



From Strategic Space to Regional Community: Why People-To-People Connectivity Will Shape the Future of the Bay of Bengal

Amitabh Mattoo

The Bay of Bengal is back. From the Indo-Pacific to maritime security, supply chains to connectivity corridors and climate resilience to sustainable development, policy conversations are starting to recognise that what happens in and around this maritime space will shape the future of Asia. Stretching from India's eastern seaboard in the west to Bangladesh in the north, Myanmar and Thailand in the east, and Sri Lanka in the south, the Bay of Bengal is today where Asia meets. And yet, there is a paradox.

On the one hand, the Bay of Bengal is Asia's newest strategic space. On the other hand, it remains one of

its least integrated regions. Increasing trade, burgeoning connectivity projects and revitalised regional institutions have not been matched by the development of social foundations of regionalism. Political speeches focus on connectivity. Business leaders talk about trade. Diplomats and security experts debate maritime competition. But conversations about human relationships that underpin regional cooperation receive insufficient attention. This is a mistake.

From serving as a civilisational highway that linked peoples to becoming a site of intense geopolitical competition, the Bay of Bengal has experienced multiple transformations.

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CMEC

Centre for Maritime Economy
and Connectivity
समुद्री अर्थव्यवस्था व संयोजन केंद्र



For much of history, the Bay was not so much a body of water that separated people as it was one that connected them. Monks, scholars, merchants and sailors crisscrossed the Bay, carrying with them goods, ideas, beliefs, languages and cultures. Buddhist pilgrims travelled between the subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Tamil merchants operated far-flung networks that spanned maritime Asia. Bengal itself linked South Asia to larger Indian Ocean trading systems. In each of these relationships, connectivity across the Bay was often more robust than connectivity with inland hinterlands.

The Bay of Bengal was not a frontier. It connected civilisations.

To be sure, much of today's efforts to build a regional architecture are attempts to rediscover connections that history had taken for granted, but that colonialism, partition, Cold War politics and parochial nationalism fractured.

Connectivity: Moving from Margin to Centre

The simple argument of this essay is that for the Bay of Bengal to transition from being a strategic space to becoming a regional community, people-to-people connectivity needs to move from the margins of policy discussions to its very centre.

Surely railways, highways, ports, trade agreements and institutions matter. But as vital as they are, without robust people-to-people connectivity sustainable regionalism cannot happen. Trust, familiarity, socialisation and a sense of shared purpose provide the social infrastructure on which harder economic and political edifices of regional cooperation can be built.

If the Bay of Bengal is to become a community, what societies think and feel about their neighbours will be at least as important as what governments agree to do.

The Basics of Regionalism

Much of the academic literature on regionalism helps us understand the importance of focusing on societies rather than simply states. Three points are worth highlighting:

First, some of the earliest scholarship on regional integration identified that connectivity at the people-to-people level was critical to regional cooperation. In his classic work on security communities, Karl Deutsch argued that peace became durable when societies across a region developed “dependable expectations of peaceful change.” It was not institutions alone, but sustained social interaction that produced reliable patterns of cooperation.

Second, even as scholarly agendas grew more sophisticated and political science took somewhat of a back seat to economics, later works like Ernst Haas's study of European integration continued to highlight the importance of societal factors in sustaining regional orders.

Decades of subsequent research on regionalism added layers of nuance to these early ideas. The European experience that shaped much of this scholarship did not translate seamlessly to other regions. Regional institutions outside Europe did not evolve the way the European Union did. There were reasons for this. Political diversity, uneven development and powerful attachments to national sovereignty

made the European model of integration difficult to replicate.

The work of Amitav Acharya and other scholars demonstrated that one did not have to replicate European experiences to have successful forms of regionalism. If Europe was an exception, many other regions were marked by their own unique characteristics. What mattered was developing what Acharya calls “social embeddedness” of regionalism.

These ideas have significant implications for the Bay of Bengal.

Regionalism does not have to look like Europe to succeed. Indeed, forced efforts at institutionalisation along European lines can be counterproductive. What is required for social embeddedness are multiple connections between societies that build relationships across borders.

History of the Bay of Bengal as a Region

To understand why people-to-people connectivity matters so much, it is important to remember that the Bay of Bengal has historically been a regional space. National borders and modern maps tend to obscure this reality. What often appears today as a maritime space separating countries was for many centuries the connective tissue tying diverse societies together.

Take for instance the spread of Buddhism across Asia. While there were undeniably powerful political and economic motivations driving these exchanges, they were made possible by networks that linked lands around the Bay of Bengal. Knowledge flowed through similar channels. Ancient India was home to some of Asia’s most prestigious centres of learning. Monasteries across

the Bay hosted students from far and wide. Archaeological research shows that the ports of Bengal connected those universities to larger Indian Ocean networks. Ideas moved across the Bay just as goods did.

Visible remnants of these interactions remain today. Architectural styles, religious practices, linguistic influences, food habits and artistic traditions across the region attest to a shared history of exchange. It is no coincidence that in several Southeast Asian languages the sea to their west is still named for Bengal. We find evidence of these connections whether we visit Angkor Wat or Ayutthaya, Borobudur or Quanzhou. Here was a region connected not by eliminating distinctions but by facilitating conversations across them.

The point is not to mythologise history, but to learn from it. Networks of exchange across the Bay are not something that need to be invented. They already exist, but at the societal rather than state level. And people-to-people connectivity has the potential to generate connections that the state cannot.

The Return of the Bay

The rise of the Bay of Bengal as a strategic space is not unrelated to broader trends affecting the Indo-Pacific as a whole. Global economic gravity is shifting towards Asia. As a result, maritime spaces connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific have taken on added significance. Supply chains, Energy linkages, Digital infrastructure - all now depend on viable and peaceful maritime connectivity. The Bay of Bengal sits at the heart of these changes. Linking some of Asia’s fastest-growing economies, the Bay provides crucial access to sea lanes, connects South

and Southeast Asia, and serves as a portal to the broader Indo-Pacific.

New Delhi is obviously a part of this narrative but so is Beijing. While no one wants a Cold War in Asia, it is fair to say that China's rise has motivated efforts at its containment. Chinese maritime presence, Infrastructure investments, and flagship projects like the Belt and Road Initiative have generated both opportunities and insecurities across the region. Countries around the Bay of Bengal want and need greater connectivity, but aren't wedded to how any particular country might propose to achieve it. They want strategic autonomy, which underscores the need for multi-alignment.

There is another factor driving the return of the Bay. Climate change.

Few regions will face the consequences of a changing climate as severely as the countries and communities around the Bay of Bengal. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, coastal erosion and environmental degradation will impact millions. Entire livelihoods are at stake. Climate change threatens to undo decades of development. Dealing with climate change will require pooled resources, shared technologies and collaboration on an entirely different level. All of these dynamics have contributed to the rise of the Bay of Bengal as a region of geopolitical consequence. But geostrategic significance does not necessarily translate into integration.

Competitive coexistence describes much of the current regional landscape. Whether the Bay becomes a community will depend on how leaders and publics choose to engage with one another. And that brings us back to people.

The Value of People-to-People Connectivity

If regionalism is a social process, then people-to-people connectivity is not simply "nice to have" but rather essential social infrastructure.

The problem is policymakers tend to treat it as an adjunct to trade, investments or security. Portals between societies are often limited to cultural exchanges or tourism. This is a mistake. Connecting societies performs at least three vital functions:

First, it generates trust. Trust is one of the rarest currencies in international politics. Governments can sign documents. Societies do not trust each other just because politicians say they should. Students who study abroad, Scholars who collaborate across borders, Journalists who do exchanges, Businesses that build partnerships - all help construct confidence over time. Trust rarely happens overnight. But it can be cultivated.

Second, people-to-people connectivity generates legitimacy. For reasons mentioned above, regional organisations often lack social roots. Few citizens are aware of what most regional bodies do. Even when agreements are signed, they can often seem distant from people's lives. When people directly benefit from regional cooperation, that cooperation begins to deepen its social roots. Students get scholarships. Entrepreneurs access new markets. Tourists discover new destinations. Businesses build networks. Those who benefit from regional cooperation are more likely to care about its continuation.

Third, and perhaps most difficult, people-to-people connectivity can

help forge a sense of regional identity. Successful regional orders do not require nations to give up their national identities. Few Europeans think of themselves as “Europeans” first. Few Africans have adopted an “African” identity despite significant efforts to the contrary. But regional orders withstand geopolitical pressures when people view themselves as having something in common with their neighbours. Scholars call this the development of a “we-feeling.” The phrase sounds wonky, but the concept is powerful. Without it, regions are just geographic expressions. With it, regional orders have the possibility of becoming communities.

Much of what is required for the Bay of Bengal to develop the fundamentals for regional integration already exists. It is the people-to-people connectivity that remains underdeveloped.

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)

The formation of BIMSTEC is perhaps the most noteworthy institutional innovation of the last three decades. Established in 1997, BIMSTEC was an effort to bring together countries from South and Southeast Asia for multi-sectoral cooperation. Slow start and periodic stagnation aside, BIMSTEC’s star has risen in recent years. As SAARC’s troubles have grown more pronounced, attention has shifted to this increasingly vibrant organisation. Two developments are noteworthy. On 30 March 2022, at the Colombo Summit, BIMSTEC members adopted a Charter that provided the

organisation with definition and clarity. Substantive cooperation has expanded in recent years.

Areas like connectivity, security, disaster management, energy and trade have seen greater levels of collaboration. Regional initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Economic Dialogue and growing Track-II activity supplement these efforts. There is reason for optimism. The problem is BIMSTEC still isn’t very well known outside of regional policy circles.

Very few university students around the Bay know about BIMSTEC. Civil society engagement is inconsistent. Business interactions are sparse. Media coverage is uneven. In short, BIMSTEC is institutionally thick but socially thin.

The sustainability of any regional order ultimately depends on whether societies view it as relevant to their lives. Publics who do not believe they have a stake in regional cooperation are unlikely to defend it when politics between governments sour. If BIMSTEC is to seize upon its advantages and continue on an upward trajectory, it will have to find ways to connect with societies throughout the region.

India and the Bay of Bengal

A discussion about the future of the Bay of Bengal must centre on India. It goes without saying that New Delhi plays a critical role in dynamics around the Bay of Bengal. The question is how. India’s size, location, economic capacity and strategic ambitions ensure that it will. That reality presents opportunities but also challenges.

The first challenge is one of perception. Anxiety about Indian hegemony is not a new phenomenon.

Neighbours frequently benchmark their countries against India. The perception of asymmetry can be unnerving. Intentions do matter, but so do perceptions of intentions. India needs to continue to lead while simultaneously reassuring its neighbours that it has no interest in dominating them.

The second challenge flows from the first and deals with trust. Cooperation will only be as strong as the trust that underlies it. India will need to manage historical narratives, domestic political pressures and occasional strategic disagreements without allowing them to detract from larger goals. Building trust is hard and often takes patience.

The third challenge has to do with people. India's efforts to balance legitimate security concerns with the free flow of students, scholars, tourists and businesspeople can sometimes come up against public policy hurdles that are more administrative than malicious but that have an outsized impact on people-to-people connectivity. Given resource constraints, there will inevitably be fewer opportunities for Indians to study in regional countries than there will be for their counterparts. Addressing this imbalance will be critical if New Delhi wants to leverage people-to-people connectivity more effectively.

The fourth challenge is implementation. India can at times announce big plans but has struggled to follow through. Speedy implementation and the avoidance of bottlenecks will be important. India thus far has been spared many of the challenges other regional countries face. Our higher education sector is a massive asset that is already home to students and scholars

from around the region. If managed properly, educational connectivity has the potential to create knowledge networks that can sustain ties even when politics between governments change. India's emerging digital public infrastructure is another potential opportunity. Already the success of platforms related to digital identity, payments, governance and more has become a global talking point. Adapted judiciously, some of these innovations have the potential to be regional public goods that benefit countries around the Bay. Finally, India must look east and northeast with a fresh eye. For too long, this region was seen primarily through a security lens. Now it is finally being appreciated for what it truly is: a gateway connecting India to Southeast Asia and the wider Bay of Bengal.

These challenges are real but not insurmountable. Each also represents an opportunity that if properly leveraged can help New Delhi lead more effectively.

Putting People at the Centre of Regionalism

What would happen if we placed people at the centre of efforts to bring the Bay of Bengal together? Imagine a Bay of Bengal People-to-People Compact to complement BIMSTEC's free trade agreement and strategic roadmap. It could include the following elements:

A BIMSTEC University Network could facilitate joint degrees, research collaboration, faculty exchanges and student mobility. Education is already a connective tissue tying the region together. Support could be provided through a Bay of Bengal Scholarship Scheme.

Annual Bay of Bengal Youth Forums could connect young people around shared challenges and opportunities. A substantial portion of the region's population is under the age of 35. Connect with them, and you connect with the future.

Collaborative Research Centres focusing on common challenges such as climate change, public health, maritime security and technological transformation could pool knowledge and resources.

The creation of digital platforms to facilitate connectivity among people in the region. The digital public infrastructure India is building has the potential to be one of the biggest drivers of regional connectivity. Focus on creating regional public goods that can facilitate connectivity among people whether they travel physically or digitally.

Focused initiatives on maritime heritage, museums, literary translations, and cultural festivals that highlight ties that have historically connected societies around the Bay of Bengal. Regional connectivity requires knowledge of each other's pasts.

Journalism fellowships and media exchanges to improve media discourse about the region. Improve how societies understand their neighbours.

City-to-city and think tank-to-think tank exchanges. These can often build connections that supplement high-level efforts. Regional institutions can also connect at the people-to-people level.

The list goes on. It need not be comprehensive to be effective. Done

properly even a few of these ideas have the potential to generate a large number of human connections.

Conclusion

When historians write about the future of the Bay of Bengal, they may well look back on this moment as a time when the Bay of Bengal had the opportunity to return to what it once was centuries ago: a regional community.

It once connected people before it connected countries. If we want the Bay of Bengal to reach its full potential, we must reconnect the people who live around it.

States come and go. Governments change. Agreements are signed and broken. But societies that have built networks of relationships with one another tend to look for ways to sustain cooperation even when politics between governments become difficult.

Regional orders are built over decades, not years. The payoff of investments in human relationships may take time. But the benefits of drawing people closer will outlive any single administration.

Too often we think of regional integration in terms of ports, cables and agreements alone. Important as they are, cables cannot connect people. Agreements don't facilitate conversations. To be sure, governments need to cooperate for regionalism to work. But people also need to continue to cooperate when governments do not.

Asia's future is being decided in and around the Bay of Bengal. So are chances to help create a truly regional community.





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RIS specialises in issues related to international economic development, trade, investment and technology. It is envisioned as a forum for fostering effective policy dialogue and capacity-building among developing countries on global and regional economic issues. The focus of the work programme of RIS is to promote South-South Cooperation and collaborate with developing countries in multilateral negotiations in various forums. Through its following centres/forums, RIS promotes policy dialogue and coherence on regional and international economic issues.



The word “DAKSHIN” (दक्षिण) is of Sanskrit origin, meaning “South.” The Hon’ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, inaugurated DAKSHIN – Global South Centre of Excellence in November 2023. The initiative was inspired by the deliberations of Global South leaders during the Voice of the Global South Summits. DAKSHIN stands for Development and Knowledge Sharing Initiative. Hosted at the RIS, DAKSHIN has established linkages with leading think tanks and universities across the Global South and is building a dynamic network of scholars working on Global South issues.



AIC at RIS has been working to strengthen India’s strategic partnership with ASEAN in its realisation of the ASEAN Community. AIC at RIS undertakes research, policy advocacy and regular networking activities with relevant organisations and think-tanks in India and ASEAN countries, with the aim of providing policy inputs, up-to-date information, data resources and sustained interaction, for strengthening ASEAN-India partnership.



CMEC has been established at RIS under the aegis of the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPS&W), Government of India. CMEC is a collaboration between RIS and Indian Ports Association (IPA). It has been mandated to act as an advisory/technological arm of MoPSW to provide the analytical support on policies and their implementation.



FITM is a joint initiative by the Ministry of Ayush and RIS. It has been established with the objective of undertaking policy research on economy, intellectual property rights (IPRs) trade, sustainability and international cooperation in traditional medicines. FITM provides analytical support to the Ministry of Ayush on policy and strategy responses on emerging national and global developments.



BEF aims to serve as a dedicated platform for fostering dialogue on promoting the concept in the Indian Ocean and other regions. The forum focuses on conducting studies on the potential, prospects and challenges of blue economy; providing regular inputs to practitioners in the government and the private sectors; and promoting advocacy for its smooth adoption in national economic policies.



FIDC, has been engaged in exploring nuances of India’s development cooperation programme, keeping in view the wider perspective of South-South Cooperation in the backdrop of international development cooperation scenario. It is a tripartite initiative of the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, academia and civil society organisations.



FISD aims to harness the full potential and synergy between science and technology, diplomacy, foreign policy and development cooperation in order to meet India’s development and security needs. It is also engaged in strengthening India’s engagement with the international system and on key global issues involving science and technology.



As part of its work programme, RIS has been deeply involved in strengthening economic integration in the South Asia region. In this context, the role of the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) is very important. SACEPS is a network organisation engaged in addressing regional issues of common concerns in South Asia.



Knowledge generated endogenously among the Southern partners can help in consolidation of stronger common issues at different global policy fora. The purpose of NeST is to provide a global platform for Southern Think-Tanks for collaboratively generating, systematising, consolidating and sharing knowledge on South South Cooperation approaches for international development.



DST-Satellite Centre for Policy Research on STI Diplomacy at RIS aims to advance policy research at the intersection of science, technology, innovation (STI) and diplomacy, in alignment with India’s developmental priorities and foreign policy objectives.

— Policy research to shape the international development agenda —

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