritius the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the **SAGAR** Initiative which stands for 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' which at the time was proclaimed to be "India's Vision for the Indian Ocean".

India's greatest **strength** in the SAGAR initiative is its central position in the Indian Ocean which allows the nation to leverage the blue economy and India a perfect opportunity to achieve its national and socio-economic goals. The policy also allows India to maintain strategic partnerships with the small states of the Indian Ocean Region in Asia and Africa.

2. China's Increasing Forays into the Bay of Bengal by Manish Jung Pulami

Beijing is implementing a "Look South" strategy, through wide infrastructure investments across the Bay of Bengal i.e. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and a growing military presence in the form of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). China claims that its intentions in the region are purely economic, but the increase of its naval presence says otherwise. PLAN has deployed several warships and submarines and has also entered India's special economic zone (SEZ). Chinese patrols have increased near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which serves as an important strategic location for India's regional intelligence.

China is seeking port access to countries near the Bay of Bengal. It has gotten into arms trade with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand, increasing their hold in the region. Their intelligence station at Coco Island helps them keep track of Indian Navy movements and live missile launches from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is to increase Beijing's leverage in the region. Investments in several strategic ports like the Chittagong port in Bangladesh and the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. These civilian ports help to better China's image with the locals and can also be converted into a strategic military port with little effort and time. China is conducting military exercises with Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka and is helping regional governments with the problem of piracy and drug trafficking. India, on the other hand, is also expanding its influence and this could cause some clash between the two countries. Both view the Bay of Bengal as a valuable resource for energy, shipping, and cultural influence. India does not rule out China's string of pearls strategy as another aspect of the conflict. It believes that China can encircle it with naval bases across the Bay of Bengal and the Indian ocean, in preparation for an all-round assault on the Indian coastline.



Country	Active Naval Vessels Manufactured/Co-Developed by China*	Big-Ticket Maritime Infrastructure under development by China	Chinese Investment Spending 2005 – 2017 (in \$ bn)+	Status of Free Trade Agreement with China
Bangladesh	46	Chittagong Port	24.1	Biggest Trading Partner, Feasibility Study Started in 2016
Maldives	0	Ihavadhippolhu Integrated Development (iHavan) Project	NA	Signed (2017)
Myanmar	17	Kyaukpyu Deep Water Port	7.4	ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (2010)
Pakistan	15	Gwadar Deep Water Port	50.6	Signed (2007)
Sri Lanka	17	Hambantota Port	14.7	Biggest Trading Partner, Negotiations Started in 2014

3. *The Malacca Dilemma and Chinese Ambitions: Two Sides of a Coin* by Navya Mudunuri

“The Malacca Dilemma”, as Hu Jintao called it, is the threat to Chinese economic development through blockage of oil imports. China has begun developing and connecting its western and southwestern regions, and the Bay of Bengal has emerged as a key economic area and also a future alternative to the Malacca Strait which entails the blockage of 80% of China’s exports due

to the rival nations surrounding the strait of Malacca, if paired with the proper land trading routes, done via the Belt and Road Initiative. The point of concern for Beijing is that Singapore, an ally of India and the US, holds control of the strait. Against the backdrop of straining relations with India and the West, it was imperative for China to reduce its dependency on the strait.

Beijing's initiatives in Myanmar, a key player in its Bay of Bengal outreach, include gas pipelines connecting Myanmar's western coast and Madaya Island to China's Yunnan province are some of the newest strategic alliances being formed by China to gain dominance over the region.

This area of the Bay of Bengal is immensely important to China's economy and China aims to protect its assets in the region by increasing militaristic and political control. Therefore in 2015, China opened a new oil link through Myanmar. This 2400 Km pipeline bypasses the pirate infested Malacca straits. This reduces the distance the oil takes from the Bay of Bengal to reach China by 700 Km and cuts the time taken by about 30%. This new oil corridor through Myanmar provided security against potential blockades at the Malacca straits as the oil will no longer have to pass through there.



4. *Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal* by Darshana M Baruah

The core Bay of Bengal countries today account for a population of almost 1.78 billion, while adjacent states with interest account for an additional 490 million. Bay of Bengal Maritime policies have a major impact on world trade, but it plays a primary role in the trade of adjacent nations such as India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and most importantly, China.

In the ever-changing Asian maritime security dynamic, the Bay of Bengal is emerging as a critical theater for regional economic and strategic competition. Today, the Bay serves as a bridge between South and East Asia and appears to be the pathway into the wider Indo Pacific Strategy.

As a result of increasing maritime conflicts in the region a warrant for greater maritime cooperation is necessary. Many Bay of Bengal littorals have announced their interest to take collaborative initiatives as great powers compete in the region.

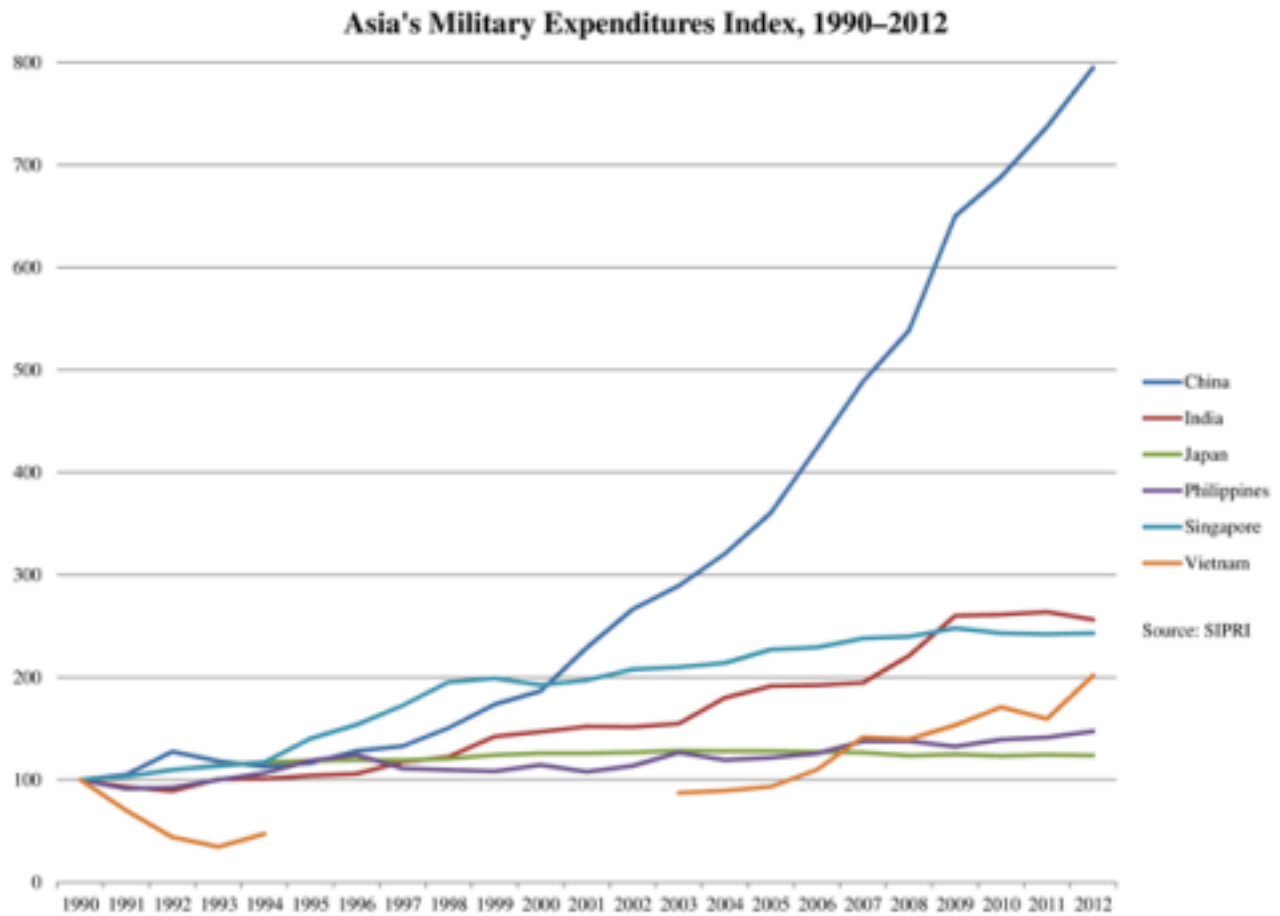
Indian platforms and conferences such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and Exercise MILAN carry significant participation from littoral states in the region and help foster a sense of collective security and wellbeing.

IONS is an initiative led by the Indian Navy that provides a platform for leaders to debate and deliberate matters of international security. India also hosts exercise MILAN, which is a biennial naval exercise among the littoral navies of the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean regions to understand the region's navies better. In addition, India regularly conducts coordinated patrols with Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia, thus, covering the immediate and extended waters of the Bay of Bengal.

5. *The U.S. Needs a New Indian Ocean Strategy* by Louis Bergeron, Nick Iorio, and Jeff Payne

As the sleeping giant, in the form of the People's Republic of China, awakens, siren bells ring throughout the various levels of United States government. To check the rise of this potential hegemon, the US has identified the Bay of Bengal's tremendous potential due to its geographical strength and collection of resources. Hence, the US is allocating a significant part of its resources, including navy vessels and military personnel, and increasing its cooperation with ASEAN member states. The 'Rebalancing' strategy directly engages with China by strengthening older alliances and forming new partnerships. The biggest challenge the US faces is the economic prowess of China, in terms of swaying smaller neighboring countries who see more benefit in siding with China. After neglecting the BoB for so long, it will be difficult to challenge either of the economic and military powers, namely India and China, in the region.

Even though the US Navy has superior capabilities, Washington's primary concern is that China directly challenges its position as a net security provider in the region, because of its increasing interest in the Bay. The US believes the best strategy going forward would be to strengthen ties with India, to take advantage of India's large naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region.



6. Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue by Patrick Buchan & Benjamin Rimland

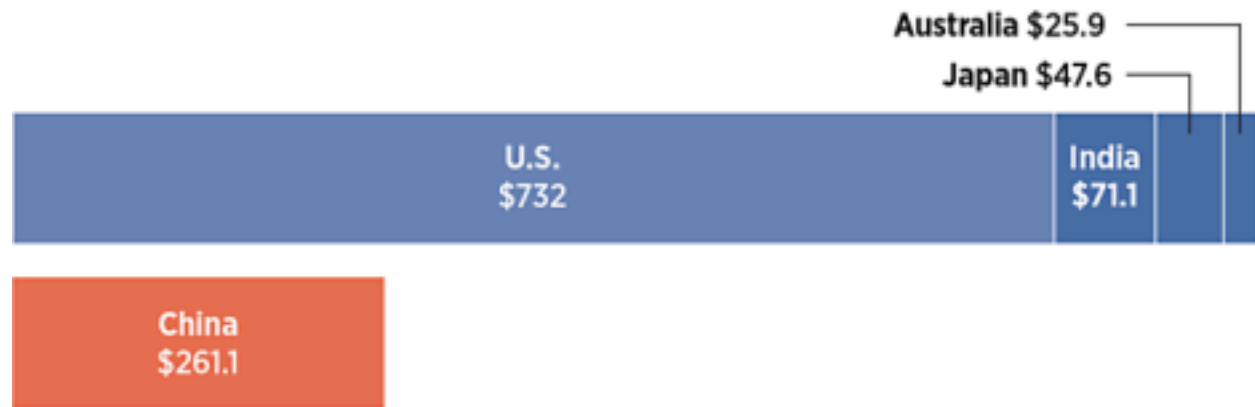
The **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD)**, often referred to as the Quad, is a strategic security dialogue between the US and Indo-Pacific nations namely, Australia, India, and Japan whose primary aim is to maintain stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region. One of the outcomes was holding a series of joint military exercises called Exercise Malabar. It involves India, USA, Japan and is conducted in the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and the Philippine Sea. This exercise started in 1992 between India and the United States. Japan and Australia later became members. The aim of the Malabar exercise is to increase cooperation between the navies to maintain order in the area and to keep in check other powers such as China and non-state bodies such as pirates in the region. The exercises include fighter combat operations, maritime interdiction, and counter piracy operations.

The importance of the **Quad** was recently reiterated during the India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue. The ministers spoke about the progress made in creating a constructive agenda for the Quad to deliver peace and stability to the region, in pursuance of the shared vision for an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. They welcomed ongoing discussions in the Quad Working Groups on vaccines, climate change, cyber security, and critical technologies for delivering tangible benefits to the region.

CHART 1

Defense Spending: China vs. the Quad

IN BILLIONS OF U.S. DOLLARS, IN 2019



SOURCE: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Military Expenditure," <https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/arms-and-military-expenditure/military-expenditure> (accessed May 7, 2020).

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Research Gaps

The study of international relations is unique, in the sense that every scenario always has more than one perspective. State-centric media often portray their government's actions as just and noble while the plight of those on the other side is ignored.

SAGAR is claimed to be the first step in India's maritime resurgence and even though it is a step forward, the initiative's primary weakness lies in India's inability to execute doctrines demanded by the initiative. India has the capability to offer maritime assets to other littoral states, but it has limited capacity to execute them. Added to this the lack of engagement of the private sector to promote agendas, such as maritime security, which would be mutually beneficial to both the nation as well as the sector's interests.

India's inherent ability to become a key player in the Indian Ocean Region can by no means be ignored. It can foster free trade in the region and through strategic cooperation with littoral states both gain as well as give access to larger markets and opportunities which would prove to be beneficial to nearly the whole globe. Granted threats such as China's increasing maritime supremacy do exist, but the right intervention at the right stage could do wonders and allow for India's maritime power to reach heights unknown.

Revisiting the Chinese perspective, there is more to it than meets the eye. At first glance, it seems that China has fixed the issue of over-dependence on the Malacca Strait and have found a strong partner in Myanmar, but the truth is, the Burmese are against these pipelines as they believe that farmers that were affected by this pipeline have not been properly compensated. The locals also resent the fact that none of the benefits of this project trickle down to the Burmese people, depriving the country of valuable resources. China had to promise a total of \$53B as

royalty, over a period of 30 years, to quell the anger. Peace was made with local military factions with the promise of \$25M worth of social benefits.

China's BRI connectivity route in the Bay of Bengal means the odds are heavily stacked against Sri Lanka to make any form of advancement in the Bay of Bengal. In addition, Sri Lanka's current debt crisis along with its concerns about taking on additional foreign currency loans means that the country finds itself in somewhat of an inescapable **debt trap**.

Under President Obama's administration the United States formed their 'Asia Pivot' strategy which stressed on strengthening bilateral security relations and forming working relationships with emerging powers in the East, primarily China. In the past several years however, the United States has found itself in competition with nations such as India and China for geopolitical and economic reasons, going against their initial strategy.

The United States however hopes that Bay states must not relapse into chaotic unstable conditions and are willing to provide them with US security assistance programs to "better control their borders and coastline and better deal with national disasters and transnational security threats. How the United States views the current geopolitical scenario in the Bay of Bengal and how they plan to deal with and integrate their plan of action into their Asia Pivot is a field left unexplored by this study.

India realizes the threat of ceding control of the IOR to China who has greater resources, a superior navy, and an increasing number of naval bases in the IOR.

China's alleged strategy to encircle India with their naval facilities, known as the "String of Pearls", has the potential to completely choke off India's coastline and deliver a devastating blow to Indian security forces. A vital issue in the IOR is "access". Both countries want to have access to strategic locations in the IOR but have a different approach. While the Chinese provide financial and technological aid in the development of infrastructure, India creates small pockets of bilateral naval exercises (Agnihotri 2014).

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend" which implies that the best strategy would be to align with the US. Both countries have a shared objective of quelling Chinese ambition. Yet, important figures in India's strategic community are pessimistic. Indian analysts, post the defense pact between the Maldives and the US, advise the Indian government to prepare for the possibility of an "overcrowding of strategic space in the IOR". While Washington is considered an ally, some analysts believe that an excessive U.S. presence in the IOR could unnecessarily provoke China, leading to adverse implications for India.

All the Quad nations have the same views on Chinese policies and acknowledge that it's a threat to their common interests. China realizes the potential of this alliance and has openly called it as an "Asian NATO". However, there are differences in their threat perceptions. The differences largely arise due to an absence of territorial disputes with China and the perceptions of running a risk of retaliation from China. This hindrance to collective action decreases the chance of any action the nations might take to defend their common interests.

India continues to bank on the illusion that having a larger number of partners is better than creating deeper partnerships. The recent Australia-Japan deal is proof that other countries can, and will move on without India, if they get the right conditions. This makes combatting a regional imbalance against China even more difficult.

Objectives

- To assess the current geo-political landscape through the lens of maritime security, with a focus on Indian policy SAGAR
- To understand the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal in the power play between China and the rest of the world, particularly the United States of America, and India's role in maintaining control and being a net security provider in the region.

Methodology

To identify research gaps in literature and analyze it in detail, we will be following a 3 phased approach.

- In the 1st phase, we will first try to understand the current geo-political landscape and the different power dynamics at play in the Bay of Bengal region. This will be mostly a collection of primary/raw data.
- The 2nd phase will follow a 3-pronged approach. We will approach the region from 3 sides
 - India's effort to remain a net security provider
 - China's effort to gain control
 - USA's effort to check China's aggression

We will review literature which covers the perspectives and try to find the research gaps for the same. This will be conversion to secondary data.

- The 3rd phase will be to provide a narrative which unifies the 3 perspectives. We will provide our analysis and give a conclusion to our research.

Analysis, Results & Discussion

The objective of this paper was to comment on India's resurgence in the maritime domain through new-age policies, most importantly SAGAR, and then to utilize the situation in the Bay of Bengal as a case study for SAGAR.

SAGAR is Prime Minister Modi's enterprising approach to maritime security and development of a blue economy. India cannot match large nations such as China's strength force-for-force and as a result is required to form bilateral alliances and perform network centric operations. In this regard, enhancing the security of small island states is integral. (Vines 2012). The relevance of

the policy is greater when you consider all the other maritime initiatives it can be linked with like the Act East Policy, Blue Economy, Project Mausam, Project Sagarmala, among others.

The “Chinese Dream” is Xi Jinping’s “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. To achieve this dream, China must ensure its political, economic, and most importantly, energy security. Beijing solved their potential oil crisis with the pipeline through Myanmar, but they must ensure the Burmese are properly compensated as their resentment can turn into revolt anytime. China must realize that India is also playing their own game. India countered China’s treatment of Myanmar by following a policy of constructive engagement instead of isolating the military regime as done before. India also tried to find complementary interests which could be used against the Chinese threat, for example pointing out the poor treatment of Muslims in China. In such littoral nations of the Bay, political stability and economic prosperity are strongly linked. Hence, inefficient governments carry the risk of vital choke points being vulnerable to piracy and terrorism. The Bay acutely requires high-level cooperation for the prevention of pirate attacks on critical sea routes. There remains a pressing need for more coordinated and comprehensive policies.

China’s state-centric approach must be met with strong resistance and India must stand its ground in this battle for the seas. The biggest challenge for India, as of now, will be to counter China’s ambition in the form of their “**String of Pearls**” strategy while also preventing the U.S. from overcrowding maritime space and in turn, provoking China.

The U.S. needs to accept that it is no longer the dominant power and must enter into partnership with regional powers. It may even see its role re-defined as a mediator between New Delhi and Washington. Kaplan predicts a decrease in the presence of the U.S. as an “elegant decline from hegemony by fostering cooperation with other navies to protect the maritime commons. The more China and India rise, the more welcome US power will be in the region as a counterbalance to both” (Kaplan 2010).

Conclusion

The Galwan Valley skirmish confirmed China’s ambition to assert dominance in the region and establish itself as the next hegemon. A sleeping giant has awoken in the form of 21st century China, the country with the largest population, largest economy, and the 3rd strongest military. A more realistic perspective of the global political landscape compels us to acknowledge that there are more significant incentives and state-centric interests at play. The Indian government has recently started refocusing its resources towards the seas to counter the rapid rise of Chinese influence, for example, appointing India’s first National Maritime Security Coordinator.

India has a renewed maritime outlook due to its emergence as a potential superpower and fast-growing economy. A key factor in the evolving geopolitics of the bay is the emergence of new players in the region and the rise of China with its growing naval ambitions. The deepening engagements between China and other neighboring nations of the bay is extending the Sino-Indian maritime competition in the region. The Indian government is increasingly concerned about China’s initiatives around its neighboring waters. As China has begun developing and connecting its western and southwestern regions, the Bay of Bengal has emerged as a key economic area as well as a potential alternative to China’s Malacca dilemma.

Infrastructure development and connectivity initiatives are rapidly becoming new areas for cooperation and competition in Asia. The People's Liberation Army Navy has increasingly deployed warships over the past two years and moreover, increased arms deals with Myanmar, Bangladesh and Thailand has increased China's leverage in the surrounding areas.

The Indian government has recently started refocusing its resources towards the Bay to counter the rapid rise of Chinese influence. The Indian Navy has made considerable efforts by fighting maritime crime in the form of piracy and smuggling and has also demonstrated capabilities to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in events such as the 2004 tsunami. The other key initiatives taken by India on the political front include cordial relations with Myanmar and Bangladesh in the form of incentives and political pressure.

The BoB will require close attention in the coming years. It is evident that no single power will have control over the region. Littoral states are turning to democracy under the expectation of stability. Super powers must exercise their **soft power** rather than hard. The need of the hour is a multilateral agreement which will allow each nation to pursue its interests.

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