

By Invitation

# Why the Andaman Sea is back in the spotlight

Changing geopolitical dynamics are reviving interest in the waterway and the Bay of Bengal littoral



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As it feels the effects of the mounting tensions – economic, political and military – to its east between the United States and China, it is increasingly worthwhile for South-east Asia to look west, to the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Key countries in the region have begun to take some tentative steps to widen their economic options and mitigate the security risks.

Last week, Singapore, Thailand and India conducted their first trilateral maritime exercise in the Andaman Sea. The exercise was announced by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address to the Shangri-La Dialogue in May last year. But some of the credit for promoting the idea goes to Singapore and its sustained security cooperation with India.

As Singapore expanded the ambit of defence cooperation with India during the last couple of years, its Defence Minister, Dr Ng Eng Hen, highlighted the need for developing a cooperative security framework for the Andaman Sea.

To be sure, there is no gathering crisis in the Andaman Sea. However, given Asean's struggles with maritime tensions in the South China Sea, it would make eminent sense to prevent one in its "ante-chamber", to the west in the Indo-Pacific.

With this idea in mind, India and Singapore agreed to step up their maritime cooperation in the Andaman Sea at the end of 2017.

That framework has now drawn in Thailand that forms the eastern littoral of the sea. There is some hope that the trilateral exercises could eventually be expanded to include Malaysia and Indonesia.

## STRATEGIC WATERWAY

The trilateral exercise is about the renewed strategic significance of the Andaman Sea. As the European expansion into the East began five centuries ago, the waterway quickly became a zone of contestation involving Portugal, the Netherlands, France and Britain. As the control of the Malacca Strait became a key objective for these powers, Britain put its anchor down in Port Blair (in the Andaman island chain) and Penang (in the Malacca Strait) towards the end of the 18th century.

As Britain prevailed over its European rivals in the early 19th century and the East India Company set up the Straits Settlement in Penang, Melaka and Singapore, the Andaman Sea turned into a placid lake. With its strategic significance in decline, the Andaman islands became a large penal colony for political prisoners and criminals from the sub-continent.

The Andaman Sea came back to the centre stage in World War II, when imperial Japan ousted Britain from the Malay Peninsula and occupied the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI). As the Japanese marched north through Burma for an overland ingress into the sub-continent, control of the Andaman islands let Japan launch aerial attacks on peninsular India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Britain needed every ounce of energy mobilised from across the empire to push Japan back and reclaim control of the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. The end of World War II followed by the Cold War turned



the Andaman Sea once again into the backwaters of the Indian Ocean as the theatres of conflict shifted to Central Europe and North-east Asia.

Today, the Andaman Sea is coming back into contention. As China seeks to secure its growing economic interests in the Indian Ocean, the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal are the first waters that it connects with. For an India that is eager to raise its profile in the Pacific, the waters of the Andaman Sea lead it to the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea.

China is stepping up its military engagement with the Bay of Bengal littoral by supplying weapons, including submarine systems, to Bangladesh and Thailand. Chinese submarines are reported to be operating regularly in the Andaman waters. India and the US, in turn, are said to be closely tracking their movement.

On its own, India has agreed to transfer a submarine to Myanmar and is raising the game on military diplomacy in the littoral. Delhi has also moved in recent years to strengthen its naval infrastructure in the ANI chain. If Beijing views the island chain as a potential barrier against its uninhibited access to the Indian Ocean, Delhi sees it as a base from which to defend India's interests as well as project its power into the east.

For Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia, securing the western maritime approaches to the Malacca Strait in the Andaman Sea is as important as the eastern flanks in the South China Sea. None of them wants to be drawn into the great power rivalries. Many of them recognise that China's global maritime role,

including in the Indian Ocean, is both legitimate and inevitable; they also see India's emerging role in the waters east of Malacca in a positive light.

They also note the emergence of the Quad – or the mechanism for quadrilateral security cooperation between the US, Japan, Australia and India. Rather than wait for this rivalry to turn hot, like the US-China contestation in the Western Pacific, Asean has an interest in developing habits of security cooperation and instituting maritime confidence-building measures in the Andaman Sea.

## ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

For South-east Asia, the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal are not only about geopolitics. They are also about economic opportunity. Myanmar is growing at a steady annual pace of 7 per cent; that is now being overshadowed by Bangladesh, which is galloping at more than 8 per cent. While the Indian economy has slowed down, its huge potential to contribute to the long-term growth of South-east Asia endures. There is also the hope that India might finally end its opposition to joining the regional free trade agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

A positive Indian decision on RCEP would transform the commercial dynamics of the Bay of Bengal. While the region is betting on Mr Modi's political will to overcome domestic resistance in India to the RCEP, it is eagerly waiting to see the implementation of the Indian Prime Minister's plans to open up the ANI chain, which runs right down the Bay of Bengal and encloses the Andaman Sea, for

economic development. After independence, India had simply shut down these islands in the name of security, protecting the environment and a small tribal population.

Mr Modi has formally ended the policy of treating this strategic island chain as a "distant outpost". During a visit to the islands last December, he promised to welcome international cooperation in the development of these islands for tourism and sustainable development.

Indonesia has already welcomed this initiative. As part of the shared maritime vision unveiled by Mr Modi and President Joko Widodo in May last year, the two sides are now planning to link the ANI with the nearest Indonesian islands of Aceh and Sumatra. The two sides are discussing the joint development of a port in Sabang in Sumatra.

Jakarta has also mooted the idea of Delhi joining the sub-regional framework for cooperation called the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle. This is a recognition of the natural synergies between India and Asean. The ANI might be Indian territory, but it is physically closer to the Malay Peninsula and the Nusantara. But political distance and economic divergence had trumped physical proximity all these decades.

Meanwhile, China's Belt and Road Initiative as well as Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific are weaving new networks of connectivity in the Bay of Bengal.

Beijing has long dreamt of creating a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor that would link its south-western provinces with the closest body of water, the Bay of Bengal. A twin pipeline system has

been moving oil and natural gas for nearly half a decade from Kyaukpyu island on Myanmar's Arakan coast to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. China has plans to construct a railway line along the same route and build a deep seaport at Kyaukpyu.

Japan, a veteran of infrastructure development in Asia, has built a major port and a special economic zone in the southern coast of Myanmar at Thilawa.

India, too, is contributing to the modernisation of connectivity in Myanmar with the construction of a port at Sittwe, not too far north of Kyaukpyu, and a trilateral highway running through the country between India and Thailand. It is also trying to promote coastal shipping between the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal. India has also sought to revive a moribund regional forum, called the Bimstec, that brought five South Asian states in the eastern sub-continent (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) together with Myanmar and Thailand.

The waters of the Bay of Bengal connected the sub-continent to continental and maritime South-east Asia and China for centuries and played a critical role in the economic globalisation of the region during the 19th and early 20th centuries. But the momentum was lost in the second half of the 20th century as India and its South Asian neighbours as well as Myanmar turned inwards.

## SILVER LININGS

As India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar broke out of their self-imposed isolation in the past couple of decades, the Bay of Bengal littoral has begun to show renewed economic dynamism. What it needs today is a solid framework for regional cooperation that can learn from the positive experiences of Asean.

To be sure, many fear the competitive dynamic between China on the one hand, and India and Japan on the other, in the development of regional connectivity. Realists would see two linings of silver. One is that competition may well produce better financial terms for the development of littoral infrastructure. In the other, all three Asian giants are looking for opportunities to resolve their differences on the promotion of connectivity, and their Asian neighbours must encourage them to move in that direction.

In the arena of geopolitics too, the Bay of Bengal littoral played a key role in shaping the larger outcomes in the Pacific theatre of World War II. Military collaboration involving the US, British India and nationalist China was critical in defeating imperial Japan. As the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea re-emerge as a critical theatre in the 21st century, there is a strong incentive to develop a framework for cooperative security in the littoral. That there are no major maritime territorial disputes between the littoral states should make it a lot easier to build a sub-regional security order in the Bay of Bengal than in the South China Sea.

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