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## **BANGLADESH-INDIA MARITIME COOPERATION IN THE BAY OF BENGAL: BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE**

### **Abstract**

The paper analyses the current trends of Bangladesh-India maritime cooperation in three aspects: maritime connectivity, blue economy and maritime security. The paper argues that there has been an increasing focus on maritime cooperation between these two neighbouring countries since 2015. However, extensive focus on connectivity, one-way maritime trade, lack of infrastructure, environmental concern, dearth of urge for on-ground implementation and dispute over continental shelf are some of the key challenges for effective maritime cooperation. Taking into account those hurdles, the analysis provides some useful suggestions to strengthen ties in this area. The paper suggests to ensure the overall benefits of both sides, some key areas need to be focused on with utmost importance that include: increased blue economy cooperation; ensuring environmental sustainability; conducting joint marine scientific research; resolving the grey areas in the Bay of Bengal; and increasing maritime diplomacy.

**Key Words:** Bangladesh, India, Maritime Connectivity, Blue Economy, Maritime Security, Bay of Bengal

### **1. Introduction**

The Bay of Bengal is often regarded as one of the new security hot spots of the twenty-first century. As Robert Kaplan observes, “the Bay of Bengal is starting to become whole again and is returning to the centre of history...No one interested in geopolitics can afford to ignore the Bay of Bengal any longer.”<sup>1</sup> The Bay of Bengal has become a source of both potential and obstacles. The Bay has unexplored natural resources, including some of the greatest gas and oil reserves in the world and other seabed minerals in the Bay’s waters. In addition, it acts as a vital transit zone between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and contains significant Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “The Critical Bay of Bengal,” *Stratfor*, November 5, 2014, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/critical-bay-bengal>.

Notwithstanding the wide range of dividends, the Bay of Bengal poses a number of marine security threats. This is because major powers are competing for influence in the region as a result of the Bay of Bengal's growing strategic and economic importance. For a number of Bay of Bengal littoral countries, such as Bangladesh and India, acts of piracy and armed robbery are sometimes a cause for significant concern. Besides, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is still a serious problem that costs approximately US\$10 billion per year in the Bay.<sup>2</sup> Illicit maritime trades and trafficking are on the rise too. Moreover, the Bay of Bengal faces the challenges of marine pollution due to contaminations from both land-based and marine sources. The Bay of Bengal littorals, in particular, are vulnerable to natural disasters and will likely be among the nations that experience significant impacts from climate change (i.e., rising sea levels and increased ocean temperature). These parallel opportunities and challenges require concerted and sustained maritime cooperation efforts among the littorals of the Bay of Bengal. Due to insufficient regional maritime governance apparatus, bilateral maritime cooperation becomes imperative between the littorals in the Bay of Bengal.

It cannot be denied the fact that, over the past decade, India and Bangladesh have made unprecedented advancements in deepening bilateral ties. The relations between the two countries have been identified as the golden age of 'Bangladesh-India relations'<sup>3</sup>. Some scholars argue that there has been a paradigm shift in bilateral relationships where the longstanding rhetoric of 'insecurity' is sidelined by a conscious vision of promoting 'connectivity' and cooperation.<sup>4</sup> There are discernible differences between the two paradigms. While the former creates a basis for confrontational policy, the latter encourages trust and confidence and signals a policy of cooperation. Consequently, the enhancement of maritime cooperation has been a key focus during this phase.

One of the turning points for Bangladesh-India maritime cooperation has been resolving the long-running maritime dispute in 2014 through the verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). Following the demarcation of maritime boundaries, maritime security and the blue economy became important priority

<sup>2</sup> Vineeta Hoon, MMarie Saleem, and Philip Townsley, "Key Considerations for a Regional SocMon Strategy for the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Countries in South Asia," Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Delwar Hossain, "The Dynamics of Bangladesh-India Relations: From a Paradigm Shift to a Challenging Era?" in *India in South Asia*, ed. Amit Ranjan (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 133-151; Sreeradha Datt, "India-Bangladesh Relations: Engaging a Dynamic Neighbours," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 13, no. 4 (2018).

<sup>4</sup> ASM Ali Ashraf and Md. Sohel Rana, "External Influence, Domestic Politics and Bangladesh Government's Northeast India Policy," in *Bangladesh's Neighbours in the Indian Northeast: Exploring Opportunities and Mutual Interest*, ed. Akmal Hussain (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2017), 18-54.

areas for both countries which is reflected in various national strategies and policy documents. Bangladesh cites the blue economy as a cornerstone for accomplishing sustainable development within an aspiration of Vision 2041 and has adopted Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 in 2018 where the maritime economy is identified as a priority area. In addition, it enacted the Territorial Waters and Maritime Zone (Amendment) Act in 2021 with a view to establishing maritime governance.<sup>5</sup> Similar developments can be seen on the Indian side as well. For example, ‘The Maritime Agenda 2010-2020’ was launched in 2011.<sup>6</sup> Besides, the “Security and Growth for All in the Region” (in brief, known as SAGAR) was adopted by India in 2015 emphasising the “port-led development” model.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the Indian Navy released the Indian Maritime Security Strategy in 2015.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequently, several policy initiatives and bilateral agreements reinforced maritime cooperation between Bangladesh and India. The June 2015 visit of Prime Minister Modi to Bangladesh was significant in terms of maritime cooperation. Most importantly, six agreements/Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) pertaining to the maritime areas (namely coastal shipping, inland waterways, blue economy, and use of Chittagong and Mongla Port Coast Guard cooperation and conducting joint research) were signed during the visit.<sup>9</sup> An MoU and Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) between the two countries on Passenger and Cruise services on Coastal and Protocol routes were concluded when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India in 2017.<sup>10</sup> During her visit in 2019, the MoU on the Coastal Surveillance System and SOP of the Agreement on the use of Chattogram and Mongla Ports were signed.<sup>11</sup>

There has been increasing naval cooperation as well between the two countries. To reflect on this, the Bangladesh-India Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) was started in 2018.<sup>12</sup> Besides, both Bangladesh and the Indian Navies have regular

<sup>5</sup> “Bangladesh’s Sovereignty over Maritime Boundary Going to be Established; Law Amended,” *The Independent*, November 28, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Adarsh Vijay, “Blue Economy: A Catalyst for India’s ‘Neighbourhood First Policy,’” in *Maritime Perspectives* 2017, ed. Pradeep Chauhan and Gurpreet Khurana, (New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, 2017), 30-32.

<sup>7</sup> P. V. Rao, “Development through Connectivity’: India’s Maritime Narrative,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 15, no. 3 (2019), 245-264.

<sup>8</sup> Darshana M. Baruah, “India’s Evolving Maritime Strategy,” *The Diplomat*, December 03, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Transcript of Media Briefing by Foreign Secretary in Dhaka on Prime Minister’s ongoing Bangladesh Visit,” June 7, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “India – Bangladesh Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India,” April 8, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “India – Bangladesh Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India,” 2019.

<sup>12</sup> “Bangladesh-India Navy Joint Patrol in Bay,” *The Independent*, June 25, 2018.

high-level visits at different times. In October 2015, for instance, the then-Chief of the Naval Staff of Bangladesh made a four-day official visit to India to assess existing naval relations. Since then, greater operational engagement between the Bangladesh Coast Guard and the Indian Coast Guard has begun to take shape. In January 2023, a joint exercise was conducted by the coast guard from both countries.<sup>13</sup>

From the above discussion, it is apparent that the emerging obstacles and opportunities in the Bay of Bengal have given the impetus to enhance maritime cooperation between the two countries. While existing analyses have provided useful insights into Bangladesh-India maritime cooperation, there is a dearth of analysis on Bangladesh's perspectives as most of the research is conducted by Indian scholars. Therefore, it is pertinent to look into the recent developments and trends of maritime cooperation from Bangladesh's side and how to strengthen maritime cooperation between the two countries in the coming days.

Given this context, the paper aims to understand those pertinent issues by raising some key questions: What are the current trends of maritime cooperation between Bangladesh and India? What are the impediments to enhancing maritime cooperation between the two countries? And, how to strengthen maritime cooperation in the coming days? Methodologically, the paper is qualitative in nature based on primary data and secondary data. For primary data, it relied on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The interviewees from academia and practitioners are purposively selected based on their expertise. Besides, speeches, agreements and MOUs (for details, see, Annex-I) were important sources of primary data for the current research. It also included secondary data culled from different sources, e.g., government and nongovernment documents, academic journals, seminar/webinar reports, books and newspaper articles.

The paper is divided into six sections including the introduction. The second section discusses the conceptual understanding of maritime cooperation. The third section examines the current state of maritime cooperation between Bangladesh and India. Section four identifies the impediments to enhancing Bangladesh-India maritime cooperation. Section five provides the policy options for Bangladesh followed by the conclusion in section six.

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<sup>13</sup> "India, Bangladesh Coast Guards showing Maritime Cooperation," *The Statesman*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.thestatesman.com/india/india-bangladesh-coast-guards-showing-maritime-cooperation-1503148451.html>.

## 2. Conceptual Understanding

Maritime cooperation can be defined as collaboration in common maritime dimensions. The contemporary understanding of maritime cooperation incorporates ‘maritime security’, ‘blue economy’, and ‘maritime connectivity’ issues. These concepts, nonetheless, are elusive and open to different interpretations. Hence, three dominant discourses are identified in regard to cooperation in the maritime dimensions.

The first school of thought (Eric Grove, K. M. Panikkar, Geoffrey Till, etc.) deems maritime security as a matter of ‘sea power’.<sup>14</sup> The term ‘sea power’ emphasises the function of naval forces and developing strategies. According to Geoffrey Till, “in peacetime, sea power is associated with countries securing the ability to conduct transport and trade via the sea. In wartime, sea power describes the agency of navies to attack other navies or other countries’ sea transportation means”.<sup>15</sup> This school of thought focuses on ‘top-down’ or structural influences on international order at sea, namely global power shifts, shifting threat perceptions, naval modernisation and changes in naval capabilities.<sup>16</sup> They admit that ensuring maritime security is predominantly an act by the navy. Therefore, maritime cooperation means naval cooperation between and among countries.

The second school of thought (Michael Leifer, Sam Bateman, James Kraska, Raul Pedrozo, etc.) emphasises the role of several international regimes governing activities at sea.<sup>17</sup> The promotion of a “stable maritime regime” based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) principles is the main concern, according to them. Therefore, upholding and implementing the ‘convention’ is a central consideration in this aspect. This perspective has been further advanced by maritime legal scholars like James Kraska and Raul A. Pedrozo who have defined maritime security as a “stable order of the oceans subject to the rule of law at sea”.<sup>18</sup> In their views, maritime cooperation means establishing maritime regimes with a view to creating common legal frameworks for maritime governance.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Grove, *The Future of Sea Power*, (London: Routledge, 1990); K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1945); Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, (London: Frank Cass, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for Twenty-First Century*, (Milton: Routledge, 2018), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Jo Inge Bekkevold and Geoffrey Till, *International Order at Sea*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Leifer, “The Maritime Regime and Regional Security in East Asia,” *The Pacific Review* 4, no. 2, 1991; Sam Bateman, “Building Good Order at Sea in Southeast Asia: The Promise of International Regimes,” in *Maritime Security in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kwa Chong Guan and John K. Skogan (London: Routledge, 2007), 97-116.

<sup>18</sup> James Kraska and Raul Pedrozo, *International Maritime Security Law* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2013), 1.

The third school of thought (Christian Bueger, Michelle Voyer, Kamal Azmi, Michael McArthur, Anja Menzel, Lisa Otto, etc.) takes a comprehensive approach to maritime security. In this regard, Christian Bueger stated that a matrix of four concepts defines the interconnectedness between different concepts of contemporary maritime security namely national security (sea power, inter-state disputes, arms proliferation, and terrorist acts); economic development (blue economy and fishing); marine environment (marine safety and accidents) and human security (resilience and human trafficking).<sup>19</sup> He highlights the changing nature of maritime security and the need for collaboration and interaction between all the actors. Besides, Michelle Voyer, Kamal Azmi, Michael McArthur, Anja Menzel, Lisa Otto further argue that there are clear linkages between maritime security and the blue economy since the former facilitates the latter.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, maritime cooperation would involve diverse actors and synergies among them. And the holistic view is adopted to develop the Maritime Security Index<sup>21</sup> that measures and maps nine themes namely international cooperation, rule of law, maritime enforcement, coastal welfare, blue economy, fisheries, piracy and armed robbery at sea, illicit trade and maritime mixed migration. These are central to achieving sustainable maritime security and good maritime governance. Besides, the UK National Strategy for Maritime Security (2022)<sup>22</sup> has also been adopted in order to understand a holistic view of maritime security in which the blue economy gets equal importance.

As far as Bangladesh is concerned, the Territorial Waters and Maritime Zones Amendment Act, (2021) is the most important official document for understanding the country's perspective on maritime cooperation. Article 7 (G), in this regard, states that for the purpose of maritime cooperation with other countries, "the government may allow movement of persons, goods, commodities and vehicles using ports in Bangladesh or transit under the agreements with other States including landlocked countries." It further states that "the government may take necessary measures to formulate cooperative mechanisms for the promotion of safety of navigation, weather, cyclone and Tsunami, etc. forecasting, protection of the marine environment." The above quote gives clear importance to maritime governance (7E) and the blue economy (7F) in the Bay of Bengal. Besides, the Act lists piracy, armed robbery, maritime terrorism, trafficking in persons, IUU fishing, and marine pollution

<sup>19</sup> Christian Bueger, "What is Maritime Security?" *Marine Policy* 53, (2015), 162.

<sup>20</sup> Michelle Voyer et al., "Maritime Security and the Blue Economy: Intersections and Interdependencies in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 14, no. 1, 1-21; Anja Menzel, "Maritime Security and the Blue Economy," in *Routledge Handbook of Maritime Security*, ed. Ruxandra-Laura Bosilca et al, (New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Maritime Security Index: Codebook, (Broomfield: One Earth One Future, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> UK Government, *The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security* (London: UK Government, 2022).

as punishable crimes. This has shown that Bangladesh’s perspective on maritime cooperation incorporates a wide range of areas related to connectivity, security and a blue economy.

Among the three schools of thought, this paper takes the approach of the contemporary experts on maritime security and maritime cooperation since the maritime security themes are linked to each other which need comprehensive and holistic responses. Therefore, maritime cooperation needs to be viewed in terms of interlinked pillars-security, sustainability and connectivity.

### 3 Current State of Bilateral Maritime Cooperation

#### 3.1 Maritime Connectivity

Between Bangladesh and India, three agreements are important in regard to maritime connectivity and trade. These are namely the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) 1972 to utilise the transboundary rivers for transit and trade; the Agreement on Coastal Shipping (2015) for direct movement of ships; and the Agreement on the usage of Chittagong and Mongla Port in Bangladesh by India (2018) for transshipment facilities.

It is worth mentioning that both countries signed the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) in 1972.<sup>23</sup> As per the commitment, it could be renewed every two years, but since October 2001, renewals have been made irregularly.<sup>24</sup> For example, after long 14 years, the Protocol was renewed on 6 June 2015 when Prime Minister Modi visited Bangladesh.<sup>25</sup> It connects the inland waterways of Bangladesh and India for the transportation of goods. Parts of the Ganga, Hooghly, Brahmaputra, Barak, and Sundarbans Delta are included in the India-Bangladesh Protocol Routes. At present, there are 10 routes and 22 ports of call.<sup>26</sup> The PIWTT allows vessels movement between Kolkata, Haldia, Dhubri, Pandu, Silghat, Karimganj, Kolaghat,

<sup>23</sup> Vasudha Chawla, “India-Bangladesh Maritime Trade: Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT),” in eds. Admiral Pradeep Chauhan and Gurpreet S Khurana, *Maritime Perspectives 2017*, (New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, 2018), 33-37.

<sup>24</sup> Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Pratinashree Basu, “India-Bangladesh Connectivity: Possibilities and Challenges,” *Proximity to Connectivity Part-1*, 2015, ORF, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> “India, Bangladesh to Extend Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade,” *The Economic Times*, April 21, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> “Second Addendum on Protocol on Inland Water and Trade between India and Bangladesh,” Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, May 20, 2020.

Dhulian, Maia, Sonamura and Jogighopa Ports in India to Narayanganj, Khulna, Mongla, Sirajgonj, Ashuganj, Pangaon, Chilmari, Rajshahi, Sultanganj, Daukhandi and Bahadurabad Ports in Bangladesh through both countries' inland waterways (see, Map 1). However, it is observed that a coastal shipping agreement was required due to the inadequacy of these inland routes for container movement.

**Map 1: Bangladesh-India Inland Waterways Protocol Route<sup>27</sup>**



<sup>27</sup> Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2022, <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/prime-minister-sheikh-hasinas-visit-to-india-sspattanaik-141022>.



On 06 June 2015, India and Bangladesh reached an Agreement on Coastal Shipping.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, the SOP between the two nations was agreed upon and signed on 15 November 2015.<sup>29</sup> The agreement aims to enhance two-way trade between Bangladesh and India. The coastal shipping began in March 2016 when the container vessel M V Harbour 1 sailed from Chittagong Port in Bangladesh with a view to importing cotton from Krishnapatnam Port.<sup>30</sup> The Agreement permits vessel movement from Chennai, Krishnapatnam, Kakinada, Visakhapatnam, Paradip, Haldia and Kolkata Ports in India to Chittagong, Mongla, Khulna, Paira, Narayanganj, Pangaon and Ashuganj in Bangladesh through coastal waterways.<sup>31</sup> Shipping time is cut short from approximately a month to six to ten days.<sup>32</sup> The application of this Agreement, however, is restricted to trade between the two countries. Hence, another agreement was concluded for the use of Mongla and Chittagong Ports.

Most remarkably, in 2018, Bangladesh and India concluded a bilateral agreement to allow the use of Chittagong and Mongla Ports.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, a SOP was signed when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited India in October 2019.<sup>34</sup> The first trial run took place in July 2020 with the transportation of four containers filled with iron rods and pulses from Kolkata's Haldia Port to Chittagong Seaport.<sup>35</sup> And in November 2022, the final trial run was concluded.<sup>36</sup> In April 2023, India was given permission to use Bangladesh's Chattogram and Mongla Ports for transportation of products to its own territory.<sup>37</sup> The routes under the Agreement include: a) Chattogram

<sup>28</sup> Agreement on Coastal Shipping Between India and Bangladesh, 2015, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/BG15B2420.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> "India and Bangladesh sign Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to operationalize agreement on coastal shipping", *The Economic Times*, November 16, 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/transportation/shipping/-transport/india-bangladesh-sign-sop-to-operationalise-agreement-on-coastal-shipping/articleshow/49802539.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>30</sup> "Container Vessel Service Between Bangladesh and India Starts," *Dhaka Tribune*, March 23, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) on Coastal Shipping, 2015, [https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/3430630577SOP\\_0.pdf](https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/3430630577SOP_0.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> G. Padmaja, "India Bangladesh Coastal Shipping: Opportunities and Challenges," in *Maritime Perspectives 2016*, eds. Pradeep Chauhan and Gurpreet S Khurana, (New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> "Bangladesh, India to Ink Pact Today to Allow N-E States Use Chittagong Port," *The Daily Star*, October 24, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> "Bangladesh Allows Use of Chattogram, Mongla Ports for Movement of Goods to and From India," *The Business Standard*, October 7, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> "First-ever container cargo from Kolkata via Bangladesh port Reaches Agartala," *Times of India*, July 23, 2020, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/77131063.cms?from=mdr&utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/77131063.cms?from=mdr&utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

<sup>36</sup> "India concludes trans-shipment trial runs to connect NE using Bangladeshi ports," *The Economic Times*, November 7, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/transportation/shipping/-transport/>.

<sup>37</sup> Abbas Uddin Noyon, "India Cleared to Transport Goods Through Ctg, Mongla Ports," *The Business Standard*, April 25, 2023,

Port/Mongla Port to Agartala via Akhaura; b) Chattogram Port/Mongla Port to Dawki via Tamabil; Chattogram Port/Mongla Port to Sutarkandi via Sheola; Chattogram Port/Mongla Port to Srimantapur via Bibirbazar; e) Agartala to Chattogram Port/Mongla Port via Akhaura; f) Dawki to Chattogram Port/Mongla Port via Tamabil; g) Sutarkandi to Chattogram Port/Mongla Port via Sheola; and h) Srimantapur to Chattogram Port/Mongla Port via Bibirbazar.<sup>38</sup> The remainder of the section looks into the impact of maritime connectivity measures on bilateral trade and connectivity.

It is notable to mention that Bangladesh is India's biggest trade partner in South Asia and India is Bangladesh's second-largest import market.<sup>39</sup> Bangladesh's export to India in Fiscal Year 2021-22 stood at about US\$ 2 billion and imports were estimated at US\$13.69 billion.<sup>40</sup> However, this trade primarily takes place through roadways. As per the Report of the World Bank, bilateral trade between Bangladesh and India is conducted through the Petrapole-Benapole road route; 17 per cent of trade is done through inland waterways whereas rail and coastal shipping account for 4 per cent and 2 per cent respectively.<sup>41</sup>

Table 1 shows the statistics of vessels and cargo movement PIWTT from 2010 to 2021. It shows that there have been increased cargo movements through inland waterways between the two countries over the past ten years. According to the Bangladesh Inland Water and Transport Authority (BIWTA), the quantity of goods carried rose from 1.4 million tonnes in 2010-11 to 3.9 million tonnes in 2020-21. Total trips under the protocol increased as well from 2084 trips in 2010-11 to 4139 trips in 2020-21. However, trade is one way in nature where most goods are carried by Bangladeshi cargo for import purposes. The main item of import from India to Bangladesh via the protocol route is fly ash. Notably, in 2020-21, the total goods carried was 3.9 million tonnes out of which 3.8 million tonnes were fly ash. The river routes were also used to import limestone, steel cargo, iron ore, rice, wheat/food grain and cement, etc. It is to be noted that, due to the introduction of anti-dumping duties in 2006, the demand for jute from Bangladesh has substantially decreased over time. Recently, the Indian authorities have extended it for another five years.<sup>42</sup> This is due

<sup>38</sup> Agreement on the Use of Chattogram, Mongla Ports for Movement of Goods to and From India, 2018, <https://iwai.nic.in/sites/default/files/Agreement%20on%20the%20use%20of%20Chattogram%20and%20Mongla.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Ali Akbar Rouf, "The Changing Face of Trade between Bangladesh and India," *The Business Standard*, April 4, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Annual Bangladesh Balance of Payments 2021-2022, Bangladesh Bank, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Matias Herrera Dappe and Charles Kunaka, *Connecting to Thrive: Challenges and Opportunities of Transport Integration in Eastern South Asia*, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021).

<sup>42</sup> "India to Continue Anti-Dumping Duty on Bangladesh Jute Products," *The New Age*, January 2, 2023.

to uncertainty surrounding how importing jute from Bangladesh will affect the Indian industry and local jute growers. Besides, due to India’s non-tariff barriers, there has been a decreasing demand for garment products.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, the cargo volume did not increase to the anticipated levels despite opening direct shipping between the two countries in 2016. Currently, vessel service exists only between Kolkata/Haldia and Chattogram. There is no vessel service between Kolkata/Haldia and Mongla because of insufficient demand and a lack of return cargo from Bangladesh.

**Table 1: Statistics of Vessels and Cargo Movement PIWTT from 2010 to 2021<sup>44</sup>**

Particulars of Performance	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Quantity of Goods Carried in Total	14,37464	14,85,002	15,54,018	19,33949	19,49454	22,59,654	26,24,614	27,02,571	24,01,796	27,80,416	39,59,885
Total Trips Under Protocol	2084	2069	2009	2363	2355	2651	3040	3386	2744	3262	4139
Ratio of Goods Carried by Bangladesh and Indian Vessels	99:01	96:04	97:03	99:01	99:01	99.62:0.38	99:01	97.08:2.92	95.21:4.79	95.95:4.05	92.23:7.77
Nature of Cargo	14,29,576	14,48,562	15,07,357	19,12,751	19,03,467	22,47,773	25,98,023	26,42,298	23,27,147	27,30,411	38,11,709
Fly Ash											
Others	7, 888	36, 440	37,171	21,198	30,482	11,881	26,591	60,273	50,005	50,005	1,48,176

In terms of transit-transshipment facilities, the recent developments in the protocol make India’s principal objective in connecting with the Northeast clear. India can use the land and waterways of Bangladesh to reach Northeast India. The waterways are renowned for their affordability and environmental friendliness. Consequently, transportation over waterways appears to be the ideal substitute for land routes.<sup>45</sup> India’s transportation through these two Bangladeshi ports will be faster and less expensive. This route significantly reduces the distance between Kolkata and Agartala via Assam from approximately 1600 kilometre (km) to just over 450 km, based on the first trial container ship from Kolkata to Agartala and Karimganj through Chattagram Port.<sup>46</sup> Besides, geopolitical factors to some extent

<sup>43</sup> Sajay Kathuria, *A Glass Half Full: The Promise of Regional Trade in South Asia* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2019); Mustafizur Rahman. “Making the Most of Bangladesh-India Trade,” *East Asia Forum*, September 17, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Bangladesh Inland Water and Transport Authority (BIWTA), 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Vasudha Chawla, “India-Bangladesh Maritime Trade: Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT),” in *Maritime Perspectives*, eds. Admiral Pradeep Chauhan and Gurpreet S Khurana (New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, 2018), 33-37.

<sup>46</sup> “Transit Via Bangladesh Ports for NE India to give Impetus to BBIN Construct,” *The Economic Times*, July 24, 2020.

influence connectivity initiatives in the Bay of Bengal. India is interested to transport goods to the Northeastern states through Bangladesh not only for reduced time and cost but also because it has geopolitical implications. Connectivity with Bangladesh means reduced dependence on the Siliguri Corridor. Bangladesh is still an important connection of India's link to Northeast India. Although Sittwe is regarded as an alternative route to reach the Northeast,<sup>47</sup> the Paletwa and Zorinpuri highway remain incomplete.<sup>48</sup> Northeast will not be able to access the Bay of Bengal through Sittwe without the completion of this road.

For Bangladesh, some analysts view that there is potential for income from the private transport and service sector as Bangladeshi vehicles will carry the freight to the Indian border.<sup>49</sup> Besides, there is an opportunity to promote connectivity between Bhutan and the seaports of Bangladesh through National Waterway 2 of India and Inland Waterways in Bangladesh. Some analysts point out the potential of the Coastal Shipping Agreement among the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries due to the probability of facilitating trade between the member countries including Bangladesh and India.<sup>50</sup> However, questions remain regarding the actual benefits for Bangladesh from such arrangements given the current trade pattern and lack of progress in connectivity initiatives.

### 3.2 *Blue Economy*

Blue economy has become another significant area of maritime cooperation between Bangladesh and India. In this regard, an MoU on 'Blue Economy and Maritime Co-operation in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Region' was concluded in June 2015.<sup>51</sup> The MoU mostly focuses on fisheries, joint research, capacity building, human resource development, marine pollution response, tsunami and cyclone warning and maritime domain awareness, etc. Article II<sup>52</sup> of the MoU stipulates,

<sup>47</sup> Adarsh Vijay, "India and Myanmar: Prospects of Maritime Reciprocity," National Maritime Foundation, 13 February 2018.

<sup>48</sup> "Sittwe Port and the Way Forward," *Maritime Gateway*, May 24, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Mustafizur Rahman, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Quoted from সমীর কুমার দে, 'দু'পক্ষেই ইতিবাচক ফল পাওয়ার সুযোগ আছে', May 5, 2023, <https://www.dw.com>.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Dr. Mahfuz Kabir, Research Director, BISS, May 2023.

<sup>51</sup> MoU between India and Bangladesh in the Field of Blue Economy and Maritime Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Region, 2015, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/BG15B2419.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> MoU between India and Bangladesh in the Field of Blue Economy and Maritime Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Region, 2015, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/BG15B2419.pdf>.

Bangladesh-India will focus on (a) Developing inclusive and people centric ocean based blue economy and maritime cooperation; (b) Research & Development in marine biotechnology and the creation of centers of excellence; (c) Capacity building and skill development in the field of marine science and blue economy; (d) Sharing knowledge and expertise on marine aquaculture and deep sea fishing and safeguarding economic interests including fishing fleets in the areas beyond national jurisdiction; (e) strengthening maritime pollution response cooperation; (f) Supporting exchange programmes for human resource and skill development in the field of green tourism and hospitality sectors; (g) exchange of Tsunami and cyclone warnings between agreed points of contact. (h) maritime domain awareness, including exchange of information and best practices, capacity building and strengthening of support centres and institutions for education, research and training in this area

The MoU also established the Joint Working Group (JWG) to operationalise the MoU and the first meeting of the JWG was held in May 2016.<sup>53</sup> In order to further develop bilateral relations, the two sides talked about potential areas of cooperation under the MoU.

Besides, IUU fishing has become a significant problem between the two countries. Fish stocks have declined due to unsustainable fishing methods and a lack of technology, which have resulted in illegal fishing in neighbouring maritime areas. In this context, cooperation in the fisheries sector is an urgent need. However, an MoU on fisheries cooperation was finalised by Bangladesh and India on 06 September 2011.<sup>54</sup> The MoU intended to provide training for people in fish production and distribution, fish stock assessment, post-harvest technology, freshwater pearl culture, Hilsha fisheries management, and preservation of biological variety related to fisheries development, etc.<sup>55</sup> However, the MoU has not been extended after the completion of five years.

River tourism is another significant area of maritime cooperation. The two governments inked an MoU for river cruises along the PIWTT routes in May 2017.<sup>56</sup> The MV Ganga Vilas cruise ship set out on its journey from Varanasi on 13 January 2023 that covered the Sundarbans as well.<sup>57</sup> The cruise travelled about 1,100km

<sup>53</sup> “Bangladesh-India Discuss MoU on Blue Economy,” *The Daily Observer*, May 10, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> “MoU Between India and Bangladesh on Cooperation in the Field of Fisheries,” *The Business Standard*, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> “MOU between India and Bangladesh on co-operation in the field of fisheries,” September 6, 2011, <https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/>.

<sup>56</sup> MOU on Passenger and Cruise Services on the Coastal and Protocol Route, 2015, <https://iwai.nic.in/sites/default/files/The%20MoU%20On%20passenger%20and%20cruise%20services.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> “MV Ganga Vilas Places India-Bangladesh on World River Cruise Map: Indian Minister,” *The Business Standard*, March 01, 2023.

across Bangladesh before returning to India.<sup>58</sup> It is expected that such arrangements will enhance the bilateral movement of passengers, tourists and cruise.

Conservation of the world's largest single mangrove forest—the Sundarbans—requires joint initiatives. Mangroves provide valuable ecosystem services that contribute to the blue economy including fisheries support services, raw materials provision, coastal protection, and climate regulation. Blue Economy Development Action Plan (2021) of Bangladesh has identified ecosystem services of mangroves as one of the significant sectors of the blue economy of Bangladesh.<sup>59</sup> The MoU on the conservation of the Sundarbans was signed on 06 September 2011 by Bangladesh and India.<sup>60</sup> The 2011 MoU identifies various endeavours: First, joint management of the Sundarbans. Second, encourage mangrove regeneration, habitat restoration and rehabilitation programmes to increase the potential for carbon sequestration. Third, the development of long-term strategy for creating ecotourism. In 2016, the JWG on Conservation of Sundarbans comprising officials from India and Bangladesh identified joint activities and agreed to work on environmental change, and large-scale climate change adaptation interventions in the Sundarbans.<sup>61</sup> During her visit to India in 2022, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina emphasised on the effective implementation of the MoU.

In an effort to strengthen Bangladesh-India scientific research cooperation, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), India and the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh signed an MOU for Joint Research on Oceanography of the Bay of Bengal in 2015.<sup>62</sup> Besides, Maritime University of Bangladesh concluded an MoU with Indian Maritime University in 2016.<sup>63</sup> In addition, Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) and CSIR, India signed an MoU in September 2022 for further cooperation in this area.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> “MV Ganga Vilas Places India-Bangladesh on World River Cruise Map: Indian Minister,” op.cit

<sup>59</sup> Blue Economy Development Work Plan, 2021, <https://mofa.gov.bd/site/page/ab254318-8f4a-423c-a3ef-733b80f28014/Blue-Economy-Development-Work-Plan>

<sup>60</sup> MOU Between India and Bangladesh on Conservation of the Sundarbans, 2011, <http://moef.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MoU-Sundarban.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> “Bangladesh, India to Jointly Conserve Sundarbans,” *Dhaka Tribune*, December 9, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> “MoU between Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, India and University of Dhaka, for Joint Research on Oceanography of the Bay of Bengal, 2015, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/BG15B2425.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> “Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Maritime University Collaboration with Indian Maritime University,” 2016, <https://bsmrmu.edu.bd/collaboration>

<sup>64</sup> “MoU between BCSIR and CSIR,” <http://bcsir.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bcsir.portal.gov.bd/nfpblock/2022-11-14-08-42-0db7ffcd6dadfba4df2ecf8c3221c98e.pdf>

### 3.3 *Maritime Security*

The Bangladesh-India Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) is likely to be the most prominent example of the two nations' maritime cooperation, which began in 2018. Bangladesh and Indian Navy jointly launched coordinated anti-crime patrol in specified areas of their maritime boundaries in 2018.<sup>65</sup> The latest edition of the Indian Navy-Bangladesh Navy CORPAT took place in May 2022.<sup>66</sup> In 2019, the Bongosagar bilateral naval exercise was announced<sup>67</sup> while in May 2022, the third edition of 'Bongosagar' took place in Bangladesh.<sup>68</sup> The CORPAT mainly involves joint patrolling and Bongosagar mainly focuses on activities such as surface warfare drills, weapon firing drills, seamanship evolutions and coordinated air operations.<sup>69</sup> Besides, both the navies interact at the multilateral exercises as well. Bangladesh Navy regularly participates in a multilateral naval exercise named MILAN conducted by the Indian Navy at Port Blair. In addition, the Bangladesh Navy has also taken part in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Indian Navy also participated in the international exercises namely IMMSAREX 17<sup>70</sup> and International Fleet Review arranged by Bangladesh in 2022.<sup>71</sup> The regular conduct of exercises has improved communication and interoperability between both navies.

Besides, both Bangladesh and the Indian Navies have high-level official visits at various times. In November 2015, Vice Admiral Muhammad Farid Habib, the then Chief of Naval Staff of the Bangladesh Navy, made a four-day official trip to India to assess the two fleets' current cooperation and look into potential future areas of collaboration.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>65</sup> "Bangladesh, Indian navies launch joint maritime patrol", *Dhaka Tribune*, 27 June 2018.

<sup>66</sup> "India, Bangladesh Navies Undertake Coordinated Patrol in Northern Bay of Bengal," *The Hindu*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Visakhapatnam/india-bangladesh-navies-undertake-coordinated-patrol-in-northern-bay-of-bengal/article65446843.ece>

<sup>67</sup> "Indian Navy-Bangladesh Navy Bilateral Exercise Bongosagar and CORPAT," Ministry of Defence, India, October 2, 2020, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1661064>

<sup>68</sup> "Indian Navy-Bangladesh Navy Bilateral EX Bongosagar Commences," Ministry of Defence, India, May 25, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1828166>

<sup>69</sup> "Indian Navy-Bangladesh Navy Bilateral EX Bongosagar Commences," Ministry of Defence, India, May 25, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1828166>

<sup>70</sup> Tarek Mahmud, "President inaugurates 32- nation naval exercise," *Dhaka Tribune*, 28 November 2017.

<sup>71</sup> "Participation of Indian Navy in the Maiden International Fleet Review Hosted by Bangladesh," Ministry of Defence, India, December 09, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1882221>

<sup>72</sup> "Bangladesh Navy Chief on Four Day Visit to India: What's on the Agenda," *The Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/bangladesh-navy-chief-on-four-day-visit-to-india-whats-on-the-agenda/articleshow/49627578.cms?from=mdr>

In 2019, the Indian Chief of Naval Staff paid a visit to Bangladesh.<sup>73</sup> The visit of the Bangladesh Navy Chief to India in October 2021 was significant as it coincided with the golden jubilee celebration of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.<sup>74</sup>

Greater operational engagement between the Bangladesh Coast Guard and the Indian Coast Guard is also beginning to take shape. The professional relationship between the two coast guards has been strong since 2015, as there has been a mutual exchange of delegations and ships visiting each other for professional interactions. An MoU between the coast guards was signed in June 2015 that intended to ensure maritime safety and prevent crimes at sea.<sup>75</sup> Instant means of communication have been established in order to facilitate a quick exchange of information and active cooperation around the clock.<sup>76</sup> There has been cooperation in the fields of Search and Rescue Operations (SAR) as well. Both the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India have complimented the armed forces of both countries for conducting Joint Search and Rescue Operations in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>77</sup> A recent initiative like SAR was observed when the Indian Coast Guard saved 32 Bangladeshi fishermen<sup>78</sup> and in another incident, 20 Bangladeshi fishermen were rescued post-landfall of Cyclone Sitrang in 2022.<sup>79</sup> These positive developments have contributed to the quick transfer of the fishermen and humanitarian treatment of the fishers during the interactions between fishing vessels and maritime law enforcement agencies.<sup>80</sup>

Besides, there have been regular high-level visits to discuss mutual concerns and methods to counter maritime crimes that affect both countries. One such visit took place in 2019 when senior coast guard officials of both countries

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<sup>73</sup> "Indian Navy Chief Visits Dhaka," *The Business Standard*, September 22, 2019.

<sup>74</sup> "Bangladesh Navy Chief Visits Mumbai, Meets Vice Admiral," *The Indian Express*, October 28, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/bangladesh-navy-chief-visits-mumbai-meets-vice-admiral-7594304/>

<sup>75</sup> Memorandum of Understanding Between Indian Coast Guard of the Republic of India and Bangladesh Coast Guard of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, June 06, 2015,

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Senior Officials of Bangladesh Coast Guard, May 2023.

<sup>77</sup> "India-Bangladesh Joint Statement During the State Visit of Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India," Ministry of External Affairs, India, April 8, 2017, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28362/India\\_Bangladesh\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_during\\_the\\_State\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_Bangladesh\\_to\\_India\\_April\\_8\\_2017](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28362/India_Bangladesh_Joint_Statement_during_the_State_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Bangladesh_to_India_April_8_2017)

<sup>78</sup> "32 Bangladeshi Fishermen Rescued by Indian Coast Guard Repatriated," *Times of India*, August 23, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/32-bangladeshi-fishermen-rescued-by-indian-coast-guard-repatriated/articleshow/93733992.cms>

<sup>79</sup> "Indian Coast Guard Rescues 20 Bangladeshi Fishermen post-landfall of Cyclone Sitrang," *The Business Standard*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/indian-coast-guard-rescues-20-bangladeshi-fishermen-post-landfall-cyclone-sitrang-520446>

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Senior Officials of Bangladesh Coast Guard, May 2023.



met in Kolkata.<sup>81</sup> Added to that, there have been regular visits of ships between the two countries with a view to encouraging operational and administrative cooperation. The latest one was in January 2023 when two vessels of the Indian Coast Guard Ships arrived at Chittagong for a six-day visit.<sup>82</sup> A joint exercise was held at the end of the visit.<sup>83</sup> Regular visits of ships and high officials between the navies and coast guards of India and Bangladesh have also contributed to further strengthening mutual understanding between the two countries. Besides, there has been cooperation with regard to Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) as well. An MoU was signed for setting up a coastline surveillance system between Bangladesh and India in 2019.<sup>84</sup> Notwithstanding that, it faced enormous challenges in regard to implementation.

#### 4. Impediments to Enhancing Bangladesh-India Bilateral Maritime Cooperation

In order to have enhanced maritime cooperation, Bangladesh and India needs to overcome a number of major obstacles. The first challenge is the systemic factors driving India's narrative of maritime cooperation. In India, efforts to build intraregional connectivity are being motivated more by extra-regional activities.<sup>85</sup> Geopolitical interests, quite often are greater than economic interests. Therefore, the current trend of maritime cooperation between the countries focuses extensively on maritime connectivity issues. It is observed that both academicians and practitioners tend to highlight connectivity initiatives. Regrettably, a holistic and comprehensive approach is absent in the whole narrative.

The second challenge stems from one-way maritime trade. The fact that the traffic has mostly remained one-way is a significant obstacle to maritime connectivity and trade with India. As mentioned earlier, there is not much demand for imported items from Bangladesh in India. As a result, much of the cargo transporting commodities

<sup>81</sup> "India, Bangladesh Coast Guards Meet to Discuss Maritime Issues," *ANI*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/india-bangladesh-coast-guards-meet-to-discuss-maritime-issues20190716185335/>

<sup>82</sup> "Two Ships of Indian Coast Guard Arrive on 6 Day Visit," *The Financial Express*, January 14, 2023, <https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/metro-news/two-ships-of-indian-coast-guard-arrive-on-6-day-visit-1673627003>

<sup>83</sup> "India, Bangladesh Coast Guards Showing Maritime Cooperation," *The Statesman*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.thestatesman.com/india/india-bangladesh-coast-guards-showing-maritime-cooperation-1503148451.html>

<sup>84</sup> Dipajan Roy Chaudhury, "India, Bangladesh sign MoU for Setting up Coastal Surveillance System Radar in Bangladesh," *The Economic Times*, October 07, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> P. V. Rao, "Development through connectivity": India's Maritime Narrative," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15 no. 3, (2019): 245-264, 10.1080/19480881.2019.1640578

from India to Bangladesh returns empty. This raises the expense required by private trading agencies and hinders economic connections.

In the case of maritime connectivity, another important challenge is the lack of infrastructure. Despite sufficient affordability, the use of transshipment facilities is low due to the lack of adequate infrastructure.<sup>86</sup> Since 2016, the Kolkata to Agartala via Ashuganj and Akhaura has been operational. According to the Ministry of Shipping, only seventeen cargo ships crossed the route, carrying 23,377 tonnes of cargo and paying Bangladesh Taka 35 lakh in transit fees.<sup>87</sup> Besides, there are issues with project completion delays. The deadline for completion of the terminal and container depot at the Ashuganj River Port was 2022 which is expected to be finished by December 2024.<sup>88</sup> The project to construct the 50-km four-lane Ashuganj-Akhaura highway has also been extended the completion date from 2023 to 2025.<sup>89</sup> Such delays have resulted in the increasing cost of the projects.

There exist environmental concerns as well. Regular river dredging is necessary for the protocol routes to be navigable. For example, the Kusiara-Barak Rivers and the Kolkata Port both require year-round dredging.<sup>90</sup> However, dredging has an adverse impact on biodiversity. Besides, fly ash is the primary commodity transported along the Protocol route as mentioned earlier. In the inland waterways, several such barges have capsized causing pollution to the waterways.<sup>91</sup> It is to be noted that heavy metals found in fly ash can seriously contaminate water sources.

The lack of implementation of the agreements and MoUs is another vital challenge. So far, there have been a number of agreements and MoUs in maritime cooperation but pledges are often not materialised. For instance, in regard to blue economy cooperation, much remains to be achieved. As mentioned earlier, the first meeting of JWG took place back in 2016. Despite the fact that both parties committed to regular meetings for discussing the status of their collaboration efforts,

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<sup>86</sup> Abdullah Sadi, "Realising the Full Potential of India-Bangladesh Transit," *The Business Standard*, November 7, 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Rejaul Karim and Al-Amin, "Indo-Bangladesh Transshipment: Execution Proving Tricky," *The Daily Star*, September 6, 2022.

<sup>88</sup> "3 More Projects May Get Costlier," *The Daily Star*, August 13, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Azizul Shonchay, "Export to India through Akhaura Awaiting a Four-Lane Boost," *The Business Standard*, September 09, 2022.

<sup>90</sup> Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury et al, India's Maritime Connectivity: Importance of Bay of Bengal (Kolkata: ORF, 2018).

<sup>91</sup> "Fly-ash Imports from India Polluting Indo-Bangladesh Waterway," *The Business Standard*, October 25, 2020.

unfortunately, it has not been continued now. Similarly, the first meeting of the India-Bangladesh JWG on the Sundarbans was held in 2016 with no continuation. Therefore, concrete steps toward implementation are scanty.

Another obstacle is the lack of resolution of the “grey area” which is overlapping continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) rights, between Bangladesh and India. It also remains an impediment to maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>92</sup> Based on the verdict by PCA in 2014, Bangladesh submitted an amended maritime boundary to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) on 27 October 2020.<sup>93</sup> However, since India objected to Bangladesh’s baseline in a note verbal to the United Nations (UN) in April 2021, the situation has grown more complex.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, Bangladesh opposed India’s adoption of straight baselines in this area in a note verbale submitted to the UN on 13 September 2021.<sup>95</sup> Such a situation acts as an impediment to realise the Bay of Bengal’s development potential.

## 5. Strengthening Bangladesh-India Maritime Cooperation

The protocol of the agreement needs to be updated so that it guarantees the overall benefit of the economies of both countries. Finding possible products that could be exported from Bangladesh to India via the coastal route is necessary. Besides, local seagoing container shippers should be allowed to carry goods to third countries for the sake of saving time and money and facilitating the industry to thrive. Most importantly, the infrastructure development projects need to be completed without much delay.

The ‘blue economy’ and collaboration in related areas need to be given more attention. During the most recent visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in India, the blue economy cooperation was not highlighted to a larger extent. Rather, the current focus is extensively on maritime connectivity initiatives as mentioned earlier. With regards to establishing the blue economy, specific initiatives need to be outlined and a road map must be provided. Besides, in order to track the development of the

<sup>92</sup> Anurag Bisen, “Enhancing Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Resolution of Grey Areas Between India, Bangladesh and Myanmar,” *Maritime Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2022).

<sup>93</sup> “Bangladesh Lodges Submission to UN on Limits of Outer Continental Shelf in Bay of Bengal,” *The Daily Star*, October 23, 2020.

<sup>94</sup> “India Opposes Bangladesh’s Claim on Deep Sea,” *The New Age*, April 18, 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Shahidul Islam Chowdhury, “Bangladesh Files Protests at UN against India’s Maritime Claim,” *The New Age*, September 17, 2021.

cooperation initiatives, the JWG on the blue economy needs to start meeting once more on a regular basis.

There is a need to ensure that all of the connectivity and blue economy activities do not affect the health and quality of the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Specifically, the expansion of river-based travel and trade under the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (2015), the Coastal Shipping Agreement (2015), and the bilateral agreement on the use of Chattogram and Mongla Ports (2018) must address the ecological concern. Both countries need to take proper steps for pollution control from tourism and the capsizing of vessels transporting goods such as fly ash.

The foundation of ocean and coastal management is marine scientific research. In comparison to other oceans, the Bay of Bengal is understudied. Hence, it is necessary to compile updated information in this area. Experts have highlighted the importance of joint research between Bangladesh and India for better managing the maritime sphere.<sup>96</sup> Besides, sensitising the important interplay between maritime security and the blue economy is necessary. More research needs to be done on the strong connection between blue economy and maritime security in the Bay of Bengal. In addition, maritime cooperation needs to be viewed in terms of interlinked pillars—security, sustainability and connectivity.

In order to maximise maritime security in the area and utilise the potential for growth in the Bay of Bengal, the grey area between Bangladesh and India is needed to be resolved. The practice of *note verbale* creates a prolonged unresolved situation.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, political will is necessary for both countries to resolve the issue. Some analysts view that an agreement could be signed based on shared sovereignty and common jurisdiction.<sup>98</sup> The resolution offers an excellent opportunity for Bangladesh and India to work together for the Bay of Bengal's economic progress.

Maritime diplomacy is vital for ensuring maritime security and the implementation of the blue economy. Tangible maritime security cooperation is needed for preventing maritime crimes such as piracy, armed robbery, illegal trafficking of arms, human trafficking and smuggling of drugs. There is a scope for a coordinated fishing ban by both countries with a view to preventing the depletion of fish stocks.

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Dr. K M Azam Chowdhury, Chairman, Department of Oceanography, University of Dhaka; May 2023; Interview with Indian Think Tanker, March 2023.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Australian Legal Scholar, May 2023.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Indian Think Tank, May 2023.

Besides, Bangladesh and India need to actively engage with multilateral forums such as the BIMSTEC, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in developing regional maritime security shared vision. Specifically, emphasis needs to be given to finalising BIMSTEC coastal shipping agreement. Besides, both countries need to promote the blue economy as one of the agendas of the organisation.

## **6. Conclusion**

Bangladesh-India maritime cooperation has improved in three aspects: maritime connectivity, blue economy and maritime security. Maritime connectivity has seen major developments where three agreements and MoUs have created opportunities for greater Bangladesh-India trade, India-India trade and regional trade and connectivity. However, recent trends show that the initiatives have had limited impacts so far. In regards to the blue economy, cooperation has begun in the fields of river tourism, Sundarban ecosystem services conservation, and marine scientific research. Besides, there has been increasing navy-to-navy cooperation in the form of joint bilateral exercises such as CORPAT and Bongosagar. In addition, the Bangladesh Coast Guard and the Indian Coast Guard are starting to work together more effectively. The MoU between the two Coast Guards has created instant means of communication which has facilitated quick exchange of information and active cooperation. Regular visits of ships and high officials between the navies and coast guards of India and Bangladesh have also contributed to further strengthening mutual understanding between the two countries.

The paper reveals that several key challenges still exist in enhancing Bangladesh-India maritime cooperation. Geopolitical stakes often dominate India's narrative of maritime cooperation resulting in focusing on connectivity initiatives. The vital challenges in terms of maritime connectivity initiatives and trading with India are that the traffic has remained largely one-way and lack of infrastructure has slowed down the whole process. In addition, there are environmental impacts from maritime activities. Another important issue is the failure to implement the agreements and MoUs. Furthermore, the resolution of the "grey area" between Bangladesh and India remains an impediment to maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal.

With a view to strengthening Bangladesh-India maritime cooperation, there is a need to ensure that the protocols of the agreements guarantee the overall benefit of the economies of both nations and are not restricted to the issues of any one particular player or sub-sector. Moreover, the infrastructure development projects need to be completed fast. Besides, cooperation in the blue economy sectors needs to receive more attention in the India-Bangladesh maritime agenda. However, it is essential to make sure that all activities related to connectivity and the blue economy have no adverse effects on the condition and quality of the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Hence, it is crucial to prioritise marine scientific research. Moreover, increased maritime diplomacy is needed in order to ensure maritime security and proper implementation of the blue economy. Lastly, the gray area between Bangladesh and India must be resolved. By doing so, the region's marine security will be increased and the Bay of Bengal's growth potential will be unlocked.

**Annex I**

**Bangladesh-India Agreements and MoUs with Relevance to Maritime Cooperation**

Title of the Agreement/MoUs	Year
Agreement on Coastal Shipping Between India and Bangladesh	June 2015
MoU between India and Bangladesh in the Field of Blue Economy and Maritime Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Region	June 2015
Protocol on Inland Waterways Transit and Trade (PIWTT)	June 2015
MoU between India and Bangladesh on Use of Chittagong and Mongla Ports for Movement of Goods to and from India	June 2015
MoU between Indian Coast Guard and Bangladesh Coast Guard	June 2015
MoU on Passenger and Cruise Services on the Coastal and Protocol Route between India and Bangladesh	November 2015
SOP to Operationalize Agreement on Coastal Shipping	November 2015
SOP of MoU on Passenger and Cruise Services on the Coastal and Protocol Route between India and Bangladesh	October 2018
SOP of the Agreement on the Use of Chattogram and Mongla Ports for Movement of Goods to and from India	October 2019
MoU on Coastal Surveillance Radar System	October 2019