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India and the Bay of Bengal: Maritime Infrastructure, Strategic Autonomy and Regional Leadership

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

The Bay of Bengal is emerging as a critical theatre for India's maritime security, economic connectivity and wider Indo-Pacific strategy. Connecting India with Southeast Asia and the approaches to the Strait of Malacca, the region presents both strategic opportunities and vulnerabilities. This article examines India's maritime infrastructure, naval capabilities and regional partnerships, with particular focus on the proposed Tajpur Deep Sea Port and the strategic significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It also considers the challenges posed by regional competition, particularly with China, and argues for a rules-based approach that combines strategic capability with regional cooperation and resilience.

1. Introduction

For more than two millennia, the Bay of Bengal connected the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia through trade, migration, religion, and cultural exchange. Historical scholarship on the monsoon system shows how seasonal winds enabled maritime mobility between ports in eastern India and commercial centres across the Bay (Kaplan, 2010). The Chola expeditions against Srivijaya in the eleventh century also demonstrate that the Bay was a zone of political and naval interaction, not merely a geographic barrier.

In the twenty-first century, the Bay of Bengal has acquired renewed strategic significance. It connects India to Southeast Asia, provides approaches to the Strait of Malacca, and sits within maritime routes that support Asian manufacturing, energy transportation, and global supply chains (UNCTAD, 2024). India's maritime security strategy accordingly treats secure sea lines of communication, naval readiness, coastal infrastructure, and regional partnerships as mutually reinforcing priorities (Indian Navy, 2015).

This article assesses the case for a stronger Indian role in the Bay of Bengal. It does not assume that India should seek exclusive control of the region. Instead, it defines maritime leadership as the capacity to secure commerce, protect national interests, provide humanitarian assistance, shape regional institutions, and deter coercion while respecting international law. The analysis focuses on economic significance, strategic requirements, Tajpur, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the constraints that could limit India's ambitions.

2. The Bay's Geopolitical and Economic Importance

The Bay of Bengal occupies the eastern maritime space of South Asia and opens toward the Andaman Sea and the Strait of Malacca. Its littoral states include India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, while Thailand is connected to the Bay through the Andaman Sea. This geography places the Bay at the intersection of South Asian, Southeast Asian, and wider Indo-Pacific security dynamics. Therefore, India's peninsular geography gives it extensive access to the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

The Bay's importance is also demographic and commercial. ASEAN's large population and expanding consumer and manufacturing base create opportunities for India's eastern states, provided that ports, customs systems, roads, railways, and digital logistics are developed together. The relevant policy objective is not simply to export more goods, but to reduce the time and cost of moving goods between India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia. India's Act East Policy and the ASEAN–India comprehensive strategic partnership provide an institutional framework for this effort (Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.).

Maritime connectivity is central to this agenda because most of India's external trade travels by sea. Recent government reporting places the share at approximately 95 percent by volume and 70 percent by value, underscoring the economic consequences of disruption to ports and sea lanes (Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, 2025). UNCTAD's discussion of maritime chokepoints further illustrates why congestion, conflict, climate events, or disruption around major passages can affect trade well beyond the immediate region (UNCTAD, 2024).

The Bay is therefore both an economic opportunity and a security problem. Its development could support maritime trade, fisheries, offshore energy, coastal tourism, shipbuilding, logistics, and other blue-economy activities. At the same time, infrastructure must be resilient to cyclones, storm surges, earthquakes, and other hazards. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami is a reminder that maritime security includes disaster preparedness and the capacity to deliver rapid humanitarian assistance, not only naval competition (UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, n.d.).

3. Strategic Requirements for India

India's maritime leadership should be understood as rules-based influence rather than exclusive dominance. The practical requirements are interconnected. Maritime-domain awareness through coastal radar, satellite and aerial surveillance, information-sharing, and closer coordination among civilian and military agencies. Naval modernization that improves the ability to protect sea lines of communication, conduct anti-piracy and search-and-rescue operations, and respond to crises without making every regional activity appear confrontational. Port, shipyard, fuel, communications, and repair infrastructure that increases resilience and reduces excessive dependence on a small number of facilities. Economic connectivity linking ports to industrial clusters, inland freight corridors, neighbouring

countries, and ASEAN markets. Regional diplomacy through BIMSTEC, ASEAN-led mechanisms, and practical cooperation on disaster response, illegal fishing, marine pollution, and maritime safety.

India's policy initiatives already provide a broad framework. Act East emphasizes engagement with Southeast Asia; SAGAR links security with growth and regional public goods; and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative promotes cooperation across maritime domains. Their effectiveness will depend on implementation, predictable financing, and the willingness of regional partners to see Indian initiatives as inclusive rather than hegemonic (BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2024; Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.).

4. Tajpur Deep Sea Port

The proposed Tajpur Deep Sea Port in West Bengal could address a structural weakness in eastern India's maritime connectivity. Existing riverine facilities around Kolkata and Haldia face navigational and draft limitations, which can increase trans-shipment dependence and logistics costs. A modern deep-water facility could improve access for larger vessels and support the maritime development priorities identified in West Bengal's investment and infrastructure planning (West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation, n.d.).

Tajpur's potential benefits extend beyond the port itself. Better connectivity could serve West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, and parts of northeastern India by linking producers to external markets. Port-led development may attract warehousing, processing, manufacturing, ship repair, and logistics investment. These benefits, however, will arise only if the project is integrated with rail and road networks, efficient customs procedures, reliable power, environmental safeguards, and transparent land-acquisition processes.

The port could also contribute to energy resilience by supporting diversified import infrastructure, including storage and, where commercially and environmentally viable, LNG or other energy facilities. That argument should be framed as a possibility rather than an established outcome. Energy security depends on supplier diversification, strategic reserves, price exposure, domestic production, and the protection of sea lines of communication; a port alone cannot guarantee resilience.

Tajpur may have strategic utility because dispersed logistics and surveillance infrastructure can reduce pressure on existing facilities. Nevertheless, a commercial port should not automatically be described as a naval base or a 'phalanx.' Any dual-use function would require explicit policy decisions, security arrangements, and attention to the concerns of neighbouring states and local communities.

5. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are India's most important eastern maritime outpost. Their location near the western approaches to the Strait of Malacca gives India an advantageous position for monitoring shipping, supporting search and rescue, and responding to emergencies in the eastern Indian Ocean. The Andaman and Nicobar Command, India's only integrated tri-service command, provides an institutional basis for coordinating these activities.

The islands can improve maritime-domain awareness through radar, aircraft, unmanned systems, communications, and information-sharing with regional partners. They can also support humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief missions. However, calling them an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' overstates their role and risks presenting a complex territory as an offensive instrument. Their strategic value lies in a combination of geography, surveillance, logistics, diplomacy, and resilience—not in geography alone. A durable island strategy should therefore combine military preparedness with civilian investment and environmental governance.

6. Constraints and Counterarguments

China is likely to respond to Indian initiatives through a mixture of diplomacy, commercial investment, coast-guard activity, intelligence collection, and naval deployments. China's involvement in ports such as Kyaukpyu and Hambantota is often described through the 'string of pearls' framework, but port ownership, commercial access, and military use should not be treated as identical. India's response should avoid an automatic security dilemma by combining deterrence with regional development and confidence-building (Mohan, 2012; Singh, 2024).

Finally, regional states may welcome Indian assistance while resisting pressure to choose between India and China. India's most sustainable advantage is therefore likely to come from dependable public goods—disaster relief, maritime safety, capacity-building, and open connectivity—rather than from coercive claims to regional primacy. These limitations do not invalidate India's maritime strategy; they define the conditions under which it can succeed.

7. Conclusion

The Bay of Bengal is central to India's maritime future because it links national economic growth with regional connectivity, energy security, and Indo-Pacific strategy. The evidence supports a stronger Indian presence, but not an unlimited or exclusive conception of dominance. India's objective should be to build the capabilities and partnerships that allow it to secure commerce, respond to disasters, deter coercion, and contribute to a stable regional order. Tajpur could strengthen eastern India's access to deep-water shipping and support port-led industrial development if it receives credible financing, integrated hinterland infrastructure, and rigorous environmental and administrative planning. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands offer a complementary advantage for surveillance, logistics, and humanitarian response near the Strait of Malacca, but their development must account for ecological and social constraints. Together, these initiatives could reinforce the Act East Policy and improve India's strategic resilience.

The article's central finding is therefore conditional: India can become a leading maritime power in the Bay of Bengal only by combining

infrastructure with institutional capacity, naval modernization with reassurance, and strategic ambition with regional consent. A rules-based and cooperative approach would give India greater influence while reducing the risk that competition with China becomes a self-defeating regional confrontation.

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