

A Commentary on Bangladesh's Need for a Maritime Doctrine

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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 witnessing paradigm-altering events in Ukraine and Taiwan with apprehension, dismal political and diplomatic limitations, and a fear of the return of the Cold War. These uncertainties come with new realities infused by new tools like algorithms, artificial intelligence, and unmanned and biological technologies. Hence, new political world order is in the making, led by two distinct but fluid blocs - the US and its allies and China and its comrades. The great power rivalries have shaken the foundations of multilateralism, liberal political order, and international stability-both in the forms of

strategic landscape and financial architecture. The conflict in Ukraine has caused a large humanitarian crisis that has generated convulsion across Europe and on supranational institutions like NATO and the EU. Beijing and Washington's response to the Taiwan crisis has sent a clear message of polarization that can make the Indo-Pacific region susceptible to the global power struggle for power.

These crises have come at a moment when the adverse aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic persists across the continents, and its residual effects keep the global economy fragile. The global politics over energy supply and food, the Asian regional geopolitical environment, including the economic collapse in Sri Lanka, the Sino-Indian tensions, the

complex US-Pakistan-Chinese approach to dealing with Taliban 2.0, and the competing strategic interests of the Chinese and the American power blocs toward the Bay of Bengal have made the regional socio-economic stability volatile. Paradoxically, we also witness an escalation in military expenditures among the major powers despite the economic slowdown. These rapid changes denote that the relationship among the contentious geostrategic rivals will arguably continue to reshape the stability dynamics over the coming years. Unpredictable but intensified strategic competitions geared toward defense counterbalancing and greater investments in strategic industries will remain at the core of the Indo-Pacific military and diplomatic engagements (Mucha, 2022).

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. Cyber threats and increasing extremism in politics, ethno-identity, and religion heavily dominate the political and security discourses. Bangladesh hosts a total of 980,000 Rohingyas who fled the genocide committed by ethno-nationalist Tatmadaw in August 2017 (UNHCR, 2022). Unfortunately, the global powers became divided on responding to ethnic cleansing and genocide committed in Myanmar. The state of Rakhine, bordering Bangladesh, China, the Indian Northeastern region, and the Bay of Bengal, is a

geopolitical spindle between South and South Asia. Hence, it is a vital point of interest for the global powers competing for geostrategic and geoeconomic footing in the Indo-Pacific waters.

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 the coasts of Thailand to Bangladesh to India to the islands of Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The binding domain here is the Bay of Bengal. The former US Deputy Secretary of State, Mr. Stephen Biegun, during his visit to Dhaka in October 2020, labeled Bangladesh as a "centerpiece" to the US engagement in the Indo-pacific region (Khan, 2021). The Japanese Ambassador to Dhaka Ito Naoki views Bangladesh as "located in the Bay of Bengal" as "a vital country in geopolitical terms." The Chinese Ambassador to Dhaka, Li Jiming, stressed the People's Liberation Army and Bangladesh Armed Forces continued engagement to "write a new chapter on safeguarding world peace & development and building a community with a shared future for mankind" (Jiming, 2022). These statements reflect intensified geostrategic interests of the global and regional powers evolving around the Bay of Bengal.

To understand the escalating geostrategic tensions further in Bangladesh's backyard, one may note that the much-debated Hambantota port and the Colombo port city came under the major

powers' foreign and military policy radar. In August 2022, Sri Lanka asked China to defer the planned visit of a Chinese survey ship to the island country after an objection from India, and "India worries that the Chinese-built and leased port of Hambantota will be used by China as a military base in India's backyard" (Reuters, 2022). While the Chinese survey ship Yuan Wang 5 has the legal right to dock at Hambantota, the Maldives government has allowed five Indian survey vessels in the Maldivian waters to conduct a joint hydrographic survey (Avas, 2022). The presence and counter presence of maritime tools will continue to assert pressure on Bangladesh's defense posture and in its pursuit to ensure a safe, sustainable, and resourceful Bay of Bengal. Here, the political concerns over the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy and the alliance like Quad factor in.

Bangladesh has not positioned itself as a member of any strategic alliances yet. The prime intention behind the neutrality is to transform the Bay of Bengal into a lucrative investment destination by retaining absolute "strategic autonomy" over its maritime territory (Khan, 2021). Despite Bangladesh's peaceful defensive and collaborative postures, Myanmar's Tatmadaw (the military junta in power) continues to remain a significant source of national security threat to Bangladesh. Myanmar has acquired a Russian-built Kilo Class submarine. Therefore, Bangladesh needs to strengthen its armed

forces, more precisely the naval forces, to deter and diffuse threats of military escalations from the neighborhood or non-state and 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 neighbor despite repeated provocations from Myanmar." The Honorable Prime Minister further mentioned: "Our nearest neighbor, at one point, showed such an attitude that there will be a war with us" (UNB, 2017).

The Bay of Bengal has become a critically potential source of sustainable energy and food security. It is a crucial supply line vital for Bangladesh's graduation to the Least Developed Country (LDC) category in 2026. Bangladesh's foreign and economic policies are required to intensify investment, of course, by ensuring environmental sustainability and the safety of the marine ecosystems. We must not forget that the International Seabed Authority (ISA) has entered into 15-year contracts with 22 contractors to explore resources available in the deep seabed between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans (ISA, 2019). That means the human activities, oceanic governance, or deployment of new and classified technologies will significantly influence inter-state relations, resource competition, and political geography centering around the seas. Henceforth, rethinking Bangladesh's political and security approaches toward the Bay of

Bengal is now a critical necessity for strategic thinkers.

As we speak about rethinking territorial waters, the polarization over the governance of the seas is intensifying. The significant naval powers are rethinking their maritime doctrines and capabilities. Bangladesh requires to develop its maritime doctrine based on the aforementioned fluidities in the international strategic landscape. Bangladesh's doctrine should, therefore, focus on the future and interlinked dimensions of naval principles, capabilities, and engagement in peace and conflict. To further exercise strategic autonomy, the government may be required to expand Bangladesh's naval capabilities by increasing its

strengths in ballistic missile submarines and transforming its conventional naval capabilities into strategic deterrence capacity. One may recall Michael Brown's epic comment: "Whether a weapon is offensive or defensive depends on the situation in which it is used" (Brown, 2004). Therefore, a well-thought-out maritime doctrine will give the nation a better sense of security and strategic superiority in the coming years.

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