

# Geography, Sea Power and Politics: Implications for Bangladesh

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In what he deemed as his magnum opus, *Modern Strategy*, Colin S. Gray (1943-2020), who has a strong claim to being considered the greatest strategic theorist of his generation, argues that along with history and culture, geography is one of those dimensions which dominate strategic theory, analysis and explanation. Of course, in an age when many deem technology to be the final arbiter of strategy, there are powerful claims that geography is in the process of being dismissed as a dimension with much ability to constrain. In other words, who cares about 'mere' geography when intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) can deliver weapons of mass destruction, or small conventional explosives, essentially with perfect accuracy (a zero circular error probable, CEP) at ranges above 7000 miles? Why waste time and words about the significant influence of brute geography when conflict has expanded in one century from the land and the

surface of the sea to encompass the domains of air and space, as well as the electromagnetic spectrum (EMS), including today the virtuality of cyberspace (Gray, 1999)? However, as the conflict in Ukraine has proved yet again, the geographical dimension of strategy is ever-present and permanent. While geography varies in its specific influence upon particular conflicts at particular times, the 'continued primacy of geography remains.

Writing for PAAL, a publication devoted to raising maritime awareness among the unconverted and reinforcing the conviction of the converted, I cannot help but reiterate the importance of geography for a country like Bangladesh, blessed with access to the sea and a rich but often overlooked, sea-faring tradition. Reverting to Colin S. Gray, his ideas about maritime strategy—that element of strategy that relates to the sea—were enunciated most

clearly in his widely read 1992 book *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War*. The recurrent theme in his work is the connected propositions that “superior sea power has provided leverage critical for success in strategy and statecraft” and that this remains the case in the conditions of today and the likely ones of tomorrow (Gray, 1992). By sea power (or maritime power, for he tended to use the two phrases interchangeably), Gray meant the capacity to deliver strategic effect by what one does at or from the sea. He was clear that this is not an absolute quality but a relative one that countries or coalitions have to a greater or smaller degree compared with other countries or coalitions. Sea power is not the polar opposite of land, or continental, power but instead its complement. Throughout his book, Gray reminds us about the continuing strategic importance of sea power. Given the need to focus on the effects of maritime preponderance on the land, policy planners should remind themselves constantly that sea power is, with very few exceptions, no more than part of an overall package.

It should be noted that Bangladesh does not aspire to be a large military power, but rather is determined to have formidable forces to safeguard its sovereignty. Bangladesh's foreign policy focuses on promoting international peace while safeguarding the country's sovereignty and furthering its interests. My emphasis on Colin Gray's ideas or the conclusions to which he came is to shed light on our understanding of geography, sea power, and strategy. Since the rest of the twenty-first century is touted widely as maritime, a proper appreciation of the nature and importance of geography and sea power

should be relevant to our current and future concerns and help shape our foreign and defense policies.

Bangladesh, being an Indian Ocean littoral, cannot afford to ignore how the oceans' geography has shaped nations' destiny (remember the East India Company and Bengal's history!), Sea power has, in a true sense, made the world we live in today and will shape the world we live in tomorrow. The Indian Ocean is what James Stavridis calls 'The Future Sea' (Stavridis, 2017) and Bangladesh's geography and the sea are bound to affect the country's foreign policy. The Indian Ocean is a vast body of water - 20 percent of the world's surface and third in size behind the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Across this vast body of water, nearly half of all shipping and containers and nearly 70 percent of all fossil fuel, making it indispensable for the global economy. A third of the world's population in nearly forty countries live in or around the Indian Ocean. However, despite its vast economic potential and the increasing importance of India, projected to be the world's most populous country in 2023 and growing power in terms of global ambitions and reach, the Indian Ocean was still relatively a tabula rasa in geopolitical terms. China's transformation, which Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues initiated, has enriched the Chinese people and strengthened the country, a mission that had eluded China's leaders for 150 years. And in the process of achieving this goal, Deng presided over a fundamental change of China itself-the nature of its relations with the outside world, its governance system, and its society (Vogel, 2017). South Asia as a region has been affected by the transformation of China. China's rise as

an economic giant and its dependence and focus on the Indian Ocean has been widely perceived as leading to an inevitable competition in the arena with consequences for the littorals. Issues such as the movement of ships, bases, geopolitics, maritime strategy, and navies crop up regularly in discussions about the Indian Ocean. Lost in the hype is the old naval adage that bases exist for ships: ships are not maintained for the sake of the base.

Naval bases, on their own, command only that portion of the sea that lies within the range of its guns. If there are no ships to protect a base, it becomes a liability, a hostage in the hands of a superior naval fleet that could blockade it off from the rest of the world, wear it down, and occupy it if such a situation arises (Graham, 1972). Thus it is a fallacy to think one can escape geography and formulate foreign policy.

Bangladesh's position is to maintain ties with all major powers. Thus, taking geographic realities into consideration, Bangladesh has maintained close ties with India. It has worked hard on its relations with China, with whom it has investment, trade, infrastructure building, and defense ties. Japan is also a significant source of investment in manufacturing and infrastructure development. The United States is an important business partner interested in building defense ties. For Bangladesh, the coming days will require delicate handling of relations as it attempts to balance development and power contest in South Asia. Geography and sea power will remain powerful elements in such balancing acts.

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