

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

WEBINAR ON

EMERGING SECURITY CHALLENGES IN INDIAN OCEAN REGION: ASSESSING THE IMPACTS OF GEOPOLITICAL AND GEO-ECONOMICS MANEUVERINGS IN THE BAY OF BENGAL LITTORALS

15 MARCH 2022



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**EMERGING SECURITY CHALLENGES IN INDIAN OCEAN REGION:
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MANEUVERINGS IN THE BAY OF BENGAL LITTORALS**

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On 15 March 2022, the Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD) organised a webinar on 'Emerging Security Challenges in Indian Ocean Region: Assessing the Impacts of Geopolitical and Geo-Economics Maneuvers in The Bay of Bengal Littorals.' Participants included maritime experts, IR scholars, Bangladesh Navy Officials (serving and retired), and representatives of prominent think tanks in Bangladesh and the discussion took place under Chatham House Rules.

The webinar **identified the critical underpinnings of the geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics of the Bay of Bengal by situating it in the broader context of the Indian Ocean.** As the Bay of Bengal (BoB) has become more strategically significant for the littorals and the states beyond this maritime region, the participants agreed that **the countries in the region need to strengthen cooperation and adopt more sustainable and meaningful engagements to tackle transboundary issues more effectively.**

This outcome document summarises the key takeaways of the discussion and recommendations for greater regional maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. **These outcomes will also be made available to the webinar participants and the relevant stakeholders for their consideration.**

The Emergence of Indian Ocean as the Center of Global Competition: The Implications for the Geopolitical Dynamics of Bay of Bengal

1. The economic importance of the Indian Ocean is vast as it is projected to feature 15.7% of the global trade by 2025. The ocean features four choking points out of the six or seven points across the globe in terms of strategic importance. Historically, trade defined the Indian Ocean rather than conflicts among the littorals. The process of decolonisation and globalisation has shaped the course of Asia's re-rise in global politics. This has consequently determined the trajectory of geopolitical competition in the region. The regional geopolitical dynamics are roughly featured by the promulgation of several alliances like Indo Pacific Alliance (IPA), QUAD, Build Back Better World Partnership (B3WP) etc. to counter China's interests defined mainly by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As the economic prowess of China and India are on the rise, the global geopolitical dynamics might take the shape of a 'Pax Multipolaritica' in the future.

2. Keeping the geopolitical dynamics of the Indian Ocean in mind, the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal need to focus more on the notion of creating a 'blue hub.' It implies the practices of increasing trade among the littoral states and consequently enriching each other. And in this context, Bangladesh's foreign policy's guiding postulate – 'friendship to all, malice towards none' which was flagged even before the independence of the country, is highly relevant. The keynote speaker termed Bangladesh's policy as the practice of 'development without enmity' and proposed that Bangladesh can be an important actor to disseminate the ideas to the region and the whole world to promote more interconnectivity among the states.

The Growing Significance of the Bay of Bengal in the Global Maritime Space: Geostrategic and Geoeconomic Implications for Bangladesh

3. Bangladesh's balancing act in the context of geopolitical competition has to be based on the spirit of friendship rather than animosity. The principle is demonstrated in her practices of not resorting to any conflict with the two neighbours even at critical times and the peaceful resolution of her maritime demarcation through international legal instruments. Therefore, Bangladesh has done reasonably well in the face of the polarising genre of global politics.

4. The idea of maritime space will be changing over the coming period, where newer forms of technologies, factors, norms, priorities, code of conduct etc. will come into play. One likely domain that will have tremendous impacts in the future is the potential of artificial intelligence. Bangladesh's maritime strategy should be updated to incorporate the changing dynamics. In this regard, the domestic resources in the Bay of Bengal have to be rethought and reassessed sustainably so that the future generation can also reap the benefits.

5. There is a growing blurring space between geopolitics or geostrategy and geo-economics, especially in the case of Bangladesh. Assessing the strategic advantages defined by the fast-growing economy, Bangladesh should explore the energy resources in the Bay of Bengal as soon as possible. It requires comprehensive planning and strategies encompassing the requirement to meet legal standards, supply competent human resources, and meet

technological and behavioural requirements. Against this backdrop, Bangladesh should rethink its naval as well as maritime doctrines.

6. Along with developing the capacity to extract resources, the sustainability of the marine ecosystem also needs to be taken into consideration. In this regard, the problematic issues of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and marine pollution are transoceanic in nature, and the existing transnational institutions like BIMSTEC can play a more prominent role. Bangladesh should take the necessary steps to put forward a robust coordinating effort among its national stakeholders to keep its share of water clean, where BIMRAD can also play an important role. The proper exchange of information regarding pollution data across the coastal states is crucial. The rise of the 'dead zones' in the Bay of Bengal has to be taken seriously, and rigorous research needs to be done to enlighten the policy stakeholders to take fast actions.

7. There should be more research and dialogues in the form of naval dialogue and intra-regional dialogue taking place at regular intervals. To accomplish the capacity of geostrategic and geoeconomic maneuverings, the development of human resources and policy designs are crucial, and Bangladesh should invest more heavily in this area. In this regard, the role of the Bangladesh Navy has become more significant than ever before.

The Growing Significance of the Bay of Bengal in the Global Maritime Space: Geostrategic and Geoeconomic Implications for Bangladesh

8. Maritime cooperation can be defined as a relationship between cross-border maritime local authorities regarding common activities. In the cases of artificial crises, awareness, prevention, law enforcement, and cooperation are vital to tackle the challenges. In times of natural crises, awareness, prevention mechanisms, and cooperation can mitigate the adverse impacts. In both cases, the principle of cooperation has to be based on mutual trust and respect among the littorals. There are multitudes of sectors for inter-state cooperation like the safety of SLOCs, combating non-traditional security threats, protection of the marine environment, economic development (maritime clusters), tourism and cultural cooperation, renewable energies, integrated management of coastal areas, development of maritime connectivity, and prevention of marine pollution.

9. There are some excellent scopes for collaborative initiatives in the Bay of Bengal region. In this regard, the existing institutional apparatus should be more proactive. IORA, IONS, and BIMSTEC should integrate and promote more proactive roles of their sub-regional partners and advance to work on common interests at sea.

10. The keynote speaker flagged the proposition of establishing a Bay of Bengal Virtual University where the universities of Bangladesh and maritime research institutes like BIMRAD can play vital roles. It will facilitate the discussion among the pertinent stakeholders to talk beyond the national understanding of the Bay of Bengal and disseminate information

and ideas among them. In this regard, the need for technological advancements comes into play, and Bangladesh's next satellite venture should explore this linkage with the education sector.

11. The fundamental basis of regional cooperative institutions has to be centred around the notion of abundance rather than scarcity. The latter has a correlated connotation of fear which can hinder the cooperation among the members of an organisation. Moreover, the institutional basis may fail if it is designed to counter something from the onset. The limitations of multilateral agencies in South Asia like SAARC and BIMSTEC can be attributed to their primary focus on trade. Future endeavours in this region should consider this issue. In this regard, social scientists should be provided with more prominent roles in conceptualising regional institutions.

12. The study of logistics chain management should be incorporated into the tertiary education system of Bangladesh. The panel discussants flagged the proposition of establishing research institutes under the authority of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA). Moreover, Bangladesh should be well-prepared to tackle the commercial aspect of maritime affairs challenges where freight price rises during a crisis or pandemic period might unsettle the stable growth trajectory.

13. The traditional understanding of geopolitics as the geopolitics of conflict rather than cooperation should be changed at the conceptual level. If the traditional legacy of geopolitics can be changed, then the states can reap the benefits of globalisation to the fullest extent. In the maritime sphere, hydro-diplomacy is pretty relevant here to foster cooperation among the littorals in tackling the challenges of climate change and marine pollution. Evidence-based knowledge is crucial, where partnerships between BIMRAD and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) can be cemented. However, the research works also need to be holistic in nature by incorporating the views of the coastal people, and thus relevant policy recommendations can be produced.

Conclusion

14. The participants recognised the timely organisation of the webinar on a very important issue for Bangladesh. The speakers agreed that Bangladesh is on the right trajectory to handle the geopolitical challenges, but it has immense scope of work to be done to realise its true potential as a maritime nation. There is a growing need to enrich our maritime wisdom, and this webinar is expected to contribute in this regard.

BIMRAD Webinar 15 March 2022

List of Participants

Keynote Speaker

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed , Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

Subject: The Emergence of Indian Ocean as the Center of Global Competition: The Implications for the Geopolitical Dynamics of Bay of Bengal

Panel Discussants

Panel Discussant: Dr. Shahab Enam Khan, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University

Subject: The Growing Significance of Bay of Bengal in the Global Maritime Space: Geostrategic and Geo-Economic Implications for Bangladesh

Panel Discussant: Rear Admiral Muhammad Anwarul Islam NGP, ndc, afwc, psc, BN (retd)

Subject: Transcending Barriers to Maritime Cooperation: The Context of South Asia

Moderator

Dr. Rashed Uz Zaman, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka

Welcome Address and Vote of Thanks

Captain M Minarul Hoque, (H), BCGM, psc, BN, Director General, BIMRAD

BIMRAD Webinar 15 March 2022 Concept Note and Agenda

On 15 March 2022, the Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD) will organise a webinar on 'Emerging Security Challenges in Indian Ocean Region: Assessing the Impacts of Geopolitical and Geo-Economics Maneuverings in The Bay of Bengal Littorals.' Prospective participants of the webinar include maritime experts, IR scholars, Bangladesh Navy Officials (serving and retired), representatives of prominent think tanks of Bangladesh and took place under Chatham House Rules.

The great game in the Indian Ocean is broadly concentrated on multiple fronts like economics, infrastructure – military and non-military, and investments. The Bay of Bengal's geography features a shallow embayment in the northeastern Indian Ocean but strategically important maritime routes. Apart from trade and commerce, the Bay of Bengal features a huge mass of unexplored renewable energy resources, fueled competition under the umbrella of major infrastructural development and investment plans of the regional and global powers. It also provides a much-needed maritime route for the land-locked countries like Nepal and Bhutan, and therefore the major actors are rallying their mega-plans in the regional and global forum incorporating the smaller nation's strategic interests.

For Bangladesh, its rise and stability depend upon understanding the nuances of both regional and international politics surrounding the Indian Ocean region and more specifically, in the Bay of Bengal region. Bangladesh's focus on a greater understanding of the region would contribute to determining where its maritime investments are made, considering its strategic interests. Furthermore, both traditional and non-traditional security (NTS) concerns need to be navigated within institutional structures as many of these require transnational cooperation. Therefore, this webinar is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics of the Bay of Bengal by situating it in the broader context of the Indian Ocean.

This webinar seeks to elicit specific responses to four questions from the presenter/panellists:

- > What are the major geopolitical issues in the Bay of Bengal region emanating from the broader security challenges existing in the Indian Ocean?
- > What are the major infrastructural initiatives taken in the Bay of Bengal littorals and what are the geoeconomic implications of these initiatives?
- > How do the dynamics of regional and global power's competition shape the policy-level decision-making of Bangladesh regarding its security and economic developmental vision in the Bay of Bengal region?
- > What are the existing maritime cooperative framework in the Bay of Bengal region and how should the states move forward in this regard?



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Webinar

Meeting ID: 972 495 0743
Passcode: 0000

Theme: Emerging Security Challenges in Indian Ocean Region:
Assessing The Impacts of Geopolitical and Geo-Economics
Maneuverings in the Bay of Bengal Littorals

Organised by
Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD)
Date: 15 March 2022, 1100-1245 (BST)



Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed
Professor
Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka



Rear Admiral Muhammad Anwarul Islam
NGP, ndc, alwc, psc, BN (retd)



Dr. Shahab Enam Khan
Professor
Department of International Relations
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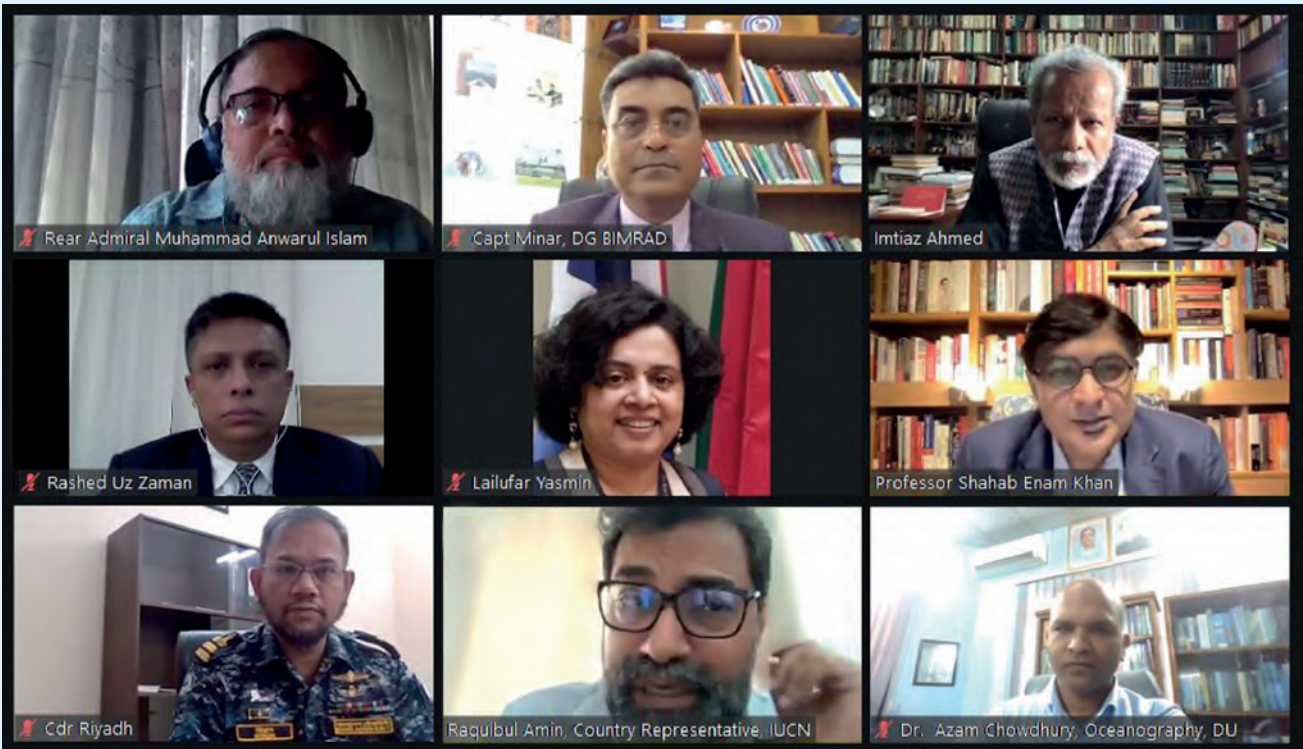


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Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD) is a charitable independent maritime think tank patronized by Bangladesh Navy. The Institute started its journey on 03 July 2018 to act as the common platform for all maritime intellectuals, researchers, institutions and maritime stakeholders to conduct maritime research with an aim to contribute towards the sustainable development of the country. It was established to conduct research on maritime affairs, security, exploration and conservation of sea resources, maritime science and technology, maritime tourism, maritime pollution, biodiversity, marine ecology, coastal disaster, marine renewable energy and climate change impact, food security, adaptation and so on. The Institute is registered under the Societies Registration Act XXI of 1860.