

# Sailing in the Same Boat: Indo-Bangladesh Cooperation for Securing Mutual Interests in the Bay of Bengal

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Submitted: 26.02.2023.

Revised: 07.05.2023.

Accepted: 14.06.2023.

**Abstract:** *The Bay of Bengal region is a strategic location that has been of growing importance in recent years, given its proximity to Southeast Asia and its rich resources, including shipping lanes, fisheries, and oil and gas reserves. Given the significance of this region, the cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal has been the subject of increasing interest. The cooperation between these two neighbouring countries has the potential to bring significant benefits to both nations. Such benefits include increased economic development, improved regional integration, and enhanced security. This article aims to examine the opportunities and challenges of cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal region, with a focus on the key areas of mixed migration, blue economy, BIMSTEC, and Sagarmala. Through an analysis of the existing literature, this article will shed light on the current state of cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal and suggest ways to enhance and deepen this collaboration for the mutual benefit of both nations. The article would also discuss the role and aspirations of the US and China in the Bay of Bengal region as two superpowers. The discussion would be related to the imperatives before Bangladesh and India for securing their strategic interests in the region.*

**Keywords:** *BIMSTEC, Sagarmala, Blue Economy, Mixed Migration, Strategic Interests.*

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## **Introduction**

Bay of Bengal is one of the most strategically important regions in the world, with serious implications for the security of maritime boundaries and navigation routes. In the modern globalized world, the significance of the Bay of Bengal will only increase, with the rise of global trade and the increasing demand for natural resources. The countries in the Bay of Bengal region, namely India, Bangladesh, and China, have a vital interest in securing the region and ensuring its stability, prosperity, and security. Any informed deliberation on the Bay of Bengal cannot be limited to examining the ways in which India and Bangladesh can work together to secure their interests in the Bay of Bengal.

The shared interests of India and Bangladesh in securing the Bay of Bengal also centre around access to the Indian Ocean. This is crucial for the security of their maritime boundaries and navigation routes. The two countries have a long history of cooperation in the region and have developed strong relationships in areas such as trade, security, and economic development. India has been a key player in the Bay of Bengal region for many years and has taken a proactive approach to secure its interests in the region. Bangladesh has also been working to establish itself as a major player in the region. It has also been working to strengthen its position as a key economic and security partner for India.

This article titled, “*Sailing in the same boat: Indo-Bangladesh cooperation for securing mutual interests in the Bay of Bengal*” would focus on the mutual cooperation and strategic interests of Bangladesh and India in the Bay of Bengal region. The article will firstly present the research questions and objectives. After briefly discussing the methodology, the findings will be presented. The article would conclude with the implications of the findings and some policy recommendations based on them.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the potential areas of cooperation between Bangladesh and India in the Bay of Bengal region?
2. What is the strategic importance of the region for Bangladesh and India?
3. How can these two countries collaborate with each other in facing the challenges to their strategic interests in the Bay of Bengal region?
4. How developed is the infrastructure for regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region?
5. How can Bangladesh and India secure their strategic interests against China through regional cooperation?

### **Research Objectives**

1. Critically analyse the strategic importance of the region for Bangladesh and India.
2. Explore ways in which these two countries can jointly face the challenges to their strategic interests in the Bay of Bengal region.
3. Examine the infrastructure for regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region
4. Assess the threats faced by Bangladesh and India from the rise of China in the region.
5. Offer policy recommendations for improving cooperation between Bangladesh and India within the specific context of the Bay of Bengal region.

### **Research Methodology**

This research is based on descriptive analysis of textual data collected from secondary sources such as journals articles, books, websites, news reports and policy documents. Use of secondary data has allowed the researcher to examine the research topic in greater depth. Considering the constraints of space, time and other resources, secondary research was the only option for critically examining the topic in depth. Similarly, descriptive analysis of textual data has facilitated a critical review of existing literature. The research is guided by the interpretivist philosophy based on inductive approach. Hence it has been possible to analyse subjective factors within a specific context in this research. The inductive approach provided scope for making generalisations from analysis of specific secondary data.

### **Findings**

#### **Maritime Mixed Migration**

Mixed migration refers to the movement of people due to different motivations and protection needs through the same routes and medium of transport.<sup>1,2</sup> It includes people who are fleeing persecution, conflict, poverty, or environmental degradation, as well as those who are seeking better economic opportunities.<sup>3</sup> The Bay of Bengal region is a key transit and destination area for mixed migration. Both India and Bangladesh have significant stakes in addressing this issue. Maritime migration in the Bay of Bengal can be dated back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

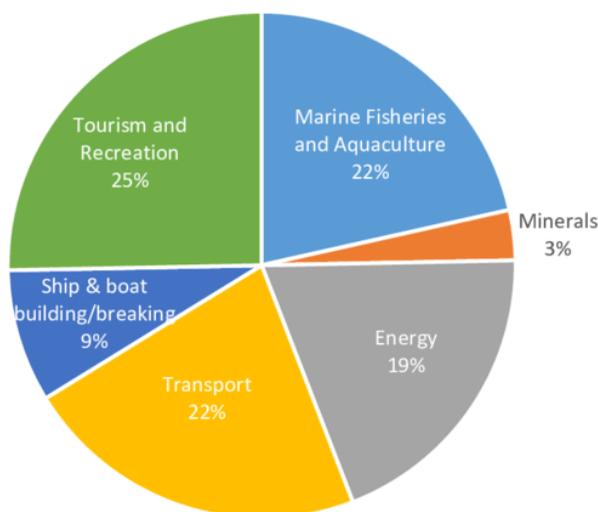
At present, there are several challenges in the area of maritime mixed migration that India and Bangladesh need to address. Firstly, the Bay of Bengal region is prone to natural disasters, such as cyclones and tsunamis, which can result in large-scale displacement of populations.<sup>5</sup> This displacement can increase the risk of trafficking and exploitation of migrants, as well as increase the risk of smuggling and irregular migration. Secondly, there is a lack of coordinated response mechanisms in the region to deal with the movement of people across borders.<sup>6</sup> This lack of coordination can lead to confusion and duplicated efforts, and can also result in human rights violations

against migrants. The maritime migration of Rohingyas during the pandemic in the Bay of Bengal emerged as a major challenge for several countries in the region. These were serious issues for both India and Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these challenges, there are also several opportunities for cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the area of maritime mixed migration. Firstly, the Bay of Bengal has emerged as an important strategic and economic hub in the larger Indo-Pacific region.<sup>8</sup> Hence, both countries have a shared interest in ensuring the safe, orderly, and regular movement of people across their borders. This can be achieved through the development of comprehensive migration policies and the implementation of effective border management systems. Secondly, there is potential for increased regional cooperation in the area of search and rescue operations, as well as in the provision of humanitarian assistance to migrants.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

### Blue Economy

India and Bangladesh can mutually benefit from cooperation on the blue economy by leveraging each other's strengths and resources. Bangladesh has a significant stake in the blue economy as the Bay of Bengal and coastal regions form the backbone of its national economy.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, India has made significant advances in marine and ocean studies and has established institutions for technological advancement in exploiting sea-based resources in a sustainable manner.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 1: Composition of Ocean Economy in Bangladesh<sup>14</sup>  
Sagarmala Programme**

The National Institute of Ocean Technology in India offers technical services and solutions for the management of ocean resources and the environment. It operates an ocean survey vessel equipped with sophisticated laboratories. By working together, India and Bangladesh can promote sustainable exploitation of the marine environment. This would also help them to increase food security, alleviate poverty, improve nutrition and health, create jobs, lift the trade and industrial profiles, and improve regional security and peace. The cooperation can also help address the challenges of climate change in the coastal area and create employment opportunities. Furthermore, it would also bring tangible changes to the lives and livelihoods of the people living along the coastline, in islands, and across Bangladesh. The Blue Economy can create enormous opportunities if the marine-based economic resources belonging to different sectors are managed and governed by principles of biodiversity protection and conservation. Apart from that it is also important that community-led efforts for care are intertwined with a vision of scientific understanding.



**Figure 2: Indian ports in SAGAR and Sagarmala projects<sup>17</sup>**  
**BIMSTEC**

Cooperation on the Sagarmala Program in the Bay of Bengal region has the potential to bring significant benefits for both India and Bangladesh. The project, consisting of over 150 projects aimed at enhancing port-led development, aims to increase multi-modal connectivity and optimize the use of India's vast network of navigable waterways and coastline.<sup>15</sup> The development of the Eastern Waterways Connectivity Transport Grid (EWaCTG) project is a key component of the Sagarmala program. It aims to provide seamless connectivity between National Waterway-1 (NW-1) and NW-2 and develop an economic corridor of 4,200 km of waterways and coastal shipping. Both India and Bangladesh have undertaken infrastructure development, dredging activities, and the promotion of low-draft vessels, freight villages, and roll-on roll-out services

to support multi-modal connectivity. Bangladesh's implementation of the National Integrated Multimodal Transport Policy in 2013 also supports the integration of different modes of transport, further promoting the goals of the Sagarmala program.<sup>16</sup> The potential for increased cargo movement and economic growth in the Bay of Bengal region highlights the importance of consistent political will and cooperation among all countries involved in these projects. Only then it will facilitate the participation of financial institutions and private entrepreneurs with the necessary investments for the success of these projects.

BIMSTEC serves as a platform for economic and technical cooperation between South Asia and South East Asia.<sup>18</sup> It includes major countries of South Asia except for Maldives, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The presence of regional powers India and Thailand makes it an attractive proposition for regional cooperation. The primary focus of BIMSTEC is to enhance regional cooperation.<sup>19</sup> It is focused on 14 sectors, ranging from agriculture to public health. The inclusion of energy in these sectors provides a unique opportunity for increased energy security through regional trade of diverse energy sources. Despite the potential benefits, cooperation initiatives in the energy sector have not progressed much beyond the drawing board.<sup>20</sup> The aim of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement, adopted in 2004, is yet to be realized.<sup>21</sup> However, the combination of India and China, with the resources of Bangladesh and Myanmar, could enable the member countries to achieve accelerated economic growth and increased connectivity with the global market.<sup>22</sup> Inland waterways transportation is an important focus for India and Bangladesh in terms of promoting regional connectivity and decongesting rail and road traffic.<sup>23</sup> Both these countries can improve inland waterways transportation through cooperation based on the forum provided by BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC states have attempted to resolve disputes peacefully through international mechanisms. This was demonstrated by the resolution of the India-Bangladesh maritime border dispute in 2014 through a United Nations tribunal.<sup>24</sup> Mutual cooperation through BIMSTEC is quite important for both India and Bangladesh with respect to their individual as well as collective interests in the Bay of Bengal region.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is becoming increasingly important due to the economic growth of China, India, and other developing nations, leading to a rise in energy demand.<sup>26</sup> The Bay of Bengal is a major part of the IOR and is becoming more strategically significant for many countries due to its role in the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) and the protection of these routes. China is adopting a "Look South" policy through heavy infrastructure investments in the countries around the Bay.



**Figure 3: BIMSTEC Countries<sup>25</sup>**

### **The strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal for Bangladesh and India**

While India on the other hand is opting for a “Look East” policy to intensify connectivity to Southeast Asia. Bangladesh is also gaining importance, with Bangladesh inviting investment in maritime infrastructure and resolving disputes through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). Increased political and economic cooperation is leading to competition and potential conflict. China and India are becoming more dependent on oil and natural gas imports, making the Bay of Bengal a crucial transit region. The recent focus on delimiting maritime boundaries for resource security is also a point of interest. The trend of settling disputes diplomatically, instead of using a bilateral mechanism, is a stabilizing factor in the Bay of Bengal.

The centrality of the Bay of Bengal in the Indo-Pacific and its role as a key transit zone between the Indian and Pacific oceans make the Bay of Bengal a coveted region. It is also the main route for trade and energy in East Asia.<sup>27</sup> The development of infrastructure and other facilities in the Bay of Bengal is likely to have a significant impact on the foreign policies of India, China, and the United States with respect to Bangladesh. India considers itself the net provider of security in the region, a stance supported by the United States but not mandated by the United Nations.<sup>28</sup> China, on the other hand, considers the Bay of Bengal as part of its strategic backyard and a core value. This explains why it is likely to jostle for influence in the region. The United States, being a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, is also likely to engage in strategic manoeuvring in the Bay of Bengal. Due to these reasons, the Bay of Bengal has already

emerged as a key theatre for a geopolitical tussle between India, China, and the US. The importance of Bangladesh in this region will also continue to increase due to the country's fast pace of growth. India, China, and the US are already looking to improve their relations with Bangladesh. It is up to the political leadership of Bangladesh to gain maximum advantage from the strategic dynamics in the Bay of Bengal.

India will continue to increase its presence in the Bay of Bengal region as it rises as a significant regional force.<sup>29</sup> The country's interests are influenced by several factors, including security against threats from the Southeast Asian region, control of the sea lines of communication, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI).<sup>30</sup> India is developing several strategic ports in the ANC's influence zone, including Chittagong Mongla, Sittwe and Sabang. India is also strengthening its defence ties in the Bay with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives. India is also trying to play a big role in the region's economic development by maximizing the economic benefits of the ANI, it must be noted that the ANI are a geostrategic bridge between the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. India is also trying to strengthen the ANI's defence capabilities in the face of China's growing strategic footprint in the IOR. India has announced the deployment of fighter jets and combat platforms, as well as extra soldiers, cruisers, planes, and missile systems in the ANI India's actions could be interpreted as a response to China's growing assertiveness in the region.

The Bay of Bengal is not only a theatre for a great power game but the livelihood and economic vitality of the countries surrounding it are highly dependent on this body of water. Domestic dynamics in each of these states, interstate conflict, non-traditional security threats, climate change, and ecology are also critical factors shaping the Bay. These factors also have significant consequences for the broader Indo-Pacific.<sup>31</sup> The strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal will considerably increase in the coming years. The power plays in this theatre involving the major and rising powers, will inevitably reshape the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific beyond the Bay. The region has been a significant focus of attention due to its strategic importance, economic potential, and critical role in shaping the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. It is shaped by a complex interplay of domestic dynamics, interstate conflict, non-traditional security threats, climate change, and ecology.

It is important to understand the foreign policy imperatives of India which is one of the major powers in the region, with a long-standing interest in securing its strategic and economic interests in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>32</sup> India's Act East Policy, a key component of its Vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), is aimed at enhancing its engagement with the countries in the region, particularly in the areas of trade, investment, and infrastructure. India's strategic interests in the region

are driven by its need to secure its eastern flank and counterbalance the influence of China. China is rapidly expanding its presence in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Bangladesh, on the other hand, is a rising power in the region, with a rapidly growing economy and a young and dynamic workforce. Bangladesh is well-positioned to benefit from the offshoring of labour-intensive industries from developed countries, as it has a relatively young population with 20% falling between the ages of 15 and 24. Furthermore, Bangladesh is believed to have significant gas reserves, which could make it a major source of energy in the Asia-Pacific.

The strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal region is set to increase in the coming years, and it is in the best interests of both India and Bangladesh to cooperate and compete in a responsible manner. Any conflict in the region could have significant political, economic, and energy security implications for all the countries involved. Moreover, the rise of multilateral approaches in the region means that cooperation and competition in the Bay of Bengal region will inevitably shape the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific beyond the Bay. The Bay of Bengal region holds significant strategic and economic interests for India and Bangladesh. As major and rising powers in the region, both countries have a critical role to play in shaping the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. It is also in their best interests to cooperate and compete responsibly to ensure stability and prosperity in the region.

### **Implications of the Findings**

In order to secure their interests in the Bay of Bengal, India and Bangladesh will have to work together to address a number of challenges such as illegal fishing, cross-border smuggling and illegal migration.<sup>33</sup> The two countries can work together to establish a regional security framework that will help to address these challenges and promote regional stability and prosperity. This will require a commitment to cooperation, coordination and a willingness to share information and resources. India and Bangladesh can also work together to build a network of maritime security partnerships, which will ensure the stability and security of the Bay of Bengal.

Bangladesh and India need to seriously consider the interests as well as the role of China and the US in the Bay of Bengal region since these are two of the most powerful countries in the world at present. China presumably would like to occupy a central place on the world stage – despite the fact that it is committed to going slow and hiding its brilliance. It is the change in relative power that is probably triggering the process. While China's military modernization is, in a way, going through a kind of military revolution, its economic diplomacy or cooperation is moving at an even faster pace.

China has an oversupply of disposable funds that can be better utilized in overseas investments. Economic diplomacy is presumably directed to help ameliorate the economic and social conditions of the countries in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia. It is even stretched to Africa and South America. China is yet to project itself in the Indian Ocean, where India is also a major power. It is discernible that strategic alliance or alignment among Japan, India, South Korea and Australia is tending to tilt the strategic balance away from China. China therefore would be compelled to look for partners and resources – mostly energy – in the region.

China has made significant investments in the region, including the construction of ports and infrastructure, which has been seen as a strategic move to secure its interests in the region. While China's role in the region is largely economic, its increased presence has raised concerns about its motives and the impact of its activities on regional stability and security. The increasing cooperation between India, Japan, USA, and Australia can be also considered a response to the increasing assertiveness of China in the Indian Ocean region which includes the Bay of Bengal.<sup>34</sup>

However, a confrontationist approach to relations with China based on rivalry and competition would not suffice for Bangladesh and India. In order to address their concerns, these two countries need to engage with China constructively and work together to establish a shared understanding of the regional security environment. They can work together to encourage China to play a more active role in regional security and stability and to promote cooperation and coordination in the Bay of Bengal. They can also work together to address the challenges posed by China's increasing presence in the region such as the potential for increased competition and conflicts over resources.

The USA has a key interest in securing the Bay of Bengal, as it provides access to the Indian Ocean, which is crucial for the security of its maritime boundaries and navigation routes. The increasing presence of India and China in the Indian Ocean has resulted in significant shifts in the geopolitical orientation of the USA in the post-cold war era.<sup>35</sup> The USA has been working to establish itself as a major player in the region and has been working to strengthen its relationships with key players, such as India and Bangladesh. The USA has also been working to promote regional stability and security and has been involved in a number of major projects in the region. These include the development of infrastructure and the promotion of economic growth. In order to secure its interests in the Bay of Bengal, the USA needs to work with India and Bangladesh. The region has immense economic and security implications and therefore, these countries must increase their cooperation and improve their relations with other powers in the region. The Bay of Bengal is an important water body that cuts

deep inland into the Asian continent and provides a gateway to the Indian Ocean.<sup>36</sup>

### **Policy Recommendations**

Bangladesh and India should work together to ensure that the program is implemented effectively and that the benefits of the blue economy are shared by all the countries in the region. The two countries should also collaborate on the development of their ports and coastal areas to promote the blue economy and increase economic cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. Maritime migration is a major challenge in the Bay of Bengal region and Bangladesh and India must work together to address the issue. The two countries should take a collaborative approach to manage the flow of migrants, ensure their safety and well-being, and prevent human trafficking. The countries should also work together to prevent illegal immigration and smuggling, which are major threats to the region. In addition to increasing cooperation between Bangladesh and India, it is also crucial for the countries to engage with other powers that have stakes in the region. The countries should seek to improve their relations with China, Japan, the United States and other countries that have a significant presence in the Bay of Bengal. This engagement should focus on enhancing economic cooperation, improving security and promoting stability in the region.

### **Conclusion**

This article can be concluded on a positive note by focusing on the factors which would determine the future of Bangladesh and India in the Bay of Bengal. The region is rich in natural resources and with the increased focus on the blue economy the countries must take the necessary steps to increase cooperation. The cooperation between Bangladesh and India in the fields of blue economy, BIMSTEC, and Sagarmala has the potential to bring significant benefits for both nations. The blue economy, which focuses on the sustainable use of ocean resources, can provide new opportunities for economic growth and job creation as well as contribute to the conservation of marine ecosystems. BIMSTEC, a regional organization of seven countries in South and Southeast Asia, can facilitate regional integration and enhance trade and investment flows between Bangladesh and India. Sagarmala, India's national port-led development program, can help modernize ports and improve connectivity in the region, making it easier for businesses to access new markets and for people to travel and trade. By working together, Bangladesh and India can harness the potential of these initiatives to boost economic development, foster regional cooperation and improve the well-being of their citizens.

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