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# India Bids to Rule the Waves: From the Bay of Bengal to the Malacca Strait

## By Ramtanu Maitra

After years of hesitancy, India has now firmly acknowledged the strategic importance of the Andaman Sea. The Indian Navy is setting up a Far Eastern Naval Command (FENC) off Port Blair on the Andaman Islands - also known as the Bay Islands - located midway between the Bay of Bengal and the Malacca Strait - to give it "blue-water" status.

It is evident New Delhi believes that the new strategic command will remain vulnerable unless the entire Andaman Sea is brought under the full control of the Indian Navy.

A variety of factors led to New Delhi's full realization of the Andaman Sea's importance for overall regional security.

To begin with, the US's recent invitation to the Indian Navy to help patrol the Malacca Strait must have been viewed as an open US affirmation of its intent to bring India into the naval big league.

The Malacca Strait, thanks to the weakness of the Indonesian and Malaysian navies, has become a hunting ground of pirates. Bringing the Indian Navy to help patrol the strait would mean, according to some analysts, Washington's tacit approval of India's assertion of naval control over the Andaman Sea, the eastern mouth of the Indian Ocean and the waters that surround Sri Lanka.

Although India is not party to any security arrangement for the Malacca Strait, the immediate purpose of any joint patrols would be to prevent smuggling, piracy, drug and gun trafficking, poaching and illegal immigration in the region.

Oil-tanker traffic through the narrow strait, which already carries most of North Asia's oil imports, is projected to grow from 10 million barrels a day in 2002 to 20 million barrels a day in 2020 - much of that oil will be destined for the fast-growing market of China.

Even if it is true that it was Washington's wink and nudge that emboldened Indian authorities to stake control over the Andaman Sea, other reasons often debated in New Delhi's South Bloc were no less critical.

As one Indian analyst points out, in recent years, in addition to the US, whose navy has long had a presence in the Indian Ocean and has been stealthily sailing the waters of the Bay of Bengal, China has also shown a considerable interest in utilizing the Andaman Sea as an outlet to the Indian Ocean in the near future.

**New command**

There is little doubt that the FENC is a well thought out development. Indian naval officers have said that FENC, when fully developed by 2012, will have a chain of small anchor stations and three main bases.

As for models, Russia has a similar base in the Black Sea, and the US naval base at Hawaii comes close. FENC will be larger than the former US base in the Philippines at Subic Bay, spreading from Narcondam to Indira Point. Car Nicobar will serve as the vital link for various FENC stations.

The plan to set up FENC was set in concrete in 1995 following a closed-door meeting in Washington between then Indian prime minister, P V Narasimha Rao, and former US president, Bill Clinton. At the time, Pentagon officials made a formal request to the United Front coalition government in New Delhi to open the base, but for various reasons the Indian government did not respond.

The US is expected to partly fund FENC because it is considered part of a US-led security arrangement for Asia in which India plays a key role. US funding was cleared in 2000 when Clinton visited India.

FENC will have state-of-the-art naval electronic warfare systems that can extend as far as Southeast Asia. Also, the Russian Navy will likely assist in setting up a few armament projects.

The command will include submarines. The upgraded naval ship repair yard at Port Blair already refits minor war vessels. FENC will build and repair bigger ships. This will release more warships for operations and more operational space in alternative ports for fleet ships and submarines.

**China bogey?**

Some Indian naval authorities who are concerned over the increasing Chinese presence in these waters point out that with China controlling the Myanmar ports of Akyab, Cheduba and Bassein, India's approaches to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands could be

threatened.

China is developing all these naval ports with facilities to handle ships considerably larger and more sophisticated than the Myanmar Navy currently possesses. A host of Indian naval analysts say that if India does not have a strong naval presence in the region, in an emergency China could enforce a sea denial on India by using its warships stationed in Coco and other islands leased from Myanmar.

Coco Island and the northern-most tip of the Andamans are separated by just 18 kilometers of sea. Officials say that Coco is visible from the Andamans, and plenty of Chinese fishermen can be seen in its port.

Others point out that the town of One Pagoda Point, located near the mouth of the Irrawady in Myanmar, is emerging as the main logistic point for the Chinese. One Indian naval analyst goes to the extent of claiming that if China acquired control over the northeastern Sri Lankan port of Trincomalee, Beijing would be in a position "to convert the Bay of Bengal into a veritable Chinese lake". Whether New Delhi sees the developments in that light is not clear. But it is likely that Washington might.

In New Delhi, there has always been a cacophony of voices concerning how to react to China's growing presence in Myanmar. While no one in New Delhi denies that China is becoming a significant military power, there are many who see no reason to push to develop an adversarial relationship with China.

They point out that the encroaching Indian naval presence in the Andaman Sea could threaten Beijing and create roadblocks in steadily developing Sino-Indian cooperation. They are not quite sure that measures undertaken by New Delhi to enhance the security of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands will not threaten, or antagonize, Beijing even if India's intent is clearly stated and underlined.

**Other threats**

The increased activities of Pakistan along the Myanmar coast have also troubled Indian authorities. According to Jane's Defence, Pakistan has supplied Myanmar with several shiploads of ordnance and other military hardware, such as 106mm M40 recoilless rifles and various small arms over the past decade, and regularly trains Myanmar's soldiers to operate Chinese tanks, fighter aircraft and howitzers.

Myanmar's officers attend Pakistan's Military Staff College at Quetta in Balochistan province. Since 2001, a full-time Pakistani defense attache has been posted in Yangon.

In 2001, three Pakistan Navy ships, including a submarine and a destroyer, called at Yangon, and this was followed by President General Pervez Musharraf's visit to Myanmar. The joint communique issued at the end of the visit mentioned the Jammu and Kashmir issue, raising concern in New Delhi as Myanmar, rarely, if at all, comments on third countries.

Security sources said that Pakistan was negotiating to build an airstrip in the Chin region of Myanmar, which is contiguous to Mizoram.

Indian naval intelligence also claims that it is through these waters that guns are run into south Bangladesh and the northwestern coast of Myanmar, to arm Naga insurgents in India and the Rohingiyas of Myanmar along the Arakan Coast, as well as the Karens and the Kachins of northern Myanmar.

In addition, India's northeast, which has remained in deep turmoil for decades, has nurtured secessionist rebels using the waters of the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. Neighboring Myanmar has a number of powerful insurgent groups that are interlinked with the Indian northeastern rebels.

A large portion of illegal lethal weapons that come into northeast India originate in Cambodia. The underground route to South Asia is said to begin on the Ranong islands off the Thai coast, from where the arms are shipped through the Andaman Sea to Cox's Bazaar along the Bangladesh coast. From here, the weapons are divvied up into smaller consignments and carried to various destinations in Myanmar and northeastern India through different routes.

In early April 2004, on a tip-off, Bangladeshi joint forces seized 10 truckloads of submachine-guns, AK-47 assault rifles and other firearms and bullets in a swoop on the Karnaphuli coast in the port city of Chittagong. It was the largest-ever arms haul. Police and coast guard forces found the new submachine guns, AK-47 rifles, submachine carbines, Chinese pistols, rocket shells and launchers, hand grenades and bullets stuffed in about 1,500 wooden boxes.

But long before the big haul was reported, it was widely known that international arms smugglers were active in the coastal belts in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar. The vast coastline in the bay near Ukhia in Cox's Bazar and border points between Bangladesh and Myanmar had become a sanctuary for arms smugglers, mainly in the absence of an adequate security watch. The smugglers were bringing in sophisticated firearms, including pure military hardware such as AK-47 and M-16 rifles, long-range pistols, revolvers and grenades, among other items.

**Naval diplomacy**

But India's strengthening of its presence in the Andaman Sea is not just derived from negative developments in the region. New Delhi's interest in and involvement with Southeast Asia has been growing steadily over the past decade, and its concern for development of the Andaman basin has grown accordingly.

An agreement was signed in 2003 in Yangon by the foreign ministers of India, Myanmar and Thailand to develop transport linkages between the three countries. When complete, a 1,400-kilometer road corridor will be a highway of friendship linking the peoples of South Asia and Southeast Asia. India also reached agreement in principle with Myanmar and Bangladesh on the construction and operation of a pipeline that will bring natural gas from Myanmar to India via Bangladesh, according to reports by the Alexander Gas & Oil company newsletter.

The pipeline, which is likely to cost more than US$1 billion, will carry natural gas from the Shwe fields in Myanmar's Rakhine or Arakan state, through the Indian states of Mizoram and Tripura, and into Bangladesh before finally crossing back into India, all the way up to Kolkata.

India's planned building of a deep-sea port in Dawei in Myanmar, together with a new highway connecting it to Kanchanaburi in Thailand, will no doubt contribute further toward closer trade and commercial links between the two regions.

India's economic ties with Sri Lanka and Thailand, meanwhile, are growing. The Indo-Sri Lanka Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement spanning trade, services and investment will advance this further. A land bridge has been proposed across the Palk Strait

that separates India from Sri Lanka. This could also carry transmission lines to hook up Sri Lanka to India's Southern Region Electricity Grid, with the Kudankulam nuclear power plant serving as a base-load station, an observer pointed out.

These developments can also be put under India's broad "Look East" policy involving the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the "rim" states farther a field - like Japan and South Korea. It can be argued that India's diplomatic success with these nations is in large part due to India's naval diplomacy.

**Eye in the Sky**

Last month, the Malacca Strait's littorals - Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia - together with Thailand launched a joint air patrol initiative called "Eye in the Sky" over the strait.

While the initiative signals the continuing determination of the Malacca Strait's littorals to take care on their own the patrolling of this strategic waterway, countries such as India, which have stakes in the strait, believe that they have a role to play in its security system.

The Eye in the Sky initiative is part of the larger Malacca Strait's Security Initiative (MSSI). India is among the countries that are keen to participate in the MSSI.

After all, India is very much a part of the Malacca Strait security system, points out Vijay Sakhuja, a former officer in the Indian Navy and now senior fellow at the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation.

Sakhuja draws attention to the fact that although India might not be a littoral, it is contiguous to the strait. Indira Point - the southern tip of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands - is about 90 nautical miles from Indonesia's Banda Aceh.

The Indian Navy has been exercising with its counterpart in Singapore for more than a decade, with the Indonesian Navy since last year and with the Thai Navy since August. The naval exercises with Indonesia were held at the mouth of the Malacca Strait.

In a briefing paper "Cooperative Security in the Strait of Malacca: Policy Options for India" brought out in August, Sakhuja draws attention to the positive impression that India's naval patrolling has had on the Malacca littorals. "Many regional countries have seen the Indian Navy's vessels patrolling the Malacca Strait and are confident about its cooperative approach and its capability to challenge forces inimical to the safety and security of maritime enterprise in the Strait of Malacca. The Indian Navy has managed to play a highly positive and balanced role, fully cooperating with and augmenting the regional efforts, but always, as it were, from behind - from a secondary position. In fact, the Indian Navy's adaptable approach has won the confidence of the regional nations on the viability and the efficacy of coordinated patrols with the Indian Navy."

This positive impression and its close naval engagement with these countries notwithstanding, India has been moving cautiously with regard to carving a larger role for itself in the security of the Malacca. Sakhuja told Asia Times Online that the Indian government's approach has been to impress on the littorals that India will not force itself on them but will be "ready to provide assets when asked for".

Outlining the kind of role that the Malacca littorals would like India to play, Lawrence Prabhakar, associate professor at the Madras Christian College and research fellow at the maritime security program at the Institute for Defense and Strategic Studies in Singapore, points out that they would prefer joint exercises with the Indian Navy and Coast Guard in the region.
"Such an Indian role would have to be non-intrusive, cooperative and benign in operations," he told Asia Times Online, adding that this "would be most preferred in the event of a contingency or crisis resulting from maritime terrorism/piracy incidents rather than a staying presence".

Sakhuja said there were several ways in which India could contribute to the MSSI that would not threaten the sovereignty concerns of the Malacca littorals. Drawing attention to the outdated radar equipment for reconnaissance that is currently in use in the Malacca Strait, he suggested that India, which manufactures this electronic equipment, could supply it to the littoral states.

What it needs now is an invitation from the Malacca Strait littoral countries, not just the US.

**Expanding reach**

Indian naval diplomacy has now gone beyond the western shores of ASEAN. The October 3 visit to New Delhi by a Vietnamese defense delegation led by Lieutenant General Nguyen Thinh, head of the Vietnamese Defense Research Center, opened up new possibilities. Thinh is expected to ask for Indian help and technical assistance in acquiring a missile production capability.

Should India agree, what it would ask in return is a moot question. One analyst claims that Hanoi should be persuaded to allow the Indian Navy a basing option in Cam Ranh Bay, the finest natural deep water harbor in Asia.

All these developments underline the strategic importance - and, in particular, its recognition in New Delhi - of India's island territories, more particularly the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which command the Malacca Strait and the sea lanes that carry vast quantities of Gulf oil to Pacific destinations.

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