

The Bay of Bengal Dynamics Due To the Quad: Implications for Bangladesh

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Abstract

After a decade-long hiatus, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, popularly known as the Quad, is back on the headlines of International Affairs, as news of its launch of the Malabar 2020 exercise stirs up intimidation and confusion. The Quad is arguably the latest attempt of the United States to create a united front to counter China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific region is known for its geopolitical and geo-strategic significance, and with China's influence growing rapidly thanks to its overambitious Belt-Road initiative, the Quad just might be the effective weapon the United States needs to reclaim its faltering presence in the region. But at what cost? The Bay of Bengal, the axis around which the Indo-Pacific region and its littoral states revolve around, was notably a region of peace, with not much attention of the global giants, whose interests were always guided towards the Mediterranean and the South China Sea. With this new growing interest, experts are dreading that the Bay of Bengal might evolve into a zone of rivalry. The Quad and their presence in the region could become a beacon for global politics and power-play, triggering conflict between major regional powers, such as India, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States.

Introduction

Matters of maritime have garnered renewed focus over the last few years, especially given the significance of dual ports and sea-routes enacted by China. Despite the fact that seas and oceans have always had an influence on cultures and civilizations, for

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several decades, especially during the latter half of the past century, the focus of states had switched from a maritime paradigm to a continental one. The importance of maritime connectivity has been brought back to the fore by several factors, such as the rising economic interdependence in the post-globalization world, the growth of China, and the slow but steady, yet looming, regional presence of India in the strategic scenario. This is particularly true of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which is bordered by several coastal countries that are becoming more prominent economically and politically. The Bay of Bengal is the key to serving as the precursor to enhanced bilateral and multilateral interaction within the IOR. Multilateral approaches such as 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' led by the U.S. and Japan, the One Belt and One Road Initiative' put forward by China and the Act East Policy as well as the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) as envisaged by India, are gaining momentum in response to geopolitical forces. The 'Look West' strategy of Australia is also noteworthy in this sense. As a convergent and perhaps, a competitive zone of all these approaches, the Bay of Bengal has once again gained strategic and economic significance. This paper will look at the growing strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal within the sphere of the emerging and increasingly contested geography of the Indo-Pacific region. And the question now remains, what role does Bangladesh have as a littoral state with its southern side opening directly into the Bay, making it prominent among its neighbors? The paper will particularly base its discussion on the Quad and their interests in the Bay and discuss the likely implications and possibilities for Bangladesh.

Bay of Bengal: A Zone Of Peace

Geographically speaking, the Bay of Bengal is a significant maritime location, with a significant impact on its surrounding littoral states, owing to the annual depression it puts them through. Cyclones and tidal waves make the countries extremely vulnerable, and despite having a regional giant, India, at one side, the Bay remains largely untapped. With only three nations bordering its northern reaches, Burma, Bangladesh, and India, it is almost a closed sea. Also, far from the main sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean, the northern waters of the Bay link East Asia's diverse economies to Europe's traditional markets through the oil-rich Gulf and rapidly rising Africa¹. In the recent past, the area has not seen any significant great-power rivalries or major conflicts. Regional cooperation and economic collaborations however focused on the Bay as a region of peace and opportunities for multilateralism. BIMSTEC, for example, was expected to strive “to help keep the waters of the Bay of Bengal open, free, and peaceful”, by looking to show how to manage and supervise them as a regional common². The proposal by the Sri Lankan Prime Minister for an “Indian Ocean Order” with “accepted rules and agreements” should be implemented in the bay³, to implement which, BIMSTEC was pressured to encourage its member states to embrace maritime multilateralism. These kinds of discussions made the region

¹ IPCC. (2020). Chapter 04: Sea Level Rise and Implications for Low-Lying Islands, Coasts and Communities. Retrieved from <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/chapter/chapter-4-sea-level-rise-and-implications-for-low-lying-islands-coasts-and-communities/>

² Xavier, C. (2018). Toward a Stronger BIMSTEC. Retrieved November 24, 2020, from Carnegie India website: <https://carnegieindia.org/2018/02/22/bridging-bay-of-bengal-toward-stronger-bimstec-pub-75610>

³ Ranil Wickremesinghe, “Global Power Transition and the Indian Ocean,” inaugural address, Indian Ocean Conference, September 1, 2016, 6, http://www.pmooffice.gov.lk/download/press/D00000000050_EN.pdf?p=7.

believe that economic collectives like BIMSTEC could ensure the peacefulness of the Bay and constrain any bellicose behavior of extra-regional powers. This sense of peace in the waters of the Bay of Bengal has, however, begun to erode over the last decade. The colonial competitiveness of the Bay region might be repeated, only this time, for regional strategic location and natural resources. Not to mention apart from the major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), the busiest East–West shipping route passes close by to the Bay of Bengal, making the significance of this maritime space in global geopolitics immense⁴. Once again, the Bay of Bengal is primed to become a zone of geopolitical competition between major powers and regional conflicts.

Mobilization of the Quad

Balance of power is crucial in the Indian Ocean Region, as many of the littoral states around the region have expressed deep concern about their economic well-being depends largely on the freedom of the SLOCs and their strategic security also depends on this concern. While it might be argued as to whether India should be the regional giant on whom the balance of power should weigh on, it has been seen that states like the United States, Japan, and Australia have all supported India's stance of overlooking the Indian Ocean region. Additionally, some agreements, including the India-U.S. Asia Dialog (2010), India-Japan-U.S. the trilateral dialogue (2011) and the

⁴ Baruah, D. M. (2018). Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal. Retrieved November 24, 2020, from Carnegie India website: <https://carnegieindia.org/2018/03/01/maritime-security-in-bay-of-bengal-pub-75754>



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trilateral dialogue between Australia, India, and Japan (2015)⁵ have been forged. Between India, the United States, and Japan, trilateral strategic alliances also exist⁶. With all this support, the talk of the 'Quad 2.0' started brewing in November 2017 which focused on maintaining the status quo in the Indo-Pacific region and enhancing and revitalizing the command of the sea. And just like that, the Bay had taken a transformation, becoming a geo-economic and geostrategic maritime space.

Before going forward with the discussion about whether the Bay is becoming a zone of rivalry, it is important to get a clear idea about what the Quad is. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, also known as the Quad) is an informal strategic forum between semi-regular summits, intelligence exchanges and military exercises between member countries: The United States, Japan, Australia, and India⁷. In 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, with the help of Vice President Dick Cheney of the United States, Prime Minister John Howard of Australia and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India launched the forum as a dialogue. The dialogue was accompanied by an unprecedented joint military exercise, called *Exercise Malabar*⁸.

⁵ Saran, S. (2017, November 25). The quadrilateral: Is it an alliance or an alignment? Hindustan Times. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/the-quadrilateral-is-it-an-alliance-or-an-alignment/story-16CvgQjKHWaayoQjaOI2kM.html>

⁶ Madan, T. (2017, November 16). The rise, fall, and rebirth of the 'Quad'. Commentary in War on the Rocks. Retrieved from <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/rise-fall-rebirth-quad/>

⁷ Griffiths, J. (2020). A border dispute with China may push India closer to some of Beijing's top rivals. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from CNN website: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/18/asia/china-india-border-dispute-quad-us-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁸ Gady, F.-S. (2018). India, US, and Japan to Hold 'Malabar' Naval War Games This Week. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from The Diplomat website: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/india-us-and-japan-to-hold-malabar-naval-war-games-this-week/>

Now in 2020, after a major setback a decade old, the Quad is back in action and taking its place in the Indo-Pacific as a force to reckon with.

On 3 November 2020, the Quad launched its Malabar 2020 Naval Exercise with full throttle in the Bay of Bengal, bringing the four states together again for the annual drill for the first time after over a decade⁹. The first phase of the naval exercise brought a line-up of major warships and aircraft, which are expected to be closely inspected by China. Malabar is expected to provide an opportunity for “like-minded navies”¹⁰, to operate and train alongside one another, sharing a shared vision of a more peaceful, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. It is said that the powerful aspect that the Quad is expected to bring lies in the diplomacy, in economic strength, in sharing of morals and values, which underline all the free and open Indo-Pacific view which each of the states has expressed. This mobilization is however proving as the distant and looming dark clouds before an impending storm.

Bay of Bengal: A Zone Of Rivalry?

China had already begun to grow out of its box of potential with its optimistic and overambitious Belt-Road Initiative. Balance of power might be a notion the strategists seek as a solution to a security dilemma, but the dilemma itself can spiral and lead to unbridled rivalry. Balance of power is not always quick to arrive. China’s renewed

⁹ Singh, R. (2020). Quad set to kick off Malabar drills in Bay of Bengal, China to keep watch. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from Hindustan Times website: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/quad-set-to-kick-off-malabar-drills-in-bay-of-bengal-china-to-keep-watch/story-JjYwqTLzRcmyV0o9SKJpjK.html>

¹⁰ Shelbourne, M. (2020). ‘The Quad’ Kicks Off Malabar 2020 Exercise in Bay of Bengal. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from USNI News website: <https://news.usni.org/2020/11/03/the-quad-kicks-off-malabar-2020-exercise-in-bay-of-bengal>



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focus on the Indo-Pacific region has concerned the US. Before this, while the United States dominated both the Indian and Pacific Oceans for a long period of time, it used to see these vast spaces as disconnected regions. Today, however, amidst the growing economic, strategic, and geopolitical integration of the two regions, Washington has considered the Indo-Pacific as coherent strategic geography¹¹. Now, like China and Japan, the United States too is investing in the connectivity of the two regions. The United States spoke of an 'Indo-Pacific Route' running from Africa's east coast to the western Pacific¹². Australia and India were soon drawn by the United States and Japan into this new multilateral debate on regional connectivity. This, of course, led to the formation of the Quad.

The rivalry is thick and palpable, as the very foundational notion of the Quad challenged the preexistent maritime initiatives of China. The group has met five times over the last few years and has emphasized about maintaining the liberal rule-based international order, which China openly seeks to undermine and even overturn. The Quad directly signals a unified resolve among these four states, a stronghold to counter China's growing assertiveness and dominion in the Indo-Pacific region. While that may be obvious, the Quad has yet to openly admit to such feelings. Then again, in order for the Quad to succeed, it needs to hold a stronger ground against China. The last time the Quad assimilated in 2007, it fell apart because of the reluctance Australia and even to some extent, India had felt over how much to test and push against China

¹¹ See White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington: December 2017)

¹² Mohan, C. R. (2020). The Bay of Bengal in the Emerging Indo-Pacific. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from ORF website: https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-bay-of-bengal-in-the-emerging-indo-pacific/#_edn8

without affecting the other dimensions of their bilateral relationships with Beijing. There were other factors too of course, like the Japanese and Australian electoral politics and America's reorientation toward trilateral engagement with Japan and Australia contributed as well¹³. So, in order to survive this revival, the Quad better have a forward-leaning approach to opposing Chinese activities in the region and stay close-knit and assured this time around. But that is not the only case of rivalry.

The littoral region around the Bay of Bengal is laced with precarious and often, prolonged conflict of interest. The Bay is overcoming its division in the second half of the 20th century, combined with its current outward focus and its strong economic growth, and seeking ways to reconnect. It is a matter of good fortune that the littoral region has not faced any territorial disputes that might have linked itself to the nearer waters of the South China Sea. The era of mutual trust and political stability between New Delhi and Beijing has ended, and their territorial tension and economic rivalry have deeply impacted their views toward the Indian Ocean region. The Bay of Bengal is now very much part of the accelerated geopolitical contestation between China and India in this shared neighborhood.

Overall, the Bay of Bengal is no longer a region to be taken lightly. The littoral states themselves are being roped into different economic cooperation and are becoming part of the interests of the regional giants, who expect them to pick a side soon. The rivalry will perhaps evolve more, but it will not falter.

¹³ Grossman, D. (2020). The Quad Is Poised to Become Openly Anti-China Soon. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from The Rand Blog website: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/07/the-quad-is-poised-to-become-openly-anti-china-soon.html>

Implications for Bangladesh

Bangladesh has made commendable economic progress, at least compared to its neighboring South Asian states. The country is now acquiring investment in maritime infrastructure building in the Bay to upgrade its strategic value. Another part of Bangladesh's strategy that has had a positive effect on the Bay was resolving the dispute through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) with Myanmar in 2012 and, more recently, with India in July 2014¹⁴. Thanks to Dhaka's initiatives, the maritime territorial disputes between Bangladesh, India and Burma have been addressed through international arbitration and became another key example of the peace Bay of Bengal was previously referred to. This instance has created a positive environment for building a regional community in the Bay of Bengal. But amid the revived competition between the major powers and their conflicting conceptions of regionalism, this crucial moment seems to have slipped away. The Bay of Bengal, located to the south of Bangladesh, is basically a frontier that is watched over predominantly by the comparatively powerful Indian Navy.

If the strategic rivalry between China and India, with the Quad, intensifies, both countries will double down on their approach to bringing strategically located Bangladesh into their side. China, along with growing investment, could also open its economy to billions of dollars in imports from Bangladesh, which will allow the country to expand its exports to target locations beyond North America and Europe. New Delhi

¹⁴ Watson, S. (2015). THE BANGLADESH/MYANMAR MARITIME DISPUTE: LESSONS FOR PEACEFUL RESOLUTION. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative website: <https://amti.csis.org/the-bangladeshmyanmar-maritime-dispute-lessons-for-peaceful-resolution/>

could ramp up diplomatic and cultural relations with Bangladesh on the Indian side. In their competition for supremacy in the Bay of Bengal, India and China will do their utmost to edge each other out and will attempt to squeeze an economically vulnerable Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh should be wary of both India and China and their self-serving investments. To steer clear of subversions and being a passive victim to their geopolitical rivalry in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh should use its strategic piston skillfully. But most importantly, Bangladesh needs to be aware of the intentions of the Quad assembling at the Bay, and learn of its potential impacts and implications.

Conclusion

In the second decade of the 21st century, as the Indo-Pacific gained momentum, its regional reach extended to include the entire stretch of waters from the East Coast of Africa to the Western Pacific. The Bay of Bengal is at the heart of this large body of water, promising among the major powers to be the latest theatre of dispute. India, which in the past ignored the coast, has now pushed it to a higher priority. In fostering regional connectivity, development, peace, and security, New Delhi is showing more enthusiasm to engage with other forces, resulting in the Quad. But India still remains at a significant gap away from completely integrating its economic and security policies with the Bay and bringing greater cohesion and intent to it in pursuit of its declared strategic objectives. And speaking of engagement, a more openly anti-China Quad is likely to both harm and help the group in the future. It would damage the Quad because it will fuel the narrative of Beijing that the Quad is a military alliance intended to "contain" and threaten China and that the region is destabilized by this approach.

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An anti-China Quad could persuade Russia to align more closely with China, or Beijing could reinvigorate rivalry to challenge the Quad's goals in southeast and South Asia as well as elsewhere. The Quad resolve, more significantly, will also no longer be symbolic, but real, and this could increase the group's deterrence value against China. To be sure, the Quad does not need to lift its status to that of a formalized military alliance, nor do the nations want to. Instead, it will likely be appropriate to clearly signal that Quad countries plan to at least support each other in the event of friction or armed conflict with China. Overall, the Bay of Bengal is heading towards a decade of new developments and potential, not simply because of the rivalry that is to brew surrounding it, but because of the ambitious military and economic implications it is yet to harbor. Being a littoral country opening into the Bay, Bangladesh can only hope to stay afloat during these drastic changes and be as strategically tactful as possible with its interests associated with the regional states.

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