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DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**INDIA'S BALANCING ACT
IN THE BAY OF BENGAL**

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INDIA'S BALANCING ACT IN THE BAY OF BENGAL

Context

- **India's maritime ambitions** in the **Bay of Bengal** face challenges despite its progress in ports and regional trade.

About Bay of Bengal: Strategic Geography

- The Bay of Bengal is **bounded by India's eastern coastline**, and is **India's maritime gateway to Southeast Asia**.
- It connects the **Indian Ocean to the Strait of Malacca**, one of the world's most critical chokepoints.
- It serves as the **maritime periphery** of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which host strategic military infrastructure and surveillance capabilities.
- It was seen as a **'natural sphere of influence'**, by India that shapes its security doctrines and foreign policy.

Significance of Bay of Bengal For India

- **Trade & Connectivity:** It serves as a vital maritime corridor linking South Asia with Southeast Asia, facilitating global trade and supply chains.
 - ♦ It includes infrastructure, trade policies including development of ports, logistics for seamless economic integration with neighboring countries.
- **Geopolitical Influence:** India's presence in the Bay of Bengal strengthens its regional leadership, countering external influences and ensuring maritime stability.
- **Energy & Resources:** The bay is rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and fisheries, making it crucial for economic growth and energy security.
- **Security & Stability:** India plays a key role in maintaining maritime security in the region, given rising concerns over piracy, illegal fishing, and transnational crime.
- **Environmental & Climate Impact:** The bay's coastal ecosystems are vital for biodiversity and disaster resilience, requiring sustainable policies to protect marine life and coastal communities.

India & Countries in Bay of Bengal

- **Bangladesh:** It is India's closest maritime neighbor and is highly impacted by shifts in India's trade and infrastructure policies.
- **Myanmar:** India's engagement with Myanmar is crucial for both regional connectivity and security.
- **Nepal & Bhutan:** They rely on India for access to Bay of Bengal ports.
- **Sri Lanka:** It plays a significant role in **regional shipping routes**.
- **Thailand & Southeast Asia:** India's policies influence BIMSTEC partnerships, which include Thailand.

Key Concerns and Challenges

- **Geopolitical Competition:** China's deep-water port constructions in **Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Chittagong (Bangladesh)** pose strategic challenges.
- **Maritime Security Threats:** The region faces rising threats from piracy, illegal fishing, arms trafficking, and natural disasters.
 - ♦ India's ability to coordinate maritime surveillance and security with littoral states is often hampered by capacity gaps and political sensitivities.
- **Inconsistent Trade Policies:** India's withdrawal of transshipment privileges for Bangladesh raised concerns about the predictability of its trade commitments.
- **Environmental Vulnerabilities:** The Bay of Bengal is highly susceptible to climate change impacts — rising sea levels, cyclones, and coastal erosion.

India's Balancing Act

- **Security Architecture:**
 - ♦ The **Indian Navy's Eastern Naval Command** and the **Tri-Service Command** in the Andaman Islands serve as deterrents and rapid deployment centers in the eastern maritime theatre.
 - ♦ **MILAN Naval Exercises:** Participants from Southeast Asia, Africa, and the West, hosted in the Bay by the Indian Navy.
 - ♦ **IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association):** India promotes a vision of cooperative maritime governance, tackling issues like piracy, illegal fishing, and environmental degradation.
 - ♦ **QUAD Alliance:** It signals India's alignment with like-minded democracies on freedom of navigation and rule-based order.
- **Economic Engagement:**
 - ♦ **Act East Policy:** Strengthening ties with Southeast Asian nations through trade agreements and infrastructure projects, reinforcing India's strategic presence in the region.
 - ♦ **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR):** It is a flagship initiative of India's maritime diplomacy, focusing on capacity-building, economic ties, and cooperative security.
 - ♦ **Regional Connectivity:** Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (**BBIN**) and **BIMSTEC** frameworks (including *recently signed BIMSTEC Maritime Transport Cooperation Agreement*), which include economic corridors and energy diplomacy in the Bay region.
 - ♦ **Infrastructure Development:** Initiatives like the **Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project** in Myanmar and **India-Bangladesh coastal shipping** enhances India's trade leverage.
 - ♦ **Sagarmala:** It aims to modernize ports, improve coastal logistics, and enhance maritime trade efficiency, benefiting India's eastern seaboard.
 - ♦ **Transshipment & Trade Facilitation:** India has invested in port infrastructure to facilitate smoother trade flows.
- **Environmental Diplomacy:** India is promoting **Blue Economy** cooperation and climate-resilient infrastructure in littoral states. It includes:
 - ♦ Hydrographic surveys and disaster management training.
 - ♦ Indian assistance in satellite data sharing for monsoon and cyclone predictions.
 - ♦ Promoting green shipping corridors and renewable energy projects in island nations like the Maldives.

Way Forward

- **Reinforce Multilateralism:** A stable, rules-based framework aims to bolster India's credibility as a benign power.
- **Transparent Trade Practices:** India could establish clearer, more predictable trade policies, especially with neighbors like Bangladesh and Myanmar.
- **Joint Infrastructure Projects:** Co-developing ports, digital corridors, and energy grids with partner countries ensures shared benefits and reduces dependency on extra-regional players like China.
 - ♦ It turns **competition into collaboration**.
- **Disaster-Resilient Development:** Investing in joint coastal resilience programs — like cyclone early warning systems or climate-smart fisheries — can address a common threat and foster goodwill across borders.
- **Security Cooperation Without Overreach:** India can promote maritime security through joint exercises and shared protocols, while **remaining sensitive to sovereignty** concerns.

Source: TH

Mains Practice Question

[Q] How can India balance its strategic ambitions and regional responsibilities in the Bay of Bengal while maintaining trust and cooperation with its neighboring countries?