

EVOLVING RIVALRY IN THE BAY OF BENGAL STRATEGY OPTIONS FOR BANGLADESH

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Introduction

Bangladesh is one of those fortunate countries which are not land-locked and have access to the sea. The sea provides for livelihood for the coastal population as well as facilitates easy and cost-effective means for trade and commerce. Shipping is the life blood of Bangladesh economy as more than 90% of our exports and imports are sea borne. Thus, Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) is the lifeline for Bangladesh.

After the settlement of maritime disputes with Myanmar and India respectively, Bangladesh obtained its absolute maritime territory of 118,813 sq-km, 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and an additional area of continental shelf. This has indeed opened a new window of opportunities and a new era of Blue Economy has started in the country.

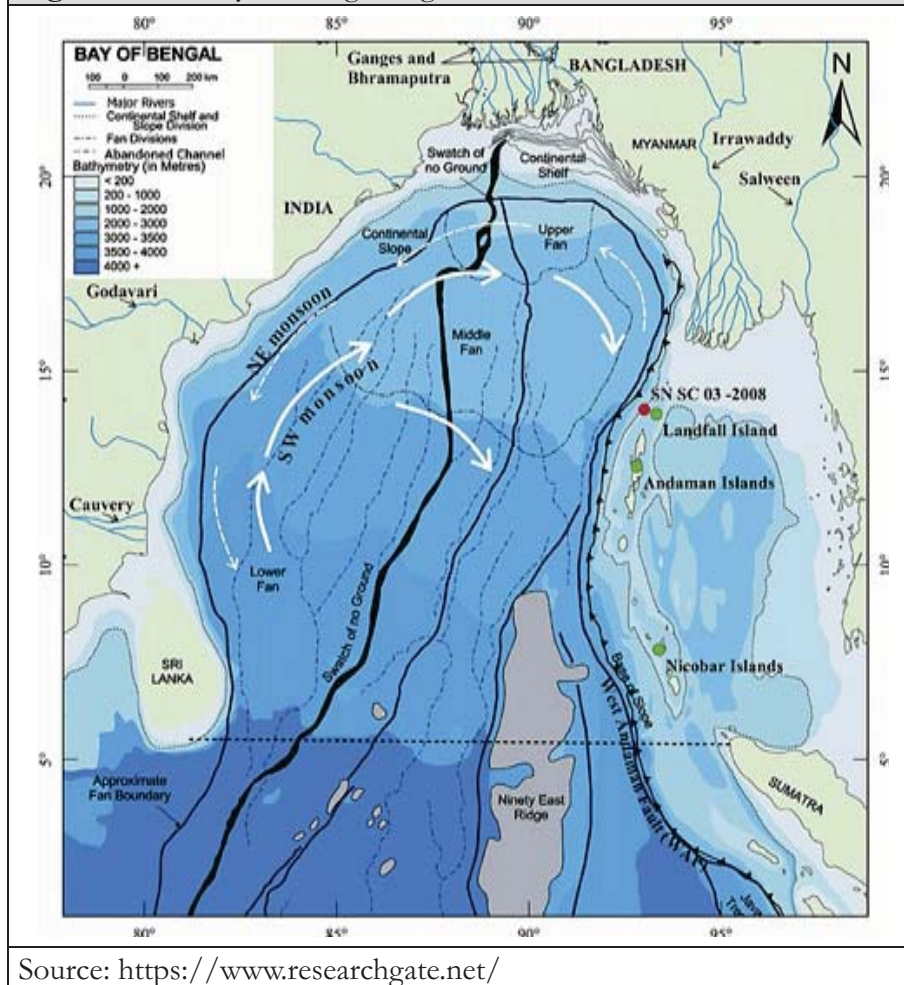
In recent years, clouds of contests and conflicts are appearing in the sky of the Bay. The main contributor to this scenario is the two major regional powers China and India. The USA has also appeared in the scene with an aim to pursue its global strategic interest. Any conflict in the Bay of Bengal (BoB) will seriously affect Bangladesh in terms of its trade, commerce and offshore resource exploration. This paper thus analyses the evolving conflicting scenario in the BoB to examine its effect on Bangladesh and formulate some strategy and policy options.

Geography and Significance of BoB

The Bay of Bengal (BoB) is a large but relatively shallow embayment of the northeastern Indian Ocean (IO). It occupies an area of about 2,173,000

square km having a wide continental shelf in the north and northeastern side and a narrow shelf in the western side along the eastern coast of India, making it the largest bay in the world. It is bordered on the north by the deltaic regions of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, on the east Myanmar Peninsula and Nicobar ridges including Malay Peninsula, and on the west the Indian peninsula and Sri Lanka.

Figure 1: The Bay of Bengal Region

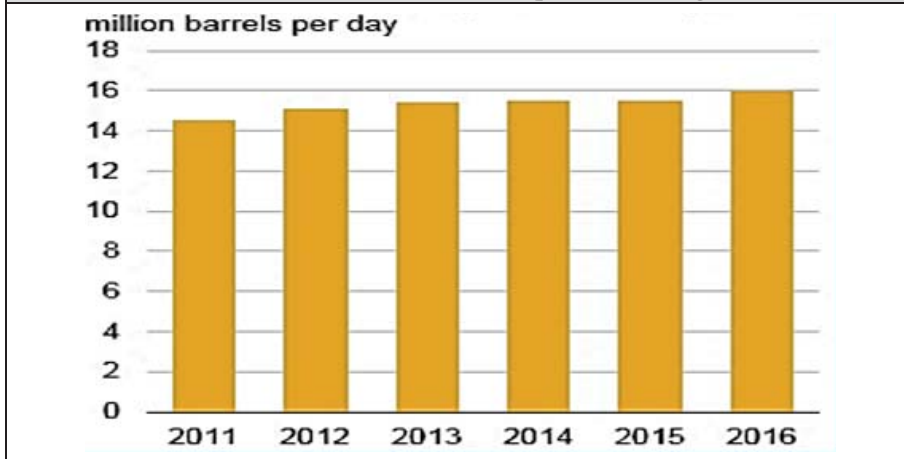


Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/>

The shipping route passing through the BoB is the shortest sea route between Persian Gulf suppliers and the Asian markets like China, Indonesia, Japan,

South Korea, and the Pacific Rim. The Malacca Strait is the main shipping channel linking major economies like India, China, Japan and South Korea with Middle East and Africa. Out of total eight oil trade chokepoints in the world, it is the second-largest after the Strait of Hormuz. Over 50,000 vessels pass through the strait per year, carrying about one-quarter of the world’s traded goods including oil. Thus, maintaining security of the strait is of paramount strategic importance for all the countries of the IO rim including China.

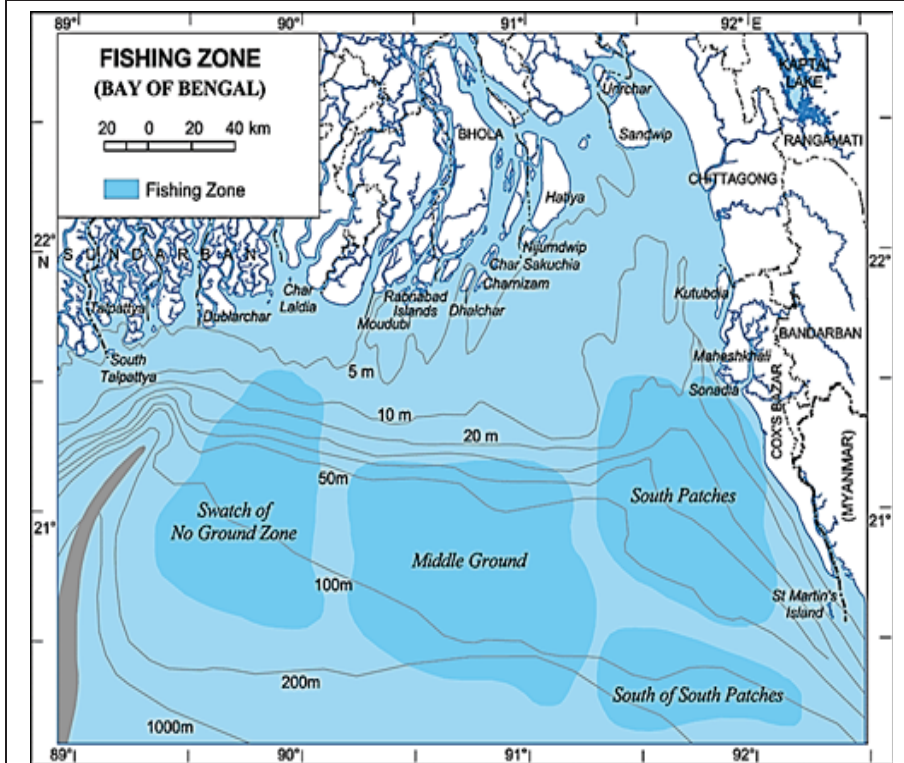
Figure 2: Crude Oil and Petroleum Transported through Malacca Strait



Source: US Energy Information Administration

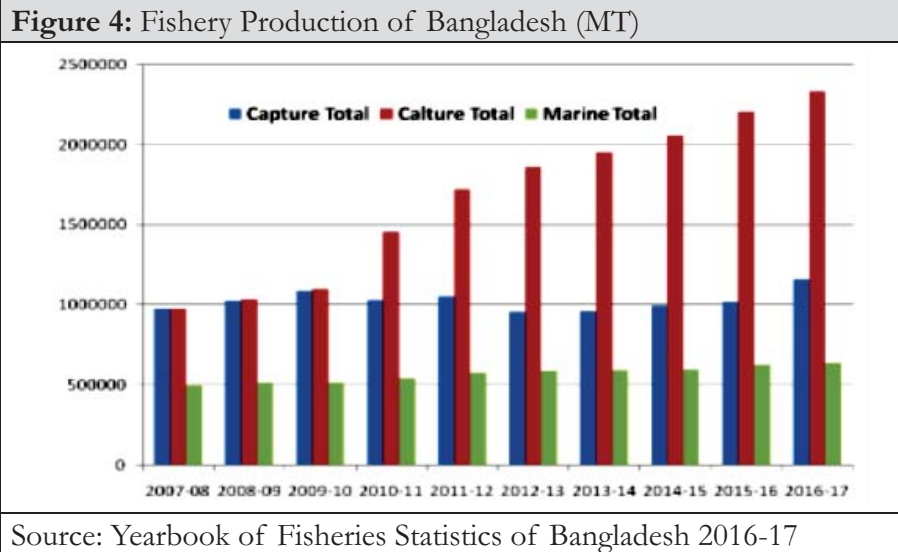
The BoB and the adjoining sea are known as a less explored regions regarding minerals. In recent years there have been discoveries of natural gas in the offshore areas of Myanmar, Bangladesh and India. The Bay is also a fertile marine fishing ground of the region. As water discharges from the surrounding river catchments carry huge influx of sediments full of nutrients which has made the Bay a fertile ground for shrimps and fishes. Four fishing grounds have been identified so far in the bay (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Fishing Zones of Bay of Bengal.



Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/>

Bangladesh is heavily dependent on sea for her trade and commerce. Considering around 90% of her imports and exports are sea borne, SLOCs are the lifeline for Bangladesh. Moreover, the country has a coastline is of 734 km involving coastal and island communities of about 50 million people. A major part of these population live on fishing and related activities. However, only coastal fishing is done by Bangladeshi small trawlers up to 60 km towards the sea. Deep sea fishing is yet to be explored due to lack of technology and trawlers of necessary sizes. Notable that Bangladesh has recorded surplus fish production with an annual output of 4.134 million MT in 2016-17, though only 16% of those came from marine sources. This leaves us with enormous potentiality to develop offshore fishing in Bangladesh.



Factors Contributing in Rising Competition in the BoB

Economic and Political Factors

In last few decades, all BoB rim nations including Bangladesh have experienced rapid growth. India wants its natural influence in the Bay as the rising regional power. Though China doesn't fall directly under BoB rim, a major part of China's imports and exports are through BoB. It is the second largest economy in the world, the largest consumer market, the biggest manufacturing nation and the principal importer of raw materials. China wants to protect its trade and flow of energy through the BoB as well as influence the BoB waters significantly to protect its strategic interests.

Energy Security Factors

'Energy Security' is one of the most significant factors for rising rivalry in the BoB. Today, energy consumption of Asia has already surpassed that of the North America. The two Asian giant China and India has become major consumers and placed among top 5 oil importers in the world in 2018 (Figure 5):

Figure 5: Top Annual Net Oil Importers, 2018.

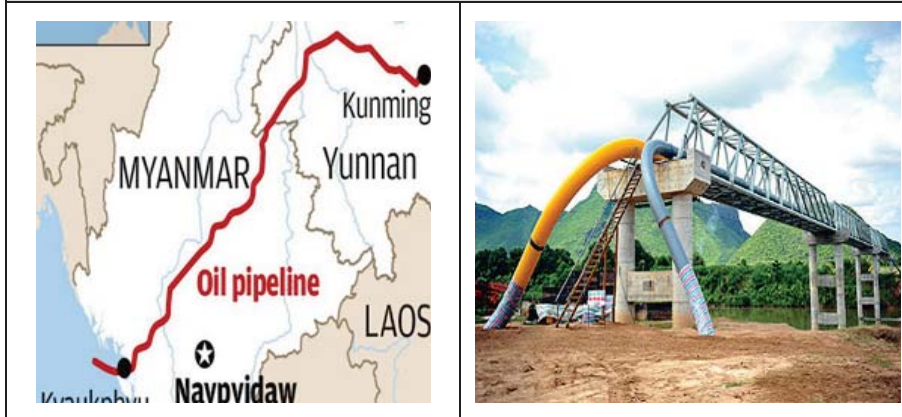
Rank	Country	Total Import (Billion US \$)	% of Global Imports
1	China	239.2	20.2%
2	United States	163.1	13.8%
3	India	114.5	9.7%
4	Japan	80.6	6.8%
5	South Korea	80.4	6.8%
6	Netherlands	48.8	4.1%
7	Germany	45.1	3.8%
8	Spain	34.2	2.9%

(Data Source: <http://www.worldstopexports.com/crude-oil-imports-by-country/>)

China's oil import reliance exceeded 65.6 percent in 2016 and is forecast to rise to 80 percent by 2030. By 2020, Chinese consumption of crude oil is expected at 12 million bpd. China and India's dependency on oil imports are expected to rise to 75% and 95% respectively of their total oil consumption by 2030. As a result, the importance of the BoB as an oil transit region will further increase, leading to increased military presence in the Bay.

China has already constructed natural gas and oil pipelines in 2014 connecting Kyaukpyu Port of Myanmar with Yunnan Province of China. The 1100-kilometre long pipelines have annual capacity of 22 million tons of oil and 12 billion cubic meters of gas respectively. As around 80% of China's energy imports are presently transported via Malacca Strait, these pipelines through Myanmar have an added strategic importance for Beijing as they will help China to reduce its dependence on the Strait of Malacca.

Figure 6: China's Oil and Gas Pipeline Connecting BoB and Kunming

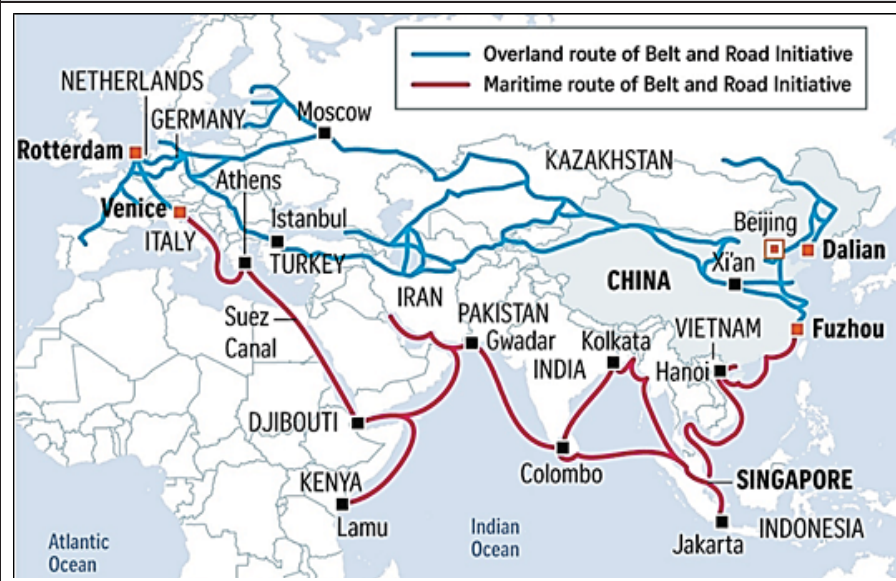


About 95 per cent of India's trade by volume and 68 per cent of trade by value come through the Indian Ocean. India is also the fourth-largest importer of liquefied natural gas (LNG), with about 45 per cent coming by sea. A significant part of these are through BoB to serve the eastern and north eastern states of India. Thus, India will strive to ensure the security of the Bay's SLOCs as being crucial for her economic growth.

Connectivity Factors

For land locked countries like Nepal and Bhutan, access to the BoB could have an enormous impact on their development and economic growth. Thus, several initiatives are underway to improve the connectivity. China is promoting the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - a network for connecting at least 80 countries of Asia, Europe and Africa along the ancient Silk Road routes. As a part of that, China is investing in several mega projects in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, which are of concern for India. In response to the Chinese initiative, India is also promoting a few such projects in the region. Through BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement, India is pursuing a road network through Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. BCIM-EC is another such initiative.

Figure 7: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)



Source: Online Journal 'The Opinion'

Regional and Extra-regional Actors in the Bay

India and the BoB

Since its independence until recent past India maintained alliance with mainly USSR/Russia as the strategic partner for security, development and geo-political issues. However, in a paradigm shift of foreign policy and strategy in 2002, India signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with USA. This followed by the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016 that give the militaries of both countries access to each other's facilities for supplies and repairs. For both US and India, it is a strategic move to contain increasingly assertive China in the IO region.

India is also increasing its profile in multilateral Indian Ocean institutions and frameworks. It patronized establishment of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 1997 which has 21 member states and 7 dialogue

partners. The Indian Navy founded the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008 to foster maritime cooperation and coordinated SAR operation. It also hosts yearly multinational naval exercises like MILAN. In 2013, India signed a trilateral maritime security accord with Sri Lanka and Maldives that appears likely to expand to a five-power grouping by including Mauritius and Seychelles.

China in the BoB Region

China has undergone a remarkable economic growth over the last few decades, averaging an annual growth of 16.8 percent from 1978 to 2010. To maintain this enormous development, China needs oil, which it doesn't produce much. Thus, China's strategic priorities are to find reliable oil supplies and unhindered SLOCs. Thus China is trying to increase its presence in BoB through growing cooperation with littoral nations.

For China, securing SLOCs has become one of the main objectives and a way to address the "Malacca Dilemma", as the strait is close proximity to Indian military bases in Andaman and Nicobar. The Chinese-built gas and oil pipeline from Kyaukpyu to Kunming is one such project to reduce dependency on Malacca. Additionally, China is seeking port access agreements with littoral countries of the Bay. In doing so, it wants access to Chittagong sea port and proposed to build a deep-sea port at Sonadia Island. Also, China accesses Myanmar's sea ports and islands and recently it has taken over the operation of Hambantota port of Sri Lanka. All these are concern for India and contributed in the tensions in the bay.

The USA in the BoB Region

In recent years, US interests in the region have grown significantly because it recognizes the tremendous potential this region has due to its massive demography, the volume of trade, and its resource endowments. In addition, America's shift in focus also have been triggered by China's fast expansion in

the region. The Obama administration announced the 'Asia Pivot' policy and the 'Rebalancing' strategy. Declaring it as 'Indo-Pacific' region and re-arranging its Pacific Command as 'Indo-Pacific Command' by Trump administration is the subsequent step to further consolidate US foothold in the region.

To set limits on China's expansion, the principal task of the US Navy would be to leverage the sea power of India in the IOR. It is in the US' long-term economic interest to prevent the region from being dominated by any single state, thereby disturbing the balance of power in the region. Again, to achieve its geopolitical objectives, the US capitalizes on the India-China rivalry to its own advantage.

Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Bay

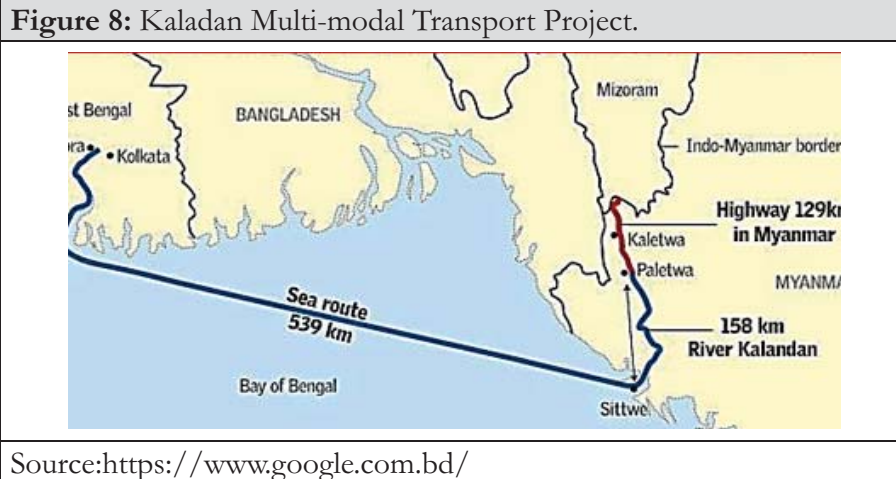
Historical mistrust between China and India has encouraged mutual suspicion regarding each other's intentions. India and China both view the BoB as a crucial frontier in their competition over energy resources, shipping lanes, and cultural influence. Up until now, the strongest manifestation of Sino-Indian rivalry in the BoB was in Myanmar where they both connect through Myanmar to their economically weaker regions, namely India's Northeast and China's Yunnan province.

Another major aspect of the rivalry lies in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that China pursues but India has refused to endorse it. China is seeking connectivity, agreements and access to facilities to ensure seamless flow of trade and energy. India also pursues to have cooperation and access facilities. Another challenge for China may be India's military disposition in the Bay, as Beijing is worried about the Malacca dilemma.

The Importance of Myanmar

Myanmar possesses a great geo-strategic advantage in the region due to its location and abundance of mineral resources. For India, Myanmar is of great strategic importance - the country can become India's link to

Southeast Asia as it is a part of ASEAN, vital for India's "Act East" policy. India is heavily investing in trade and infrastructure there, for example the Kaladan project which would connect the Kolkata Port to Sittwe Port.



Myanmar holds great strategic importance for China as well. The pipelines through Myanmar have the potential to help China reduce its heavy dependence on the Strait of Malacca. This has strategic implications against the backdrop of the United States' rebalancing in Asia and the ongoing maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Russia is another player engaging heavily in Myanmar. Japan is also actively involved in Myanmar mainly due to economic interests.

The Importance of Sri Lanka

Due to its geographical close proximity, historically Sri Lanka maintained strong ties with India. Sri Lanka is India's largest trading partner in South Asia and India is Sri Lanka's largest trading partner globally. The two neighbours also have defence cooperation mainly through training program.

Sri Lanka also shares robust ties with China, the latter being the largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Projects such as the new Colombo Port Terminal, Hambantota Port, and a four-lane Expressway

among others are funded by China. In return, the country recently agreed to join China's ambitious Maritime Silk Route project. For China, access to Hambantota is essential for its new strategic and connectivity aspirations.

'The Quad Approach' -Australia and Japan in the Scene

In recent years, there are some interesting developments in the regional geopolitics. As such increased military cooperation between India, Australia, Japan and USA is developing. Strategists termed it as the 'Quad Approach'.

The IOR is important to Australia as it is economically significant as a crucial conduit for global trade, home to some fastest growing economies and contains large reserves of natural resources. India is coming increasingly closer to Japan with a strategic aim to offset China by forming alliance. In 2014, India invited the Japanese Navy to participate in the annual Malabar exercises with the U.S. Navy in the Pacific waters. India and Australia are skeptic of China's assault on maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan is also assertive in the IOR mainly due to its dependency on the IO for trade and commerce.

Bangladesh on the Crossroads of Conflicts and Contests

Preamble

Bangladesh and BoB is beginning to emerge as the center form where connectivity could spread both towards the west (India, Nepal, and Bhutan) and to East (ASEAN countries). This brings in the regional powers India and China in a power play scenario to ensure their political, economic and strategic interests. Competition between these two historical rivals is spreading across the ocean, from Myanmar to Sri Lanka, Maldives till Tanzania. Extra-regional powers like USA, Japan and Australia are also actively engaging in the region to protect their geo-strategic and economic interests.

As the stage is set for severe rivalry in the BoB, Bangladesh is caught in between a potential strategic competition and conflicts in the Bay. As a small and developing nation with limited resources and heavy dependence on the sea for the livelihood, trade and commerce, Bangladesh needs to be prudent to use its all possible leverages to stand firm in between the conflicting scenario and protect her national interests.

The Leverages of Bangladesh with India

The most important leverage that Bangladesh has with India is its historical, cultural and ethnical bondage. Also, Bangladesh is a huge market for India and a major part of this 160 million people’s market is served by Indian goods. As such, Bangladesh has the enormous bilateral trade deficit with India, importing goods of about \$6 Billion and exporting only about \$600 million worth of goods. This is a leverage Bangladesh can use to set terms with India at times of need.

Figure 9: Bangladesh Trade with India

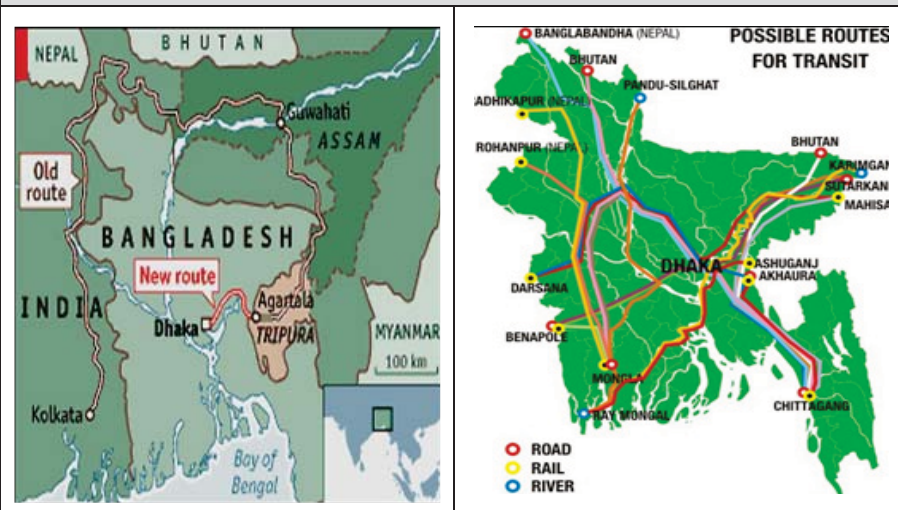


(Source: The Bangladesh Chronicle; from: bangladeshchronicle.net/2016/08/trade-gap-with-india-drops-again-to-4-76b-in-fy16/)

Connectivity is another factor for which India is depending on Bangladesh significantly in these days. India’s northeastern states can have easy

access to the BoB either through Bangladesh or Myanmar, and through Bangladesh it is the shortest route. Generally the Northeast India has to access the rest of India largely via the narrow corridor near Siliguri, greatly increasing travel times. To reach a port, traders needed to travel 1,650 km from Agartala to Kolkata, instead of travelling 515 kms to reach the same destination through Bangladesh, or travel only 200 km to access the nearby port of Chittagong. Several development projects are underway including container terminals, roads and railways to serve the Indian transit and connectivity needs. Thus India need close cooperation for transit and transshipment through Bangladesh.

Figure 10: General Route from Kolkata to Agartala and Probable Transit Routes.



(Source: The Economist and The Daily Star)

Bangladesh is a top source of remittance for India. In 2017, India earned remittance of US\$ 5 billion from Bangladesh through official channel only. Adding to it the remittance through un-official channel like ‘Hundi’, Bangladesh became the 4th top remittance source for India in 2017. Bangladesh may use this issue as a leverage while setting terms with India.

Another issue can be used as leverage is that Bangladesh's policy of 'Zero Tolerance' to any kind of insurgency activities on its soil. Due to this policy Bangladesh has strongly curbed Indian militants using Bangladeshi soil to operate in their north eastern states. Therefore, the security situation in the Indian northeastern states has dramatically improved. As such in recent time the insurgency related incidents have declined 85 per cent and there is 96 percent reduction in casualty of civilian and security personnel.

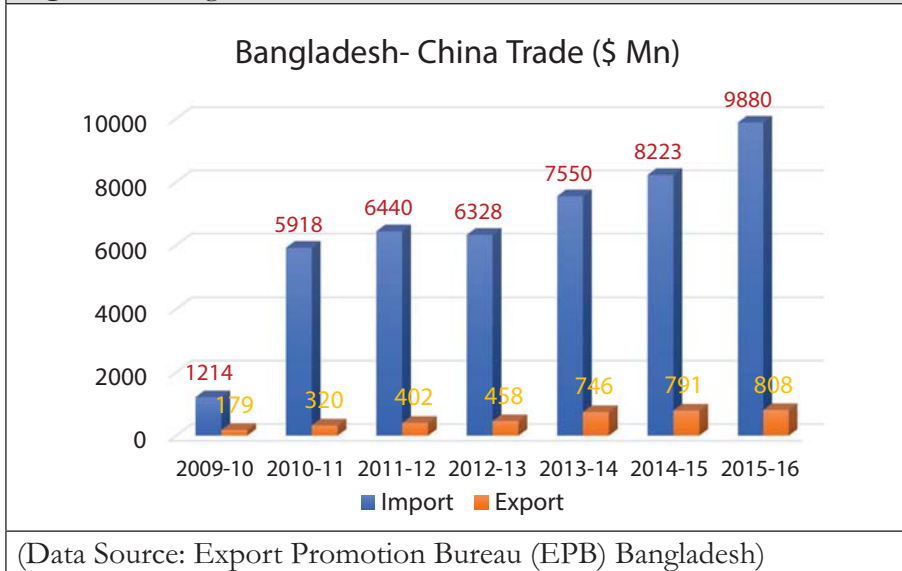
Bangladesh may also use the China card in setting terms with India like what being used by Sri Lanka and Maldives. As China is eager to use Bangladeshi ports and other facilities to operate in the BoB region, Bangladesh may use this leverage to bring India in favorable terms during settling bi-lateral issues.

The Leverages of Bangladesh with China

As for China, access to ports in Bangladesh can facilitate Beijing's oversight of its SLOCs and be a key geographical location for its envisaged Maritime Silk Route. Bangladesh's strategic location, physical proximity to India, and proximity to the Bay have considerable implications for Chinese regional geopolitics. China has also been pledging heavy investment in infrastructural projects in Bangladesh under BRI. It is due to this strategy, Bangladesh, owing to its geographic positioning in the BoB can have a greater attention by China.

Bangladesh is a huge market for Chinese goods as well. Over the past years China has gradually replaced India as Bangladesh's most important import-sourcing country. The data of Bangladesh Bank shows that import from China was worth about US\$ 9.8 billion and export to China was only US\$ 808.14 million in FY 2015-16. The import volume is rising in a good pace and expected to rise further in coming years (Figure 11). Bangladesh should continue to foster trade with China and use this relation as a leverage while negotiating bi-lateral and international issues.

Figure 11: Bangladesh-China Trade 2009-2016.



The Leverages of Bangladesh with other Actors

Like China, Japan has also been trying to make its way into the BoB through Bangladesh. Japan has been increasing its influence in the BoB littorals and showing greater interest in the region. Tokyo’s new strategy may have been adopted due to security environment in East Asia (the China factor), making the nation turn toward South Asia (Bangladesh and Myanmar).

Among other projects, the BoB Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) plan is a strategic initiative proposed by Japan, which aims to promote industrial agglomeration along the Dhaka- Chattagram-Cox’s Bazaar belt, and enhance economic ties stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. The initiative include constructing a deep-sea port on Matarbari Island, energy flow through developing a massive supply base of primary energy such as coal, LNG, oil and transportation.

The US is one of few countries with which Bangladesh has trade surplus. It is a significant market for Bangladeshi RMG. The US and Bangladesh

established a bilateral security dialogue in April 2012, through which the US is helping Bangladesh Navy to develop Special Forces for counterterrorism and maritime interdictions. As a BoB littoral, US wants good defence ties with Bangladesh to promote security, curb terrorism and serve its strategic interests in the IO region. Bangladesh may use this relation to go ahead further and achieve favourable terms in bi-lateral and international issues.

Coordination with Regional Organisations

Utilizing regional cooperative organisations like SAARC could be a better leverage for small states like Bangladesh. However, unlike ASEAN, SAARC is yet to achieve satisfactory progress towards an active regional alliance for prosperity and security. As such, all parties need to continue support and promote SAARC and SAFTA. Also Bangladesh need to keep close cooperation with ASEAN countries to achieve supports on various geo-political issues.

Bangladesh's Foreign Policy Standings and its Outcome

The key essence of our foreign policy is 'friendship to all, malice to none'. It is apparent that the conduct of foreign policy of Bangladesh appears to be a delicate balancing act between preservation of sovereignty and pressures from external powers. The recent handling of strategic issues like signing agreement for economic zones and deep sea port was a showcase for such policy. So far Bangladesh has reasonably utilized this non-alliance standings in various low profile international issues. But at times of serious conflicting scenario, how effective this policy will be is a matter to ponder.

In modern days, economic relation plays a vital role in determining foreign policy and international relations. It is mentionable that still Bangladesh has greater volume of trade with both India, China and other international actors in comparison to that of Myanmar. It is a strong diplomatic leverage, which could generate better results in international affairs and foreign policy matters, if utilized to its fullest potential.

Djibouti is a good example of how advantageous geo-strategic location can be used by a small states to negotiate terms with bigger neighbours to make balance, protect national interests and promote developments. Recent events in Maldives and Sri Lanka can also be studied to formulate lessons and rearticulate our foreign policy standings.

It is important to note that most of our military hardware are sourced from abroad. At times of crisis and urgent need, Bangladesh may not get enough and speedy response from those foreign sources. Now, time has arrived to invest significantly in military research and development as well as promote indigenous military hardware production.

Recommendations

Non-Alliance and Multilateralism is the Key Strategy. In view of above deliberations, followings are recommended:

- Bangladesh should continue to maintain non-alliance foreign policy and promote multilateralism in a potential conflicting scenario in the BoB. However, it is important that the country utilizes all possible leverages to have a firm standings in bi-lateral and multi-lateral forums to protect its national interests.
- Bangladesh should thus actively be engaged in regional cooperative forums like SAARC, BCIM, BBIN, BIMSTEC, ASEAN, IORA and IONS.
- Bangladesh should regularly and actively participate in the maritime activities and exercises of regional initiatives like, IONS and MILAN with an aim to have more interactions and ease tensions in the Bay.
- In case of a serious conflicting scenario in the BoB, if current policy fails to protect national interests, Bangladesh should be ready for such circumstances with a clear policy guidelines with possible Courses of Action.

- A high level national committee constituted with experts on security and international relations may be employed with Top Secret agenda for studying and formulating such guidelines and Courses of Action to be adopted at times of conflicts in the Bay.
- Bangladesh should invest significantly in military research and development and promote indigenous military technology.
- Further research may be undertaken to determine in details, the policy guidelines and Course of Actions for adopting at times of serious conflicts in the Bay of Bengal.

Conclusion

As the above study reveals that slowly and gradually the BoB is becoming a hot bed for potential contests and conflicts between regional and extra-regional powers. This is due to its strategic location, connectivity, massive sea borne trade through its SLOCs and Malacca Strait, potential endowments underneath and the strategic interests of world powers. India and China heavily depends on the SLOCs and Malacca Strait through BoB for their trades and energy flow. In addition to protect trade and energy flow, China wants to develop its landlocked southwestern regions, including Tibet and Yunnan by gaining access to the Bay. The USA has arrived in the scenario to offset China in the IO Region as a part of its rebalancing strategy. Other major player of Asia Pacific region like Japan and Australia are also in the scene to protect their flow of trade and ensure energy security. Thereby tensions in the Bay are evolving mainly because of geo-economic factors, energy security factors and connectivity factors.

Bangladesh depends heavily on the Bay for the livelihood of its population as well as trade and energy security. Apart from the livelihood of coastal people, around 90 percent of the country's exports and imports are sea borne. Also, after the maritime boundary delimitation, Bangladesh is all set to explore its offshore resources. Any conflict in the Bay will severely hamper Bangladesh regarding livelihood, trade, commerce and the exploration

of offshore living and non-living resources. However, the country has a few leverages to deal with its counterparts in a contesting scenario. But, these leverages can only be utilized in conjunction with appropriate policy and strategy. The current non-alliance foreign policy standing has been generating satisfactory results so far in peaceful environment. But recent events suggest that during any serious conflicting scenario, this policy standing may not produce satisfactory results. As such Bangladesh need to re-visit its policy and strategic stature through analyzing present situation, international order and policy followed by other small littorals like Djibouti, Sri Lanka and Maldives.

Though rivalry is increasing day by day, we can also assess that no single state will be able to dominate the region. Thus, it is obvious that multilateral cooperative engagement is a key to avoid tensions in the Bay. Therefore, all BoB nations should promote multilateral approach to allow countries to pursue their goals on equal terms. For that to occur, it is necessary that countries give emphasis on regional cooperative arrangements like SAARC, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, BBIN, IORA, IONS etc.

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