

Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal

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Synopsis

Since from the dawn of time, human civilizations were dependent on the rivers and sea routes. Great powers have risen by exploring the maritime routes. Bangladesh is a maritime nation with a huge population and limited resources. Understanding the maritime potential of the country can make a difference by exploring her maritime resources. This paper providing a preview of different aspects of maritime security challenges of Bangladesh. The paper will also analyze the security threats and discuss its impact on Bangladesh's blue economy. Finally, the paper offers a few recommendations that can help countering the threats. The paper focuses on the progress that has been made across the Bay of Bengal, as well as the challenges that remain for maintain sustainable maritime security in the region.

Commentary

Maritime security in the Bay of Bengal is vital to maritime stability and governance in the South Asian region. States in the Bay of Bengal, especially Bangladesh are battling with issues of corruption, inadequate provision of public and private sectors, lack of economic reforms and the threats of imminent environmental affects due to climate change. All these problems, if left unresolved, have the potential to adversely affect the relations between the coastal countries. This paper will describe these mechanisms in a greater detail, especially focusing on how security issues of state officials are related to problems such as poor maritime law enforcement, sluggish development of the regional blue economy, pervasive illicit maritime economies, and even organized political violence in coastal areas.¹ For Bangladesh to achieve greater penetration of social services to vulnerable coastal communities, it needs to refine its blue economy policies. Bangladesh is still lagging behind in terms of maritime industries. To address that, broad progress in these areas is a critical prerequisite for a lasting solution for the maritime security threats.

¹ "Stable Seas: Bay of Bengal." 2020. Stableseas.Org. March 16, 2020. <https://stableseas.org/publications/stable-seas-bay-bengal-maritime-security>.

Blue Economy of Bangladesh: A Maritime Security Concern

While countries like China, Japan, and the Philippines have been earning multiple forms of revenue from ocean economy for almost 300 years, Bangladesh is relatively new in this industry. Marine fish, plants, and animals provide 15% of the protein that 430 crore people consume globally.² About 30% of the world's gas and fuel demand is supplied from different seaside gas and oilfields.³ With time the global blue economy is growing more prominent. Using the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh earns a significant amount of foreign currency.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, twenty-six maritime economic activities have been identified such as the fishery, maritime trade and shipping, energy, tourism, coastal protection, maritime safety and surveillance for the development of the blue economy in Bangladesh.⁴ But the recent pandemic has halted many of the ongoing projects and thus the blue economy is facing a setback. The following summarises this phenomena: how some of the maritime economic activities are underway to harness the benefits of the blue economy for Bangladesh.

Livelihood Security in the Coastal Zones

Combatting a pandemic and providing treatment for affected people will likely increase the demand for water due to overgrowing demand of using in public health sector and rising human consumption. For example, the coastal agricultural system in Bangladesh faces a multitude of problems caused by the rise in sea-levels and lack of freshwater. More than 30% of the total cultivable land and one-fourth of the population of Bangladesh lies in the coastal belt. A total of 366,650 hactor of land is affected by salinity in Barisal and Patuakhali, where farmers usually only cultivate during winter and leave the land uncultivated during other seasons.⁵ Thus biodiversity, crop yields, cropping intensity, production levels, and the quality of people's livelihoods are much lower than other parts of the country. At the same time, demand for food in

²Devaraj, M. "Status of research in marine fisheries and mariculture (role of CMFRI)." *CMFRI Special Publication* 67 (1997): 1-35.

³ *ibid*

⁴ "Ministry of Foreign Affairs." n.d. Gov.Bd. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://mofa.gov.bd/site/page/8c5b2a3f-9873-4f27-8761-2737db83c2ec/OCEAN/BLUE-ECONOMY--FOR-BANGLADESH>.

⁵ "Promoting Climate Smart Agriculture in the Coastal Belt of Bangladesh." n.d. Aci-Bd.Com. Accessed September 15, 2020. <http://aci-bd.com/research-development/promoting-climate-smart-agriculture-in-the-coastal-belt-of-bangladesh.html>.

the area is increasing with the steady increase in population. Therefore, to provide secure livelihood in the coastal zones, building resilience for this cultivation system is highly important. Bangladesh plans to develop a coastal agro-ecosystem stewardship strategy⁶ that will cover all five dimensions, such as social, economic, ecological, physical, and institutional to mitigate the COVID-19's effect on coastal agriculture.

On the other hand, Bangladesh has a total of 166,000 sq. km. area of water including the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Bay of Bengal. According to the Department of Fisheries, there are about 255 trawlers, 67669 mechanized and non-mechanized boats engaged in fishing.⁷ In the year 2017-18 total fish production from Marine sources was 6.55 lac metric MT.

Environmental Sustainability

Climate vulnerability is a looming challenge that has the potential to increase maritime migration, degrade coastal welfare and undermine the potential of the blue economy. Bangladesh is geographically exposed to a multitude of adverse impacts of climate change, due to its geographical location, in the delta of three of the world's biggest rivers, and its flat, low-lying deltaic topography.⁸ It is predicted that climate change will create barriers to future poverty reduction and reverse many of the important socio-economic gains made by the country throughout years. Sea level rise will affect the vast coastal area and low-lying river zones of Bangladesh. The livelihoods of coastal communities and the natural environment of the coastal zones will be severely affected by the much anticipated sea-level rise. The mangrove forest the Sundarbans is the part of most important ecosystem of the country, as the survival of 10 million people depends on the forests for their livelihood. People will be forced to move out of their homes, take refuge on drylands, and change their livelihood. This will result in a complete change of their way of life.⁹

⁶ Roy, Ranjan, Animesh K. Gain, Narimah Samat, Margot Hurlbert, Mou Leong Tan, and Ngai Weng Chan. "Resilience of coastal agricultural systems in Bangladesh: Assessment for agroecosystem stewardship strategies." *Ecological Indicators* 106 (2019): 105525.

⁷ "মৎস্যঅধিদপ্তর." n.d.Gov.Bd. Accessed September 16, 2020. <http://fisheries.gov.bd/site/page/43ce3767-3981-4248-99bd-d321b6e3a7e5/->.

⁸ Cell, Climate Change. "Climate change and Bangladesh." *Department of Environment, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh* (2007).

⁹ Sarwar, MdGolamMahabub. "Impacts of sea level rise on the coastal zone of Bangladesh." See http://static.weadapt.org/placemarks/files/225/golam_sarwar.pdf (2005).

Renewable Energy Production

Recent survey researchers have discovered large natural gas and oil reserves at the Bay of Bengal. Researchers concur that the bay holds more oil reserves in the Asia-Pacific region than any other region. Both China and India have shown interest in oil exploration and mining in the Bay of Bengal. On the other hand, marine-based renewable energy such as wind, wave and tidal range and currents offers a significant potential to contribute to low-carbon energy supplies for regions with appropriate coastal features.¹⁰ The energy scenario has changed worldwide due to the pandemic. In the midst of lockdown, most of the countries shifted their energy mix towards renewable energy. The low operating costs of renewable energy, as well as a decline in demand for electricity, facilitated this shift.¹¹ Like the other coastal countries, Bangladesh too can alleviate its energy deficiency by investing on renewable energy resources. Other renewable energy producing machinery, such as wave energy converters may help to reduce wave attack and generate electricity. The renewable marine energy sector can provide viable work opportunities; particularly for maritime communities that used to rely on fisheries. There is a need for incentives such as grants, subsidies and tax credits to encourage private investments in the large, expensive infrastructure that is required to move from small prototypes to pilot plants.¹²

Latest Development: Bangladesh's role in the Indo-Pacific Strategy

The USA considers Bangladesh as a key partner to protect and enhance a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region that respects principles such as peaceful resolution of disputes, freedom of navigation, an open and transparent investment environment and strong and responsible institutions. Bangladesh shares many of these goals of building a more prosperous and secure interconnected region, and with its strategic location and fast-growing economy, it is poised to play a central role in the Indo-Pacific strategy. In 2018 the USA allocated USD 40\$ million in additional security assistance to help Bangladesh improve its coastal radar system, modernise

¹⁰ "Ministry of Foreign Affairs." n.d.Gov.Bd. Accessed September 13, 2020. <https://mofa.gov.bd/site/page/8c5b2a3f-9873-4f27-8761-2737db83c2ec/OCEAN/BLUE-ECONOMY--FOR-BANGLADESH>.

¹¹ Ashrafee, Firoza, "Energy Security in the COVID-19 Era", *Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies*, Accessed September 16, 2020. <https://bipss.org.bd/energy-security-in-the-covid-19-era/>

¹² Hossain, Mohammad Faruque, S. Hossain, and Muhammad Jasim Uddin. "Renewable energy: Prospects and trends in Bangladesh." *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 70 (2017): 44-49.

and enhance its patrol boat fleets, and provide training and support of expanded maritime interdiction as part of their Bay of Bengal initiative.

Conclusion

The strategic foresight of seeking opportunities amid difficult times, even in a a pandemic, will determine the strategic adaptability of a growing economy like Bangladesh. Therefore, every aspect of the economy and the country's strategic goals have to be reappraised in regards to the pandemic. This paper contributes to providing a framework of this much needed assessment and a set of policy-oriented recommendations. Bangladesh has immense potential of extracting the most out of its maritime resources and devising a contemporary and regionally inclusive maritime strategy. It should maintain a policy level vigilance to tailor its priorities and future trajectories in this regard. A much needed coordinated policy reshuffle will pave the way to achieve the strategic success in theatre of the Bay of Bengal in the years to come.

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