

*Mahmudul Haque Majumder*

## MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE BAY OF BENGAL: A BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

### Abstract

The Bay of Bengal, once at the heart of global history, was lost into oblivion for more than half a century. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it started to re-emerge as a strategic theatre of competition and cooperation amidst evolving geopolitical seascape. With diverse political, economic and geostrategic interests of the littorals fueled by the presence of extra-regional powers, the Bay is today confronted with a myriad of maritime security challenges, both traditional and non-traditional. This paper argues that the concept of maritime security has transcended the boundary of the traditional notion of ‘state-centric’ or ‘sovereignty at sea’, focusing more on ‘maintaining good order at sea.’ It also recognises that the boundless sea makes it difficult for any single nation to address the wide-ranging maritime security continuum, making security cooperation the only practical option. After the historic maritime boundary delimitations with the neighbours, Bangladesh’s maritime outlook has started to take a new shape. Nonetheless, without cooperative engagements involving other littoral states, the country cannot escape burgeoning maritime security challenges. This article identifies a plethora of maritime security threats affecting all the littorals, and suggests various measures to effectively chart a way across the wide spectrum of security cooperation to address maritime security threats in the Bay of Bengal.

**Keywords:** Maritime Security, Maritime Security Cooperation, Traditional Threats, Non-Traditional Threats, Bay of Bengal

### 1. Introduction

“Security is not military hardware, though it may include it. Security is not military force, though it may involve it. Security is not traditional military activity, though it may encompass it. Security is development. Without development, there can be no security. A developing nation that does not in fact develop simply cannot remain ‘secure’”—Robert S McNamara.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S McNamara, “Address by US Secretary of Defense Robert S McNamara before American Society of Newspaper Editors” (Speech, Montreal, Canada, May 18, 1966).

The first essence of maritime cooperation can arguably be traced back to the heritage of Hugo Grotius' conception of *mare liberum*<sup>2</sup>—an idea advocating the preservation of freedom of access for the benefit of all,<sup>3</sup> where the High Sea is regarded as one of the traditionally defined “global commons” or “common heritage of mankind.” However, drawing from the post-Cold War European concept of “Common Security,”<sup>4</sup> it was Eric Grove who first explored the idea of cooperative maritime security.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the Cold War period, Security Studies had been a sub-discipline of International Relations (IR), which was state-centric, landlocked, militaristic and embodied an object of study largely in the northern hemisphere.<sup>6</sup> Today, the concept of maritime security has traversed the boundary of the traditional notion of Westphalian sovereignty (security against military threat and sovereignty at sea), and now accentuates more on ‘good order at sea’ encompassing a host of factors. While the Copenhagen School promotes the duality of security, i.e. state security and societal security, Buzan identifies five traditional sectors of security: political, military, economic, environmental and societal.<sup>7</sup> All these dimensions are inextricably linked to the maritime domain. Hence, in today’s burgeoning maritime security lexicon amidst rapidly changing global and regional seascape, cooperative security can no longer be viewed within the narrow lens of realists’ ‘zero-sum’ game. Consequently, maritime security cooperation has gradually taken its due share in global and regional policy lexicons, which is aptly applicable in the context of the Bay of Bengal (BoB).

Since antiquity, civilisation and human development have been revolving around the sea. While almost 72 per cent of the earth’s surface is covered by water, nearly three-quarters of the world’s population lives within 50 km of the sea<sup>8</sup> and till

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<sup>2</sup> *Mare Liberum* (Latin), in English ‘Freedom of the Seas’, is a book written by Dutch Jurist and Philosopher Hugo Grotius in 1609.

<sup>3</sup> Nico Schrijver, “Managing the Global Commons: Common Good or Common Sink?” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 7 (2016):1252–1267.

<sup>4</sup> In 1982, the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues (commonly known as the Palme Commission), Chaired by late Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, first generated the idea of Common Security. See Olaf Palme et. al, *Common Security: A Blueprint for Survival* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 7; Olof Palme International Center, *Common Security—For Our Shared Future* (Stockholm: Olof Palme International Center, International Peace Bureau, IPB and International Trade Union Confederation, ITUC 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Duk-Ki Kim, “Cooperative Maritime Security in Northeast Asia,” *United States Naval War College Review* 52, no. 1 (1999): 55–56.

<sup>6</sup> Ruxandra-Laura Boşilcă, Susana Ferreira, and Barry J. Ryan, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Maritime Security* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations* (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books Ltd, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Broom, “Only 15 per cent of the World’s Coastlines Remain in Their Natural State,” accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/02/ecologically-intact-coastlines-rare-study/>

today, around 80 per cent of the world's commerce travels by sea.<sup>9</sup> With the depletion of land resources and overwhelming dependence on maritime trade, especially for the growing energy needs, the nations are now increasingly looking towards the seas. BoB, the largest Bay in the world, hosts Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and part of Indonesia (Sumatra).<sup>10</sup> The Bay is strategically located at the critical crossroad of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, connecting South Asia to Southeast Asia. This region houses almost a quarter of the world's population with a combined GDP of around US\$7.5 trillion.<sup>11</sup> The preeminence of the Indian Ocean and the evolving Indo-Pacific geopolitical framework has added additional attention to the BoB. Consequently, the concern over maritime security in the BoB has become a widely-discussed issue. Due to the intricacies, diversities and transnational character, it is almost impossible for a single nation to address the wide-ranging maritime security challenges alone, which brought the concept of security cooperation to the forefront.

With its strategic location and rich maritime heritage, Bangladesh remains a maritime nation in all counts of the Mahanian<sup>12</sup> definition of seapower. Bounded by two neighbours on three sides, the southern part of the country is exposed to the BoB, often regarded as the "Third Neighbour." Since antiquity, the numerous rivers crisscrossing the Bengal delta and an elongated coast of the BoB has been defining the maritime identity of the region. Eventually, the seafaring people of the Bengal grew diverse nautical skills; notably navigation, trade, shipbuilding and maritime warfare. Despite a glorious maritime inheritance, Bangladesh's maritime identity faded into oblivion during the two successive colonial periods—the British and Pakistan. Even after the independence, Abul Kalam notes, the country neither inherited any maritime status with a demarcated maritime boundary nor carried an enduring maritime legacy in politico-security awareness, strategic formulations or policy formulation.<sup>13</sup> Of late, especially after the peaceful settlement of maritime boundaries with its neighbours in 2012 and 2014 under the prudent leadership and initiative of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the country has started to revitalise its maritime identity. Nonetheless, being a littoral of the BoB, Bangladesh is either directly threatened by maritime security threats around its water or likely to be

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "Review of Maritime Transport 2022," accessed December 20, 2022, [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2022\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2022_en.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Sunil S. Amrith, "The Bay of Bengal in Peril from Climate Change," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Nafisa Yeasmin and Pavel Tkach, "Regional Management of the Bay of Bengal Water Area: The Challenges of Maritime Security," *Academicus International Scientific Journal*, no. 25 (2022):104–121.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), an American Navy Admiral, historian and maritime strategist, first coined the term 'sea power'.

<sup>13</sup> Abul Kalam, *Bangladesh's Maritime Policy: Entwining Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2019), 1.

confronted with spillover effects from various security issues within the broader Indian Ocean or the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, an effective cooperative security mechanism in the BoB is paramount for Bangladesh's maritime security discourse, not only to defend its maritime sovereignty and territorial integrity but also to safeguard its Blue Economy agenda vis-à-vis sustainable development aiming to achieve Vision 2041.

The core focus of this paper is to rationalise why Bangladesh needs to pay serious heed to the emergent maritime security challenges and seek regional maritime security cooperation within the BoB. It also suggests some plausible ways towards cooperative engagements. Premised on the qualitative method, this paper carefully examines existing literature from diverse sources—books, journal articles, government and non-government policy papers and documents, newspapers and web articles. Besides, data and ideas were gathered through expert interviews. This paper is structured into seven sections including the introduction and conclusion. Section two highlights the significance of the emerging BoB. While section three analyses the reasons for evolving nature of maritime security, section four discusses various traditional and non-traditional security threats in the BoB. Section five explains imperatives and impediments towards maritime security cooperation. Section six recommends various options along a wide spectrum of maritime security cooperation. Finally, section seven concludes the paper.

## 2. Strategic Emergence of the Bay of Bengal

The French Navy-led three-day exercise 'La Pérouse' in the BoB on 05 April 2021, participated by the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) navies (the US, India, Japan and Australia) is a manifestation of the strategic emergence of the BoB. The BoB was once at the heart of global history as a region.<sup>14</sup> In the colonial era, a succession of European powers dominated the Bay—Portuguese, Dutch, French and British. Until the end of World War II, the British controlled the Bay politically, militarily and economically. The demise of the colonial epoch and the formation of new states in and around the Bay eventually resulted in economic, political and geostrategic divergence<sup>15</sup> as well as new fault lines in the region. Nonetheless, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the BoB again gained its strategic importance and continues to draw attention to regional and global actors. Its strategic

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<sup>14</sup> Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Constantino Xavier and Darshana M. Baruah, "Connecting the Bay of Bengal: The Problem," accessed December 20, 2022, <https://carnegieindia.org/2018/03/01/connecting-bay-of-bengal-problem-pub-75710>

significance is stemmed from several factors; some notable ones are highlighted below.

## 2.1 *Changing Geostrategic Seascape*

Alfred Mahan once prophesied, “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia... the destiny of the world would be decided on its waters”. From its unique strategic position, the Bay connects two large water bodies of the world—the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean via the Malacca Strait. It is the principal maritime gateway not only for the littorals but also for land-locked countries like Nepal and Bhutan. Due to their geographical proximity, Singapore and the Maldives are also linked to it. The unprecedented growth of China’s economic and military might with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has elevated the strategic outlook of this region. Likewise, the promotion of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) by the US and its allies has furthered the strategic engagement in the BoB. As BRI and FOIP or Indo-Pacific Strategy continue to advance, the presence of the global powers and their geopolitical steering is likely to deepen in the BoB region. Amidst such a scenario, the Indian Ocean is becoming the “centre stage of the world.”<sup>16</sup> Asia’s claim of the “continent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” is arguably stemmed from the growing significance of the Indian Ocean, where the world’s vital strategic chokepoints including the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz, Suez Canal and Bab-el-Mandeb are located. The BoB, which Brewster calls a “strategic space,”<sup>17</sup> lies at the heart of the Indian Ocean.

## 2.2 *Geo-economic Potential and Maritime Connectivity*

The littoral states of the BoB count around a quarter of the world’s population and its coastal rim is inhabited by almost half a billion people.<sup>18</sup> It comprises a large portion of Asia’s emerging economies. For the last few years, with a collective gross domestic product near US\$3 trillion, the region could withstand average annual rates of economic growth between 3.4 and 7.5 per cent.<sup>19</sup> The geo-economic potential of the region is also subjected to its natural resources—living and non-living. It houses one of the world’s largest fishing grounds, generating almost

<sup>16</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “Centre Stage for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> David Brewster, “Dividing Lines: Evolving Mental Maps of the Bay of Bengal,” *Asian Security* 10, no. 2 (2014): 151–167.

<sup>18</sup> Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Md. Khurshed Alam, “Emerging Maritime Development in the Bay of Bengal—An Opinion,” *Bangladesh Maritime Journal*, Special Issue (June 2021): 77–84.

15 per cent of the global total fish catch (approximately 9 million tons per annum).<sup>20</sup> It not only constitutes some of the world's largest gas reserves and other seabed minerals but is believed to have the presence of a large amount of oil. Connectivity is the most compelling enabler in today's world of interdependence (or over-dependence). It is not the usual "high" politics of states, military strength, or a world of zero-sum games but connectivity, to be regarded as the driving force of the twenty-first century.<sup>21</sup> The BoB, with its enormous potential for maritime connectivity, constitutes a trade route for one-fourth of global commerce, where about 50,000 vessels pass through it annually.<sup>22</sup> Half of the global container traffic passes through this region, and the ports of the littorals handle almost 30 per cent of world trade.<sup>23</sup> Around 66 per cent of oil shipments for China, Japan and India and over 33 per cent of the global bulk cargo traverse through the Bay, making it the conduit of global integration.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. The Evolving Contour of Maritime Security

The maritime security contour is expansive and multifaceted and comprises various fragments in a way that it is almost impossible to define where maritime security begins and where it ends.<sup>25</sup> The maritime security conception has evolved over the centuries entwined with the history of 3,000 years of naval battles, dominance over the seas to retain control over Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) and natural resources, maritime power projection, colonialism or globalisation and specific security threats. Within the growing ambit of security dynamics, the concept of maritime security is rapidly changing. The burgeoning geopolitical, geostrategic, geo-economic, military and environmental significances of the seas are altering the out-fashioned notion of seapower. From Mahan's seapower that "embraces all that tends to make a people great upon the sea or by the sea",<sup>26</sup> its realm now resides more on, as Colin Gray advocates, an "instrument of state policy"<sup>27</sup> in other words, furthering national interest. Hence, 'hard seapower' is either contested or more

<sup>20</sup> Alam, "Emerging Maritime Development," 77.

<sup>21</sup> Rashed Uz Zaman, "Bangladesh's Quest for Development and the Sino-Indian Contestation," in *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*, eds. N. Peng, G. Ali and Yi Zhang (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 138.

<sup>22</sup> Y. Yagama Reddy, "Bay of Bengal Community to Accomplish Regional Cooperation: Rhetoric and Reality!" *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2022): 41–55.

<sup>23</sup> Alam, "Emerging Maritime Development," 77.

<sup>24</sup> "Japan for Better Connectivity between Cox's Bazar and Rakhine," *The Daily Star*, March 15, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Barry J. Ryan, "Maritime Security in a Critical Context," in *Routledge Handbook of Maritime Security*, eds. Ruxandra-Laura Boşilcă, Susana Ferreira, and Barry J. Ryan (New York: Routledge, 2022), 27.

<sup>26</sup> A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660–1783* (15<sup>th</sup> edition), (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1898), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 3.

entangled with the ‘soft seapower.’ Speller correctly identifies that the theoretical analysis of maintenance of good order at sea has not been traditionally discussed like wartime activity or even diplomatic roles.<sup>28</sup> As such, the maritime security lexicon is now complex, interconnected and all-inclusive.

There is no global consensus over the definition of maritime security. However, as the interpretations of threats can differ significantly, the understanding of the concept of maritime security will always vary according to the divergent political interests and normative understandings of related actors.<sup>29</sup> In the simplest form, it represents any ‘threat’ in the maritime domain—both traditional and non-traditional. Given the broader edifice of today’s maritime security contour, Bueger and Edmunds suggest four domains of the contemporary maritime security complex, where each domain accommodates a series of cross-cutting security concerns.<sup>30</sup> These are: national security, marine environment, economic development and human security. On the other hand, Rahman identifies five interconnected areas: security of the sea itself; ocean governance; maritime border protection; military activities at sea; and security regulation of the maritime transportation system.<sup>31</sup> Maritime security, as such, can embrace four characteristics: interconnectedness, transnationality, liminality, and national and institutional cross-jurisdictionality.<sup>32</sup>

Several factors make the spectrum of maritime security wide-ranging. Historically, the oceans and seas are the most popular and cheaper means of transportation for goods and people. They are also blessed with numerous natural resources. Hence, it eventually raised concern over the dominance of water mass by the maritime powers to secure their SLOCs and gain control over strategic chokepoints. Oceans and seas are hubs for diverse economic activities, which attract domestic and foreign illegal intruders, such as pirates and armed robbers. Oceans and seas are boundless, which helps to conceal one’s ill intentions/activities and criminals can easily transcend the boundary between countries. Hence, maritime security threats are transnational, by and large.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 150.

<sup>29</sup> Christian Bueger, “What is Maritime Security?” *Marine Policy* 53 (2015):160.

<sup>30</sup> Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, “Beyond Seablindness: A New Agenda for Maritime Security Studies,” *International Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2017): 1299.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Rahman, *Concepts of Maritime Security: A Strategic Perspective on Alternative Visions for Good Order and Security at Sea, with Policy Implications for New Zealand* (New Zealand: Centre for Strategic Studies, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Bueger and Edmunds, “Beyond Seablindness: A New Agenda,” 1300–1301.



## 4. The Continuum of Maritime Security Threats in the BoB

Two broad categories of maritime security threats, as applicable in the BoB are—traditional and non-traditional. Again, non-traditional maritime security threats can include numerous issues as discussed in this section.

### 4.1 *Traditional Security Threats*

Traditional security threats are deep-rooted in the annals of naval warfare, largely stemming from safeguarding maritime sovereignty and territorial integrity, the competition over resources, security of the SLOCs and maritime power projection. The growing military presence of the US, China, India and other extra-regional powers and the rapid nuclearisation of the Indian Ocean are remodelling the security calculus of the BoB region. Furthermore, emerging domains of warfare—space, cyberspace and hybrid will likely be the new norms of conflict. Some scholars even argue that the ongoing Sino-American rivalry in the region may lead to another Cold War in the future.<sup>33</sup> The maritime aspiration of the states and their geopolitical manoeuvring to extend the sphere of influence are making the Bay an emerging theatre of strategic competition and potential conflict. While the BoB itself is becoming a hotspot for strategic competition between major powers, any conflict in the Indian Ocean or the Indo-Pacific maritime theatre will certainly have a spillover effect on this region. Furthermore, there are rivalries within the region and conflicting interests amongst the littorals. Table 1 shows the naval strength and global firepower ranking of the littorals. Any country's naval strength reflects the magnitude of maritime interests the Navy needs to safeguard. It also helps understand the current trend and the development of the military. As an example, the global firepower ranking indicates 4 littorals out of 7 are within the first 40 (out of 142 countries). Given the growing involvement of the extra-regional powers as well as the conflicting interests of the littorals, the existing and/or any future flashpoints triggering conflict in the region cannot be overruled. In fact, such flashpoints exist in other parts of the world as well and it is not a safe assumption that any such flashpoint will not lead to a conflict in the BoB region. Bangladesh is at the critical crossroad amidst burgeoning geopolitical competition in the region and has often found itself “swimming the troubled waters while balancing the relations” as articulated by Zaman.<sup>34</sup> Given the geographical realities, it actively engages India in political, economic and security cooperation, and at the same time, is calibrating its

<sup>33</sup> Brandon Friedman and Ori Sela, “Sino–American Relations and the ‘New Cold War’: A Useful Analogy for the Middle East?” *Global Policy* 14, Special Issue (2023): 46–57.

<sup>34</sup> Zaman, “Bangladesh’s Quest,” 147–151.



effort to attract Chinese investment and deepening its bilateral, economic and security collaboration with the US. Although non-traditional security threats remain the key concern for the littorals, traditional security challenges cannot be simply ignored. The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War is a glaring example. Focusing on the significance of the Black Sea, Seth Cropsey argues that the largely destroyed and insolvent Donbas can no longer be considered a prize but the real strategic prize of the war is the possession of the greater part of Ukraine's coast on that body of water (also considered as the southeastern maritime frontier of NATO).<sup>35</sup> Therefore, control over adversary's coast, vital maritime installations including ports and other maritime economic activities is always considered a strategic gain in any war or conflict. The growing power rivalry and any future conflict in the region may engender threats to the maritime security of Bangladesh and may seriously undermine the maritime interest of the nation.<sup>36</sup>

**Table 1: Naval Strength and Global Firepower Ranking of the Bay of Bengal Littorals<sup>37</sup>**

Naval Strength of the Bay of Bengal Littorals <sup>a</sup>							Global Firepower Ranking (out of 142) <sup>b</sup>
	Aircraft Carrier	Submarine	Destroyer	Frigate/ Corvette	Amphibious Vessel	Personnel	
Bangladesh	-	2	-	13	13	25,000	46
India	2	18	11	32	17	69,000	4
Indonesia	-	4	-	31	30	66,000	15
Malaysia	-	2	-	14	4	16,800	48
Myanmar	-	2	-	8	19	22,000	39
Sri Lanka	-	-	-	2	8	38,000	79
Thailand	1	-	-	16	12	74,000	29

<sup>35</sup> Seth Cropsey, "Naval Considerations in the Russo-Ukrainian War," *United States Naval War College Review* 75, no. 4 (2022): 17–42.

<sup>36</sup> Moutusi Islam, "Maritime Security Challenges for Bangladesh: Response Options," *BIISS Journal* 40, no. 3 (2019): 269–290.

<sup>37</sup> Compiled by the Author from a. Alex Pape, *Janes Fighting Ships 2021–2022* (Surrey: Jane's Group UK Limited, 2021), 53–814; b. "Global Firepower, 2022," accessed December 24, 2022, <https://www.globalfirepower.com>

## 4.2 Non-Traditional Security Threats

### 4.2.1 Piracy and Armed Robbery

Historical evidence suggests that more than 4,000 years back, pirates from the Persian Gulf attacked Sumerians.<sup>38</sup> The piracy in the IOR was observed as early as in twelfth century.<sup>39</sup> Although the incidents related to piracy are minimal in the BoB region, there are reported cases of armed robbery. In 2018, nearly a third of all reported incidents in the Indo-Pacific occurred in the BoB, with most incidences occurring at the Chittagong anchorage, Kolkata, Visakhapatnam and Kakinada in India.<sup>40</sup> According to the report of Stable Seas, 2020 (excluding Malaysia and Indonesia), Bangladesh, and Chittagong in particular, remain the focus of occurrences in the Bay.<sup>41</sup> It is difficult to measure the exact number within the BoB as the maritime space of some littorals, such as India, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia extend beyond the boundary of the Bay. The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP) Report 2021 shows a total of 82 incidents of armed robbery against ships were reported in Asia, out of which 19 were from the BoB littorals (Table 2).

**Table 2: Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships from the BoB Littorals (2017-2021)<sup>42</sup>**

Piracy and Armed Robbery in the Bay of Bengal (2017-2021)					
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Bangladesh	11	11	-	5	-
India	4	4	5	9	5
Indonesia	33	27	23	22	13
Malaysia	2	6	8	3	1
Myanmar	-	-	-	-	-
Sri Lanka	-	-	-	-	-
Thailand	-	-	-	-	-

<sup>38</sup> Shishir Upadhyaya, *Combating Piracy in the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi: Manas Publication, 2011), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Lailufar Yasmin, "Non-Traditional Security Threats in the Bay of Bengal: We are all in the Same Boat, Brother!" *BIMRAD Journal* 2, no. 1 (2021): 30.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Len and Roshni Kapur, *Regional Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal: The Role of Energy Security and Maritime Governance in Promoting Integration* (Singapore: Energy Studies Institute and Institute of South Asian Studies, 2021), 11.

<sup>41</sup> Jay Benson, *Stable Seas: Bay of Bengal* (Cape Town: Stable Seas, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Compiled by author from ReCAAP: Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, *Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia Annual Report January to December 2021* (Singapore: ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, 2021), 11.

#### 4.2.2 *Maritime Terrorism*

Maritime terrorism implies any perpetration of terrorism at sea or from the sea. In 2000, the attack on USS Cole, a guided-missile destroyer, in the Yemeni port of Aden, using an explosive-laden small boat symbolises the vulnerability of a Navy (in fact, the most powerful Navy in the world) against a low-tech assault. The first reported case of modern-day maritime terrorism in the IOR is the hijacking of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro in October 1985. Other examples are the use of the BoB sea route by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE); the Gulf of Eden and the Persian Gulf by Al Qaeda and the Arabian Sea for the terrorist attack on Mumbai.<sup>43</sup> Although, at present, the concern over maritime terrorism in the BoB is not quite troubling, however, probability of any such occurrence should not be overlooked.

#### 4.2.3 *Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing*

IUU Fishing Index 2021 indicates, although the situation has slightly improved from last year, Asia remains the region of most concern (with the worst rank/score) and Bangladesh ranks 52<sup>nd</sup> out of 152 countries.<sup>44</sup> At present, there is no reliable record of IUU fishing in the BoB.<sup>45</sup> Frequent citations of incidents from various sources exemplify an alarming state of IUU fishing activities in the region. There are recurrent IUU fishing arrest cases observed between Bangladesh and India in the BoB, India and Sri Lanka in the Palk Strait and India and Pakistan in the Kutch Strait.<sup>46</sup> IUU fishing can threaten the fishery stock and can even lead to the collapse of fisheries. It also has deep social and economic impacts on communities. The Somalia case is a glaring example demonstrating how a problem like IUU fishing can transform into a larger threat like piracy or armed robbery. The rapid depletion may even trigger conflict over fish resources in the region. For Bangladesh, it can also hinder the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, i.e. Life Below Water.

<sup>43</sup> Alok Bansal, "Maritime Threat Perceptions: Non-State Actors in the Indian Ocean Region," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 6, no. 1 (2010): 10–27.

<sup>44</sup> Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and Poseidon—Aquatic Resource Management Ltd., *The Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing Index 2021* (Geneva: Global Initiative, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Mohammad Rubaiyat Rahman, "Illegal Fishing and Laws of Bangladesh," *The Daily Star*, October 06, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Afifat K. Ritika, "IUU Fishing: A Serious Threat to Bangladesh's Marine Catch," *Daily Sun*, September 20, 2022.

#### 4.2.4 *Transnational Organised Crimes*

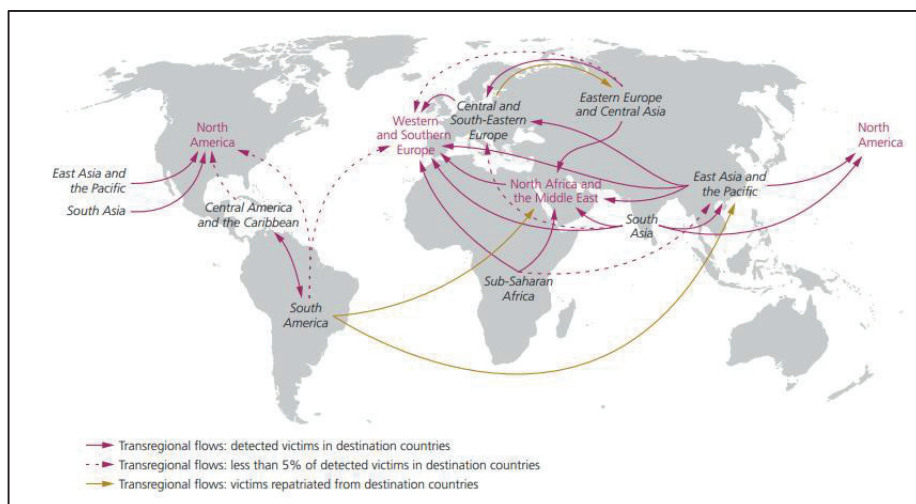
Transnational Organised Crimes (TOC) include human, drug and arms trafficking. Maritime routes are found to be more suitable as large volumes can be transferred through sea routes with lesser obstacles/checkpoints. The BoB littorals are often used as transit points to trade illicit products originating in Africa or the Middle East and smuggling on to Europe, Oceania or elsewhere in Asia.<sup>47</sup> At least two known drug smuggling routes located in this region—Pakistan’s ‘Golden Crescent’ and Myanmar’s ‘Golden Triangle’ are closely connected to Bangladesh through the Bay. Drug and arms smuggling are interwoven in the sense that drug money is used to procure arms and ammunition, which may again be used by terrorist groups. In the BoB region, a common practice of alluring poor people with a promise of a better life ultimately turns into human smuggling. The influx of 1.1 million Rohingya in 2017 has further intensified human trafficking in the region with false hope for a better life in Malaysia and Thailand. Besides seeking a better living, people also flee their homes for multiple reasons, such as internal conflicts, violence and natural disasters. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Report 2020 identifies, 15 per cent of human trafficking takes place across regions, while 20 per cent is within the same region or sub-region and 65 per cent victims within national boundaries (see Figure 1). Another report shows, 2 per cent of the total recorded incidents related to irregular human migration in 2021 took place in South Asia off mainly Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and 7 per cent in Southeast Asia, out of which 65 per cent off Malaysia and 17 per cent off Indonesia.<sup>48</sup> Figure 1 indicates South Asia as an origin from where trafficking takes place to the rest of the world. The primary destinations are the Middle East, East Asia and the Pacific, Western and Southern Europe and North America. The BoB route is largely used by the traffickers destined for Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia and Thailand.

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<sup>47</sup> Len and Kapur, *Regional Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal*, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Information Fusion Centre—Indian Ocean Region, *Annual Report 2021*, 74–75.

**Figure 1: Main Detected Transregional Flows<sup>49</sup>**



#### 4.2.5 Environmental Threats

Nearly 1.4 billion people live along the coastline of the BoB<sup>50</sup> and remain vulnerable to the rise of sea level and salinity, natural disasters and climate change. The BoB region periodically suffers from floods, cyclones, storm surges, riverbank erosion, earthquakes, drought, and tsunamis. Between 1891 and 2018, 41 severe cyclonic storms and 21 cyclonic storms hit the BoB region, and from 1996 to 2015, the littorals lost 317,000 lives to disasters.<sup>51</sup> Due to sea level rise, Maldives, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are under existential threat. Prediction indicates, with a rise of 50 cm by 2050, 11 per cent of the land in Bangladesh may go underwater. Recent research also identifies that the magnitude of sea level rise could be twice more rapid as the previous prediction.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, increasing marine pollution poses a grave environmental threat in the region. Transportation of about 60 per cent of world crude oil and its products across the BoB has rendered it prone to oil pollution.<sup>53</sup> The most notable incident in 2021 occurred off Colombo, Sri Lanka, when a cargo ship (MV X-PRESS PEARL) carrying chemicals caught fire and

<sup>49</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020* (Vienna: United Nations publication, 2021), 11

<sup>50</sup> Xavier and Baruah, "Connecting the Bay of Bengal."

<sup>51</sup> A. B. R. Chaudhury and Sohini Bose, "The Core of Security Cooperation in BIMSTEC: Maritime Domain Awareness," accessed December 23, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-core-of-security-cooperation-in-bimstec/>

<sup>52</sup> "Sea Levels in Bangladesh Could Rise Twice as Much as Predicted," *The Business Standard*, January 07, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Alam, "Emerging Maritime Development," 79.

eventually sank.<sup>54</sup> It leaves an unprecedented impact on the environment and fish species in the area, where plastic pellets are believed to be present for decades.

## 5. Maritime Security Cooperation in the BoB—Imperatives and Impediments

Blessed with untapped natural resources including reserves of gas and other seabed minerals and fishing stocks, the BoB region has the potential to emerge as a distinct regional identity through cooperative engagements. To offset individual weaknesses, many nations are now consolidating their efforts and sharing common strengths through regional cooperation, such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the EU (European Union). Such cooperation is critical in the semi-enclosed BoB region, where the littorals share contiguous and at times, even overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).<sup>55</sup> With its 80 per cent of EEZ and 20 per cent High Seas, not a single country alone is fully capable of facing the upcoming challenges in the maritime domain because of various resource constraints, such as lack of expertise, technological prowess and other factors. The same is suggested in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS-III, 1982), especially in article 123 titled “Cooperation of states bordering enclosed or semi-enclosed seas.” As a whole, the UNCLOS not only provides legal rights to coastal states on various maritime zones but serves as a facilitator for regional cooperation and dialogue, i.e. cooperation between user states and states bordering a strait for navigational safety and prevention, reduction and control of pollution (article 43); conservation and management of living resources (articles 61–64, 66, 69–70, 118, 119) and protection and preservation of the marine environment (art. 197, 200, 207–208 and 210–212). Since a large portion of the BoB is under the jurisdiction of the littoral states leaving a small area as High Seas (following article 86 of UNCLOS), it facilitates maritime cooperation in this region.<sup>56</sup>

Owing to various impairments, building effective maritime cooperation within the BoB could not herald any remarkable outcome against its potential and promise. First, there are divergent interests of the nations and often conflicting maritime interests that led to a fragmented regionalism in the BoB. It varies according to the perception of the local and regional actors, who conceptualise the Bay in different ways in their mental maps.<sup>57</sup> For example, the way Bangladesh looks

<sup>54</sup> Information Fusion Centre—Indian Ocean Region, *Annual Report 2021*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Chaudhury and Bose, “The Core of Security Cooperation in BIMSTEC.”

<sup>56</sup> K. R. Singh, “Regional Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal: Non-Conventional Threats—Maritime Dimension”, *Strategic Analysis* XXIV, no. 12 (2001).

<sup>57</sup> Len and Kapur, *Regional Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal*, 4.

towards the sea for economic emancipation through the Blue Economy Initiative or sustainable development, a conflict-prone Myanmar does not necessarily see through the same lens. Hence, a country with small maritime zones would not focus much on IUU fishing in comparison to another nation having a large EEZ with inadequate capability for surveillance and control.<sup>58</sup> Brewster claims that decolonisation in the late 1940s first created strategic fragmentation of the BoB region with the conceptualisation of ‘South’ and ‘Southeast’ Asia.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the regional architecture of the BoB is different in the sense that it comprises both South and Southeast Asian nations, and it is maritime-centric. Despite some initiatives over the decades, this region is yet to develop any distinct security arrangement. Existing frameworks like SAARC, ASEAN, IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) or IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium) do not truly reflect BoB regionalism. Although BIMSTEC (The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), formed in 1997, gives an expression of the BoB region, the mentionable lacuna is that it includes Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan but left out Malaysia and Indonesia. Again, BIMSTEC does not regard maritime concern as a preeminent arena. Hence, maritime security cooperation in its true sense has not adequately developed in this region.

Second, the littoral states are in different phases of their development and their governments have diverse perceptions and mechanisms for dealing with external actors.<sup>60</sup> Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka continue to engage with China for development projects but India remains concerned about China’s growing assertiveness in the BoB. Similar variance amongst the littorals is also observed in the case of the US and other extra-regional powers, which hinders the way towards regional maritime consensus.

Third, despite the shared historical ties amongst the BoB countries, presently there is no noteworthy cultural idea or aspiration amongst the people that can promote regional identity formation.<sup>61</sup> Rather, a host of factors, such as historical resentment, unsettled land and maritime boundaries, conflicting economic interests, cross-border affiliation of ethno-linguistic and religious groups, sharing of common rivers/natural resources coupled with several interstate conflicts and other regional/extra-regional factors has eventually transformed this region into a zone of

<sup>58</sup> Sam Bateman, “Solving the ‘Wicked Problems’ of Maritime Security: Are Regional Forums up to the Task?” *A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2011): 1–28.

<sup>59</sup> David Brewster, “The Challenges of Building the Bay of Bengal as an Interconnected Region,” in *Twenty Years of BIMSTEC* ed. Prabir De (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 239–248.

<sup>60</sup> Len and Kapur, *Regional Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal*, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Len and Kapur, *Regional Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal*, 4.



mistrust and tension.<sup>62</sup> As an example, the intra-regional trade for SAARC countries is only 5 per cent of their total trade, while ASEAN counts 25 per cent and EU and North America enjoy 40–50 per cent of intra-regional trade.<sup>63</sup> The EU or ASEAN could materialise cultural closeness to form effective regional apparatuses, the absence of such linchpin impedes the way to elevate maritime security cooperation in the BoB region.

Fourth, despite acknowledging the blessings of the sea, people largely remain sea blind. Some argue that the sea is usually poorly understood, little researched and evidently absent from International Relations.<sup>64</sup> It is arguably more vividly observed in the BoB region than in any other regional or sub-regional architecture. Sea blindness grossly hinders any meaningful maritime cooperation in this region.

Fifth, Ryan claims that maritime politics had always been fashioned as a state-centric quagmire.<sup>65</sup> By and large, the historiography of the sea is a chronicle of state-to-state relations, disregarding the perspective of non-state actors. On the contrary, now maritime security has transcended the state-centric boundary and is more observed in the transnational realm with the increased involvement of non-state actors. Without acknowledging this, it would be difficult to chart a way for cooperative maritime security.

Finally, there exists a large asymmetry in maritime capabilities including technological prowess and strength of maritime forces amongst the nations. Maritime cooperation is successful only through a coordinated approach. Such asymmetry marginalises their desire as well as the practical application of security measures amongst the littorals.

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<sup>62</sup> Alam, “Emerging Maritime Development,” 78.

<sup>63</sup> Tariq Karim, “Importance of the Bay of Bengal as a Causeway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans,” accessed December 26, 2022, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/importance-the-bay-bengal-causeway-between-the-indian-and-pacific-oceans>

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin de Carvalho and Halvard Leira, “Sea Power in the Transformation of States and Overseas Empires (1500–1800),” in *Routledge Handbook of Maritime Security*, eds. Ruxandra-Laura Boşilcă, Susana Ferreira, Barry J. Ryan (Routledge, 2022), 18.

<sup>65</sup> Ryan, “Maritime Security in a Critical Context,” 28.

## 6. The Spectrum of Maritime Security Cooperation: Way Forward

### 6.1 *Regulatory Body and Policy Framework*

Historian Sunil Amrith reckons that the hope for a new regionalism in the BoB lies in realising that the Bay's history, as much as its ecology, outreaches national frontiers.<sup>66</sup> It indicates a prospect of regionalism only to be driven by the common interests of all the littorals, not bound to any single nation. As discussed before, the BoB is yet to emerge as a regional entity. Therefore, the formation of an exclusive regional body for the littorals of the BoB has become an indispensable issue. In this regard, the following may be considered:

- a. Bangladesh championed the idea of South Asian regionalism by advocating the formation of SAARC. The same endeavour may be taken by the government, either to expand the existing BIMSTEC with the inclusion of Malaysia and Indonesia or form a new regional apparatus with an expanded focus on the maritime domain.
- b. The next step could be to devise a "Bay of Bengal Maritime Security Policy" (BBMSP) similar to the EU (European Union Maritime Security Strategy), ASEAN (ASEAN Maritime Forum and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum) and African Union (Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy), which may include legal frameworks in conjunction with the UNCLOS and other international laws. Policy/strategy can effectively direct towards the tangible outcome. The European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) report 2019 highlights the implementation of a maritime operation, named Operation Atalanta fighting piracy off the Horn of Africa as one of the EU's most successful initiatives: from 176 attacks in 2011, incidents have gone down to a total of just four failed attacks in 2018.<sup>67</sup> With the secretariat of BIMSTEC in Dhaka or using other new architecture, Bangladesh may initiate the formulation of BBMSP.
- c. Similar to IONS, the BoB littoral navies may form an exclusive forum (Bay of Bengal Naval Symposium, BBNS or Bay of Bengal Naval Forum, BBNF) focusing on maritime security issues.

<sup>66</sup> Amrith, "The Bay of Bengal in Peril."

<sup>67</sup> Oscar L. Larsson and J. J. Widen, "The European Union as a Maritime Security Provider—The Naval Diplomacy Perspective," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2022).

- d. At the national level, Bangladesh may formulate its long-awaited maritime policy/strategy, which would include the maritime vision of the country including cooperative mechanisms in the regional and global spheres.
- e. Besides, to coordinate with numerous relevant ministries and organisations dealing with national maritime affairs in Bangladesh, a central body or focal point may be established. It could be named as National Maritime Commission (NMC), chaired by the Prime Minister (similar to Planning Commission) or National Maritime Division (NMD) under the Prime Minister's office (similar to Armed Forces Division).

## 6.2 *Promotion of Blue Economy*

More than 30 million people are involved in tourism, aquaculture and offshore oil and gas extraction activities only within the BoB region<sup>68</sup> leaving greater potential in other sectors of the Blue Economy. Bangladesh considers Blue Economy as a new 'development space' and promoted the idea of "Bay of Bengal Partnership for the Blue Economy" in an International Workshop on Blue Economy in Dhaka in 2014.<sup>69</sup> The same is reflected in its Seventh Five Year Plan (2016-2020).<sup>70</sup> The country is also pushing the Blue Economy agenda in various international forums including SAARC, BIMSTEC and IORA and holding several conferences, workshops and seminars in tandem. However, the regional Blue Economy initiative entails political will and capacity building in terms of skilled human resources, technology and investment and ensuring safety and security. For example, Blue Economy currently contributes over \$6 billion to Bangladesh's GDP, which has the potential to reach about a trillion dollars.<sup>71</sup> To promote Blue Economy within the BoB littorals, some steps may be considered:

- a. Through consensus, the littorals may agree to identify common priority areas from the plethora of Blue Economy sectors. Bangladesh identifies 26 blue economic functions from among the six major broad areas: i) Maritime trade and shipping; ii) Food and Livelihood; iii) Energy; iv) Tourism; v) Coastal protection/Artificial islands/Greening coastal belts; vi) Human

<sup>68</sup> "Japan for better Connectivity between Cox's Bazar and Rakhine," *The Daily Star*, March 15, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> "Bangladesh Seeks 'Bay of Bengal partnership' for Blue Economy," accessed December 26, 2021, <https://bdnews24.com/economy/bangladesh-seeks-bay-of-bengal-partnership-for-blue-economy>

<sup>70</sup> General Economics Division, *Seventh Five Year Plan FY 2016-FY 2020: Accelerating Growth, Empowering Citizens* (Dhaka: Planning Commission, 2015). It is written, "It is needless to say that for most developing States particularly for Bangladesh, making transition to Blue Economy would entail fundamental and systemic changes in their policy-regulatory-management-governance framework(s) and identification of various maritime economic functions."

<sup>71</sup> Karim, "Bay of Bengal as a Causeway."

resource, maritime surveillance and spatial planning.<sup>72</sup> Once common priority areas are identified, different bilateral and multilateral arrangements may be made to harness the maximum benefits by offering one's strength to offset other's weakness. Even, littorals may agree upon financial investment in other country's potential Blue Economy sector.

- b. The conduct of seminars, workshops and joint research activities will help make the Blue Economy cooperation more institutionalized.

### 6.3 *Addressing Environmental Issues*

The UN Secretary-General recently warned that humanity is on a “highway to climate hell,” and the fight for a liveable planet will be won or lost in this decade.<sup>73</sup> Being one of the most disaster-prone regions of the world, the BoB is severely affected by the climate change. Yasmin presumes, despite low carbon footprints, the countries from the Global South remain more vulnerable to the consequences of human-induced warming.<sup>74</sup> Hence, the interconnected destinies of the people in the Bay demand a comprehensive approach to address environmental degradation in the maritime domain. Bangladesh has made substantial progress in combating climate threats including community-level engagements and awareness and formulation of a mega strategy, Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100. However, the country adequately suffers from marine pollution. Bangladesh may endeavour to bring all the littorals of the BoB in addressing the marine environmental issues. Accordingly, the following may be contemplated:

- a. Based on agreements and dialogues; littorals may endeavour to formulate policy/strategy/action plan to address the environmental issues. It may focus on capacity enhancement in technology, including surveillance and satellite image processing and analysis for monitoring, early warning and quick response. Climate-resilient infrastructures could be a key focus.
- b. Creation of a Marine Incident Database, where information on marine accidents, oil spills or any other casualty within the territorial waters of the littorals will be recorded, which can be accessed by all.

<sup>72</sup> General Economics Division, *Seventh Five Year Plan FY 2016–FY 2020*.

<sup>73</sup> Fiona Harvey and Damian Carrington, “World is on ‘Highway to Climate Hell’, UN Chief Warns at Cop27 Summit,” *The Guardian*, November 07, 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Lailufar Yasmin, “Bangladesh’s Indo-Pacific Emergence,” in *Enhancing Australia’s Engagement with the Indian Ocean Region*, ed. James Bowen (Perth: USAsia Centre, 2022), 8.

- c. Large-scale awareness programmes at national and regional levels may be conducted at regular intervals incorporating electronic, print and social media.

## 6.4 *Naval Diplomacy*

John F Kennedy once said, “Diplomacy and defence are not substitutes for one another, either alone would fail”.<sup>75</sup> Frederick the Great professed, diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments.<sup>76</sup> Within the rubric of defence/military diplomacy, naval diplomacy stands as the most significant element that utilises the political (or diplomatic) leverage and influence-building potential of warships. It is an age-old concept premised on the traditional gunboat diplomacy exhibited by the colonial and other maritime powers throughout centuries. Oliver Cromwell famously declared, “A man-of-war (warship) is the best ambassador.”<sup>77</sup> By and large, navies need to strike a balance between their war-fighting roles and their “softer” tasks, including maritime security.<sup>78</sup> Ken Booth’s legendary articulation of the naval trinity describes three roles of the Navy: military, diplomatic and policing.<sup>79</sup> Naval thinkers, from Thucydides to Mahan, Corbett, Admiral Turner, Admiral Gorshkov, James Cable, Edward Luttwak, Ken Booth, Collin Gray and Geoffrey Till, all have recognised naval diplomacy as an element of national power. Its objectives and outcomes can be as broader as any other instruments of diplomacy. It encompasses a wide range of peacetime naval activities aiming to influence the behaviour of people/other countries in order to achieve foreign policy objectives.

Numerous historical narratives epitomise the strategic outcome of naval diplomacy. From 1405 to 1433 AD, Chinese Admiral Zheng He made seven voyages with the largest and most advanced armada the world had ever seen (comprised of 317 ships, including 62 “treasure ships” filled with rich souvenirs for heads of state) in 30 Asian and African countries (including Bangladesh) through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and along the east coast of Africa,<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> H. K. Pandey, A. Dwivedi and A. Bora, ed., *Changing Dynamics of National Security* (Chhattisgarh: Orange Books Publication, 2021), 36.

<sup>76</sup> “Diplomacy without Arms,” *The Times*, February 01, 2010.

<sup>77</sup> Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 1977), 33.

<sup>78</sup> Geoffrey Till, “Maritime Security: “Good Navies” and Realism Re-Imagined,” in *Routledge Handbook of Maritime Security*, eds. Ruxandra-Laura Boşilcă, Susana Ferreira, and Barry J. Ryan (New York: Routledge, 2022), 38.

<sup>79</sup> Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy*, 15–16.

<sup>80</sup> “Zheng He’s Achievements,” accessed December 10, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Zheng-Hes-Achievements>

regarded as a peaceful expedition which still serves as one of the cornerstones of Chinese foreign policy, i.e. “peaceful rising.”

Naval diplomacy is an essential enabler of maritime security (cooperation), which is even more significant amidst the burgeoning maritime security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Naval diplomacy broadly stands on three pillars:<sup>81</sup>

- a. Confidence Building Measures (CBM)
- b. Enhancement of defence capabilities
- c. Development of domestic defence industries (Transfer of Technology, procurement of platform, hardware, etc.)

There are some distinct constituents of naval diplomacy, as discussed below, most of which the Bangladesh Navy has been pursuing for decades.

#### 6.4.1 *Naval Port Call*

The naval port call also referred to as ‘goodwill visit,’ is historically a strong form of naval diplomacy, a way to exhibit ‘naval presence.’ In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt dispatched his ‘Great White Fleet,’ comprising 16 battleships and 14,000 men to circumnavigate the world. This historic voyage, which steamed 43,000 miles making 20 port calls on six continents, was meant to establish US global presence, engender international goodwill and garner enthusiasm for the Navy by promoting it as an instrument for diplomacy.<sup>82</sup> Hence, the naval port call is a way of ‘showing flag’ and sending political/military messages. It provides opportunities for the navies to build confidence, gain mutual trust, learn others’ customs and practices, bolster the existing bilateral relationship and usher new horizons for cooperation. The statistics reveal that the port calls made by the Bangladesh Navy ships to the BoB littoral states are marginal, and the number of ships from BoB countries received by Bangladesh is discouraging. Such port calls within the BoB navies would lead to functional maritime security cooperation in the region.

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<sup>81</sup> Deny Wirawan, “Maritime Security Increases Defense Diplomacy in the World Maritime Axis Framework,” *Jurnal Diplomasi Pertahanan* 8, no. 1 (2022).

<sup>82</sup> “Sailors, Steelships, and Diplomacy: World Cruise of the Great White Fleet,” Naval History and Heritage Command—National Museum of the U.S. Navy, accessed December 12, 2022, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/nmusn/explore/prior-exhibits/2022/great-white-fleet.html>

#### 6.4.2 *Combined Naval Exercise*

Combined naval exercises include traditional naval operations as well as elements of Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW), such as anti-piracy, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Search and Rescue (SAR) missions. Such exercises offer to enhance professional acumen, interoperability and operational readiness, build common understanding and share knowledge. At present, the Bangladesh Navy conducts bilateral exercise only with India from the BoB navies. Nevertheless, the Navy has exhibited its capability in arranging mega events in recent years. In 2017, it conducted the maiden sea exercise in the BoB under the aegis of the IONS, named IMMSAREX (IONS Multilateral Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise). Very recently (6-9 December 2022), the Navy organised the first-ever International Fleet Review (IFR) in Cox's Bazar to commemorate the Birth Centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Golden Jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh, where eight foreign ships from six countries (US, China and four BoB littorals, India, Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia) participated and 77 delegates from 27 countries remained present. The success of these two multilateral exercises could be the driving force for the Bangladesh Navy to initiate combined exercises exclusively for the BoB navies.

#### 6.4.3 *Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW)*

For HADR, international assistance is always recommended, as disasters may have local impacts but HADR missions are global in scope.<sup>83</sup> The same is with the case of SAR operations, as observed during the search of the Indonesian missing submarine on 21 April 2021, where Malaysia, Singapore, the US, Australia, India, France, Germany, Russia, Turkey and South Korea offered assistance.<sup>84</sup> In fact, any humanitarian effort demands interoperability and mutual understanding, for which cooperative engagement is essential. Table 3 shows some mentionable HARD missions by the Bangladesh Navy.

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<sup>83</sup> Yuste et al., "Synchronized Humanitarian, Military and Commercial Logistics: An Evolving Synergistic Partnership," *Safety* 5, no. 67 (2019).

<sup>84</sup> Madison Hall, "Countries from around the World are Chipping in to Help find Indonesia's Missing Naval Submarine," accessed December 14, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/missing-indonesian-naval-submarine-countries-helping-search-2021-4>



**Table 3: HADR Missions by the Bangladesh Navy<sup>85</sup>**

HADR Mission by Bangladesh Navy		
Year	Country	Mission
2005	Sri Lanka and the Maldives	Relief operations (post-tsunami)
2013	Philippines	Relief operations (post-Typhoon Haiyan)
2014	Maldives	Humanitarian aid (fresh water and desalination plants)
2016	Sri Lanka	Emergency relief and humanitarian assistance after a land slide and flood
2020	Maldives	Relief and humanitarian assistance for COVID-19

In the case of SAR operations, the Navy dispatched three ships and two Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) in search of the missing Malaysian Airliners MH 370 in 2014. Many regional bodies like ASEAN have different operating procedures for such MOOTW, which the BoB littorals do not have. The US-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) is a multinational maritime partnership, comprises of 34 nations from around the globe with its Headquarters in Bahrain.<sup>86</sup> Its main objectives are: defeat terrorism, prevent piracy, encourage regional cooperation and promote a safe maritime environment. A standing BoB Maritime Task Force (BMTF), mustering all littoral navies, may be formed to address the maritime security threats in the BoB. They will enhance their interoperability through frequent training, exercises and other engagements.

#### 6.4.4 *Maritime Domain Awareness*

According to International Maritime Organisation (IMO), “Maritime Domain Awareness” (MDA) is the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could impact security, safety, the economy or the marine environment.”<sup>87</sup> Hence, it is all about intelligence and situational awareness in the maritime domain. It has three broad objectives: early threat detection, decision support and monitoring adherence to international laws.<sup>88</sup> The MDA process involves monitoring and data collection from various sources designed to detect violent acts, environmental threats, incidents and human, drug and arms trafficking.

<sup>85</sup> Collected by the Author from the Directorate of Naval Operations, Naval Headquarters, Bangladesh Navy on December 12, 2022.

<sup>86</sup> “Combined Maritime Forces (CMF),” accessed December 13, 2022, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com>

<sup>87</sup> International Maritime Organization, *Amendments to the International Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue (IAMSAR) Manual* (London: International Maritime Organization, 2012).

<sup>88</sup> Deon Canyon and Jim McMullin, “Maritime Domain Awareness and Maritime Fusion Centers,” DKI APCSS, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://dkiapcss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/N2526-Canyon-Maritime-awareness2.pdf>

Unfortunately, the BoB littorals do not possess adequate surveillance capacity despite having substantial EEZs. Hence, no single country can achieve MDA covering the entire BoB. A collaborative approach would allow monitoring maritime space of the BoB through continuous surveillance, identifying threats, providing early warning and disseminating information. A BoB Information Sharing Centre (BISC), similar to the Singapore-based Information Fusion Centre (IFC) led by the Republic of Singapore Navy, may be established.

#### 6.4.5 *Other Cooperative Engagements*

The navies of the BoB have the scope to build partnerships and contribute to the country's overall diplomatic efforts through other cooperative engagements, such as security dialogues and staff talks; visits by senior navy leaders; seminars, workshops and symposiums and training exchange programmes. These offer naval diplomacy an institutional character. It helps to promote mutual trust, shape the security agenda and promote status. It may also facilitate defence industrialisation and resolve conflicting issues including a durable solution to the Rohingya crisis.

### 7. **Conclusion**

The world is witnessing the rise of maritime Asia with a gradual shifting of the global economic centre of gravity from Europe to Asia. The BoB region has gained enormous significance as a maritime highway of global trade and energy flows intertwined with numerous maritime economic activities. With the strategic emergence of the Bay on the rise, it is confronted with multi-dimensional maritime security challenges. Maritime security is increasingly becoming a transnational issue, and eventually, emerging as a key constituent in the political and security lexicons of nation-states. The BoB maritime order is calm yet fragile largely due to the region's dearth of all-encompassing security architecture amidst wide-ranging traditional and non-traditional security threats.<sup>89</sup> It is fragile because, with the turn of the tide, it may spark conflict leading to instability and any untoward situation in near future. Any conflict in other segments of the IOR or even in the South China Sea or the Persian Gulf will have certain spillover effects in this region. Besides, the BoB waters are often found turbulent with myriad non-traditional security challenges, such as armed robbery and piracy, IUU fishing, TOC and environmental threats.

While the Bay offers mammoth promises, it is now the political will of the littorals to chart the way towards a safe and secure maritime order. Furthermore,

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<sup>89</sup> Alam, "Emerging Maritime Development," 78.

energy security for the rising economies, increasing connectivity, the growing volume of trade, climate resilience and sustainable development are the cornerstones for promoting regional maritime cooperation within the BoB. Nonetheless, there are multiple impediments towards such regional endeavour including divergent interests of the nations, varying perceptions about dealing with external actors, lack of mutual trust and aspiration for a regional identity, sea blindness and a large asymmetry in maritime capabilities amongst the littorals.

Bangladesh has excelled in disaster response and management, naval diplomacy and building partnerships with regional and extra-regional powers following the mainstay of its foreign policy—“Friendship to all, malice to none.” Bangladesh requires its maritime domain and surroundings to remain secure in order to excel in its development and economic growth. It needs to play a critical role in integrating the littorals of the BoB towards effective maritime security cooperation. Either expanding BIMSTEC or the formation of a new regional body; in any case, the inclusion of Malaysia and Indonesia should be a key concern. Along with this, a regional maritime policy, a regional body for the navies and other mechanisms to cooperate in Blue Economy, environmental issues and naval diplomacy as proposed above may be taken into consideration. At the national level, it is imperative to formulate an inclusive maritime policy as well as a regulatory body as a focal point. Furthermore, most significantly, all the littorals need to enhance maritime capacity building including naval strength, as soft power becomes determinative when orchestrated with hard power. Without a regional approach, it will be almost impossible to maintain freedom and good order at sea in the BoB region.