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MARITIME SECURITY IN BAY OF BENGAL: POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: Bangladesh is a maritime nation with heavy dependence on seaborne trade with the outside world (Delwar Hossain and Md. Shariful Islam 2016). More than 98% of Bangladesh's total containerised goods and products are transported through the Chittagong port via the Bay of Bengal. Hence, it is crucial to protect its sea lanes of communications along the maritime border from any nefarious maritime activities including conventional and non-conventional security threats. The government is also prioritising the marine affairs and integrating it to top foreign and security policy issues. The security affairs also go beyond the national border and impacts international trade and geopolitical issues with other Indian Ocean littoral states.

This paper will contextualise the maritime parameters, analyse the emergence of the blue economy in the Bay, explore the threat landscape, provide modalities of developing national capabilities and smarter maritime border management, and discuss the opportunities in forging a stronger regional integration through maritime cooperation among the littoral states.

Blue Economy in the Bay: A New Horizon for Bangladesh

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. Located on the northern border of the BoB with 710-kilometre-long coastline, Bangladesh had obtained a sea area of about 166,000 square kilometres after the demarcation of its maritime boundary with Myanmar in 2012 and with India in 2014. 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 (Sarker 2019).

Figure 1: Maritime borders of Bangladesh
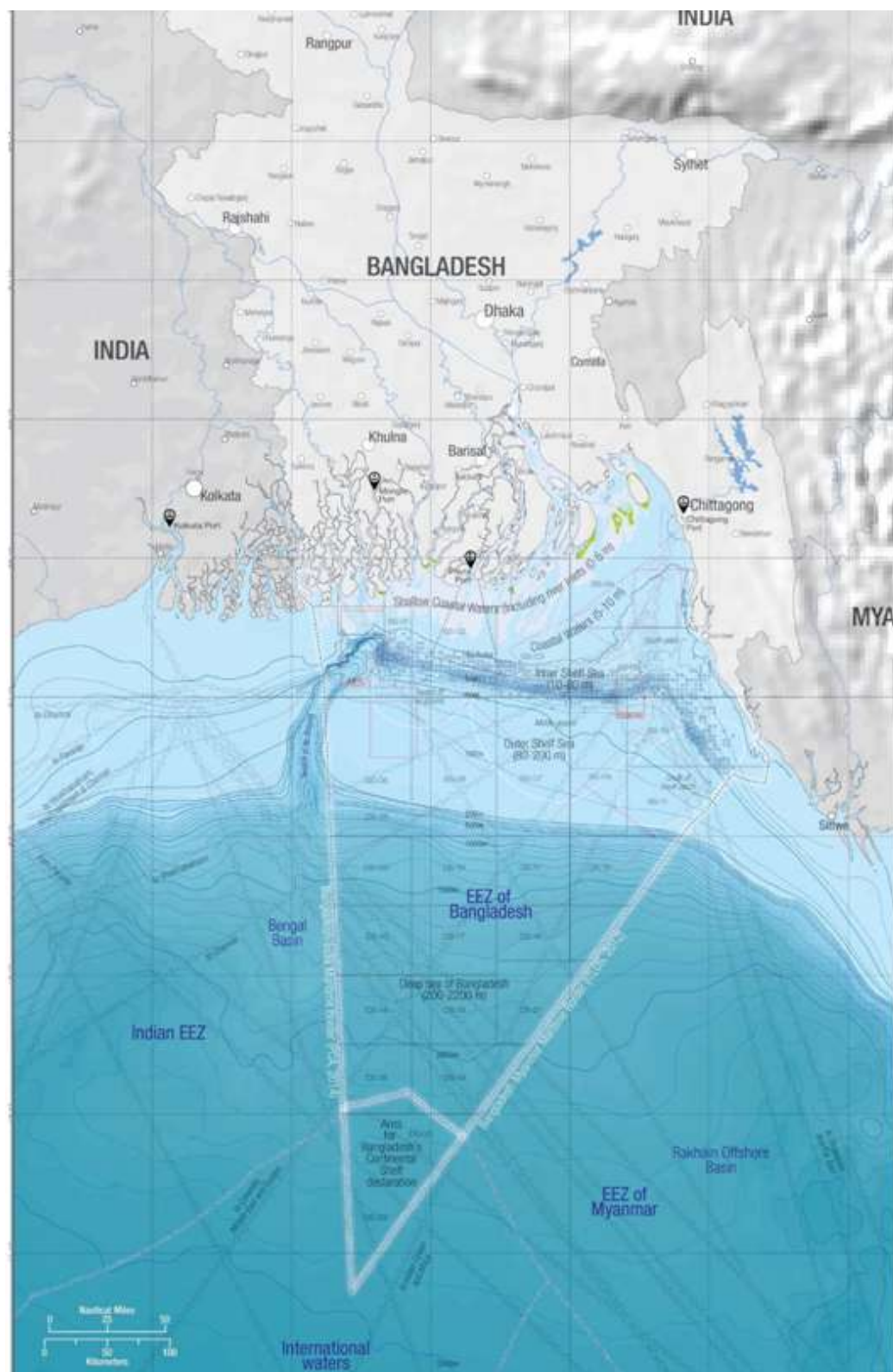
Source: (Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission 2019)

From an economic point of view, BoB and its adjoining littoral areas have a vast amount of living and non-living organisms and resources, i.e., hydrocarbons, fisheries, minerals, and energies. The sea has a huge potential for energy motherload. For instance, about 106864.56 million barrels of oil (MMbbl) of gas motherload was discovered in Bhola, the southeast district of Bangladesh, in January 2018 (Ibid).

The coastal belts of BoB have about 475 species of fish. This accounts for about 4.9% of the country's total export earnings and 2.73% of national GDP while generating about 12% of its total employment. For Bangladesh, these data indicators provide the proving ground of adopting an appropriate platform of marine and maritime security. In this case, Bangladesh has the option of utilising its blue economy for national development and harnessing further geo-economic opportunities.

Although Bangladesh has vast potential in maritime affairs, the bay area is open to numerous security and strategic threats. BoB consists of two critical sea lines of communications (SLOCs): 1) One route heads east to the Eastern countries like China, Japan, countries in Southeast Asia (SEA) and the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca, 2) The second one heads west to Iran and Saudi Arabia. Besides trade and economic routes of communication, the seaborne area also poses great geo-strategic contention in the Indian Ocean. Due to its strategic vantage point, the area has become the tiger's eye for the superpowers, i.e., China, USA, India, and Japan (Łukaszuk 2012).

Security Threats in the Seas

apparatus, i.e., the navy and coast guard, maritime security in the BoB demands more security. These insufficient maritime securities and increasing seaborne threats are exponentially reducing the potentials of newfound maritime boundaries. Illegal fishing, arms & drug smugglings, human trafficking, seaborne pollution, and acts of robbery and piracy are some of the major trans-national threats faced by the BoB.

Maritime Terrorism

One increasing concern is the rising of maritime security threats among 60 countries in the world, among which Bangladesh is one. Among major non-conventional maritime threats, maritime terrorism is increasingly becoming an international security concern. The security threats are easy to enter through any land and port through the sea and hard to trace and track the location of the incident through any available technology. Bangladesh maritime domain is also becoming a proving ground of armed robbery and piracy-related incidents. If we consider the combined number of incidents related to piracy and robbery in the major maritime junctions, the Straits of Malacca has 10 incidents, Malaysia has 14 and BoB has 10 (Suritec Piracy Report, August 2014). The same report by Suritec also revealed that the major upcoming seaborne threats will take place in South China, the Gulf of Guinea and Bangladesh. In the first half of 2014, there were 18 major piracy and robbery related incidents (RECAAP 2018). Among this, 2 incidents took place in the BoB. The pirates (locally known as 'Jol Doshus') plunder natural resources like fish and minerals and collaborate in smuggling of small and heavy arms. They are even patronised by the local hooligans (mastans) and corrupted leaders & police officers.

Illegal Fishing

Illegal fishing and poaching is another age-old maritime issue in Bangladesh. Among this illegal fishing, the illegal trade of baby Hilsha (locally 'Jatka') is the most threatening one. This issue even breeds another problem: 40% of the local fishermen depend directly or indirectly on the illegal trade of baby Hilsha for their livelihood. In Bangladesh, fishing is considered illegal when it is done in the wrong seasons or without a license. Local fishermen also catch immature fish and use prohibited nets.

Only 1,18,000 metric tons of fish and shrimps are legally harvested among the total annual yield of 3,89,000 metric tons (UNDP). The remaining 2,71,000 metric tons are attributed to the illegal poaching by foreign fishing boats and trawlers. In this act, sea pirates, bandits, and robbers had killed at least 411 local fishermen and wounded another 1,000 in the last five years (2014-2019). (Cox's Bazar District Fishing Trawler Owner Association (DFTOA), Ibid).

Although the Bangladesh Navy and Coast Guard are technically competent, they lack proper equipment and effective manpower. As a result, many of the threats are not being handled properly. On top of that, when catching fish, illegal fishermen from Myanmar are breaking international maritime territory laws. As a result, local Bangladeshi fishermen are being deprived of fishing in their own ground.

Drug Smuggling

In the BoB, drug smugglers and international terrorist groups sometimes work hand-to-hand which has long been a painstaking task for Bangladeshi national security agencies to prevent. The country's maritime area is bordered with Pakistan's 'Golden Crescent'. It is also sharing the maritime area with Myanmar's 'Golden Triangle'. These areas pose significant security threats as they have long been considered as the proving ground of illegal drug smuggling. In this junction, Bangladesh remains a significant security threat as drug peddlers can use BoB as a portal of illegal drug supply in the national and international markets.

Smugglers from Myanmar and Afghanistan are also using BoB and adjacent rivers to supply their illegally produced drugs. Through BoB, smugglers from India and Myanmar are channeling Yaba and other illicit drugs and narcotics to the Bangladeshi (Khan 2019).

Arms Smuggling

Illegal arms smugglers use land and maritime ports as a junction of transit points to channel their products. For Bangladesh, gunrunning and illegal arms trafficking in the BoB is another maritime security threat. Historically, the country has experienced such incidents for long. For instance, on April 2, 2004, Bangladesh police had

Amanat at the Chittagong Urea Fertilizer jetty. It was later found that the arms haul was conducted by Assam-based militant group United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) (Ibid).

From 2012-2019, Bangladesh Coast Guard and navy police have also seized several fishing crafts loaded with arms and drugs in Cox's Bazar's coastal area.

Sea-borne Robbery

Recently, Bangladesh has emerged as a strong country in shipbuilding and related shipping business. This is often challenged by the danger of sea-borne robbery. Many of the international shipping lines and ocean-bound Bangladeshi ships are being attacked by these sea pirates. However, unlike Somalia sea pirates, Bangladeshi robber goes for petty theft as they do not have the equipment and capacity to go to deep seas and commit robbery there. Hence, they are confined to armed robbery and banditry on anchored ships near the coasts or even in the ports—both national and international.

Sea piracy does not take place in Bangladeshi waters. However, incidents of armed robbery and demand for ransom have taken place in several shores of the country. However, in recent time, the Bangladesh Navy and Coast Guard have successfully dismantled incidents such as petty theft targeting ships at Chittagong Port anchorage.

Ocean Pollution

Although not directly related to maritime security, ocean pollution of the marine environment is another cardinal offence in the BoB. Bangladeshi rivers travel across lands from India, Nepal, and China and fall in the BoB. The upstream rivers carry river dumps and industrial waste in the BoB which is dangerous for living and non-living beings and resources. For instance, the BoB has 20% living organisms and 80% non-living resources which accounts for almost half-million different types of living and non-living prototypes in the BoB. Sea-borne ships and vessels discharge injurious oil and chemicals which pollute the water by spreading oil across the water-surface and hampering fisheries.

Warming in the Ocean

Bangladesh has undivided 710 km long coastline in the BoB. Out of 64 districts, 19 are dangerously lying below coastline. Rising temperature is causing a sea-level rise in the BoB and affecting the low delta districts. It is estimated that due to global warming, sea level will rise 10 cm, 25 cm, and 1 m respectively by 2020, 2050 and 2100. Respectively, 2%, 4%, and 17% of the land will be submerged by the sea (World Bank). This is even more dangerous for Bangladesh, as sea level in the BoB is rising 1 cm every year which is putting a dangerous effect on agriculture, ecosystem, fisheries, island, ports, tourism, and associated business sectors. Furthermore, a rise in 1 degree Celsius will put around 20% of Bangladeshi land underwater. This will turn another 30 million people into climate migrants (Ibid).

Smart Maritime Border Management and Coastal Security

Managing an efficient maritime border, countering coastal threats, and ensuring marine security are herculean tasks for any maritime nation including Bangladesh. Since it is not possible to install a fence along the sea-line and around the seashore, it is difficult for the maritime nations to put voluntary vigilance and effective physical surveillance in place. The resulting gap puts the coastlines and seashores vulnerable to several marine and sea-bound crimes. Hence, Bangladesh must install an effective maritime security measure end state of ultimate peace and security in the BoB. For a maritime nation like us, smart border management for the coastal areas can be one such way to counter the burgeoning maritime threats.

However, the desired result of smart border management can only be achieved through joint efforts and collaborative approach among the security apparatus, intelligence agencies, and relevant maritime stakeholders working in this sector. As the BoB is the domain for multiple users and definition groups, no single security agency alone can ensure its overall guarantee. Hence, apt cooperation and collaborative approach are needed where coordination among the different operators is of paramount importance for achieving a sustainable security measure in the maritime domain. Some of the guidance mechanisms for harnessing an effective smart maritime border in the BoB are discussed below.

A crucial element of acquiring effective maritime security is to harness vigilance and awareness for maritime domain. It is important that both the civil society and law enforcement agencies hold and participate in related campaigns, and based on that provide situational assessment, response, and reporting on the most recent information. The objective of this awareness program is to gather and disseminate as much information, strategies, and action plans as possible and relevant intelligence regarding any nefarious activities taking place in the BoB at any given moment. As Bangladesh has adopted a 'zero tolerance' policy on maritime terrorism and violence, this is particularly useful for the law enforcers as they will be able to share any information available in their database inventory. Maritime domain awareness is another important aspect as law enforcers can learn new field techniques, tactical battle plans and wargames being initiated and adopted by the sea criminals. Through a comprehensive domain awareness, law enforcers will be able to check and investigate the entry points of the criminals that they are going to penetrate along the maritime border. By doing so, the patrol guards will be able to eliminate any risks of potential attack at any given time.

Maritime Security Governance

Ensuring sound governance for maritime security cannot be emphasised more for a country whose 20% of the annual income comes from sea-borne fisheries that contributes to 5% in GDP. 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) whose 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 is crucial for energy trading and transit routes for Africa, Europe, and the Middle East with the countries in Southeast Asia. For this purpose, the government of Bangladesh is refocusing on the importance of coastal areas and island states in the BoB which is now dealing with both traditional and non-traditional threats in the domain.

Cooperation in BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional bloc built upon the promise of mutual cooperation that comprises of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. It is one of the well-positioned multi-country initiatives that can aptly engage in maritime security cooperation among the member countries.

For a bay state like Bangladesh, it is, however essential to develop a robust framework of maritime governance and cooperation mechanism with other countries that lie in its surrounding water. Timely and coordinated cooperation through the BIMSTEC network can be effective in resolving issues such as the 2015 Rohingya refugee crisis. The incident involved thousands of 'boat people' being stuck in international waters that provided potential recruitment opportunity for sea pirates, international criminal networks, and Islamic militant groups.

Maritime security cooperation through BIMSTEC also provides another wide-angle benefit—a potential inroad into the Southeast Asian (SEA) countries. Under the BIMSTEC initiative, cooperation in maritime security does not include all the coastal states in the bay belt but includes states from outside of South Asia. This can be useful as SEA countries like Myanmar and Thailand can make avenues into the other part of the Indian Ocean. Leaders and governors from Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka also agree with the vision by reflecting their awareness that the South Asian countries should break out from its confinement and connect more with the SEA states.

Maritime Security in the Digital Age

The maritime industry is responsible for over 80% of global transportation of goods and services, and a successful cyber-attack against this sector could be devastating, costing millions and ruining businesses.With the rise of technical efficiencies, industries are now facing new vulnerabilities. These newfound threats are now emerging on the surface due to the modified synchronisation of informational, administrative, and operational technologies. To protect the sea, Bangladesh government should concentrate on protecting the oceanographic

plots in the sea at a grander scale.

The digital age has enabled governments to develop digital technologies that incorporate AI and robotics into processes making systems smooth, seamless, and more secured. As new innovations come through, Bangladeshi governments need to readily equip themselves with the latest technological developments to protect the seas.

Digital Transformation in Green Shipping

Shipping industries in the BoB today confront the challenges of operating efficiently and profitably while meeting the sophisticated need and demand of the customers through digitisation. The percentage of transport and logistics companies that rated themselves as 'advanced' on digitisation is just 28%. In addition to regular threats like fleet utilisation, shipping lines are now facing the challenges of changing environment due to increased digitisation and its impact such as digital darwinism and digital dwarfism.

Decision-makers in Bangladesh now should be more open to trend-setting digital ideas such as crew-less shopping to optimise efficiency. Systems will need to be integrated as companies will have to work in tandem with port authorities and coastguards for a seamless and secured digital experience.

A Concerted Effort

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. For maximum impact, the government will, however require to adopt a more comprehensive and all-inclusive approach to better synergise and synchronise all institution-level strategies and action plans. For ensuring more maritime and coastal security, activities can be initiated 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 battleplans in the marine domain. This integration mechanism of dealing with marine security hazards can be bolstered by inter-departmental cooperation.

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 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 non-living organisms. Such policy can also be instrumental in providing a research base for technology transfer, protection of the marine ecosystem, and prevention of global climate change. It is also evident that Bangladesh is likely to face increased naval competition in the coming days. A well-crafted marine and maritime policy measure can guide countering these obstacles, competition and potential geo-strategic threats.

Way Forward and Conclusion

UNCLOS's Articles 33 and 73 provide rights and permission to countries to engage and exercise necessary control to protect their maritime sovereignty. Under the bracket, Articles 110 (rights to visit) and Article 111 (hot pursuit) permit to fight any trans-national crimes by allowing random visits and inspections of ships and seaborne vessels that might be suspected of engaging in illicit maritime activity. The Articles also allow the enforcers to intercept foreign ships (which are roaming in the national maritime border) by warships or military aircraft. Although a friendly nation, Bangladesh government must put its effort in exercising these maritime actions to secure its marine backyard. At the same time, the government should also foster stronger regional and maritime cooperation by harnessing robust diplomatic relations with its neighbouring countries like India and Myanmar. Bangladesh government can also take the initiative to initiate and enact the 'Convention for

criminalise robbery, piracy, and amend related national legislation should be brought into daylight for legal consideration.

Furthermore, to promote national maritime security, Bangladesh government can integrate the 'Look East Policy' in its foreign policy agenda which will also assist in diversifying Bangladesh's external relations. In addition to modernising the Mongla and Chittagong ports, the Sonadia Deep Sea Port should be resumed and Paira Sea Port should be developed fast. Developing technical capacity for deep-sea fishing and anchoring larger international shipping lines will enable the country to deepen its cooperation in maritime affairs with other littoral states and thus address the national capacity gap.

This can be further bolstered by forming a coalition between the littoral states in the BoB and countries from Southeast Asia. As discussed previously, BoB provides two crucial SLOCs, one of which is harnessing the critical paths of countries from East and Southeast Asia. Bangladesh can consider developing a maritime partnership with these countries to build a robust framework to enhance maritime security in the sub-region which is considered to be the hotbed of seaborne trade and commerce.

It is evident that, for both economic and strategic well-being, Bangladesh will 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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