

## Bay of Bengal as Strategic Construct in the Maritime Space

Nafiz Farhan<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Maritime space itself has become a major part of the global politics due to its strategic significance and economic importance among many other important variables. Oceanic spaces have led to the creation of great empires and powerhouses throughout history, a prime example being the great British Empire and its spread of strategic influence through Royal British Navy, a major force to be reckoned with throughout history. Thus far, the importance of maritime spaces has only increased exponentially in this era of connectivity and cooperation, and amidst many, Bay of Bengal has seen the growth in terms of its significant importance in the strategic sphere.

### Bay of Bengal: Geographical Understanding and Characteristics

Extending all the way to the Indian Ocean in its northern frontier, the Bay of Bengal is bounded on the north by the deltaic region of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system, by the



east coasts of Sri Lanka and India in the west, and on the east by the Myanmar peninsula extended up to the ridges of Andaman-Nicobar.<sup>2</sup> Bay of Bengal on its Southern frontier is marked along the line drawn from the “Dondra Head” located in the south of Sri Lanka to the north tip of Sumatra. The Bay of Bengal is believed to be occupying an area of approximately 2.2 million square kilometers and the average

depth is 2,600m with depth of even going down to 5,258m in some deeper areas. Bangladesh is located right above the Bay of Bengal.<sup>3</sup> The topography at the bottom of this maritime space

<sup>1</sup> Nafiz Farhan is currently working as a Research Assistant at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies. He has completed his Bachelor's and Master's in International Relations from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

<sup>2</sup> Bouma, M.J. and Pascual, M., 2001. Seasonal and interannual cycles of endemic cholera in Bengal 1891–1940 in relation to climate and geography. In *The ecology and etiology of newly emerging marine diseases* (pp. 147-156). Springer, Dordrecht.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

has been characterized as a U-shaped basin with its southwestern part opening to the Indian Ocean. The entire Bay of Bengal is occupied by a thick uniform abyssal plain gently sloping southward at the considerable angle of 8'-10'. Underwater valleys dissect this plain mass in many places.

The Bay of Bengal's continental shelf extends to different lengths in different places of the Bay of Bengal, varying significantly. It comprises of area of less than 100 km off the south coast between Hiron Point and the SWATCH OF NO GROUND and more than 250 km off the coast of Cox's Bazar.<sup>4</sup>

As far as the geographical characteristics of the Bay of Bengal are concerned, they are mostly determined by a significant number of factors such as winds associated with monsoons and to some extent by the hydrological characteristics of the open part of the Indian Ocean. Fresh water from the rivers largely influences the coastal northern part of the Bay. The rivers of Bangladesh discharge the vast amount of 1,222 million cubic metres of fresh water (excluding deep percolation losses, evaporation, and evapotranspiration) into the Bay.

### **Bay of Bengal: Significance in the Maritime Strategic Space**

The shores of the Bay of Bengal and its ports stand as major testaments of political, religious and economic tensions throughout the centuries. From ancient times to the middle ages, traders from Arab countries, including missionaries, who had arrived at the shores of the Bay of Bengal via the Arabian Sea. Eventually, Portuguese, French, Danish, Dutch and English companies started coming from Europe after the discovery of the Bay of Bengal by Vasco-da Gama. The shores of the Bay of Bengal became the ideal location for constructing their company's offices and forts. The fights between the Indian kings and the European merchants began soon after. However, following these clashes, The British East India Company eventually triumphed and established their empire in India.

The Bay of Bengal has now evolved into the center of international politics in the contemporary world system due to its ever-growing economic and strategic importance. It is the busiest international shipping route due to its geography. An estimated 40,000 ships travel through this route annually.<sup>5</sup> A significant number of the world's goods and fuel vessels have used this route extensively throughout on more than once.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Humayun Kabir, M. and Ahmad, A., 2015. The Bay of Bengal: Next theatre for strategic power play in Asia. *Croatian International Relations Review*, 21(72), pp.199-238.

<sup>6</sup> Brewster, D., 2014. Dividing lines: Evolving mental maps of the Bay of Bengal. *Asian security*, 10(2), pp.151-167.

the largest beach in the world 'Cox's Bazar', , the largest uninterrupted mangrove forest 'The Sundarbans', and one of the world's most delicious fish species, the habitat of hilsa and it's cultivation is linked directly with the Bay of Bengal. After taking a closer look at the Bay of Bengal, it is pretty much apparent that its all-northern boundary has formulated a parallel belt. On the outside, the two frontiers of the Bay have gradually extended and culminated in Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. On the other side, the Andaman Islands merge with Sumatra from Myanmar and takes a turn to the right to join Sri Lanka, further emphasising upon the importance of this maritime entity.<sup>7</sup>

The Bay of Bengal countries haven't been able to garner a sense of a cohesive community identity, yet. If the littorals in Bay of Bengal could persuade evolvement towards formulating a sense of community at Bay of Bengal, recreating the attributes of EEC and ASEAN, the prospects and likelihoods for prosperity for all the littorals would almost be endless, while previously land-locked entities (northeast Indian states, Bhutan, and Nepal) would get a much-needed gateway to the seas.<sup>8</sup>

Prospects for a Blue Economy as a long as Bangladesh is concerned, is also a very enticing proposition as it provides the opportunities towards ensuring the encapsulation of quite a number of functions, such as maritime trade, shipping, fisheries, maritime security and surveillance, energy connectivity, increased tourism etc.<sup>9</sup>

### **Bay of Bengal: Overarching Competition in the Maritime Space**

Bay of Bengal has now become a critical theatre for economic and strategic competition. Due to it being a connecting point between South and Southeast Asia, now it is the focal point for competing connectivity initiatives.

The concept of BIMSTEC as a regional entity has only been gaining traction in recent years, despite the 'Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation' (BIMSTEC) having been formed in 1997. Moreover, a few more key factors are India-Pakistan relations, the subsequent geopolitical developments or deteriorations, and the consequent impasse within SAARC countries, a crucial impetus for ensuring BIMSTEC cooperation.<sup>10</sup> The China factor has been equally important. In order to balance China's growing soft power outreach and footprint in the region, India has also showcased the tendency of stepping up in its engagement with its regional neighbors.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Brewster, D., 2014. Dividing lines: Evolving mental maps of the Bay of Bengal. *Asian security*, 10(2), pp.151-167.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

On a more positive note, The strong foundation of good multilateral relations between the existing seven countries and their desire to push further with strengthening regional integration initiatives are what the core tenants of BIMSTEC are being built upon. Moreover, BIMSTEC integration also owes a lot of its progress to the BBIN(Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) initiative.<sup>11</sup>

New connectivity corridors are subsequently being introduced as China has unveiled its intentions on more than occasion to link its western provinces to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Energy connectivity infrastructures are also being built between China and Myanmar's western coast. India has been more than apprehensive about the initiation of these projects, as they believe these corridors could introduce further challenges for India and its allies such as Japan, Australia and the United States in the future. There is a sense of imminent desperation and urgency among the four countries towards ensuring cooperation to securitise SLOCs and vital chokepoints for international shipping in the Eastern Indian Ocean.

China is soldering on towards strengthening its maritime and military ties with Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, with India also partaking in the same practice. It's also spreading its economic connectivity in the meantime, prime example being The China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)—the crown jewel of the Belt and Road Initiative— which will connect Yunnan province with the Bay of Bengal. A considerable “point of the CMEC” is the Kyaukphyu Port, garnering US \$ 1.3 billion in investment, alongside the construction of a Special Economic Zone with assistance from the Chinese.<sup>12</sup> China now holds the accolade for introducing a colossal 70% foreign investments in the energy sector of Myanmar. Recently a proposition was put forth by India for the construction of a petroleum refinery worth \$6 billion in Myanmar. Touting it as a major “win win arrangement” for both countries, a step like which will significantly help balance the sphere of influence China and India intend to spread across in the region.

Bangladesh is a key focal point for both the Chinese and the Indian strategic interest in the coming times. The challenge for Bangladesh will be to leverage the economic benefits offered through the string of infrastructural developments and ensure the upholding of “strategic neutrality” without leaning too heavily towards a particular block.<sup>13</sup>

Connectivity and the geo-politics surrounding it certainly envisages competing visions for shaping the “neighborhood”. Connectivity visions reflect national values and whether they are solely for the benefit of one or for the benefit of a collective group. Competitive connectivity initiatives can be labeled as the modern-day reincarnation of the “arms race” of the 21st century, and Bay of Bengal is at the very center of this strategy. While keeping these underlying

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Baruah, D.M. and Mohan, C.R., 2019. The emerging dynamics of Sino-Indian rivalry in the Bay of Bengal. In *India–China Maritime Competition* (pp. 88-110). Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

dynamics in mind, Bangladesh ought to predict the significance of the Bay of Bengal not just within the maritime space, but within complex yet delicate inner-workings of global politics. It also highlights the monumental number of opportunities and challenges that Bangladesh encounters and will encounter due to its geo-strategic proximity to the Bay of Bengal.

### **Conclusion**

The inception of a modern multilateral system demands the inclusion of every concerning factor towards formulating a modern world system. Thus, this indicates that the formulation of a multilateral system, with the inclusion of the growing geostrategic influence of the Bay of Bengal, will only ensure further competition in the concerned maritime space.