

## Strengthening Maritime Ties: India-Bangladesh Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal

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Source: World Atlas

### Introduction

The Bay of Bengal is a vast and significant body of water that holds great importance for the countries surrounding it, especially for India and Bangladesh, serving as a key route for international trade and a source of abundant marine resources. Both nations have prioritized cooperation in areas like economic development, responsible resource management, and marine security, recognizing the importance and the significance of the bay. With the goal of securing important marine routes and enhancing regional stability, their alliance is based on similar interests

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and historical links. By cooperating, Bangladesh and India improve not only their bilateral ties but also the stability and prosperity of South Asia as a whole. The scope of discussion on this topic is quite vast. This commentary aims to analyze the existing framework of cooperation between India and Bangladesh in the Bay, explore prospective avenues for future collaboration, and pinpoint potential obstacles to fortifying this cooperation.

## **The Bay of Bengal: A Geostrategic and Geoeconomic Hub**

As a maritime region with significant historical, economic, and strategic significance, the Bay of Bengal, named after Bengal, is extremely important. Due to its bordering nations—India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka—it serves as a major hub for regional geopolitics. This marine region is particularly beneficial to India and Bangladesh, as it is one of the busiest shipping routes globally, with around 40,000 ships passing through each year. The Bay of Bengal has become a focal point for global powers such as the US, UK, China, India, and Japan. In order to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the US has refocused its attention from the Asia-Pacific region to the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh is eager to join China's and the US's respective alliances. Japan is very concerned about keeping the Indo-Pacific area open and free. These great powers are paying more and more attention to the Bay of Bengal due to its growing strategic significance.

On the other hand, the bay is home to some of the busiest maritime routes in the world, which promote global trade and the movement of energy. The economics of the bay's neighboring nations, such as Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, are greatly impacted by the abundance of marine resources, including as fish, oil, and natural gas. Its coastal regions are essential for regional trade, and the economy is growing because to important ports like Chennai, Kolkata, and Chittagong.<sup>3</sup> The Blue Economy, which encourages the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, also heavily relies on the Bay of Bengal. Furthermore, the bay's enormous potential for renewable energy—especially solar and wind—proves how crucial it is to address both climate change and energy security.

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<sup>2</sup>Pathik Hasan, “Strategic Significance of Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh’s Balancing Capability”, The Daily Sun, December 21, 2021, <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/595053>

<sup>3</sup>Abhijit Singh, “Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Obstacles and Opportunities”, ORF, May 14, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/maritime-security-in-the-bay-of-bengal-obstacles-and-opportunities>

## **Existing Cooperation Frameworks in the Bay between Bangladesh and India**

The Bay of Bengal is a crucial area for bilateral cooperation between India and Bangladesh. The two countries have created a number of structures to improve their cooperation in this vital maritime area over time. These frameworks cover a wide range of area and all those issues hold equal importance.

### **Maritime Boundary Dispute Resolution - 2014:**

The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague rendered a decision in 2014 regarding the protracted maritime border dispute involving Bangladesh and India. The Bay of Bengal's maritime border was established by this arbitration decision, which also awarded Bangladesh 19,467 square kilometers out of the 25,602 square kilometers that both nations had claimed.<sup>4</sup> Along with fishing and oil exploration, collaboration in the management of marine resources has been made easier by the settlement of this issue.

### **Coastal Shipping Agreement- 2015:**

On June 6, 2015, India and Bangladesh signed the Coastal Shipping Agreement, which intends to facilitate trade between the two nations by cutting down on shipping delays and logistical expenses along the Bay of Bengal route.<sup>5</sup> This arrangement has made it easier for container ships to travel directly from India's eastern ports, or industrial zones, to Dhaka, Bangladesh's manufacturing powerhouse. Importers benefit from avoiding traffic jams between Dhaka and Chittagong because to this.

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<sup>4</sup>Douglas Jackson, "Bangladesh v. India: A Positive Step Forward in Public Order of the Seas", September 2017, [https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA\\_Files/pdf/dop-2017-u-016081-final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/dop-2017-u-016081-final.pdf)

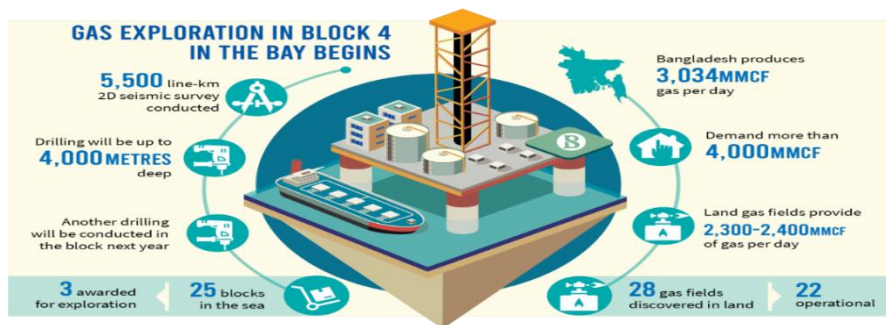
<sup>5</sup>"India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement", n.d., <https://cuts-citee.org/pdf/working-note-india-bangladesh-coastal-shipping-agreement.pdf>



Source: RMG Bangladesh

### Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs):

Under Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs), Bangladesh and India have jointly taken the initiative to drill additional blocks in the Bay of Bengal in 2021. ONGC Videsh Ltd, Oil India Ltd, and Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited (Bapex) drill in the SS-4 (Shallow Sea-4) block.<sup>6</sup> This partnership's primary goal is to boost gas production in order to lessen Bangladesh's acute gas shortages.



Source: The Business Standard

<sup>6</sup>Eyamin Sajid, “Bangladesh begins drilling for gas in Bay 29 Sept”, The Business Standard, September 27, 2021, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/energy/bangladesh-begins-drilling-gas-bay-29-sept-308317>

## **Blue Economy and Maritime Cooperation:**

Both Bangladesh and India are progressively pursuing the sustainable use of ocean resources as a means of strengthening their blue economies. The primary plans of India, "Amrit Kaal Vision 2047" and "Maritime India Vision 2030," are designed to enhance port infrastructure, encourage environmentally friendly maritime activities, and promote global cooperation.<sup>7</sup> Similar to this, Bangladesh's Vision 2041 aims to use its marine and coastal resources to turn the country into a high-income nation, with an emphasis on enhancing the blue economy's share of the national GDP and aiding coastal communities.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the two countries are working together on a number of blue economy-related projects. They participate, for example, in the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) Project, which encourages the Bay of Bengal's marine resources to be used sustainably. Again, in line with the tenets of the blue economy, new accords such as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade seek to expand maritime commerce, strengthen regional connectivity, and encourage sustainable development.<sup>9</sup>

A Memorandum of Understanding (Mou) for collaboration in the area of blue economy in the Bay of Bengal and India Ocean Region was signed between Bangladesh and India in June 2024. Additionally, the Bangladesh Oceanographic Research Institute (BORI) and the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) of India will collaborate on oceanographic research under the terms of this memorandum.<sup>10</sup> These agreements seek to strengthen collaboration in strategic and sustainable fields, while promoting economic growth and stability in the region.

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<sup>7</sup>Sohil Sinha, "Opinion | Towards Bharat's Amrit Kaal: Building Ports for Prosperity", News 18, February 15, 2024, <https://www.news18.com/opinion/opinion-towards-bharats-amrit-kaal-building-ports-for-prosperity-8779930.html>

<sup>8</sup>"Investment in Bangladesh - Challenges and Prospects for Realization of Vision 2041", June 15, 2017, <https://ndc.gov.bd/publications/b60acbb3-507e-4554-a3eb-689be5e59799.pdf>

<sup>9</sup>Subhajit Roy, "India-Bangla trade, now set for CEPA boost", September 7, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-economics/india-bangla-trade-now-set-for-cepa-boost-8135019/>

<sup>10</sup>"Bangladesh, India sign 7 new MoUs to further deepen ties". Prothom Alo, June 22, 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/m8pxfzdgif>

## Scopes for Further Cooperation

**Blue Economy:** Driven by a shared ambition to harness ocean resources responsibly, Bangladesh and India may work to further extend their collaboration regarding the ‘Blue Economy’ in the huge and unexplored Bay of Bengal. Traditional methods like fishing, resource mapping, and hazardous extractions could be completely transformed by the marine industries' use of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technology including IoT, AI, robotics, and GPS mapping. The two countries may boost the marine supply chain by constructing the required infrastructure and advancing their shipbuilding capabilities through the utilization of public-private partnerships (PPP). Joint research projects examining potential fields such as offshore energy, shipping, fishing, and maritime infrastructure could advance this cooperation. Delineating the roles of the public and private sectors and ensuring that legislative frameworks promote capacity creation, among other things, would be part of a well-structured national Blue Economy roadmap.

In addition, a commitment to strategic growth and sustainability is emphasized by the recently signed MoU between Bangladesh and India, as well as partnerships between the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in India and the Bangladesh Oceanographic Research Institute (BORI). The launch of this blue bond presents a special chance for governments and companies operating in the ocean economy to obtain long-term, affordable funding. Capital market investments could be drawn to these bonds, and private sector involvement could be encouraged by tax holidays, exemptions, and technology help, among other fiscal incentives.

**Blue Tourism:** By creating a common vision for sustainable coastal and marine tourism in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh and India may work together in the field of blue tourism. Together, the two nations' rich cultural histories, varied ecosystems, and clean coasts might be marketed as a distinctive tourism destination. Establishing transboundary marine protected zones is one example of a collaborative project that could preserve the area's biodiversity and natural beauty while promoting ecotourism. Furthermore, the two countries might collaborate to create joint tourism packages that highlight the top coastline attractions in each of their respective countries. They might make sure that the expansion of tourism does not come at the expense of environmental preservation by harmonizing their standards and regulations related to tourism.



Source: UNDP

**Fisheries:** By working together, Bangladesh and India can create a fisheries sector that is an example of sustainable management of marine resources in the Bay of Bengal. Both countries might guarantee the health and availability of fish stocks by launching a cooperative maritime research and monitoring project that would make use of cutting-edge technology like AI-driven analytics, satellite tracking, and Internet of Things-based monitoring devices. A shared framework for managing fisheries that harmonizes policies and allows for coordinated fishing seasons, protected breeding zones, and coordinated efforts to combat illicit, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing might be created as a result of this relationship. Additionally, the two nations might promote innovation by collaborating on aquaculture projects and investigating productive sustainable farming methods that protect marine environments.

**Maritime Ecology:** Bangladesh and India can strengthen their efforts in marine ecology cooperation by creating cooperative marine conservation zones in the Bay of Bengal and combining data on marine biodiversity and the effects of climate change via common research platforms. Also, establishing transboundary marine protected areas should be given top priority in order to protect important species and habitats. Ecological health can be enhanced by bolstering programs like cooperative monitoring schemes and coordinated responses to marine pollution. In order to promote better environmental stewardship and resilience against climate change, both countries could also profit from supporting community-based conservation initiatives and incorporating the traditional knowledge of the nearby fishing communities into ecological management plans.

**Marine Piracy:** Marine piracy and other maritime crimes are causing Bangladesh great concern, particularly in light of the recent hijacking of the ship MV Abdullah, which was flying the Bangladeshi flag off the coast of Somalia.<sup>11</sup> Not only those near to home, but worries about security in all bodies of water have increased as a result of this tragedy. Illegal activities are also major problems, including illegal fishing and poaching. Bangladesh's economy depends heavily on the fisheries industry, which generates 2.73% of the nation's GDP.<sup>12</sup>

By combining cutting-edge technology with regional cooperation, Bangladesh and India can effectively tackle sea piracy in the Bay of Bengal. The two countries may improve real-time monitoring and fast response capabilities by building a comprehensive maritime surveillance system using satellite technology and drones, merging their coast guards and navy units for cooperative patrols, and exchanging intelligence. Additionally, by encouraging information sharing, cooperative training, and cooperative law enforcement, building a regional anti-piracy coalition with nearby nations and international organizations can support their efforts. By addressing fundamental problems like economic instability and lax marine governance, this all-encompassing strategy not only protects important fishing grounds and shipping routes but also establishes Bangladesh and India as leaders in the region's maritime security.

## **Possible Challenges**

### **Potential Militarization:**

India is building a submarine facility in the Bay of Bengal, named as 'Project Varsha' which, when finished, will provide a safe haven for its nuclear deterrent against China and Pakistan at sea. Project Varsha is a massive 1,680-acre naval base that is situated in Rambilli, on the Eastern Coast.<sup>13</sup> Over 12 nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) can be housed in its subterranean structure, which protects them from airborne assaults.

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<sup>11</sup>Mohosina Mostofa, "Hijack of MV Abdullah: A Critical Analysis of Bangladesh's Maritime Security and Future Preparedness" BIPSS, April, 2024, <https://bipss.org.bd/hijack-of-mv-abdullah-a-critical-analysis-of-bangladeshs-maritime-security-and-future-preparedness/>

<sup>12</sup>Tasnim Hasan Saara, "Maritime piracy in Bangladesh, a ticking bomb already", TBS, May 9, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/maritime-piracy-bangladesh-ticking-bomb-already-846946>

<sup>13</sup>Gabriel Honrada, "India making Bay of Bengal into a nuclear launchpad", June 4, 2024, <https://asiatimes.com/2024/06/india-making-bay-of-bengal-into-a-nuclear-launchpad/>





Source: Asia Times

India's this nuclear deterrence strategy may heighten tensions and shift focus away from cooperative security, leading to increased patrol and surveillance. Bangladesh may perceive India's Project Varsha as a threat, potentially triggering a security dilemma where both nations escalate their military presence, thereby weakening trust, transparency, and collaboration. These challenges could pose a threat to non-militarization initiatives in the Bay of Bengal; they could also put pressure on Bangladesh to enhance its naval capabilities, sparking an arms race that undermines non-militarization efforts.

### **Increased Maritime Strategic Competition:**

Increased maritime strategic competition in the Bay of Bengal, particularly driven by the growing influence of China and India's responses, can potentially erode India and Bangladesh's cooperative efforts in the region. In terms of economic resources, environmental sustainability, and marine security, the Bay of Bengal is essential to both nations. But as China and India compete for influence, attention may turn from shared resource management and disaster relief to military and strategic issues. On the other hand, the first-ever joint military drill between Chinese and Bangladeshi soldiers is the main source of anxiety in Indian strategic circles. New Delhi is concerned about the recent Chinese investments in Bangladesh's naval capabilities, which include the construction of a submarine facility. This change in emphasis toward military readiness may draw money and attention away from ongoing joint projects that work to improve maritime safety,

fight piracy, and guarantee the sustainable use of marine resources. Moreover, the increasing visibility of outside forces in the Bay of Bengal may also result in a breakdown in communication and trust—two crucial elements of productive cooperation—making it more difficult for Bangladesh and India to cooperate on common regional objectives.

**Environmental and Legal Complexities:** The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and other international agreements serve as the foundation for the legal frameworks that regulate the Bay of Bengal. However, there are substantial obstacles to India and Bangladesh's collaboration due to varying interpretations and the application of these regulations. An additional degree of complication is created by the Bay's environmental degradation, which is made worse by pollution, overfishing, and climate change. The implementation and enforcement of environmental legislation by both nations exhibit disparities, which may give rise to future conflicts about resource management.

For example, the exploitation of marine resources, such as oil and gas, raises questions about the equitable sharing of benefits and environmental risks. Given its increased susceptibility to climate change, Bangladesh may prioritize sustainable methods. But India, with its larger economy and greater energy requirements, may advocate for more vigorous exploration. Their collaboration may be strained as a result of this disagreement, particularly if legal challenges emerge regarding the interpretation of environmental legislation or marine boundaries.

### **Possibility of Shifting Alliance?**

The exit of Bangladesh's long-time Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and potential shifts in Bangladesh's political landscape could impact India-Bangladesh cooperative mechanisms in the bay. According to many analysts, changes in domestic politics further increase the likelihood of a change in Bangladesh's foreign policy posture. But in our understanding, although Bangladesh has recently formed an interim government, significant changes in the country's policy direction are not anticipated. New Bangladesh is committed to maintaining a balanced foreign policy, with a strong emphasis on prioritizing its national interests. Additionally, the country is keen to contribute to the strengthening of a rule-based international order. As a result, Bangladesh's international counterparts, such as India, should not be concerned about the continuation of ongoing

collaborative projects initiated under the previous government, as these projects are expected to progress further as long as they align with both the countries positive interests.

## **Conclusion**

The Bay of Bengal is a crucial geopolitical and economic area where India and Bangladesh's joint efforts hold great potential for both countries' prosperity and stability. Their cooperation in a number of areas, including resource management, economic development, and marine security, shows the value of common interests in promoting peace and prosperity in the region. But there are obstacles that could draw attention away from these cooperative efforts, such as the growing strategic rivalry and possible militarization of the area. The ability of India and Bangladesh to uphold mutual trust, give priority to their shared goals, and adjust to the changing geopolitical environment will be essential as they negotiate these challenges. Their ability to balance security concerns with the more general objective of inclusive and sustainable development will determine the future of their relationship in the Bay of Bengal and will serve as a model for how neighboring nations might cooperate in an increasingly disputed maritime area.