

## **Emerging Maritime Development in the Bay of Bengal – an opinion**

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Oceans and seas support all life by generating oxygen, absorbing carbon dioxide, recycling nutrients and regulating global climate and temperature, food and livelihoods to a substantial portion of the global population. Over 90% of planets living and non-living resources are found within a few hundred kilometres of the coasts and nearly 2/3 of world population lives near the seacoast. The ocean acts as a great heat reservoir levelling and moderating the temperature extremes, provides the least expensive form of transportation and the coasts serve as a major recreational site. From time immemorial, the oceans and seas have been serving as international ways for ships and fishing grounds for fishermen and have long influenced human imagination, cultures and destiny. The direct promotion of the economy by providing food for livelihood, tourism, trade, shipping, ship building, ship recycling, health products and recreation is one of the major off set of ocean resources/blue economy management. Beyond fish worth 135 billion dollar and ships carrying 90% of cargoes, 200 billion dollar of tourism, seas and oceans also provide climate regulation covering 70% of the earth's surface. Mangroves, seagrass and salt marshes remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere 10 times more than a tropical forest and store 3 to 5 times more than carbon thus decreasing the impacts of climate change and they are reducing the impacts of storm surge, erosion and flooding.

Closer to our homes we have the Bay of Bengal (BoB) attached to the Indian Ocean. The bay is rich in untapped natural resources, with some of the world's largest reserves of gas and other seabed minerals, as well as, it is increasingly believed, about the presence of oil. Linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Bay of Bengal occupies a central position in relation to global economic flows in a way that few other regions do. As a strategic funnel to the Malacca Straits and Lombok Strait, the region has been an important location in the strategic calculations of the great powers of the world and has grown in strategic importance for China and Japan, and India as well. This is primarily due to the economic impact of the BoB in the east-west maritime trade. It is through this region that half of the world's container traffic passes and whose ports handle approximately thirty percent of world trade thus becoming the "economic highway of the world". "...66% of oil shipments so vital for India, Japan and China... and 33% of the world's bulk cargo" passes through these waters. Its global significance is further reiterated as one of the world's largest fishing grounds, providing approximately fifteen percent of the world's total fish catch (approximately 9 million tons per annum).

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The BoB region encompasses Maldives, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and in the hinterland Bhutan and Nepal. More broadly, demographic, economic and security developments in the region have crucial implications for Asia and the global order. The highly populated Bay of Bengal, with a combined gross domestic product close to US\$ 2.8 trillion were able to sustain average annual rates of economic growth between 3.4 and 7.5% for the last few years. Despite its status as a key maritime role in global terms and all its economic promise, its potential is hamstrung by a lack of close internal economic integration among the countries that call the region home.

The prospects for conflict and or cooperation in this region are affected by multidimensional factors. A variety of transnational threats like trafficking of narcotics, drugs, weapons and people; the illegal exploitation of natural resources; border disputes, refugee flows, rebel insurgencies and terrorist groups or natural disasters that disrupt regional stability compound the challenge of making the BoB integrated. More generally, the issues of economic/maritime trade and environmental security are increasingly being supplemented by the more traditional military concerns.

A complex web of factors like historical antagonism, undefined land and maritime boundaries, cross border affiliation of ethno linguistic and religious groups, conflict of economic interests, sharing of common rivers/ natural resources and a turbulent process of nation building accompanied by numerous interstate conflict along with a combination of regional as well as extra regional factors have gradually transformed this region into an area of mistrust and tensions. Recent events do not necessarily portend a more dangerous or unstable future, but for the time being, they do point to one of greater uncertainty and potential for fatal miscalculation. SAARC could not be fully functional due to grid lock between India and Pakistan. Even in the BIMSTEC maritime issues do not figure as the priority areas and it also does not include countries like Maldives, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia as its members.

The maritime order in the BoB is calm but fragile, primarily because the region lacks overarching security architecture and faces a diverse range of traditional and non-traditional security threats. What is needed is the application of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)? The world's centre of political and economic gravity is moving eastwards to Asia and Africa. The importance of the BOB needs no reiteration especially for many countries whose existence, prosperity and security were, and always will be, intimately linked to it. It is not necessary to go into the figures to convey the importance of the BOB to the world's container trade, oil trade and even the transportation of coal. And yet, the BOB is one of the least economically integrated regions of the world. There is a historical irony here, because thanks to the predictable monsoons, the Indian Ocean did not have to wait for the age of steam to be united unlike the other oceans. Deep water sailing developed here first.

Today the BoB does not see the same overlapping sovereignty claims as the South China Sea (SCS). Its littoral states display an evident willingness to rely on UNCLOS

and accept its decisions; to illustrate, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh recently accepted what UNCLOS prescribed for their maritime boundaries. But this does not preclude sources of future instability, which is why the present calm is considered fragile. One possible source of instability is the amount of tensions in the neighbourhood, the Persian Gulf, East and South China Seas which could spill over into the Indian Ocean. The geopolitical framing of BOB security is becoming more complex. We are dependent on the sea for trade and living and non-living resources including energy and sea-based minerals and this dependency is going to increase considerably in the 21st century, thereby providing greater importance to the maritime dimensions of national security and cooperation in the years ahead so as to allow unimpeded socio-economic growth and development in the region.

Estimates of density vary with the maximum of over 41000 ships passing over the Malacca Strait areas in a year and to the non-seafarer, such a figure, promotes a view of a dangerously unregulated, overcrowded shipping movements/environments. Collisions and grounding continue to be a very real threat to ships here and in other areas of high traffic density. Maritime piracy remains a comparatively low key but a very real problem in several parts of the world, particularly in Somalia and Southeast Asia.

Fisheries are significant as a food source for many countries of the BOB provides comparatively small fisheries yield compared with the other seas. Many countries in the region lack sufficient information and infrastructures about sea fish resources, their exploitation and sustenance.

While merchant shipping is being increasingly recognized as essential for economic development, transportation of about 60% of world crude oil and its products along the oil tanker routes across the Bay of Bengal has rendered these waters also prone to oil pollution. Oil spills can occur anywhere at sea and have no respect for national boundaries.

The importance of monitoring the enhanced greenhouse effect and the possibility of long-term climate change, global warming and rising sea levels and their particular effects on some regional countries demands for a multidisciplinary approach for coordination among all Meteorological stations of the countries of the region and the World Meteorological Organization.

The multilayer plastic used in packaging of different products is one of the main reasons that have been exacerbating the already existing sources of land-based pollution and thus creating dead zones in the BoB. The BoB has a long history of natural disasters. Between 1980 and 2008, it experienced 219 natural disasters. The coastal morphology of the rim countries influences the impact of natural hazards on the area. The region suffers from floods, cyclones, storm surge, riverbank erosion, earthquake, drought, and tsunamis. Cyclones and floods particularly caused massive damages.

The region is also witness to 70 percent of the world's natural disasters. Countries in Asia and the Pacific are four times more likely to be affected by a natural catastrophe than those in Africa, and 25 times more vulnerable than Europe or North America. In

fact, almost 80% of the human fatalities in natural disasters of the last decade have been in Asia.

The maritime domain itself is exceptionally large and 95 % of the world's trade transits over the seas. The traffic on the seas has increased by 470% since 1970 and is likely to triple in the next 20 years. Therefore, no single agency can achieve Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) by itself. The success of MDA is, therefore, dependent on collaborative efforts of various maritime stake-holders, and the integration of technical means of tracking their respective vessels.

Maritime orders are positive sum, unlike zero sum territorial orders where territory can only belong to one state or the other. That is not true with maritime orders because it is a public good and there are collective goals such as freedom of navigation. There are also positive effects on trade and economy. Therefore, the security as a maritime order should be amenable, theoretically at least, to cooperative solutions. It is here that the world's largest trading nations have their interests. Hence, it makes sense to build a maritime order.

Devising a comprehensive strategy for one of the most diverse, complex, and contested regions in the world is by no means an easy task, and no individual or organization can comprehensively predict the best ways to grapple with Indo-Pacific strategy in the near future with pinpoint accuracy (Lutwin 2019). BoB's position under Indo-Pacific construct may be governed by peace and prosperity of the Region focusing on socio-economic development of the region to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It should also ensure establishing a meaningful relationship with the other countries in the Indo Pacific to promote accelerated technological change in order to explore and exploit the oceanic resources to empower the youth and women; promote sustainable and equitable growth and decent employment in the region.

With a vision adapt countries along the road to new realities in the 21st Century such as globalization, regional integration and win- win cooperation, China proposed in 2013 that China and countries along the ancient Silk Road would build together the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (the Belt and Road initiative)(BRI). The initiative aims to inject strong impetus in enhancing political mutual trust, deepening economic cooperation, and promoting cultural as well as people-to-people exchanges among relevant countries. 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is not just a physical trade or transportation route. It is an open platform for all relevant countries to work together for collaborative benefits in all areas.

Bangladesh may broaden and deepen our alliance cooperation and encourage the possible economic and security engagement by the United States in the region, and at the same time strengthen Bangladesh's Comprehensive and Strategic partnership with China which is also vital for both to pursue extensive bilateral economic interests. Bangladesh is one of the largest democracies of the world and issue specific and flexible alliance building has been the traditional feature of Bangladesh Foreign Policy. More than 90% of Bangladesh's external freight trade is seaborne and hence promotion of connectivity and Improving "connectivity" through infrastructure development

(strengthening economic partnership and improving business environment), climate change through BIG-B (developing economic infrastructure, improving investment environment, fostering regional connectivity) projects is important along with promotion of Blue Economy following the maritime boundary settlement, strengthening measures against human trafficking, drug smuggling, terrorism, capacity building for maritime law enforcement, disaster relief, anti-piracy, and counter terrorism.

Bangladesh, under the leadership of the Hon'ble Prime Minister- an avid follower of pragmatism, has embarked on an ambitious plan to achieve its long-cherished goals engraved in its Vision 2021 and Vision 2041. Both BRI and IPS have potentials to complement this development-endeavour of Bangladesh. The concept of Free and Open Indo-Pacific would help Bangladesh to improve its connectivity and investment climate, promote blue economy as well as strengthening measures against terrorism and other organized crimes in the maritime sphere. Bangladesh looks at both the initiatives primarily from a development point of view and thus considers them complementary – not competing or contradictory. Besides, if the initiatives do not entail any military objective, Bangladesh does not see any reason not to associate with them.

In the maritime field the high seas have no international boundaries as in the words of an Old Norwegian saying – ‘the land divides the sea unites’. The waterways through the region are strategically important for both merchant, fishing and naval vessels. As the maritime environment is basically an international one, where issues and interests, are not restricted to national boundaries alone, the advantages of multilateral cooperation in maritime matters are also expected to grow. The key challenge is continuing to shift the mindsets of officials to recognize the vital importance of the maritime domain as part of a comprehensive national security strategy. Greater certainty and more stability will only be achieved through institutionalizing the regional dialogue and cooperation among regional organisations to accommodate and harmonise great diversities of the region. However, the present century has been identified as the ‘Century of the Sea’ opening the international markets to provide a large boost to international trade thus to sea borne trade of all countries. There is, therefore, an increasing need for peace and security in this region to be insulated against external pressure. The development of multinational corporations managing stateless capital invested in ships flying flags of convenience with disguised beneficial ownership is arguably making traditional concepts of nation-state and flag-state jurisdiction irrelevant. This does not deny the necessity for a regulatory body such as IMO.

To improve the overall maritime challenges in the Bay of Bengal, it is suggested that “Partnership among the Bay of Bengal Community” (PBBC) could be considered among all the rim countries of the Bay as the unique forum and a significant step towards better understanding between the maritime forces/vessels and regional navies/coast guards and others operating in the region. To readily respond to any maritime challenges at sea, an effective Information Exchange network may be considered initially and agreed in the first case by all the member states of the BoB like threats to the freedom and safety of navigation, real time sharing of information on Search and Rescue at sea, sharing of warning information about

weather/cyclone/Tsunami, fisheries infringements and other living resources, high Seas robbery, piracy and other suspicious activity including arms/drug smuggling, accidental/incidental oil spills, marine pollution from all sources, and marine scientific research regarding ecological condition of the BoB like dead zones etc. A cooperative mechanism focuses on opportunities versus threats, on optimism over fear and on confidence instead of doubt. It recognizes the challenges imposed by the uncertain conditions in a time of rapid change and makes pro-active assistance and disaster response crucial elements to building relationships across nations. If there is a clear quest for more cultural, economic, politics and even strategic emancipation from the large foreign powers and among the regional organizations, this does necessarily mean that a wide and dynamic regional cooperation may be successfully developed as normally expected but real efforts as suggested here can probably change the real structure of the effectivity of any multilateral organizations like BIMSTEC. Bangladesh was in the growth trajectory at least in the last decades during which the country steadily increased its exports, particularly the ready-made garments and manpower. At the same time it boosted its agriculture and produced adequate food grains, cattle, fish, vegetables, etc accelerating the growth often punctuated by natural calamities, political unrest and lastly by the pandemic -driven lockdown. Bangladesh with its foreign policy based on 'friendship to all and malice to none' has been steadily progressing with its economic growth and successfully trying upgrade its status to developing country and with investments in different proportions from Chinese, United States, India and several European and Middle Eastern countries must continue its journey to become a developed country by 2041.

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