

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF BAY OF BENGAL AND OPTIONS FOR BANGLADESH

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INTRODUCTION

The Bay of Bengal (BoB) is one of the geo-political epicenters of the Indo-Pacific region. Geographically, (BoB) gives access to the major Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs). Since these routes are crucial for the interests of major regional and extra regional players, some scholars assume that the region might become a center of global conflict gradually.¹ One of the significant causes of increased competition in the BoB can be defined by geostrategic and economic factors. Such as: energy security, maritime power projection capabilities, connectivity, and increasing significance of seaborne trade etc. Moreover, there has been a considerable increase in energy demand by growing economies which has already created energy security challenges in the region. Additionally, the economies of the littoral and the hinterland nations of the BoB are resource-poor and trade dependent. In these circumstances, regional production has also been declining and reliance of these nations on foreign energy imports is increasing. And most of these resources are usually delivered by sea. However, growing maritime presence of different regional actors is another crucial element shaping the dynamics of the new configurations in the Bay.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE BAY OF BENGAL

In terms of geopolitical competition, several factors like economy, politics, energy security and connectivity are playing a great role in the Bay of Bengal. In addition, not only regional actors such as India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar are involved in this race but also extra regional powers like China, The United States, and Japan are also considered as significant stakeholders in this region. Question can be arised, why the Bay of Bengal became this much important for major global powers? Here, the paper will give a brief analysis on this issue.

¹ Kaplan, R. D., 2010. Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power. New York: Random House Publishing.

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Though China is not a littoral country, the state is trying to increase its presence through growing cooperation with other littoral nations. In order to understand the complexity of China's strategic situation, one needs to take into account its remarkable economic growth over the last decades. In this whole journey of tremendous economic growth, one main commodity that Beijing lacks is oil. Today, the country is the second largest global oil consumer (Fig 01). China's strategic priorities are to find reliable oil supplies and secure unencumbered Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) so that it can sustain its rapid economic growth. This explains China's focus on military facilities along the SLOCs from China to the Persian Gulf. This route can reduce its reliance on the Malacca strait through which about 80% of its energy import is transported.²

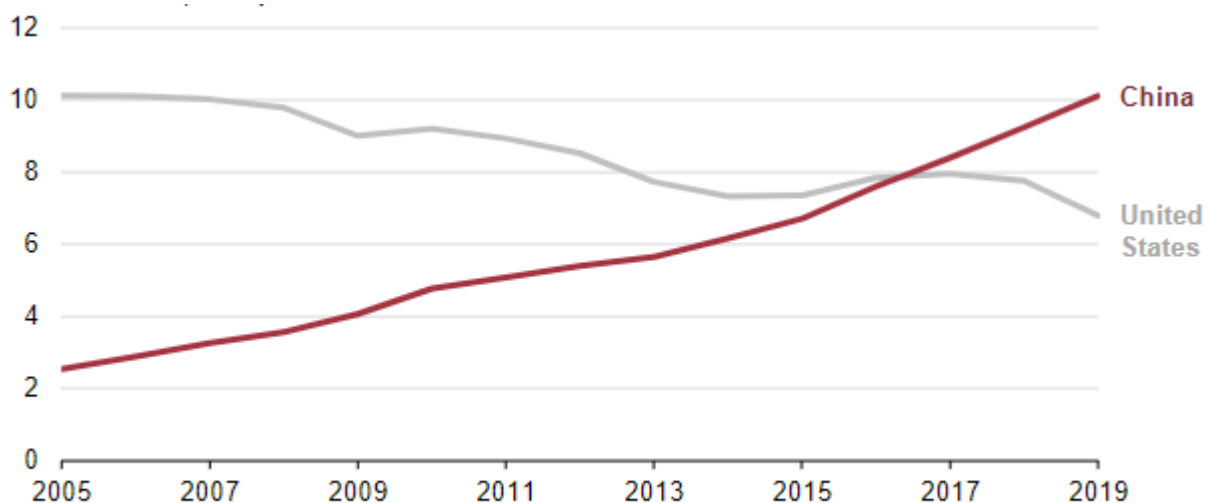


Figure 01: China and US annual crude oil import 2015-2019 (million barrels per day)

Source: China General Administration of Customs, based on Bloomberg, L.P.

The US, not even a coastal nation, is increasingly shifting its strategic focus from the Middle East to Asia. Some scholars argue that America's shift in focus may have been triggered by China's fast expansion in the region. The US sees China's rise as a threat to its role as a provider of regional stability. As a result, the state is now reallocating resources in Asia as its Rebalancing Strategy.

² Eshel, D., 2011. Flashpoints: Asia, 'String of Pearls' Is Securing China's Sea Lanes. Defence Update. Available at: http://www.defense-update.com/analysis/2010/20122010_analysis_string_of_pearls.html

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While it might seem obvious that, given its long border with the Bay of Bengal, India should be the principal player in this area, which is far from the case. It was only after external actors started showing interest in the region, India realized the importance of protecting this geo-strategic area situated right above one of the world's busiest SLOCs. At present, China is the major power India has to catch up to. Because China sees the Bay of Bengal as an integral part of its "One Belt One Road" policy which combines its proposed maritime and overland trade routes into one giant network (Fig 02). In terms of its counter foreign policy and strategy, India has adopted a 'look East' approach. The nation is also interested in building the "Bay of Bengal Community," where it proposes greater security cooperation among the littoral nations. As a consequence, India could concentrate on improving security relations with countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar.



Figure 02: Overland and Maritime Routes for One Belt One Road Initiative

Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies

Besides these major players, Japan has also recognized the growing importance of the Bay of Bengal as an economic and physical connection between East and Southeast Asia. Japan is

trying to make its way into the BoB through Bangladesh. Economically and strategically, Japan has been increasing its influence in the littoral nations and showing greater interest in the region. Among other projects, the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) plan is a strategic initiative proposed by the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, which aims to promote industrial agglomeration along the Dhaka-Chittagong-Cox's Bazar belt, and enhance economic ties stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean.³

OPTIONS FOR BANGLADESH IN THE BAY OF BENGAL

Blue Economy as a New Horizon in the Bay: In the course of strategic positioning in Asia and the Indian Ocean, Bangladesh's geo-strategic location in the Bay of Bengal (BoB) provides the country with a significant strategic maritime vantage point. Bangladesh is located on the northern border of the BoB and has obtained a sea area of about 166,000 square kilometers after the demarcation of its maritime boundary with Myanmar and with India.⁴ This maritime area serves as the lynchpin of Bangladesh's economic development, affecting about 30 million people who are directly connected to the ocean-based economy. From an economic point of view, BoB and its adjoining littoral areas have a vast amount of living and nonliving organisms and resources, such as: hydrocarbons, fisheries, minerals, and energies. The sea has a huge potential for finding new energy resources. For instance, about 106864.56 million barrels of oil of gas was discovered in Bhola, the southeast district of Bangladesh, in January 2018. There are around 475 species of fish in the coastal belts of BoB.⁵ This accounts for approximately 4.9% of the total export earnings of the country and 2.73% of the national GDP, contributing about 12% of its total employment.⁶ These data indicators provide a proving ground for Bangladesh to implement an effective marine and maritime security platform. In this case, Bangladesh has the option of

³ Bhatnagar, G. V., 2013. First India-Japan maritime exercise in Bay of Bengal. The Hindu. [online] December 17, 2013. Available at: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/first-indiajapan-maritime-exercise-inbay-of-bengal/article5469941.ece> [accessed July 2014].

⁴ Mohammad Rubaiyat Rahman, "Regional Cooperation in Maritime Security: A View from the Bay of Bengal", Annual International Studies Convention on Re-imagining Global Orders: Perspectives from the South, organized by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India, 10-12 December 2013.

⁵ According to data of the Department of Fisheries; The Government of Bangladesh.

⁶ Bangladesh Economic and Financial Indicators, April 2018

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utilizing its blue economy for national development and harnessing further geo-economic opportunities.

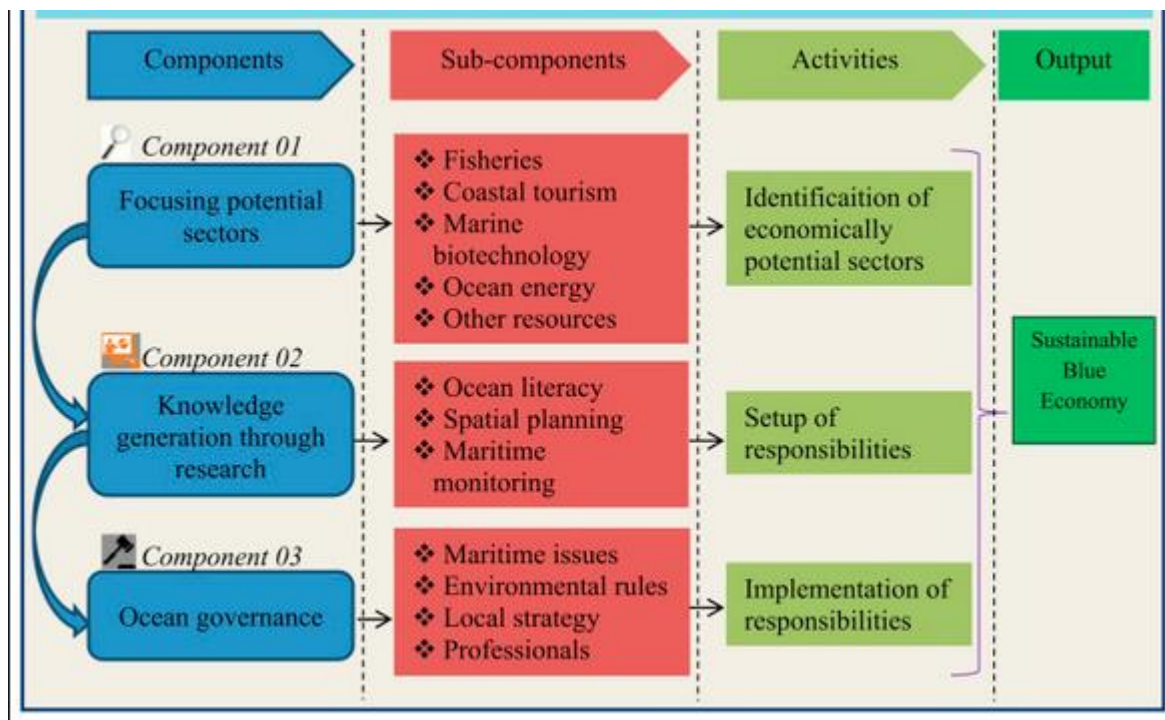


Figure 03: Blue Economy Management Framework for Bangladesh

Source: Ocean & Coastal Management; Volume 157, 1 May 2018.

Co-ordination with regional and extra regional actors: The key essence of our foreign policy is 'friendship to all, malice to none'. It is noticeable that the conduct of Bangladesh's foreign policy appears to be a delicate balancing act between the protection of sovereignty and external powers' pressure. The recent handling of strategic issues like signing agreements for economic zones and deep sea ports was a showcase for such policy.

For India, the importance of Bangladesh in having access to its Seven Sisters cannot be underestimated. Moreover, China's contribution to Bangladesh's development in the form of economic aid, military assistance and infrastructure development has been significant. More recently, attention has been put on infrastructure growth, which benefits Bangladesh and China to a large extent for strategic purposes, such as greater connectivity to Yunnan Province in China. Besides that, Japan is also trying to strengthen its economic and strategic relations with

Bangladesh by increasing investments and considering Bangladesh as one of the alternative locations for production.

On the other hand, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional bloc comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand, based on the promise of mutual cooperation. It is one of the well-positioned multi-country initiatives that member countries can adequately engage in cooperation on maritime security. However, it is important for a bay state like Bangladesh to establish a robust maritime governance system and a mechanism for cooperation with other countries that lie in its coastal waters. In solving issues such as the 2015 Rohingya refugee crisis, timely and organized cooperation through the BIMSTEC network can be successful.

Building Maritime Capability: Ensuring sound governance for maritime security cannot be emphasized more for a country whose 20% of the annual income comes from sea-borne fisheries that contributes to 5% in GDP.⁷ It is equally crucial for ensuring food security and bolstering national security. Without a strong and prudent national policy for this area, it is impossible to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) where several goals are associated with maritime and food security.

The BoB is being marked as a cockpit for economic and strategic growth. It provides critical SLOCs which are crucial for energy trading and transit routes for Africa, Europe, and the Middle East with the countries in Southeast Asia.⁸ To this end, the Government of Bangladesh is refocusing on the significance of the BoB's coastal areas and island states, which are now dealing with both conventional and non-traditional risks.

Developing an Integrated Maritime Policy: Although Bangladesh does not have a robust policy on maritime security, due to the vast potential of natural resources in the BoB, it is necessary to develop an integrated maritime policy. The policymakers should focus on protecting the

⁷ Bangladesh Economic and Financial Indicators, April 2018

⁸ Brewster, D., 2014. The Bay of Bengal: A New Locus for Strategic Competition in Asia. East-West Center: Asia Pacific Bulletin, Number 263 | May 15, 2014.

exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and continental shelf from any maritime security threat. It should also provide a legal provision of preventing any marine pollution including the protection of the living and nonliving organisms. Such policies can also play an important role in providing a scientific base for the transition of technology, the conservation of the marine environment and the mitigation of global climate change. It is also evident that, in the coming days, Bangladesh will likely face intensified naval rivalry. Combating these barriers, rivalry and future geo-strategic challenges can be driven by well-crafted marine and maritime policy initiatives.

A Public-Private Combined Initiative: As discussed, a major portion of Bangladesh's security and economic growth depends on the secure use of BoB and its adjacent rivers and waterways. It is thus imperative to enhance our efforts and technical knowhow to combat the evolving threats and their potential perils in the BoB. In this regard, the government of Bangladesh has taken several policy measures and administrative steps to enhance the capacity of the naval staff, coastal guards, and supporting law enforcing agencies to combat naval crimes.⁹ For maximum impact, the government will require to adopt a more comprehensive and all-inclusive approach by blending public-private partnership. These strategies and action plans can be realigned with our existing maritime security programs for putting a complete and cohesive national effort by integrating both public and private agencies. Furthermore, designated units and departments can develop, share, and integrate their sector-specific security threats, challenges, and battle plans in the marine domain. This integration mechanism of dealing with marine security hazards can be bolstered by inter-departmental cooperation.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the Bay will become a battlefield in a multi-polar world order in the coming years. That is why it is utmost important to establish governance frameworks that will facilitate the integration of rising powers in regulating the order and upholding the principles of an open world economy. It is becoming more evident that no single state will be able to dominate the region. Therefore, a multilateral setup will emerge to allow each country to pursue its goals on equal

⁹ "Bangladesh Navy – Modernization", Global Security, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/bangladesh/navy-modernization.htm>, accessed on 12 January 2014.

terms. For that to occur, it is necessary that countries give more credibility to multilateral arrangements. For both economic and strategic well-being, Bangladesh will also need to instate a strong security measure in the BoB. For this purpose, the country will have to put an all-out effort of adopting a stronger policy regime, build capacity for the law enforcement agencies, and strike a balance in maintaining a relationship with old allies and tying knots with new friends. The boundless maritime interests and benefits of Bangladesh can be extended to its oceanic backyard which will ultimately reshape and govern the next decades of the country.

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