

POWER STRUGGLE OVER INDIAN OCEAN: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR BANGLADESH

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INTRODUCTION

Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century; the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters.

Alfred Thayer Mahan¹

The Indian Ocean - a centre of human progress, a great arena in which many races have mingled, fought and traded for thousands of years, has indisputably become a strategic pivot of the present day global affairs.² In fact, its geostrategic and economic importance to the world at large and to the littoral states in particular is much more pronounced today than what it was before. However, like in the past, especially during the Cold War era, the warm waters of the Indian Ocean remains as a fulcrum of power struggle among the contending big global players. Due to the conflicting interests of the principal stakeholders of the Indian Ocean Realm (IOR) especially USA, China and India, a new great game is, thereby, emerging over the Indian Ocean. Under this evolving geo-strategic scenario, the littoral countries of the IOR are becoming uncomfortable in adjusting their positions. With that, the vital maritime interests and security of the littoral sea-dependent countries like Bangladesh are also becoming vulnerable due to volatile situation over the region.

As a maritime nation, Bangladesh has a great stake in the stability of the Indian Ocean. Her 92% of foreign trade is carried over through the sea routes;³ her energy security is mostly dependent on the uninterrupted oil supply over the Indian Ocean and future exploration and exploitation of her sea area. Having so much of sea dependency, Bangladesh has genuine concern over the ominous sign of power struggle over the Indian Ocean. Moreover, due to existing global and regional political setting and geographical location, Bangladesh significantly carries strategic importance to all the three major contending powers.⁴ Conversely, to ensure security from external threats and interference, to maintain internal stability and to continue ongoing economic progress, Bangladesh needs to actively engage and develop balanced relationship with

1. Kumar, Narnder 2011, *Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region*, KW Publishers, New Delhi, p. 13.
2. Absar, Captain M N (L) psc BN 2011, *USA, China and India in the Indian Ocean: Implications for Bangladesh*, National Defence College, Dhaka, p.9.
3. Over View of Chittagong Port Authority, 2013.
4. Lecture at NDC by H.E. Dan Mozena, Ambassador of USA on 'Contemporary USA: Changing Global Role in 21st Century' on 05 August 2013 and lecture at NDC by H.E Mr Pankaj Saran High Commissioner of India on Contemporary India - Its Foreign Policy and Security Strategy: Implications for Bangladesh on August 2013.

all these partners of progress. Playing any wrong card to any of the big players might severely affect the national security and overall interest of the country. On the other hand, judicious manoeuvre through this uncharted water might open up new avenues of opportunities for Bangladesh. It is, therefore, of paramount importance for Bangladesh to study the ongoing phenomenon of big powers' struggle over the Indian Ocean vis-à-vis national security concerns and interests of the country.

Indian Ocean – A Strategic Overview

Indian Ocean is geo-strategically important because the industrial hub of the world lies to its east; the world's largest concentration of oil reserves (80%) lies to its west; and it is a major maritime highway connecting Middle East, East Asia and Africa with Europe and the Americas. 40% of global seaborne commerce moves across this ocean.⁵ The astonishing economic growth of China, the steady rise of India's trade and productivity, increasing exports of raw materials from the littoral developing countries have also totally recalibrated the Indian Ocean's strategic importance to the world.⁶ Moreover, the physical configuration of the Indian Ocean provides certain choke points or narrow channels which are critical to world economic stability as huge amounts of oil and trade pass through them. Over 50,000 vessels transit the Strait of Malacca per year and over 3,000 oil tankers pass through the Suez Canal annually.⁷ Aside from the continued strategic relevance of the well-known and long-acknowledged chokepoints, vital terminals and ports, and primary Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), certain "Evolving Strategic Maritime Regions" (ESMRs) within the IOR viz. the East African Coast, the Mid-section of the Red Sea, the Northern Gulf of Oman, the Bay of Bengal and the Timor Sea are likely to emerge and develop into important strategic foci in the coming years due to their immense resource potentials.⁸

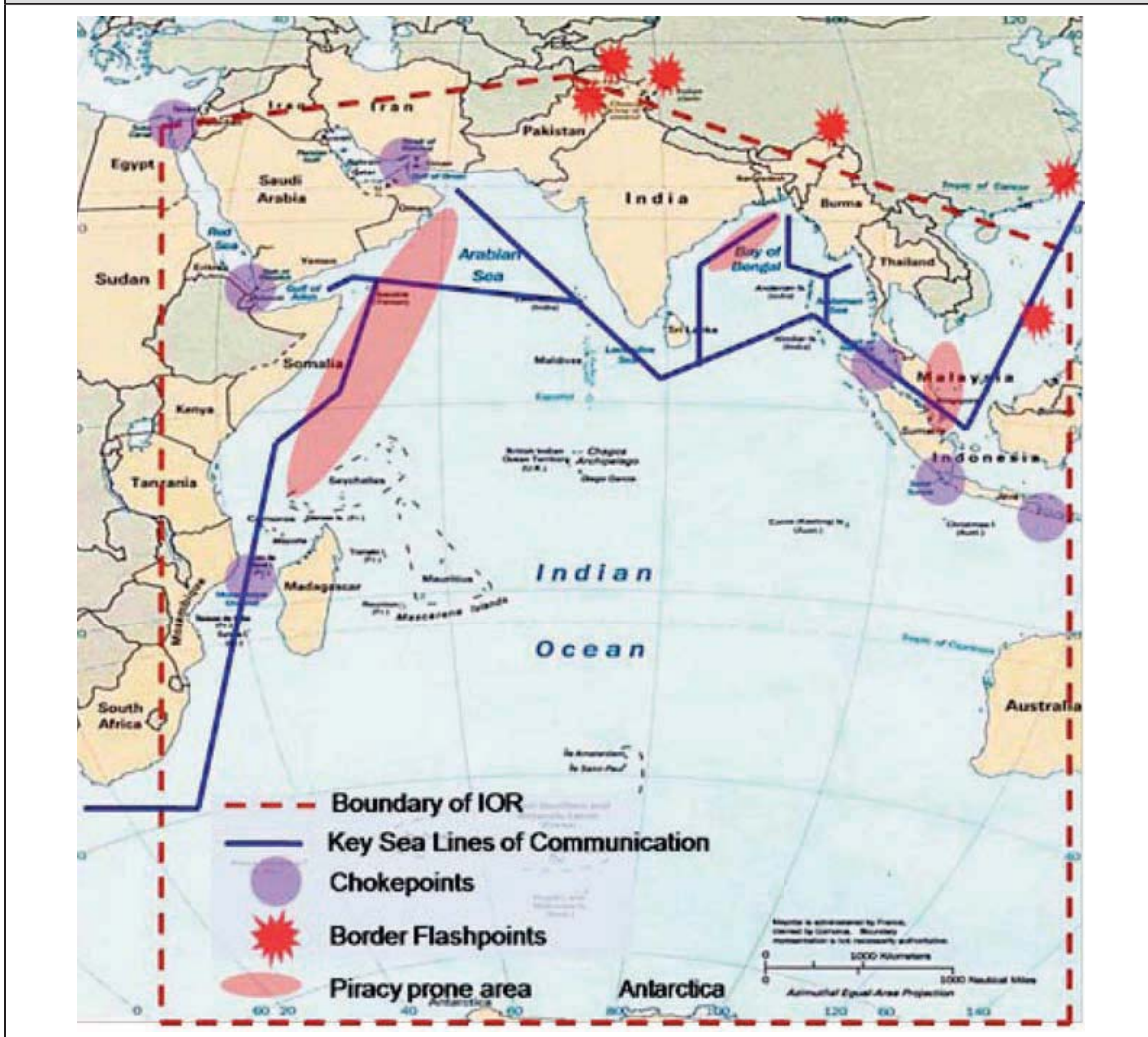
5. Khan, op. cit.

6. Michel, op. cit.

7. Absar, op. cit., p. 10.

8. Michel, op. cit.

Figure 1: General geographical layout of IOR⁹



Apart from above, the IOR is also becoming very important for the global political stability. There are two declared nuclear powers (India and Pakistan) are operating in this region; with Iran at the threshold of acquiring nuclear weapons in near future. More worryingly, as good as 8 states of the IOR are seemingly at risk to become failed states.¹⁰ To make the situation worse, arms race in the region is also getting currency;¹¹ the Red sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and adjoining the South China Sea have all been under heavy militarization over the years. In no point in history had the Indian Ocean seen such large numbers of warships at one time.¹²

9. 'Map of the Indian Ocean', available at <https://www.google.com.bd/?gws_rd=cr&ei=PxlUrSaCYiShQfgjoDACw#q=map+of+indian+ocean> (accessed on 8 July 2013)

10. Kumar, op. cit., p. 15.

11. 'Annual Defence Report 2012', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 12 December.

12. Michel, op. cit.

Given the overall geo-strategic and geo-economic scenario, it appears that the IOR is developing into an area of both ferociously guarded sovereignty with fast-growing economies and militaries, and astounding interdependence and cooperation due to its immense potentiality of resources, and global and regional trade and commerce. Under such paradoxical situation, Indian Ocean is emerging as the vortex of world affairs. As such, major stake holders of the IOR especially the 'Three' prominent players of the emerging world, the USA, China and India, are contemplating their future strategies in line with their vested interests over this fascinating ocean. And that phenomenon is leading to a renewed power struggle for dominance over the placid waters of the Indian Ocean.

DIMENSIONS OF POWER STRUGGLE OVER INDIAN OCEAN: THREE PLAYERS, THREE INTERESTS

Indian Ocean for the Indians

India's 'Hormuz Dilemma', i.e. its dependence on imports passing through the Hormuz Strait which is close to the shores of Pakistan's Makran coast, where the Chinese is developing a strategic deep-water ports, is making India nervous. The critical concern of India is, however, not only economic security but also 'strategic autonomy' which suggests Indian goal of achieving the super power status and opposing the presence of extra regional powers in the Indian Ocean. Because, India thinks presence of extra regional powers creates tension in the region which is detrimental to its sensitive interests. For this reason, India is planning to spend almost US \$ 45 billion behind naval build-up over the next 20 years. The Indian Navy (IN), with its 155 warships, is already one of the world's largest, and it expects to add three nuclear-powered submarines and three aircraft carriers to its arsenal by 2015, making it a Blue Water Navy in true sense.¹³ Indian naval fleets are, therefore, destined to "Enter East" into the South China Sea and the Pacific, "Exit West" through the Red Sea and Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, and "Go South" toward the Cape of Good Hope and the Atlantic in pursuit of their national maritime ambition.¹⁴

Enter the Dragon

As India is trying to establish its dominance over the Indian Ocean, China, being not very far from its shores and whose waters wash the coasts of many of her friends, cannot afford to remain unconcerned. Therefore, the Director of the General Logistic Department of the Chinese Navy exclaimed, "we can no longer accept the Indian Ocean as only an ocean of the Indians."¹⁵ Actually, the prime consideration animating Chinese

13. Sheikh, Salman Rafi, 'Evolving Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean,' available at <<http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Evolving-Strategic-Competition-in-the-Indian-Ocean.htm>> accessed on 6 July 2013).

14. Holmes, James R, Andrew C Winner and Toshi Yoshihara 2009, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, Routledge, London, p. 134.

15. Pant, Harsh V, 'China's Naval Expansion in the Indian Ocean and India-China Rivalry', available at <<http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Evolving-Strategic-Competition-in-the-Indian-Ocean.htm>> accessed on 6 July 2013).

interests in the Indian Ocean is its concern over the security of energy and overseas trade. A disruption of the sea routes across the Indian Ocean may severely harm China's economy as billions of dollars a year in trade occurs between China and Europe, the Middle East and East Africa.¹⁶ Like 'Hormuz Dilemma' of India, China is also facing the 'Malacca Dilemma'.¹⁷ Because, China's too much dependence on the Strait of Malacca has brought a potential threat to her energy security. It is no exaggeration to say that whoever controls the Strait of Malacca will also have a stranglehold on the energy route of China. Under such geo-strategic constraint, the Chinese government is trying to fully or partly bypass that strait by transporting oil and other energy products via roads and pipelines through the friendly ports of the Indian Ocean. The idea has eventually prompted China to devise its much discussed 'String of Pearls' strategy (Figure 2).¹⁸

The 'String of Pearls' strategy consists of setting up a series of ports in friendly countries along the Indian Ocean's northern seaboard, like ports in Gwadar and Pasni of Pakistan; a container port, a bunker system and an oil refinery at Hambantota of Sri Lanka; a container port in Bangladesh at Chittagong;¹⁹ and a port facility at Kyauk Phyu of Myanmar.²⁰ Besides, China is cultivating its relations with the countries of the region through aid, trade and defense agreements and cooperation. The Chinese government is also envisioning a canal across the Isthmus of Kra in Thailand to link the Indian Ocean to China's Pacific coast. This ground-breaking project would further tip Asia's balance of power in China's favour by giving her burgeoning navy and commercial fleet easy access to a vast oceanic continuum stretching all the way from East Africa to Japan and the Korean Peninsula.²¹

japanfocus.org/-Harsh_V_-Pant/3353> (accessed on 28 June 2013).

16. Payne, Jeffrey 2013, 'Finding a Balance in the Indian Ocean Region', *PacNet*, Pacific Forum CSIS, Number 58, Honolulu, Hawaii, July 25, available at <<http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1358.pdf>> (accessed on 19 August 2013).

17. Sheikh, op. cit.

18. A "String of Pearls" strategy is a strategic move that involves establishing a series of nodes of military and economic power throughout a region. Each node is a "pearl" in the string, enhancing the overall power of the parent nation.

19. Pant, Harsh V, 'China's Naval Expansion in the Indian Ocean and India-China Rivalry', available at <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Harsh_V_-Pant/3353> (accessed on 28 June 2013).

20. Nazemroaya, op. cit.

21. Sheikh, op.cit.

Figure 2: Chinese “String of Pearls”



USA – the Cold War Specialist

For the most part of the recent history, the USA was the only country to deploy the biggest fleet and to show the most permanent presence in the Indian Ocean.²² The USA has to maintain its military presence for control of the Straits of Malacca that enables it to seize geo-political superiority in the region, restrict rise of local powers, and control the flow of the world’s energy. And, that is the rationale of her maintaining military bases in Diego Garcia, Qatar, Singapore, and searching for new military ties with the littorals.

But, today, the biggest challenge the USA is facing in the world politics is in the Indian Ocean where both China and India are emerging as the major maritime and economic powers and posing challenge to the USA’s many decades long hegemony.²³ In fact, over the last 30 years, the rate of Chinese economic growth had been almost miraculous, averaging 8% growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per annum.²⁴ Statistics at Table 1 shows that Chinese GDP is expected to overtake that of the USA by 2025.

22. Ibid.

23. Sheikh, op. cit.

24. Absar, op. cit., p. 16.

Table 1: Projections of GDP, 2005-30, China vs USA²⁵

Year	China (US \$ Trillions)	USA (US \$ Trillions)
2005	9	12
2010	14	17
2015	21	22
2020	30	28
2025	44	37
2030	63	49
Source: Author		

But the USA's present 'Chinese Dilemma' is that it cannot prevent or block supply to China since it would dampen world economy, neither can it altogether sideline Chinese military especially its burgeoning navy. Against such adverse reality, the USA is trying to expand its military presence across Asia and the Pacific and strengthen ties with its traditional allies.²⁶ In that direction, an American grand design of 'Containment Strategy'²⁷ is already underway to check China's expansion and sphere of influence especially over the IOR (Figure 3).

25. John, Ikenberry G, 'The Rise of China and the Future of the West', *Foreign Affairs*, 00157120, Jan/Feb2008, Vol. 87, Issue 1, available at <https://www.google.com.bd/?gws_rd=cr&ei=xCpaUtvKFcW00QXk04DwDg#q=the+rise+of+china+and+future+of+the+west+foreign+affairs+g+jhon+Ikenberry> (accessed on 13 October 2013).

26. 'Indian Ocean The Focus Of New Rivalries', ABC Radio Australia, available at <<http://www.cnas.org/node/6523>> (accessed on 2 October 2013).

27. An outline of the USA's new containment strategy to curb Beijing's geo-political expansion is: housing US bases in the allied countries on which America can rely on; hostile countries to be checked; ambivalent or neutral states to be aware of; and most importantly, affiliating the strategic countries which can come in help for Chinese counteroffensive but aren't part of the US strategy yet. Available at <<http://temi.repubblica.it/limes-heartland/how-america-wants-to-check-chinas-expansion/897>> (accessed on 10 October 2013).

Figure 3: US containment strategy to check Chinese expansion



Bangladesh vis-à-vis Strategic Calculus of the Contending Powers

India – The Hegemon

The political relationship between the Bangladesh and India has passed through cycles of hiccups over the last forty two years, because of India's 'hegemonic bilateralism', its lack of fairness and generosity toward Bangladesh.²⁸ Despite that, India's present strategic calculation on Bangladesh carries special significance to the national interests of both the countries; as the renowned Indian security analyst C. Raja Mohan said "Relations with Bangladesh are too important to be left to traditional ways It is a large market for Indian goods and has a huge bearing on India's security and development challenges in the North East."²⁹

It is to be noted that, geographically, Bangladesh's location is a strategic wedge between mainland India and Northeastern seven states of the Indian Union that are close to the Chinese border. Each of these states is land-locked and has shorter route to the sea through Bangladesh. Additionally, Bangladesh carries significant importance because of the complex geo-strategic scenario that has emerged due to India's alliance with the USA to contain China and its rivalry with Pakistan for regional supremacy.

28. Banerjee, Major General Dipankar (Retd.) 2000, *Security in South Asia*, Manas Publications, New Delhi, p.67.

29. Lecture Mrs. Rokia, op. cit.

Chinese Counterweight

China's relationship with independent Bangladesh has developed on the basis of strategic convenience and calculation ab initio. By now, both the parties have signed a plethora of bilateral agreements that range from economic engagements, soft loans, social contacts, cultural exchanges, academic interactions and infrastructure development.³⁰ In military front, China and Bangladesh have signed a "Defence Cooperation Agreement" In 2002, which covers military training, defence production, and military sales at 'friendship' prices. Currently, China is known to be the largest and most important provider of military hardware and training to the Bangladesh's armed forces.³¹

In economic front, Bangladesh is now the third largest trade partner of China in South Asia.³² The proposed "Chittagong-Kunming Road and Railway Link" and the Sonadia deep seaport, if materialized, will boost the trade relation to a significant level. These road and port facilities would also provide China a cheaper alternative for shipping goods to its western neighbours because this road, rail and port system would cut the trip to Indian Ocean by thousands of kilometres. Moreover, this would permit China to bypass US-patrolled Malacca Strait.³³ In return, Bangladesh is expecting to capitalize the huge economic potentials of China and might be thinking to exploit its political, strategic and economic influences as a counterweight against India and the USA.³⁴

USA-The Balancer

Today, Bangladesh, which was once called by the US administration a basket case,³⁵ carries significant geo-strategic and geo-economic importance to the US.³⁶ At present, America's visible interests in Bangladesh include promoting development, trade and energy, democracy support, countering militant Islamists, and working together in peace operations.³⁷ There are, however, invisibles in the strategic calculation of the US in regard to Bangladesh. Because, Bangladesh has emerged on the strategic radar of the US as it is in quest for new strategic partners in the region to grip with the changed geostrategic and geopolitical realities in South Asia.

30. Rahman, Tareque Shamsur and Mohammad Jasim Uddin, 'Bangladesh and China: a Review of 35-Year Relations', available at <<http://www.biliabd.org/article%20intl/Vol-15/Tareque%20Shamsur%20R%20and%20M%20Jasim%20Uddin.pdf>> (accessed on 16 August 2013).

31. Lecture by Mrs. Rokia, op. cit.

32. 'Bangladesh China Relations', available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh%E2%80%93China_relations> (accessed on 1 August 2013).

33. 'China Bangladesh Overland Trade Route', available at <http://www.gokunming.com/en/blog/item/2824/china_bangladesh_to_build_overland_trade_route> accessed on 17 August 2013.

34. Dutta, Piyali, 'India-Bangladesh Relations', *IPCS* Special Report, available at <http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/SR97.pdf> (accessed on 17 August 2013.)

35. It is widely known that the then US Foreign Secretary Henry Kissinger passed the derogatory remark about newly independent Bangladesh as a 'basket case'. But it is now claimed that it was not Mr. Kissinger who passed that remark but some other junior official of his administration (Lecture Dan Mozena, op. cit.).

36. Lecture by Dan Mozena, op. cit.

37. Vaughn, Bruce, 'Bangladesh: Political and Strategic Developments and U.S. Interests, available at <<http://www.fas.org/srgp/crs/row/R41194.pdf>> (accessed on 17 August 2013).

Actually, it is now a strong American policy imperative to loosen Myanmar and Bangladesh from their strategic linkages with China. Further, for successful implementation of the US strategic pivot to Asia and its corollary of China Containment Strategy, the American security architecture has to incorporate Myanmar and Bangladesh in its ambit.³⁸ The USA is, therefore, trying to ensure its naval presence in the Bay of Bengal and eyeing to forge strategic partnership with Bangladesh with renewed vigour.³⁹ On the other hand, Bangladesh considers the USA as a reliable partner for her development, and has cultivated friendship with it over the years in a fruitful manner. Moreover, it seems that Bangladesh tends to use the USA to ensure fair play of both India and China.

Summary of the Findings

From the above discourse, it is evident that all the three contending powers will remain as crucial partners of progress for Bangladesh. She is, therefore, expecting to capitalize their huge economic potentials for her national development. She might also wish to exploit their political and strategic influences in her favour. On the other side, all the contending powers are having huge stakes in Bangladesh under the evolving geo-strategic scenario of the IOR in general and South Asia in particular. Because of this, they are now eyeing on Bangladesh to affiliate her into their respective strategic game. But the question is “What implications Bangladesh might face if she fails to accommodate the vested interests of these big powers”. The question leads the study to the next discourse on the potential threat dimensions from the contending powers and options for Bangladesh in order to ensure safe journey through the uncharted waters.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR BANGLADESH

Use of Physical Force

At this point of human history, it is widely perceived that military/physical threat to any country is remote under the prevailing international order. On the contrary, general wisdom suggests that in this volatile world ‘uncertainty is the only certainty,’ and ‘change is the only constant.’⁴⁰ Given this philosophical insight in regard to the interstate relationships, however remote and hypothetical the threat to the physical security of a country may seem today, there is no guarantee that such a threat would not become real.⁴¹ It would, therefore, be too naive to conclude that possibility of physical aggressions specially against a small state like Bangladesh has gone from this world for ever.

38. ‘Myanmar And Bangladesh In US’ China-Containment Strategy – Analysis’, October 2012, available at <<http://transmissionsmedia.com/myanmar-and-bangladesh-in-us-china-containment-strategy-analysis/>> (accessed 16 August 2013).

39. Chauhan, Kirti Singh 2012, *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh*, Kaveri Books, New Delhi, p. 99.

40. Lecture by Mr Pankaj Saran, op. cit.

41. Osmay, Mufleh R and Muzzaffer Ahmad 2003, *Security in the Twenty First Century A Bangladesh Perspective*, Academic Press and Publisher Ltd, Dhaka, p. 105.

Threat to Political Sovereignty

Sovereignty in the modern world means the power of a state to do everything necessary to govern itself. But under the banner of the much debated globalised regime, the political sovereignty of the small states specially their independent policy making authority are coming under serious threat. Today, the global and regional neo-colonialist powers are assaulting the political autonomy and sovereignty of the small states through a new exploitation mechanism “neo-colonialism,” the essence of which is to direct and control or even punish a country through stringent economic and financial control irrespective of social, cultural, environmental, developmental or any other very foundational cost of the victim country.⁴² Similarly, contending big powers are now enjoying nearly unfettered scope of influencing independent policy making of the countries like Bangladesh.

Playing Game of Chicken: Sponsoring War Within

In this interconnecting and interdependent world, internal peace and stability of any country much depends on the happenings beyond its national boundary. Surge of “Arab Spring” across North Africa and the Middle East is the latest testimony of this new phenomenon. Moreover, many of the internal unrests are, allegedly, engineered by the external powers to realize their vested interests in the victim countries. Ongoing happenings in Egypt and Syria can be attributed to this new trickery of international politics. Accordingly, due to fragile and weak foundation of political and governance system, Bangladesh remains vulnerable to the big powers’ game of chicken.⁴³ They may ignite internal political unrests and discord into violence by fuelling feuds among the rival political parties. They may sponsor financial chaos and social unrest in order to put pressure on the government to adopt policy in favour of them.

Threat to Maritime Security

Bangladesh has critical dependency on the sea uses. Her 92% of foreign trade is carried over the sea and over 75% of it is carried by foreign ships that make the country’s economy extremely vulnerable.⁴⁴ Any disturbance or interference on her Sea Lines of Communication, especially with the petroleum imports, will bring the nation on the knees in no time; any interruption on the economic activities especially in fishing and energy activities would cause serious damage to the national growth. It is to be noted from the previous findings that the Bay of Bengal is likely to

42. Uddin, Lieutenant Commander Mohammad Zohir, psc, 2003, *The Politics of Globalisation of Trade – A Crafty Road Toward Neo-colonialism*, Mirpur Papers, Issue Number 9, Defence Services Command and Staff College, Dhaka, Pp. 110-111.

43. The phrase game of chicken is a metaphor for a situation where two parties engage in a showdown and faces collision course where one must swerve or both may die. However, though they have nothing to gain out of the situation, but only pride stops them from backing down. The terminology is most prevalent in political science and economics. Available at <<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=1005122904584>> (accessed on 12 October 2013).

44. Alam, Commodore Mohammad Khurshed, (C), ndc, psc, BN (Retd) 2004, *Bangladesh’s Maritime Challenges in the 21st Century*, Pathak Shamabesh Book, Dhaka, p. 474.

become one of the contesting grounds of the ESMR of Indian Ocean because of its huge resource potentials. From that consideration, any military confrontation among the rival powers in and around the Bay of Bengal or over the Indian Ocean, or any deliberate interference on the SLOC by any of them is likely to strike the very lifeline of Bangladesh.

POLICY OPTIONS FOR BANGLADESH

Transforming Geo-vitality into Geo-opportunity

Due to the ‘tyranny of geography’⁴⁵ and India dominated geo-political realities, Dhaka had little room of geo-strategic manoeuvre in the past. Thereby, Bangladesh’s geo-strategic location and its importance in regional and extra-regional politics were considered to be somewhat minimal.⁴⁶ But, today, due to the revolutionary concept of physical and information connectivity, Bangladesh is no more considered to be constrained by its geography. Rather, now Bangladesh stands crucially important in this intertwined global village because of her geographical location. She lies in the hub of South Asia, a region that is surrounded by the Middle East, Eastern-Asia, Central-Asia, South-eastern Asia and the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh, therefore, enjoys enormous intra-regional and inter-regional communication potentials.⁴⁷

Given the huge potentials of becoming a subregional and regional communication hub and geo-strategic and geo-political pivot, Bangladesh would now require to turn her geo-vitality into geo-opportunity. Toward this end, Bangladesh should re-conceptualize her security concerns, and go beyond the banal discourses of linearity, dualism and dichotomies.⁴⁸ Keeping aside hesitancy, Bangladesh should now take aggressive steps to bring connectivity philosophy into reality and make her a real hub of inter-regional and intra-regional communications.

The steps should include connecting with the Asian high way, connecting with the Asian oil and gas pipeline, and connecting with the proposed Chittagong-Kunming road and rail network, directly or through Myanmar. At sea front, Bangladesh should develop and open its ports facilities to the sub-regional and regional countries. Bangladesh should also develop and expand its airport facilities and ease visa processing to make it a chosen destination for the business tourists and air transits. It is also the time for Bangladesh to positively consider offering road transit to India’s North-eastern provinces keeping aside distrust and suspicion. And this global and regional connectivity will create dependency of others on Bangladesh including the contending powers which will in-turn help insure

45. Bangladesh is surrounded by India from three different sides, with an outlet through the Bay of Bengal, access through which is also heavily dependent on India. This may be termed as the ‘tyranny of geography’ which undermines the national security of Bangladesh.

46. Banerjee, op. cit., p. 154.

47. Lecture by Mrs. Rokia, op. cit.

48. Absar, op. cit., p. 54.

security of the country. After all, connectivity is seen to be the best guarantor of peace and stability in the new emerging world.

Balancing not Bandwagoning

For insuring national security, theorists of international relations specially the influential Realist school of thought concludes that the only viable strategy available to the smaller and weaker states is ‘bandwagoning’.⁴⁹ According to this concept, smaller states generally seek to achieve their security by appeasing any stronger power or coalition. But, Bangladesh being a self-respecting nation cannot opt for this type of derogative policy of appeasement with anyone. Rather, given the propitious geo-political and geo-strategic environment, Bangladesh should opt for an alternative strategy of ‘balancing’.⁵⁰

To achieve that end, Bangladesh has to take into confidence all the three powers as important partner of progress. And, therefore, should not declare her foreign policy toward any particular direction, like ‘Look East’, ‘Look West’ etc. Bangladesh should not also compartmentalize her strategic and economic engagements with the contending powers as suggested by many, like leasing out energy sector to the USA, deep sea port to China or trade and transit to India etc. Rather, to achieve balancing, Bangladesh should opt for multi-partnership consortium in dealing with the strategic issues, resources, projects and facilities. However, in doing so, due attention should be given to maintain transparency, openness and multi-partite communication in the engagements. Proactive diplomacy, both at track-one and track-two level, should be vigorously pursued while settling important issues.

Multilateralism: Cultivating International Support

Today, Bangladesh's security and overall national interests can better be served by its active involvement in multinational institutions like the OIC, BIMSTEC, SAARC, NAM, D-8, Commonwealth, WTO, IMF, EU etc.⁵¹ It should also try to establish meaningful engagement with ASEAN, African Union, and other regional and sub-regional forums and countries around the globe. Bangladesh should continue to actively participate in international peace-keeping and peace-making efforts and should seek opportunities to become a worthy member of the UN organs and agencies. The strategy of Multilateralism would give number of dividends to Bangladesh – firstly, it will provide global connectivity; secondly, it will help shape world opinion in her favour during confrontation with any party; thirdly, it will provide leverage in negotiating any crisis with anyone; and fourthly, it will help resist any big power to coerce Bangladesh.

49. Pons, Juan M 2010, *Small States, Hegemony and the Security Dilemma: Panama's Quest for Autonomy in the 21st Century*, University of Miami, USA, p. 21. Available at <[http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1950&context=oa_dissertations&sei-redir=1&referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com.bd%](http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1950&context=oa_dissertations&sei-redir=1&referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com.bd%3A)> (accessed on 10 July 2013).

50. Karim, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

51. Karim, op. cit., p. 34.

Modernisation of the Armed Forces

From military point of view, Bangladesh should rely on her own resources and actions to assure her survival and security. In this context, famous Kautilya's theory "societies that want to live in peace should be always prepared for war"⁵² seems still relevant for Bangladesh. Accordingly, Bangladesh has to maintain an effective military capability through continued modernization of its armed forces. However, due to poor economic base, Bangladesh cannot have a large standing armed forces; it should, therefore, have a core standing military with the provision of a large reserve. The core group should be equipped with state-of-the-art platforms, arms, equipment and techniques. Such a capability along with a 'People's War'⁵³ concept will dissuade any of the big powers from using military force against Bangladesh as that would outweigh the benefits being expected out of the adventure.

CONCLUSION

The prophetic observation of Alfred T. Mahan is proving to be true. Because, the centre of gravity of global geo-politics has shifted from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and the IOR has become the strategic heartland of the 21st century. Today, Indian Ocean has emerged as an area of extraordinary potential for natural resources, an area crossed by trade routes that are vital to outside powers and to the littorals; an area of conflicts over political and economic interests of the regional and extra-regional powers. And, due to the conflicting interests of the major actors of the contemporary world viz. The USA, China and India, a great power game is now unfolding over the placid waters of the Indian Ocean. Being a littoral of this Ocean and, more importantly, being located close to the vortex of the melee, Bangladesh is supposed to have genuine concern over her security.

As Bangladesh has critical dependency on the contending powers; and maintains strategic partnerships with all of them, this triangular power competition is likely to create strategic dilemma in adjusting her position. Because, playing wrong card to any of the giants might severely affect the national security and overall interest of the country. However, Bangladesh can get through these difficult challenges by the application of wisdom, realism and prudence in developing her policy and strategy. If Bangladesh can capitalize her geo-strategic importance by connecting with the intra-regional and inter-regional communication network and sell her geo-vitality to the contending parties in a crafty way, she will be able to turn the situation rather in her favour. For this Bangladesh will need to delicately balance her relationships with all the three powers without bandwagoning anyone and continue to pursue multilateralism in a comprehensive manner

52. Holmes, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, op. cit., p. 18.

53. The basic concept of People's War is to maintain the support of the population and draw the enemy deep into the interior where the population will bleed them dry through a mix of mobile warfare and guerrilla warfare. ('People's War', *Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia* [online], available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People's_war> (accessed on 15 Oct 2013).

for wider connectivity across the world. However, as last defence, Bangladesh needs to have its own military means to safeguard her territorial integrity and defend her national sovereignty without looking at any one's mercy.

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