

MARITIME SECURITY OF BANGLADESH: EXPLORING REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

Abstract

Maritime security, which is a vital aspect of a nation's comprehensive national security, presupposes security of terrestrial area of an ocean. There is no universal legal definition of the term "maritime security". Broadly, it entails security from crimes at sea, resource security, environmental security, and security of seafarers and fishers. These in turn presupposes sustainable management of ocean. Maritime security entails possession of and control over marine resources: both living and non-living by nations-states, which fall within the domain of a state's maritime or oceanic zone. The Common Heritage of Mankind has several dimensions such as economic/resource, environmental/ecological, peace and security, and ethical. Bangladesh, which confronts both conventional and non-conventional maritime security threats, needs bilateral, national, regional, and global approaches to address these threats. As most non-conventional maritime security threats are trans-boundary in nature and as all SAARC members face these trans-boundary maritime security threats, a global approach cannot solely address these threats. Ocean management, compliance of it by states and pursuance of democratic principles without infringing states' sovereignty vis-à-vis the aforementioned dimensions of Common Heritage of Mankind, ocean good governance, maritime security, human security, state security—all are interconnected. Therefore, these cannot be dealt with in segregation. As states' security, and for that matter, human security, cannot be ensured without thorough states' restructuring in which an inclusive participatory democratic order needs prevailing, restructuring of ocean management on a sustainable basis, taking into cognizance of the aforesaid four dimensions, could make a regional approach toward ocean management sensible as it brings the key actors—national, regional, and global in a single continuum. In a globalized world, regional connectivity vis-à-vis ocean (e.g. the Indian Ocean) management, via the SAARC mechanism, has both limitations and prospects, for institutional pillars of SAARC to promote regional maritime co-operation, thereby enhancing ocean management need firm implementation. It is here in which major SAARC's weakness has been tangible. SAARC has a legal and political framework following the adoption of several SAARC conventions recently to address a set of trans-boundary issues. These conventions, which are related to addressing land-centric transnational issues, have little bearing upon the nature of transnational issues of maritime security. In the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, which are potentially highly rich in marine resources (as mentioned earlier, both living and non-living), competition to exploit and control over these resources have given rise to contentions between SAARC countries. The Bangladesh-India dispute is a case in point. So is Bangladesh-Myanmar. While conventional bilateral maritime contentious issues call for both political and legal approaches to resolve, non-conventional issues require a regional joint co-operation and global efforts as well. The smaller littoral states of the Indian Ocean need exploring all opportunities for negotiations with India so that all can play an active regional role under the aegis of SAARC to establish a democratic ocean management order, emphasizing the ethical dimension which covers equitable share of ocean resources underlining the rights of the weaker and smaller states. Hence, the paper proposes a regional "co-operative security" mechanism, which should be framed in line

with the UNCLOS, aiming at operationalizing an integrated regional maritime resource management system (IRMRMS). This may help to evolve an effective regional joint management of maritime resources and governance, ensuring maritime security of regional powers, including Bangladesh. Under the rubric of SAARC, an ocean-based traffic system that goes beyond the capability of a nation's Coast Guards needs exploring to enhance regional maritime co-operation. Regionally, Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation stands as one of the outstanding examples of regional maritime co-operation among its 44 member states of which Bangladesh is an active member. The paper offers a set of fresh recommendations that are as follows:

1. SAARC leaders' consensus to promote regional co-operation through a "regional maritime co-operative security mechanism" (RMCSM) and its implementation through operationalization.
2. Operationalizing an integrated regional maritime resource management system (IRMRMS). In managing an IRMRMS, rule of law must prevail.
3. Establishing and operationalizing a SAARC network of surveillance, to vigil at trans-boundary crimes. It can and will act as a detection and notification system for the states' agents.
4. Formation, under the SAARC umbrella, an ocean-based traffic system, manned by SAARC Ocean Force (SAARCOF), which will go beyond the capability and efficiency of a nation's Coast Guards. This may help to evolve an effective regional joint management of maritime resources and governance, enhancing maritime security of regional powers, including Bangladesh.
5. Having vision-based action plan: SAARC leaders' vision should be to establish an overarching ocean management regime indispensable for preserving peace and security in the ocean, hence, in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal in which India has supremacy vis-a- vis other SAARC states. India's goal of building up a blue water navy should be designed as such so that smaller littoral states of Indian Ocean do not view it targeted against their interest. India rather should ensure, through its blue water navy mechanism, the protection of smaller Indian Ocean littoral states' interest in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal as well. Strong advocacy of this should be a continuous task of the smaller Indian Ocean littoral states. After all, India is destined to be a great power for which its needs its blue water navy too as China has built up its own blue water navy. Both want to see a balance of power is maintained in the Indian Ocean.
6. Establishing and implementing of a SAARC Maritime Security Centre/Institution in India, having its sister-branches in Chittagong and Mongla Ports of Bangladesh. Within their ambit, introducing of the *SAARC Maritime Security Chair* (e.g. at Universities of Madras, Bombay, Andhra, JNU, Delhi, and Kolkata) will be helpful to introduce undergraduate and graduate courses on marine resources and technology and maritime security. These will give rise to increasing awareness about maritime security and ocean management, contributing to address the maritime security and ocean management issue

effectively. And such practice has been introduced in the world's other region from which the region has positively been profited in terms of regional co-operation.

7. Undertaking SAARC action plans and strategies to address problems of maritime security by interfacing [as and when situation calls for] Track-I, Track-II, and Track-III processes. These in turn will take SAARC toward greater connectivity in ocean management.

8. A rapid formulation and implementation of a SAARC Parliamentary Maritime Group. It will act as a watch-dog in strengthening SAARCs' institutional pillars necessary for enhancing good governance in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, thereby promoting regional maritime co-operation through RMCSM.