Dividing Lines:

Evolving Mental Maps of the Bay of Bengal

In April 1942 a seemingly invincible Japanese army stood at India's eastern border after having conquered Burma in the space of weeks. The British Army had been routed and the British Fleet withdrew to Africa - the gates of India lay open. But the Japanese Army stopped where it was and never tried to overthrow the British Raj.   Underlying their decision to stop at India's border was the fact that Japan's leaders did not see the Bay of Bengal to be a single strategic entity – rather, there was a dividing line between their "mental map" of what constituted Asia and the Indian subcontinent beyond.

This article will consider how, since the end of World War II, "mental maps" of where regions are perceived to begin and end have created a sharp divide between South Asia and Southeast Asia. The line between these regions is widely understood to run along the Myanmar-India border and through the middle of the Bay of Bengal. These perceptions have had a profound impact on strategic behavior and have inhibited a proper analysis of the strategic dynamics in the area. This article will argue that fundamental power shifts occurring in Asia will increasingly make the Bay of Bengal matter as a strategic space in the Indo-Pacific theatre.

Regions in strategic thinking

A focus on the role and significance of regions in international relations is often associated with the so-called Copenhagen School which claims that, despite globalisation, the regional level has become a major locus of both conflict and cooperation and an important level of strategic analysis.[1]   According to Barry Buzan, regional security dynamics should be primarily understood within what he calls a "security complex" or a set of states whose

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[1] See Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); and Barry Buzan and Gowher Rizvi, *South Asian Insecurity and the Great Powers* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986).

security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another.[2] The character of a regional security complex will be affected by historical factors such as long-standing enmities or a common cultural embrace of a civilization area. The standard pattern for a regional security complex is one of rivalry and balance of power among the main powers within the region, to which can be added the effect of outside powers that make alignments within the region.

According to Buzan, in security terms, Asia can be split into three distinct sub-regions: Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia. Southeast Asia is comprised of a large number of secondary states in the Southeast Asian peninsula and archipelago. South Asia is comprised of India and Pakistan, as the major regional rivals, and smaller states in and around the Indian subcontinent. South Asia and Southeast Asia are divided or "insulated" from each other (and also from China) by Myanmar. Thus the strategic behaviour of India and other states in South Asia should be primarily analyzed within the framework of the security dynamics of South Asia and likewise the behaviour of states in Southeast Asia must be primarily analyzed within a Southeast Asian framework. This understanding is consistent with a clear division between South Asia and Southeast Asia that is now commonly perceived or assumed by most strategic analysts.

But Buzan also recognized the distinctions between the regions of Asia were changing - the Northeast and Southeast Asian security regions began to merge with each other and, to a lesser extent, also with the South Asia.[3] The transformation was most evident in East Asia where the end of the Cold War allowed significantly greater freedom for China and greater incentive for Japan to interact with Southeast Asia on a security level. Since that time, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a leading role in institutionalising engagement between Southeast and Northeast Asia through creating institutions and groupings that covered the whole of East Asia.

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[2] Buzan *et al*, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, pp.10-11.

[3] Ibid., p.96.

According to Buzan, over time there will also be an increased level of security interaction between South Asia and East Asia, caused by the decay of Pakistan's relative power and the intensification of India's rivalry with China. The rise of India as the dominant power of South Asia is allowing it to gradually transcend its long-standing confinement to the subcontinent and carve out a wider role as an Asian great power. Simultaneously, the rising power of China in Southeast Asia leads ASEAN states to pull India into the region as a balancing force.

The observations of Buzan and other writers on regional security help us to better understand how defined geographical groupings of states may be expected to interact with each other and the outside world. But sometimes it is too easy for international relations practitioners to place states in familiar boxes. There is a danger that an overreliance on existing mental maps of the world - and the resulting dividing lines that they create – can conceal evolving strategic dynamics that cross traditional lines.   This article will argue that our understanding of what constitutes a "region" is highly subjective and mutable: fixed ideas of regions need to be approached with care and with an understanding of their limitations.

Our mental construction of the world around us – including how we divide the world up into usable pieces - is what behavioral geographers call "mental mapping."   The concept of a mental map refers to a person's subjective perception of their area of interaction. A mental map is an individual's internal map of their known world, which is a composite physical geography and other subjective experiences.   Kevin Lynch, a prominent writer on mental maps, noted that our perceptions of space are partial, fragmentary and mixed with other concerns – "…. the image is the composite of them all."[4] Most behavioral geographers apply this concept to personal spaces such as neighborhoods or cities, but there is an easy analogy with how we come to understand strategic spaces as well.   As will be seen, our understanding of strategic space is a composite of geography and many subjective factors. Nor are these spaces immutable.   As the fall of the Berlin Wall demonstrated, what can

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[4] Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), p.2.

appear to be almost permanent geo-strategic divisions in the world sometimes disappear very quickly.   Nevertheless, our fragmentary and relatively transient conceptions of how states should be grouped and where regions begin and end can have a profound effect on strategic behavior.

The Bay of Bengal as a strategic space

The remainder of this article will examine evolving strategic perceptions of the Bay of Bengal, the huge, largely enclosed, bay in the northeast Indian Ocean, and consider the strategic interaction among the states surrounding the Bay: India, Sri Lanka (formerly called Ceylon), Bangladesh (East Pakistan), Myanmar (Burma), Thailand (Siam), Malaysia (Malaya), Singapore and Indonesia (the Dutch East Indies).[5] It will ask whether many of the strategic problems and interactions in the Bay of Bengal should be best understood in terms of the Bay of Bengal as a coherent space – one that overlays but does not necessarily replace traditional understandings of regions.

The Bay of Bengal derives its strategic significance from several factors: first, from its littoral states which comprise a large portion of Asia's emerging states, including around 37% of Asia's total population; and second, from the almost unique strategic position of the Bay as the connection between the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean, via the Malacca Strait. The Bay of Bengal and the narrow Malacca Strait is transited by around one third of global trade, including some 82% of China's oil imports[6] and is projected to have some 140,000 major commercial ship movements by 2020. In this respect, the Bay of Bengal arguably has

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[5] The term Bay of Bengal will generally be used to include associated waters of the Andaman Sea and the Malacca Strait on the east of the Bay. This article will generally use country names applicable in the relevant time period being discussed, except where it would lead to confusion.

[6] United States, Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2012,* p.42*.*

a strategic significance akin to the South China Sea, its Pacific "twin" on the other side of Southeast Asian archipelago.

Importantly, the Bay of Bengal and its littoral are beset by a great number of security problems which in many ways exceed those that exist in the South China Sea. These include concerns over freedom of navigation in the Bay of Bengal/Malacca Strait; maritime boundary disputes involving access to energy resources; recent or ongoing separatist insurgencies in almost all of the littoral states; widespread piracy and smuggling; and many environmental security problems, including tsunamis, cyclones and not least the possible inundation of large parts of the littoral by rising sea levels. On the face of it, at least, there would seem to be good reason to argue that the security issues faced by this area should be understood and analyzed in a coherent manner as a single strategic "space." Many of these problems affect most if not all of the littoral states and may require a collective response. There are also growing expectations of strategic leadership from India, which recently declared itself to be a "net security provider" to its region.[7] However, what that means in practice is not yet clear and there remain serious questions about the ability of littoral states to act together on security issues or India's willingness or ability to assume security responsibilities.

An interconnected strategic space

That there exists a dividing line between South Asia and Southeast Asia running through the middle of the Bay of Bengal hasn't always been so clear. Indeed, 75 years ago the terms for these "regions" did not even exist in popular perceptions. Up until the 1940s, the littoral of the Bay of Bengal was highly interconnected in terms of flows of trade and people and to a large extent in terms of political administration and security.

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[7] "India well positioned to become a net provider of security: Manmohan Singh," *The Hindu,* 23 May 2013.

There is a considerable amount of scholarship on the trading, cultural and human linkages across the entire Indian Ocean in the pre-colonial era, and the Bay of Bengal is a part of that story.[8] The lands surrounding the Bay were linked by geography and climate, with the Bay of Bengal acting as the principal connector. Trade by sailing dhows was encouraged by the particular effects of the Monsoon, which provided regular southwesterly winds from April to September, which reverse to become northwesterly from November to March. The Monsoon's regular rainfall allowed intensive agricultural production, helping to produce a surplus for trade. Although political and military power was highly fragmented among various kingdoms around the littoral, India played a profound cultural role throughout the Bay. The area's main religions, Buddhism, Sufi Islam and Hinduism, were all derived from or through India and for centuries culturally Indianized kingdoms ruled large parts of modern day Indochina and Indonesia, as those names attest.

In the colonial era, the Bay was dominated by a succession of European powers. First, the Portuguese, whose principal strategic interest in the Bay was to secure trading routes between Europe and East Asia, including the Spice Islands (now in eastern Indonesia). The Portuguese treated the Indian Ocean as a strategic whole, referring to the lands running from the Cape of Good Hope to Timor as the 'State of India'. Their strategy, which is most closely associated with the adventurer and imperialist, Afonso de Albuquerque, involved treating the Indian Ocean as a *mare clausum* (or 'closed sea') over which Portugal had exclusive jurisdiction that was enforced by interdicting any ship found without a Portuguese *cartaz* or permit. Their principal objectives were to monopolize trade between Asia and Europe, and between India and China.

Portugal implemented its strategy by taking control of all major entry points into the Indian Ocean and key points between. In the early 16th century, they took the port of Malacca on

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[8] See, for example, K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and M.N.Pearson, *The World of the Indian Ocean* 1500-1800: Studies in Economic, Social and Cultural History (Aldershot: Variorum, 2005).

its eponymous strait, allowing them to control the main gateway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Major trading hubs and bases were also built at São Tomé (now Mylapore, India), Hugli (near modern day Kolkata, India) and Colombo. This system formed the basis for Portuguese military and economic domination of the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indian Ocean for more than a century. Although Portuguese predominance ended in the mid 17th century, Afonso de Albuquerque's ideas continue to be highly influential in strategic thinking in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Navy's 2007 *Maritime Military Strategy* invokes Albuquerque's name to justify India's strategy of seeking control of the Strait of Malacca and other Indian Ocean chokepoints.[9] As the Indian Navy's 2004 *Indian Naval Doctrine* comments: 'Control of the chokepoints could be useful as a bargaining chip in the international power game, where the currency of military power remains a stark reality'.[10] Control over the Strait of Malacca continues to be regarded as a key strategic prize.

Britain gained control over the entire Indian Ocean when it became the dominant global naval power at the beginning of the 19th century. Britain's primary strategic objectives in the eastern Indian Ocean over the next 150 years were to protect India from maritime threats and protect trade routes to China and the Pacific. Like the Portuguese, the British seized control of key chokepoints. In the Bay of Bengal, they established Penang and Singapore as way-ports for trade to China, and they built major naval bases at Singapore on the Malacca Strait in the east and at Trincomalee in the west.

Britain became the colonial or suzerain power over most of the territory surrounding the Bay of Bengal including almost the entire Indian subcontinent as well as Ceylon, Burma and Malaya. Britain's control of India was the key to this empire and its huge population, resources and economic power made it naturally dominant over its surrounds. Between the early 1800s and 1942, British-administered India held virtually complete strategic dominance over the Bay of Bengal, in military, economic, demographic and political terms.

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[9] Indian Navy, *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy*, 2007, p.59.

[10] India Navy, *Indian Maritime Doctrine,* 2004*,* p. 64.

The Royal Navy was responsible for maritime security in the Bay and the British Indian Army for the surrounding territories. According to one historian, the Indian Army and the Royal Navy were "the 'hammer and anvil' upon which Britain's paramount power depended."[11] While the British Army in India was largely employed to maintain domestic security, the Indian Army, which was around twice its size, was available for Imperial duties.[12] Indian troops were cheaper, could be deployed without Parliamentary approval and were considered better suited for tropical climates than British forces. Thus Indian forces formed the backbone of military campaigns or deployments throughout the Bay of Bengal including in Ceylon (1942-45); Burma (1824-26; 1852; 1885-87; 1942-47), Siam (1945-46); Malaya (1874-76; 1941-42; 1945-46) and the Dutch East Indies (1811; and 1945-46).

To the territories they controlled around the Bay, the British also brought with them millions of indentured workers, administrators and traders, mostly Indians. Between 1834 and 1937, an estimated 30 million Indians worked overseas.[13] Of these some 28 million Indian migrant workers crossed and recrossed the Bay.[14] These workers formed the basis of large Indian communities that changed the demographics and economics of the area. Indian laborers and merchants played fundamental roles in the creation of the tea industry in Ceylon, the rice industry in Burma and the rubber industry in Malaya.

Calcutta was the political centre point and economic hub for most of the Bay. British India founded the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca and Singapore) in the eastern Bay of Bengal, and they were administered from Calcutta for many years until they were established as separate colonies. Calcutta was the Bay's main trading hub and principal

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[11] Ashley Jackson, "Britain in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol.7, No.2 (December 2011), pp.145- 160.

[12] Karen A. Rasler, William R. Thompson, *The Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490-1990,* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p.149.

[13] Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.223.

[14] Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: the Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Immigrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p.28.

source of capital. While there was naturally a high degree of political and strategic coordination among the British colonies, there was also considerable cooperation with Dutch colonial authorities in the Dutch East Indies. Only Siam managed to stay beyond the direct control of Europeans.

A space divided

The interconnections across the Bay of Bengal were badly interrupted by World War II, which together with decolonization in the following years, led to the strategic fragmentation of the area.

As noted previously, in May 1942 a victorious Japanese army stood at India's border. In previous few months, Japan had destroyed much of the colonial system in the Bay of Bengal, conquering Malaya, Singapore, Siam, Burma and the Dutch East Indies in quick succession. But despite the apparently overwhelming strategic position of Japanese forces, the Imperial Army halted at the border and nor did they attack India's east coast beyond some scattered air raids. In fact, Japan had little interest in moving west beyond Burma during the Pacific War.[15] There were good practical reasons: India was seen as too big and ungovernable and there were considerable geographic obstacles. But underlying Tokyo's decision was a sense that India did not fall within Japan's primary strategic sphere - India was seen as not belonging within the so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Some Japanese strategic planners assumed that India would eventually become associated in one way or another with Japan's new sphere of influence, but this was not essential: Tokyo also saw India as a potential pawn for future diplomatic bargaining with other powers.[16]

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[15] Although the Japanese army made small incursions into India's northeast territories in 1944, these were primarily an attempt to disrupt Allied supply lines to China.

[16] Milan Hauner *India in Axis Strategy: Germany, Japan, and Indian Nationalists in the Second World War* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), p.107.

Tokyo's wartime perspectives reflected a particular cultural and geographic understanding of where Asia began and ended. For many, India was seen as occupying a wholly separate cultural, economic and geo-strategic sphere. A quarter of a century later, the distinguished Indian journalist, Durga Das, noted: "A majority of [Japanese] bureaucrats prefer to exclude India from the Asian personality, which according to them ends on the borders of Burma and Malaysia."[17] This was a view shared by many in East Asia, reflecting an understanding of a division between the Indian and Sinic civilizational areas (which was perceived to include not only China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, but also "tributary" states in Southeast Asia). Interestingly, this perceived civilizational divide did not necessarily coincide with language, religion or even cultural influences.

Decolonization, disconnection and divergence

If the strategic domination of the Bay of Bengal by British India was rudely interrupted by the war, it was shattered by the end of colonial rule in the following years. From the late 1940s trade and human movement across the Bay was not permitted to return to pre-World War II levels as the governments of newly independent states concerned themselves with protecting local industries and restricting labor immigration. National governments also began pursuing quite divergent strategic paths. Although the ideas of nonalignment or Asian solidarity to some extent bound them together they also remained highly conscious of their own security concerns and threats, which frequently emanated from their neighbors.

The strategic fragmentation of the Bay began in the 1930s, when the Depression devastated export industries throughout the Bay, increasing social and economic tensions. British colonial administrations began acting with greater autonomy, partly reflecting the growing national aspirations and concerns of the colonial subjects. The British Indian administration in Madras, for example, pursued something akin to a foreign policy in negotiating with British colonial authorities in Burma, Malaya and Ceylon over the rights of Indian migrant

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[17] Durga Das, 'Japan's Role in Asia', *Indian and Foreign Review,* Vol. 7 No.18, 1 July 1970.

workers.[18] The administrative separation of Burma from India in 1937 and its establishment as a separate colony also brought into sharp focus the position of a large Indian community in Burma which exceeded 1 million people (including around half the population of Rangoon).[19] Resentment against the economic domination by Indian merchants and workers compelled the British administration to expel many Indians and impose passport requirements on new entrants.[20]

But it was the Independence of India in 1947, and its inward turn for the next 40 years, that led to the biggest change in the strategic dynamics of the Bay of Bengal. In the decades following Independence India disclaimed any practical role in the security of its eastern neighbours. At Independence, India turned its back on Imperial strategic traditions that emphasized British India's role as a security provider in the entire Indian Ocean region. In its place India adopted a distinctive 'Nehruvian' strategy. At its core was the concept of nonalignment, whose key principles, as espoused by India, were nonviolence, international cooperation and Afro-Asian solidarity. Nehruvian strategic doctrine eschewed a direct security role for India beyond the subcontinent and Nehruvian ideology and rhetoric frequently overshadowed the practical economic and security concerns of India's neighbors.

Nehru refused to recognise the legitimacy of colonial-era security linkages across the Bay of Bengal. He had particular contempt for Western-leaning governments of what is now called Southeast Asia, calling them 'Coca Cola governments' and discouraged attempts by Indian diplomats to engage with them over their security concerns.[21] But while Nehru resented the growing US strategic and cultural influence in Southeast Asia, he did not cultivate India's own relationships in the region. During the 1960s there were several proposals for India to

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[18] Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, p.190.

[19] K Kesavapany, A Mani, P Ramasamy (eds.), *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008)*, p.34.

[20] Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, pp.190-1.

[21] J.N. Dixit, *Makers of India's Foreign Policy: Raja Ram Mohun Roy to Yashwant Sinha* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2004), p.12.

join in collective defence arrangements across southern Asia to counter Chinese-sponsored subversion and fill a power vacuum that was feared would arise following the British withdrawal east of Suez. But consistent with its principles of nonalignment, India refused to participate in any regional security arrangements. India's persistent downplaying of regional security concerns may have seemed "callous, incredible and unrealistic" to Southeast Asians,[22] but the Indians saw themselves as hardly capable of providing for their own security, let alone acting as a regional security provider. Nevertheless, India's perceived indifference to its eastern neighbours severely undermined India's strategic role across the Bay of Bengal, which it is still trying to rebuild.

Another major structural change was Partition and the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. This was a strategic disaster for India. The enmity between India and Pakistan, including wars in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999, kept India strategically preoccupied in the subcontinent (largely focused north-westwards to the plains of Punjab and the mountains of Kashmir) and unable or unwilling to project its influence much beyond. The India-Pakistan conflict adversely affected India's relationships with Muslim-majority states, including Malaysia and Indonesia, which to a greater or lesser extent felt bound to support Pakistan. The carving out of East Pakistan from Bengal also physically distanced India from its eastern neighbors. Partition effectively moved India's sea coast westward to Calcutta. India's land connections with Burma were cut off, except via the northeast States which could only be accessed through the narrow "Chicken's Neck" between East Pakistan and China.

India's economic connections in the region were also undermined by India's post-Independence policies that promoted economic autarky and government control of the economy. As part of its inward turn, India imposed high barriers to trade and investment that severely restricted its economic links with its eastern neighbours. The so-called 'Hindu rate of growth' averaging around 3% p.a. that India experienced from the 1950s to the

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[22] 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 at p.74.

1980s, made India a by-word for failed economic policies and contrasted sharply with the 'economic miracles' being experienced in East Asia during that period.

The Indian diaspora further complicated relations. Indeed, in the immediate post-Independence years, Nehru regarded the large Indian immigrant communities scattered across the Bay of Bengal, especially in Burma, Sir Lanka and Malaya, as more of a liability than an asset.[23] Burma expelled much of its large Indian community in 1962; in Sri Lanka tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities led to a bitter civil war lasting more than 25 years; while the inferior economic position of the Indian Tamil community in Malaysia continues to be the cause of friction.

Divergent strategic perspectives were also reflected to a greater or lesser degree in other Bay of Bengal states. Although many paid lip service to the rhetoric of pan-Asianism and Nonalignment that was so loudly proclaimed at Bandung in 1955, there was little practical cooperation among them on security issues. Each had its own concerns. Sri Lanka was worried about India's hegemonic tendencies, allowing the Royal Navy to maintain its base at Trincomalee until 1958. Thailand, concerned about Chinese hegemony and the impact of Communist insurgencies in Indochina, invited the US to establish a large military presence under the cover of SEATO. Malaya fought a Chinese Communist inspired insurgency as well as infiltration from Indonesia during the *Konfrontasi*, mostly relying on British and Australian forces. India was increasingly concerned about Indonesia's territorial ambitions in the Andaman Islands.[24] Burma represented an extreme case, simultaneously fighting Chinese forces on its northern border and numerous ethnic-based insurgencies. Its internal preoccupations led it to increasingly turn its back on the world and retreat into a prickly neutralism.

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[23] Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, p.225.

[24] See David Brewster, "The relationship between India and Indonesia," *Asian Survey* Vol. 51, No. 2 (March/April 2011), pp.221-244.

Thus the process of decolonization during the 1940s and 1950s broke political and economic interconnections across the Bay and led to strategic fragmentation.   India, which might have inherited the British mantle as regional security provider, turned inward, while the other newly independent states around the Bay battled divergent security threats both internal and external.   There were few common strategic perceptions.

The idea of Southeast Asia

The process of decolonization led to the drawing of new maps throughout Asia, including in particular a new mental map of Southeast Asia. Academics and policy-makers divided the post-World War II world into new "regions" that has been likened to a new Scramble for Africa, drawing lines that were just as bold as the old imperial boundaries.[25] Just as a new region to be called "Southeast Asia" gained popularity from the late 1940s, the states of the Indian subcontinent were grouped into a region now called "South Asia."[26]

The term Southeast Asia (or "South East Asia") first came to prominence in 1943, when the Allies established a South-East Asia Command headquartered in Ceylon to coordinate the fight against Japanese forces to the east of India. The South-East Asia Command actually coordinated the combat activities of most Allied forces throughout the southern Asian littoral, including in India, Burma, Ceylon and Malaya and more or less in Thailand, the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina.   Nevertheless, its name and its focus on the territories east of the Indian subcontinent played an important role in popularising the idea of Southeast Asia as a separate strategic region.   The term was again given prominence in strategic thinking when in 1954 the United States sponsored the establishment of the South

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[25] Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia,"in Paul H. Kratoska et al, *Locating South Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (Singapore: Singapore University Press,2005), pp.275-308, at p.276.
[26] Used as an apparently politically neutral term to avoid offending non-Indians. "Ideas of South Asia: Symbolic Representations and Political Uses," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal,* 19 March 2013. http://samaj.revues.org/3527.

East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) as a sort of NATO of Asia. Although its membership may not have corresponded with current conceptions of Southeast Asia (including as it did the United States, Australia, New Zealand, France, Britain and Pakistan), it nevertheless gave further respectability to Southeast Asia as a strategic region.[27]

The *de facto* division of South Asia and Southeast Asia into separate regions was made *de jure* through the formation of ASEAN in 1967 as a grouping of Southeast Asian states. Although broadly anti-Communist and pro-Western, it sought to balance the security role in Southeast Asia of the United States and other extra-regional powers.   This more than anything else formalized the division of the Bay of Bengal.   From its establishment with 5 member states, ASEAN now has 10 members, with the western border of the grouping ending at the borders of India.

While our mental map of what constitutes Southeast Asia is now broadly understood, even in the late 1960s, the boundaries of this region were unclear.   Southeast Asian states, such as Singapore, reportedly tried to encourage India to join ASEAN upon its formation, perhaps with a view to finding a balance with large states within that grouping. India, suspicious of ASEAN's pro-Western tilt, declined any tentative approaches.[28]   A more concrete proposal related to Sri Lanka's membership, which was invited to join by Malaysia. Sri Lanka was understood to be initially keen on the proposal, reflecting a desire to hedge against India's overwhelming power and its ideological alignment with ASEAN's core members. It is not clear why its membership did not proceed – although on one account it was opposed by Singapore.[29] This prompted C. Gunasingham, Sri Lanka's High Commissioner in Singapore,

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[27] See Donald K. Emmerson "Southeast Asia": What's in a Name? *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Mar., 1984), pp. 1-21. Sri Lanka also considered joining SEATO but declined from a combination of pressure from New Delhi and domestic political reasons.

[28] Kripa Sridharan, *The ASEAN Region in India's Foreign Policy* (Brookfield: Dartmouth, 1996), p.49.

[29] Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Asean at 40: What could have been?"*The Nation,* 27 July 2007. http://nationmultimedia.com/2007/07/23/opinion/opinion_30041947.php.

to comment that "Sri Lanka's hope of breaking away from its moorings in South Asia and becoming a trading nation with links to Southeast and East Asian nations as well as to all of littoral Asia was lost".[30] Colombo later made a formal application in 1981 to join the grouping, which was declined for geographic reasons – by that time it was generally understood that Southeast Asia did not extend to Sri Lanka.[31]   Burma rejected an invitation to join the original grouping in 1967, primarily due to its isolationist diplomatic stance. But its admittance as a member in 1997 as part of a post-Cold War expansion of the grouping brought the institutional border of Southeast Asia up to India.

The establishment of ASEAN also reflected and reinforced differing Cold War alignments and gave the division of the Bay of Bengal an ideological element. ASEAN states were anti-Communist and essentially reliant on the United States for security, while India pursued its rhetorical policy of non-alignment, which from 1971 involved a tilt towards the Soviet Union. Many ASEAN states showed considerable disquiet at India's relationship with the Soviet Union, including concerns that India may give the Soviet Navy access to bases in the Bay of Bengal. The Indonesian Foreign Minister made clear that arrangements of the nature of the 1971 Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty would not be acceptable within ASEAN.[32] Indira Gandhi's support for Communist Vietnam's takeover of Cambodia in 1980 brought India's standing with ASEAN to its lowest point, confirming for many that India was acting at the bidding of Moscow. These differing alignments were only resolved with the end of the Cold War.

The idea of the Asia Pacific

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[30] S.R. Nathan, *An unexpected journey: path to the presidency* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2011), p.351.

[31] Shelton U. Kodikara, *Foreign policy of Sri Lanka: a Third World perspective* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1982).

[32] Asian Recorder, 27 May-2 June 1972, p.10794.

The conceptual division between South and East Asia was further cemented by the development of the "Asia Pacific" as a new economic and political "region" in the 1980s. The Asia Pacific region was centered on East Asia, but also included Australasia and the United States. In the Bay of Bengal it extended as far as the western border of ASEAN. The idea was initially pushed by countries such as Japan and Australia in the 1970s and 80s that that wanted to better bind the United States with the economically vibrant East Asia. Although primarily driven by economics, the idea of the Asia-Pacific also had a strong underlying security element: keeping the United States as a benign offshore balancer and the main security provider to the region. As a result, Asia-Pacific institutions such as APEC, as well as forums built on existing ASEAN arrangements excluded India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Although there is considerable support among some countries for including India in APEC, there is a moratorium on new membership.

The success of ASEAN and Asia Pacific groupings in promoting intra-regional economic integration stands in stark contrast with the low level of regional interconnectedness of South Asia. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) acts as a regional grouping comprising India and its South Asian neighbours. But since its establishment in 1985 it has been hobbled by the India-Pakistan dispute and there is little indication that SAARC will become a real engine for regional cooperation any time soon. According to one study, South Asia is also the least economically integrated region in the world. In 2008, intra-regional trade among the South Asian states constituted a mere 4% of all international trade by them. Trade between India and its neighbours constituted less than 3% of its total foreign trade.[33] In comparison, in the Asia Pacific, intra-regional trade constitutes around 50% of total trade.

The recreation of the Bay as a strategic space

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[33] Razeen Sally, *Regional economic integration in Asia: The track record and prospects,* ECIPE Occasional Paper No.2, 2010.

The conceptual division of the Bay of Bengal is now being challenged by the rise of India as an economic and military power and a consequent push to develop better connections between India and East Asia. Indeed, as Buzan predicted, the rise of India as a major power is allowing it to transcend the confines of South Asia and spread its strategic influence further, including into Southeast Asia. Writers such as Raja Mohan argue that this involves a partial return of India to the security role it played under the British Raj,[34] while others would see it in terms of a natural expansion of India's strategic space. In any event, the phenomenon will require changes to our mental map of the southern Asian littoral.

In the early 1990s, in response to economic crisis and strategic isolation, New Delhi adopted its Look East Policy that was intended to rebuild India's economic links with the thriving economies of Southeast Asia. Several ASEAN states also saw this as an important opportunity to access the huge Indian market. Although it has taken much longer than was originally hoped this policy is now bearing fruit and bilateral trade between India and ASEAN is now growing quickly, reaching US$79 billion in 2011–2012. There have also been significant increases in two way direct investment between India and ASEAN over the last few years. A multilateral ASEAN-India Free Trade Area Agreement was concluded in 2009 and India has also finalized comprehensive bilateral free trade arrangements with Singapore and Malaysia, with several other bilateral trade agreements under negotiation.

India has also actively sought to join various ASEAN-centred groupings in an effort to improve political interconnections. India became a full dialogue partner to ASEAN in 1995 and an annual India-ASEAN summit has been held since 2002. India joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a regional security forum, in 1996[35] and has effectively acceded to two ASEAN-sponsored regional security treaties.[36] In 2005 India was included in the first East Asia Summit. Together, these moves have much reduced India's isolation from East

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[34] C. Raja Mohan, "The Return of the Raj," The American Interest, May-June 2010.

[35] Since then the ARF has also been extended to include Pakistan (2004), Bangladesh (2006) and Sri Lanka (2007).

[36] The Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

Asian centred arrangements, although in some cases there is still a feeling that India lies outside the core of these groupings.

In 1997, a new subregional organization was also formed which gives some expression to the Bay of Bengal as a "region". The grouping, now called the Bay of Bengal Initiative for MultiSectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation organization (BIMSTEC), includes India, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan as members. However, the absence of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia means that it represents only a partial step in creating a forum to address issues that affect the whole Bay.[37]   The BIMSTEC grouping has relatively few concrete achievements to date, to a significant extent reflecting the internal political turmoil and violent insurgencies that have kept key members such as Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand internally focused for some years.

BIMSTEC is primarily focussed on the promotion of technical and economic cooperation and does not explicitly have a broader agenda. India initially refused to discuss any security-related issues despite promptings from Thailand, but in 2001 it brought terrorism onto BIMSTEC's agenda.[38]   In 2004 most of its members agreed in principle to establish a new free trade area encompassing the Bay of Bengal which has not yet been implemented. Although there have been ambitious calls to establish a Bay of Bengal Economic Community,[39] the negotiation of BIMSTEC free trade agreements have progressed at a

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[37] It has been suggested that Thailand sought to exclude its larger or wealthier ASEAN partners from the arrangement so that it could maximise its own economic opportunities amount BIMSTEC members. P Shanthie Mariet D'Souza & Rajshree Jetly (eds), *Perspectives on South Asian security* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2013), p.87.

[38] Arndt Michael, *India's Foreign Policy and Regional Multilateralism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.150.   In 2004, the Times of India commented that the grouping was renamed and focussed on the Bay of Bengal as a way of keeping Pakistan from "gate crashing" the grouping. See ibid., p.155.

[39] "Future Directions of BIMST-EC: Towards a Bay of Bengal Economic Community," RIS Policy Brief, No.12, February 2004. *www.ris.org.in/images/RIS_images/pdf/pbno12.pd*

glacial pace. This may suggest that there is little consensus yet on economic complementarities among its members.

However for India, BIMSTEC, which does not include Pakistan as a member, may represent an important alternative to SAARC as a key regional grouping. Indeed, New Delhi has threatened to promote BIMSTEC as an alternative to SAARC for regional economic integration in face of what it perceived as Pakistani obstructionism.[40] According to one influential Indian commentator and analyst, Sanjay Baru: "Rather than expend energy on breathing new life into a moribund SAARC, India will be better off allowing SAARC to grow at its own pace and at a pace that Pakistan will allow it to grow by, and instead devote greater energy and more resources to BIMSTEC."[41]

Recently New Delhi has given renewed focus to the BIMSTEC grouping, with particular emphasis on the need to develop improved transport connectivity across the southern Asian littoral.[42]   This would include the development of road infrastructure (and, significantly, accompanying transit rights) across Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand.   This idea is to connect major manufacturing areas in eastern India with Thailand and even Indo-China, avoiding the circuitous routes through the so-called Chicken's Neck in northeast India. India has also sponsored the development of new connections between its northeast States and the Bay of Bengal through the development of a road and river route that connects with new port facilities in Sittwe in Myanmar.   New Delhi believes that the economic development spurred by such infrastructure will be an important factor in promoting political stability among Bay of Bengal states.   As Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared at the third BIMSTEC Summit held in Myanmar in March 2014: "Connectivity –

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[40] Michael, *India's Foreign Policy and Regional Multilateralism,* p.161.

[41] Sanjay Baru, "Trade and Security: Multilateral and Regional Opportunities," *Times of India,* 16 November 1999.

[42] India is also a member of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation group (whose members also include Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) to promote greater east-west transport connectivity between South Asia and Indochina.

physical and digital – is the key to [BIMSTEC's] vision and can be a driver of cooperation and integration in our region."[43]

India's growing economic and political links across the Bay of Bengal have been accompanied by an expansion of India's primary area of strategic interest. India has long aspired to be recognised as the predominant power in the Bay of Bengal and it now also aspires to assume a greater strategic role in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. These ambitions are broadly consistent with the perspectives of many ASEAN states, which generally see India as a positive factor in the regional balance of power, although sometimes with a degree of ambivalence.

New Delhi's strategic interests in the Bay of Bengal are driven by several imperatives. First, the Bay represents a defensive space against security threats that may emanate from or through the Southeast Asian archipelago. Second, the ability to control the sea lines of communication that pass through the Malacca Strait and cross the Bay of Bengal would provide India with considerable strategic leverage, particularly in dealing with extra-regional powers such as China. Third, are India's concerns about numerous security issues that may either directly threaten India's interests or otherwise require it to act as a regional security provider. Political instability in the Bay of Bengal, including ethnic conflicts or flows of large numbers of refugees could also become a matter of significant concern for India. These last that are the most likely to be played out in coming years.

These imperatives have led India to reinforce its defence capabilities in the Bay of Bengal in recent years, effectively "rebalancing" the proportion of resources committed to its eastern waters. India's dominant strategic position is underpinned by its possession of the Andaman and Nicobar islands, an archipelago which runs north-south near the western end of the Malacca Strait. As the grandfather of Indian naval strategy, KM Panikkar, once commented, these islands potentially give India strategic bases that could "convert the Bay

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[43] "Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's statement at the third BIMSTEC Summit", *NDTV.com,* 4 March 2014. Accessed March 2014.

of Bengal into a secure area."[44] The islands also form a natural base for India to project power into the Malacca Strait and have been described by a Chinese naval writer as constituting a "metal chain" that could lock the western end of the Malacca Strait tight.[45] Since the 1990s, India has developed extensive military facilities in the Andaman and Nicobars, including port facilities for India's Eastern Fleet and air bases, reportedly with the encouragement and support of Washington.[46] This has a considerable impact on the balance of power in the eastern Bay of Bengal and the Malacca Strait.

While expanding its own capabilities, India has also sought to improve bilateral defence relationships in the Bay. Despite strains caused by Sri Lanka's civil war, Delhi has developed close relations with the Sri Lankan Navy, which includes a trilateral maritime security agreement with the Maldives.[47] India has also been developing closer relations with the Myanmar armed forces, including recent agreements on coordinated actions against cross-border insurgents, the supply of patrol vessels and training. In the east of the Bay, New Delhi has developed a close defence relationship with Singapore, but relationships have been slower to develop with Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.[48] India conducts symbolic biannual joint naval patrols with each of Indonesia and Thailand supposedly aimed at piracy and smuggling. However, overall the relationships in the eastern Bay (with the exception of Singapore) still lack much substance. This may reflect caution on both sides or sometimes just a lack of focus. Among other things, Indonesia and Malaysia guard their territorial

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[44] K.M.Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History,* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1945)*,* p.96*.*

[45] Zhang Ming, "The Malacca Dilemma and the Chinese Navy's Strategic Choices," *Modern Ships,* No.274, October 2006, p.23.

[46] Ramtanu Maitra, "India Bids to Rule the Waves: From the Bay of Bengal to the Malacca Strait" *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus,*19 October 2005.

[47] Which has recently been extended to include Mauritius and the Seychelles.

[48] See generally, David Brewster, "India's Defense Strategy and the India-ASEAN Relationship," *India Review,* Vol.12, No.3 (2013), pp.151-164.

rights in the Malacca Strait jealously, and are yet to be convinced that India should play a direct security role in those waters.

An important expression of India's leading role in the Bay of Bengal is its biennial MILAN naval "gathering" held at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands, which has grown to include the navies and coastguards of some 16 states in addition to India. Exercise *Milan 2014* was the largest ever, with representatives from all states from the extended Bay of Bengal area (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore), elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Australasia, and the western Indian Ocean. Exercise *Milan* is primarily an exercise in Indian naval diplomacy rather than an exercise for practicing technical skills. Since its inception in 1995, the biennial exercise has focused on building relationships and confidence among senior naval officers of participating states.   Exercise *Milan* is an expression of the expansion of India's area of strategic interest as it grows as a major power and its interest in fostering greater defence cooperation throughout the region. *Milan* has now become an important and highly successful part of India's growing 'soft' military power.

India is now seeking to create a multilateral maritime security grouping in the Bay of Bengal. In March 2014, Shiv Shankar Menon, the Indian National Security Advisor, announced that the Indian Ocean island states of Seychelles and Mauritius had joined India's existing naval arrangement with Sri Lanka and the Maldives, in a new Indian Ocean maritime security grouping   Importantly, Menon also expressly foreshadowed that in the future the arrangement may be expanded to encompass the Bay of Bengal or that a similar arrangement may replicated with relevant Bay of Bengal states.[49]   However, it is not yet clear which Bay of Bengal states such arrangements would extend to.

The idea of Indo-Pacific

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[49] http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/seychelles-mauritius-join-indian-ocean-maritime-security-group/article5758402.ece?css=print

The re-emergence of the Bay of Bengal as a strategic space worthy of analysis has been given conceptual force through the growing popularity of the idea of the "Indo-Pacific region." The "Indo-Pacific" involves understanding the Indian and Pacific Oceans as an increasingly interdependent strategic space, particularly in relation to maritime security, along the Asian littoral stretching from Vladivostok to the shores of Somalia.[50] It is in effect a proposed new mental map that looks at much of the western Pacific and northern Indian Ocean as a single space rather than two spaces that are divided at the Strait of Malacca or the western edge of ASEAN. Proponents of the Indo-Pacific point to a number of factors driving the idea, including the expansion of the strategic interests of both China and India into the others' area of core interest and the increasing economic interdependence of states right along the Asian littoral. In some ways it represents a recognition of the partial merger of the Northeast Asian, Southeast Asian and South Asian security systems previously foreshadowed by Buzan.

The concept is being promoted by many strategic analysts, and increasingly also political leaders, in the United States, India, Australia and Indonesia. They argue that it is becoming increasingly necessary to transcend the traditional mental divisions between the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean region, particularly in issues of maritime security. For some, the idea also involves the legitimization of an increased strategic role for India in the Bay of Bengal area, Southeast Asia and the western Pacific in the face of the rising power of China. The United States in particular is encouraging an expansion of India's security role eastwards into Southeast Asia and the Pacific, largely driven by concerns about China. But China has been hesitant to adopt a new mental map of the Indo-Pacific, perhaps fearing that the idea is merely intended to provide intellectual cover for an anti-China coalition of maritime powers such as the United States, Japan, India and Australia.[51]

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[50] Rory Medcalf, "The Indo-Pacific: What's in a Name?" *The American Interest,* November/December 2013, p.58.

[51] Dennis Rumley, Timothy Doyle & Sanjay Chaturvedi, "'Securing' the Indian Ocean? Competing regional security constructions", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 8, No.1 (2012), pp.1-20..

In certain ways the Bay of Bengal region could be seen as a subset of the wider Indo-Pacific, at least to the extent that it is largely driven by the expansion of India's area of strategic interest beyond its traditional preoccupations in South Asia.   The idea of the Indo-Pacific as an interdependent strategic system also has considerable implications for the mental map of the Bay of Bengal. At the geographic centre of the Indo-Pacific lies the Bay of Bengal, maritime Southeast Asia and the South China Sea.   The Bay of Bengal thus moves from the periphery of East Asia - where strategic thinkers could safely divide it into separate parts – to close to the centre of strategic concerns. This supports an imperative for the security problems and dynamics in the Bay of Bengal to be analyzed as a coherent space.   It also supports the further proposition that the Bay of Bengal, Malacca Strait and South China Sea need to be better understood as an interlinked strategic space in a manner that does not merely focus on position of the ASEAN states.

Conclusion

The evolving mental map of the Bay of Bengal has significant strategic implications.   The Japanese Army halted at Burma's western border in 1942 because it represented the limit of Japan's perceived strategic sphere. For decades India's strategic behavior was profoundly affected by a view that its principal area of strategic interest did not include archipelagic Southeast Asia.   Until recent times, many states in what was perceived to be the "Asia Pacific region" saw a bright dividing line in the middle of the Bay of Bengal that excused the need for them to engage with India.

The division of the Bay of Bengal is now becoming increasingly blurred, primarily due to the rise of India as an economic and military power. For India, the idea of the Bay of Bengal as a coherent space is important. The existence of a Bay of Bengal region helps legitimise India's ambitions to assume a security role throughout the Bay and potentially into the Malacca Strait. It would no longer be just an extra-regional power. By the same token, the existence of such a "region" could also provide institutional means for small or weak states such as Sri

Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan hedge against India's overwhelming dominance of the subcontinent.

A new mental map of the Bay of Bengal may also help Myanmar move beyond its longstanding strategic isolation.   While Myanmar is a poor and peripheral outpost of ASEAN, it occupies a central position in the Bay of Bengal. A Bay of Bengal regionalism could assist it in forming economic and infrastructure links to both east and west, making it a vital connection between the Indian subcontinent, Indochina and the Southeast Asian archipelago.   This could help provide political stability for a transition towards democracy.

The expansion of economic, political and security links between India and Southeast Asia is also generally seen as a positive for Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia – although not without a small degree of ambivalence.   Although Cold War era suspicions have largely dissipated, India is yet to prove itself as a useful and reliable strategic partner and as a net security provider to the Bay of Bengal.   That will be up to India.

While our understanding of strategic space has a strong basis in geography, it is also highly subjective and transient. For decades a clear division of the Bay of Bengal between South Asia and Southeast Asia represented a convenient mental shortcut to help in our understanding of the strategic dynamics of Asia, but this is no longer tenable. In recent years, China has made increasingly assertive claims over the South China Sea. As its power rises, India will increasingly see the Bay of Bengal as constituting its backyard where it carries special rights and responsibilities – although probably very different ones from those claimed by China elsewhere. A new mental map of the Bay of Bengal is necessary to help us better understand the consequences of this.