

Bangladesh's Journey Towards Maritime Development in Uncharted Seascape

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The geostrategic makeover of Bangladesh is land-based that demands an orientation towards the ocean. Soon after the delimitation of maritime boundaries with our neighbors, the importance of the marine economy came to the attention of policymakers and the concept of a Blue Economy (BE) for sustainable maritime development emerged. Our maritime interests in the Bay of Bengal (BOB) encompass exploring and exploiting living and non-living resources, ensuring uninterrupted Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and trade, enhancing the livelihood of coastal people, preserving the maritime environment, and maintaining peace and stability. Being an underbelly, the Bay provides this rising maritime nation with a strategic outlook, be it for prosperity or security.

The Government of Bangladesh's (GoB) plan for maritime development was generally orchestrated in the Perspective Plan 2041, Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, and the 7th and 8th Five-Year Plans. More than 20 ministries are currently responsible for dealing with various maritime affairs. A 'Coordination Committee' to tap marine resources and its management was constituted and headed by the Principal Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office. A 'Blue Economy Cell' established within the Energy & Mineral Resources Division is carrying out the institutional coordination related to the BE activities. Such involvement of various ministries, divisions, committees, and cells needs greater coordination, generates various cross-cutting and overlapping issues, and creates a dilemma of who will take the lead in maritime development.

The GoB's endeavor in setting up Special Economic Zones (SEZ), offshore energy clusters, deep-sea ports, multimodal freight corridors, eco-tourism parks, coastal industrial growth belts, and other maritime facilities is likely to create many upstream and downstream industries and will change the outlook of our maritime economy. Considering technological advancement, these efforts need an integrated and combined approach by public and private stakeholders. Regrettably, all these efforts are being planned and implemented by various authorities without a central direction and governance. Recently, it has been widely discussed between academia and policymakers to have a separate ministry or division related to the Blue Economy and maritime development.

The prime challenge in maritime development is the right kind of investment and financial support. The GoB's plan to initiate the 'Blue Bond' to raise capital is a maneuver in the right direction. The lack of scientific management of the sea and marketing strategy also hinders maritime economic growth. Bangladesh is yet to conduct a full-scale oceanic survey. The absence of marine data statistics hinders the calculation of marine potential and limits future projections and plans. Insufficient scientific information and gaps in technology & innovation also prevent us from exploring emerging maritime sectors. We need inclusive research and speedy innovation by our Maritime Education and Training institutions, domestic research organizations, as well as support from international partners. Our policymakers are unaware of the hinterland and maritime economy link. Enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness is thus important for policymakers, entrepreneurs, and all strata of society through a proactive campaign.

The growing geostrategic importance of the BOB, coupled with transnational and environmental threats and the apprehension of traditional security issues, pose a concern about the rule-based maritime order. The BoB has a fragile maritime order and the absence of an all-encompassing security structure. The one million Forcibly Displayed Myanmar Nationals (Rohingya) sheltered in Cox's Bazar emerged as a critical vulnerability for our maritime security. The non-traditional security threats are to be prevented through a gapless maritime surveillance network of coastal radars, Vessel Traffic Management Systems, use of Unmanned Aerial Systems, air and sea patrol, etc. The emerging cyber threat in the maritime domain and security of the Sea Lanes demands appropriate concern for maritime cyber security. Besides, the presence of global, rising, and regional powers contesting for security and economic interests in the region created a challenging situation for Bangladesh to navigate in the uncharted water of geopolitics.

We need to explore and enhance the traditional sectors of the marine economy (e.g., fishing, salt industries, shipping, port and logistics, tourism, etc.) and delve into the evolving sectors. Pelagic fishes like Tuna fishing have a great prospect in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as well as in Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ). Seaweed farming has a great prospect in the coastal area, and it has substantial demand in the global market. Eco-tourism in Sundarbans, Teknaf, and St Martins may be promoted by building necessary infrastructures and developing awareness and knowledge among the business stakeholders and consumers. The hydrocarbon exploration activities in the potential shallow and deep blocks of the BOB may be started immediately. Power generation from RE sources may be

enhanced as per the GoB's target (10% by 2021) from tidal and wind energy in the coastal area. The national shipping needs to be expanded to tap international shipping markets as per the guideline of The Bangladesh Flag Vessels (Protection of Interest) Act, 2019: The performance of ports needs to be improved to remain competitive in the international market by enhancing port logistics capacity, reducing turnaround time, improving the container and cargo handling capacity, and ensuring prompt administrative support. The direct freight service to Europe is a welcome move, and such effort may be extended to the US, Canada, eastern Europe, and South America priority-wise. The shipbuilding industry needs inducement to grow to acquire international markets for small and medium ships.

The thematic framework of sustainable maritime development is the combination of maritime economy and ecology. The ocean-based industries affect the health of the Ocean and demand an integrated approach to ocean management. Our progress in SDG 14 is insignificant, and we need greater effort in operationalizing the SDGs for sustainable maritime development. We need to adopt the activities of ocean governance for the management of sustainable and equitable use of ocean resources. Maritime-related institutions should be brought under a common umbrella to implement the plans and policies of maritime development. This also entails the requirement of codified legislation and a policy framework for using marine space to develop the ocean economy. An Ocean policy may be prepared for ocean use and marine planning, which has to be interdisciplinary, catering to the common

ocean interests and ensuring a sustainable ocean ecosystem in line with the development vision of the country.

Capacity building of existing maritime industries and infrastructure, innovation and indigenous capacity in the emerging sectors of the maritime industry expanding hinterland connectivity, and developing human resources through maritime education and research are crucial. Maritime security is vital for the protection of critical infrastructure, SLOC, marine ecosystems, and people working in the maritime domain. Establishing a link between maritime cooperation, maritime security, and economic development to be operationalized through proactive maritime diplomacy. Maintaining balanced relationships with global and regional powers like the US, China, India, EU, UK, Japan, and Australia and cultivating relationships with emerging powers are essential to withstand the dynamics of geopolitics.

Bangladesh is at a crossroads in its maritime destiny. The development space offered by our vast maritime zones is to be explored and utilized sustainably to attain our development vision. We should articulate our foreign policy and maritime diplomacy in the context of geopolitical reality, develop partnerships and cooperation, and leave a healthy maritime domain for future generations.

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