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EMERGING STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE IN THE BAY OF BENGAL AND MARITIME CAPABILITY BUILDING OF BANGLADESH

Abstract

The paper seeks to assess the growing strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal and how this signifies for Bangladesh's imperative to develop strong maritime capabilities. With the growing significance of the Bay of Bengal, both the littoral and the extra-littoral countries are reassessing their interests in this region and reformulating respective strategies to ensure optimum benefit in their favour. After the verdict by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in March 2012, Bangladesh is now able to establish its claim over a significant area in the Bay of Bengal. These emerging realities are driving Bangladesh to develop capabilities to project effective control over its maritime zone and to ensure sustainable utilisation of marine resources. To respond efficiently, Bangladesh government has undertaken various initiatives including modernisation of the Bangladesh Navy with an aim of establishing a three dimensional force. The paper, based on secondary literature, finds that there is a growing interest among the countries in the Bay of Bengal area leading to a competitive strategic atmosphere for countries like Bangladesh. The findings also suggest that Bangladesh's drive for maritime capability building is a timely and pragmatic step which requires further strengthening in the coming years. Besides, the paper also argues that Bangladesh needs to formulate a comprehensive maritime strategy, focusing on diverse sectors of capability building. Some key areas can include empowering the coast guard, resource exploration and exploitation capacities, maritime infrastructure development for connectivity and seaborne trade as well as well-coordinated maritime governance.

1. Introduction

The Bay of Bengal, the largest bay of the world, is strategically important for all the littoral¹ countries – Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The interests of extra-littoral countries² namely those of China and the United States (US) have multiplied the significance of the Bay of Bengal. Over 400 million people of the littoral countries are directly or indirectly dependent on the coastal and marine

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¹ In geography, littoral means the coast, and littoral countries are those located in the coastal zone of a sea or an ocean. Key littoral countries in the Bay of Bengal region include Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

² Extra-littoral countries refer to the countries with significant maritime stakes, in this context in the Bay of Bengal, although their geographic location lies outside the littoral zones, namely China and the US.

resources of the Bay of Bengal for their food, livelihood and security.³ It is also a rich source of marine biodiversity as it abounds with coral reefs, tropical dolphins and sharks. From the ancient period a large amount of international trade of the littoral countries is being conducted through the sea lanes of the Bay of Bengal. With the verdict by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in March 2012, Bangladesh is now able to establish its claim over with 111,000 sq km in the Bay of Bengal.⁴ These emerging realities are driving Bangladesh to develop capabilities to project effective control over its maritime zone and to ensure sustainable utilisation of marine resources, including significant hydro-carbon reserves in its maritime zones. Besides, the growing interests of other players, mainly of India, China and the US are also pushing Bangladesh to rethink its own maritime strategy. This has put forward the question of Bangladesh's maritime capability building *vis-à-vis* other countries with strategic and economic interests in the Bay of Bengal.

Among the littoral countries, India has already taken distinct policy approaches towards the Bay of Bengal. It has undertaken endeavours to modernise its navy and is increasing bilateral and multilateral naval ties with other littoral countries. Over the years, it has made strategic partnership with the US. India might have counted China as a potential competitor in the greater Indian Ocean region and strengthened its ties with the US. Indian strategic planners worry that Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean outposts could turn them into military bases that would enable China to 'encircle' India.⁵ Particularly with regard to the Bay of Bengal, China's influential relationship with Myanmar has also added urgency to India's involvement. India has deepened its ties with Myanmar to have a safe gateway to the Southeast Asian countries. Similarly, Myanmar, another actor in the region to be counted by Bangladesh, is keen to redefine its geopolitical identity by exploiting its mounting strategic value in the Bay of Bengal region. The country, coming out of decades-long isolation, is actively engaging with the world's major players in the region. It is participating in naval exchanges, joint exploration of energy resources and development of connectivity infrastructure in the vital littoral outposts of the Bay of Bengal.

Extra-littoral actors like the US and China have also been drawn to the geographical and strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal. Particularly, the Obama administration has undertaken major policy shifts to the Asia-Pacific region adopting a rebalancing foreign policy in the greater Indo-Pacific region, and explicitly identified the region as a geographic priority for the US.⁶ Although commentators in China and many observers have suggested that the rebalancing is designed to contain China, the policy itself indicates the intensity of US interests in the region. Following more

³ Food and Agricultural Organisation, "Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) Project", *BOBLME Brochure*, 2011, available at http://www.boblme.org/project_overview.html, accessed on 24 December 2013.

⁴ "BD wins maritime suit against Myanmar", *The Financial Express*, 15 March 2012.

⁵ Nilanthi Samaranayake, "The Long Littoral Project: Bay of Bengal A Maritime Perspective on Indo Pacific Security", CNA Corporation, September 2012.

⁶ Ely Ratner, "Rebalancing to Asia with an Insecure China", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2013, pp. 21-38.

than a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Obama administration has been trying to place more emphasis on Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia – parts of the world that will be of growing strategic and economic importance in the first half of the 21st century.⁷ China, on the other hand, has interests in the Bay of Bengal and taken initiatives to make strong ties with the littoral countries. It has economic and strategic partnerships with Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Over the years, China has taken multiple initiatives to modernise its navy. Critics argue that China has undertaken ‘string of pearl’ strategy to spread its sphere of influence in the region⁸ though Chinese political and military leadership has repeatedly opposed the proposition.

In this context, Bangladesh, being in the vital strategic location of the Bay of Bengal, is reassessing its fundamental geopolitical and economic stakes in the region. It is formulating pertinent policy guidelines and undertaking initiatives to strengthen maritime capabilities, particularly focusing on the modernisation of its navy, for safeguarding and augmenting its maritime interests. While the country is emphasising primarily on naval modernisation, there is a growing need for a comprehensive maritime strategy where diverse sectors of capability building need to be prioritised. Some key areas can include empowering the coast guard, resource exploration and exploitation capacities, maritime infrastructure development for connectivity and seaborne trade as well as well-coordinated maritime governance.

The objective of the paper is to analyse the interests of littoral and extra-littoral countries in the Bay of Bengal as well as to delineate maritime capability building endeavours of Bangladesh. The key research questions that the paper addresses include: What factors are contributing to the growing significance of the Bay of Bengal as a vital strategic and economic region? How are the littoral and extra-littoral countries reconfiguring their respective policies to utilise the geopolitical advantages of the Bay of Bengal for maximising their national interests? What are the key strategic and economic interests of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal region? And finally, what endeavours has Bangladesh been undertaking to enhance its maritime capabilities?

To answer the key research questions, the paper is divided into six sections. After introduction, the second section deals with geostrategic and economic significance of the Bay of Bengal. The third section details out the emerging security landscape of the Bay of Bengal based on maritime strategic postures of India, Myanmar, China and the US in this region. The fourth section discusses Bangladesh’s stakes in the Bay of Bengal. The fifth section analyses Bangladesh’s drive to strengthen its maritime capability, particularly its endeavour to modernise its navy, as well as outlines the necessity to initiate comprehensive capability building in

⁷ Robert G. Sutter et. al., “Balancing Acts: The US Rebalance and Asia Pacific Stability”, George Washington University, August 2013, available at http://www2.gwu.edu/~sigur/assets/docs/BalancingActs_Compiled1.pdf, accessed on 04 March 2014.

⁸ Ashley S. Townshend, “Unraveling China’s String of Pearls”, *Yale Global*, 16 September 2011.

diverse sectors. In the sixth section, the paper concludes by outlining some policy perspectives.

2. Geostrategic and Economic Significance of the Bay of Bengal

In the South Asian geopolitical context, the Bay of Bengal bears enormous spatial and strategic significance for the littoral countries of the region. The Bay of Bengal, with an approximately 1,000 miles (1,600 kms) width and an average depth near 8,500 feet (2,600 meters), is the northern extension of the Indian Ocean.⁹ It is geographically positioned between India and Sri Lanka in the west, Bangladesh to the north, and Myanmar and the northern part of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the east. The Bay of Bengal is the largest bay of the world occupying an area of about 2.2 million sq kms.¹⁰ A unique feature of this Bay of Bengal lies in its location in the downstream of one of the world's most active delta, receiving massive inflows from many large international rivers.



Source: Google Map

From the geostrategic perspective, the Bay of Bengal is a highly potential ground of power politics. Its geographical and strategic environment promises tremendous opportunities for regional and global powers to leverage. As it is situated

⁹ "Bay of Bengal", *World Atlas*, available at <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/baybengal.htm>, accessed on 10 December 2013.

¹⁰ "Bay of Bengal", *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, 2012, available at http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/B_0406.htm, accessed on 12 December 2013.

in the dead point of strategically rival countries, the geopolitical value of the Bay of Bengal is far beyond than its anticipated values.¹¹ It lies at the centre of two adjacent economic blocs, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and connects the South East Asian economy to Middle Eastern oil sources. It also connects the strategic sea route between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.¹² The Bay of Bengal stretches to all the sea lanes of the region, connecting the important Malacca Straits and Taiwan Straits, and extends to South China Sea, East China Sea and the Pacific.¹³ The marshalling point of Malacca Straits that hosts an average of 200 ships' transit everyday is located in the Bay of Bengal. The trade link along the Bay of Bengal stretches from China in the east to West Asia and Africa in the west. Each of the smaller littorals offers tremendous economic potential due to untapped natural resources.¹⁴ These connections have enhanced the position of the Bay of Bengal as a strategic and economic hub in the region. Hence, the security and stability in the Bay of Bengal is crucial for both littoral and extra-littoral countries.

One aspect of geostrategic importance involves the South Asian security dynamics. As the Bay of Bengal provides access for all major sea ports of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and other littoral countries as well as China's southern landlocked region to the Indian Ocean, controlling and commanding position in this maritime sphere by any particular country provides critical strategic leverage to dominate regional politics and security matters. For instance, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are of immense importance of India's security, providing the country with strategic and military foothold in the heart of the Bay of Bengal. The Islands are in commanding position and hold a key to the eastern gate to Pacific Ocean, being situated astride the strategic sea lanes of communication.¹⁵ The Bay of Bengal is also going to host two emerging strategic waterways: the Sethusamudram Canal Project between southern India and Sri Lanka and the Isthmus of Kra in southern Thailand which are dubbed as Asia's Panama Canal.¹⁶ These waterways could reduce transit time tremendously, save few hundred miles of distance as well as facilitate small littoral ports to grow and thereby boom the littoral countries' economic growth.

From the ecological and natural resource perspectives, the Bay of Bengal also bears special significance. It is one of the world's sixty-three large marine ecosystems. Over 400 million, the 25 per cent of global population, live on coastal catchment

¹¹ Farhana Razzak, "Geopolitical Significance of the Bay of Bengal", Academia.edu, 2012, available at http://www.academia.edu/5104579/Geopolitical_Significance_of_the_Bay_of_Bengal, accessed on 23 November 2013.

¹² Vijay Sakhuja, "Energy Transformation Security in the Bay of Bengal", in Sudhir T Devare (ed.), *A New Energy Frontier: The Bay of Bengal Region*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008, p. 155.

¹³ Mahbubur Rahman, "Security Dimensions of Bay of Bengal and Sino-Bangla Cooperation", *The Daily Star*, 27 December 2012.

¹⁴ Golam Sadeq, "Involvement of the United States in the Bay of Bengal: Need for a Strategy of Winning the Battle Without Fighting", *LUCE.NT*, November 2011, pp. 75-87.

¹⁵ Vijay Sakhuja, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

areas and these numbers are expected to increase by 20 per cent by the year 2015.¹⁷ The Bay of Bengal, having one of the most densely populated coastlines on earth, provides natural resources for its coastal habitats, particularly fisheries to these large numbers of people. The potential of huge oil and gas reserves, particularly Bangladesh, Myanmar and Indian coasts hold unexploited reserves of 100 Trillion Cubic Feet (TCF) or approximately 1 per cent of the world's total of oil and gas, according to official sources, and approximately 200 TCF according to various unofficial sources.¹⁸ Besides, fisheries production in the Bay of Bengal is six million tonnes per year, more than 7 per cent of the world's total catch.¹⁹

However, what has increased the geopolitical significance of the Bay of Bengal the most is the shifting of world center of gravity from trans-Atlantic to Indo-Pacific, as delineated in Robert Kaplan's assessment of Indian Ocean, in his book *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and The Future of American Power*, as demographic and strategic hub of the world in the twenty-first century. This proposition signals of a paramount shift in the locus of strategic rivalry among the big powers.²⁰ The rise of China and India on one hand and the US rebalancing policy in Indo-Pacific on the other have come together to make the region a geopolitical hub of world economic and political competition.²¹ The Bay of Bengal, due to its geographic proximity with the Indian Ocean region and its location as a buffer between the Indian Ocean and the littoral countries of South, Southeast and East Asia, occupies a significant place within the calculus of Indo-Pacific great game.²² Therefore, the Bay of Bengal becomes strategically crucial for both littoral and extra-littoral countries.

3. Emerging Strategic Landscape in the Bay of Bengal

Historically, the Bay of Bengal, being shaped by the monsoons and human migration, served as a maritime highway between India and China and then as a battleground for European empires.²³ While in the nineteenth century, colonial powers reconfigured the Bay of Bengal in their quest for coffee, rice and rubber, the littoral ports and cities in the region became the most culturally diverse societies of their time. But with the shifting geopolitical focus to Euro-Atlantic landscape in the early twentieth century, the Bay of Bengal's centuries-old patterns of interconnection

¹⁷ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *State of World Population 2011*, New York: UNFPA, 2011.

¹⁸ Golam Sadeq, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ "Bay of Bengal", Wildlife Conservation Society, available at <http://www.wcs.org/where-we-work/oceans/bay-of-bengal.aspx>, accessed on 12 December 2013.

²⁰ See Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2010.

²¹ For details, see S. D. Muni and Vivek Chadha (eds.), *Asian Strategic Review 2014: US Pivot and Asian Security*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2014.

²² In the emerging strategic landscape, the US rebalancing in Asia and the convergence of Indo-US interests in the greater Asia-Pacific region have acquired a connotation of 'Indo-Pacific Great Game' due to the potential of great power rivalry among the US, China, Japan and India on the cards.

²³ See Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

began to erode. History has come to repeat its episodes again and now with a more convoluted and conflicting storyline. Both the littoral and the extra-littoral countries are keen to shape the contemporary strategic development in the Bay of Bengal at their own advantages, utilising its growing significance in recent years. Bangladesh, being one of the vital littoral countries, is going to face an increasingly competitive maritime atmosphere in the coming days.

3.1 *Strategic Postures of the Littoral Players*

India and Myanmar, the two adjacent neighbouring countries of Bangladesh, are major littoral players in the Bay of Bengal. India has enormous strategic interests in the Bay of Bengal. Considering it as its backyard sphere of influence, India puts substantive strategic weight on controlling and commanding maritime security matters in the region. The fundamental interests of India in the Bay of Bengal include: to negate the expansion of any influence by any other actors who can substantively threaten India's national interests; to enshrine India's leadership and dominance on the Bay of Bengal's geopolitical issues; to reduce the growing Chinese influence in the greater Indian Ocean region, particularly the Bay of Bengal littoral countries' economic and military dependency on China;²⁴ and to ensure safety and security of India's seaborne trade and energy supply.

Indian policymakers count the Bay of Bengal as a strategic-maritime space for its political and diplomatic initiatives. The fundamental among all is India's drive to modernise its maritime capability which was started more than five decades ago. After mid 1960s, India began to search for a new framework for its maritime strategy. It started to modernise its navy with modern equipments. Most importantly, India approached the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and began acquiring Soviet equipments such as submarines, destroyers, frigates, missile boats, ships for amphibious operations as well as maritime reconnaissance aircrafts.²⁵ The potential for China to project maritime power in the Indian Ocean has arguably become India's principal long term source of concern.²⁶ As a result, India is increasing bilateral and multilateral naval ties in the region and strengthening strategic partnership with the US, another anxious party about China's entry into the Indian Ocean region.

Partly in response to China and partly as a power rising on the world stage, India, in recent years, is undertaking a major modernisation endeavour of its navy. It has begun upgrading its tri-service Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) Command, allocating

²⁴ David Brewster, "The Bay of Bengal: A New Locus for Strategic Competition in Asia", *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 263, 15 May 2014.

²⁵ K. R. Singh, "The Changing Paradigm of India's Maritime Security", *International Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2003, pp. 229-245.

²⁶ P. K. Ghosh, "Maritime Security Challenges in South Asia and the Indian Ocean: Response Strategies", Paper prepared for the Center for Strategic and International Studies – American-Pacific Sealanes Security Institute conference on Maritime Security in Asia. Honolulu, Hawaii, 18-20 January 2004.

greater resources to the Eastern Naval Command (ENC)²⁷, which is located along India's Bay of Bengal coast, and increasing navy-to-navy ties through forums such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and the 'Milan' exercise.²⁸ It has embarked on infrastructure development projects of its own in the littoral countries including at Sittwe port in Myanmar and at Sri Lanka's Kankesanthurai (KKS) port. In August 2013, the Indian Navy celebrated two major developments: it launched the first indigenously built carrier, the 37,500 ton 'Vikrant' and the reactor of its first native-built nuclear submarine 'Arihant'.²⁹ The country, by 2022, plans to own a 160-plus ship navy, along with 3 aircraft carriers, 60 major combatants, including submarines and about 400 aircrafts of different types.³⁰ India, with a proactive maritime policy and strong naval capability, is preparing for its take off stage to become a dominant power in Asia.

Myanmar, like India, gives immense importance to the Bay of Bengal, as it perceives the Bay of Bengal as a vital part of its strategic security and economic growth. Isolated for decades, Myanmar is now actively engaging with the world's major players in redefining its geopolitical identity, where its location as a geopolitical pivot in the Bay of Bengal is playing a significant role. This has encouraged naval exchanges, exploration of energy resources and development of connectivity infrastructure by a vital littoral of the Bay of Bengal.³¹ Besides, the reform process in Myanmar adds newer strategic weight to the country, and opened up opportunities to build partnership with the US and India in maritime affairs.

Over the years, Myanmar has been counted by both India and China, as the country can provide access for the poor landlocked provinces in their southeast and northeast to the Indian Ocean respectively.³² Utilising this opportunity, Myanmar is developing defence and economic ties with both countries. On one hand, Myanmar has been strengthening naval cooperation with China in the last many decades. The country has purchased naval defence equipments, including missiles, fighter planes, radars and warships, and also received training for its naval officers.³³ The defence

²⁷ Founded in 1968, the ENC is headquartered at Vishakhapatnam and has bases in Chennai and Kolkata. The ENC is responsible for India's security in the Bay of Bengal.

²⁸ Milan, meaning meeting in Hindi, is a biennial gathering of regional navies that is hosted by the Indian Navy. The aim of this exercise is to foster understanding and cooperation in the areas of common interest and safeguard SLOC's (sea lanes of communication) from poaching, piracy and terrorist activities, promote interoperability to the extent possible and engage in joint search and rescue and humanitarian operations. See Mrityunjay Mazumdar, "Exercise Milan 08: Friendship Across the Seas", *Bharat Rakshak*, January 2008. See also, Nilanthi Samarnayake, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Norman Friedman, "World Naval Developments – India's Naval Buildup Gains Stream", *Proceedings Magazine*, October 2013.

³⁰ "Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta Spells Out Vision 2022", *India Defence*, 10 August 2008.

³¹ K. Yhome, "Myanmar and the Geopolitics of the Bay of Bengal", *Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief*, No. 68, January 2014.

³² Ramtanu Maitra, "The Strategic Importance of Myanmar for the Region and Beyond", available at http://fsss.in/agni-volume/The_Strategic_Importance_of_Myanmar_forthe_Region_and_Beyond.pdf, accessed on 03 February 2014.

³³ Li Chenyang and Lye Liang Fook, "China's Policies towards Myanmar: A Successful Model for Dealing with the Myanmar Issue", in Li Chenyang and Wilhelm Hofmeister (eds.), *Myanmar: Prospect for Change*, Singapore: Select Publishing, 2010, p. 186.

ties between Myanmar and China have grown to an extent of strategic partnership today. On the other hand, the Myanmar Navy has a sound relationship with India. Exchange of high-level naval officers has become an important part of the ties. During the Myanmar Navy chief's visit to India in July 2013, the two navies proposed "to further strengthen the navy-to-navy cooperation in operations, training and material support and take the existing relationship to another plane and promote capacity building and capability enhancement".³⁴

However, in the shadow of isolation, Myanmar has been modernising its military capabilities continuously. Though the Myanmar Navy started a modernisation program in 2001, it experienced dramatic growth between 1988 and 1998 under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), when Myanmar doubled the number of fleet with Chinese assistance. It is claimed that Myanmar could have a blue water capability for the first time in its history, provided the SLORC's ambitious naval modernisation program is successful.³⁵ After the modernisation scheme started, the Myanmar Navy had significantly upgraded and its scope of operations has expanded to include carrying anti-ship missiles in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. It is also planning to establish a submarine fleet by 2015.³⁶

3.2 *Extra-littoral Interests and Forces*

Among the extra-littoral countries, the US has appeared to be a principal actor in the emerging strategic dynamics in the Indian Ocean region in general and the Bay of Bengal in particular. In the shifting geopolitical focus towards the Indo-Pacific, referred to as the "post-Vasco da Gama era", "the post-Columbian epoch" and "the end of the Atlantic era"³⁷, the US is keenly interested to check the rise of any peer competitor capable to threaten US vital interests and allies in the region. The primary concern for Washington in Asia is mainly China's growing military capabilities and assertiveness, especially in the South and East China Seas, and potentially into the Indian Ocean region.³⁸ Thus, America's 'Asia Pivot' policy aims at bolstering the country's defence ties with countries throughout the region and expanding its naval presence there.³⁹ The US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, during his mid 2012 trip to Southeast Asia, assured its allies and friends in the region by foregrounding on 'rebalancing' foreign policy.⁴⁰ Panetta remarked that America's "rebalance" strategy would involve:

³⁴ "Myanmar Navy Chief visits India", Indian Navy Release, available at <http://indiannavy.nic.in/print/1864>, accessed on 12 January 2013.

³⁵ "Myanmar – Navy", Global Security, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/myanmar/navy.htm>, accessed on 12 January 2014.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Michael Evans, "Power and Paradox: Asian Geopolitics and Sino-American Relations in the 21st Century", *Orbis*, Vol. 55, No. 1, 2011, pp. 85-113.

³⁸ Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress", CRS report prepared for members and committees of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 05 June 2014.

³⁹ Robert R. Ross, "The Problem with the Pivot: Obama's New Asia Policy Is Unnecessary and Counterproductive", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, 2012.

⁴⁰ K. Alan Kronstadt and Sonia Pinto, "India-US Military Relations: Current Engagement", CRS report prepared

Over the next few years an increase in the number and the size of [U.S.] exercises in the Pacific. [The United States] will also increase and more widely distribute port visits, including in the important Indian Ocean region. And by 2020 the Navy will reposition its forces from today's roughly 50/50 per cent split between the Pacific and the Atlantic to about a 60/40 split between those oceans. That will include six aircraft carriers in this region, a majority of our cruisers, destroyers, Littoral Combat Ships, and submarines.⁴¹

However, it is evident from the growing involvement of the US with India in the Bay of Bengal security matters, after engaging in strategic partnership in 2010, that the country prioritises the Bay of Bengal as a significant strategic outpost in its Indo-Pacific strategic calculation. Changing its traditional policy of depending on the Diego Garcia naval support facility which was established in the 1970s, it is pursuing partnership building with the littoral countries including India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It was involved in more than fifty joint military exercises and combined military operations with India, such as naval cooperation during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and the Malabar naval exercise involving Quad group⁴² in the Bay of Bengal.⁴³ As the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean region are becoming epicentres of critical trade and energy conduit,⁴⁴ the US' concerns also involve the security of its 22 per cent oil imports and more than 50 strategic minerals that come from or transit through this littoral region.⁴⁵

China, though an extra-littoral nation to the Bay of Bengal, has become an emerging player here, due to its southward orientation and interests in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁶ The country's aspiration to expand its influence in the Bay of Bengal is a part of its long-aspired vision of developing strong foothold in the Indian Ocean region. Its overall growth of power and influence in the Asia-Pacific, including its naval capabilities, designates the country as a key stakeholder in the region.⁴⁷ The major concerns of China involve the security of its energy supply and its seaborne trade with South Asia, Middle East and Africa. Although China does not admit explicitly, its perceived fear of containment by the US on one hand and India on the other has made the country to appear cautious, and to engage with the littoral countries so that it manages an uninterrupted energy supply and trade transactions with other parts of the world.⁴⁸

for members and committees of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 13 November 2012.

⁴¹ The speech delivered by the US Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta at Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore, 02 June 2012.

⁴² Quad group nations are: the US, Japan, Australia, and India.

⁴³ Ashok Sharma, "U.S.-India Strategic Partnership: An Overview of Defense and Nuclear Courtship," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 04 July 2013.

⁴⁴ Andrew E Erickson, Walter C. Ladwig and Justin D. Mikolay, "Diego Garcia and United States' Emerging Indian Ocean Strategy," *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2010, pp. 214-217.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ K Yhome, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Sujit Dutta, "China's Emerging Power and Military Role: Implications For South Asia", in Jonathan D. Pollack and Richard H. Yang (eds.), *In China's Shadow: Regional Perspectives on Chinese Foreign Policy and Military Development*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1998.

⁴⁸ Gordon Sandy, "Strategic Interest of Major Indian Ocean Powers: An Australian Perspective", in Harjeet Singh (ed.), *South Asia Defence and Strategic Year Book 2010*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2010.

Over the years, China has strengthened its defence and economic cooperation with the Bay of Bengal littoral countries.⁴⁹ For instance, it has cultivated relationships with Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh through mega-infrastructure projects including port development. Certain sites on the Bay of Bengal are of particular interest to China. These include, but are not limited to, ports along the coastline: Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Chittagong in Bangladesh. These Chinese activities often have been dubbed a “string of pearls” in an attempt to characterise them as a coordinated Chinese effort to establish strategic lodgments along the Indian Ocean littoral.⁵⁰ According to Lin,

China’s ‘pearls’ consist of an upgraded airship on Woody Island in Paracel archipelago, a container shipping facility in Chittagong, Bangladesh, the construction of deep water port in Sittwe, Myanmar, the construction of navy base in Gwadar, Pakistan, a pipeline through Islamabad and over Karakoram Highway to Kashgar in Xinjiang province, intelligence gathering facilities on islands in the Bay of Bengal near the Malacca Strait and the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, etc. with more projects in the planning.⁵¹



Source: globalbalita.com

⁴⁹ “US \$1.5 Billion Chinese Built Deep Sea Port Opens in Sri Lanka”, *Taipei Times*, 07 June 2012.

⁵⁰ Nilanathi Samaranayake, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ Christina Y. Lin, “Militaryization of China’s Energy Security Policy-Defence Cooperation and WMD Proliferation Along its String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean”, Institut für Strategie-Politik-Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung (ISPSW), Berlin, Germany, 18 June 2008, pp. 3-4.

However, China is keen to preserve its interests in the Bay of Bengal particularly to ensure the security of the vital sea lanes of communication. Chinese strategy became evident that with a powerful navy, it has the ability to dominate the regional security matters. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has been producing frigates, destroyers, submarines and missile boats at an unprecedented speed. It already has commissioned its first air craft carrier.⁵² It appears to have established some communication facilities and a radar station in Coco Island in the Rakhine coast of Myanmar to observe the naval movements in the Bay of Bengal.⁵³ China fears that the continuing Indo-American cooperation in defence and maritime spheres would prolong the US hegemony and prevent the establishment of a post-American, Sino-centric hierarchical order in Asia.⁵⁴

4. Bangladesh's Stake in the Bay of Bengal

Bangladesh's maritime territory in the Bay of Bengal is of paramount importance to its national interest and security. Bangladesh has 47,211 sq kms of coastal area which is approximately 32 per cent of the total land mass of the country.⁵⁵ It is the gateway for Bangladesh to the Indian Ocean.⁵⁶ The maritime delimitation of March 2012 grants Bangladesh with 200 nautical miles Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), extensive share of outer continental shelf beyond 200 miles and full 12 nautical miles territorial sea around St Martin's Island and so on.⁵⁷ It has not only brought ample resources and opportunities for Bangladesh, but also given huge responsibility on the country to effectively patrol maritime zones, safeguard sea lanes of communication as well as maintain effective maritime governance in the area.

In the changing context as discussed in the previous section, the delimitation of the maritime zone has necessitated revisiting Bangladesh's stakes and interests in the Bay of Bengal region. The first and foremost task is to establish effective control and sovereign entitlements in the country's maritime jurisdiction. This is fundamental for fighting both traditional security threats and geopolitical barriers. Bangladesh has to keep in mind that the Bay of Bengal is fast turning into a hotbed of rivalry involving India, China and the USA.⁵⁸ Besides, Bangladesh has long-disputed maritime boundary with India and conflicting claims over the South Talpatti Island, located 3.5 kms from

⁵² Seth Robson, "China's naval aspirations: A blue water force", *Stars and Stripes*, 25 June 2013.

⁵³ Andrew Selth, "Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth", *Regional Outlook Paper*, No. 10, Griffith Asia Institute, 2007.

⁵⁴ Mohan Malik, "China and India Today: Diplomatic Jostle, Militaries Prepare", *World Affairs*, July-August 2012.

⁵⁵ Mohammad Rubaiyat Rahman, "Regional Cooperation in Maritime Security: A View from the Bay of Bengal", *Annual International Studies Convention on Re-imagining Global Orders: Perspectives from the South*, organised by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India, 10-12 December 2013.

⁵⁶ Ayabur Rahman, "Challenges in conducting Bangladesh's foreign policy", *The Daily Star*, 15th Anniversary Special, 19 February 2006.

⁵⁷ Syed Tashfin Chowdhury, "Bangladesh Wins Offshore Claims Against Myanmar", *Asia Times Online*, 20 March 2012.

⁵⁸ Sakhawat Hussein, "Geo-strategic Importance of Bangladesh", *The Daily Star*, 15th Anniversary Special, 19 February 2006.

the mouth of the Hariabhangha River, which serves as the border between Bangladesh and India. Unlike with Myanmar, a legal arbitration might not be enough to settle the dispute with India, requiring effective power projection to maintain stability in the region. Importantly, India has the ability to successfully blockade the Bay of Bengal with a potential to inflict grave economic damage for Bangladesh.⁵⁹ One crucial thing is that one of the strategic Indian marine outposts, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which is developing to be an important military base is only about 300 miles south of Bangladesh's prime seaport of Chittagong.⁶⁰ Bangladesh also encounters traditional security threats from Myanmar as reflected in the incidents of 2008 and 2009 when the naval vessels of both countries confronted in the disputed territorial waters.⁶¹ In this context, Bangladesh needs to pursue maritime capability to project effective power over the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf and beyond to both gain the legitimacy of its jurisdiction as well as to defend the territorial integrity of the country.

The strategic importance of Bangladesh would be sustained and augmented further only if it can acquire adequate naval strength to command its maritime jurisdiction as well as act strategically keeping a balanced engagement with the Indo-Pacific big powers. While due to the establishment of a naval base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean reduces Bangladesh's strategic importance to the US, the country particularly its Chittagong port and coastal St Martin Island receive immense priority to China. China's profound interest in the proposed deep sea port of Bangladesh underlies much of its strategic objective in the Bay of Bengal region.⁶² On the other hand, the US, in recent years, is also strengthening maritime cooperation with Bangladesh to devise partnership so as to curb the expanding influence of the supposed 'String of Pearls' strategy of China. Maintaining the relations with both the big powers within acceptable bounds of one another is critical for Bangladesh's command in the Bay of Bengal.

A vital maritime stake for Bangladesh is to ensure maritime security, particularly to curb irregular security threats in the sea waters (see table 1). Armed robbery, petty theft and piracy remain major concerns for Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal region.⁶³ The safety of both seaborne trade and energy transportation are

⁵⁹ Andrew Detsch, "With Pricey Naval Revamp, Bangladesh Can't Afford to Fail", *The Diplomat*, 22 November 2013.

⁶⁰ Sakhawat Hussein, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Sam Bateman, "Bay of Bengal: A New Sea of Troubles?", *RSIS Commentaries*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, 21 May 2010.

⁶² Jonathan B. Miller, "China Making a Play at Bangladesh", *Forbes*, 03 January 2014.

⁶³ In Bangladesh coastline, threats are basically come from armed robbery and petty theft, rather than what is called "maritime piracy" according to international law of the sea. But Chittagong port of the country was listed as one of the most piracy-prone ports in the world by International Maritime Bureau. This was due to the mislabeling of armed robbery and petty theft as piracy by the local newspapers. For details, see Md. Khurshed Alam, "Maritime Piracy and Bangladesh Perspective", paper presented in the Seminar *Maritime Piracy and Human Response*, organised by Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), 05 March 2013, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

fundamental for Bangladesh’s economy. Almost 90 per cent of the Gross National Product (GNP) depends on sea trade and commerce as well as almost 100 per cent of its energy requirements travels by sea.⁶⁴ As many as 2500 merchant ships arrive at Chittagong and Mongla ports every year. The menace of piracy is also threatening fishermen’s income. About 5 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bangladesh gleans from the fish produce.⁶⁵ Besides, trafficking of arms and drugs via sea routes, illegal and unregulated fishing and other living resources are also present. Curbing security threats in the maritime zone, therefore, appears to be an important priority of Bangladesh.

Table 1: Irregular Threats in Bangladeshi Sea Waters

| Vulnerable Areas | Threats | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| | High | Medium | Low |
| Sea ports | Natural disaster | Smuggling of goods and arms | Piracy |
| Merchant ships | Petty theft | Armed robbery | Piracy |
| Non-biological resources | Natural disaster | Petty theft, armed robbery | Piracy |
| Biological resources | Illegal exploitation | Over exploitation | Marine Pollution |
| Marine environment | Pollution | Sea level rise | - |
| Coastal population | Natural disaster | Sea level rise | Extortion |
| Sea farers | Petty theft, armed robbery | Natural disaster | Extortion |

Source: The table is a modified version, originally taken from Masudul Karim Siddique, “Irregular Threats at Sea that Never Cease to Bother”, *Sharanika*, published on the occasion of the 18th Anniversary of Bangladesh Coast Guard, 14 February 2013, pp. 36-47.

The most significant of all is Bangladesh’s drive to safeguard, explore and extract mineral and marine resources. Natural resources such as petroleum, carbon and marine fisheries in the Bay of Bengal are significant components of future economic development of Bangladesh.⁶⁶ It has potential to become one of the biggest sources of offshore hydrocarbon reserves including gas and oil as well as organic materials such as fish, herbs, creepers, corals and so on. While almost entire pool of resources are yet to explore in Bangladesh’s part of the Bay of Bengal, the discovery of the Krishna Godavari and Mahanandi Basins of India with a potential reserve of 100 trillion cubic feet of gas (200 trillion cubic feet according to unofficial estimates) indicates that the prospect of hydrocarbon reserve in Bangladesh’s part is massively high.⁶⁷ Myanmar also discovered seven trillion cubic feet of gas in 2006

⁶⁴ “Bangladesh Free to Explore Resources in Bay: PM”, *The Daily Star*, 11 December 2012.

⁶⁵ According to data of the Department of Fisheries, the Government of Bangladesh.

⁶⁶ Sifat Uddin, “US Naval Interest in Bangladesh”, *The Daily Star*, 28 July 2012.

⁶⁷ “Sea border issue fails to grab govt focus”, *The Daily Star*, 03 November 2008.

close to Bangladesh waters and India discovered two billion barrels of oil.⁶⁸ India is utilising its share in the Bay of Bengal significantly. For instance, a large gas field in the Bay of Bengal produces one-third of the country's domestic supply. Besides, the huge reserve of marine fisheries in the Bay of Bengal, estimated 475 species⁶⁹, also presents an essential maritime incentive for Bangladesh.

One of the currently discussed priorities of Bangladesh is to undertake an ambitious plan to develop a blue water economy along with a deep sea port in order to increase seaborne trade and connect the country's economy with the emerging economic tigers of Southeast and East Asia. It can be termed as "look-sea policy", in which the plan would be to develop coastal cities facing the Bay of Bengal as industrial and logistics hub of the Indo-Pacific region. Myanmar's ongoing Special Economic Zone (SEZ) projects in Kyaukpyu in Rakhine state, Thilawa near Yangon and Dawei in Tanintharyi could be some examples to follow.⁷⁰ The cornerstone of Bangladesh's policy in this area is the development of a deep sea port in Sonadia Island. Many governments including China and India have proposed to assist Bangladesh with the construction of the port. The ongoing negotiation with China is progressing in this regard. While Bangladesh strongly maintains only economic motives of the deep sea port, in effect, the port will not only enhance geo-economic position of Bangladesh, it will also serve as the major strategic outpost for the country's maritime security.

It is also in the interest of Bangladesh to maintain stable and effective maritime governance by promoting regional cooperation and collective actions to face transnational vulnerabilities and climate change induced calamities. In addition to natural disasters, rising sea levels caused by climate change pose a long-term security threat to coastal regions. Large numbers of Bangladesh's total population live at sea level in low-lying area particularly in the coastline areas. An eight-inch rise in sea levels could result in 10 million environmental refugees by 2030.⁷¹ Besides, issues of piracy and illegal maritime activities can be best addressed through cooperative surveillance and information sharing arrangements.⁷² Bangladesh has propounded the formation of a SAARC Centre for Maritime Cooperation which would foster maritime cooperation and dialogue, secure atmosphere for the sustained exploitation of the resources of the sea and provide a framework of cooperation for weather prediction and marine environment protection. Bangladesh also needs to build a common vision of maritime security, unhindered passage of trade, counterterrorism and piracy, disaster prevention and humanitarian relief in a balanced and inclusive manner for safeguarding regional commons.⁷³ The next section will discuss how Bangladesh is

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Md Owasim Uddin Bhuyan, "No survey on fish reserve in 32 years", *The New Age*, 19 February 2013.

⁷⁰ KYhome, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *op. cit.*

⁷² Mohammad Rubaiyat Rahman, *op. cit.*

⁷³ Ataur Rahman, Keynote paper presented in the seminar on *Bangladesh-China Cooperation and the Security Dimensions of the Bay of Bengal*, organised by Centre for East Asia (Foundations) at CIRDAP Auditorium, Dhaka, 22 December 2012.

undertaking maritime capability building activities as well as what other areas need to be taken into consideration for comprehensively addressing maritime security.

5. Maritime Capability Building of Bangladesh

5.1 Modernisation of Bangladesh Navy

The emerging security landscape in the Bay of Bengal and the associated strategic postures projected by both the regional and the extra-regional forces have created a logical culmination in the maritime capability building initiatives by the littoral countries like Bangladesh. As a response, Bangladesh government has engaged into diverse capability building activities, particularly focusing on the modernisation of its navy. While the prime mission of the navy is to make effective use of the Bay of Bengal and adjoining sea areas in the interests of national development and to safeguard territorial sovereignty against external aggression in any form, it lacks adequate strength to perform its duty effectively. However, the navy is undergoing major transformation since last decade. The government of Bangladesh has undertaken an ambitious procurement and expansion program under “The Forces Goal 2030” (initially under “The Draft Forces Goal 2020” proposed in 2005-2006), which envisaged the navy with submarines, helicopters, maritime patrol-aircrafts and so forth. This plan has thoroughly assessed the navy’s deficiencies and offered endeavours to address those in phases. The modernisation initiative began with the adoption of the 10 year development plan in 2009. The navy’s capacity building is now coming into focus primarily to protect maritime interests in the large EEZ that the country has acquired. Given the importance of maritime boundary, the government has put substantial importance on equipping the navy. Statistics of defence purchase from fiscal year 2008-09 to 2012-13 show that Tk 4,975.49 crore was spent for the navy, compared to Tk 5,407.27 crore for the army.⁷⁴ Several programmes have been taken to turn the navy into a balanced and strong force by 2030.

Bangladesh Navy has undertaken modernisation drive in four fundamental areas of maritime capability building. The first area is the *maritime surveillance capacity* which is of paramount importance against both conventional and non-conventional threats. Traditionally, the navy was dependent on the clock surface ship deployments for the maritime policing role, as it lacked air surveillance capabilities. With the establishment of aviation wing in 2011, the surveillance capability of the navy has considerably improved.⁷⁵ The aviation wing will have both rotary and fixed wing air assets. The navy has already acquired two Augusta Westland AW109E helicopters in June 2011 and has three surface platforms including BNS Bangabandhu, Dhaleswari and Bijoy for operating these helicopters at sea.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ “Defence purchase govt’s priority”, *The Daily Star*, 31 August 2013.

⁷⁵ “PM inaugurates 3 warships, 2 patrol aircraft”, *The Daily Sun*, 30 August 2013.

⁷⁶ “Bangladesh Navy – Modernization”, *Global Security*, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/bangladesh/navy-modernization.htm>, accessed on 12 January 2014.

The second major area of modernisation is the *surface capability building*. To address the capability gap in this field, two castle class offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) have been acquired from the UK in March 2011. These OPVs are now being deployed regularly in the Bay of Bengal. Surveillance and fire power augmentation of these OPVs are ongoing. Moreover, two new large patrol crafts (LPCs), fitted with surface-to-surface missiles and medium range guns with search and fire control systems, were constructed in Wuchang Shipyard, China. Besides, the navy has operationalised the Otomat⁷⁷ missile system of BNS Bangabandhu. The navy has also acquired QW-2⁷⁸ shoulder launched surface-to-air missiles to improve the ships' self-defence capability against air threats. The navy is also planning to build two new corvettes with all-round capabilities. The inclusion of more surface platforms and augmentation of the existing ones will multiply the navy's offshore capabilities.

The third area involves the inclusion of *submarine capacity* as one of the three pillars of Bangladesh government's plan to transform its navy into a three dimensional force by 2019.⁷⁹ Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared the government's plan in December 2010. The recent rush of submarine acquisition by most of the South and Southeast Asian nations highlights the platform's importance in maintaining maritime sovereignty. Bangladesh Navy is actively negotiating with China to procure two diesel-electric submarines.⁸⁰ For that end, the force has already taken steps to build infrastructure and train up its personnel.

Finally, the development and organisation of *special operations forces* is another priority area for maritime capability building. Bangladesh Navy is working to prepare for special operations during war and peacetime including antiterrorism and antipiracy capability. It has introduced 'Special Warfare, Diving and Salvage' (SWADS) teams in 2011.⁸¹ To help capacity building, the US has provided Bangladesh with 16 Defender class high-speed boats and 22 rigid hull inflatable boats. These boats are playing an active role during the navy's support in civilian governance in the maritime related areas. The SWADS personnel are trained to dispose of explosives and bombs, conduct underwater search, rescue or salvage, and deep diving for commandos. Their training and ability to move quickly to remote areas would also help the navy to better handle natural disasters and post-disaster situation.⁸²

Besides, operational and infrastructural development, Bangladesh Navy's modernisation drive also includes measures to enhance *resource mobilisation capacity*. Research and development particularly the navy's drive for building capacity in oceanographic research became the first priority. For that end, the navy has acquired

⁷⁷ The Otomat is an anti-ship and coastal attack missile built by the Italian company Oto Melara jointly with Matra.

⁷⁸ QW-2 is a missile with all aspect attack capability and improved electronic counter-countermeasures (ECCM) capabilities.

⁷⁹ Shakhawat Liton, "Navy eyes sub, new frigates", *The Daily Star*, 24 June 2009.

⁸⁰ "Bangladesh Navy – Modernization", *op. cit.*

⁸¹ Sharier Khan, "Navy adds spl war unit to fight terror", *The Daily Star*, 26 November 2013.

⁸² *Ibid.*

an oceanographic survey ship, the BNS Anushandhan in 2010.⁸³ The ship is fitted with the latest equipment for carrying out surveys in deep seas. Besides, for human resource development, the navy is undergoing a major shift in the digitisation and transformation in terms of improving processes and infrastructures to ensure quality human resources. It has been upgrading its training facilities to match the changing technology and systems and also developing new training establishments. The newly introduced various automation systems are likely to enhance both its capacity and performances. Furthermore, the navy is getting involved in the defence industry sector particularly in shipbuilding industry. Matching the ongoing private sector shipbuilding boost, the navy has taken steps to reduce its long-term dependence on foreign warship builders. It has concluded a deal under which a Chinese company will help Khulna shipyard with construction and technology transfer.⁸⁴ The Shipyard has already started constructing five patrol crafts which will boost the navy's inshore maritime governance capability.

The promising modernisation scheme of the navy is a pragmatic and timely initiative by the Bangladesh government which requires further strengthening in the coming years. The implementation of the targeted measures within the projected time would be critical. Further emphasis needs to be given on training, quality and efficiency of the personnel as well as procuring advanced combat vehicles and weaponry. In the near future, Bangladesh Navy needs to be able to command at high seas as well.

5.2 Empowering the Coast Guard

Along with the navy, empowering the coast guard bears enormous significance in the overall maritime capability enhancement framework of Bangladesh. Established in 1994, Bangladesh Coast Guard, has been playing a significant role in preserving economic and security interests at sea, particularly protecting fisheries; controlling piracy, illegal immigration, smuggling and illicit trafficking; and conducting search and rescue as well as disaster relief operations. Over the years, from only two ships, the coast guard is gradually becoming a full grown national law and order agency entrusted with the responsibility of providing surveillance over the sea areas of Bangladesh. However, though the agency is required to provide security to the coastal and island communities of about 50 million people who are dependent on sea professions either directly or indirectly,⁸⁵ it lacks adequate men and resources, particularly high-powered ships and other vehicles. Equipped with only around two thousand people,⁸⁶ it is almost impossible to provide security in the vast area of jurisdiction in the Bay of Bengal. Similarly, the numbers of ships are inadequate

⁸³ "Bangladesh Navy – Modernization", *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ "Khulna Shipyard hands over locally made ship to army", *The Daily Star*, 14 November 2012.

⁸⁵ Masudul Karim Siddique, "Irregular Threats at Sea that Never Cease to Bother", *Sharanika*, published on the occasion of 18 Anniversary of Bangladesh Coast Guard, 14 February 2013, pp. 36-47.

⁸⁶ These people are also responsible to provide security in inland riverine waters of Bangladesh. See, *Ibid.*

including: one aging coastal patrol vessel (CPV) and one riverine patrol vessel (RPV) acquired from the navy; one inshore patrol vessel (IPV); two fast patrol boats (FPB); five high quality defender class boats and three metal shark ambulance pilot boats supplied by the USA; and indigenously built twenty dolphin class boats and one harbour patrol boat (HPB).⁸⁷

Though the Bangladesh government has promised to modernise the coast guard on several occasions,⁸⁸ plans were hardly materialised. With the delimitation of maritime boundary with Myanmar, now the area of jurisdiction is much bigger than before. It requires a coast guard, not only with enough men and resources, but also fortified with highly trained and efficient force operating modern vessels and boats. It is crucial that the coast guard is prioritised in the scheme of 'Forces Goal 2030' and modernised accordingly. For that end, newer ships are required to increase patrolling capacity at least up to continental shelf areas. Improvement of training facility particularly completing the construction of proposed training academy in Patuakhali is vital. Some other areas can include regular joint exercise with the neighbouring coast guards, and inter-agency coordination is also necessary to enhance the surveillance efficiency of the coast guard. Here, establishing a Maritime Interagency Coordination Centres (MIACC) in Chittagong and Mongla can harmonise the actions of concerned maritime agencies especially in combating crimes in the sea areas.⁸⁹

5.3 *Building Soft Capabilities*

Along with hard capabilities, a comprehensive capability building also requires considerable attention towards soft capabilities. Bangladesh is lagging behind in this area, specially when it comes to the issues of maritime capability. There are at least three areas that demand extensive attention from both government and private-led institutions. The first is the development of resource exploration and extraction capacities. Bangladesh needs to strengthen capacity in hydrographic survey and oceanographic research for measuring the feature affecting maritime navigation, marine construction, dredging, offshore oil exploration and drilling and related activities. Currently, the Hydrographic Department of Bangladesh Navy is responsible for ensuring availability of reliable and updated information on the marine environment.⁹⁰ But the country needs to develop comprehensive technological and technical know-how required for effectively exploring, drilling and extracting seabed mineral resources.

The second area is the construction of critical infrastructure at sea for facilitating seaborne trade, fight sea-induced natural disasters, control piracy and maritime pollution. Some priorities in the area are: the construction of deep sea port in Sonadia, increase capacity and efficiency of both Chittagong and Mongla ports, building

⁸⁷ Masudul Karim Siddique, *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ "Coast Guard to be modernised", *The Daily Star*, 15 February 2009. Also see, Mohammad Jamil Khan, "40 Coast Guard members awarded medals", *Dhaka Tribune*, 15 February 2014.

⁸⁹ Masudul Karim Siddique, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ According to the information of Hydrographic Department of Bangladesh Navy.

strategic communication facilities in some coastal Islands and so on. The country needs to develop a clear policy guideline for the deep sea port and settle the issue of contract with the interested countries as soon as possible. The delay in constructing the port is harming Bangladesh's economy exponentially and diminishing the growing prospect of the country to become a commercial and logistical hub in the region.

And the final area is the issue of maritime governance as the cornerstone of Bangladesh's long-term maritime policy in the Bay of Bengal. Currently, maritime affairs are managed without any central coordination. There are many agencies including the navy, the coast guard, Maritime Fisheries Department, Department of Dhipping, Shipping Corporation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, port authorities, custom authorities, Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited and so on are operating often with overlapping jurisdiction in maritime related activities. For greater coordination, a central coordinating body would be critical in the coming years, given the increased level of activities in maritime areas in near future. For that end, Bangladesh government can think of either designating any of the relevant ministries as the lead body or establishing a separate full ministry of maritime affairs entrusted with the responsibility of managing the maritime affairs.

5. Conclusion

The Bay of Bengal is a lifeline for Bangladesh which has immense potential to contribute to its economy, if the enormous reserve of seabed resources are explored and extracted effectively. The geostrategic location of the Bay of Bengal has made it enormously important to the other countries including India, Myanmar, China and the US as well. The paper delineates the stakes of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal and analyses the country's necessity of engaging in maritime capability building endeavours. While other littoral countries, particularly India and Myanmar, are acting proactively by redefining their objectives and reassessing their priorities in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh is yet to develop a comprehensive maritime strategy to deal with the emerging issues and realities in the Bay of Bengal region. The consolidating efforts of the Indian Navy on one hand and the expanding naval ties of Myanmar with China and India on the other pose long-term challenges to Bangladesh's stable and peaceful maritime governance. On the extra-littoral front, the US and China have also been drawn to the geographic and strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal and rebalancing their respective strategies to shape the rising security dynamics in their own favour, either in the form of partnership building or by marshalling their military presence in the littoral outposts of the Bay of Bengal. Both the Obama administration's 'Asia Pivot' policy and the supposed Chinese strategy of 'String of Pearls' have brought compelling situation for Bangladesh to act in a balanced and stable manner, projecting its clear and definite national interests, instead of appearing to be taking sides. These realities demand a long-term maritime capability building programme for Bangladesh, where the country would not only

develop strength and capacities, but also engage with both littoral and extra-littoral countries in creating a peaceful and prosperous Bay of Bengal region. This is fundamental to ensure the security of the sea lanes of communication, to boost seaborne trade and to maintain uninterrupted energy supply for the countries of the adjacent regions.

As a littoral country, Bangladesh needs to act proactively in providing security of the maritime areas under its own control. It has to employ its geopolitical and geostrategic advantages to extract a better output from the emerging landscape. The verdict of the ITLOS has brought a unique opportunity for Bangladesh to utilise the vast maritime areas for economic and development output so as to complement the fast saturating inland resources. To this end, Bangladesh needs to adopt a comprehensive maritime strategy, focusing on both hard capabilities including the modernisation of the navy and the coast guard as well as soft capabilities such as maritime governance, research and development, and resource exploration and exploitation capacities. Effective maritime governance is crucial to conserve, explore and manage both living and non-living resources at sea. It also helps to better coordinate among agencies working on maritime affairs, cooperate with other countries having overlapping interests and claims, and to fight irregular and transnational threats and vulnerabilities including piracy, illegal fishing, theft, smuggling, human and drug trafficking and so on. With a vigilant and comprehensive maritime capability, Bangladesh can reap the optimum benefit from the emerging opportunities in the Bay of Bengal as well as safeguard its rightful claims in the region.