

# RUSI – BIMRAD Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal Symposium 2023

BIMRAD Correspondent



The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), UK, and TAG International, in partnership with Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD) organized the Bay of Bengal Maritime Security Symposium on Tuesday 21 March at The Westin Hotel, Dhaka. H E Robert Chatterton Dickson, British High Commissioner to Bangladesh delivered the keynote address during the opening remarks of the symposium. Captain M Minarul Hoque, (H), BCGM, psc, BN Director General, BIMRAD delivered the welcome address.

The symposium brought together policymakers, practitioners, academics, and the private sector to discuss some of the mutual challenges facing the region within the maritime security domain. The BIMRAD research team presented the findings from the research conducted over the past six months in collaboration with RUSI and other regional partners. Project

partners from India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka also presented their views and commented on the research findings. A distinguished panel of experts, including Dr. David Brewster, Senior Research Fellow at the National Security College, Australian National University, commented on the research findings at the symposiums. In addition to the commentaries by the distinguished panelist, learned audiences engaged in constructive discussion at the end of each symposium session.

The Symposium was divided into four sessions focusing on the following topics:

- Session One: Illegal and Forced Migration - the challenge of human-trafficking and other maritime crime
- Session Two: Illegal Fishing - the challenges with monitoring and

tracking illegal activities across the region

- Session Three: Climate change and Environmental Protection - impacts of sea-level rise, natural disasters, pollution and plastics in the sea
- Session Four: The Future of Regional Cooperation – the role of regional actors in promoting regional cooperation to tackle maritime security challenges in the region

The symposium was held as part of a joint collaborative research project. Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD) signed an agreement with TAG International and Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), UK, on September 2022 to conduct a joint research project on ‘Maritime Security Challenges in the Bay of Bengal’. The project was part of the UK Government’s Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) Maritime Security Pilot Programme. The project had three key components:

- Component 1: Country-Specific Papers (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives), Regional Paper, Maritime Security Expert Working Group (MSEWG), Community of Practice, and Political and Economic Modelling
- Component 2: Perception Surveys and Focus Groups
- Component 3: Two Regional Symposiums held in Dhaka and Colombo

BIMRAD formed a core research team, led by Professor Rasheduzzaman of Dhaka University to conduct the research works. Capt M Minarul Hoque, Director General (DG) of BIMRAD and Nur Ahmed, Research Officer of BIMRAD worked as Co-researchers of the team. The BIMRAD team drafted the Bangladesh specific paper and contributed to the other components completed by regional partners like the Pathfinder Foundation of Sri Lanka, Observer Research Foundation (ORF) of India. The project was completed in March, 2023 with the presentation of the research findings in two symposiums held in Dhaka and Colombo.

The project was taken at a time when the Bay of Bengal region has come under intense geopolitical competition among regional and extra-regional powers. The Bay of Bengal holds immense strategic significance due to its location as a crossroads between South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. The region is rich in natural resources, including oil, natural gas, and fisheries. It also has a large population and is home to important sea ports and shipping lanes, making it a crucial economic hub. In recent years, several global powers, including China, the United States, Japan, and Australia, have taken a keen interest in the Bay of Bengal region. The region is a crucial geopolitical space in the Indo-Pacific region due to its strategic location, natural resources, and economic potential. The involvement of global powers in the region highlights its importance and underscores the need for cooperation and strategic partnerships among countries in the region to maintain stability and security.



Apart from the geopolitical challenges, the littorals of the Bay of Bengal face a myriad of security challenges in the maritime domain ranging from unpredictable nature to ungoverned human migration. Bangladesh has established itself as a key littoral of this region due to its strategic location, economic progress and exemplary developmental track record. The maritime policies of Bangladesh prioritize the maintenance of a peaceful coexistence in the Bay of Bengal for the mutual benefit of the littorals. Bangladesh has always prioritized its adherence to the global regime on maritime affairs. It has therefore sought to seek multilateral approach to solve any type of disputes in the maritime domain. Bangladesh's maritime security challenges emanate from different factors. Its coastal region faces the wrath of natural calamities due to the geographical location of the country and the growing impacts of climate change. Henceforth, climate change can be identified as the most critical factor that might destabilize the maritime domain of

Bangladesh. The country has been hosting more than 1.1 million Forcible Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) in the coastal region and the ramifications have been wider than anticipated for the maritime security of Bangladesh.

Moreover, issues like Irregular, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and marine pollution pose credible threats to the country's maritime domain.

The discussion at the Symposium produced some captivating ideas about identifying how countries can best align their responses against maritime security challenges in this region. The outcome of the RUSI-BIMRAD Maritime Security Symposium will play a significant role in developing some guidelines for further research works, strategies and principles in this field. BIMRAD's collaboration with RUSI will augment the future prospect of conducting joint research work with globally renowned think tanks.