

Singapore, India and Thailand Trilateral Naval Exercise and Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal

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Summary

As Singapore, India and Thailand embark upon their first ever joint naval exercise off the coast of India's Andaman Islands this week, the larger geostrategic significance of the Bay of the Bengal is slowly becoming evident. These naval exercises, focussed on sub-regional naval cooperation among local participants, present an avenue to construct a new maritime security architecture in the Bay of Bengal.

Following the [announcement](#) by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018, the navies of Singapore, India and Thailand began their first-ever [trilateral](#) Singapore India Thailand Maritime Exercise (SITMEX) 2019 in the Andaman sea this week. SITMEX 2019 will witness three Indian Navy ships – the guided-missile destroyer INS *Ranvir*, the guided-missile corvette INS *Kura* and an offshore patrol vessel INS *Sukanya* – exercising with the Singaporean navy's guided-missile frigate RSS *Tenacious* and the Thai Navy's guided-missile frigate HTMS *Kraburi*. The Indian Navy's P-8I maritime reconnaissance aircraft will also join the fray. The first half of this five-day event comprises a [harbour phase](#) involving professional exchanges, sports fixtures and cross deck familiarisation. The second half consists of the [sea phase](#) where the three navies will perform a slew of surface and air manoeuvres, including gunnery, force protection and communications drills. Increasing interoperability and learning from each other's best practices is the official position explaining the motivation behind these exercises. However, the importance of these drills in the broader geopolitics of the Indian Ocean, particularly in the sub-region of the Bay of Bengal, should not be understated.

First, SITMEX 2019 signals the arrival of the Bay of Bengal as one of the most [critical sub-regions](#) in the Indian Ocean. In the broader dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the centrality of the Bay of Bengal is uncontested. Historically, it has been the natural geographical connect between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Today, it is one of the most dynamic geo-economic sub-regions in the IOR: the littoral states in the Bay contribute almost 16 per cent to Asia's total gross domestic product. Most of South Asia's trade to Southeast Asia and vice-versa passes through the Bay of Bengal. Notwithstanding its prominence of being the old conduit between South and Southeast Asia, and its current geo-economic heft, the Bay of Bengal is also fast becoming the centre of the Indian Ocean's geopolitics. The Bay of Bengal plays a prominent role in China's North-South connectivity projects through the development of port facilities in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Second, the littoral states have an inherent interest in securing the Bay of Bengal from any economic or security disruptions, particularly in the backdrop of recent developments in the South China Sea. However, the Bay of Bengal countries have been cagey about multilateral security cooperation, evident in the [controversy](#) around the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation's first joint military exercise in 2018. The

SITMEX proves that like-minded countries in the Bay can selectively initiate cooperation on security issues, especially in the maritime domain. India, Thailand and Singapore, given their geographical position and their relatively powerful navies, represent the resident naval powers in the Bay of Bengal. India and Singapore have a very robust defence relationship, and the navies of the two nations have conducted bilateral naval exercises since at least 1993. The Indo-Thai maritime cooperation started a decade later with the launch of the first Indo-Thai Coordinated Patrols in 2003. However, until SITMEX 2019, the three resident naval powers in the Bay of Bengal did not coordinate their maritime strategies. The SITMEX sends a clear signal that the littoral states have a keen interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the Bay and keeping open its sea-lanes of communications – the lifeline of trade in the region.

Lastly, SITMEX’s sub-regional focus and local participation ensures that it cannot be categorised as an anti-China entente in the Bay of Bengal. It will help the budding trilateral cooperation avoid the fate of the multilateral maritime exercise between the [United States \(US\), India, Singapore, Australia and Japan](#) in 2007. China’s hostility towards the concert of maritime democracies in the Indo-Pacific has been the most critical factor behind the Quad’s moribund state. Two factors help the cause of maritime security cooperation between the Bay of Bengal countries. First, local participation ensures that China cannot label such naval exercises as an attempt towards its containment. Second, such initiatives, insofar they support core American interests in maintaining a liberal order in the Indian Ocean, would always receive the US’ approval.

The nascent journey of the SITMEX, however, faces several challenges. First, it is still to be seen whether the initiative would grow into an annual exercise or would be a one-off event. Political, institutional and organisational commitments would be the most essential ingredients behind the SITMEX’s enduring legacy in the Bay of Bengal’s geopolitics. A trilateral security dialogue between the three countries would help ensure the continuity of this maritime initiative. Second, to intensify naval cooperation between these three countries, the SITMEX would have to gradually increase the operational tempo of the trilateral naval exercises both in terms of capabilities and content. Beyond interoperability, the SITMEX should focus upon logistics support, intelligence gathering and sharing and, lastly, on anti-submarine warfare. Last, New Delhi, Bangkok and Singapore would have to do some serious thinking on the merits and demerits of [roping in other littoral countries](#) under this security initiative. India does intend to transform the nature and substance of its ‘Act East’ policy from a purely economic endeavour to a more robust security partnership. New Delhi should hold extensive consultations with the littoral countries, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, to create an institutional mechanism for maritime security in the sub-region. The SITMEX provides a solid foundation to build a robust security architecture around the Bay of Bengal.

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