

Importance of Maritime Engagement to be a Developed Country by 2041

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Fast economic growth enabled Bangladesh to reach the lower middle-income country status in 2015. Bangladesh has already fulfilled all three eligibility criteria for graduation from the UN's Least Developed Countries (LDC) list for the first time in 2018 and is on track for graduation as a middle-income country by 2024. Bangladesh targets a hallowing commitment to become a developed country by 2041. The aim of this article is to highlight how Bangladesh would be benefited through maritime engagement, which in turn will contribute to Bangladesh's economy in achieving its vision 2021 and 2041.

A definitive goal has been set for the country, so now all the mechanism should be endeavored as its best to achieve the aim. There are lots of hindrances on the way, but challenges have to be overcome boldly. Investment is becoming affable, then why are we not utilizing the business environment to achieve the goal? First of all, a question could arise, whether the target is achievable or not? The answer is yes; it is possible provided

Bangladesh is steered in the right direction. If the growth rate continues above 7.5%, Bangladesh will have half a trillion dollar economy very soon. Bangladesh assume that the per capita income will be \$5500 by 2031 and it will be \$16000 in 2041 as the current government pursues the "Vision 2041". To become a developed country, we need \$3 trillion economy. Despite the fact that according to World Bank's ranking of 'Ease of Doing Business', Bangladesh ranks 176th out of 190 countries in 2019. So, this could be a huge challenge for Bangladesh to lead towards a developed country.

Now let's see, for example, when there had been sufficient investors come in or considering to invest in our country, they would first look for, apart other factors, the transportation system of the country — how the goods will be transported to the world's different destinations, and then the concomitant maritime safety and security would come into as vital role to play. Easy transportation system and trade facility will pave the way for the investors to

choose Bangladesh as their desired country to invest and set up factories. Bangladesh imports and exports around 82% of goods through sea route and the rest 18% by air and road. We have Bay-of-Bengal (BoB) in the south (580 km) and the rest are land which is connected with the most part of India (4,142 km) and a small portion with Myanmar(271 km) as well.

Let's discuss the opportunities and challenges regarding land connectivity. Bangladesh is a member of multilateral forum such as BIMSTEC and SAARC. One of the initiatives of SAARC was the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) for road connectivity. Initiative of Motor Vehicles Agreement was signed in Bhutan in 2015 but it has no visible progress yet. BIMSTEC was established in 1997 through Bangkok declaration. It is more than 20 years but there is no visible progress as far as land connectivity is concerned. Despite the very name of 'BoB Initiative', yet there is no 'BoB connectivity' among the BIMSTEC countries except few river/inland water connectivity between Bangladesh and India through bi-lateral arrangement. Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transportation project, an initiative of India, is bypassing Bangladesh. It is assumed that this project will not bring any fruitful result for at least Bangladesh. The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar-Economic Corridor (BCIM) has not also seen the light of hope yet despite several initiatives taken by China, although China denied that it had dropped the BCIM economic corridor from its multi-billion dollar Belt and Road Initiative. Since independence, Bangladesh is yet to achieve road connectivity with outside world except India. It needs consensus of neighbouring countries and appears to be a nexus process. So what option is left for Bangladesh to be connected

with the outside world? To my understanding, it is the BoB connectivity which is our third boundary. Bangladesh can be connected to the world through maritime connectivity without the consent of third country. The prospect of maritime connectivity is the best strategic opportunity to gain most advantageous position in achieving the goal to become a developed country.

Bangladesh is a signatory to BRI. Maritime Silk Road is a component of BRI and China intends to connect Southeast Asian countries with China. China has already funded billions of dollar for making maritime infrastructures in the BoB region. China, under BRI projects in Bangladesh estimates US\$10 billion and the country is also involved in many projects in Bangladesh also. China is constructing 6.5 km Padma Bridge, tunnel road under Karnaphuli River, Pyra deep sea port, etc in Bangladesh. At the same time China, under Maritime Silk Road (MSR), is constructing ports at Sittwe (Myanmar) and oil pipeline from Kyaukpyu of Ramree Island to Kunming(China) to get BoB access, port in Hainbantota (Sri Lanka) as well. Bangladesh, till now appears to engage with BRI with cautious approach in maximizing gain without putting the country in economic crisis at the same time not exasperating China.

Involvement of Japan is no less than others in the region. Japan is making deep sea port and coal-fired 1200MW (1st Phase) power plant at Matarbari, Bangladesh. Japanese investors also showed visible interest in the state at Rakhine Investment Fair in February 2019.

India has tremendously improved its trade connectivity with Myanmar through bilateral negotiation. In fact,

Myanmar's very strategic location in between southeast and southwest of Asia plays an important role for India to resolve many of its economic and particularly security issues. Myanmar is the lynchpin to implement India's 'act east' policy. Through the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, India intends to connect sea ports of Kolkata with Mizoram State in Northeast India via Sittwe Sea Port in Rakhine, Myanmar. India also started naval engagement with Myanmar in building/reshaping nascent Myanmar navy since 2013.

Indian policy is also to engage Bangladesh Navy to maintain Indian Ocean regional stability. In a recent visit to Bangladesh on 21 September 2019 during the first anniversary of BIMRAD, Indian Naval Chief Admiral Karambir Singh highlighted the importance of collaboration and joint effort, such as, collective maritime security, information sharing, sharing of resources & technological know-how, etc. His candid and endearing statement would bring bonhomie among the BoB littorals. To become a developed country, intricately linked with it is a maritime security dimension of Bangladesh's relation with the regional powers. The maritime security has become a pivotal in the BoB. The BoB is no more considered as benign; rather it has become a contested region for the safeguard of the littoral country's economic interests. India's seaborne trade is almost 55% of India's GDP and in case of China,

almost 55% trade is seaborne. As such, both countries have their naval deployment in this region. Myanmar Navy also took part with Indian Navy in maritime security patrol. Bangladesh cannot be also an exception where her 82% trade is seaborne.

Indo-pacific strategy has become another issue in the security context in maritime domain where Bangladesh has not joined in the dialogue yet. Quad is another concept aimed at free and secure Indo-Pacific for 'Freedom of Navigation, Maritime Security Cooperation', and so forth. Bangladesh needs desperate engagement with all those mentioned maritime forums but that needs careful maritime strategy through which Bangladesh can position herself in obtaining optimum achievement through maritime connectivity. The country needs to enhance people's maritime awareness through deluge of write-ups/seminars/campaign. Without effective maritime engagement, there is every possibility of getting debilitating.

In maximizing the maritime engagement and to maintain blue economy interests, Bangladesh needs to enhance the maritime cooperation with all possible maritime forums in the BoB, thereby the investors would be encouraged to invest in maritime infrastructures. I believe, policy makers would delve in justifying the priority sectors for gaining most out of maritime connectivity.