

The Evolution of Indian Maritime Diplomacy: From a Zone of Peace to Growing Strategic Friendships.

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ABSTRACT

The following article is an evaluation of India's Maritime Strategy from exalted morality to pragmatism with the introduction of 'Act East' policy through the North-East, introduced by the incumbent Government of India, under the leadership of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. The essay is an assessment of the opportunities and challenges posed by the 'Act East' policy through the North-East. This article elucidates two central components of India's evolving maritime strategy- Utilitarian Bilateralism and Selective Plurilateralism. As India disproportionately strengthens its naval relations with the United States, Australia and Japan, a clear emphasis on a shift towards maritime Utilitarianism and Selective Plurilateralism is evidently visible. Subsequently, having assessed the opportunities and security challenges in the region, it identifies the Andaman & Nicobar Islands as a complementary medium to advance its national interests. Moreover, amid the ongoing conflict with China, it would be desirable and advantageous for New Delhi, to consider more than one form of recourse to pursue its foreign policy. The 'Act East' policy through the North-East, provides greater physical connectivity with Southeast Asia extending up to East Asia and consequently, bolsters India's foreign ties with the regional member countries. On the other hand, pursuing the policy through the Andaman & Nicobar Islands provides New Delhi, an opportunity to reconsolidate its maritime influence and footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), in response to the augmenting presence of the Chinese in the region.

Keywords: Indian Maritime Strategy, Maritime Diplomacy, Utilitarian Bilateralism, Selective Plurilateralism, Act East Policy, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and North-Eastern India.

Introduction

Geopolitical trends in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) have distinctive yet challenging undertakings. For decades, political commentators have struggled with defining the maritime boundaries of the IOR, despite its growing importance. This challenge is partly credited to the very conceptualization of the region. Is it an economic thoroughfare, described by trade and cooperation, or is the geo-strategic competition that accentuates the growing concerns of resource vulnerability that further impairs the preceding security dilemma in the region?

In this context, India has, lately, endured consistency in its conceptualization of the mounting importance of the Indian Ocean - a region beyond its narrow geographical lens, is viewed holistically with a potential rise of great power status. Despite the historical

underpinnings of maritime connectivity and informal diplomacy, India's maritime geo-strategic initiatives are a relatively recent phenomenon.

This article elucidates two central components of India's evolving maritime strategy- utilitarian bilateralism and selective plurilateralism. Utilitarian bilateralism in Indian maritime diplomatic attitude is expressed through New Delhi's strong emphasis in pursuing bilateral naval diplomacy with 19 countries, mainly the US, Japan, France, South Korea, Australia, and the ASEAN States to enhance their capacity building measures and undertake developments in new areas of technology, logistics, exercises, and information sharing. Additionally, India's selectivity in its plurilateral exercises and diplomacy through IBSAMAR (with Brazil and South Africa), MALABAR (with Australia, Japan, and the U.S), MILAN (with Southeast Asia), and newfound emphasis on the growing construct of engagements through the Quad architecture, thus strategically indicates its steadfast efforts towards mitigating and deterring the expanding Chinese influence in the IOR. As for the Chinese, the IOR is central to their ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹

Furthering, this article is divided into four parts. Firstly, it examines the evolution of Indian maritime strategy in the post-colonial era, which was deep-rooted in exclusionary propriety and the rhetoric of non-alignment. Secondly, it charts India's gradual shift from a reflective embattlement towards India's new self-confidence of inclusivity. An array of factors has contributed to this shift in maritime attitudes with the emergence of favourable geopolitical conditions, thus providing India with an opportunity - 'Maritime Peace Dividend'- enduring India's growing capabilities power projections and employ soft power to further integrate the region under India's sphere of influence. The following section highlights the range of obstacles that undermine New Delhi's attempts at coordinated strategies of collective actions to enhance its prime integrative powers in the IOR. The final section explores maritime opportunities under the evolving strategic environs, thus compelling India to adopt cohesive bilateral and plurilateral in maritime diplomacy in pursuant of common goals of safety, security, peace, and prosperity.

Exalted Morality of the Past: Fixation on Zone of Peace, and Bilateralism

The Lusaka Non-Aligned Conference held in September 1970 was purported for "states to recognize and respect the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace from which the great power rivalries and competitions, as well as bases conceived, are excluded".² Enthusiastically, India spearheaded this initiative with support from other states such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The following year, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution on 16 December 1971 to declare and recognise the Indian Ocean as 'for all time a zone for peace'.³

Throughout this post-colonial era, India's strategic focus was situated over land borders while disregarding the importance of maritime security, primarily due to the frequent conflicts emerging from China and Pakistan.⁴ Many analysts have accounted for New Delhi's imprudent fixation over the mainland borders as a response to the strategic

circumstances and complex path dependencies.⁵ The empirical data following the decades after independence indicates the severe underfunding of the Indian Navy.

*“In principle, the proposal to declare the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as a zone of peace is strikingly apposite. Increasing Chinese presence and the threat of PLA-N bases in the IOR, the growing interests of other major powers (U.S., U.K., Russia, France, and Japan) in the region, and the many Chinese infrastructure projects in the region, create an imperative for India to actively limit the military maritime activity of external powers in the region. But attempting to do so through the IOZOP route will ensure that while no military activity is ever practically curtailed, Indian influence and credibility in the region will be severely eroded”.*⁶

Confronted with new realities of material weakness and the growing presence of strong militaries in the region, India resorted to a tactic generally employed by smaller countries to appeal to the ‘Morality.’ India’s eagerness to embrace the idea of ‘the zone of peace’ can be analysed on a similar light of former Yugoslavian President Josip Tito, to propose the Mediterranean as a ‘sea of peace’.⁷ Both the nations, desirous of maintaining a degree of strategic flexibility in a constantly intensifying bipolarity, attempted to use Morality to preserve a modicum of autonomy while evading the great power rivalry. The December 1971 War exposed the Indian Navy to severe attacks.⁸ Despite the victory, new vulnerabilities from state and non-state actors, discussions on the overall security, prosperity, and naval integration to India’s grand strategic vision, re-emerged over the last few decades.⁹ However, the gradual spill over of the Sino-US rivalry into the IOR drew many analysts’ attention to contemplate the renewed strategic importance of the region.¹⁰

Former, US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski has notably observed that ‘the arc of crisis stretched along from the shores of the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean’ with severe fragility in political, social, and maritime institutions fissures, constitute the gaps in the security infrastructure of the state.¹¹ Subsequently, a dire warning for a coherent strategy led to the reactive nature of India’s new maritime developments in the region. Despite the rapid advancement in naval technologies, Indian’s maritime prowess failed to translate into effective naval diplomacy during the Cold War era.

However, in the recent past, India has held bilateral missions, promoting interoperability, security, and trade activities in the region with significant number of countries including the Maldives and Sri Lanka in the neighbourhood, member states of the ASEAN, the Middle East and with a few European navies, as well. Bilateralism under the SAGAR initiative (Security and Growth for all in the region), has expanded the utilitarian spheres of naval diplomacy with exercises such as Varuna with France, Konkan with British Royal Navy, INDRA with Russia, SIMEX with Singapore, and JIMEX with Japanese Navy, thus contributing to enhanced trust and cooperation.¹² Joint-Manship and deterrence against Chinese aggression and belligerence in the IOR and the Pacific have been the focal point during these exercises.¹³

Shifting to a pragmatist foreign policy has led to both display of strength though subtle projections of power as well as, panic in public discourse due to the loss of neutrality in India’s foreign policy disposition, as a result of its simultaneous multilateral engagements with new emerging power rivalries in the region.¹⁴

Strategic Shift in India's Maritime Engagement Policy - Towards Selective Pluralism

The end of the Cold War brought radical shifts in India's maritime policy. The collapse of the erstwhile partner, the Soviet Union, made Indian policy-makers pragmatist in their approach to international issues. This ideological shift represented India's departure from the Nehruvian non-alignment and appealed to morality to its substantive manifestations to engage strategically and economically with various nations.¹⁵ The Indian Navy's Maritime Doctrine of 2004 and 2009 reiterates the importance of the Navy's role as the ultimate guarantor of economic growth, virtuously upholding freedom of navigations of seas and ensuring the safety of sea-lanes of communications of the region.¹⁶

Scilicet, India has been proactive in its desire to shape multilateral discourse concerning the Law of the Seas. India ratified the UNCLOS in 1995 and is deeply involved in various maritime organizations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), International Seabed Authority (ISA), and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982)).¹⁷ As India realized the importance of Indian Ocean, Act East Policy pursued through diplomacy both, bilateral and multilateral, thus securing their vital economic and security interests in the region. IOR is an emergent 'centre stage' and 'a crucial theatre for global strategic interest for all militaries, regionally and globally'.¹⁸ Multilateral structures in the IOR namely the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) in conjunction with external balancing measures of multilateral maritime exercises such as Exercise MILAN and Exercise MALABAR, collectively display a naval culture of common interests, challenges, and objectives.¹⁹ However, a vacuum has emerged with the growing Chinese hegemonic interest, in response to such changes, Dr Jaishankar says,

"Multilateralism has fallen short and bilateral delivery is not what it used to be. The world is moving towards multipolarity, rebalancing & plurilateralism. Shared values and comforts create new combinations. Will not fall for mind games. India-France-Australia: From maritime security to blue economy; HADR to emerging technologies; resilient supply chains to counterterrorism; sustainability to connectivity. And to sports and education. Coming together for global, regional & national benefit".²⁰

Many scholars continue to deliberate whether India has a definable grand strategy, yet there is growing consensus upon the notion that sustained economic growth supersedes the strategic priorities. The Indian Ocean is pivotally located in the strategic crossroads of global trade, connecting several international economies, promoting convergent interests. Thus, furthering on the same agenda, India's primary focus lies in maintaining and upholding an open economic order though securing supply chains, ensuring sea lane communications, and vital intelligence sharing to maintain peace and security of the ocean.²¹ Leveraging the Indian Navy as an instrument for economic growth, by virtue of its constabulary role in protecting the critical sea lanes of communication in the IOR, combating piracy, tapping seabed resources and more importantly safeguarding the country's offshore energy

installations, it however, remains a ‘Cinderella Service’^{1 22} accounting for 15 percent of the defence budget. Undeterred by the vicissitudes in the Navy’s budget, the latest data of 2021-2022 indicates a static 15 percent allocation of India’s defence budget towards naval operations, modernizations, and maritime security.²³

Despite the navy being significantly underfunded, India seeks to expand its regional influence in the IOR as a Net Security Provider.²⁴ This is further demonstrated in India’s eagerness to accomplish unilateral actions such as deploying ships to the Gulf of Aden, escorting US ships through the Malacca Straits, and deploying vessels to Colombo for security against LTTE, under the UNSC Resolutions and Combined Multinational Task Forces. In its efforts to ensure freedom of navigation and safety of sea-lane communications, New Delhi has increasingly engaged in naval cooperation, despite remaining wary of joining any regional groupings with rotational command structures, thus limiting India’s operational autonomy.²⁵ Nevertheless, a subtle amalgam of economic and ideological underpinnings has shaped Indian Maritime Doctrine since the end of the Cold War.

Since 2014, the Indian administration under PM Narendra Modi, has revisited the ‘Look East Policy’ and rebranded it as the ‘Act East Policy’. This policy shift aims to bring a cohesive structure to India’s foreign policy, simultaneously accomplishing the national goals notably in the North-eastern region of India. This region has been a continual challenge for India, given its landlocked geography, history of insurgencies (aided externally by China and supported internally by numerous separatist groups), and the overall inadequacy of infrastructure has hindered the region’s development.²⁶ India is actively seeking to achieve profound economic and political goals through extensive linkages connecting the two regions, namely- Indian Subcontinent and the Southeast Asian region.

Origin of the ‘Act East’ Policy

In an endeavour to advance economic and security cooperation in the IOR, as well as to foster and extend cultural ties with all the Indo-Pacific countries through uninterrupted engagements at various bilateral, regional and multilateral levels, New Delhi has promoted the ‘Act East Policy’. This diplomatic effort is intended to exalt the prevailing bilateral relations and transform them into a comprehensive strategic partnership. Likewise, it also strives to increase the degree of engagement between the North-eastern states of India with its Southeast Asian neighbours through an enhanced physical connectivity and infrastructural development, by air, railway and road. The Indian government has given precedence to the North-eastern states as a ‘gateway’ to carry out the ‘Act East’ policy due to its physical proximity with the ASEAN member countries, strengthening its bilateral relations through cultural and people-to-people contact. In regard to issues of strategic affairs, there has been an increasing concurrence of cooperation to combat terrorism and to promote maritime security in conjunction with the international laws and regulations.²⁷

In the face of China’s truculent disposition and its growing regional and global ambitions, the ‘Act East’ policy could be regarded as one of the country’s most pivotal regional

1 Cinderella Service refers to a person or an organization with deficient or denied funding.

foreign policies that acts as a countervailing measure against the Chinese expansionist approach in the Indo-Pacific - an extension of its erstwhile 'Look East' policy introduced post-Cold War 1991, by the then incumbent Indian Prime Minister, Dr P.V Narasimha Rao. The 'Look East' policy was enacted in a bid to reinvigorate India's economy, under the initiative of the economic liberalisation programme to abate the over-dependence of trade, on the West.²⁸ In doing so, it redirected India's primary focus from the West to the resurging East. The key objective was to forge a strong economic and political cooperation and to integrate exclusively with the Southeast Asian nations. This move proved to be a game changer for the Indian economy in many ways, resulting in an upsurge of Indian exports to Southeast and East Asia at 14.7% annually between 1990-2013. Apart from this, India had signed numerous Free Trade Agreements with the Southeast Asian economies as well. Over and above, the economic reformation paid significant dividends to the national treasury and laid the cornerstone for trade integration between Indian and the ASEAN up until 2014.

Although the 'Act East' policy is an evolutionary continuation of the erstwhile 'Look East' policy, its *raison d'être* is entirely different.²⁹ Apart from their respective objectives which depart from the same point, the two policies diverge in terms of their overall impact, geographic entourage, political and economic outreach, and strategic outcomes. The following chart features a summation of the quintessential characteristics that accentuate the differences between the two policies.

Table: 1

'Look East' Policy (1991)	'Act East' Policy (2014) <i>(Act East Policy of India, Launched in 2014- A Comprehensive Overview, 2021)</i>
Objective: To enhance economic cooperation exclusively with the ASEAN members.	Objective: To enhance economic, political and strategic cooperation beyond the ASEAN architecture to all the Indo-Pacific member countries. To build physical infrastructure for greater connectivity with ASEAN members through the Northeast region of India.
Purpose: To reduce its economic dependence on the West, namely the Soviet Union after its fall, and to find an alternative in the East and Southeast Asian economies.	Purpose: To forge stronger strategic bilateral relations with the Indo-Pacific member countries to offset China's increasing influence and footprint in the Indian Ocean region and in the South China Sea.
Lack of defence cooperation.	Greater thrust on defence cooperation.
The Northeast was overlooked while drawing out the plans to forge deeper ties with the Eastern neighbours.	The development of the Northeast is given preponderance in the strengthening of ties with East and Southeast Asia.
Inefficient use of Track-III diplomacy for fostering bilateral relations.	Commissioning all aspects of Track-III diplomatic tools to bolster relations with the member countries.
India did not aid in the development of infrastructure in the neighbouring countries.	India has collaborated with Japan to assist in the construction of infrastructure in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka

Opportunities and Challenges of the Infrastructure Project in the Northeast

The Government of India has paid special heed to the infrastructural development in this region. Several cardinal projects financed by the Central Government have been undertaken to provide impetus to the ‘Act East’ policy.³⁰ Despite all the best efforts the Kaladan Multi-Modal project that oversees the infrastructural development in the Northeast, has encountered several roadblocks that have stalled and delayed the much-needed infrastructure to physically integrate the Northeast with the ASEAN neighbourhood. The complexities and the challenges of the landscape include the topography, monsoon, landslides, land compensation arrangements and most importantly insurgency. All these factors have affected and arrested the momentum of the project.³¹

The Kaladan project is configured to connect East and Northeast of India with Myanmar, via sea connectivity from Kolkata to Sittwe and northwards to Mizoram through Myanmar. This project is estimated to open and strengthen economic and strategic interaction between the two countries, while reducing the physical distance between Kolkata and Sittwe by almost 1328km. Furthermore, the Indian Government has identified various land ports, waterways, and integrated check posts all along the region as trade rivets to the ASEAN. Moreh in Manipur and Akhaura in Agartala are a major source of land-port based trade junctions. The government has confirmed that the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway will serve as the main trade and tourism artery in the future, for the region. As far as the physical infrastructure is concerned, the transnational highway is in good condition except for a 120 km long Kalewa-Yagyi stretch, which is currently being upgraded to a two-lane highway by the Indian Government and this project is set to be completed by 2021.³²

Figure: 1 Map: Quora



Tripura has gained the attention from institutional investors as a potential hub of logistics for the Northeast, on account of a project funded by the Government that will connect Sabroom, the southern-most tip of Tripura to the Chittagong Port in Bangladesh, 64kms away from each other.³³ Hence, welding the Northeast to the Indian Ocean and providing new trade arbitrage opportunities. Upon completion of the project, it will advance the prospective of Tripura as a state, to compete in a two-way trade with Kolkata.

The Central Government is driving towards an 'all-round development' of the region through airways, highways and railways, which would provide a multi-mode connectivity to South-East Asia. As a result, several highway and railway projects are underway. The Civil Aviation Ministry is expanding the intra-regional air connectivity through the UDAN Scheme. In the coming months, Guwahati airport is going to introduce six flights to the ASEAN region, extending its international outreach. The Civil Aviation ministry in November 2019 had launched the 4th phase of UDAN with a particular emphasis on the Northeast region, granting 78 new routes in conjunction with the foreign policy.³⁴

Security Threats Prevailing in the Northeast and Adjacent Neighbourhood

The Northeast region of India was neglected for far too long and as a result, has experienced a lacuna of infrastructural development leading towards poor regional connectivity since independence. With the advent of the 'Act East' initiative, this region is witnessing a rapid make-over of infrastructural development which could trigger greater thrust of movement not only within the country but internationally as well.³⁵ This region offers many opportunities for investment in development of various sectors; however, it is crippled by a large number of security challenges which hinder in manifesting its potential.

Among the many security concerns, the burgeoning of contraband items such as narcotics and illegal arms trade is most prevalent. Considering that the Northeast is adjacent to the 'Golden Triangle' an epicentre of heroin-based substance trade, contrabands are routed through and distributed all over the region.³⁶ Porous borders, mountainous terrains, extensive vegetation and same ethnicity living on either side of the boundary, render the complex manning and controlling the influx of movement of the contrabands across the borders all the more arduous. Coupled with these challenges, there persists one more deep-rooted threat of insurgency.³⁷

Insurgency has been prevalent in this region for several decades now, harming and halting the daily routine of its people, while suspending the growth and development of the states. Nonetheless, a concerted effort between the Union Government and the Northeast State Governments has seen to the abatement of insurgency, while ensuring a considerable stable functioning of the state. As it stands, the region is largely free of terror and enjoys a peaceful ambience as never before. Nevertheless, several Indian insurgency groups have taken refuge across the border; and it is through constant monitoring and vigilance by the Indian security agencies that their influence and morale has waned. On this account, in a recent military development on 26 December 2020 over 50 National

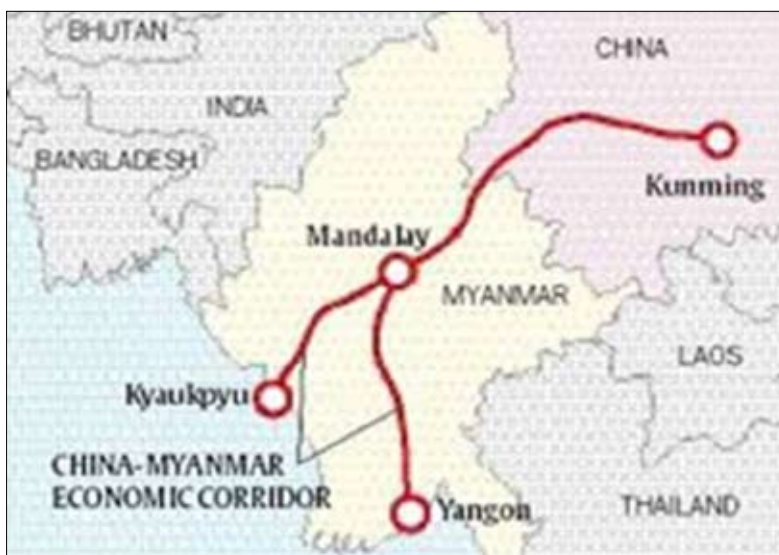
Socialist Council of Nagaland, Khaplang Yung Aung (NSCS)(K-YA), Naga insurgents had surrendered to the Indian Army due to the relentless military counter-insurgency operations on the India-Myanmar Border.³⁸ Moreover, the regular exchange of military intelligence between the Indian Army and the Myanmar Army has led to the elimination of the insurgent top leadership, resulting in the surrender of over 50 cadres. Despite such heavy military deployment, surveillance and coordinated military operations along the borders, there have been occasions of successful attacks on the Indian security forces. Apart from insurgency, militancy too has harried and threatened the development and completion of the Kaladan project.

China's Abetting Insurgency in Myanmar to Derail the Kaladan Project

Adding fuel to the fire, the Chinese have been sneaking in arms and ammunition to equip various terror outfits across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Several reports have stated that China has been funding seven terror groups including the 'Arakan Army' (AA) and the 'United Wa State Army' (UWSA) in Myanmar to target the Kaladan project and to protect China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Kyauphyu, a deep seaport that provides China, access to the Bay of Bengal.³⁹ To corroborate Chinese involvement with the terror outfits in Myanmar, the Thai security officials had intercepted a large weapon consignment of Chinese made weapons near the Thailand- Myanmar border, besides arresting a few. Following the interrogation, it came to light that the AA had requisitioned for the arms from China. It was also revealed that there is a Sino-Pakistan axis that is responsible for sponsoring various militant organisations in Myanmar to target the Kaladan project.⁴⁰

The Kaladan project poses a direct competition to the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor project (CMEC) under the aegis of the BRI. The CMEC proposes to connect China's southern province of Yunnan with Myanmar's city of Mandalay and to further extend it southwards to Yangon and southwest to Kyaukpyu. From the strategic perspective, China perceives Myanmar as a crucial partner for the development of the CMEC, which includes the construction of the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone and the building of a deep-water port in Kyaukpyu, in the state of Rakhine.⁴¹ Suppose Beijing realises its ambitious project, it will not only make inroads into the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean but will place itself within striking distance of the Indian shores.

However, much to Beijing's displeasure, the CMEC has failed to gather much momentum and fair wind since its announcement. The reason being that critics from across various quarters, including the public in Myanmar, have raised their concerns over the fear of the country running into the Chinese debt-trap much like, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Drawing lessons from their former's experiences, the Myanmar military has swayed its government to withdraw and cancel several of its joint-venture projects with China along the CMEC and effectively persuaded to cut-back the initial estimate of the Kyaukpyu port project from \$7.5 billion to \$1.3 billion, while increasing its own financial share from 15% to 30%.⁴² By taking such bold measures, Myanmar has taken the wind out of China's sails limiting the latter's economic verve in the country.

Figure: 2. Map: Twitter.com

In contrast, India and Myanmar are prepared to operationalise the Sittwe port by the first quarter of 2021 under the Kaladan initiative, resulting in the free flow of goods and an increase in trade activities between the two nations. If the Kaladan project prevails, it may render the CMEC ineffective and redundant to certain extent, leaving China in the lurch. The only way CMEC could remain relevant and in contention is if the Kaladan project fails. Therefore, China is using every possible means to destabilise and deter the project from succeeding, by furtively abetting insurgency in Myanmar.

Against these complex diverse security challenges, one begins to ponder whether the Northeast is adequately safe, to executive an economic foreign policy of trade and commerce of such magnitude through these corridors. However, until the security architecture in the region is rendered fool-proof, one reckons that there will be no exponential gain in commercial and trade activities despite the infrastructural layout, as every business enterprise desires to operate in a secure environment. Nonetheless, despite these challenges India should continue to persist with its interests in the region, as it would not only provide employment and economic opportunities for all, ergo help abate insurgency and militancy in due course, but also offers an opportunity for the country to reinforce its ties with ASEAN, in the wake of Chinese belligerence and military adventurism. Under these treacherous circumstances, is there a better alternative for India to complement and engage its 'Act East' policy?

Andaman and Nicobar Islands an Opportunity

Despite the absence of a coherent National Security Doctrine, evaluating by the numerous statements issued by both the governments and the strategic community in India, it is

evident that India has a relatively more comprehensible and planned vision of its past, present, and future roles in the IOR. New Delhi strategically upholds the value of maritime diplomacy as a means to bolster perceptions of India as a compassionate and responsible power by a) Enhancing the global prestige by being viewed as a responsible stakeholder and as a custodian of the global commons, and b) Positively shaping the maritime security environment by emerging as an integrative power in an essentially disintegrated region.⁴³

India's eagerness to embrace the political use of maritime power is not a new phenomenon. It is, rather an age-old notion that states which direct their power and developments, seawards, will appear less threatening and hostile to the neighbors, thus shape favourable perceptions than those that are wed into the continental, geo-political game of domination.⁴⁴ Despite the wide array of political regimes ranging from dysfunctional democracy to crawling authoritarianism, the Indian Navy has repeatedly suggested that the 'small mobile pieces of national sovereignty are also floating vessels promoting the ideals of democracy'.⁴⁵ New Delhi's continual efforts to maintain its image as a vibrant democracy reflects on their power projections abroad. The Indian maritime doctrines recurrently elucidate the strategic importance of upholding its primary and secondary spheres of maritime interests. Hence, coherently differentiating the same, India maintains its primary maritime zone covering the Persian Gulf, and secondary zones stretching until the Red and South China Seas.⁴⁶

Maritime diplomacy is considered as an instrument to shape India's strategic environment, as an integrative power in the region, which is plagued with several challenges, ranging from climate change, piracy, natural disasters, and governmental deficits. However, India's ambitions are to foster stability in the region through a two-pronged strategy – firstly to discharge the increasing number of custodial duties, and secondly, to implement a 'neo-Nixonian' approach of building regional capacity by assisting the weaker states to help themselves.⁴⁷

External powers with strategic ambitions in the IOR have impeded India's determination of becoming an integrative power - notably China's growing economic presence in the region has diluted India's bid to gain control and influence over the smaller archipelagic and littoral states. Due to such foreign interference, India will remain to be perceived as a resident power instead of an indispensable power.⁴⁸

Against this backdrop, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands offer a potential strategic sphere of influence, economically and militarily. The Great Nicobar Island is situated at the entrance of the Strait of Malacca. India's growing bilateral relationship with the Eastern countries is standing in good stead and renders an opportunity for an increasing strategic depth into the Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁹

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands offer a tremendous vantage point over the Strait of Malacca, a sea lane of communication crucial and essential for movement of oil trade from the Gulf up to the South China Sea, East China Sea and the Pacific. Secondly, it houses economic opportunities through forms of tourism, fisheries, forests and facilitates and adds approximately 30% of additional Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) which would benefit India in undersea mining and exploration activities for tapping oil and gas reserves.

Figure: 3. Map: BirdForum

Strategic Importance of Andaman & Nicobar Islands

In view of the current security challenges prevailing in the Northeast, and the rapid expansion of Chinese naval presence in the IOR over the last decade, it is imperative for India to reassess its maritime strategy in regard to the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Despite China's ongoing aggression on land and sea, the Indian Maritime Doctrines have merely mentioned China in passing as references to 'some nations attempting to gain a strategic toehold in the Indian Ocean Rim,' or as 'attempts by China to encircle India strategically'.⁵⁰ India remains cognizant of China's growing presence and influence in the IOR; despite the immediate concern, it considers China, as a long-term strategic challenge for India's maritime security.⁵¹

In this relatively benign threat environment, India's policy is directed towards soft power projection. Indian Maritime Doctrine since 2004 has repeatedly defined the Navy as an effective instrument of foreign policy by generating goodwill through Maritime Diplomacy.⁵² By participating in disaster relief programs and assisting in humanitarian crises, India has successfully engaged in many bilateral and multilateral naval exercises with regional and foreign powers. MILAN exercises between India and the nations of Southeast Asia, IBSAMAR exercises with active participation from India, Brazil, and South Africa are India's conscious efforts to turn towards Maritime Plurilateralism.⁵³

Considering the strategic geographical layout of the Islands and the economic objective of India's 'Act East' policy, it would be plausible indeed, to suggest that these Islands constitute a favourable and sustainable disposition to thwart China's ambitions

in the region. Suppose adequate importance is accorded to the archipelago and there is a comprehensive strategic plan rolled out, it could alter the course of India's destiny in the coming years.⁵⁴ The Chinese leadership has taken cognisance of the importance of controlling the Strait of Malacca and comprehends that whosoever controls the Strait will have a leverage, thereby choking China's supply line.⁵⁵ According to Sithara Fernando, 'China's most important maritime concerns in its relations with South Asia are oceanic trade transit points for western China, the sea lanes connecting the Straits of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca which carry its energy imports'.⁵⁶ Reinforcing this view, Che Lin states that 'China's National Security and peaceful development demand that the Indian Ocean be incorporated into the national security strategy because China's trade, investment, energy, religion, territory and territorial seas are intimately linked to Indian Ocean'.⁵⁷ Eighty percent of China's oil supply is shipped from the Gulf, hence, China's conundrum with the Strait of Malacca is real. Hence, China has recalibrated its national strategy by reorienting its focus towards the Indian Ocean and ergo modernising and developing its Navy at neck-breaking speed, to deter any prospective impediments to its national interests.

China's Predicament: India's Opportunity

The induction of the BRI is a contingency plan to mitigate its over-dependence on maritime trade and alleviate the burden of the Strait of Malacca. If India could feed on this opportunity and reorient its strategy towards the Andaman Islands, it could well offer India the leverage that it requires to negotiate over the disputed territorial issues on the mainland, along the Line of Actual Control, from a position of strength. And since historically, China has always conformed to the attributes of strength and power and respected a country that speaks from this position, it is necessary for India to acquire such a leverage.

The Strait of Malacca is certainly China's dilemma which India must capitalise on, if it seeks to gain any sort of strategic mileage over China in the IOR. Moreover, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands provide significant surveillance and monitoring platforms to the Indian Navy.⁵⁸ Therefore, it is imperative for New Delhi to utilise its inherent maritime strategic assets and use their advantages to outplay the Chinese in the IOR. To achieve its objective, New Delhi should assign a definite role for the Islands in its maritime domain, as this could help achieve far greater deterrence through staging and power projection in the Indian Ocean and eastward. Additionally, the Islands also provide excellent opportunities to deepen India's maritime partnerships, plurilateral military engagements with the Quad members and other Asia-Pacific states to countervail the Chinese aggression.

Security Challenges

About one third of India's EEZ is around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands but unfortunately, due to its physical structural deficiencies and lack of maritime capabilities,

the Indian Coast Guard is unable to conduct efficient and proper surveillance in the region. In the last decade, the Coastguard along with the Fishing Federation and the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission have received numerous complaints of foreign vessels fishing illegally in Indian waters. A survey study undertaken by the University of British Columbia stated that India incurs a significant loss of an estimate of US \$150 million to \$200 million a year, due to illegal fishing in India's EEZ, while the fisheries contribute to 2 percent of India's total GDP.⁵⁹

Apart from the illegal exploitation of marine resources by foreign agents, a greater security threat prevails in the Islands. Several reports have claimed that the Andaman & Nicobar Islands are being used as a safe haven by anti-nationals and terror outfits. Among these groups were the erstwhile banned outfit of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who treated these Islands as an arms depot, while operating freely on these Islands.⁶⁰ A lack of human resource in the Coast Guard, inadequate security measures and a want of adequate state of art surveillance machinery have facilitated the non-state actors to exploit the Islands for their own interests. Reports suggest that foreigners from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, have settled permanently in the Andaman Islands using fake Indian Ration Cards as their identification cards. According to some unofficial reports around 50,000 foreigners have already settled in the archipelago.⁶¹

To monitor and safeguard activities in 572 islands around the archipelago against poachers, pirates and non-state actors is certainly a herculean task which could prove to be economically expensive too. Therefore, it is crucial for the Government to design a provident and functional strategy using tourism to parry the various prevailing threats in the region. The development of tourism could help render continuous surveillance of multiple strategic islands round the clock, with the help of the locals and the staff of the tourism industry. Selected individuals could be trained by the security agencies for gathering intelligence in addition to their regular occupations. In this manner, tourism and security compounded together can help achieve a secure environment in the archipelago.⁶²

If New Delhi continues to overlook the illegal activities festering on the Islands and fails to address its sovereign control and influence to redress the situation soon enough, there is a fair possibility of Chinese exercising control in parts of the IOR as it did in the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, where it instituted a civilian Governor in the garrison city of Sansha, and hoisted its own flag, to lay its legal claim on the territory. And as a result the Chinese Navy is able to provide requisite protection around these Islands increasing its sphere of influence.⁶³ This is a case of acquiring actual jurisdiction over one's own governed territory.

After all, this assumption may appear alarmist, however, Chinese unpredictability and aggressiveness has revealed persistent assertiveness in their behaviour and claims in the South China, East China, and Indian Ocean Regions. Additionally, India's past experiences with a belligerent China has increased tensions in their relationship, despite continuous diplomatic endeavours. India has been enduring various forms of Chinese aggression and encroachments, time and again. Firstly, upon the un-administered territory of Ladakh in 1962, which is presently under Chinese control. Subsequently the 2013 incursion at Depsang and recently violent clashes at the Galwan Valley in June 2020

expose Chinese expansionist posturing through the ‘nibble and negotiate policy’.⁶⁴ With growing maritime economic interests in the IOR, it would be in New Delhi’s favour to act to seize opportunities by building its strategic maritime strength in the Andaman Islands, as it would enhance India’s maritime footprint in the IOR. Recognizing the need for such renewed strategies and providing adequate funding for the same is the need of the hour in today’s geopolitics. To restore its sphere of influence in the IOR, it is thus, vital that India errs on the side of caution and ensures that none of its sovereign territory is left unmonitored and unguarded. In order to achieve this, it must encourage and stimulate tourism across the archipelago especially in the uninhabited Islands, to curb illegal immigration and settlement, while also combating violent non-state actors from their safe retreats.

Conclusion

In essence, the CMEC project holds immense strategic value for China’s economy and maritime power. Kyaukpyu port provides China an access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, reinforcing its maritime presence around the Indian sub-continent. It is worth noting that China has already instituted two maritime nodes around the Indian peninsular in the form of the Gwadar port and the Hambantota port in Pakistan and Sri Lanka respectively, and if the CMEC is carried out successfully, it would complete the Chinese ‘String of Pearls’ strategy, encircling and arresting India’s influence within the subcontinent. Also, the operationalisation of the CMEC reduces China’s dependence on the Strait of Malacca, subsequently, decreasing its susceptibility of being cut-off by its adversaries in the event of a crisis, and severing India’s leverage.

Suffice to say how crucial CMEC is for China, India must not consider abandoning the Kaladan project, for it serves as deterrence against China’s economic and maritime expansion. More importantly, the Kaladan initiative would help generate institutional investments and spawn Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in the Northeast and provide greater economic and employment opportunities to all in the region. The Government of India could frame a better conducive working environment, to successfully implement the policy. Parallely, it should identify the Andaman & Nicobar Islands as a potential prospect for undertaking the ‘Act East’ policy, complementing the Northeast. The Islands render a strategic military and economic leverage to New Delhi against China’s expansionist policy which the Northeast region does not offer. More so, these Islands share a strategic proximity not only with the ASEAN member countries but also with the Indo-Pacific countries for diverse and renewed maritime partnerships, both in utilitarian bilateral and strategic plurilateral sense. Multi-aligned, multi-directional, multi-layered, and multi-factorial engagements in the maritime domain can help India achieve its goals of Net Security Provider in the region. Additionally, utilising the Islands strategically, could help counter the ‘String of Pearls’ strategy of China.

Lastly, enhancing economic activities on the Islands, could lead to reclaiming its lost maritime control and influence in the Indian Ocean region. Integrating the Andaman &

Nicobar Islands with the Act East policy will render India new options and opportunities to exercise economic and military muscle, as it continues to increase its bilateral partnerships eastward towards the Pacific, as a response to a 'Rising China'. The Islands will contribute to India's assets and will create room for debate on deterrence policies. And finally, it will positively enrich India's efforts in establishing itself as a serious regional actor. It is the need of the hour for India to prioritise and act on this issue, as its foreign policy continues to grow and evolve.

The challenges in the Northeast and in the Andaman Islands are contrasting in nature and therefore their strategic outcomes too. Having said that, the quintessential objective of physical connectivity with the Indo-Pacific countries through land and sea shall be attained, nonetheless. The commonality between the two regions converges on their physical proximity with the ASEAN. The promotion of infrastructural and economic development in both regions would manifest different outcomes and yet, both results would converge towards achieving the Government's aspirations of the 'Act East' policy and help curtail China's growing influence in the region. By engaging both the regions simultaneously as a means to an end, the Government would be reassuring itself of bolstering its ties with ASEAN and East Asia in the midst of Chinese belligerence. The Northeast and the Andaman Islands have distinct challenges and thereby could complement each other by overcoming each other's differences with their respective advantages and strengths. Given the present political climate between India and Beijing, and the Chinese military adventurism along its territorial and maritime frontiers, it would be agreeable for New Delhi to strengthen and safeguard its territorial and maritime interests in synchronisation, while carving renewed bilateral and plurilateral diplomatic ties with its neighbourhood to balance Chinese antagonism.

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