

## THE EVOLVING STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION: THE NEED FOR A NAVAL DOCTRINE OF BANGLADESH

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### *Abstract*

Once again, the Cold War syndrome is back in the international strategic environment. The complex strategic relations between the US and China have emerged as a critical factor constantly reshaping geopolitical and geostrategic stability in the Indo-Pacific region. The Bay of Bengal, being a part of the Indo-Pacific region, is now witnessing an unprecedented interest from the global power to project their military and diplomatic strengths. Given the militarization of the Indo-Pacific waters and the geostrategic rivalries unfolding in the Bay of Bengal – a vital sovereign jurisdiction of Bangladesh, the necessity for strengthening Bangladesh's naval power has never been as critically important as of now. Like the Balkans a century ago, riven by overlapping alliances, competitions, and rivalries, the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific and the Bay of Bengal regions will only become complex and hostile in the future. To secure Bangladesh's strategic autonomy and to reduce the impacts of global power rivalries over the Bay of Bengal, it is high time for Bangladesh to develop its naval doctrine. The critical powers, i.e., the US, China, Russia, Japan, and Australia, are now rethinking their naval doctrines. Henceforth, Bangladesh's naval doctrine should be aimed at embracing the rapid changes in geopolitics, peace, stability in the region, and technological advancements in the maritime domain. A doctrine, therefore, would give the international community a better sense of security and how Bangladesh's armed forces would act in a hostile geostrategic situation.

**Keywords:** Cold War, Doctrine, Realism, Sea Power, Strategic Autonomy, Technopolar

### **Background**

Bangladesh is at a geopolitical crossroads. Understanding geopolitics from the prism of Dhaka has never been as complex as ever in its recent history. The world has been observing, rather than watching, two events unfolding and evolving in Ukraine and Taiwan with apprehension, dismal political and diplomatic limitations, and fear of the return of the Cold War backed by new tools

like algorithms, artificial intelligence, and unmanned and biological technologies. Hence, a new political world is in the making, led by two distinct but fluid blocs – the US and its allies and China and its comrades. Both the test cases in international cases, the Ukraine crisis led by Kremlin, Moscow, and Taiwan tension led by Washington, USA, have shaken the foundations of multilateralism, liberal political order, and international stability – both in the forms of strategic and financial. Kremlin's calculated attack on Ukraine has caused a large humanitarian catastrophe that has generated convulsion across Europe, once an abode of liberalism, civilizational development, and supranational institutions like NATO and the EU. Beijing's response to Taiwan has sent a clear message of deeper polarization than can continue to keep the Indo-Pacific region susceptible to the global power struggle for power. Unsurprisingly, diplomatic and military miscalculations, or even a military accident, e.g., caused by nuclear submarines or a military aircraft, will have disastrous effects on the growth and development processes.

These crises have come at a moment when the adverse aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt across the continents, and its residual effects keep the global economy fragile. However, the countries are slowly returning to normalcy. In between, Bangladesh, in its immediate neighborhood, is feeling the heat of a state-level economic turmoil in Sri Lanka, nosedived economy in Pakistan, the continued rise of ultra-nationalist rightist politics in Bangladesh's two immediate neighbors, India and Myanmar, failures in China's zero-COVID policy, return of Taliban 2.0 in Afghanistan along with the renewed presence of the US-Pakistan tacit ties to counter Al Qaeda and ISKP, and competing strategic interests of the two global powers, China and the US, in the Bay of Bengal. The events in the extra-regional settings, such as the energy crisis and the looming food crisis, competition to control the global sea lines of communication and freight movement, global climate change, and Iranian and North Korean nuclearization, led to more significant military expenditures for the major powers. In addition, public health and technological disparities have gotten countries like Bangladesh to infuse extra resources to sustain economic growth. That means quantitative easing (QE) will become a phenomenon and near mandatory as a policy response to financial crises. Such phenomena have their flip sides, too - greater borrowing and spending, mixed with supply issues, will compel the nations to embrace inflation.

While the unfolding global precedence and evolving events are not soothing for the statist realists or the structural liberalists, the Washington-Beijing relationship will redefine geopolitics and geoeconomics in the coming years. The

US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), published in February 2022, denotes “the centrality of the region to core US interests and its forthright characterization of challenges posed by China”.<sup>1</sup> The 2022 version of IPS differs from the one pursued by the Trump Administration. The Biden Administration focuses on greater cooperation with regional allies and flags the necessity to bolster economic presence through an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) that seeks to limit China’s economic, technological, and foreign-policy dominance in the region.<sup>2</sup> Beijing has intensified its “military basing pursuits” to the South Pacific and Indian Ocean, seeking to establish its strong foothold in the Bay of Bengal. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has already made substantial headway in securing new bases in new destinations such as Cambodia, Tanzania, and the United Arab Emirates, among other locales.<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese military presence became more intensified after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022. The visit prompted China to conduct unprecedented military drills, highly aggressive diplomatic and political steps, and foreign policy pressures on the Indo-Pacific countries. As a result, the region became polarized between the countries that overwhelmingly upheld Beijing’s “One China” principle and the key US allies that strongly support Taiwan’s cause.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the emergence of the so-called military and technology pact among Australia, the US, and the United Kingdom (AUKUS) has raised the Indo-Pacific region’s geopolitical stakes to a higher level. China sees the AUKUS as another military, more precisely naval, red flag, and the ASEAN countries view it as a conduit for further militarization of the region. Choong and Seah (2021) mentioned, “the same goes with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue-known as the Quad. In August and October 2021, the four Quad members’ navies conducted maritime exercises in the Philippine Sea and the Bay

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<sup>1</sup> The White House, "Indo-Pacific Strategy." February N/A. March, 2022, Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>. Also see, Carla Freeman, Daniel Markey, and Vikram J. Singh, “A Closer Look at Biden’s Indo-Pacific Strategy”, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Robert D Atkinson, "Biden’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Is a Paradigm Shift", Foreign Policy, 01 July 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis Hardy, "Repositioning the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Regional Change", Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, 2019, p. 1-16.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Grossman, "After Pelosi’s Visit, Most of the Indo-Pacific Sides With Beijing", Foreign Policy, 22 August 2022.

of Bengal, respectively. As a testament to these drills' growing importance, the United States announced plans to possibly include Britain's Royal Navy in the future".<sup>5</sup>

The snapshot mentioned above reminds us that the core of our understanding of geostrategic structure is increasingly changing, where variables such as access to information, unpredictable and disruptive technologies, and evolving military strategies are playing key roles. The state no longer holds the monopoly over data and information, and technology allows unprecedented level surveillance on the public and the state, changing the armed forces' strategic behavior and autonomies. The relationship between military-technology superiors and geostrategic rivals, particularly in the domain of maritime dominance, will arguably remain the most critical and contested geopolitical complex and dynamics over the coming years, with intensified strategic competitions geared toward diplomatic and defense counter-moves and greater support for strategic industries.<sup>6</sup> In this structure, "controlling of the Indo-Pacific waters is one of the main approaches behind geostrategic rivalries among the great powers."<sup>7</sup> Once again, Alfred Mahan's Sea power theory returns, which stresses that supremacy at sea was essential for a nation's political and commercial success.<sup>8</sup> In essence, Mahan's doctrine stated that: (1) The United States should be a world power; (2) Control of the seas is necessary for world power status; (3) The way to maintain such control is by a powerful Navy.<sup>9</sup>

Henceforth, paradigm-altering unpredictable equations and their domino effects have undoubtedly asserted pressures on Bangladesh's foreign policy choices, economic stability, strategic priorities, and national security policymaking. What this means, then, is the unpredictability in global political

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<sup>5</sup> Willian Choong and Sharon Seah, "Why AUKUS Alarms ASEAN", Foreign Policy, 19 October 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Mucha, "Geopolitical Outlook: Turbulence Ahead?", 22 June 2022, Available at: <https://www.hartfordfunds.com/insights/market-perspectives/global-macro-analysis/geopolitics-in-2022-turbulence-ahead.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Iain D Henry, "What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence", *International Security*, vol 44, no. 4, 2020, p. 45-83.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, "The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783", First. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890.

<sup>9</sup> H Kaminer Manship, "Mahan's Concepts of Sea Power: A lecture delivered at the Naval War College on 23 September 1963", *Naval War College Review*, vol 16, no. 5, 1964, p. 15-30.

ecosystems, which directly impacts political and foreign decision-making processes. Hence, the need for a well-articulated naval doctrine for Bangladesh has become a critical feature of the defense discourse. Even if one takes Mahan's Sea Power Theory into cognizance or resorts to the geostrategic rivalries unfolding in the Bay of Bengal – a vital sovereign jurisdiction of Bangladesh, the necessity for strengthening Bangladesh's naval power has never been as critically important as now in its five decades of independence.<sup>10</sup> Like the Balkans a century ago, riven by overlapping alliances, competitions, and rivalries, the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific and the Bay of Bengal regions will only become complex and hostile in the future.<sup>11</sup> Henceforth, this article has been written to add value to defense discourse, alliance narratives, and as an apt reminder that the country should adopt its clear sea doctrine without delay. Bangladesh cannot afford to see the Balkanization of the Bay of Bengal.

### **The Geo-Geo Complexities in the Indo-Pacific and the Bay of Bengal Waters**

The Bay of Bengal is a classic case of blurring space between geopolitical and geostrategic realities. The Bay of Bengal littoral countries have to balance among development trajectories, human development, macro and micro economic stability, and rising income disparities.<sup>12</sup> These are the key variables that define, at least in the case of Bangladesh, to determine and design its geostrategic responses to the changing global orders. Hence, the polarization in the international political environment and the Cold War syndrome in the unpredictable Indo-Pacific region constantly put pressure on Bangladesh's foreign relations and defense postures. The Ukrainian and Taiwanese experiences show the difficulties in predicting a diplomatic breakthrough (in the case of Taiwan) or any significant military de-escalation (in the case of Ukraine); in the short term, political and economic sanctions are likely to continue and expand.

While the conflict in Ukraine is not the only security emergency the world is facing, and it is impactful because of its far-reaching effect on global security

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<sup>10</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, 1890.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Rudd, "A Maritime Balkans of the 21st Century? East Asia is a tinderbox on water", Foreign Policy, 30 January 2013.

<sup>12</sup> David Brewster, "A rising Bangladesh starts to Exert its Regional Power", 10 June 2021, Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/rising-bangladesh-starts-exert-its-regional-power>.

and prosperity in a technopolar world system.<sup>13</sup> That means the countries will continue to struggle for power (in the case of military superiors), economic stability (in the case of developing countries), and existence (in the case of small states). Once again, a harsh history of the Cold War returns as the Cold War 2.0 in the Indo-Pacific region. Kraska and Wilson (2009) argued, “following the Cold War, the littorals have emerged as the primary maritime battleground for peace and stability.”<sup>14</sup> The seas have further become a domain to exercise “lawfare” in addition to traditional “warfare.” The Bay of Bengal is increasingly becoming a strategic and economic battleground for both “lawfare” and “warfare,” as seen in the backgrounder of this article.

However, Bangladesh’s naval and maritime importance is complex. While the world is now struggling with multiple crises or perhaps unfolding new threats, we are seeing responses from the non-state actors intensifying too. The rise of extremism, which is a perennial problem for the states – in the forms of Islamist reactionary forces, saffron Hindutva, Buddhist ethnonationalism in Myanmar, or even ultra-right supremacist nationalism in the US and Europe – continues to be a significant security verbatim in defining ethnic and political relations.<sup>15</sup> Bangladesh, in its neighborhood, is observing a crisis of secularism that has potential spillover effects that can make the region volatile. Bangladesh now hosts the largest refugee camp in the world in Cox's Bazar, hosting 600,000 Rohingya refugees (officially known as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals) from the Rakhine state of Myanmar. In total, Bangladesh hosts 980,000 Rohingyas who fled the genocide committed by Tatmadaw in August 2017.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the global powers are divided on responding to the genocide committed in Myanmar.

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<sup>13</sup> KPMG International, “The geopolitical impact of the conflict in Ukraine”, Washington DC: KPMG International, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> James Kraska and Brian Wilson, "China wages maritime “lawfare”", Foreign Policy, 12 March 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "How Extremism Went Mainstream Washington Needs a New Approach to Preventing Far-Right Violence", Foreign Affairs, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, “Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained”, New York: UNHCR, 2022.

However, the US has formally recognized the atrocities and lethal crimes committed by Tatmadaw as genocide.<sup>17</sup>

The key obstacle has been the opposition from China and Russia in the UN Security Council with veto powers and India's national security priority, which is plagued with cross-border insurgencies in its Northeastern region. However, in an unprecedented move, on August 6, 2022, foreign ministers from the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed to bar Myanmar's ruling generals from the group's meetings until they make progress on a 15-month-old plan to address the crisis triggered by the military coup.<sup>18</sup> China and Russia see the Myanmar-Bay of Bengal connection as a vital source of geopolitical rivalries between the US-led and the non-US-led blocs. Rakhine has emerged as a geopolitical spindle between South and South Asia, an imminent point of interest for the global powers competing for geostrategic firm footing in the Indo-Pacific waters.

However, Rakhine is a blind spot for China as it serves its access to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar. China shares a 2,129 km border with Myanmar that runs from the tripoint with India in its north to the tripoint with Laos in the South.<sup>19</sup> Hence, on the Southern Chinese side, particularly for Yunnan and as an alternative to Malacca Strait, Rakhine has become a strategically vital landmass for Beijing and PLA.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, for India, Rakhine remains a strategic

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<sup>17</sup> Alexandra Sharp, "The U.S. Has Recognized Myanmar's Genocide. But Is That Enough?", 2022 Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/24/myanmar-genocide-rohingya-us-recognition/>. US Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Bangladesh", 2021, Available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-bangladesh/>. Also see, "The United States Announces New Assistance to Respond to the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis", 2021, Available at: <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-announces-new-assistance-to-respond-to-the-rohingya-humanitarian-crisis/>.

<sup>18</sup> AlJazeera, "Myanmar generals banned from ASEAN until peace plan progress.", 06 August 2022, Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/6/myanmar-generals-banned-from-asean-until-peace-plan-progress>.

<sup>19</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Burma", 08 August 2022, Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burma/>.

<sup>20</sup> Yann Roche, "La Mer de Chine méridionale un enjeu frontalier majeur en Asie du Sud-Est (The South China Sea: a Major Frontier Issue in Southeast Asia)", *L'espace Politique*, vol 21, no. 3, 2013, Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/espacepolitique/2780>

region for alternative sea and surface supply lines for the landlocked Northeast India, connectivity between India and the Southeast Asian countries, and combating insurgencies. As a result, both countries have invested substantially in Rakhine.

However, Myanmar's volatility and the global power rivalries in and around the Bay of Bengal refer to the making of an arc of stability from Singapore to Bangladesh to India to the islands of Sri Lanka and the Maldives.<sup>21</sup> The binding domain here is the Bay of Bengal, as the former the US Deputy Secretary of State, Mr. Stephen Biegun, during his visit to Dhaka in October 2020, mentioned that "Bangladesh will be a centerpiece of our work in the region".<sup>22</sup> The Japanese Ambassador to Dhaka Ito Naoki mentioned – "Bangladesh, located in the Bay of Bengal, is a vital country in geopolitical terms, and it needs to utilize its geographical advantage to increase economic opportunities fully".<sup>23</sup> The Chinese Ambassador to Dhaka Li Jiming, highlighting the growing strategic positioning in the Indo-Pacific waters, wrote an article in which he mentioned: "It is highly expected that the PLA and Bangladesh Armed Forces continue to strengthen exchanges and cooperation, and jointly write a new chapter on safeguarding world peace & development, and building a community with a shared future for mankind".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> K. W. Chern, "More Indian investments expected with better connectivity, bilateral ties", Myanmar Times, 15 July 2019, Available at: <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/more-indian-investments-expected-better-connectivity-bilateral-ties.html>. Also see, D. S Mathieson, "Balkanization of Burma?" Irrawaddy, 2008, Available at: [https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=11644&page=1](https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=11644&page=1).

<sup>22</sup> Shahab Enam Khan, "The Bangladesh-US Bilateral Relations: Rethinking through the Blurring Space between Geopolitics and Geoeconomics in the Indo-Pacific Region", AmCham, vol 15, no. 3, 2021, p. 17-26. US Embassy in Dhaka. Remarks by Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, 2020, Available at: <https://bd.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-deputy-secretary-of-state-stephen-biegun/>.

<sup>23</sup> The Business Standard, "Bangladesh strategically vital in Indo-Pacific", 28 February 2022, Available at: <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-strategically-vital-indo-pacific-377905>.

<sup>24</sup> Li Jiming, "Ambassador Li Jiming Publishes an Op-ed Titled "The PLA: A Staunch Force to Safeguard the World Peace and Development", 2022, Available at: [http://bd.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202207/t20220731\\_10730895.htm](http://bd.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202207/t20220731_10730895.htm).



Ambassador Jiming's article came at a time when the US released its new Indo-Pacific Strategy and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, "the Quad" – an alliance of four Indo-Pacific countries such as Australia, India, Japan, and the US has been formed – and the AUKUS became a source of trilateral tension among China, France, and the AUKUS members.<sup>25</sup> The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement: "The logic behind the US Indo-Pacific strategy, AUKUS, the Quad grouping, and the latest Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is US' centrism' and 'exceptionalism'".<sup>26</sup> The statement further mentioned that the bilateral relations could be "substantially damaged" in case Bangladesh decides to join the Quad, which China deems as "a military alliance aimed against China's resurgence and relationship with neighboring countries".<sup>27</sup>

While the US-China conundrum continues to influence Bangladesh's foreign and defense policy choices, its relations with India remain an essential geopolitical and geostrategic focus for China, the Quad alliance, and a diverse range of Indo-Pacific Strategies pursued by the US, Japan, and Australia. During the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Dhaka on March 27, 2021, the issue of stability in the Indian Ocean was highlighted. In a joint statement issued on the occasion of the visit of the Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh, the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India agreed to strengthen cooperation in the maritime domain. The joint statement states: "Bangladesh side highlighted that the country would assume chairmanship of the IORA for the first time in October 2021 and requested the support of India for working towards greater maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Bangladesh and assured India's cooperation in this regard".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The White House, "Indo-Pacific Strategy", February 2022, Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Radio Free Asia, "China takes dig at US as it again warns Bangladesh against Quad", 03 June 2022, Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/bangladesh-diplomat-06032022170832.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Also see, UNB, Dhaka, "Relations with China will be damaged if Bangladesh joins US-led 'Quad': envoy", The Daily Star, 10 May 2021, Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh/news/relations-china-will-be-damaged-if-bangladesh-joins-us-led-quad-envoy-2091345>.

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Joint Statement issued on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India to Bangladesh", 27 March 2021, Available at: <https://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?33746/Joint-Statement-issued-on-the-occasion-of-the-visit-of-Prime-Minister-of-India-to-Bangladesh>.

## Bangladesh's Geopolitical and Geostrategic Concerns

While the statements mentioned above clearly reflect intensified geostrategic interests of the global and regional powers evolving around the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh's challenges lie in the military presence of the great powers in the Bay of Bengal littoral water. These challenges are linked to geostrategic interests, national security, and the political economy around the Bay of Bengal. The Sri Lankan economic turmoil is a harsh reminder of the blurring space between geopolitics and geoeconomics. Sri Lanka, a Bay of Bengal country, suffered a devastating economic collapse, allowing Bangladesh to observe a new geopolitical environment. The IMF is negotiating with the Sri Lankan government to arrange for a sustainable bailout which will require political stability, unpopular austerity measures, restructuring of debt profile, and emending infrastructure projects. The much-debated Hambantota port and the Colombo port city came under the geostrategic radar of the powers, which has further intensified Chinese concerns over the Indian Ocean waters. On August 07, 2022, as Reuter reported, "Sri Lanka has asked China to defer the planned visit of a Chinese survey ship to the island country after an objection from India".<sup>29</sup>

The Reuter report further noted, "India worries that the Chinese-built and leased port of Hambantota will be used by China as a military base in India's backyard. The \$1.5 billion port is near the main shipping route from Asia to Europe".<sup>30</sup> The event marks the making of a more profound strategic polarization in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal region. According to international maritime law, the Chinese survey ship Yuan Wang 5 has the right to dock at the Hambantota Port. At the same time, Maldives National Defense Force has allowed five Indian vessels in Maldivian waters to conduct a joint hydrographic survey with the Maldivian government.<sup>31</sup> The presence of the Indian survey vessels has sparked political polarization in the Maldives, deeply rooted in anti-China or anti-India blocs. Subsequently, it has further made the Chinese approach to the Indian Ocean more combative. While we are witnessing militarization, or in a

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<sup>29</sup> Reuters, "Sri Lanka asks China to defer arrival of ship after India objects", 07 August 2022, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sri-lanka-asks-china-defer-arrival-ship-after-india-objects-2022-08-07/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Avas, "Five Indian vessels in Maldives for hydrographic survey", 07 May 2022, Available at: <https://avas.mv/en/117653>.

softer way to say 'securitization,' of the Indo-Pacific waters, Bangladesh's approach to the Indian Ocean, or the Indo-Pacific waters as a whole, has so far been neutral.

Indian intelligentsia has raised concerns over Bangladesh's procurement of Chinese Ming-class submarines. Bangladesh has reminded the strategic partners and powers that Bangladesh had to resolve its maritime disputes through international legal systems and institutions.<sup>32</sup> The maritime demarcation was not achieved through bilateral mechanisms with India and Myanmar; instead, it has been peacefully resolved through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) and the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). Bangladesh has not positioned itself as a member of any strategic alliances to transform the Bay of Bengal as a liberal investment destination for the international community while retaining absolute "strategic autonomy" and "control" over its maritime territory.<sup>33</sup> US Ambassador to Dhaka has mentioned, "by committing to the peaceful resolution of its land and maritime border disputes, Bangladesh has made the Bay of Bengal an example for the world to follow".<sup>34</sup>

Undoubtedly, Bangladesh's peaceful defensive posture continues despite Myanmar's Tatmadaw (the military junta in power), a significant source of national security threats to Bangladesh, acquiring a Russian-built Kilo Class submarine from India. In fact, just an anecdote, China, procured eight new Kilo-class diesel submarines from Russia in May 2002.<sup>35</sup> Bangladesh needs to strengthen its armed forces, more precisely the naval forces, to deter and diffuse threats of military escalations from the unpredictable government in Myanmar or insurgent activities in the Rakhine state. Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reiterated that "the government was very much cautious to avert any kind of war with Bangladesh's

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<sup>32</sup> Shahab Enam Khan, "The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations", *Defence Review* (Institute of National Security Studies), 2020, p. 46-59.

<sup>33</sup> Shahab Enam Khan, "The Emerging Regional Power Dilemma in the Indo-Pacific Region: Bangladesh and Sri Lankan Perspectives", *Journal of Defence and Policy Analysis*, vol 1, no. 1, p. 16-28.

<sup>34</sup> US Embassy in Bangladesh, "U.S. Ambassador Peter Haas's Remarks at the International Conference on Moving Forward in the Indo-Pacific", 31 March 2022, Available at: <https://bd.usembassy.gov/u-s-ambassador-peter-haas-remarks-as-prepared/>.

<sup>35</sup> Lyle Goldstein and William Murray, "Undersea Dragons: China's Maturing Submarine Force", *International Security*, vol 28 no. 4, 2004, p. 161-196.

neighbor despite repeated provocations from Myanmar." The Prime Minister mentioned: "Our nearest neighbor, at one point, showed such an attitude that there will be a war with us".<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the strategic posture and the commitment toward the peaceful Bay of Bengal should be seen as a source of both strategic and economic security.

## **A Naval Doctrine for Bangladesh to Respond to the Evolving Strategic Environment**

The Bay of Bengal has become a critically potential source of sustainable energy and food security, most notably after the Ukraine crisis, and a supply line vital for Bangladesh's graduation to the Least Developed Country (LDC) category in 2026. The United Nations Committee for Development Policy (CDP) has confirmed that Bangladesh is eligible to exit from the Least Developed Country category, having crossed the threshold of three defining criteria, namely per capita GNI, Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index (EVI), and Human Assets Index (HAI).<sup>37</sup> Bangladesh's foreign and economic policies are required to intensify investment, of course, by ensuring environmentally sustainable and safe for the marine ecosystem in the Bay of Bengal. It should be noted that "the deep sea, the vast expanse of the world's oceans beyond the continental shelf, is at risk of conflict and competition. The fact is, even the cold, dark reaches of the ocean are no longer immune to resource competition between the world's major powers".<sup>38</sup>

The seas are now being seen through a combination of technological advances, rising demand for fish and rare minerals, and an under-developed institutional framework making the deep sea the planet's latest – and perhaps last – frontier for those concerned with preventing future conflict.<sup>39</sup> The International

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<sup>36</sup> UNB, Dhaka, "PM Hasina: Govt was cautious against provocation of war with Myanmar", Dhaka Tribune, 07 October 2022, Available at: <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/10/07/pm-hasina-govt-cautious-provocation-war-myanmar>.

<sup>37</sup> Debapriya Bhattacharya, "Bangladesh qualifies for LDC graduation: What next?", Financial Express, 11 March 2021, Available at: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/bangladesh-qualifies-for-ldc-graduation-what-next-1615473209>.

<sup>38</sup> Scott Moore and Dale Squires, "Deep Trouble: Emerging Resource Competition in the Deep Sea", Washington: Wilson Center, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Scott Moore and Dale Squires, "Governing the Depths: Conceptualizing the Politics of Deep Sea Resources", *Global Environmental Politics*, vol 16, no. 2, 2016, p. 101-109.

Seabed Authority (ISA) has entered into 15-year contracts to explore polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulphides, and cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts in the deep seabed with 22 contractors.<sup>40</sup> These explorations will be performed in Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone, Central Indian Ocean Basin, Western Pacific Ocean, South West Indian Ridge, Central Indian Ridge, Mid-Atlantic Ridge, and Western Pacific Ocean.<sup>41</sup>

The contracts and exploration drives have redefined the geopolitics of ocean governance. The ocean's governance has to be understood as "a function of its significance for life and functioning of ecosystems, its 'unique materiality – heavy, fluid and yet fixed in place and its ability to shift between different physical states – solid, liquid and gas'.<sup>42</sup> That means the human activities, or deployment of technologies, will significantly influence inter-state relations, resource competition, and political geography centering around the seas. Thus, the deep seas now, on the one hand, "stand at the threshold of becoming a matter of politics; it has provoked a wide range of geopolitical imaginaries variously relating to 'resource security' and 'progress', on the one hand, and environmental disaster and precaution on the other".<sup>43</sup> Henceforth, rethinking the political, security, and alliance approaches toward the Bay of Bengal have become an essential security priority for emerging economies such as Bangladesh.

As we speak for rethinking the territorial waters, political and economic structures of the governance of the seas are fundamentally changing. The significant powers with access to seas are now rethinking their naval doctrines. Therefore, it is high time for Bangladesh to develop its naval doctrine. This article shows an increasing acknowledgment of the economic importance and future potential of the Bay of Bengal, often framed in terms of the 'blue economy' concept and the context of great power involvements.<sup>44</sup> The role of the human element and

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<sup>40</sup> International Seabed Authority, "Exploration Contracts", 2019, Available at: <https://www.isa.org.jm/exploration-contracts>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> A. Calrke-Sather, B. Crow-Miller, JM Banister, K Anh Thomas, ES Norman and SR Stephenson, "The Shifting Geopolitics of Water in the Anthropocene", *Geopolitics*, vol 22, no. 2, 2017, p. 232-359.

<sup>43</sup> John Childs, "Extraction in Four Dimensions: Time, Space and the Emerging Geo(-)politics of Deep-Sea Mining", *Geopolitics Open Access (Online)*, 2018, p. 1-25.

<sup>44</sup> M G Hussain, P Failler, M Khurshed Alam and A Al Karim, "Major opportunities of blue economy development in Bangladesh", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, vol 14, no. 1, 2018, p. 88–99.

the complex defense-technological systems will continue to be transformed and redefined by technological advancement. These advancements will significantly influence the naval doctrines over the years to come. Although, of course, it is notable that the autonomous operations and advanced maritime surveillance to determine "sea denial" and "sea control" is still in the infancy for the South Asian countries, Bangladesh's Naval Doctrine should focus on four inter-linked dimensions of naval geopolitics – (i) Principles of War, Peace, and Governance; (ii) Capacity and Capacities; (iii) Maritime Combat Power and Operations; (iv) Awareness, Understanding, and Cooperation; (v) Strategic Autonomy and Control; (vi) Training, Development and Modernization; (vii) International and Regional Governance; and (viii) Protection of Marine Ecosystems and Environment.

The Doctrine, henceforth, should be able to embrace the rapid changes in geopolitics and technological advancements. In terms of strategic considerations, Bangladesh's Doctrine should spell out clear priorities and goals of the Bangladesh navy in line with the economic and national security interests of the country, protecting Bangladesh in the event of a conflict and deterring adversaries from initiating and executing hostile actions, develop early warning mechanisms, effective control of sea lanes of communication, ensuring maritime border defense including underwater, modernization of naval command and control systems, political aspects such as joint exercises and operations, and calculated participation in maritime security cooperation forums.

In terms of economic considerations, the Doctrine should be synchronized with the Forces Goal 2030, foreign policy, protection of offshore investment, technology transfer and indigenous manufacturing of naval vessels, research and development using both external and internal resources, and protection of maritime ecosystems and environment. That means the Doctrine must be able to facilitate a combination of a high level of readiness with the ability to deploy in any part of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean and neutralize threats through a preemptive strike or other conventional attacks. Furthermore, to further exercise strategic autonomy, the Bangladesh Navy may be required to expand its naval capabilities by increasing its strengths in ballistic missile submarines and transforming its conventional naval capabilities into strategic deterrence capacity.<sup>45</sup> That means a modern Navy should focus on procuring the full range of possible maritime equipment, including multipurpose nuclear and conventional

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<sup>45</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's New and Unrealistic Naval Doctrine", 26 July 2017, Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/russias-new-and-unrealistic-naval-doctrine/>.

submarines, multipurpose surface combat ships, naval aviation, coastal defense forces, and even ground effect vehicles over the period.<sup>46</sup>

## **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, one may recall Michael Brown's (2004) epic statement: "Whether a weapon is offensive or defensive depends on the situation in which it is used".<sup>47</sup> Given the fluidity in international security, developing and designing a well-planned and coordinated defense doctrine based on national interest is essential. The definition of offense and defense should be developed with political priorities and economic interests. Undoubtedly, there is always a possibility that Bangladesh could tilt the strategic balance of power in the Bay of Bengal with far-reaching impacts on the Indo-Pacific. One should remember that Bangladesh, as of now, is one of the most significant UN Peacekeeping contributors, the 41st largest economy in the world, and the most strategically stable country without border or strategic tensions or conflicts with its immediate neighbors. It sits between South and Southeast Asia and is at the heart of the Bay of Bengal. The country's growing economic power, potential to assume regional leadership, and ensure stable control over sea lanes can convert Bangladesh into a strategic fulcrum in the era of U.S.-Chinese great-power competition. Henceforth, to prevent the spillover effects of great power rivalries, destabilizing conflict spiral, and since "offensiveness and defensiveness of many weapons are ambiguous," the preparedness should be bolstered with choices open to AirSea Battle (ASB) and Anti-Access or Area Denial (A2/AD).<sup>48</sup> A doctrine, therefore, would give the international community a better sense of security and how Bangladesh's armed forces would act in a hostile situation.

## **About Author**

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<sup>46</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's New and Unrealistic Naval Doctrine".

<sup>47</sup> Michael Brown, "Preface", In *Offense, Defense, and War*, edited by Michael E. Brown, Jr. Owen R. Cote, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, xvii. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Zachary Keck, "AirSea Battle, A2/AD and the Offense-Defense Balance", *The Diplomat*. 06 August 2013, Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2013/08/airsea-battle-a2ad-and-the-offense-defence-balance>.