ISAS Working Paper

India's New Geopolitical Paradigm
and Reintegration of the Bay of Bengal

The 'Look East' Policy (LEP) is usually identified as the beginning of an effort by India to build relations with its eastern neighbours lying on the other side of the Bay of Bengal rim. Following the LEP, the Bay of Bengal has been witnessing a process of economic, political and cultural reintegration. Historical analysis, however, reveals that, in the pre-colonial era, the Bay used to be a circular space, interconnected by movements of goods, people and ideas. As a consequence of colonialism, this interconnectedness was altered, a sense of otherness developed among the rim nations, while India consolidated a foreign policy focused on the territorial rather than the maritime dimension of the space. This paper adopts an inter-disciplinary approach (bridging history, international relations and foreign policy analysis) in a reconstruction and reassessment of the transformation of the Bay of Bengal from a unitary to a fragmented space, as well as of India's interaction with the same.

Jayati Bhattacharya and Silvia Tieri[1]

Introduction

On 26 January 2018, India celebrated its Republic Day with the customary parade which takes place every year at the Rajpath in New Delhi, spectacularly exhibiting the country's

---

[1] Dr Jayati Bhattacharya is a Lecturer at the South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be reached at sasjb@nus.edu.sg. Ms Silvia Tieri is a Research Assistant at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at NUS. She can be reached at isasts@nus.edu.sg. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

cultural diversity as well as its growing defence potential. This year's parade was both extraordinary and surprising beyond its vibrancy and magnificence largely due to the number and relevance of the invited guests. Every year the event is graced by a foreign head of state or of government, invited as chief guest: a sign of prosperous relations between Delhi and the hosted country. This year, with a remarkable deviation from the conventional protocol, Prime Minister Narendra Modi received not one but ten heads of the ASEAN states. The countries represented were Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Philippines, Brunei, Laos, and Cambodia. In the highly symbolic language of diplomacy, the gesture had the clear intent of affirming India's commitment in engaging Southeast Asia (SEA), as well as the intention of showcasing itself as a friendly neighbour grown mature and powerful. As a consequence, the occasion, besides memorialising the Indian nation becoming a republic after independence following 200 years of colonial rule, also became a celebration of 25 years of India-ASEAN ties which proceeded with renewed vigour in the 1990s and steadily improved over the years. Not without reason New Delhi's decision to invite the ten SEA countries was widely seen by the national and international press as the most assertive statement by India of its 'Act East' policy (AEP).[2] Formulated in 2014 with the aim of expanding to the wider Asia-Pacific region, the AEP goes further than the 'Look East' policy (LEP). The LEP had been launched as a first eastward step by a then isolated India, especially after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, when New Delhi was eager to build ties with its nearest eastern neighbours. Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia and the countries of former Indo-China connected to the subcontinent fluidly through the eastern section of the Indian Ocean: the Bay of Bengal.

The LEP in primis, and then the AEP, gave Southeast Asia an increasingly relevant role within India's economic and security strategy after long years of neglect. Following decades of isolationism from the affairs of the wider region, India started working through bilateral and multilateral channels to raise its level of involvement in the neighbourhood. India's new initiative to integrate into the most immediate Bay of Bengal neighbourhood (with the LEP), and with the "extended neighbourhood"[3] (with the AEP), is regarded as a major shift in the

---

[2]   "India marks 69th Republic Day with grand parade; Asean leaders attend as chief guests." *The Times of India*, January 26, 2018. Accessed April 1, 2018. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com; "ASEAN leaders watch India's national day parade." *China Daily*, January 26, 2018. Accessed April 1, 2018. http://www.chinadailyhk.com; and "In a first, all Asean leaders to attend India's Republic Day." *The Straits Times*, December 14, 2017. Accessed April 1, 2018. http://www.straitstimes.com/.

[3]   The strategic concept of "extended neighbourhood" expands India's potential sphere of influence beyond the traditional limits of the region (South Asia). For an analysis of "extended neighbourhood" see: David Scott,

country's geopolitical paradigm.[4] "Looking east" and "integration" actually brought about revolutionary changes in the foreign policy orientations of post-independence India. In fact, if the time frame of reference is expanded to include colonial and pre-colonial eras, it may be argued that LEP/AEP resulted in a return to the past rather than a brand new endeavour. As a matter of fact, India – today the core of "South Asia" – and the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal rim – which are now part of "Southeast Asia" – existed as a highly integrated and dynamic space for centuries. Going back in history, the "South vs Southeast" demarcation, which divides the Bay of Bengal into two separate regions, vanishes. In the past, it was a highly integrated area: a unitary space, interconnected by cultural cross-pollination, trade and migratory flows circulating across the Bay.

How did the Bay of Bengal go from being an integrated space, with India at its centre, to a separated space, ignored by India for most of its existence as an independent nation? And what brought India in the early 1990s to re-focus its attention on the Bay, to overcome the previous separation and seek to renew old ties?
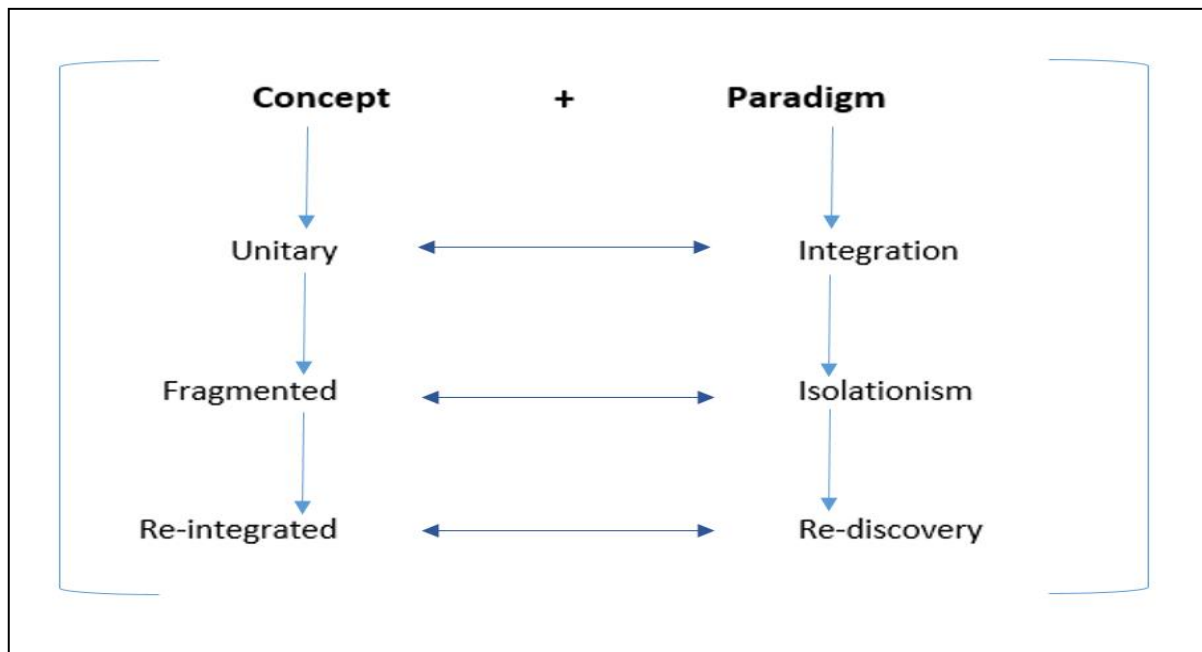
This paper seeks to investigate the evolution of the relationship between India and the Bay. The relationship seems to have been shaped through three different paradigms: (1) *integration*, (2) *isolationism*, and (3) *rediscovery*. While India's position within the Bay fluctuates in each of these phases in terms of economic ties, mobility and connectivity, cultural exchange or ideological affinity, political association, and diplomatic activism, at the same time the Bay's characterisation fluctuates within the Indian *weltanschauung*[5]. Each phase corresponds to a peculiar conceptualisation of the Bay, as seen through Indian eyes – (i) a *unitary* space, (ii) a *fragmented* space, and (iii) a (*potentially*) *re-integrated* space.

"India's "extended neighborhood" concept: power projection for a rising power." *India Review* 8, no. 2 (2009): 107-143.

[4]   For an analysis of India's foreign policy turn see: Raja. C. Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005.

[5]   Originally a German term formed by the words "welt" (world) and "Anschauung" (perception, view), Weltanschauung is widely used in English as well across disciplines to design "a general world view; an overarching philosophy". From: Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2008, www.oxfordreference.com.

Figure1: Political and Spatial Imagination of the Bay

Source: Authors' contribution.

In the pre-colonial as well as in the colonial period, India was at the centre of a global network of vibrant ports and trade routes through which goods, people, religions, cultures and ideas travelled across the whole region. Dependence on the monsoon winds in the earlier phase enabled the trading diasporas and sojourners to facilitate interesting settlement patterns, assimilation and acculturation on the rims of the Bay, ensuring familiarity and adoption of cultural nuances. Such fluidity and circularity ended with the fragmentation of the idea of the Bay from the colonial times as a single region, and the withdrawal of India from it. Though British hegemonic control extended from the Indian sub-continent to the Malayan peninsula, it created new divisions and discriminations amongst the peoples, led to forced and voluntary migration trends,[6] and set new cultural patterns based on Western ideas, language, fashion and technology. The colonial economic project was also directed towards commodities trade that was dependent on global demand and supply, and was not essentially intra-regional. While the seeds of the separationist paradigm were planted in colonial times, isolationism with regard to the Bay of Bengal region clearly became India's stance from the first years of independence after 1947 till the early 1990s. While India's position grew increasingly isolated within the Bay, the latter was perceived with a sense of otherness and distance, lack of interest and threat. Despite its geographical proximity to the subcontinent, the Bay in this

---

[6] Both Bose and Amrith discuss this in their research on the circulations in the Bay. Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*. Harvard University Press, 2009.; Sunil S. Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia*. Vol. 7. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

phase played a marginal role in India's foreign and economic relations. The circular movement of people, products and ideas which used to take place earlier across its water, connecting India to the other littoral countries, withered and other regions became the primary stages for India's projection.

The recent paradigm of interactions, a distinct departure from isolationism and inward-looking policies, is being developed and practised with continuous innovations. This phase started with the LEP, followed by the formulation of the Gujral Doctrine by the late 1990s.[7] India has now re-discovered the relevance of the Bay and strives to build its presence in the region. This has translated into a renewed diplomatic activism, the search for economic partnership, and a boost of the country's maritime presence through both naval acquisition and security partnerships, like joint naval and military exercises with SEA countries. India is focused on the goal of restoring its pivotal position within the Bay, reaching out to all nations of the region and picturing a future of renewed integration and a significant strategic presence in a more globalised Asia.[8] The fragmentation which had characterised the Bay till recently is being overcome through the proposition of new strategic concepts such as "Indian Ocean as India's Ocean", "extended neighbourhood", "Indo-Pacific", all hinting at a more far-reaching and inclusive maritime doctrine.[9] It also displays the shift in the core ethos of the Indian foreign policy – from territoriality to maritimity.

The above scenarios with strikingly different trajectories of India in the Bay of Bengal space pose certain fundamental questions. Why did this happen? In its ever-transforming relation

---

[7] The Gujral Doctrine is named after I.K. Gujral, Foreign Minister from 1989 to 1990 and from 1996 to 1998, and Prime Minister from 1997 to 1998. The main themes of the doctrine are the end of the so called Monroe Doctrine for India, the principle of non-reciprocity in bilateral relations, and the imperative for India to extend its relations and influence beyond South Asia. The doctrine was announced for the first time with the speech "Aspects of India's Foreign Policy" delivered at the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies of Colombo, Sri Lanka, on 20 January 1997.

[8] A considerable amount of literature is being published on the new shift in India's policy to reach out to its eastern neighbours, both immediate and the not-so-immediate ones. For detailed discussions, refer to Mohammad Kabir Humayun, and Ahmad Amamah. "The Bay of Bengal: Next Theatre for Strategic Power Play in Asia." *Croatian International Relations Review* 21, no. 72 (2015): 199-238; Indian Navy, *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (2007), p. 59; Kripa Sridharan, "Regional Perceptions of India," in Frederick Grare and Amitabh Mattoo, eds., *India and ASEAN: The Politics of India's Look East Policy* (New Delhi: Centre de Sciences Humaines, 2001), pp. 67–89; Sanjay Baru, "Trade and Security: Multilateral and Regional Opportunities," *Times of India,* 6 November 1999.

[9] For references on similar discussions, refer to Scott, David. "India's Aspirations and Strategy for the Indian Ocean – Securing the Waves?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4 (2013): 484-511; Khurana, Gurpreet S. *The 'Indo-Pacific' Concept: Retrospect and Prospect.* National Maritime Foundation. 2 February 2017; Scott, David. "India's "Extended Neighborhood" Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power." *India Review* 8, no. 2 (2009): 107-43.

with the Bay of Bengal, was India consciously pursuing self-imposed strategic goals, or was it determined by systemic dynamics?

This study wishes to explore how and why the transition took place from one paradigm-concept to the other. Based on a reconstruction of the historical context of each phase, the paper attempts to identify the endogeneous and exogeneous factors which brought India to assume distinct positions with respect to the Bay, and the Bay itself to be conceptualised, from the Indian perspective, in very different fashions.

Generally speaking, the foreign policy of any country, and consequently its analysis, is considered to "necessarily follow(s) a statist perspective – one that emanates from a country's capital whose sovereignty extends to certain defined, though possibly contested, national border".[10] In fact, the nation-state framework represents an approximation for the understanding of political actors and spaces: the imposition of nation-state-centric lenses implies a notion of space "which in its period of hegemony not only legitimised a whole imperialist era of territorialisation but which also … refused to acknowledge its multiplicities, its fractures and its dynamism."[11] The Bay of Bengal is an excellent example – and a victim – of (mis)understanding of this kind. Once a unitary and circular space intra-connected by trade links and migratory flows, the Bay's unity got repeatedly fragmented by the territorial reorganisation enacted under colonial rule – one important example was the separation of Burma Province from British India in 1937.[12] This process of fragmentation, vehiculated by the nation-state framework and the mechanism of *othering* that national borders naturally bring along, continued in the post-colonial era, when former colonies re-established themselves as independent, different, separated nation-states. Regions, however, are spaces that escape the staticism of nation-state-centrism, and are dynamic entities. The case of India provides a clear proof if we consider its ambiguous membership in South and Southeast Asia, regions whose definition repeatedly changed over time. The fact that Nehru participated in the Conference of Southeast Asian prime ministers, better known as the Colombo Conference, together with the heads of government of Sri Lanka and Pakistan, proves that, in 1954, none objected to India (or Sri Lanka, or Pakistan) participating in forums of Southeast

---

[10] Neil Padukone, *Beyond South Asia: India's Strategic Evolution and the Reintegration of the Subcontinent*, 7. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
[11] Doreen B. Massey, *For Space*, 65. London: SAGE, 2005.
[12] For a more detailed analysis of the impact of colonialism on the dynamics of the Bay of Bengal, and the need of a revisionist historical approach see: Jayati Bhattacharya, "The Sea of Changes: Shifting Trajectories Across the Bay of Bengal." *Asian Politics & Policy* 9, no. 2 (2017): 245-267.

Asia.[13] Regions cannot indeed be reduced to mere geographical – as in, tangible, material – entities: they are also socially constructed, and in their dynamism, they transform themselves, based on changeable criteria.[14] How they are constructed and perceived, in turn, affects the way they are related to. This must be kept in mind when the focus of analysis moves to the Bay of Bengal and the way India interacted with it. Specific conceptions of space have certainly affected the way India has interacted with the region, and the way it has juggled between territorial and maritime spaces.

This awareness calls for an interdisciplinary approach, where international relations and foreign policy analysis are sustained by history, an approach that is able to ascertain not only their role as a static scenario of the evolving interactions among traditional political actors (for example, the states existing/acting within the borders of the space itself) but also their identity, characterisation and evolution as entities in their own right. A call that resonates with the Braudelian critique of disciplinary fragmentation and the affirmation of the importance of geography (space) in the construction of long-term history (time).[15]

Integration and Fragmentation of the Bay: A Historical Perspective

The Bay of Bengal maritime space can be studied both through the lenses of integration and fragmentation in the pre-colonial as well as the colonial period. In the pre-colonial period, it served as an integrated space connected through 'monsoon winds' trade routes across the Indian Ocean, exchanging textiles, spices, gems and precious stones and celebrating the inflow of gold and silver into the Indian sub-continent. Migration was mostly short-term and voluntary initiated by the trade diasporas, sojourners, religious leaders and preachers, and also seafarers and adventurers. The heartland polities and principalities, however, remained distant from the inter-regional maritime interactions that remained more or less confined to the coastal regions, and their littorals and hinterland. This was an important phenomenon during Mughal rule. The Mughals, who had penetrated into India through its north-western

---

[13] Amitav Acharya, *East of India, South of China: Sino-Indian Encounters in Southeast Asia*, 20. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017.

[14] Mary Farrell, Hettne Björn, and Luk Van Langenhove, *Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice*, 8. London: Pluto Press, 2005.

[15] Braudelian structuralism in his work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* as interpreted in Samuel Kinser, "*Annaliste* Paradigm? The Geohistorical Structuralism of Fernand Braudel." *The American Hisorical Review* 8, No.1 (1981): 63-105.

frontier, established the political centre of their empire in northern Indian, the heartland of the sub-continent, thus distancing themselves from regular maritime activities that assumed the status of the peripheral. However, from a dimension of global networks and connections, the Indian subcontinent remained at the centre of Indian Ocean maritime activities with different communities and commodities participating in the maritime exchange and interactions both near and far, thus making it more integrative in nature.

In the colonial period, the situation changed due to European political dominance and forced and involuntary migrations – largely labour migrations to meet the different colonial economic needs that were intimately tied to global monetary exchanges and demand-supply fluctuations. Thus, new colonial port-cities emerged, such as Calcutta, Colombo, Penang, Singapore to mention a few, and new cash crops were introduced, leading to bulk movement of commodities like Bengal jute, Ceylonese coffee, Burmese rice, Malayan rubber, Javanese sugar and coffee, that matched the unprecedented scale of movement of people across this space. In Amrith's calculations, around eight million people travelled from India to Ceylon between 1840 and 1940, and about four million to Malaya, and 12-15 million to Burma, and about half of them went back to the subcontinent within three to seven years.[16] There were big British business houses that dominated the trade and commerce, however, they worked with indigenous business communities as well, depending mostly on their knowledge and skills for sourcing and distribution across regional markets.[17] The British administrative machinery integrated the fluid space across the Indian subcontinent, Burma and the Malayan peninsula. However, distinct social categories and economic classes were created in different lived-spaces that were fragmented by growing walls between them, isolating migrant groups and locals in the same landscapes.

---

[16] Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants,* 104. Harvard University Press, 2015.

[17] For a history of the Indian business communities in Singapore, refer to Bhattacharya, Jayati. *Beyond the myth: Indian business communities in Singapore*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011. For more information on working of the markets and local 'bazaars' refer to Christopher Alan Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*. No. 28. CUP Archive, 1988.; Rajat Kanta Ray, "Asian capital in the age of European domination: the rise of the bazaar, 1800–1914." *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 3 (1995): 449-554.

India's Territorial Foreign Policy

The argument about territoriality as a driving factor of India's strategic thinking in the post-independence years holds strongly in analysing the trends of the Indian foreign policy. The prevailing policy had its focus on the landmass and territoriality and that, in turn, led to the detriment of considerations of the state's maritime space in spite of the long coastlines. Circumstances compelled New Delhi to be focused on territorial integrity for the wars with Pakistan and the Sino-Indian conflict involved territorial issues. The territorial focus remained a characteristic of independent India's foreign and defence policy from its very beginnings till the 1990s when the rediscovery of the maritime space found accomplishment in the LEP, later upgraded to the AEP. The inattention to the Bay of Bengal in the post-colonial years and India's neglect of the maritime space in practice had translated into disengagement from the broader Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It is not as if India's rediscovery of the Bay and its first experiments aimed at reintegration with the region occurred concurrently with India releasing a new maritime doctrine and envisaging a more active role in the IOR.[18] Discerning this underlying sea-denying attitude is, therefore, critical for understanding the country's approach to the Bay.

In all probability, territoriality is not the product of a single factor. The reciprocal feature of a strategic culture which denies the importance of the sea is its heightened attention to the land: *focus on land* is complementary to *sea-denying*. The motivations of India's territoriality vary in typology: some of these factors are ideological – for example, the vision promoted by the Indian leadership of the time; in other cases they are about the geopolitical setting within which India, as a regional and global player, is placed at a certain point in time; in yet other cases, the critical factor in determining India's territoriality is the country's historical memory. In many cases, India's sea-denying strategy was a response to the impositions of the circumstances. At the same time, there lies a stratification of events, perceptions and notions which arose at different points in history and progressively got "sedimented" in India's psyche. Some of these conditioning elements are specific to the post-independence period, others are rooted in the very beginnings of India as an independent country through the traumatic process of partition, yet others date back to colonial and pre-colonial eras.

---

[18] The following section will address such move of India towards re-integration, and its new proposed paradigms for the IOR.

The following section aims to understand India's protracted territorial policy, identifying and analysing the possible causes which brought to its constitution and consolidation, from pre- to post-independence.

India's strategy as an independent nation has been centred on what has been called India's Monroe Doctrine, emphasising the need to maintain the subcontinent internally united and prevent the entrance of extra-regional powers.[19] The pursuit of these two imperatives has contributed to predispose India towards a land-centred strategy; this doctrine has characterised India's behavior since independence and it is rooted not only in Britain's own strategy with regard to colonial India, but also in the geography of the subcontinent itself and the historical consequences of its geopolitical outlook.

One could argue that India's tendency to focus on the land may be traced back to the overall prevalence in Indian history of northern empires. Cohen observes:

> Of nine powers that achieved pan-Indian status (covering at least four of India's five major regions), seven were centred on the North Indian plain. Of 63 pan- and supra-regional powers (defined as powers that covered at least two regions), 28 had their base in the North Indian plain, and all but five or six decades of pan-Indian rule were based there.[20]

Cohen's observations lead us to argue that the prevalence of political systems characterised by a certain geography – as well as by all those features that are determined by geography – entailed the prevalence of a corresponding strategic notion. In other words, the fact that most of the states which succeeded in extending their power over and beyond the subcontinent were located in the northern plains – thus being land-based entities – could account for an early enduring bias in favour of the landmass in India's perception of the geographical and political space.

---

[19] Neil Padukone, *Beyond South Asia: India's Strategic Evolution and the Reintegration of the Subcontinent*, 21-24.

[20] Stephen P. Cohen, 2015. "India and the Region." In *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, edited by David Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan, 342. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Neil Padukone, *Beyond South Asia: India's Strategic Evolution and the Reintegration of the Subcontinent*, 45.

Cohen continues to suggest that the legacy of the great early Indian empires on India's strategic culture extends to the realm of political doctrine:

> The north also provides the source of the dominant Indian tradition of statecraft. Scholars generally agree that the formative era of Indian civilisation was the period that spanned the writing of the Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, and the development of the Mauryan Empire (321-181 BC) under Emperor Asoka. The Indian imperial vision was then defined, even though by 180 BC this first attempt at imperial government ended. The desire for empire remained, but without the success of the Mauryas, Guptas, Mughals, and British. The same can be said of free India's 70 years: there has been ambition aplenty, but marked strategic under-achievement.[21]

The roots of India's land-focus, thus, can be traced back to the geography of northern statecraft which initiated a line of thought set on that geography itself. In this perspective, *the North* emerges as a key element of India's territoriality. However, there may be other points of view regarding parallel exchanges in trade, religious and cultural interactions in the region and across the globe that India had enjoyed through different generations, which requires a separate context of discussions.

A third reason for the north Indian, land-oriented perspective is that the north has always been the most easily-accessible gateway to India. With the Himalayan belt creating a natural barrier against attackers from the northern and eastern side, the north-west border was the most porous and prone to invasions.[22] As a matter of fact, most of the invaders entered the subcontinent from the north-west, not only imprinting their trace in languages and customs of the macro-region, but also succeeding in establishing their rule in some cases.[23] There were Greeks, Turks, Afghans, Mongols and lastly, the Mughals, who invaded the subcontinent from the north-west, and successfully established another northern plains-based empire that continued for centuries till the coming of the British, leaving a lasting legacy on Indian culture. As a consequence, because of the geostrategic nature of the borders and in view of the numerous historical precedents, a potential land warfare conflict triggered by an invasion

---

[21] Stephen P. Cohen, 2015. "India and the Region." 342-343.
[22] Neil Padukone, *Beyond South Asia: India's Strategic Evolution and the Reintegration of the Subcontinent*, 14-15.
[23] Sandy Gordon, *India's Rise as an Asian Power: Nation, Neighborhood, and Region*, 112. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2014.

from the north-west matured in India's mind as the epitome of a security threat. Hence Indian strategists drew a bead on land security, rather than maritime security.

During the British colonial era, paradoxically, the sea-denying attitude remained and evolved though the British were the most acclaimed naval power of the time. One argument suggests that since the Raj had been built on the ruins of the Mughal empire, the old notion of the need to protect the north-western border was reinforced. However, there were other reasons for paying attention to land defence – it was in line with the state of Britain's warfare assets, as well as with the power-play dynamics of the time. Creating a buffer state of Afghanistan in the north-west against possible Russian incursions, and protecting Tibet and Nepal against Chinese prowess, were also part of the British strategy that led to legacies of undefined borders and other complications after the imperial retreat.[24] On the other hand, Britain's maritime power was already well developed.[25] A strong navy was indeed one of the pillars on which the British had built and expanded their empire, making them relatively safe on water, contributing to their ascension in the Indian Ocean. They had defeated the French, Portuguese and the Dutch navies in the Bay to claim political superiority in the region. Examining the Raj's legacy in (independent) India's foreign policy, Mahajan writes:

"Being a dominant naval power, the British spoke only of defending the land frontier and did not have to bother about the naval defence of the Raj.[26] It was only when the Japanese reached Mandalay during the Second World War that the British became concerned about naval weakness…After 1950, too, India remained complacent about developing its maritime strength."[27]

From the late 19th century, the British started to apprehend that their position in India was being increasingly jeopardised by Russian expansionism. The Tsarist Empire had made

---

[24] On the creation of buffer states with reference to the Indian case, see: Parshotam Mehra, *Essays in Frontier History: India, China, and the Disputed Border*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007; For an analysis of the buffer state system at large, see: Michael Greenfield Partem, "The buffer system in international relations." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27, no. 1 (1983): 3-26.

[25] For a detailed comparison of the Royal Navy's assets vis-a-vis the naval strength of main European powers of the 19th century, see: Thomas Brassey, *The British Navy: Its Strength, Resources and Administration*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, Vol.2, pp. 199-247.

[26] Itty Abraham, *How India Became Territorial: Foreign Policy, Diaspora, Geopolitics*, 112. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

[27] Sneh Mahajan, 2015. "The Foreign Policy of the Raj and Its Legacy", In *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, edited by David Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan, 63. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

inroads in Afghanistan and seemed to threaten further movement towards the infamous Indian north-western border. Britain's anxiety with regard to Russia was such that it continued for decades even after the end of the Romanovs, becoming one of the main drivers of British foreign policy in India. This has been highlighted in Mahajan's argument:

"From the 1860s, the security policy in India centered on defence against the expansion of the Tsarist Empire towards the northwestern frontier...From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain's strategic preoccupation with this threat to the Indian Empire became a major component of Britain's foreign policy in general and defence of the Indian Empire in particular...Even after the collapse of the Tsarist Empire in 1917, the War Office remained convinced that Soviet Russia would strike a blow at the Indian Empire...Down to 1940 when Russia joined the Second World War on the side of Britain, the problem of defence of India against Russia's design remained the central preoccupation of British foreign and defense policies."[28]

Analysing the reasons of Britain's Russophobia goes beyond the scope of this section. What matters here are the two underlying points: (1) in the case of British India, the territorial attitude, which had already characterised Indian political doctrine *ab originis,* got further strengthened due to specific circumstances peculiar to British colonial rule and the British position in India; (2) even after the Raj ended, this territorial approach endured in India, although the circumstances which had brought it into being (British naval strength; Russophobia) were not applicable to India after independence. In this sense, the territoriality characterising India's strategic policy after independence is seen as a legacy of the Raj.

The perduring focus on the land, in Indian defence and foreign policy, even in the post-colonial period can be plausibly explained, at least partly, as a trait inherited by the new Indian political class from the ex-colonial masters. However, besides the 'Raj legacy' explanation, independent India had also reasons of its own to focus on land *vis-a-vis* blue water. First and foremost, a fundamental event for the decolonised country to take this turn was 'independence' itself. In the case of British India, the moment of emancipation from colonial rule came to coincide with that of partition, as the newly freed territory got split between two nations, India and Pakistan. While the way in which partition eventually took

---

[28]   Sneh Mahajan, 2015. "The Foreign Policy of the Raj and Its Legacy", 53-54.

place was equally unforeseeable and painful for South Asians on either side of the border, the political meaning it acquired differed considerably. For Pakistan, partition represented the accomplishment of self-determination, and became the year zero of a new national history. From the point of view of independent India, however, partition remained the sacrilegious mutilation of Mother India's body.[29] From an Indian perspective, the borders which cost a bloodbath had shrunk considerably compared to what "India" had looked like on maps till 1947. This was especially true on the north-western side, where with the partition of Punjab, and the transfer to Pakistan of the territories westwards, the loss of land had been greater. Because of this, the trauma of partition produced long-term psychological consequences in the Indian mind both at the individual and collective level, and added new meaning to the old notion of the north-west as something to be protected at any cost. For India (and in a complementary and opposite way for Pakistan) the (new) north-western border became not only the last frontier before the neighbour-enemy, but also an image of sovereignty and nationhood, hence the urgency of protecting it both as a border and as a symbol.

The militarisation of the border increased in tandem with the worsening of the relations between the two neighbouring countries. The reciprocal process of othering between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress, and Muslims and Hindus, which had led to partition, contributed significantly to make the position of the two countries irreconcilable after independence.[30] In addition to this, India grew increasingly worried of a possible attack from Pakistan especially when the latter, under military rule, took an authoritarian and Islamist turn. The Mumbai terror attacks perpetrated in 2008 – followed by other incidents of violence – by a Pakistani-based Islamist cell strengthened and seemed to confirm the Indian perception of Pakistan as an unstable and radicalised country. Furthermore, Pakistan's long economic and political association with the US and its ever-growing partnership with China added an international dimension to already troubled bilateral relations.[31] Thus, a traumatic

---

[29] On the imagination of the pre-partition Indian nation as a mother/female corporeal body see the following studies: Kanika Sharma, "Mother India: The Role of the Maternal Figure in Establishing Legal Subjectivity." *Law and Critique* 29, no. 1 (2017): 1-29. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

[30] Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, "Introduction". New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2017.

[31] Subrata K. Mitra, "War and Peace in South Asia: A revisionist view of India-Pakistan relations." *Contemporary South Asia* 10, no. 3 (2001): 361-379.

beginning and persisting hostile relations prompted India to make the Indo-Pak land border a top priority in its defence policy in the aftermath of the partition in 1947.[32]

Partition also brought about the Kashmir conundrum, an armed conflict, which after 70 years is yet to be solved and that has seen considerable deployment of soldiers from both sides. The objective relevance of Kashmir, which is the northernmost region of the subcontinent, does not seem to do justice to the obstinacy with which India and Pakistan have been fighting over it. This is because the value of Kashmiri land transcends mere strategic calculations and has a fundamental political meaning. In its analysis of *sovereignty* as a central element in the Indo-Pakistan conflict, Bajpai explains that the importance of Kashmir from the sovereignty point of view well exceeds its economic and strategic importance. The obsession of both contending countries with regard to this old kingdom therefore might be better understood in terms of the meaning it bears for Indian and Pakistani nationalisms:

> "...from the beginning, powerfully shaped by Jawaharlal Nehru, Indians have come to see the state [Kashmir] as being part of the map of India and as vital for its sense of nationhood. This "cartographic imagination" of India and the construction of nationhood around the inclusion of Kashmir have taken powerful hold. For India, Kashmir is a symbol of secular nationalism. Its inclusion in India affirms the view that Muslims can be happy and secure in a Hindu-majority nation. For Pakistan, by contrast, Kashmir is a symbol of religious nationalism. Kashmir substantiates the view that Muslims in the northwestern part of the subcontinent are part of a larger Muslim nation and must be free of Hindu domination."[33]

In sum, the land-centred defence strategy of post-colonial India was not only a British legacy but also a legacy of the partition, which configured Pakistan as the number one threat for both India's security and Indian nationalism. This helped keep Indian strategists focused on the north-western border.

---

[32] Subrata K. Mitra, "Intimate enemies: Trauma, violence and longing in India-Pakistan relations: A review article." *India Review* 16, no. 2 (2017): 266-276.

[33] Kanti P. Bajpai, 2015. "Five approaches to the Study of Indian Foreign Policy", In *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, edited by David Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan, 23-24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.This aspect has also been discussed by other scholars like Guha Ramachandra, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*. New Delhi: Pan Macmillan, 2017.

The legacy of partition affected first and foremost India's relationship with Pakistan (and, after the second partition in 1971, with Bangladesh) and that with the external powers intervening in this bilateral relation, i.e. the US and China. India's posture was shaped more consistently by the aspirations of the Indian leadership in power and by the challenges posed by the specific international situation of the time. While focusing on defending the north-west for the mentioned reasons, India neglected the other neighbouring countries, especially those around the Bay. India's territoriality, besides being explained as complementary to the focus on the Pakistan frontier, must also be understood as prioritisation of internationalism versus regionalism in Nehru's political vision. In Nehruvian India, as scholars have argued, "foreign policy neglected any tangible focus on the Indian Ocean as a sphere to be secured. Instead, Nehru looked towards international global issues".[34]

Also, while non-alignment is often understood by many as a foreign policy outlook, others underlined the fact that, in the case of India, it worked as "realpolitik cloaked in idealism", working in favour of the idea of the subcontinent as India's sphere of influence.[35]

Acharya maintains that, after the Bandung conference, in Nehru's vision global non-alignment took over Asian neutralism for "Asia to be too small a stage for its diplomacy"[36]. The pursuit of India for a status of *primus inter pares* among developing nations, desired by Nehru, prompted him to prefer Yugoslavia, the USSR and decolonising Africa as favourite interlocutors, downplaying the importance of Southeast Asia and of the maritime bridge connecting it to India. In addition to this, a big chunk of the Indian political elite at this point in time looked at former Indo-China with scepticism, considering its countries sold to neo-imperialism. The defeat suffered in 1962 at the hands of China cost India its credibility in the eyes of the eastern neighbours.[37]

From the 1950s onwards, the Delhi government had to face numerous challenges which took priority on the political agenda and also absorbed a considerable amount of resources.

---

[34] David Scott, 2015. "The Indian Ocean as India's Ocean", In *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, edited by David Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan, 467. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[35] Neil Padukone, *Beyond South Asia: India's Strategic Evolution and the Reintegration of the Subcontinent*, 25.

[36] Amitav Acharya, "India's 'Look East' Policy", In *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, edited by David Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan, 448-450. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[37] Amitav Acharya, *East of India, South of China: Sino-Indian Encounters in Southeast Asia*, xxi. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Domestically, there was the insurgency in the north-east (Naga tribal areas, and then Manipur, Tripura, Bihar), the language protests in the south (Tamil Nadu), and Khalistan secessionism in Punjab. While the Kashmir situation kept on escalating, India went to war with China in 1962, and in 1971 with Pakistan, which got closer to the US following the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Throughout these decades, India's main focus remained on keeping the country together by countering secessionist trends and neighbours' irredentism. As a consequence, while military expenditures grew considerably, most of the resources were allocated to counter-insurgency in the north-east and in the north-west, and to the securitisation of the contended borders.[38]

Although under Indira and Rajiv there was a push to build a hegemonic position for India over the subcontinent, nonetheless defence of the land remained a constant of India's activity. In the 1970s and 1980s, India's focus remained very much on the subcontinent and did not go beyond the boundaries of South Asia:

> "In contrast Indira Gandhi looked towards India's region; but this was a focus on its immediate land neighbours Pakistan, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bangladesh. The Indira Doctrine focused on India taking a position of leadership in South Asia, but land power was a crucial underpinning for the doctrine."[39]…"Admittedly, under Rajiv Gandhi's premiership (1984-9)…a modest naval push…was short-lived and India's naval strength subsequently declined in the 1990s."[40]

Overall, during the 1970s and 1980s, the antagonism between the two superpowers, and its reverberation on Asian affairs strongly restrained India's presence in the maritime space of the region: India "*perceived the Indian Ocean Region as subject to dangerous Cold War superpower rivalries*", hence kept out of it.[41] India's paradigm shift in the early 1990s confirms this: with the disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War in Asia, it felt ready to play a greater role in the region and re-focus its attention on the neglected Indian Ocean. The process which brought India to abandon the territorial standard, to re-

---

[38] Neil Padukone, *Beyond South Asia: India's Strategic Evolution and the Reintegration of the Subcontinent*, 30-31.
[39] David Scott, 2015. "The Indian Ocean as India's Ocean", 467.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

engage the Southeast Asian neighbours and eventually to rediscover the Bay of Bengal is analysed in the following section.

That the time is ripe for India to exit the continental paradigm and pursue fully its maritime power potential, however, remains a matter of debate. Besides the aforementioned internal instability and border protection imperatives, which continue to persist and shape strategic policies, there are other factors, mentioned by Gordon, for instance, which have led India to become and substantially remain a continental power.

These features and issues are characteristic of the Indian polity and it is unlikely that they will cease being so in the short run, which casts a doubt on the future of Indian naval capabilities. However, taking into consideration the growth of inter-regional interactions, India's global rise, and also China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region, looking eastwards is only inevitable.

India "Rediscovers" the Bay of Bengal: Looking and Acting East

India engaging Southeast Asia

India's isolation in the eastern Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia came to an end in the 1990s after years of neglect due to a busy domestic agenda and a preference for the more appealing stage of global non-alignment; India "returned to Asia".[42] The turning point was the end of the Cold War, which marked the transformation of India's economy, and brought about profound changes in both international and regional dynamics.

In 1991, the Soviet Union began disintegrating, and with it the first and greatest experiment of economic socialism of history. At the same time, socialism declined in India, where economic policy had been inspired by the Soviet Five-Year Plan strategy, although with peculiar and more mitigating characteristics. Plagued by a balance of payment crisis, India accepted the support of the IMF, agreeing in exchange to liberalise its economy. Till that time the country's economy had been a closed one, in accordance with the import-substitution autarchic model set up in the Nehruvian era. For an India faced for the first time by the

---

[42] Amitav Acharya, "India's 'Look East' Policy", 455.

challenges of integrating itself into the globalised world economy, Southeast Asia represented a source of potentially advantageous and much needed partnerships.

India's economic imperatives changed drastically and this got reflected in its foreign policy agenda: as the Manmohan Doctrine formulated more explicitly later, economics started playing a fundamental role in shaping the country's international relations and its power aspirations.[43] The Indian Ocean, hosting the sea line of communications along which oil is shipped to South and East Asia, acquired an unprecedented economic and strategic relevance for the growing Indian industry as well as for the energy-thirsty East Asian economies, China in primis.[44]

India's opening eastwards had another fundamental economic objective: the development of its north-east. India's north-east includes the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura and is the true overland gateway to Southeast Asia. Landlocked, connected to mainland India only through the Siliguri corridor, and bordered by Tibet, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan, it is geopolitically relevant yet vulnerable. Different in ethnic, religious and cultural identity from India's mainstream, and brought within the Indian federation by peculiar historical circumstances, the north-eastern states have complicated relations with the central government, making the region prone to secessionism and insurgency. This in turn has negatively affected the region's development, further fuelling the perception of the central government as an indifferent, unfair, even colonial, political master. The establishment of economic partnerships with Southeast Asia represented for Delhi an ideal strategy to boost growth in the region, able to expand its trade sector as well as its connectivity, providing access to the Bay of Bengal through transnational corridors. Opponents of the policy maintain that it is unlikely that the region would be able use this connectivity to its benefit. In fact, they maintain that, even with India-Asean integration, the north-east would still play an ancillary role since Delhi aims to use the region as a bridge to Southeast (and East) Asia in order to pursue its own economic interests. Others, however, believe that, with the creation of an India-ASEAN integrated

---

[43] Sanjaya Baru, *India and the World: Economics and Politics of the Manmohan Singh Doctrine in Foreign Policy*. Working paper no. 53. Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore. November 14, 2008. Accessed April 2, 2018. http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg.

[44] Mohammad Kabir Humayun, and Ahmad Amamah. "The Bay of Bengal: Next Theatre for Strategic Power Play in Asia." *Croatian International Relations Review* 21, no. 72 (2015): 199-238.

economic area, the north-east, historically relegated to a peripheral role in Indian affairs, could finally acquire for the first time a central position.[45]

These new and complex economic agendas of India emerged on the backdrop of the ideological and geopolitical transformations produced by the end of bipolarism. The changed international setting represented for India a fertile ground to pursue its outward economic outlook and contributed to the formulation of India's new strategic goals.

The end of bipolarism meant the end of a world dichotomically halved into incompatible ideologies and "spheres of influence". This allowed the emergence of a space for negotiation and accomodation within which new understandings and convergences, which were unthinkable before, became possible again. This transformation was critical to the evolution of the relations between India and Southeast Asia, as it mitigated that ideological wall which had largely been responsible for keeping them apart and fomenting mutual distrust. While both India and and the ASEAN bloc had been united by the non-aligned movement under the common credos of decolonisation, solidarity and anti-imperialism, as a matter of fact, non-alignment had been understood and practised in different fashions. Notwithstanding India's central role in pioneering and spreading the spirit of Bandung, India had soon been perceived as leaning towards the Soviet bloc. This alignment seemed to have received a formal corroboration in 1971 with the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, although relations between Delhi and the USSR remained problematic/ambiguous as well. India's association with the USSR and its adoption of a socialist economic scheme at home prejudiced pro-Western Southeast Asian countries against India. This in turn created within Indian political circles a notion of ASEAN as a philo-imperialist coalition.[46] In sum, the end of the Cold War world view allowed India to lessen its strict non-alignment, and ASEAN to overcome its defensive stance and open to non-Southeast Asian countries.[47]

Another element which had added to the ostracisation of India by ASEAN was the Cambodian conundrum. India had refused to join in the condemnation of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979, creating displeasure amongst the neighbours and ASEAN, including Singapore. Having considerably contributed to the ASEAN-Indian divorce, the

[45] Thongkholal Haokip, "India's Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India." *Studies in Indian Politics* 3, no. 2 (2015): 198-211.
[46] Amitav Acharya, "India's 'Look East' Policy", 456.
[47] Ibid.

Cambodia issue too eventually found a resolution in 1991 with a comprehensive peace settlement.[48]

The emergence of China in the region provided an additional factor for India to extend its influence eastwards, and for its neighbours to welcome it positively. While Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean posed a security threat to India (as articulated in the so-called "String of Pearls" theory), at the same time it benefited New Delhi because India emerged, for Southeast Asia in primis, as a reliable partner to balance China's inroads in the region.[49]

Effects and Implications

This set of economic and strategic elements led to the formulation of a new economic and foreign policy imperative, understood as an effort by India to overcome isolation by creating economic and strategic links with Southeast Asia. India had already started pursuing this new direction in 1991 under the premiership of Narasimha Rao (June 1991-May 1996), and future leaders like Gujral pursued the policy further.[50] The LEP remained since then a constant of India's economic and political agenda, pursued by the succeeding governments headed by Vajpayee (March 1998 to May 2004, after the shortlived Gujral government from April 1997 to March 1998) and Singh (May 2004-May 2014). This remained the case even after the government changed colour in 2014 with the victory of the BJP. In fact, in the first year of the Modi government, the policy received a new momentum with the elevation of its status to the AEP. The LEP had already taken a step into the next phase in 2003, with the beginning of a new phase characterised by the extension of its proposed area of outreach to include Australia and East Asia, and a stronger emphasis on connectivity and security cooperation besides economic partnership.[51] The transformation from "looking" to "acting" as announced by Prime Minister Modi in Naypyidaw at the ASEAN Summit in November 2014 confirmed

---

[48] Steven R. Ratner, "The Cambodia Settlement Agreements." *The American Journal of International Law* 87, no. 1 (1993): 1.

[49] On India's role as a strategic balancer in the IOR see: Vivek Mishra, "Indo–US Security Cooperation: Implications for the Indian Ocean." *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 13, no. 1 (2017): 73-81. On the potential strategic consequences of the String of Pearls see: Gurpreet S. Khurana, "China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and Its Security Implications." *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 1 (2008): 1-39.

[50] 1996b. 'Statement By His Excellency Mr. I. K. Gujral, Minister of External Affairs of India', ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference, Jakarta, 20–21 July, accessed from http://www.aseansec.org/4308.htm.

[51] Thongkholal Haokip, "India's Look East policy: Its evolution and approach." *South Asian Survey* 18, no. 2 (2011): 239-257.

not only the intention of the new BJP government to remain on the same track, but possibly also the pursual of a more action-oriented and pragmatic performance.[52]

The relevance of the engagement of the eastern neighbourhood has been reiterated by both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs on numerous occasions, such as the 15th India-Asean summit in Manila (November 2017), the India National Day ceremony in Delhi (December 2017) and the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Singapore (January 2018).[53] There is, however, a consensus that the policy has delivered less than expected.

With the 'Look East' and the 'Act East', India has succeeded in overcoming the distance which had fractured the unity of the Bay of Bengal and frozen the relations with the Southeast Asian neighbours. This is evident from the fact that, besides enjoying improved bilateral relations, India today also participates in a number of multilateral organisations. ASEAN is, obviously, the most important one, within which India has progressed from the stage of a Sectoral Partner (1992) to that of a Dialogue Partner (1996) and finally a Summit Level Partner (2002). India today is a member of the East Asia Summit, which besides ASEAN members includes the ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, South Korea), and Australia, New Zealand, Russia and the United States. Additionally, India is an "active participant" in the "ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting + (ADMM+) and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF)".[54]

India participates in regional affairs also through other multilateral organisations, of which BIMSTEC and the MGC are perhaps the most promising ones, considering their economic focus, which does not exclude soft power/strategic potential. The Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) was launched in 2000, named after the rivers Ganga and Mekong, constituent elements of the civilisations of South and Southeast Asia respectively. Besides India, the MGC includes five ASEAN countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam), and has traditionally focused on tourism, culture, education, and connectivity. It has, however, undertaken a process of expansion of its areas of cooperation, including for

---

[52] "English Rendering of PM's Remarks at the East Asia Summit, Nay Pyi Taw." Prime Minister of India. Accessed April 02, 2018. http://www.pmindia.gov.in.

[53] "Highlights of Day 1 from ASEAN INDIA Pravasi Bharatiya Divas 2018." High Commission of India in Singapore. Accessed April 02, 2018. https://hcisingapore.gov.in.

[54] "ASEAN-India Relations." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India. Accessed March 30, 2018. http://mea.gov.in/aseanindia/20-years.htm.

example cooperation in the field of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME).[55] Latest projects include Conservation of Rice Germplasm; a Working Group on Health; a Common Archival Resource Centre (CARC) at the Nalanda University; and India-Cambodia-Laos-Myanmar-Vietnam Quick Impact Projects.[56]

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was born in 1997 as 'BIST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation), and is defined as a sector-driven sub-regional cooperative. The organisation now includes five members from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka) and two from Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand). The underlying idea is to bring together neighbouring nations "lying in the littoral and adjacent areas of the Bay of Bengal constituting a contiguous regional unity" which can play the role of "a platform for intra-regional cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN members"[57] Some of the projects promoted through BIMSTEC include the Kaladan Multimodal project[58], the Asian Trilateral Highway connecting India and Thailand through Myanmar,[59] and the BIIN pact for the movement of goods and vehicles among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. From the Indian point of view, BIMSTEC also represents a multilateral tool to pursue stronger connectivity and economic partnerships between its northeast region and the eastern neighbours, besides bilateral efforts.[60]

BIMSTEC is important for India because it is a regional framework which does not include Pakistan. As such, it has the potential to be more effective and work better, not being doomed by the Indo-Pak rivalry which has supposedly brought SAARC to an impasse. India has in a

---

[55] "MEA | Statements : Bilateral/Multilateral Documents." Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Accessed April 02, 2018. http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28815/Joint Ministerial Statement for the 8th Mekong Ganga Cooperation Ministerial Meeting in Manila Philippines.

[56] Prabir De, Prabir, Durairaj Kumarasamy, Sreya Pan, and Opinder Kaur. *Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Mekong-Ganga Cooperation: Breaking Barriers and Scaling New Heights and Breaking Barriers.* Report. Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS). 2017. Accessed April 2, 2018. http://aic.ris.org.in.

[57] "Overview | BIMSTEC." Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Accessed April 02, 2018. http://bimstec.org

[58] The Kaladan Multimodal project seeks to link India and Myanmar, connecting Kolkata to Sittwe, and then to Mizoram by river and road. The framework agreement between India and Myanmar gas has been signed in 2008. The project is under implementation.

[59] The Asian Trilateral highway will run from Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar and represents a significant step in establishing connectivity and boost trade between India and Southeast Asian countries. The project is under implementation.

[60] Rubul Patgiri, and Obja Borah Hazarika. "Locating Northeast in India's Neighbourhood Policy: Transnational Solutions to the Problems of a Periphery." *India Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2016): 235-249.

way a duty to show that BIMSTEC works, considering that it has long promoted the narrative that Pakistan is to blame for SAARC inactivity. Also, the absence of Pakistan allows India the space to acquire a leading role within the group, of which she is obviously the biggest member country. BIMSTEC, however, has been criticised for not being as conclusive as it could be. The sectoral nature of the organisation can represent an advantage from the point of view of its ability to deliver, vis-a-vis the sluggishness which often characterises more all-inclusive organisations. At the same time, it can represent a drawback for India's political and strategic goals. Also, the organisation is handicapped by the notable absence of Indonesia.

Besides India's participation in Southeast Asian fora (the mentioned ASEAN, sub-ASEAN and sectoral regional organisations) the LEP has produced a proliferation of strategic and security initiatives involving the littoral countries of the Bay of Bengal and its immediate proximities. These include the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP);[61] friendship (naval) exercises, like the Milan exercises;[62] the "IISS Asia Security Summit: The Shangri-La Dialogue" (SLD).[63]

India's re-engagement with Southeast Asia is to be contextualised in the wider re-engagement with the IOR. India's search for a more assertive presence in the IOR is reflected by the latest trends in its military policy, which shows the effort to develop its naval capabilities. This represents a new direction for India's defence planning, which has historically focused on land warfare to the detriment of maritime power.

There are various aspects to this trend. The first is the expansion of the Indian naval capabilities. A glimpse of this is witnessed in the growing share of the general defence budget

---

[61] ReCAAP is a multilateral agreement concluded in November 2004 and entered into force in September 2006. It includes Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Denmark, India, Japan, South Korea, Laos, Myanmar, the Netherlands, Norway, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States and Vietnam. ("About | ReCAAP ISC." ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre. Accessed April 02, 2018. http://www.recaap.org/about_ReCAAP-ISC.)

[62] David Scott, "The great power 'Great Game' between India and China: 'The logic of geography'." *Geopolitics* 13, no. 1 (2008): 1-26.

[63] The IISS Asia Security Summit, is an inter-governmental security forum hosted annually since 2002 by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), featuring defense ministers, prime ministers and Army heads of 28 Asia-Pacific states. These are: Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Sweden, Thailand, East Timor, United Kingdom, United States and Vietnam. It is also known as Shangri La Dialogue (SLD) after the name of the hotel where it takes place annually in Singapore. The keynote speaker of the 2018 IISS SLD is India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. ("IISS." International Institute for Strategic Studies. Accessed April 02, 2018. https://www.iiss.org/).

allocated to the navy, which from "a low point of 3.4 per cent in 1963-4 crept up to 11.2 per cent in 1992-3. The 1999-2000 budget pushed this up to a 14.5 per cent share, and a decade later it had reached a 19 per cent share"[64] The second is the upgradation of the naval assets. While "the focus on India's naval force projection capacities thus far has been intelligence gathering, escorting merchant ships of India and friendly states, joint exercises with the navies of allied countries, and anti-piracy mission", it has now embarked on the endeavour of upgrading its capabilities to full blue water ones.[65] Thirdly, India has also "embarked on huge indigenisation of its navy"[66]. Fourth, it is working on a process of rebalancing the navy's fulcrum from the fleet stationed in the Western Indian Ocean to that in the Bay of Bengal, an aspect of it being the expansion of its eastern naval command, headquartered at Andhra Pradesh's Rambilli, south of Visakhapatnam.[67]

The boosting of India's naval assets within the Indian Ocean and especially in the Bay of Bengal is taking place along with China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) expanding in the IOR itself, through the construction of ports and the creation of transport routes to connect them. The MSR represents for India a mix of potential opportunities and risks. On the one hand, it could benefit India's economy, attracting foreign investment, particularly in the manufacturing sector, which is regarded as a priority by Modi's development strategy; focusing on the economic opportunities posed by the MSR, India could become 'a major variable in the long-term success of the MSRI by creating internal conditions conducive to growth of regional and global production networks'.[68] On the other hand, Indian strategists tend to identify it as a security threat, maintaining that the development of port infrastructure across the IOR which China promotes through the MSR has potential military development.[69]

---

[64] David Scott, 2015. "The Indian Ocean as India's Ocean", 471.

[65] Neil Padukone, *Beyond South Asia: India's Strategic Evolution and the Reintegration of the Subcontinent*, 120. For India's Navy's role as a provider of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, see: Raja C. Mohan, *Indian Military Diplomacy: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.* Working paper no. 184. Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore. March 26, 2014. Accessed April 2, 2018. http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg

[66] Mohd. Aminul Karim, "China's Proposed Maritime Silk Road: Challenges and Opportunities with Special Reference to the Bay of Bengal Region." *Pacific Focus* 30, no. 3 (2015): 297-319.

[67] Sudha Ramachandran, "Indian Navy Pumps up Eastern Muscle." *Asia Times*, August 20, 2011. Accessed April 02, 2018. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/MH20Df02.html. For further details on the ongoing naval rebalancing through the strengthening of the Bay of Bengal fleet, refer to Mohd. Aminul Karim, "China's Proposed Maritime Silk Road: Challenges and Opportunities with Special Reference to the Bay of Bengal Region."

[68] Amitendu Palit, "India's economic and strategic perceptions of China's maritime silk road initiative." *Geopolitics* 22, no. 2 (2017): 292-309.

[69] Zhu Li, "The Maritime Silk Road and India: The Challenge of Overcoming Cognitive Divergence." *Asia Policy* 22, no. 1 (2016): 20-26.

It is notable that the occurring India-China encounters in the IOR are a sort of unicum in the history of relations between the two Asian civilisation powers, considering that 'Since their emergence as nation states in the contemporary times [...] the interface between the two countries has been restricted to the continental domain.'[70] The Bay of Bengal, closest to the South China Sea, is emerging as a primary theatre for such encounters, with numerous ports developed through Chinese partnership located within the Bay or in its immediate proximities (Sittwe in Myanmar, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh).

Towards a Reintegration of the Bay of Bengal

The overall picture of the Bay of Bengal which emerges from the analysis above is that of a region where connectivity has been a characterising feature for centuries, and whose relevance from an Indian perspective is now irresistibly emerging again. The importance of the Bay covers possibly all fields of interest. Economically speaking, the inclusion of India in the process of regionalism through ASEAN and other organisations has partially restored the connectivity and commercial interconnectedness which used to characterise the Bay, although there is a lot of untapped potential yet to be fully developed. Culturally speaking, old civilisational ties continue to be celebrated through multilateral and bilateral channels in soft power approaches and cultural confluences. While they often serve propagandistic aims when used by policymakers eager to support positive relations, these historical civilisational ties are at the same time the object of investigation by a critical school of interdisciplinary area studies which is promoting a re-conceptualisation of the relations that existed between the rim communities.[71]

The space of the Bay is also scenario to environment phenomena (for example, the recurrence of natural disasters, and the challenges that the Bay's ecosystem is facing due to climate change) and humanitarian emergencies (such as the unfolding Rohingya crisis, and enduring human trafficking). Although not analysed within the limited capacity of this paper, these

---

[70] Gurpreet S. Khurana, "China, India and "Maritime Silk Road": Seeking a Confluence." *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 11, no. 1 (2015): 19-29.
[71] See for example, the critique to the concept of "Indianization" of Southeast Asia and the formulation of a more balanced and comprehensive paradigm with regard to the India/Southeast Asia civilizational ties, as proposed by Amitav Acharya, *Civilizations in Embrace: The Spread of Ideas and the Transformation of Power; India and Southeast Asia in the Classical Age*. Singapore: ISEAS, 2013.

common issues, too, provide additional reasons to boost cooperation across the Bay.[72]

Politically speaking, the Bay has returned to the centre of India's agenda through the effort of promoting closer bilateral ties with the rim countries, as well as through the formulation of the new paradigm of 'extended neighbourhood', and India's renewed protagonism in the IOR. This shows the strategic dimension of the centrality of the Bay, which includes a potential role of India as a balancer *vis-a-vis* Chinese inroads in the region, as well as the growing relevance of the geopolitical advantage which India enjoys within the Bay, enabling her to oversee the critical sea lines of communications (SLOCs). In this sense, the future of the Bay is the subject of debate, and potential tensions and convergences which characterise the wider picture of the Indo-China relations get reflected in it as a micro-cosmos of those dynamics. There is no agreement with regard to the future of Sino-Indian relations, with some analysts maintaining that they are destined to war, and others believing in the possibility of a future convergence.[73] Similarly, the Bay has been identified as the future stage of Indo-Chinese power-politics by some, while others have objected to such a conflictual future scenario in view of the Bay's characterisation as a generally pacific arena, and the lack of important disputes like those which characterise the South China Sea.[74] The Bay of Bengal has emerged as a pivot of politico-economic and strategic interests in regional and global interactions like never before in history, thus creating more opportunities for India to promote more decisively the Bay's reintegration as well as for academic research, post-colonial scholarship and understanding.

. . . . .

---

[72] Aparna Roy, *BIMSTEC and Climate Change: Setting a Common Agenda.* Issue brief no. 203. Observer Research Foundation (ORF). October 2017. Accessed April 2, 2018. http://cf.orfonline.org.

[73] On a possible future conflict between India and China, see: S. Padmanabhan, *Next China-India War: World's First Water War-2029.* New Delhi, Manas Publications, 2014. See also: N. C. Asthana, *Next war : India, Pakistan, China.* New Delhi, Manas Publications, 2017.

[74] Ellen L. Frost, *It's Time to Deepen Integration around the Bay of Bengal.* Report. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. May 31, 2017. Accessed April 2, 2018. http://carnegieendowment.org.