

The Geopolitical Significance of Saint Martin's Island: With Special Context to India

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Abstract

The current research paper focuses on the geopolitical and strategic significance of Saint Martin's Island, situated in the Bay of Bengal within the Indian subcontinent. This study employs secondary data, drawing from prior research papers, newspapers, geographical analyses, expert opinions, and other credible communication sources as required. The nature of this research is Descriptive. It investigates the potential strategic applications of Saint Martin's Island by global powers and assesses Indian security issues. The findings and recommendations of this research underscore the possible challenges associated with Saint Martin's Island and the implications that may arise.

Keywords: Geopolitical, Saint Martin's Island, India, Global Power, Geostrategic.

Introduction

Due to ideological divisions, India was partitioned on the 14th and 15th of August 1947, leading to the establishment of Pakistan and the political independence of the remaining part of India. Following the India-Pakistan conflict in 1971, prior to the partition of Pakistan, East Pakistan emerged as Bangladesh. India's military assistance was instrumental in facilitating Bangladesh's independence. Consequently, India and Bangladesh maintained a cordial relationship; however, another faction within Bangladesh developed ideological differences with India, reminiscent of those that precipitated India's partition in 1947. This faction ousted Bangladesh's amicable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, seized control of the Bangladeshi government, and opposed India and Hindus based on these ideological disparities. As a result, Bangladesh could potentially become a tool for global powers that may exploit it against India. Notably, Bangladesh shares its longest border with India. It is bordered on three sides by India, with its southern boundary resting along the northern shores of the Bay of Bengal, which provides a link to the global community. Located in the Bay of Bengal, often regarded as India's own courtyard, Bangladesh possesses numerous strategically vital islands, with St. Martin's being the most prominent. This island garners the interest of global powers including the United States, China, and Myanmar. Therefore, the following research questions emerge-

Research Questions

1. What is the geostrategic importance of Saint Martin's Island for India, and what challenges might it present?
2. What is the geostrategic importance of Saint Martin's Island for global powers? Consequently, the aims of this research are outlined below to tackle these concerns.

Research Objectives

1. To determine the geostrategic importance of Saint Martin's Island for India and the possible challenges it may pose.
2. To investigate the potential geostrategic relevance of Saint Martin's Island for global powers.

Research Methodology

This research paper will utilize secondary sources to fulfill the research objectives, encompassing reports from reputable newspapers, geopolitical theories, relevant research articles, as well as government and non-government websites, among others, all of which will be referenced in the bibliography. The data acquired through these means will be examined to perform Interpretative and Descriptive research. Following this examination, conclusions will be formulated. Based on these conclusions, recommendations will be offered, which may inform actions in response to both favorable and unfavorable conditions for India.

Recent Discussion regarding Saint Martin's:

The former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, has alleged that the United States is attempting to remove her from office due to its unwillingness to cede authority over the island of Saint Martin's. This control, she argues, would enable the US to exert influence over the Bay of Bengal. Hasina contended that conceding sovereignty of the island would facilitate her continued leadership.¹

Following Hasina's assertion, the media has been actively engaging in discussions regarding this island group, which spans merely three-square kilometers in the northeastern section of the Bay of Bengal. Indeed, the United States aims to assert control over this island to reinforce its influence in the Indian Ocean. The increasing presence of China in the Indian Ocean region has raised concerns within the United States. In reaction, the U.S. has implemented its Indo-Pacific strategy, with India serving as a crucial strategic ally. In light of China's growing influence in the area, both nations have formed the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Within this framework, Saint Martin's Island possesses significant strategic relevance.²

Strategic Significance of Saint Martin's Island: Heartland Theory

According to Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory established in 1904, the entity that governs the Heartland holds dominion over the entire globe. Eurasian Heartland - 1904: The USSR ascended to global power status. By 1980, the Atlantic Ocean was recognized as the new Heartland, with the United States emerging as a world power.

In the 21st century, a new heartland is taking shape in the Indo-Pacific region, with the Bay of Bengal being its most crucial component. While India and China are engaged in competition within this area, other powers such as the United States, Japan, and Australia are also striving to assert their influence in the region.

Historically, the Bay of Bengal held great significance for the Silk Route, which linked India to Southeast Asia. During the era of the Chola Empire, it was referred to as 'Chola.' By the medieval period, the Bengal Sultanate leveraged its authority to position the Bay of Bengal as a conduit for connectivity with the then-contemporary Muslim world and Southeast Asia. In the 16th century, a struggle ensued among Britain, France, and Portugal for dominance over the Bay of Bengal, culminating in Britain's establishment of supremacy and its rise as a major global power.

During World War II, Japan asserted its supremacy in the Bay of Bengal. Following independence, the Bay of Bengal fell under India's jurisdiction. In an effort to curb India's growing influence in this area, China is exerting all possible efforts. However, the pertinent questions remain: why does China seek to enhance its

influence in the Bay of Bengal? Is the Bay of Bengal genuinely a heartland?

Bay of Bengal

The Bay of Bengal is adjacent to the Ganga delta in the north. To the southeast, one can find the strategically significant Andaman and Nicobar Islands, situated between the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. This bay is bordered by India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Sri Lanka. It serves as a connection between South Asia and East Asia through the Strait of Malacca. This route is among the busiest in the world. Within the Krishna-Godavari delta of the Bay of Bengal, gas reserves surpassing 1.2 trillion cubic feet are present, and one-third of Bangladesh's gas reserves are extracted on a global scale. Myanmar stands out as a significant gas-producing nation. Consequently, the Bay of Bengal represents a strategic and economic lifeline for the Indo-Pacific region.

China aims to emerge as a global power by asserting its dominance in the India-Pacific region, particularly through its control of the Bay of Bengal. Consequently, it is essential for China to exert influence not only in the Western Pacific but also in the Bay of Bengal. Thus, China is diligently pursuing the establishment of its dominance in the Bay of Bengal.

The geographic positioning of St. Martin's Island, located in the Bay of Bengal, renders it of considerable strategic importance. From this point, one can access any part of the globe via maritime routes; furthermore, this island allows for the surveillance of not only the Bay of Bengal but also the entire adjacent area. Thus, St. Martin's Island possesses significant strategic value.³

The capacity of any strategic passage is also contingent upon the volume of traffic it accommodates. Daily, 210 commercial vessels traverse the Strait of Malacca. With nearly 30 percent of global maritime trade being conducted through Malacca, it stands as the most crucial route in the global economy, followed by the Suez Canal at 15 percent and the Panama Canal at 5 percent.⁴

An Overview of Saint Martin's Island

This small island situated in the Bay of Bengal lies between the latitudes of 20°30' and 20°39' North, and the longitudes of 92°18' and 92°30' East. It is located approximately 9 kilometers to the south of the southernmost point of mainland Bangladesh. The island covers an area of roughly 8 square kilometers, featuring an average elevation of

2.5 meters above sea level, with the highest rock reaching 6 meters. The geological composition of the island primarily consists of sandstone, shells, conglomerates, limestone, concrete, pebbles, boulder rock, and coral rock. Locally, the island is referred to as 'Narikol Jinjira' owing to the plentiful coconut trees found there. It forms part of the Teknaf range, which stretches from Teknaf to Cox's Bazar.

Approximately 7,000 individuals reside on the island of Saint Martin's. This island features 17 hotels, 12 dining establishments, a single government office, two mosques, three primary educational institutions, one secondary school, two cyclone shelters, and two community resource centers. The majority of the island's terrain is composed of coral reef sand and agricultural land. The primary economic pursuits include fishing, fish preservation, tourism, and agriculture.⁵

The Historical Background of Saint Martin's Island

Centuries ago, this island formed a segment of the Teknaf Peninsula. As certain areas of the Teknaf Peninsula were submerged, its southernmost section detached from mainland Bangladesh, thus establishing itself as an

island. In the 18th century, Arab merchants set up settlements here, referring to it as Jazeera. During the period of British colonial rule, it was named in honor of Martin's, who was the Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong at that time. After the 1947 partition, it became incorporated into East Pakistan. Following the events of the Liberation War in 1971, it was integrated into Bangladesh. Reports from Dainik Jagran indicate that the island is named after a priest, Saint Martin's.⁶

The Competition between China and the United States and the Strategic Significance of Saint Martin's Island

The primary pathway for China's maritime transportation, both currently and in the foreseeable future, is through the South China Sea leading to the Strait of Malacca, and subsequently through the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Approximately 90 percent of China's trade is conducted via maritime routes. It is projected that China could become up to 80 percent reliant on imported oil. By the conclusion of this decade, China is expected to achieve a 62 percent dependency on foreign liquefied natural gas imports.

China is concerned that, should a significant conflict arise, these Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) may be obstructed via the Indian Ocean. To mitigate the Malacca dilemma, China has sought to leverage foreign ports owned by Chinese enterprises to extend its naval influence. Additionally, it has investigated alternative supply routes. This exploration encompasses extensive overland infrastructure initiatives that link inland Chinese cities to ports in Pakistan and Myanmar, with expenditures reaching billions of dollars.⁷ For both commercial and strategic security, Myanmar's ports and Coco Island may serve China for strategic purposes rather than purely commercial ones.

Furthermore, the potential utilization of St. Martin's Island could play a role in exerting control over this situation.

For many years, the United States has underestimated the importance of securing global maritime routes, presuming that both commercial and military shipping would function without interruption. In the meantime, while America has been negligent, China has methodically increased its maritime supremacy, guaranteed a consistent flow of its own products and enhanced its ability to selectively disrupt American supply chains. The growing influence of China over international ports and shipping logistics represents a developing reality that could significantly impact the economy of the United States and its military mobilization capabilities during a geopolitical crisis. As tensions escalate in critical maritime chokepoints such as the South China Sea, the Red Sea, and the Panama Canal, vulnerabilities in maritime infrastructure may lead to economic and national security challenges for the United States. The United States can no longer afford to adopt a passive stance. A lackluster response will be inadequate to address China's strategically orchestrated expansion of maritime power.⁸

The position of St. Martin's Island in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh, may hold significance for the United States for several reasons, particularly in terms of managing the growing influence of China-

1. China maintains a presence at the Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar. Situated in the Bay of Bengal, this port has afforded China commercial maritime capabilities, which may be leveraged as a military facility in times of conflict.⁹ The Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar is merely 185 km distant from St. Martin's Island.
2. Another significant Chinese presence close to the Indian coastline is situated on Coco Island. Coco Island is positioned to the north of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Its strategic importance escalates during periods of conflict. It is reported that China has established a military installation there. Furthermore, China has received authorization to create intelligence facilities on Coco Island in Myanmar,

adjacent to the Malacca Strait. This location serves as a crucial choke point for China. The growing Chinese presence in the Bay of Bengal holds considerable significance for its broader maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean region and the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, it acts as a foundational element; China's strengthening in this area poses a challenge to US interests in the Indo-Pacific. The United States aims to curtail China's influence in this region.¹⁰ The United States aims to establish a military base in proximity to the Bay of Bengal to ensure a prompt response in emergency situations and to enhance intelligence gathering capabilities. Diego Garcia, situated in the Indian Ocean, is considerably distant from the Bay of Bengal, with distances of 2339 km from Kyaupkyu Port, 2057 km from Coco Island, and 1938 km from the Malacca Strait, as per Google search results. Consequently, the establishment of a military base near the Indian Ocean holds significant strategic importance for the United States. Therefore, St. Martin's Island emerges as an optimal site to bolster America's strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region.

3. China has developed the Chattogram port in Bangladesh and has played a crucial role in establishing the nation's inaugural submarine base. This submarine base is under construction along the coastline of Cox's Bazar, thereby creating opportunities for the deployment of Chinese submarines within the Bay of Bengal. In the year 2023, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh officially inaugurated the \$1.2 billion submarine base with six slots, constructed by China in Pekua's, Cox Bazar, designated as BNS Sheikh Hasina. The objective of this facility is to enhance and modernize the capabilities of the Bangladesh Armed Forces. Situated at the entrance of the Bay of Bengal, this base will accommodate submarines operated by the People's Liberation Army Navy of China, positioning them perilously near the Indian Navy's Andaman and Nicobar Command.¹¹
4. Chinese companies have developed the Hambantota Port in the south-eastern part of Sri Lanka, and the Sri Lankan government has also given its control to a Chinese company. After 2015, the Sirisena government in Sri Lanka did not allow the construction of a naval base. In the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, the United States has only one naval base, Diego Garcia, which is 1791 km away from the southernmost point of mainland India. It is the largest island among the 60 Chagos Islands located in the center of the Indian Ocean, with an area of 32 square km. From here, it is easy to monitor the entire Indian Ocean.¹²

It is clear that “as China is increasing its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, the United States and other powers are keen to monitor and counterbalance this influence. Control of any country's presence on Saint Martin's Island would provide a significant advantage in maintaining surveillance over the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indian Ocean region.”¹³ Therefore, to control China's strategic advance, the United States needs Saint Martin's Island, located in the Bay of Bengal, or a similar island where a naval base can be developed.

Mainland China and Saint Martin's Island

Amid the coup in Bangladesh and the conflict in Manipur, the market for discussion has heated up again regarding the US intelligence agency CIA following a statement by the Chief Minister of Mizoram. Is the US intelligence agency working on a plan to separate parts of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar to create a separate Christian country?

In this context, the Chief Minister of Mizoram, in his speech in the United States, mentioned not only India but also Bangladesh and Myanmar. He spoke about the Chin-Kuki community, saying that we are all one, and

we cannot take the risk of dividing. We have been unfairly divided among the three countries. In this regard, former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina had also claimed that a U.S. official had talked about a plan to create a new Christian country by merging certain areas of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.¹⁴ It is clear from the above fact that creating a Christian country and maintaining it requires military strength. Therefore, the nearby island of Saint Martin's is a suitable location to fulfill this need. From this perspective, Saint Martin's holds increased strategic and tactical importance for the United States of America.

The Significance of St. Martin's Island for India

Spanning approximately 3.2 square kilometers, Saint Martin's Island is located 9 km from Bangladesh and 8 km from Myanmar. The strategic significance of Saint Martin's Island for India increases due to its position between Myanmar's Kyaukpyu and Bangladesh's Chattogram, both of which have a Chinese presence. Being situated between the Indian mainland and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Bay of Bengal holds a position equivalent to India's home yard. In a diverse and democratic country like India, the presence of foreign powers is a matter of security concern. To counterbalance these foreign powers, India has strategic islands available in the Bay of Bengal, namely the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as well as in the Arabian Sea, the Lakshadweep Islands. Additionally, since India's mainland itself is located in the Bay of Bengal, under normal circumstances, India does not require Saint Martin's Island as much as the strategic interests of China and the United States do.

The strategic presence of China or the United States on any island or group of islands in the Bay of Bengal increases their importance for India. The presence of China or the United States in the Bay of Bengal or the Arabian Sea not only affects India's interests and regional sovereignty but also impacts its relations with neighboring countries. To balance the imbalance arising from this new situation, India must undertake defense preparedness on islands or groups of islands under its sovereignty or, if necessary, from the mainland.

Saint Martin's and Bangladesh

Following the statements made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the news, Bryan Shiller, the spokesperson of the

U.S. Embassy in Dhaka, told the media on Thursday, 'The United States and Bangladesh remain committed to a strong and cooperative partnership. We respect the sovereignty of Bangladesh and have not laid claim to any part of the country, including St. Martin's.'¹⁵

In contrast, Rashid Khan Menon, leader of the Awami League's allied parties JSD and the Workers Party, said, 'The United States wants to include Bangladesh in the Quad.' To keep Bangladesh within its fold, they have previously imposed sanctions. Now, on the occasion of the elections, a new visa policy has been announced. This is not only opportunistic but also part of their strategy for a change in power.

Saint Martin's Coral Island is one of the most important areas of Bangladesh. Saint Martin's holds significance for various reasons, including biodiversity, environment, fisheries, tourism, and natural resources. This region also has considerable importance in geopolitics. Dr. K. M. Azam Chowdhury, Head of the Department of Oceanography at the University of Dhaka, stated in this regard that Saint Martin's is an offshore area, meaning it is located away from the coastline. According to international maritime law, if a country has any offshore island, that country is entitled to the maritime area adjacent to that island. Therefore, Bangladesh gained a substantial maritime area adjoining Saint Martin's. In an interview with The Times, Abu Nasim Khan, President of the Environmental Protection Movement (PEBA), said, "Saint Martin's is Bangladesh's only coral island from an environmental perspective." Retired Major General, Chairman of the

Bangladesh Institute of Security Studies and security analyst ANM Muniruzzaman stated that while we describe Set Martin's as having strategic significance, it is not actually that important. From the perspective of the Indian Ocean or the Bay of Bengal, it holds no such significance.

Retired Major General and former Ambassador Shahidul Haq stated that Saint Martin's is an important island. The island is so small that it is not feasible to establish a military base or a naval station there, nor is it possible to set up any military installation. No warship can approach close to Saint Martin's.¹⁶

Conclusion

1. Ports, islands, and archipelagos situated in maritime regions hold significant strategic value.
2. Global powers often engage in the domestic matters of nations to secure resources.
3. At present, the United States stands as a superpower in the maritime domain, while China is recognized as an emerging superpower.
4. India is encountering fresh strategic challenges in safeguarding its interests in the Bay of Bengal.
5. It is imperative for India to enhance its strategic and economic partnerships with the nations surrounding the Bay of Bengal.

Suggestions:

1. India must be sufficiently equipped both economically and strategically to confront existing and foreseeable challenges.
2. Partnerships with the leading global powers will need to be established.
3. The defense and monitoring of both land and maritime boundaries must be enhanced.
4. The rich diversity of India should not be allowed to be used against the nation.
5. The navy's capabilities and shipbuilding capacity require fortification.

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