

# Maritime Security Challenges in the Bay of Bengal: Dr. David Brewster Talks to BIMRAD

Interviewed by Nur Ahmed

The strategic competition of the 21st century has moved to the Indo-Pacific region, so has the strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal, the largest Bay in the world. It has become a major hotspot in the Indian Ocean region. With the ascendancy of the Indian Ocean as the center of gravity 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 corollary of these developments. The geopolitical competition puts systemic pressure on the littoral states of this region and impacts their maritime security.

Dr David Brewster is a leading academic figure to talk about the maritime security challenges in the Bay of Bengal. He is a Senior Research Fellow with the National Security College, Australian National University where he works on the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific maritime security. He is a frequent writer about security developments in the Indian Ocean and Indo Pacific. During his recent visit to BIMRAD in October 2022, Research Officer of BIMRAD, Nur Ahmed, took an interview where he talked about major security challenges in the Bay of Bengal, Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), and Bangladesh's policy choices in the maritime domain.



**Nur Ahmed:** In your opinion, what are the major security challenges for the littorals of the Bay of Bengal? And do the major security challenges only emanate from geopolitical competition? Or are there other sources in this regard?

**Dr. David Brewster:** It is no secret that there is growing political competition between the major powers in the Indian Ocean and the indo-pacific region more broadly. And that's principally between the United States, China, and India. In the Indian Ocean, the competition is at its sharpest between India and China, and the

United States plays a lesser role here. Although I hesitate to use the word smaller in relation to Bangladesh, many other countries in the region are finding themselves squeezed between these pressures from India and China. In some cases, we've seen that leading to political and economic instability. Recent events in Sri Lanka, to some extent, were connected with strategic competition between China and India, and going back another couple of years, the Maldives also experienced this. These domestic political pressures from strategic competition destabilize the country's political setting. For example, if one leader is seen as too close to China, it creates pressure from India and aggravates the bilateral relationship. I'm worried that those pressures will only increase in the coming years and there is a potential, just as we saw during the Cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union, that more and more countries could become the object of this competition between major powers. I think the key sources of maritime security challenges are transnational challenges, whether traditional problems like piracy or illegal fishing, people smuggling drugs. And far more important than those in coming years will be climate change and environmental challenges, which will impact the maritime space in many ways that we haven't thought of. We obviously know there will be sea level rise, storm surges, and severe weather events, and we can only guess at some of the consequences of that. There's a potential for sea level rise to cause large-scale population displacement. That means we may see large numbers of people moving by sea, and there could be an increasing crime rate and piracy. In recent years, Rohingya people traveling by sea have become very easy targets for

pirates and other criminal gangs. So there's a series of knock-on effects in the maritime space that would come from climate change. We all have a shared interest in making sure every country in the region can better govern its Maritime spaces. And that's where Australia and Bangladesh have a lot of shared interests and potential for working together.

**Nur Ahmed:** South Asia is not known to be conducive to regional integration and cooperation. Do you think littorals will come together to address the challenges of maritime security threats? What are the main challenges in this regard?

**Dr. David Brewster:** I suppose we have to address it at different levels. One level is something like IORA, which has a role to play. We can also use regional groupings like BIMSTEC. It could play a significant role in the future. This is apparent that it doesn't act like that at the moment. And there are also issues relating to Myanmar which will restrict what BIMSTEC can do until things get resolved. Some groupings, such as the Colombo Conclave, could be valuable. I know, Bangladesh is Observer at the moment. Groups like this are quite beneficial because they're small groupings of countries with real shared interests and want to work together. There are also growing new bilateral relationships. I would potentially include Australia and Bangladesh in that, but also other bilateral relationships where countries can work together to provide or share expertise.

**Nur Ahmed:** So, do you think groups like minilaterals are more effective than traditional multilateral engagement?

**Dr. David Brewster:** Yes, I strongly believe that. They are also labeled as the 'Coalition of the Willing' They bring together countries who want to do certain things in certain areas. That makes it much more likely that they will achieve something. Whereas in the cases of big multilateral groupings, you have to get everyone to dream. So I think, in practical terms, if you just bring countries together who are very interested, capable, and willing to do things, you're much more likely to achieve something.

**Nur Ahmed:** Coming back to some conceptual issues now, as we have heard a lot about the distinction between traditional and non-traditional security threats. Do you think the distinction between traditional and non-traditional security threats overlaps in the maritime sector?

**Dr. David Brewster:** Yes. You know, we all use them as shorthand, but we have to be careful. In the climate and environmental security space, we will have a strong impact on what we call conventional security. There are some very interesting examples of this. If you go back to the 1990s, with the collapse of the Somali State and the growth in illegal fishing in Somalia, local communities turned to piracy, and the international response led to things like the Chinese Navy establishing a base in Djibouti. So, you have a direct chain of events that led to an important geopolitical change, starting with illegal fishing. You can look at examples from the 2004 tsunami, where the tsunami affected the countries in different ways. In Indonesia, at that time, there was a separatist insurgency. The tsunami stopped the insurgency. Because there was such destruction, the insurgents declared a ceasefire when the government

announced a truce, giving them space to come to a peace agreement. In Sri Lanka, there was a ceasefire in their civil conflict with the Tamil insurgents at that time. The tsunami led to a lot of destruction, and a lot of international aid was coming to Sri Lanka. The Tamil insurgents managed to get their hands on it, which funded the renewal of the Civil War. It restarted in about 2005 and went on until 2009. It's an interesting study. We had two insurgencies on each side of the Bay; the tsunami stopped one and restarted another. That's a lesson of how unpredictable these things can be. They have showcased how the interaction between a natural disaster and conventional security threats happens and how unpredictable it can be.

**Nur Ahmed:** Now focusing on Bangladesh's foreign policy, do you think Bangladesh has successfully ventured through the tussle among the major powers? Is it possible to maintain neutrality amidst a geopolitical crisis like Russia-Ukraine War?

**Dr. David Brewster:** In the last few years, I think Bangladesh has been quite good at navigating some of these tensions, particularly between India and China. Bangladesh feels very pressed sometimes, but Bangladesh has been very careful. The BRI projects you have taken on and others you decided not to add are quite intelligent because you want investment to help your economic development. In the last few years, I think that's been quite good. It's better to say that Bangladesh wants to maintain its options and be able to choose different things. However, you can't just put a box around economic issues because something you do have political and even strategic consequences. It's pretty obvious in

the choices that Bangladesh has made in relation to the BRI that Bangladesh is very aware of the strategic implications. I fully understand that economics is the objective, but there will always be other implications.

**Nur Ahmed:** In the context of geopolitical crises, like the conflict in Ukraine, what are your thoughts on the future trajectory of the foreign policy choices of Bangladesh, especially in the maritime domain?

**Dr. David Brewster:** Look, I think, major power competition is going to increase and become worse. It's up to Bangladesh to decide, but a clear articulation of how you will navigate the indo-pacific space is necessary. Whether you make that public or not is entirely a different question. We have seen many countries around the region articulating their Indo-Pacific strategies - their versions of how they see the Indo-Pacific. The countries like Japan, Australia or India, Indonesia, or Southeast Asian countries, have found it useful to articulate their strategies. But that's a choice for Bangladesh to make its strategy for Indo-Pacific or not.

**Nur Ahmed:** IUU fishing has emerged as a major regional problem for the littorals in this region. What do you think are the gaps in controlling this malpractice, and what should be done to stop it?

**Dr. David Brewster:** Yeah, I think there are many gaps. And to be honest, the biggest gap is the lack of data. I don't think there has been, or I'm unaware of, any stringent study to quantify the amount of illegal fishing. So I would argue that Bangladesh needs to do that study, and the whole of the Bay of Bengal, not just Bangladesh, needs to be

covered under the study of the quantity of illegal fishing. The other important thing is Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). It's a foundation for acting on maritime security to know what's going on out there. There needs to be a National Center that brings together all of the data from the Navy, Coast Guard, and other agencies involved in fishing, shipping, satellites operation, etc. to get all this information into one single class to analyze them. Australia has a very sophisticated and effective MDA system that has come over the last 20 years. If you go to Canberra, you should visit the Australian Border Operation Center, our key MDA center, which is a whole-of-government enterprise. There's the operations room where you will find all related government agencies sitting there, feeding information of their own agencies, analyzing it, making decisions about what to do and then feeding the instructions back out again. And it's very important, a physical place where people sit next to each other every day because, you know, government agencies don't like to share information. It means you have to work very hard to overcome that and bring all of the information together, including information from commercial sources, shipping companies, or from satellites, or partner countries. So, if you know what is happening somewhere out in the Indian Ocean or somewhere out in the Pacific, you can then figure out what you're responsible for doing.

**Nur Ahmed:** We think the Indian Ocean should be the theater of peace. It was declared many years ago, but now we see the opposite. This is becoming the hotspot of geopolitical tussles. What is your perception regarding this?

**Dr. David Brewster:** I think there are a whole lot of reasons. The rise of China is one, but climate change and a lot of other reasons exist. The Pacific is more dangerous than the Indian Ocean. I'm certainly of the view that if you want a peaceful Indian Ocean, you have to do something about it. It's not enough just to say we love peace. The countries have to do something about it to ensure that it's peaceful, which means working with each other to create the conditions for peace. I don't think the countries are trying hard enough for it. We pretend that some multilateral group is doing something but is not. I think in some areas, for example, there's no effective regional forum or grouping to address climate change in the Indian Ocean region. And if we believe that climate change is one of the biggest security threats to us, how can we allow that to happen? So I think there's space for building new arrangements or

mechanisms on certain issues. Oil spills can be one of the biggest threats countries face, and we've obviously seen some major shipping accidents near Bangladesh in recent times. We know there will be a major oil spill sometime in the future, with the number of tankers crossing the Indian Ocean. But there is no regional mechanism for cooperation in responding to such accidents. Many small countries cannot respond to oil spills, but some bigger countries like India, Australia, France, and Japan do. But there's no mechanism for them to cooperate. So there's a whole lot of issues where we have to think about making any space for cooperation. We don't have to go and create some new club. You have to look at the particular issue and figure out how best to cooperate.

**Nur Ahmed:** It has been a privilege to talk to you, Sir. Thank you very much for your insightful answers.