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Promoting Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea

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Abstract

The Bay of Bengal has become a hotbed of irregular human migration in recent years, with Rohingya refugee boats making their way south to safer sanctuaries in Southeast Asia. The illicit drug trade has flourished especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with supplies originating from the Golden Triangle region using Southeast Asia as the transit point on the way to other regions. These developments highlight the need for greater maritime security cooperation between South Asian and Southeast Asian governments. Both these sub-regions within the broader Indo-Pacific region, have their own maritime security capacity shortfalls. While piracy and armed robbery targeting ships in the Malacca Strait, a key waterway astride the Bay of Bengal, is no longer as serious a threat as in the early 2000s, there is nevertheless a need for maritime security cooperation between South and Southeast Asia in the Bay of Bengal in areas of irregular human migration and illicit drug trade. Promoting better maritime domain awareness and information-sharing between these two regions would be a good start.

Recommended citation:

Lean, C. K. S. (2023). Promoting Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. In Xavier, C & Palit, A. (Eds). *Connectivity and Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal Region*. (pp. 69-76). Centre for Social and Economic Progress. Retrieved from <https://csep.org/MCZ3bim>

Maritime security threat

When discussing maritime security in the Bay of Bengal, one should not forget about the contiguous Andaman Sea. The interconnectedness between these two water bodies is more salient, from a policy perspective, than an artificial division via the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Such interconnectedness makes it essential to treat the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea as a single maritime geostrategic construct. Myriad security threats straddle this vast maritime domain, even though some of these challenges are confined mainly to the distinct water bodies. For example, the incidence of piracy and armed robbery in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea is mainly in the immediate coastal waters of the littorals, such as the cases recorded close to Bangladeshi shores, mainly in the anchorages and, in particular, around Chittagong Port. However, as Table 1 shows, piracy and armed robbery against ships do not constitute a major issue in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. The author is, of course, mindful that available statistics indicate reported incidents, and that there could be cases that went unreported.

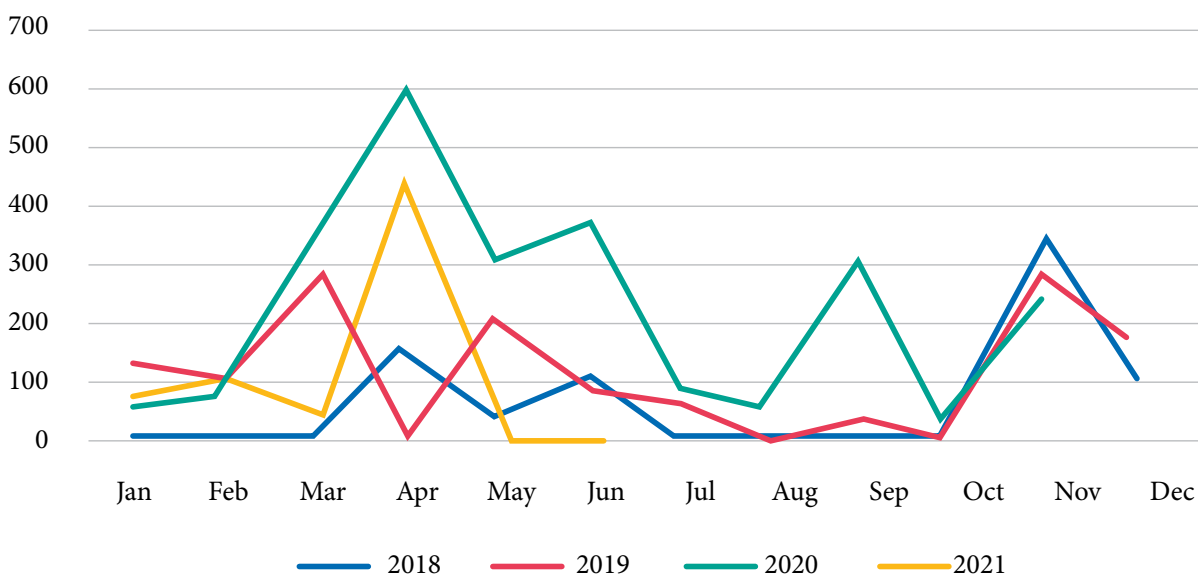
Table 1: Piracy and armed robbery against ships in the Bay and Bengal and Andaman Sea

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021
Bangladesh	11(2)	0	5	0
Bay of Bengal	0	0	0	0
Andaman Sea	0	0	0	0

Source: Piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia: Annual report – January to December 2021, ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, p. 11. Figure for Bangladesh in 2018 denotes 11 reported incidences, of which two were attempts and the remaining nine were actual attacks.

However, some other maritime security challenges do pose a more serious problem to the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea littorals. The Rohingya refugee problem was a severe one in 2015, leading to the ‘boat crisis’ that afflicted countries along the Andaman Sea coast, such as Indonesia and Malaysia. The Rohingya sea movements are one of the best examples to highlight the interconnectedness of the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, and demonstrates how a security challenge emanating in a distinct maritime area can affect countries in a contiguous area. Amidst economic hardships during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there was a spike in the number of Rohingya who undertook the perilous southbound voyage compared to the previous years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Confirmed Rohingya sea movements by month: January 2018 – June 2021



Source: Left adrift at sea: Dangerous journeys of refugees across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, January 2020 – June 2021, p. 11.

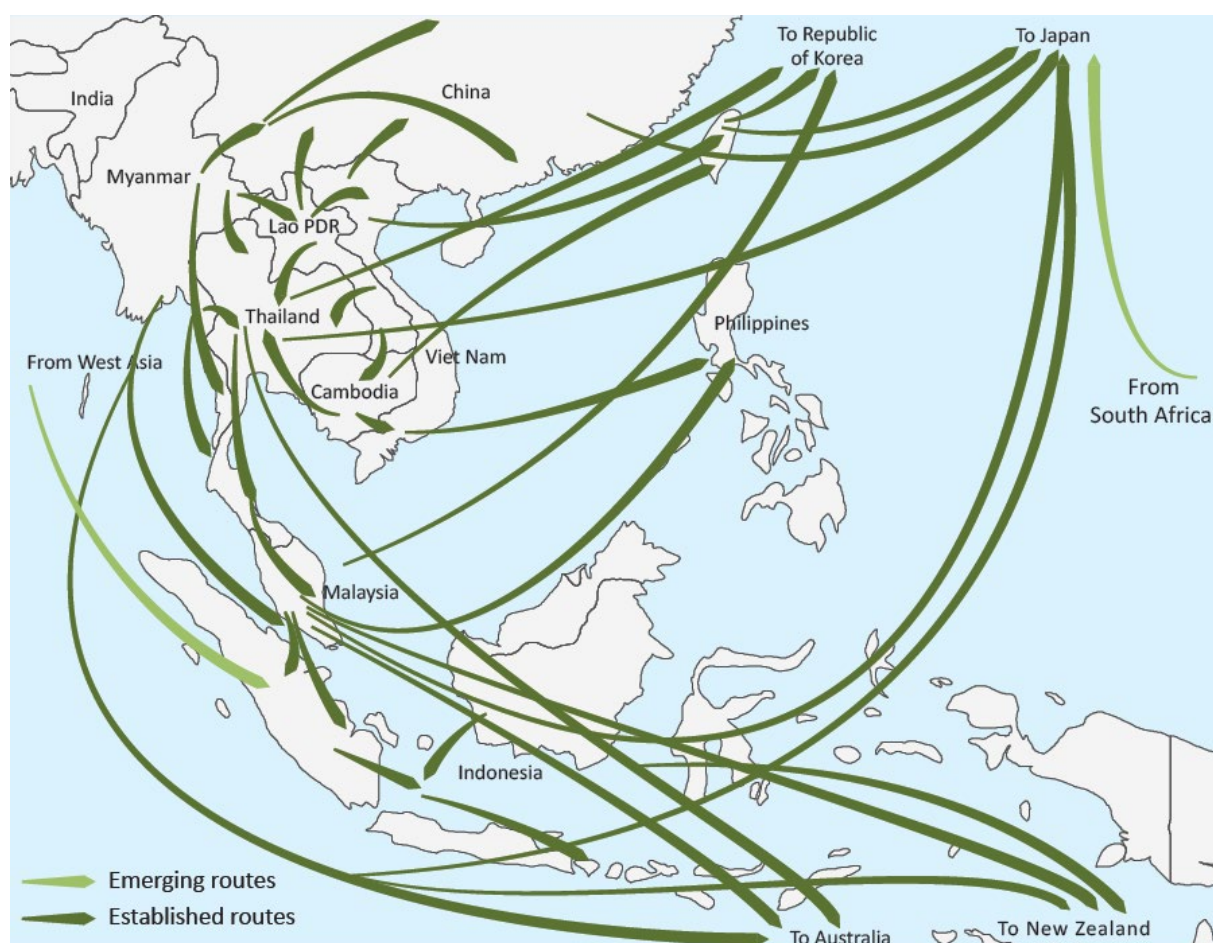
To worsen the problem, these voyages also became fatal. As Table 2 shows, while the number of Rohingya making the risky seaborne dash saw an almost 100% increase from 2019 to 2020, there was a disproportionate explosion in the number of people killed or missing, from 4 to 209, over the same period. The situation was serious enough for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to release a joint statement in May 2020 expressing deep concern that the “boat crisis” of 2015 might return. The statement calls on regional states to uphold the commitments of the 2016 Bali Declaration (Joint statement by UNHCR, IOM and UNODC on protection at sea in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, 2020). This declaration promulgated in the following year the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, which sought to promote multilateral dialogue, awareness, information sharing, and cooperation on human trafficking, smuggling, and related crimes (Regional Treaties, Declarations and Related, 2016).

Table 2: Rohingya sea movement trends: 2018–June 2021

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021 (until June)
Number of persons	762	1337	2413	633
Dead and missing	11	4	209	9

Source: *Left adrift at sea: Dangerous journeys of refugees across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, January 2020 – June 2021, p. 10.

The other serious maritime security challenge in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea is the illegal drug trade. Available data on seizures and major trafficking cases reported in 2020 from countries in East and Southeast Asia point to “continuous large-scale manufacturing of methamphetamine in Shan state, Myanmar, situated in the three-country border area known as the Golden Triangle” (Global SMART Programme, 2021). Notwithstanding COVID-19, seaborne drug trafficking along the Andaman Sea and Malacca Strait to transport crystalline methamphetamine to Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, and further afield to countries such as Australia and Japan, gained importance in the same year. Kuala Lumpur reported that, since the beginning of the pandemic, stringent land border controls had resulted in increased use of sea routes, including from southern Thailand (SMART Programme, 2021). Besides traditional seaborne routes from Myanmar via the Andaman Sea, the UNODC also identified emerging routes from West Asia through the Bay of Bengal (see Figure 2). Transnational drug traffickers continue to use Indonesia’s Aceh province as their main entry point into the country to import drugs such as crystalline methamphetamine. According to Indonesia’s National Narcotics Agency Commissioner General Heru Winarko, “the drugs are smuggled into Aceh province from such countries as Thailand and Malaysia through the seas and alternative paths to be then distributed to various areas in Indonesia” (Harris & Nasution, 2020). Aceh was in a “state of emergency” over the drug scourge (Nasution, 2021).

Figure 2: Crystalline methamphetamine trafficking flows in East and Southeast Asia 2020

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Synthetic drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest developments and challenges 2021*, p. 13.

Limits to Existing Measures

The Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea littorals together, at least on paper, muster a sizeable pool of maritime forces that could have dealt with the extant maritime security threats. However, the development of capabilities has been “beset by funding constraints, competing strategic and domestic priorities, lack of interagency coordination, and insufficient assets and resources” (Benson, 2020, p. 74). The addition of assets in the last two years (see Table 3) to these countries’ maritime forces that are suitable for tackling such transnational security challenges as irregular human migration and drug trafficking chiefly came

about from programmes that pre-dated the pandemic. And the count here does not take into account the geographical distribution of these maritime forces. For example, the entire holdings of Indonesia’s maritime assets have been represented here, and by no means does the country deploy all of them to the Andaman Sea coasts given other equally, if not more pressing, concerns elsewhere throughout the vast archipelago. Even though India musters the largest pool of assets in the region, it still has to address security concerns on its western seaboard.

Table 3: Maritime forces in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea

Country	2018		2019		2020		2021	
	Vessels	Aircraft	Vessels	Aircraft	Vessels	Aircraft	Vessels	Aircraft
Bangladesh	69	2	67	2	75	2	75	2
India	248	49	321	49	329	49	332	52
Indonesia	167	33	168	34	175	36	190	36
Malaysia	177	5	174	5	175	5	193	5
Myanmar	82	0	82	0	84	0	85	2
Sri Lanka	145	0	147	0	149	0	149	0
Thailand	188	27	190	27	195	27	200	27

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 editions*. Figures represented here are surface combat and patrol vessels that belong to both navies and civilian maritime law enforcement agencies, whereas only maritime surveillance/patrol aircraft from both military and civilian agencies are counted.

Compounding the capacity limitations in the foreseeable future is the present economic hardship faced by several countries. Even though regional countries have embarked on a gradual road to economic recovery starting from early 2021, current challenges—the Russia-Ukraine War and global supply chain disruptions—cast a pall of uncertainty over post-pandemic recovery and growth prospects. At the same time, external debts have continued to spike over the COVID-19 period (see Table 4) as regional governments took loans amidst reduced revenues to fund pandemic-related programmes. Sri Lanka, at the time of writing this paper, was arguably the hardest hit by the economic turmoil, especially its maturing debts and dwindling foreign exchange reserves. While not suffering the same fate as Colombo, the neighbouring countries in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea are seen to be tightening their belts for fiscal prudence, devoting significant attention to public healthcare (given the emergence of new mutated strains, and social security.

To augment their national capacities, the Bay of Bengal littorals actively participate in both multilateral and bilateral forms of military cooperation, which has “helped to generate mutual trust, enhance operational interoperability, and facilitate information-sharing across the region” (Benson, 2020, p. 72).

Table 4: External debt-to-gross national income of Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea littorals 2018–2020 (%)

Country	2018	2019	2020
Bangladesh	18	18	20
India	19	20	22
Indonesia	38	37	41
Malaysia	24	23	25
Myanmar	16	14	18
Sri Lanka	62	69	72
Thailand	36	34	42

Source: Data compiled from *International Debt Statistics 2022* (Washington D.C.: World Bank Group, 2021), augmented by national government statistics.

India plays an outsized role in providing crucial maritime security public goods to the region, for instance training, intelligence-sharing, and other forms of maritime capacity-building support (Benson, 2020). The Bali Process, which arose from the Rohingya “boat crisis” in 2015, would have been an ideal arrangement to cope with the extant maritime security challenges in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, considering that all the resident littorals and some world powers such as the United States and China are signatories. However, the UNODC has determined that such mechanisms as the Bali Process—of which all Bay of Bengal littorals are members—“have failed to live up to their promise” (UNHCR, 2021, p. 1).

Broad multilateral mechanisms such as the Bali Process are hamstrung by familiar problems among regional countries, such as inequitable burden-sharing and lack of implementation. Notably, in the case of the regional response to the Rohingya boat-people phenomenon, as per the UNHCR (2021, p. 15), “there are to date no regional mechanisms to ensure equitable and predictable disembarkation of refugees and migrants in distress at sea, despite the maritime obligations of all states in the region” and the political commitments made by all signatories of the Bali Declaration. Bangladesh has borne the brunt of this challenge, with Foreign Minister Dr A.K. Abdul Momen lamenting that while Bangladesh was requested to provide shelter to the Rohingya on humanitarian grounds, other countries in the region were not asked to do the same (United News of Bangladesh, 2020). Malaysia did back Bangladesh by calling for proportionate responsibility-sharing, particularly among the signatories of the 1951 Refugee Convention, to receive more Rohingya refugees (Bernama, 2021). However, neither the Bay of Bengal states nor primary destination countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The way forward

The Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea constitute a singular maritime geostrategic construct, considering how the natural connectivity between these water bodies also brought about extant common security challenges at sea. Irregular human migration and illicit drug trade are among the most common security challenges faced by littorals sitting astride the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. Faced with capacity shortfalls of maritime forces amidst economic challenges, regional governments envisage confronting practical challenges in “going alone” with tackling security threats. In any case, transnational threats mean national self-help alone has clear limitations. As discussed in this brief, while regional mechanisms such as the 2016 Bali Process exist, they are constrained by persistent problems among the participating

nations, especially where it comes to burden-sharing and commitment to those initiatives.

If broad multilateral mechanisms such as the Bali Process have fallen short, it might be useful to consider smaller-scale, sub-regional initiatives. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a noteworthy example. Comprising seven littorals including Myanmar and Thailand as the Southeast Asian member states, BIMSTEC has in recent times engaged in maritime security-related cooperation. Notably, the inaugural meeting of BIMSTEC national security chiefs held in 2017 focused not only on counter-terrorism cooperation but also “emphasized the importance of maritime security in view of the significance of the Bay of Bengal for the well-being, prosperity, security and socio-economic development in the BIMSTEC Member States and decided to examine ways to further strengthen maritime security cooperation” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). However, BIMSTEC initiatives are yet to gain the support of all members; Thailand for example withdrew from the joint training exercises due to budgetary restrictions (Benson, 2020). Moreover, considering that maritime security challenges in the Bay of Bengal are not necessarily confined to the bay itself and can extend to the contiguous Andaman Sea, the absence of Indonesia and Malaysia from BIMSTEC appears odd. There is also a lack of institutionalised cooperation between BIMSTEC and these two Southeast Asian countries.

This policy brief proposes the following measures aimed at rectifying problems in the short and longer terms. In the short term, considering the ongoing economic challenges of post-pandemic recovery and inflationary pressures, regional governments are not likely to drastically increase maritime security capacities. However, while maritime forces capacity-building could be stymied by the overarching need for fiscal prudence, the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea countries can promote better coordination among national

agencies, especially those dealing with not just maritime but land-based issues, given the obvious land-sea nexus of such security threats as drug trafficking.

Currently, regional maritime security agencies rely heavily on bilateral relationships to strengthen enforcement capabilities and maritime domain awareness (Benson, 2020). In the long term, the solution is not to create new mechanisms but to improve upon existing ones such as the Bali Process and BIMSTEC. Within the Bali Process, signatories should work towards a regional mechanism for predictable and equitable disembarkation of

the Rohingya refugees (or other migrants) so that some governments do not have to bear the entire burden (UNHCR, 2021). In the long term, one should envision the future possibility of Indonesia and Malaysia getting BIMSTEC membership or observer status. Having more comprehensive coverage across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea littorals as an institutionalised mechanism may be helpful in ensuring more information and burden-sharing. Initiatives such as India's Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), which is modelled on the Singapore-based Information Fusion Centre and with which it maintains close institutional links, is a step towards this direction.

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