

## THE MARITIME DIMENSION OF FOREIGN POLICY CHOICES OF BANGLADESH: SECURING NATIONAL INTERESTS AMIDST GEOPOLITICAL CONUNDRUM

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### *Abstract*

The Bay of Bengal, or broadly defining, the Indian Ocean region, has become a major hotspot for geopolitical tussles among major powers. Like other littoral states, Bangladesh also faces enormous external pressures to shape its critical foreign policy choices. This paper aims to surface the maritime dimension of these choices and to provide a comprehensive analysis of those choices. It analyses the choices through the Neoclassical Realist framework and hence, takes both the domestic and external variables into consideration. The paper argues that Bangladesh has been articulating national interests based on the required variables for its economic development and this principle has been guiding its foreign policies in the maritime domain. Based on the current trajectories, the study also provides a brief outline of the future challenges for Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, Maritime Domain, Indo-Pacific Region

### Introduction

The Bay of Bengal has emerged as an important strategic maritime space where the Sino-Indian relational dynamics has come into force to shape the maritime policy (security and non-security aspects) of the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh is geographically positioned in the middle of a geostrategic competition between the major regional and global powers. The maritime dimension of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), popularly known as the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road has been a major catalyst in terms of its relations with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. In response to the Chinese 'String of Pearls' strategy, an analysis of India's foreign policy reveals a counter-containment strategy in the Indian Ocean. And under the umbrella of Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), India is also exploring its partnership with USA, Japan, Australia, and regional partners to form a strong partnership against the BRI interests in the

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region. On top of that, Bangladesh's growing prominence in the regional and global politics, and its mega-developmental vision in the strategically significant maritime locations have added different dimensions to the power game. Among all the significant spaces for geostrategic competition, the aspects of building Bangladesh's first deep sea-port and submarine base have been the major domain of geostrategic competition in this regard.

Against this backdrop, this paper will revisit the foreign policy dynamics of Bangladesh from perspective of maritime domain. It will seek to analyze Bangladesh's policy dynamics in the context of regional and global power's maritime competition. It is theoretically and practically difficult to distinguish between land-based and maritime dimension of foreign policy of a country. The policies are formulated under a comprehensive view of the political vision of the country. Nevertheless, this paper will try to focus exclusively on the maritime domain to highlight the policy dynamics in this sector. The maritime dimension of foreign policy of Bangladesh is defined here as policies which involve engaging external partners and shape activities in the maritime territory and coastal region of the country. By incorporating the parameters embedded in this definition, this paper will try to explain the exclusive nature of the maritime domain and seek to answer whether there is any difference observed in this regard. Firstly, it provides a chronological analysis of the developments in the geopolitical competition in the maritime space. Afterwards, it briefly highlights the foreign policy practices and principles of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB). Finally, it employs a Neoclassical Realist framework to analyse Bangladesh's policy interactions with the USA, China, India, Japan and Myanmar in the maritime domain and addresses future trajectories and challenges. The main contribution of this paper will be regarding the application of Neoclassical Realist framework to correlate a domestic policy with the external dynamics. Bangladesh's maritime security and economic developmental policy will be analysed through this framework in the context of the geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics.

### **Methodology and Conceptual Framework: Analysing Foreign Policy Choices**

Qualitative case study method has been applied in this study which is a widely used method in social science research. It facilitates a researcher to 'understand the case in depth, and in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context' (Punch, 1988). The nature of the study resembles the basic tenets of 'intrinsic case study' which entails the study of a single case for holistic understanding of that particular case. The study is based on both primary and

secondary data collected from various sources: selected books, academic journals, reports of print and electronic media, official documents etc. Though it is a qualitative study, a wide range of relevant data has been utilized to substantiate the arguments presented in the paper.

This paper outlines a case study to understand Bangladesh's foreign policy choices in the maritime domain. There are several theoretical explanations in the field of International Relations, to trace the source of a state's foreign policy behavior. The Neo-realist paradigm stresses the salience of anarchic international system in dictating states' foreign policy decisions and some theories offer a domestic level analysis of states' behaviour (Waltz, 1993). By contrast, neo-classical realism takes a mediating position between these two. It stipulates that systemic variables pass through some intervening variables (domestic level variables) to shape the foreign policy of a particular state (Walt, 1985). Apart from the theoretical difference, neo-classical realists agree with the neo-realists that the analysis of state behavior should start from systemic level. Neoclassical realism has been applied in this case study to understand the pattern of Bangladesh's policy decisions regarding choosing its strategic partner in implementing its maritime development projects. Then, adopting this two level theoretical framework, this study has detected the systemic and domestic level variables to develop an analytical framework.

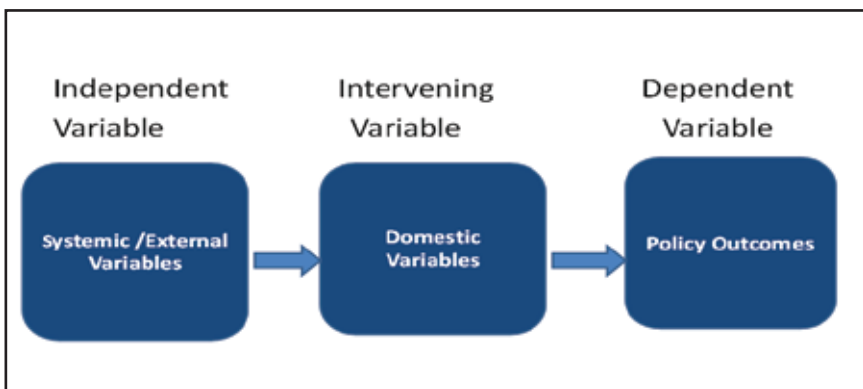


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Neoclassical Realism

In the subsequent sections, both external and internal variables of Bangladesh's foreign policy dynamics in the maritime domain has been analytically appraised. Afterwards, the analytical application of the Neoclassical Realist framework has been exerted where Bangladesh's choices regarding its relations with some of the major external actors in the maritime domain are explained.

## Major Powers' Interests in the Bay of Bengal: Conflicts and Convergences

The major powers' interests in a strategic hotspot like Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal will inevitably conflict with one another. A careful analysis of the policies of India, China, USA, Japan and Australia reveals deep-rooted strategic rivalries. On top of that, these differences get reshaped through different alliances, minilateral and multilateral forums. In order to understand the foreign policy challenges for Bangladesh in the maritime domain, it is imperative to understand the external variable – the major powers' interests in this region.

Infrastructural Connectivity Projects	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), Built Back Better World (B3W)
Security Alliances and Grand Strategies	Quad, AUKUS, Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), Free and Open Indo-pacific (FOIP)
Banks/Economic Platforms/ Trade Blocs	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), Asian Infrastructure Investment bank (AIIB)
Minilaterals	AUKUS, Quad

Table 1: Alliances and Groupings in the Indo-Pacific Region

The scholarly discussions around the renewed significance of the Bay of Bengal have always predicted the conflicting outcomes. Quite a number of multilateral platforms have already been clashing in terms of their conflicting interests and strategies. The common pattern of interests of the external powers in this region lies in developing trade capacity and infrastructures for a better regional connectivity through Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), Official Development Assistance (ODA) and other arrangements. These economic cooperation among the littorals and the major powers has deep-rooted security and political implications. Since the region is home to several maritime choke points for international trade and an abundant chunk of marine resources, the control of marine space through a littoral state is seen as a strategic leverage over a counterpart. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is perhaps the most widely discussed strategy concerning the Bay and the IOR. It is a inter-continental connectivity initiative, but its security implications are seen as a threatening one by its regional rival - India. In a broader sense, BRI has triggered a consolidated approach by the Western allies comprising Australia, USA, Japan, UK. The allies have come up with different platforms like Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), Built Back Better World (B3W) and Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). Each of the members of these different platforms have their own vision and strategic

priorities in this region. Therefore, these platforms also often exposes intra-group frictions regarding key aspects. While Japan has a different IPS vision under the auspices of Free and Open Indo-pacific (FOIP), it is not as different as India's own IPS strategy. Indian strategic priorities are defined in terms of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), and the Act East Policy. The first one concentrated on developing India's capability in the Bay through regional cooperation, while the latter one is entirely focused on growing bilateral and multilateral footprints in the South East Asian region. Australia's strategic priorities are more US-centric in nature. The centrality of the US in Australia's defence and foreign policy have been demonstrated through the formation of AUKUS (Parry, 2022).

The major powers have conflicting interests in this region, but they also converge at some points. Apart from the usage of rhetorics, the regional and external powers are mainly interested in forging alliances manifested in diplomatic, economic and political partnerships. These partnerships are often demonstrated through various infrastructural development projects and investments in different sectors of the littoral states. Therefore, if the interest of the regional and external powers in the littoral states of the Bay and IOR are perceived as a constellation of stars, some of the stars might be aligned. But the strategies to materialise that particular interest can be different and conflicting with each other. If a regional power offers investment to build a key maritime infrastructure of a littoral state, the other powers will articulate a competing narrative and will offer a different pathway of assistance towards the state. On top of that, the interdependence and impact of the major powers have increased in this region and it has paved the way for tensions and geopolitical competition and conflict at sea (Banerjee, 2018). In order to understand the pattern of disputes, it is imperative to understand the politics behind the convergence of interests among major powers. The convergence of interests is greatly shaped by rival interests. Chinese interests in the Bay and IOR are countered by the competing strategies of US, Australia, UK, India and Japan. The partnerships are mostly demonstrated through inking deals for technology transfer, holding joint naval exercises, developing intelligence sharing platforms etc. Although the risk of the outbreak of traditional warfare in the IOR is less than in the Pacific, the growing strategic rivalry cannot be negated. The renewed strategic importance is expected to grow manifold in future as the region is projected to feature 21 of the 25 maritime and airborne trade routes (Ranjan, 2016). Therefore, the growing militarization of the region poses a substantive threat to regional and global order.

Commentators	Remarks	Issues Highlighted
US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E. Biegun (October, 2020)	‘The United States sees Bangladesh as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific region and we’re committed to growing our partnership in this regard to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific. Bangladesh will be a centerpiece of our work in the region’ (The U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh, 2020).	Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS)
Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Mr. Li Jiming (May, 2021)	‘...obviously it will not be a good idea for Bangladesh to participate in this small club of four because it will substantially damage our bilateral relationship...’ (Bdnews24.com, 2021).	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and China-Bangladesh Bilateral Relation
US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price (May, 2021)	‘We have taken note of that statement from the PRC ambassador to Bangladesh. What we would say is that we respect Bangladesh’s sovereignty and we respect Bangladesh’s rights to make foreign policy decisions for itself’ (The Business Standard, 2021)	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and US-China Geopolitical Tussle
Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar (February, 2022)	“We have seen countries, including in our own region, being saddled with large debts, we have seen projects which are commercially unsustainable, airports where aircraft doesn't come, harbours where ship doesn't come ...every country will look for opportunities and see what it can do. But while doing so, it is in their own interest to be prudent about what they are getting into, to do the due diligence” (The Daily Star, 2022)	India’s perspective on BRI projects in South Asia and Sino-Indian rivalry in the region

Table 2: Manifestation of Major Powers’ Rivalry vis-à-vis Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy

In addition to securitizing the region in the traditional sense, strategic rivalry poses an existential threat to the demography. The conceptual paradigm of human security is essential in this regard which is primarily concerned with individual security, rather than the state. Although there is a binary of traditional and non-traditional security to distinguish between state-centric and human-centric security, the differentiation often becomes obsolete. Threat to human security is, directly and indirectly, related to national security. The maritime dimension of human security in the Bay of Bengal region is often negated due to the focus on high geopolitical issues. But the strategic rivalries can pose entwining challenges to the socio-economic conditions of the people. Nearly

1.4 billion people are populated across the littorals of the Bay, and a whopping quarter of the global population regards this region as their home (Dutta, 2021). There are wide range of threats to human security in the maritime domain of this region like climate change, pollution, IUU fishing, irregular migration, piracy, human trafficking, etc., (Banerjee, 2018). The nature of these threats to human security is particularly important here as these maritime threats require collective efforts to mitigate the adverse impacts (Upadhyaya, 2018). The region is home to more disaster-prone than other regions and climate change poses an existential threat to the people living along the coastline of the littorals. Due to the heightened geopolitical rivalry, there is hardly any multilateral interaction among the China-India-USA trio and any partnership between any two parties is seen as a threat to the other (Singh, 2016). Therefore, there is no multilateral platform for cooperation in issues like climate change, pollution, oil spillage etc. These issues are transboundary in nature in the sense that their source and impacts of them are not confined within the maritime boundary of a nation. However, due to the growing geopolitical tension, the naval capabilities of the states are being directed towards developing conventional warfare capability, instead of tackling threats to human security (Bateman, 2012).

### **Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: Determinants, Principles, and Articulation of National Interests**

The making period of Bangladesh's foreign policy started under the leadership of the visionary Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He prudently laid the foundation of a peace-centric principle of the newly independent country's foreign policy. The mandate of the nation's foreign policy – 'friendship to all, malice towards none' was a timely principle to guide the country out of the war-ravaged situation. And it is still guiding the foreign policy of one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The relevance of the principle can be traced even back to the mid-1950s when Bangabandhu strongly condemned Pakistan's signing of military pacts with the United States. So, the foundation of the defining principle of Bangladesh's foreign policy goes way back to the time before its emergence as an independent nation. Afterwards, the principle was cemented in the new constitution of the newly emerged South Asian nation. Article 25 of the constitution of Bangladesh states that:

*"The State shall base its international relations on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, peaceful settlement of international disputes, and*

*respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter, and on the basis of those principles shall –*

*(a) strive for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament;*

*(b) uphold the right of every people freely to determine and build up its own social, economic and political system by ways and means of its own free choice; and*

*(c) support oppressed peoples throughout the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism or racialism” (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972).*

The concept of ‘National Interest’ is intrinsically linked with the foreign policy dynamics of a country. According to W. W. Rostow, ‘National interest is the conception which nations apply in trying to influence the world environment to their advantage’ (Rostow, 1958). From the time of medieval age to the end of Cold War, the territorial security was at the heart of national interest of the political entity. The introduction of the concept of ‘Human Security’ and the advent of globalization have decentralized the idea of national interest. Economic development and prosperity define the foreign policies of the states across the globe now a days. Economic and security interests are intertwined and the economic ones drive the security policy of the countries. Bangladesh has also been prioritizing the economic diplomacy at the core of its foreign policy. A careful analysis of Bangladesh’s foreign policy choices will showcase that securing development funding has been the driving forces behind every dimension of its foreign policy. And Bangladesh has been an exemplary case in securing a consistent growth, even during a global pandemic. Comparing to other South Asian economies, Bangladesh’s growth trajectory has nothing short of a remarkable one.

## **Manifestation of Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy Principles**

Bangladesh’s foreign policy dictum shapes its peaceful approach to realize its national interests in the global arena. Bangladesh’s diplomatic activities are summarized below:

### **International Level**

- **Humanitarian Diplomacy:** Under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has been able to maintain the continuance of Bangabandhu’s ‘enlightened foreign policy’. Enlightened approach’ to foreign



	Countries in South Asia Region (Excluding Afghanistan)	Real GDP Growth at Constant Market Prices (Percent)			
		2021	2022	2023 (f)	2024 (f)
Calendar Year Basis (January – December)	<b>South Asia Region</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>5.9</b>
	Maldives	41.7	12.3	6.6	5.3
	Sri Lanka	3.5	-7.8	-4.3	1.2
Fiscal Year Basis (April – March)		<b>FY21/22</b>	<b>FY22/23(e)</b>	<b>FY23/24(f)</b>	<b>FY24/25(f)</b>
	India	9.1	6.9	6.3	6.4
Fiscal Year Basis (July – June)		<b>FY20/21</b>	<b>FY21/22</b>	<b>FY22/23 (e)</b>	<b>FY23/24(f)</b>
	<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>6.2</b>
	Bhutan	-3.3	4.3	4.5	3.1
	Nepal	4.2	5.8	4.1	4.9
	Pakistan	5.7	6.0	0.4	2.0

*\*(e)=estimate, (f)=forecast; Source: The World Bank, 2023*

Table 3: Comparative GDP Growth Rates in South Asia

policy focuses not only on the interest of a particular country but also on the countries of the world based on shared prosperity and development and humanity at large. In this regard, Bangabandhu wrote in his ‘Unfinished Memoirs’, ‘As a man, what concerns mankind concerns me’. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has globally been lauded for her humanitarian approach to the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals.

- **Climate Diplomacy:** Bangladesh is geographically a disaster-prone country and it has been able to mobilize global support for its fight against climate-induced vulnerabilities. Under Bangladesh’s presidency (2020-2022), the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) emerged as a legitimate voice for most climate-affected countries.

- **Peace Diplomacy:** Bangladesh has repeatedly reiterated its peace-centric foreign policy and has contributed to the maintenance of global peace and stability. According to the UN data of March, 2022, Bangladesh tops the troops contributing nations in the UN peacekeeping missions.

- **Vaccine Diplomacy:** In spite of going through a global pandemic where the world needed a shared sense of responsibility, vaccines became a tool of geopolitical weapon and the countries raced toward securing a fair share of vaccines for their citizen. But Bangladesh has made tremendous progress under the

dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to ensure free vaccines for the Bangladeshi people. Bangladesh pursued a policy of approaching simultaneously both bilateral and multilateral vaccine-sharing initiatives. Consequently, Bangladesh became the largest recipient of U.S.-donated COVID-19 vaccines among all countries worldwide.

- **Public Diplomacy:** Public diplomacy denotes a foreign policy component aimed at communicating directly with the foreign public. Bangladesh has immense scope for promulgating a comprehensive strategy to explore the new labour markets through public diplomacy. Bangladesh can also forge cultural ties beyond the regional level to make the best use of the Bangladeshi expats living across the globe.

### **Regional level**

- **Trade liberalization and Integration:** Bangladesh has been an important regional partner in forging strong regional integration to facilitate more trade across the South Asian region. Some of the initiatives include BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) Economic Corridor, BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) initiative, BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) etc.

- **Energy Diplomacy:** Bangladesh has been pursuing an active policy regarding energy cooperation with its neighbors. If bilateral issues are resolved, Bangladesh has huge prospects of energy cooperation with its mineral-rich neighbour – Myanmar.

- **Maritime Diplomacy:** Bangladesh has unlocked its maritime potential through resolving bilateral delimitation issues with Myanmar and India respectively in 2012 and 2014. Bangladesh has followed the international legal norms and brought out an exemplary instance in securing its maritime boundary through a complicated legal process.

### **Domestic Level**

Foreign policy is often dubbed as the extension of domestic policy in the sense that the policies adopted at the national level are reflected in the external policies. Bangladesh is actively pursuing a developmental policy to ensure the maximum level of alignment between its internal initiatives and the engagements of external actors. The goal is to achieve Vision 2030 – Attaining zero poverty rate

and Vision 2041 – Maintaining sustainable economic growth as a developed country. Economic diplomacy lies at the heart of Bangladesh’s relationship with external actors and therefore, the government is leaving no stone unturned to prepare its domestic industries in order to ensure expanded global market access. In order to reduce tariff barriers in the developed markets, Bangladesh needs to maintain its progress and aim at producing further developments in this regard. Bangladesh is scheduled to graduate out of the LDC status in 2026 and the government has already been working on addressing the impacts in this regard. The government is trying to forge greater economic engagement with the international actors for promoting Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) and obtaining aid.

The interplay of domestic and external factors shapes the foreign policy choices of a country. Based on the aforementioned foreign policy principles and priorities of Bangladesh, it is evident that ensuring security and preserving sovereignty, and engaging in the quest for resources for overall development are two of the most pertinent objectives of Bangladesh’s foreign policy choices.

### **Bangladesh’s Foreign Policy Choices amidst the Geopolitical Challenges in the Maritime Domain**

The maritime dimension of Bangladesh’s foreign policy emanates from the strategies to navigate through the regional tussle between India and China, and the global dimension of the Sino-American conflict. These two overarching geopolitical competitions mainly constitute the external variables Bangladesh’s foreign policy formulation in this regard.

### **Bangladesh’s Engagement with China and India in the Troubled waters of Sino-Indian Rivalry**

As it mentioned earlier, the BRI might be the most discussed project in the Indo-Pacific region. Bangladesh’s approach to the BRI has been a purely economic one where the domestic need to develop infrastructural capacity has overwhelmed any other reasons. The momentum started after the 2016 visit of the Chinese President Xi Jinping to Bangladesh. China agreed to finance a total of 27 projects of which there were some major maritime development projects.

Bangladesh found the zeal of BRI in the source of financing for its connectivity and infrastructural development visions. From a war-ravaged economy, Bangladesh has historically been preoccupied with the idea of transforming

Sl.	Name of the Project	Proposed Assistance (million USD)
1	Construction of tunnel under Karnaphuli River	705.80
2	Installation of Single Point Mooring (SPM) with double pipeline	500.466
3	Marine Drive Expressway and coastal protection works from Sitakunda–Chittagong–Cox’s Bazar	2856.56
4	Expansion and modernization of Mongla port facilities	249.17

*Source: Saimum, 2020*

Table 4: Major Maritime Projects under Chinese Financial Assistance

into an industrial economy by ensuring employment, social progress, economic growth, and foreign investment. So, BRI quickly became one of the cornerstones of Bangladesh’s infrastructure diplomacy. In addition to capital infusion, ideas like ‘One City, Two Towns’ symbolizing Shanghai are shaping Bangladesh’s development plans in its port city – Chittagong. Bangladesh’s decision to embrace BRI carefully also comes from another important aspect of its domestic politics. The political leadership of this country has historically embraced the idea of infrastructural power as a vital element of political rhetoric and legitimacy (Zaman, 2022). This has been an integrated part of the electoral politics of Bangladesh’s domestic political landscape. Throughout history, this philosophy has undergone several shifts which now incorporate the importance of regional connectivity in the domestic development discourse. So, these domestic variables including the political leadership’s worldviews are considered as the foundational blocks of the foreign policy of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh-China bilateral relation has passed through a substantive period of time and both the parties have benefitted from it. While many speculations are surrounding about the plausible case of a big state’s coercion of a small one, the relational dynamics is a two-way street (Zaman, 2022). Bangladesh has been aware of its choices and what the consequences of those are. Economic choices cannot be exclusively made without political considerations, but the latter often get trumped by the former. These narratives get prominent when we take Sino-Indian rivalry and India-Bangladesh bilateral relation into consideration. Indian defence and political establishments are very much aware that the presence of BRI will be felt most in the South Asian neighbourhood which is critical for its territorial integrity. Indian policy narratives perceive the BRI as containment strategy, namely a ‘string of pearls, encircling India’s national interests, Therefore, Bangladesh has often found itself navigating through the troubled waters as Chinese engagement in Bangladesh has been dubbed as another pearl in the Chinese strategy. India’s counter-strategies are mainly concentrated on reviving its

historical regional ties and expanding security ties with regional and extra-regional powers. These are fundamentally different from the Chinese approach as they feature political rhetoric and security initiatives rather than gigantic financial unloading in the partner countries. The idea is to portray itself as a ‘benign’ power resembling regional connectivity and harmony, in striking opposition to an ‘aggressive’ power resembling coercion and entrapment in the region. India has built and reinvigorated partnerships with Australia, Japan and USA through QUAD. It has also revised its 1990s’ ‘Look East’ policy to a more proactive version – ‘Act East Policy’. India’s vision in the maritime domain has been codified in its Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) concept which defines its strategy in the Indo-pacific region. Under these doctrines, India is strengthening its maritime cooperation with the Southeast Asian nations (Lee, 2020).

The demonstration of the Sino-Indian rivalry on Bangladesh’s choices in the maritime domain has been showcased in the case of building the country’s first deep seaport. Bangladesh-China agreed to ink a deal, back in 2014 during the Prime Minister’s visit to China, to construct the first deep sea port in Sonadia – an island of Cox’s Bazar. The financial cost was estimated at US\$14 billion. After the settlement of the maritime boundary disputes, the maritime domain started to be prioritized in the foreign policy agenda of Bangladesh. The prospect of the Sonadia deep seaport brought the potential of the untapped development in Bangladesh’s maritime domain and that attracted the interplay of regional rivalry. This rivalry mainly among India and China, along with the American and Japanese oppositions, influenced Bangladesh’s detour from the plan. It not only postponed the signing of the deal, during Chinese Presidents’ visit in 2016, but also officially scrapped together four years later (The New Age, 2020). Bangladesh is constructing its first deep sea port in Matarbari, just North of Sonadia, with Japanese assistance. This move has often been labelled as a strategic victory for India as it gets access to its fellow QUAD member backed ‘industrial value chain’ from the Bay to its land-locked and under-developed North-eastern states (Mahmud and Satoh, 2023).

Therefore, Bangladesh’s navigation through the troubled waters of regional rivalry has been featuring a careful hedging of the bilateral relations with China, while keeping the historical friendship with India protected. Bangladesh’s purchase of two submarines from China also caused a huge uproar among the Indian policy makers and policy analysts. As part of its Act East and SAGAR policy, India also moved to strengthen defense cooperation with Southeast Asian nations. Amidst Bangladesh’s problems of dealing with the Rohingya crisis, India

gifted a submarine to Myanmar to stop Chinese encirclement of military ties with the neighbouring nations. Bangladesh has reportedly been building a modern base for its two submarines with Chinese technical assistance. The issue is often exaggerated as an initiative of harboring Chinese naval power, any prospect of which has been denied by Bangladesh (Radio Free Asia, 2019).

### **Japan-Bangladesh ‘Heart-to-Heart’ Relations: Implications for the Maritime Domain**

Bangladesh has started working together with Japan regarding the development of major maritime infrastructures. The Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) initiative was launched by the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2014. BIG-B initiative aims to make Bangladesh a regional industry hub by developing power, connectivity, urban development and private investment sectors. The Moheshkhali-Matarbari Integrated Infrastructure Development Initiative (MIDI) will be a game-changer for Bangladesh’s economy and maritime capacity. The project is being developed centering on the first deep-sea port of Bangladesh and will become a regional energy gateway. The consequential cancellation of the Sonadia Deep Sea Port was followed by two complementary causal directions: Japan’s flexible plan with Matarbari, and the discovery of Matarbari’s strategic importance as a space for comprehensive development package (Ferdous and Islam, 2020).

Bangladesh has also sought defence cooperation with Japan to enhance its maritime capacity. As part of bilateral engagement with Japan, Bangladesh has discussed issues of maritime security and marine environment protection and agreed to undertake an action plan to mitigate maritime threats. As part of the bilateral cooperation in the maritime domain, Japan Government has also built and delivered a total of 24 ultramodern boats for Bangladesh Coast Guard (The Daily Star, 2019). This trend will likely to continue in the coming days as Japan plans to move away from its strict non-military approach of providing Official Development Assistance (ODA) to developing countries. As part of its policy to address the growing influence of BRI in the region, Japan will include new category of security assistance as part of its development aid which might include military-use facilities and coastal radar systems (Shigeta, 2023).

01	National Executing Agency		Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) and the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) of the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges
02	Location		Moheshkhali, Cox’s Bazar
03	Total Port Area		70.5 Hectares
04	Draft		16m
05	Infrastructural Components	a) Multi-Purpose Terminal	Berth 300m, Terminal 17ha Vessel: Max 70,000 DWT Cargo: 2.25 mil. tons/year
		b) Container Terminal	Berth 460m, Terminal 18ha Vessel: Max 8,000 TEU Cargo: 0.6~1.1 mil. TEUs/year <b>Future Expansion:</b> Berth 1,850m, Terminal 18ha Cargo: 1.4~4.2 mil. TEUs/year
		c) Sea Channel	Depth 14.5m, Width 350m Dredging: 11 mil.m3 <b>Future Expansion:</b> Extension for new berth Dredging 20 mil.m3
06	Project Cost		Estimated Project Cost 17,777.16 crore BDT • ODA Loan from Japan: 12,892.76 crore BDT • Government of Bangladesh (GoB): 2,671.15 crore BDT • CPA contribution: 2,213.24 crore BDT
07	Project Implementation Period		June 2018 - December 2025 (91 months in total).

Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 2018

Table 5: Matarbari Port Development Project

Project Status	Ongoing Project
Project Implementation Period	June 2014–July 2024
Location	Moheshkhali, Cox’s Bazar
Type of Loan from Japan	ODA Loan (437,754 million JPY as of now)
Project Brief	Construction of 600MW x 2 units of Ultra Super Critical Coal-Fired Power Plant

Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 2022

Table 6: Matarbari Ultra Super Critical Coal-Fired Power Project

## **The American Vision of Indo-Pacific: Where does Bangladesh Stand?**

The US-led constellations in the Indo-Pacific region are broadly defined in terms of its Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), and the goals and rules of engagement has varied across different US administrations. The US has repeatedly underscored the importance of the geostrategic importance of Bangladesh in this region and the inclusion of the country in its IPS. Bangladesh has so far stuck to its core mantra of prioritizing economic diplomacy in terms of bilateral relations with the US. Economic diplomacy has been the cornerstone of Bangladesh's success in its developmental trajectory. As long as the underlying objective of a bilateral or multilateral engagement is purely an economic one, Bangladesh finds it aligned with its policy-level philosophy of 'development without enmity'. Therefore, Bangladesh has not been a part of the IPS and QUAD. Although there was no official invitation to join the latter security forum, there was discussion in the diplomatic and media forum regarding a possible interest from the US side. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) has recently been developed against the backdrop of the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017. The IPEF marks a new beginning for constructive economic engagement with major US partners in the geopolitically important Indo-Pacific region. The success of the initiative depends on how seriously the US government thinks about how it can reduce its partners' dependence on the Chinese economy. Therefore, Bangladesh might be inclined towards joining IPEF soon as the economic partnership is merely a framework, not a trade agreement.

Bangladesh has sought to explore the bilateral partnership with the US to enhance maritime defence capabilities. As part of this bilateral assistance, Bangladesh has received patrol boats for the Bangladesh Army; additional patrol vessels for the Navy and Coast Guard; electronic and mechanical upgrades to the fast patrol boats and former U.S. Coast Guard cutters currently operated by the Bangladesh Navy; technical and professional training for Bangladesh military and Coast Guard personnel; and joint military and coast guard training and exchanges. US-Bangladesh has been conducting annual joint military exercise 'Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)' since 2010 to enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Bangladesh also seeks to explore further areas of maritime cooperation with the US under the "Vision for Advancing US-Bangladesh Economic Partnership". These plausible areas include innovative financing, transfer of critical technology, cross-sectoral partnership.



## **Myanmar-Bangladesh Relations: Bumpy Roads Ahead**

While Bangladesh resolved the maritime boundary disputes with Myanmar through ITLOS verdict in 2012, the Rohingya refugee crisis continues to strangle the bilateral relation. The Rohingya crisis has spearheaded into multifaceted crisis affecting the socio-political dynamics of the coastal community of the South-eastern Bangladesh. In consequence, the South-eastern coastal zone is being affected by alarmingly increased phenomena of narcotics trafficking and irregular migration using maritime routes. The future trajectory of the bilateral relation depends on the how the issue of Rohingya repatriation is dealt by Myanmar and regional powers. The geopolitical conundrum is hampering any progress in this regard as both India and China have vested interest in infrastructural, military and mineral resources development of Myanmar. An Indian financed deep-sea port has started operations in the capital city conflict-prone Rakhine, which is set to become a new trade route for India's Northeastern states (Kalita, 2023). So, the future of the Rohingya people largely depends on how much the regional geopolitics will be yielded for the resolution of this prolonged crisis.

## **Future Trajectories: Challenges Ahead for Bangladesh**

The great power rivalry is a defining factor in the Bay of Bengal or broadly IOR and will only increase in the coming days (Brewster, 2022). Bangladesh will face multifaceted challenges in this regard. The key challenge will be ensuring the required economic partnership to augment the country's development initiatives in the maritime domain. In line with this, some of the major challenges are outlined here: risk of periodic pause of economic growth and productivity, policy and security dilemma, preserving the legacy of the Father of the Nations' strategic balancing, risk of worsening bilateral relations with the regional partners, diverting welfare budget to increasing defense budget to address security dilemma, materialization of the development plans to flourish Blue Economy.

Bangladesh has so far maintained a higher degree of autonomy in terms devising its own development agenda, comparing to other regional states struggling to cope up with the geopolitical tussle in the region (Plagemann, 2021). Bangladesh's economy has not yet shown any significant indication for falling into debt trap because of allowing foreign infrastructure investments. In addition to the traditional pressures to join any blocs or groupings, Bangladesh has to deal with

the existing challenges like the Rohingya refugee crisis and climate change. But, due to the external pressures and growing militarization in the IOR, Bangladesh will feel the need for increasing its defence and military spending. This will result in diversion of funding from the socio-economic development and other infrastructural development initiatives. More importantly, any diversion in terms political priorities will be significant for the future of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is still far behind in the comprehensive realization of its maritime potential. In order to materialize the potentials to the fullest extent, Bangladesh needs huge investments in developing the resources, institutions and technology to realize the full potential as a maritime nation. However, the growing rivalry surrounding the Bay of Bengal will hamper the smooth progress of some of mega plans like Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100. The potential of flourishing blue economic activities are therefore dependent on the external situation as much as the internal one. Bangladesh will be challenged to maintain its foreign policy position of 'Friendship to All, Malice towards None' in the context of volatile geopolitics. We have already seen how the regional powers fall short of supporting Bangladesh to solve the prolonging refugee crisis which is affecting maritime development and security (Hasan and Ruud, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The Bay of Bengal has turned into a major hotspot in the Indian Ocean region. With the re-energization of the Indian Ocean as a core of international politics and the re-emergence of the geopolitical space of the Indo-Pacific, the rising attention towards the Bay of Bengal was nothing but a natural phenomenon of these developments. Bangladesh holds an important geostrategic position in the Bay and therefore, it is quite expected that the country's foreign policy has to take these external challenges into consideration. The importance of maritime domain surfaced in the national policy narrative at the beginning of the last decade and the government has also reciprocated by enhancing the country's naval and maritime capability. Therefore, the maritime dimension of the country's foreign policy requires a closer look and this paper is an outcome in that direction.

There are many ways of analysing a country's foreign policy choices. This study has sought to provide a neoclassical realist explanation of Bangladesh's foreign policy choices regarding its development projects in the maritime domain. It has done so taking the context of great power game in the Indo-Pacific region into consideration. It has attempted to provide a comprehensive framework for

analyzing Bangladesh's choices in the maritime domain, taking both external and internal variables into considerations. It sheds light on a distinctive dimension of foreign policy choices which is not often analysed exclusively. While it is difficult to distinguish and focus exclusively on this issue, it is also a significant part of the country's foreign policy dynamics and therefore requires special focus. Taking this difficulty and limitation into consideration, this study has attempted to provide a different perspective on the issues. It has found that the continuation of the foreign policy fundamentals are reflected in dealing with the issues of maritime domain. However, the maritime domain is different than traditional policy landscape and this paper has tried to highlight those differences which might be useful for further studies and policy actions.

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