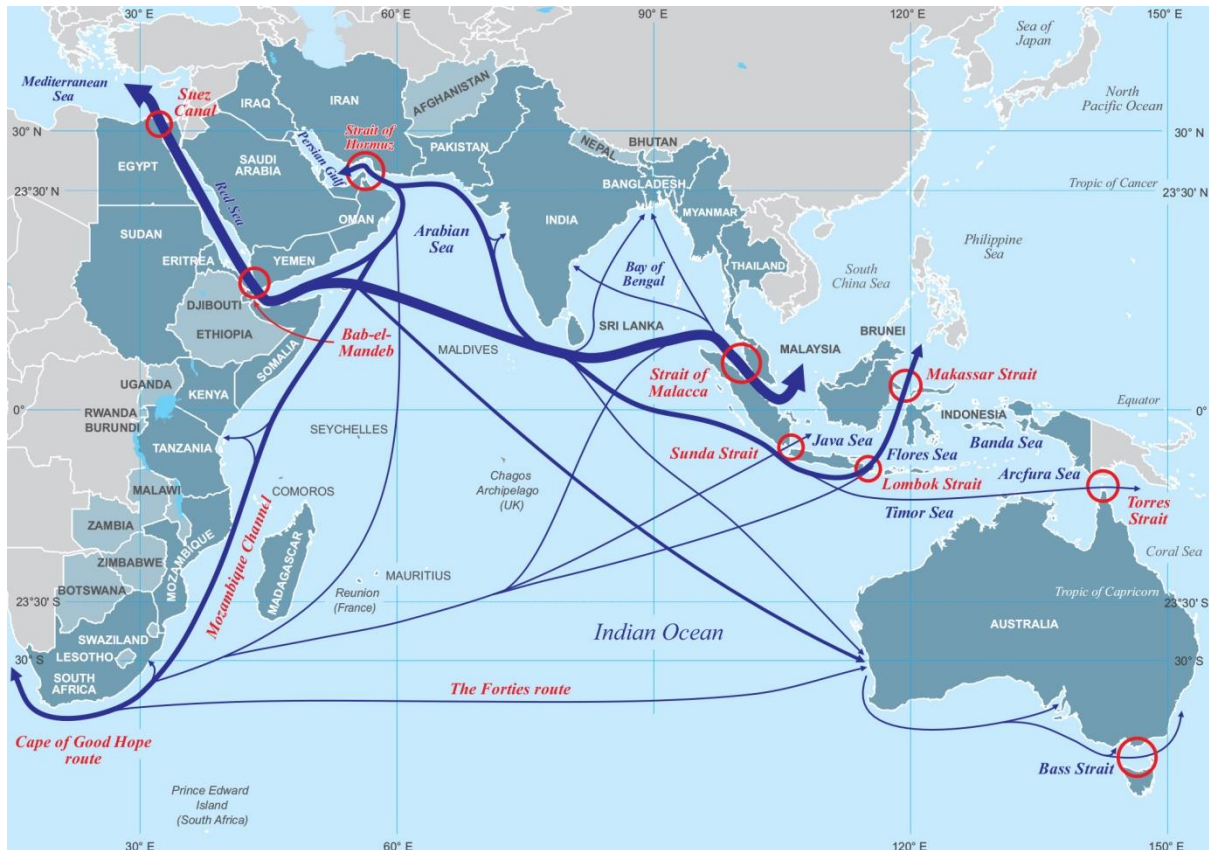


# The Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh: Flexible Foreign Policy for Sustainable Blue Economy

Nur Ahmed



Foreign policy is often dubbed as an extension of domestic policy. At the same time, relations with external actors also shape the trajectory of domestic policy. Therefore, flexible foreign policy principles and practices are instrumental in ensuring successful policy formulation and implementation at the national level. The maritime domain of Bangladesh has been getting increasing prioritization since the peaceful demarcation of the maritime boundary with the neighboring littorals. Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina labeled the Bay of Bengal as the 'third neighbor' of the country to exemplify the potential of Bangladesh as a maritime nation.

The Government of Bangladesh has focused on strengthening its naval and maritime capability to foster blue economic growth. The Government has already identified twenty-six potential sectors to harness the potential of the blue economy. Due to the nature of the maritime domain, transnational cooperation is more crucial than any other sector to ensure the sustainable use of marine resources. Therefore, geopolitical tussles among extra-regional and regional powers often work as obstacles to realizing the true potential of a blue economy.

The geopolitical significance of the Indo-Pacific region does not require to be elaborated anymore. The region has a critical maritime space in terms of geoeconomic and geostrategic bottlenecks. Bangladesh holds a key geostrategic position in the Bay of Bengal, and her peaceful maritime boundary delimitation in the first half of the last decade has exemplified the country's potential as a maritime nation. In the context of the rival ambition of the USA and China in the region, Bangladesh's position matters in materializing the grand Indo-Pacific vision or strategies of the global and regional powers. Bangladesh has long maintained a balanced outlook in this regard, but until now, it was not articulated as a foreign policy doctrine.

The articulation and publication of foreign policy principles are standard practices in international politics, often as White Papers, Blue Papers, or Green Papers. These documents clarify a country's stance on specific issues, enabling external partners to understand its position and instilling confidence among potential investors. They also play a pivotal role in enhancing a country's profile on the global stage, mainly concerning matters like counterterrorism, security, or foreign policy. Failure to establish comprehensive policies on specific issues can erode trust among international partners.

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has finally unveiled its highly anticipated Indo-Pacific Outlook, coinciding with the Honorable Prime Minister's recent visit to Japan, the US, and the UK. As a nation in the Indo-Pacific region, it was high time for

Bangladesh to present a comprehensive strategy or doctrine for its external engagement, given the region's boiling pot of intense geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomic competition where global and regional powers strive for influence. Bangladesh found it crucial to explicitly state its position to avoid misinterpretations and assert its interests amidst this geopolitical struggle.

Throughout history, Bangladesh has adhered to a flexible stance guided by the foreign policy principle of "Friendship to all, malice toward none". The country has prioritized economic diplomacy in its external engagement, necessitating a degree of adaptability to explore available options. The recently announced Indo-Pacific Outlook aims to formalize this policy. However, it should be noted that Outlook is not intended as a comprehensive strategy for engaging with the Indo-Pacific region. Instead, it serves as a carefully crafted outlook, preserving the sanctity of Bangladesh's foreign policy in the face of a complex geopolitical landscape. Therefore, the Outlook should not be seen as a paradigm-shifting initiative that changes Bangladesh's foreign policy posture tilted toward the West or rebalanced in the context of Sino-US rivalry. The Outlook has only formalized the flexible foreign policy principles and extended the applicability in the maritime domain.

The timing of Bangladesh's announcement of the Indo-Pacific Outlook is noteworthy as it coincided with the Honourable Prime Minister's significant visits to Bangladesh's three

crucial external partner countries. The four guiding principles and fifteen objectives outlined in the Outlook align with the country's foundational foreign policy principles. Meticulous planning went into both the articulation and deciding on the announcement's timing to ensure the official clarification of Bangladesh's position. One of Bangladesh's fundamental tenets for its remarkable development trajectory is to avoid entering alliances or blocs that may result in heightened hostility with other countries. While the nation welcomes external engagements for economic progress, it staunchly rejects any sovereignty and national security compromises through military alliances. Consequently, Bangladesh cautiously approaches bilateral and multilateral engagements in the Indo-Pacific region, keen to identify any potential military implications. Moreover, Bangladesh emphasizes non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations, expecting external partners to respect its authority over domestic matters.

It is vital to recognize that articulating a policy or strategy paper represents only the initial step in the formulation process. The subsequent phase of policy implementation is both crucial and challenging. In the maritime domain, implementation strategies differ significantly from traditional approaches. Collaboration with neighboring and regional countries becomes paramount, particularly concerning maritime affairs. The successful implementation of domestic policies in the maritime domain heavily relies on cooperation with neighboring coastal states. For example, Bangladesh imposes a yearly 65 days

ban on marine fishing to protect marine fisheries and aquaculture and ensure safe spawning, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 14. However, the absence of a coordinated ban among neighboring littorals hampers the effectiveness of this policy, making it susceptible to destructive fishing practices due to the vastness of the maritime domain and challenges in patrolling unlawful activities. Fisheries resources are vital for realizing the true potential of the blue economy. The Indo-Pacific Outlook contains several overarching objectives for ensuring a sustainable blue economy in Bangladesh through regional collaboration. However, these objectives must be correlated and corroborated with other relevant ministries administering blue economic activities. Only then micro-level implementation of this grand objective will be possible.



While geopolitical struggles and strategies in the Indo-Pacific region primarily address geopolitical problems, these struggles often inadvertently harm coastal communities. States, preoccupied with safeguarding their national interests, tend to overlook these consequences. Bangladesh can serve as an exemplary case by pursuing a human-centric Indo-Pacific Strategy in the region. The country has consistently prioritized economic development to

uplift its population from poverty and has achieved remarkable success in human development. With its graduation from the category of Least Developed Country (LDC) scheduled for 2026, Bangladesh can view the heightened external interests in the Indo-Pacific region as an opportunity to improve the economic conditions of its coastal communities spanning 19 districts across the coastal belt. Ambitious developmental initiatives are underway in these districts to enhance maritime connectivity, triggering intense competition among external

partners for financing. However, efforts must be amplified to improve the livelihood conditions of the people in these areas. By integrating this aspect with Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook, the country can adopt an innovative approach to thrive in its blue economy potential amidst the ongoing geopolitical tussles among significant powers.

***Writer: Nur Ahmed is a Research Officer of BIMRAD.***

***Email: snahmed184@gmail.com***