



China's Influence on India's Maritime Security in The Bay of Bengal: Relevance of The Quad

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the major geopolitical shifts in the Asia-Pacific over the past decade that have revitalized the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, initially established between India, Japan, Australia, and the United States in 2007-2008. China's expanding maritime strategy and growing assertiveness in land reclamation and territorial claims have been key factors driving a stronger alignment among the Quad members. China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) presents distinct concerns for each member: India fears encroachment on its strategic interests and potential encirclement due to Chinese projects in Pakistan. Japan is cautious about China's potential to influence the energy supply chains critical to East Asia. Australia is worried that China's project aid might make fragile states more susceptible to coercion. The United States is looking for ways to counteract Chinese influence, especially in the void created by its withdrawal from the TPP. While the official Quad meeting in November 2017 covered key issues such as freedom of navigation, maritime security, and respect for international law, the differing official readouts indicate that the parties have varying perspectives on strategic geography, threat perceptions, and their dynamics with China. Despite these challenges, the interests of the Quad countries are converging. This underlying structural dynamic provides a robust foundation for the member countries to develop an agenda for regional cooperation.

Key Words: Maritime Security, Maritime Silk Road, Bay of Bengal, Challenges, Connectivity, Strategic Significance, QUAD, Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the significance of the Bay of Bengal region has increased. In February 2018, during the political unrest in the Maldives, China dispatched 11 warships, prompting India to deploy its own warships in the Bay of Bengal. The Chinese warships eventually withdrew to the Pacific side. There are reports indicating that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), consisting of India, Japan, Australia, and the US, is establishing an anti-submarine network system to monitor China's submarine activities in the Bay of Bengal. For example, India's transport planes and anti-submarine aircraft have recently been landing on Australia's Cocos Islands, a strategic location for detecting Chinese submarine activities. Additionally, India is enhancing its military infrastructure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It has also agreed to develop Indonesia's Sabang port. Like India, the US is also planning to establish a First Fleet in this region. In July 2023, US naval warships were repaired in India for the first time. These repair facilities are intended to support increased US deployment in the Bay of Bengal.

These actions suggest that the Bay of Bengal region is becoming increasingly important in terms of regional security. Three questions must be posed to comprehend why this is occurring now: i) What is the present security situation in the Bay of Bengal? ii) What are the characteristics of China's activities? iii) How should the QUAD respond to China? Subsequent sections delve into these questions in greater detail.

Security Dynamics in the Bay of Bengal

Primarily, the Bay of Bengal serves as a geographic link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, making it a focal point for both China and the QUAD.

For China, this region is crucial for safeguarding its Sea Lanes of Communication

For China's security, it is critical to sustain the development of coastal cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong. As a result, China aims to remove foreign militaries from the seas facing these cities and has thus established defence lines to achieve this goal. The concept of the first, second, and third island chains is formulated on this principle. The first island chain is delineated by a line connecting Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, encompassing the East China Sea and the South China Sea. The second island chain is defined by a line connecting Japan, Guam, and Palau, and is established to control the

access routes to the first island chain. To control access to the second island chain, China established a third island chain encompassing Alaska, Hawaii, the South Pacific, and New Zealand.

In addition to these Defence lines aimed at protecting its coastal cities, China also considers the security of supply routes to these cities as a matter of concern. The supply of water to these cities depends on the source of water in Tibet and the route it takes. China's increased provocations along the India-China border region correspond to the growing importance of that region for China. Concurrently, China is placing emphasis on the Bay of Bengal as a key supply route.

The Bay of Bengal holds strategic importance for China, serving as a crucial component in its security strategy and for safeguarding its sea lanes of communication (SLOC). Due to China's coastal cities depending on oil imports from the Middle East, the country is concerned about the Malacca Dilemma. The Malacca Dilemma refers to China's reliance on oil shipments passing through the Malacca Strait, an area secured by the US, a situation China seeks to avoid. To mitigate this risk, China has pursued alternative routes, such as developing ports and land routes in Pakistan, to establish the Middle East-Pakistan-Xinjiang Uygur route. China is constructing a port and pipeline in Myanmar to establish the energy supply route from the Middle East to China via Myanmar.

In addition to these efforts, China has constructed ports on both the Indian Ocean and South China Sea sides of the Malay Peninsula, connecting them with a land route. Using the Malay Peninsula route would allow China to bypass the Malacca Strait. Nevertheless, even with these alternative routes, China must still traverse the Indian Ocean, including the Bay of Bengal. Securing the Bay of Bengal is thus crucial for China to safeguard its supply route.

As a result, China has deployed military forces to secure the Bay of Bengal. In the mid-2000s, China established naval communication facilities on the Coco Islands of Myanmar, close to India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. There is a high likelihood that this facility could be used to guide China's naval fleet from the South China Sea into the Bay of Bengal.

Moreover, starting from 2008, China has been carrying out anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, using this as a pretext to deploy naval vessels in the Bay of Bengal. For instance, China has deployed both nuclear and conventional submarines under the guise of counter-piracy operations, despite submarines being generally ineffective in combating piracy. In the past, the Netherlands deployed submarines in the same coastal area, where they were effective because their communication systems were well-coordinated with other surface ships as part of a multinational operation. In contrast to the Netherlands, China's submarines did not share much information with other countries. Despite claiming that the deployment was for anti-piracy measures, Chinese submarines did not operate off the coast of Somalia.

China's deployment of submarines in the Bay of Bengal poses a potential threat to India. In response, India is developing an underground naval port for submarines in Rambilli, near Vishakhapatnam, and deploying nuclear ballistic missile submarines to counter China. Yet, if China's submarines remain near India's nuclear ballistic submarines, they could potentially sink India's nuclear ballistic submarines, thus impacting India's nuclear deterrence strategy against China. Moreover, India's nuclear operations could also be impacted. With Chinese submarines active in the Bay of Bengal, India's aircraft carrier battle group must exercise caution, as China could restrict India's access to the South China Sea by deploying its submarines.

Expanding its influence in countries surrounding India, China's fleet has made port calls in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Additionally, China has exported submarines to Pakistan and Bangladesh, donated a frigate to Sri Lanka, and engaged in negotiations with the Maldives to purchase uninhabited islands for establishing a naval base. Supplying weapons to other countries enables Chinese weapons specialists and instructors to be deployed in these states, facilitating the collection of information. China's military presence in the Bay of Bengal could be a decisive factor in persuading regional countries to view China as a security provider. This shift could potentially lead to a loss of regional influence for India and other QUAD members.

Hence, for China, securing the Bay of Bengal is imperative to safeguard its sea lanes of communication (SLOC) and reduce the influence of India, the US, and other QUAD members. China's strategic goals drive its infrastructure development, deployment of naval ships (including submarines), and provision of weapons in the region. If China persists with this approach, it is plausible to anticipate the deployment of an aircraft carrier battle group in the Bay of Bengal to demonstrate increased military presence in the future.

The Bay of Bengal holds strategic significance in the Indo-Pacific region for the QUAD

Geographically, the Bay of Bengal is crucial for the Indo-Pacific region as it serves as the confluence point between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In reaction to China's deployment, the QUAD countries have collaborated on numerous projects. Foremost, the QUAD has collaborated to bolster India's anti-submarine capabilities. While a US aircraft carrier was deployed to assist India during the 1962 war against China, in the 1970s and 1980s, it became a primary focus of the Indian Navy when a carrier was dispatched to caution India against its participation in the third Indo-Pakistan war. The Indian Navy acquired numerous anti-ship missiles and submarines to counter US aircraft carriers, yet it faced a shortfall in submarine defence capabilities. Since the 2000s, with China deploying submarines in the Indian Ocean, India has prioritized enhancing its anti-submarine capabilities.

India, the US, Japan, and Australia are now members of the QUAD. The US contributes anti-submarine equipment, including P-8 anti-submarine patrol planes, MH-60R anti-submarine helicopters, and Sea Guardian unmanned patrol planes, to enhance submarine detection capabilities. In addition to equipment, expertise is also shared. Japan possesses one of the world's largest anti-submarine forces. Furthermore, the 2017 "Japan-India Joint Statement: Toward a Free, Open and Prosperous Indo-Pacific" explicitly highlighted "the ongoing close cooperation between the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) and the Indian Navy in various specialized areas of mutual interest, including anti-submarine aspects."

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India are strategically positioned for monitoring Chinese naval activities. India established the Andaman and Nicobar Command as an integrated three-service command and has started enhancing its capabilities. Japanese-US infrastructure projects are also collaborating to support these initiatives. For instance, Japan utilized Official Development Assistance (ODA) to invest in India's electric power project for constructing power plants in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The Japanese company NEC was responsible for laying a fiber optic cable connecting Chennai to several islands in the Andaman and Nicobar chain (including Port Blair, Little Andaman, Car Nicobar, Kamorta, Campbell Bay, Havelock, Long, and Ranghat Islands). The cable stretches over 2,300 kilometers with a design capacity of 100GB per second. These infrastructure projects bolster India's military capabilities, as reliable electric power and internet connectivity are directly related to the effectiveness of military facilities.

In addition to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Cocos Islands (Keeling) of Australia are strategically significant for monitoring China's submarine activities. Since 2012, the US has had plans to deploy the unmanned surveillance plane Global Hawk to the Cocos Islands. In 2023, India dispatched P-8 anti-submarine patrol planes and transport planes to the Cocos Islands. Australia has also deployed P-8 anti-submarine patrol planes to bases in India. Therefore, it appears that the QUAD's anti-submarine patrols in the Bay of Bengal have already commenced via the Cocos Islands.

Due to this cooperation, some experts speculate that there are significant plans in place to address Chinese submarine activities. Chinese submarines deployed in the Bay of Bengal likely originated from the Hainan Islands in the South China Sea, an area where the QUAD aims to monitor their movements. During the Cold War, the US and Japan established a network of sensors to monitor magma movement, tsunamis, and earthquakes, which incidentally could also detect Soviet submarine activities. Therefore, there is a precedent for setting up a similar submarine detection sensor network in the Bay of Bengal.

India has indeed established submarine detection sensors around the Rambilli base to detect Chinese submarines dispatched to monitor the activities of India's submarines. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are also outfitted with anti-submarine forces. The internet cable connection facilitated by Japan's initiative, linking Chennai with the Andaman and Nicobar Islands via light fiber cables, could be crucial. If submarine detection sensors are linked to these light fibers, they can transmit information through the cables.

In 2023, the QUAD summit declared, "Today we announce a new 'Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience.' The Partnership will enhance cable systems in the Indo-Pacific, leveraging the world-class expertise of Quad countries in manufacturing, delivering, and maintaining cable infrastructure. Therefore, it is anticipated that the QUAD will establish an anti-submarine network in the Bay of Bengal if the threats posed by Chinese submarines are deemed credible.

In addition to the anti-submarine network, Japan's infrastructure projects also indicate efforts to counter China. Since 2014, Japan has been investing in infrastructure projects in Northeast India. While this infrastructure development is taking place outside of Arunachal Pradesh, which China also claims, the Indian Army can utilize these infrastructures to deploy military forces to the Indo-China border. Simultaneously, the road in Northeast India connects with roads in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, facilitating trade between India and Southeast Asia. Japan has also initiated several infrastructure projects, including the Chennai Port in India and the Trincomalee Port in Sri Lanka, to enhance connectivity between India and Southeast Asia.

Increased trade between India and Southeast Asia could reduce Southeast Asia's reliance on China. Therefore, infrastructure projects in the Bay of Bengal region will impact India-Southeast Asia relations and counterbalance China's influence.

Japan has endeavoured not only to enhance trade between India and Southeast Asia but also to counter China's infrastructure projects in the Bay of Bengal. The Matarbari port project in Bangladesh is a prime example. When China proposed the Sonadia port project, Japan responded with the Matarbari port project, even though the two projects are in close proximity. Bangladesh carefully examined the two competing proposals and ultimately chose Japan's project. This is significant because China's infrastructure projects have often come with high interest rates, resulting in substantial debts for the recipients and giving China leverage over them. If there are alternative projects available, developing countries should avoid falling into China's debt trap.

Japan's initiatives have effectively hindered China's ambitions, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. The Bay of Bengal, central to the QUAD's Indo-Pacific strategy, could serve as the arena for the competition between the QUAD and China to unfold.

The Characteristics of China's Activities

China's territorial expansion in the Bay of Bengal shares many similarities with its actions in the East China Sea, Taiwan, the South China Sea, the South Pacific, the Indo-China border area, and the Arabian Sea. This expansion can be characterized by three main features. One notable feature is the country's consistent disregard for existing international laws when asserting claims over new territories. In the East China Sea, China did not assert its claim over the Senkaku Islands before 1971. However, its stance shifted afterward due to the islands' strategic location, which could be used to exert pressure on Taiwan, as well as their potential oil reserves. Similar to its actions in the East China Sea, China may potentially expand its territorial claims elsewhere in the future if deemed necessary.

The second characteristic of China's territorial expansion is its exploitation of "power vacuums." For instance, China took control of one-half of the Paracel Islands immediately after France withdrew in the 1950s. In the 1970s, following the U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam, China occupied the remaining half of the islands. In the 1980s, China increased its presence in the Spratly Islands and seized control of six features there, taking advantage

of the reduced military presence of the Soviet Union in Vietnam. In the 1990s, China took control of Mischief Reef following the withdrawal of US troops from the Philippines.

These actions illustrate China's tendency to extend its territorial influence in response to shifts in military balances and the creation of power vacuums. A comparable event took place in the Bay of Bengal. Following the Cold War, Soviet submarines vanished from the region, and there was also a reduction in the US naval presence. However, the Indian Navy has been unable to fill this void. This power vacuum has created an opportunity for China to expand its presence in the Bay of Bengal.

The third characteristic of China's territorial expansion is its non-military control. China has utilized foreign infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to extend its sphere of influence. For example, China's development of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka resulted in a debt trap. The interest rate for this project was six to eight percent, significantly higher than the rates offered by the World Bank or the Japan-led Asia Development Bank, which ranged from 0.25 percent to three percent. This led to a significant debt burden for Sri Lanka. Subsequently, China was able to secure the rights to control the Hambantota port for 99 years. This illustrates that economic dominance is consistently a component of China's strategy.

What should be the QUAD's response to China?

Disregard for international law, expansion of territorial claims in areas of power vacuums, and the use of economic dominance or other non-military tactics to extend influence abroad are recurring patterns in China's actions across the entire Indo-Pacific region, including the Bay of Bengal area. Therefore, how should the QUAD countries respond? Understanding the pattern of China's behaviour suggests the answer: the QUAD should act in direct opposition to China's desires.

Firstly, the QUAD must persist in upholding and advocating for a rules-based order founded on existing international law, as reiterated in the joint statements of the QUAD, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and numerous bilateral summits. For instance, the joint statement issued at the QUAD summit in 2023 stated: "We emphasize the importance of adherence to international law, particularly as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the maintenance of freedom of navigation and overflight, in addressing challenges to the maritime rules-based order." This kind of emphasis is crucial for safeguarding a rules-based order.

Secondly, the QUAD countries should address perceived power vacuums by preserving a military equilibrium. A key area of focus for the QUAD is enhancing India's anti-submarine capabilities, which have significantly advanced. Nevertheless, there are lingering challenges. For instance, India's existing conventional submarine fleet comprises eight Kilo-class and four 209-class submarines, which are outdated, having been inducted between 1986 and 2000.

However, there has been a lack of induction of alternative submarines. Since 2001, only five French-designed Scorpene-class submarines have been inducted, while China has inducted more than 42 conventional submarines during the same period. In comparison to China, India's progress has been notably slow. Certainly, it's not just India; other QUAD members also need to accelerate their efforts to equip themselves with new weapons. Australia, for example, will not acquire nuclear submarines until it receives three US Virginia-class nuclear submarines under AUKUS in 2030.

The increase in the number of US warships has not yet occurred. Although Japan has raised its defence budget, it faces a shortage of manpower due to its aging society. Therefore, the QUAD must recognize the gravity of the situation and enhance coordination. Sharing information, deep coordination, and effective utilization of limited military assets are crucial.

Thirdly, the QUAD has effectively highlighted China's foreign infrastructure projects in the Bay of Bengal as non-military methods of exerting control. The Hambantota port situation has become widely recognized, leading many countries in the region to approach China's proposals with caution and careful review. However, China remains the only viable option for many business ventures. For instance, its 5G communications network is significantly cheaper than alternatives. The QUAD countries must develop cost-effective systems that are acceptable to regional developing countries. In the Bay of Bengal, China has been expanding its influence, necessitating deeper cooperation and a more assertive response from the QUAD.

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