

India and Myanmar: Prospects of Maritime Reciprocity

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Myanmar occupies a central position in India's geopolitical imperatives in the Bay of Bengal (BoB). On 06 September 2017, the two countries inked agreements on maritime security and cooperation, including one on white shipping information-sharing. New Delhi seeks to enhance its geopolitical leverage in the BoB, particularly in context of how the maritime template of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is being shaped through the ubiquitous presence of the non-resident stakeholders. What does India seek to achieve through this emerging maritime narrative? Are New Delhi's ambitions purely security-centric? If not, is India triggering a geopolitical rivalry in the region?

India's maritime cooperation with Myanmar has significant potential. The International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) between India and Myanmar adjoining the strategic Andaman and Nicobar Islands necessitates an intensive maritime interface, including military ties. The trends in this direction need to be viewed in context of New Delhi's flagship "Act East Policy", its "Neighbourhood First Policy", and, the Chinese strategic presence in the area. China's interests in the IOR, especially in Myanmar, are being viewed as challenges to India.

The prevailing maritime cooperation involves aspects ranging from reciprocal warship port to the supply of naval hardware by India. Since 2013, the Indian Navy and Myanmar Navy have also been engaged in coordinated patrols along the IMBL. This series of patrols has the slightly clunky appellation, "Indo-Myanmar Coordinated Patrol" (IMCOP). Bilateral maritime cooperation is in evidence even beyond the IMCOP. For instance, Naypyidaw sent a ship to participate in the Indian Navy's International Fleet Review, 2016. A Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), too, has been signed (in February 2016) between the two navies. In the past, New Delhi has provided sonars and sonar domes, 'BN-2 Defender' ('Islander') medium-range maritime surveillance aircraft, directing gear, deck-based air-defence systems, and, naval-gun boats, to Naypyidaw. In March 2017, India agreed to establish meteorological facilities and provide training for the Myanmar Navy.

The two countries had also cleared a deal worth US \$37.9 million, for the supply of lightweight torpedoes to Myanmar. The two most recent Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) — signed in September, 2017 — primarily focus on intensifying maritime security cooperation, and, the sharing of ‘white shipping’ information. Adding to this, a technical agreement on a coastal surveillance system was also signed. The cooperation is also, said to help complement the defence cooperation with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). India’s proximity to Myanmar - the only ASEAN state which shares both land and maritime boundaries with India - is crucial for sustaining the strategic edge enjoyed by New Delhi.

The nature of maritime cooperation, however, goes beyond a security-oriented dimension. India’s maritime engagement of Myanmar also reflects an economy-driven approach. In the past, India’s image as a regional hegemon has invited scepticism from its neighbourhood. New Delhi’s immediate neighbours were almost invariably wary of the former’s intentions. India’s role as a net security provider in the region, therefore, remains a challenged one. Extra-regional players such as the USA (with its stated “Rebalance to Asia” policy), and China, which ideates on an Asian security mechanism, seek to impose a security architecture that is likely to undermine New Delhi’s role in the Indian Ocean. Considering the apprehensions of her neighbourhood, India appears to be moving on the right track by capitalising upon economic and diplomatic options as the foremost priority.

The proposed ‘Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor’ (BCIM-EC) and the ‘Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation’ (BIMSTEC), which are the two major sub-regional organisations in the region, offer a platform for both, the Indian and the Myanmar establishments, to redefine and prioritise their areas of cooperation, and create a trans-regional market comprising South Asia and Southeast Asia. BCIM’s expected capitalisation upon the ‘three Ts’ (Trade, Transport and Energy) has an inescapable and important maritime facet. A shared vision, incorporating the creation of maritime infrastructure, and harnessing the benefits of a ‘Blue’ economy, underscores the potential value of these ‘three Ts’. These initiatives would definitely help minimise the potential of politico-economic instability in the BCIM sub-region.

India is keen on the early completion of a US \$484 million Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport System on the western coast of Myanmar, which acts as a trade and logistics-link between the state of Mizoram in India’s Northeast and Myanmar. The project focuses on an integrated Inland Water Transport (IWT) constituent, which extends up to 158 km along the Kaladan River from Sittwe to Paletwa. The proposed navigational channel

is expected to enhance the connectivity and bilateral trade between the two countries. The transshipment terminal at Paletwa is connected to Zorinpui, on the Indo-Myanmar border, by a 110 km highway, which is further complemented by a 100-km long road-network that joins up with the National Highway-54 at Lawngtlai, in Mizoram. This project also includes the option of a 539 km shipping-lane between the ports of Kolkata and Sittwe. The initiative, which was conceptualised through a 'Framework Agreement' in 2008, and also covers a 'Special Economic Zone' (SEZ) is progressing well. Hence, the goals of regional connectivity and engagement, which are important facets of New Delhi's "Neighbourhood First" policy, are steadily being realised. The present pace of Indian endeavours promises to keep its neighbourhood intact. Nonetheless, the project also brings a number of dilemmas in its wake. Most importantly, the location of the project is largely in the conflict-torn Rakhine state, within the Arakan region of Myanmar. The insurgency resulting from the ongoing ethnic-cleansing and the exodus of Rohingya Muslims means that the security outlay for the project will be much higher than might have otherwise been the case. The port-related nature of the programme provides room for the naval forces of the both countries in decision-making, in order to balance the security equations.

The containment of maritime crimes is another area where India and Myanmar find convergence. The IOR continues to be a hub of drug trafficking, Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing, and arms smuggling. The North-East (NE) of India has descended into a volatile and vulnerable continuum of Low-Intensity Conflicts. Myanmar has invariably been a point of transit for these drug traffickers and arms smugglers, who then feed into the insurgency-intensive economy of the NE, from the 'Golden Triangle'. Political and economic destabilisation within India's NE is directly proportional to instability in Myanmar. Therefore, given the desired regional security architecture, a stable Myanmar, as also its borderlands, is imperative for both New Delhi and Naypyidaw. Both neighbours can jointly address these common threats and work towards greater coordination in terms of information-sharing and higher degrees of security-cooperation, by unearthing the alternatives in counter-strategies, particularly, on the maritime front.

IUU fishing, too, is a major cause of degradation of the maritime environment and the deterioration of the economies of the BoB littorals. Drawing a requisite contour at the bilateral level in order to strengthen the maritime law enforcement is a need of the hour. A joint strategy would be an add-on to the greater schema in stopping unhealthy ocean practices and in reviving the ocean to a point of stability. The serious depletion of fish in the BoB contributes to a significant imbalance in livelihood and hence degrades the security of all of the Bay's constituent littoral States. The continuing menace of illegal fishing, especially by foreign trawlers from Taiwan, calls for better coordination among BoB littorals.

It would be unwise for India to underestimate the galloping interests of China in Myanmar even within structures such as the BCIM, which are designed to promote shared interests. Apparently, New Delhi is constantly exploring options to deter the Chinese in what New Delhi considers to be its own backwater. The Act East Policy helps in the generation of investment in non-military and diplomatic capital with which New Delhi seeks to outweigh China in terms of strategic balance in SE Asia. On the other hand, Chinese investments, particularly in the deep-sea port at Kyaukpyu, in Myanmar, are of great geopolitical significance, in that it is an important component of the much-vaunted Maritime Silk Road (MSR). China's decision to invest in Kyaukpyu is viewed as a part of a larger picture in terms of Beijing's effort to resolve the 'Malacca Dilemma'.

Finally, Beijing's port-led development initiatives in Myanmar may also result in enhanced Chinese naval presence in that country, especially over the long run. Such an event would bring the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) much closer to India's own naval bases on its East coast as also in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where India's only tri-service command is headquartered. If India wishes to counter this, it needs to tilt Naypyidaw's disposition in favour of New Delhi. The China factor also drives Indian endeavours that seek to broadening cooperation with countries such as Japan, which shares New Delhi's interests in a stable Myanmar free from undue Chinese influence. Averting Chinese threats in the IOR requires the adoption and sustenance of a neighbour-friendly approach by the Indian establishment, on both, the military and economic fronts. The fact that the maritime domain offers the greatest potential in this regard bears little elaboration.

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Notes and References

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