

Security Pluralism and Maritime Cooperation in the Age of Anthropocene: Challenges and Prospects in the Bay of Bengal

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In the maritime domain, understanding insecurity is not just an epistemological dilemma; it is indeed more ontological in nature. What is security in the ocean and the surroundings? Whose security is at stake, and against what threats? This leads to another question. In what Paul Crutzen and others discussed, how do we frame security crisis in the age of Anthropocene—human dominance on the earth's geological, biological, and chemical processes? The Anthropocene lens highlights the fundamental transformation in ecological interdependencies by making human beings the dominant global species at the cost of damaging the relationship with the environment. The maritime domain is the most critical in this aspect, and it became a new ecologically turned geological space in the age of the

Anthropocene. It may be implausible to confine the maritime security issues within the binary, i.e., traditional vs. non-traditional, lenses. Therefore, the big question will be whether or not addressing maritime security issues may rely on the balance of power. How would one shape the maritime security ecosystem in the Bay of Bengal in the Anthropocene? This write-up attempts to dig deeper into the potentiality of Amitav Acharya's security pluralism to understand a cooperative security community's viability in the Bay of Bengal (BoB) context.

Why is the Bay of Bengal a critical maritime space? Sunil Amrith, in his books *Unruly Waters: How Mountain Rivers and Monsoons Have Shaped South Asia's History* and *Crossing the Bay of*

Bengal, established how the Bay of Bengal constitutes a plethora of opportunities and complications and prospects of exploration of the marine resources. An epistemological perspective of security, as Amrith demonstrates, refers to the fact that the future of BoB is uncertain as it is constantly changing due to a mingling of traditional power rivalries between states and the non-traditional threats of people's movements and environmental challenges. It is not exaggerating even to argue that the BoB has re-positioned itself at the core of International Politics by re-branding the broader maritime vision of the 'Indo-Pacific' with an extension of some significant states' interests in energy resources, shipping lanes, and cultural influences. Who controls the waves of the ocean—is, unfortunately, the dominant point of exit that plays a critical role in shaping the maritime security framework.

Undoubtedly, the geopolitics of oceans haunt states' foreign policies in various ways, and they often traverse beyond Mahan and Corbett's framing of sea power. The BoB and its littoral states are no exception here. The BoB's strategic location is reconstructed, and it has demanded that the coastal states reconsider their military, economic, and political relations with the states of concern accordingly. National interests become a key determining factor in facilitating such relationships. In this very statist posture, how would we address the anthropocentric maritime security concerns through the lens of cooperative security architecture? Does the BoB demonstrate any potential to formulate a maritime security community?

Non-traditional security concerns are multidimensional, involving many internal, regional, and transnational threats. The economic, environmental, and social forces are influenced and mobilized due to the inception of such threats. The security threats range from maritime terrorism to piracy, drug trafficking, and

illegal and forced migration. The region's water has been experiencing one of the most significant refugee influx owing to the Rohingya Crisis. The BoB has become a hotspot of climate vulnerability with depleting resources. International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report highlights how extreme floods increase economic loss in the coastal cities of the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. Rising sea levels make cities susceptible to sinking. Several events of dead sea fish washed ashore in the last few years. The complex social, economic, and political drivers of environmental destructions demand a broadening and deepening of anthropocentric insecurity in the maritime domain in the Bay of Bengal. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* narrated the insecurity dilemma more eloquently. Can the ontological insecurity in the Bay of Bengal be understood and resolved? How?

Amitav Acharya's security pluralism can be a plausible normative framework that embraces cooperative security through an inclusive multilateral framework. The normative aspect of security pluralism is vital and requires instrumenting a positive relationship between security conditions. Withering away containment and deterrence components, security pluralism refers to an interplay of interdependence, institutions, norms, and mutual or shared imperatives to preserve the status quo and growth of the cooperative order. Inspired by Karl Deutsch's security community, Acharya and other scholars have excelled in the ideas of proactive, collaborative security frameworks. Security pluralism, as Acharya extends, is not an extension of national security doctrines. It rather respects the role and autonomy of all big or smaller nations.

The interdependence of coastal states in the BoB on marine issues is significant. Freedom of uninterrupted lawful

navigation and countering irregular and transnational threats would enhance global stability benefitting all nations. The relative efforts to introduce and materialize collaborative efforts among the BoB Littorals with relative homogeneity. These countries, mostly remaining climate-vulnerable states, have experienced challenges and aspirations. India and Myanmar have settled maritime disputes with Bangladesh amicably through the international judiciary. The criticality of interdependence for the BoB coastal states is further evident in addressing climate-induced cross-border migration in Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. Climate threats, internal migration, and resource competition have triggered long-standing ethno-religious cleavages in this region. These realities also enforce some forms of equilibrium or stability of relations between the littoral states to extend interdependence.

Harnessing the blue economy is the new norm in maritime trans-regional cooperation, which demands sustainable use of marine resources. It requires cooperation among the littoral states to continue the exploration of resources using sophisticated technologies. Regional and sub-regional connectivity is crucial in this regard. The BoB littoral states have promoted road, rail, and sea connectivity projects, resulting in more cooperation and opportunities. Bangladesh has continuously supported Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement, Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, BIMSTEC, and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) ventures to demonstrate cooperative security and development framework in multilateral platforms. It has also balanced between the connectivity projects of the China-led Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) and the Indo-Pacific ventures of the West concerning maritime connectivity initiatives. It is important to note that the BoB crosses the

path of the regional structures of the ASEAN, BIMSTECs, and SAARC and by the supra-structure such as the IORA. These plural multilateral platforms may need to move forward with ideas of cooperation in preventing marine pollution, safeguarding traditional fishing communities, small-scale fishing in coastal regions, and protecting ecology through saving forests, flora, and fauna. The Anthropocene lens is significant in framing this cooperative dimension of connectivity.

Is the presence of big powers a challenge that targets a profound entanglement toward power politics and state-focused progress at the cost of the anthropocentric decline of ecology? China and the United States have vividly been mastering the security conditions in the Bay of Bengal, offering instruments for cooperation, such as investment, loans, and trading opportunities. They also pose the risk of hedging and balance of power in the framework of containment between the regional and extra-regional powers in the BoB. The commitments of these countries to protect the environment and, therefore, align strategic and economic development in line with the anthropocentric lens are not mutual and not very visibly promising yet. The presence of power politics is an existential reality in the region with security and economic implications. Nevertheless, a continuous effort from epistemic and policy communities of the region is necessary, which would enforce to create an opportunity to reorient a collective sense of security through the maritime ecosystem, improving the quality of life and increasing the livelihood opportunities of vulnerable communities of the littoral states.

Security pluralism offers more potential to frame the maritime security ecosystem in the Bay of Bengal. Only the state-centric so-called comprehensive security may not excel in the outputs from trans-regional

multilateral platforms. The slowness of the functionality of SAARC and BIMSTEC is a case in point here. Bilateral security agreements between littoral states are critical; nevertheless, they may need to focus on collective efforts to protect shared sustainability imperatives through promoting connectivity in norms, identities, and politics. Most importantly, there is a need to move beyond land-based geopolitics and conventional regional identity. The Anthropocene lens is a critical way out in this regard.

This write-up attempts to deconstruct the impression of maritime security, which is embellished mainly through the ideas of power politics promoted by conventional maritime military powers. The traditional wisdom “one who rules the sea rules the

land” is not fully extraneous at this time; however, it remains biased in omitting the opportunity to grasp the totality of ontological insecurity in the age of the Anthropocene. The major normative appeal, therefore, is that maritime security should not be confined only to the geopolitical great games. A south-south maritime security community perspective is more practical and essential to yielding visible outcomes and fostering relationships between the littoral states. Security pluralism merits further academic and programmatic interventions in promoting a cooperative security framework in the Bay of Bengal.

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