

***Mohammad Shibli Sadik Sarker***

## **EVOLVING GEOPOLITICS IN THE BAY OF BENGAL: THE CHALLENGES AND STRATEGY OF BANGLADESH**

### **Abstract**

The Bay of Bengal has re-emerged as a critical geopolitical and economic hub, drawing attention from regional and global powers such as India, China, the United States, and Japan. As nearly half of global container traffic passes through this maritime corridor, the Bay plays a vital role in trade, security, and energy supply. Bangladesh, situated at the apex of the Bay, faces both opportunities and challenges in navigating the complex power dynamics. Despite growing scholarly attention to the literature on the Bay of Bengal, limited research has examined how Bangladesh should navigate the contemporary power dynamic while safeguarding its national interests. Using a qualitative analytical approach based on secondary data and policy documents, the paper explores Bangladesh's challenges and possible pathways for advancing its national priorities amid the contemporary geopolitical dynamics of the Bay of Bengal. In this paper, Bangladesh's role is examined as a case study to also explore how a small yet strategically located nation can both influence and be influenced by larger regional and global powers. The study argues that Bangladesh needs to adopt a pragmatic policy of "minimum risk, maximum benefit," leveraging economic diplomacy and regional cooperation to uphold national interests amid power rivalries across the Bay of Bengal.

**Keywords:** Bay of Bengal, Geopolitics, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Belt and Road Initiative, Blue Economy

### **1. Introduction**

The Bay of Bengal (BoB), covering approximately 2.173 million square kilometres (sq.km.), stands as the world's largest Bay, and nearly half of all global container traffic passes through this region, with ports in this region managing roughly one-third of the world's trade.<sup>1</sup> Historically recognised as a vast highway for commerce, transport, and cultural exchange, the bay's waters have been traversed

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<sup>1</sup> Sabera Chowdhury, "Economic Connectivity and Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal," Australian Institute of International Affairs, Last modified May 11, 2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/economic-connectivity-and-cooperation-in-the-bay-of-bengal/#:~:text=About%20half%20of%20the%20world's,33%20percent%20of%20global%20trade.>

by merchants and explorers alike. Today, the region's core littoral states collectively host nearly 1.78 billion people and boast a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of approximately US\$ 7.5 trillion.<sup>2</sup>

Over the centuries, the bay's strategic and economic significance has been shaped by waves of migration, trade networks, and imperial ambitions. In recent decades, however, a profound transformation has taken place. This transformation has been largely driven by the emergence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the United States (US)-led Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), which have redefined the BoB as one of the keys of Indo-Pacific geopolitical contestation. The BRI's massive infrastructure and connectivity projects, particularly in the South and Southeast Asia, have expanded China's economic footprint across the region. In response, the IPS has sought to ensure a "free and open Indo-Pacific," enhancing the strategic presence of the US and its allies. Together, these initiatives have transformed the BoB from a historical trading basin into a central axis of twenty-first-century maritime geopolitics, where strategic competition, economic interdependence, and security interests are increasingly converging.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the BoB is drawing strategic attention from other regional powers, such as India and Japan. Each actor's pursuit of influence through initiatives like the BRI, the IPS, and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) has transformed the Bay into a site of competing interests. Despite this growing strategic competition, Bangladesh, situated at the centre of this maritime crossroads, faces the complex challenge of balancing economic opportunities with geopolitical risks.<sup>4</sup> In this context, "the changes in the BoB are key to understanding Asia's future," as Amrit observes and further argues that the region is driving two major dynamics that will shape the continent's trajectory.<sup>5</sup> First, the BoB has re-emerged as a theatre of strategic competition among rising powers, echoing its role in the eighteenth century. The difference today is that the principal actors are Asian rather than European: both India and China regard the Bay as strategically significant for energy security, maritime trade, and cultural outreach. Second, the Bay's littoral zones constitute one of the world's most exposed frontiers of climate risk, with more than half a billion people residing in densely inhabited coastal areas that are highly vulnerable to environmental change.

<sup>2</sup> Tariq Karim, "Importance of the Bay of Bengal as a Causeway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans," East-West Center, Last modified May 12, 2021, [https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/importance-the-bay-bengal-causeway-between-the-indian-and-pacific-oceans#:~:text=The%20core%20Bay%20of%20Bengal,interest%20add%20another%20\\$811%20billion](https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/importance-the-bay-bengal-causeway-between-the-indian-and-pacific-oceans#:~:text=The%20core%20Bay%20of%20Bengal,interest%20add%20another%20$811%20billion).

<sup>3</sup> Sabbir Mahmud Shibli, "The Blue Economy of Bangladesh: A Development Opportunity amid Geostrategic Competition in the Bay of Bengal Region," *SN Social Sciences* 5 (2025): 85.

<sup>4</sup> Nur Ahmed, "The Maritime Dimension of Foreign Policy Choices of Bangladesh," *Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development Journal* 3, no. 01 (2023): 54–71.

<sup>5</sup> Sunil S. Amrit, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 7–8.

While existing studies have examined the BoB's geopolitical importance and the ambitions of major powers, there is a significant lack of research on Bangladesh's challenges and possible pathways to advance its national priorities amid the contemporary geopolitical dynamics of the BoB. Therefore, this research addresses the problem of how Bangladesh, as a small yet strategically located state, navigates the emerging geopolitical rivalry in the BoB while ensuring national security, economic growth, and regional stability. The research seeks to examine how the evolving geopolitics of the BoB is reshaping Bangladesh's national priorities, and to identify the strategic options through which Bangladesh can mitigate emerging risks while maximising potential benefits. Bangladesh's role is examined as a case study in how a small yet strategically located nation can both influence and be influenced by larger regional and global power plays. The study adopts primarily a qualitative methodology anchored in an interpretive research tradition. It relies extensively on secondary data to analyse the evolving geopolitical environment in the BoB and Bangladesh's corresponding strategic challenges. A wide spectrum of literature was reviewed to develop a holistic understanding of the region's security dynamics. This included academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, monographs, analytical commentaries, as well as reports and news coverage from reputable local and international outlets. The literature review serves as the basis for tracing both the historical trajectory and contemporary shifts shaping the BoB's geopolitical landscape. It also helped identify existing gaps in scholarship, particularly in relation to Bangladesh's security concerns and strategic priorities. By triangulating insights from diverse sources, the study aims to generate a more refined and contextually grounded assessment of the region's emerging security challenges. The interpretive approach ensures sensitivity to the perspectives, interests, and experiences of the various state and non-state actors whose actions and interactions are reshaping the BoB's strategic calculus.

The discussion is organised into six parts. The first section provides an introduction. The second section traces the historical "resurgence" of the BoB. The third section examines contemporary geopolitical dynamics and the competing interests of the US, China, India, and Japan. The fourth section considers the challenges confronting Bangladesh and the priorities arising from them. The fifth section examines Bangladesh's strategic options for maximising benefits while minimising risks. The final section offers concluding reflections on the shared future of the Bay.

## **2. The Resurgence of the Bay of Bengal**

The BoB has long served as a vibrant maritime corridor, witnessing centuries of dynamic trade, cultural exchange, and geopolitical manoeuvring. For

millennia, its waters have been traversed by Indian and Malaysian traders, whose merchant fleets connected the vast lands of South Asia with distant markets. In addition, Chinese maritime trading, dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, played a pivotal role in enriching the region's economic and cultural tapestry, with the area at times being known as the "Chola Sea." Rajendra Chola expanded maritime trade and influence across Southeast Asia, establishing settlements in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia while maintaining a trade presence in China.<sup>6</sup> This early period of trans-regional commerce laid the foundations for what would become a complex web of interconnections, shaping the economic fortunes and social landscapes of the Bay's diverse communities.

The arrival of European powers marked a new chapter in the history of the BoB. In a move that would forever alter the region's trajectory, Vasco da Gama led the first European voyage into these waters in 1498, a voyage that signaled the beginning of European maritime expansion in Asia. These successive waves of European intervention turned the BoB into a contested battleground where imperial ambitions were pursued. The patterns of human migration further shaped these developments, influencing the establishment of trading posts along the coast. Between 1840 and 1940, nearly 30 million people migrated from India, with the vast majority moving back and forth across the BoB, primarily to Ceylon, Burma, and Malaya.<sup>7</sup> This circular migration made the BoB one of the most economically significant regions.

The BoB has reemerged as a critical maritime basin within the larger Indo-Pacific framework. Today, its significance is underscored by its strategic location, linking the emerging economies of South Asia with those of Southeast Asia and beyond. This "resurge" is driven by several factors that have reinvigorated the Bay's role in global commerce and geopolitics. Among the primary catalysts is the emergence of China as a dominant economic power. Over the past few decades, China's rapid industrialisation and ambitious infrastructure projects have reshaped regional dynamics, drawing renewed attention to key maritime routes, including the BoB.

Parallel to China's rise, the US has revised its strategic priorities in what is often referred to as the "pivot to Asia."<sup>8</sup> Recognising the shifting balance of power, the US has increased its military and diplomatic engagement in the Indo-Pacific

<sup>6</sup> A. Ragu Raman, "How Did the Cholas Conquer the Seas?" *Times of India*, September 10, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/how-did-the-cholas-conquer-the-seas/articleshow/94120921.cms>.

<sup>7</sup> Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth G Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," Brookings Institution, Last modified December 21, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

region, with the BoB emerging as a crucial element in its broader strategy to secure free and open sea routes. This US interest in the region is driven not only by security considerations but also by the desire to maintain access to vital global energy routes that pass through these waters.

**Figure 1: Maritime Chokepoints Have Become Sites of Strategic Contestation<sup>9</sup>**



The global energy landscape plays a significant role in the Bay's resurgence. As the world's economies continue to expand, demand for energy resources has increased. The BoB, with its proximity to major energy-producing regions and its potential for offshore gas reserve exploration, has become increasingly important.<sup>10</sup> Another key factor in the Bay's resurgence is the emergence of new regional economies. The rapid economic growth witnessed across South and Southeast Asia has transformed the BoB into a dynamic centre of commerce and innovation. This economic transformation has not only boosted intra-regional trade but has also

<sup>9</sup> "World Oil Transit Chokepoints," U.S. Energy Information Administration, Last modified June 25, 2024, [https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/special-topics/World\\_Oil\\_Transit\\_Chokepoints](https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/special-topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints).

<sup>10</sup> Anu Anawar, "The Bay of Bengal Could Be the Key to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific," War on the Rocks, Last modified June 17, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/the-bay-of-bengal-could-be-the-key-to-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>.

increased the Bay's relevance in global economic circuits, making it a focal point for investors and policymakers alike.

Perhaps the most dramatic recent event contributing to the Bay's re-emergence is the July uprising of 2024 in Bangladesh. The uprising initially emerged from widespread public frustration over governance failures and economic inequality, inadvertently reshaping the country's political economy and strategic outlook. In the aftermath, the new leadership prioritised restoring international confidence, rebranding Bangladesh as a stable and reform-oriented economy.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the uprising's geopolitical implications were also significant.<sup>12</sup> Bangladesh's changing foreign policy approach after the Sheikh Hasina regime, especially its current tension with India, while deepening ties with China, and even Pakistan,<sup>13</sup> is a significant factor shaping the geopolitical outlook of the Bay. The cumulative impact of these diverse factors has led to a reimaging of the BoB's role. No longer can the Bay be viewed solely as a relic of colonial maritime history; it is now a dynamic and contested space where the interplay of economic opportunity and geopolitical rivalry defines its future.

### **3. Contemporary Geopolitics in the Bay of Bengal**

The BoB has emerged as a critical theatre in the global geopolitical arena, driven by the strategic imperatives of major powers and the complex interplay of regional interests. As traditional alliances and economic priorities evolve, the littorals of the Bay have become a focal point for competing narratives.

#### **3.1 The US's Strategy in the Bay**

The US's engagement in the BoB is shaped by its broader IPS, which aims to counter China's influence and ensure a free and open maritime order. The 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)<sup>14</sup> reinforces this approach by authorising US\$ 14.7 billion for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) and

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Planning, Government of Bangladesh, *Final Report of the Task Force on Economic Reforms* (Dhaka: 2025), [https://plandiv.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/plandiv.portal.gov.bd/notices/6913b4c2\\_1320\\_4034\\_9b10\\_cc1dec2e9788/Task-Force-Report\\_Final\\_11-Feb-2025-with-Cover.pdf](https://plandiv.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/plandiv.portal.gov.bd/notices/6913b4c2_1320_4034_9b10_cc1dec2e9788/Task-Force-Report_Final_11-Feb-2025-with-Cover.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), *BIGD Reflections 2024* (Dhaka: BIGD, 2024), [https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Reflections-2024\\_BIGD\\_Final.pdf](https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Reflections-2024_BIGD_Final.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Bian Sai, "Uncertain Diplomatic Shift: Bangladesh's Foreign Policy and Its Internal Logic," NUS Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), Last modified January 24, 2025, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/uncertain-diplomatic-shift-bangladesh-s-foreign-policy-and-its-internal-logic/>.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Summary of the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Senate, 2024), [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy24\\_ndaa\\_conference\\_executive\\_summary1.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy24_ndaa_conference_executive_summary1.pdf).

establishing the Indo-Pacific Campaigning Initiative to enhance military exercises, freedom of navigation operations, and partner engagements. It also provides US\$ 1.3 billion for campaigning activities, including military training and capacity-building programmes with regional allies.<sup>15</sup> The Act strengthens security cooperation with key partners like India, Japan, Australia, and Taiwan, including enhanced military cyber security collaborations, training initiatives, and arms sales such as the transfer of Virginia-class submarines to Australia under AUKUS. Additionally, it expands cyber cooperation with Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia while advancing a strategy for deploying ground-based theatre-range missile capabilities in the Indo-Pacific. American efforts to promote free and open maritime domains, coupled with the development of regional defence capacities, are central to its vision of an Indo-Pacific order that limits the expansion of Chinese influence.

### 3.1.1 *Implications of the Trump Administration*

Under President Donald Trump's administration (Trump 2.0), US policy in the Indo-Pacific increasingly emphasised India as a pivotal partner to counterbalance China. This India-centric approach manifested in enhanced defence cooperation, strategic alignment, and economic engagement between Washington and New Delhi. While strengthening US-India ties was central to the Trump administration's regional strategy, it inadvertently sidelined the strategic interests of smaller BoB countries, notably Bangladesh. Bangladesh's concerns about maintaining a peaceful, inclusive, and economically prosperous BoB often received less attention amid the larger geopolitical contest focused on India-China rivalry.<sup>16</sup>

This shift was evident during the visit of the US National Intelligence Director Tulsi Gabbard to India, where she made controversial remarks about Bangladesh, alleging that the country harbours elements of "Islamic Caliphate" and persecuted minorities, claims that Bangladesh strongly refuted.<sup>17</sup> The incident signalled that the US under Trump is more aligned with India's rhetoric, reinforcing India's strategic position in the region while neglecting Bangladesh's interests. This imbalance undermined the possibility of a cooperative Indo-Pacific, as the US appeared to prioritise countering China through Indian partnerships rather than fostering inclusive regional cooperation.

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Summary of the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act*.

<sup>16</sup> Kanishkh Kanodia, "US Indo-Pacific allies are unhappy about Trump's defence demands. But they have to comply," Chatham House, Last modified July 13, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/us-indo-pacific-allies-are-unhappy-about-trumps-defence-demands-they-have-comply>.

<sup>17</sup> "Groundlessly Linking to 'Islamist Caliphate' Undermines Countless Bangladeshis' Hard Work: Govt Slams Tulsi's Remarks," *The Business Standard*, March 18, 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/groundlessly-linking-islamist-caliphate-undermines-countless-bangladeshis-hard-work-ca>.

The warming relations between the US and Russia, particularly Trump's rapprochement with President Vladimir Putin, also have implications for the region. India welcomes these efforts, as it views Russia as a necessary pole in a multipolar world and seeks continued Russian arms supplies to counter China.<sup>18</sup> If Trump successfully disengages Russia from China, it could bolster India's strategic position while further embedding US-India defence ties in the Indo-Pacific. However, these developments risk marginalising Bangladesh's security and economic interests, as the BoB becomes a theatre for great power competition rather than a zone of regional cooperation and shared prosperity.

Therefore, while the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific policy aligned with its broader goal of countering China through robust partnerships, its strong India-centric orientation risked undermining Bangladesh's aspirations for a balanced and peaceful regional order.<sup>19</sup> Moving forward, a more inclusive US strategy that recognises the strategic importance of Bangladesh and other smaller Indo-Pacific states beyond the India-China binary will be critical to fostering long-term stability, economic growth, and regional cooperation in the BoB. However, the geopolitical landscape has been shifting, with growing recognition among US policymakers that sustainable regional stability requires engaging a broader spectrum of Indo-Pacific actors, not only India and China. Moving forward, a more inclusive US strategy that acknowledges the strategic importance of Bangladesh and other smaller Indo-Pacific states beyond the India-China binary will be critical to fostering long-term stability, economic growth, and regional cooperation in the BoB.<sup>20</sup>

### **3.2 *China's Approach toward the Indo-Pacific and BoB***

China's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific and the BoB is driven primarily by its BRI, with the Maritime Silk Road forming the backbone of its regional connectivity ambitions. This initiative seeks to establish critical trade and infrastructure networks that reduce China's dependence on the Malacca Strait by creating alternative sea routes through Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. The BoB plays a crucial role in this strategy, as China aims to develop ports, fuelling stations, and industrial corridors to secure its trade and energy supply chains. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a key component of the BRI vision,

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<sup>18</sup> Rahul Roy Chaudhury, "India's Diplomacy Amid Changing Great-Power Dynamics," IISS, Last modified March 14, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/03/indiias-diplomacy-amid-changing-great-power-dynamics/>.

<sup>19</sup> K. U. Mahmud and M. S. Hossain, "Trump 2.0 and the future of Bangladesh-US defence relations," *The Daily Star*, November 19, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/trump-20-and-the-future-bangladesh-us-defence-relations-2086753>.

<sup>20</sup> Amit Ranjan and Chulanee Attanayake, "The Bay of Bengal in the Evolving Indo-Pacific Debate," *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 16, no. 03 (2024): 285–291.

providing direct access to the Arabian Sea and reducing logistical vulnerabilities.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, China's investments in ports like Kyaukpyu in Myanmar and Hambantota in Sri Lanka enhance its strategic presence in the region, allowing for both economic expansion and potential military utility, thereby strengthening its influence over critical maritime routes. Other projects, ranging from the Hydro Power Lower Sesan 2 Dam in Cambodia to port facilities in Kota Bharu, Malaysia, extend this web deeper into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region, furthering China's commercial and strategic objectives.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond the immediate BoB, China's strategy includes integrating these regional hubs with distant outposts such as Nairobi Terminus in Kenya and Piraeus Port in Greece, framing the Bay as a central node within China's global BRI network.<sup>23</sup> These interlinked ventures not only enhance connectivity and investment prospects but also foster strategic dependencies, gradually shifting regional dynamics and power balances in China's favour. While promising economic development, this expansive footprint has prompted apprehension among neighbouring states about Beijing's rising leverage and potential military utility over the surrounding littoral zones.<sup>24</sup> As illustrated in Figure 2, these initiatives have enabled Beijing to broaden its presence across the BoB, effectively surrounding the region through a network of strategic projects. Although such initiatives provide considerable advantages in terms of connectivity, infrastructure, and investment, they have also generated unease among regional actors, who are wary that China's expanding role may confer enduring strategic leverage over the littoral states.

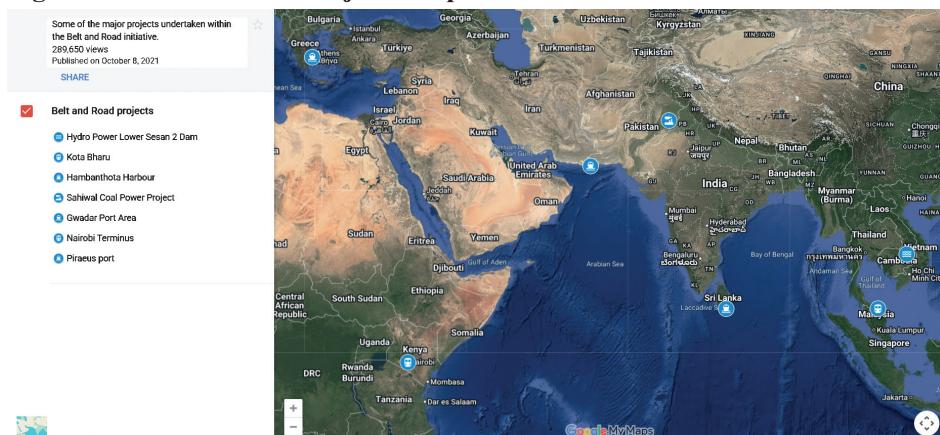
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<sup>21</sup> Yu Jie and Jon Wallace, "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?" Chatham House, Last modified December 19, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-bri>.

<sup>22</sup> James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, Last modified February 03, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>23</sup> Mae Chow and Shakti De Silva, "Sino-India Rivalry for Port Dominance in Bangladesh," 9 Dash Line, Last modified April 24, 2024, <https://9dashline.com/article/sino-india-rivalry-for-port-dominance-in-bangladesh>.

<sup>24</sup> Manish Jung Pulami, "China's Increasing Forays into the Bay of Bengal," South Asian Voices, Last modified November 29, 2020, <https://southasianvoices.org/chinas-increasing-forays-into-the-bay-of-bengal>.

**Figure 2: Belt and Road Projects Map<sup>25</sup>**

From a strategic perspective, this evolving network is often perceived as China's pursuit of the "String of Pearls" strategy, creating a series of commercial ports with latent military potential across the Indian Ocean. The BoB, positioned between the Malacca Strait and the Arabian Sea, becomes crucial for maintaining China's access to global sea lanes while offsetting its "Malacca Dilemma." This growing Chinese presence challenges India's traditional dominance in the Bay, prompting New Delhi to advance counter-initiatives such as the SAGAR vision and to strengthen cooperation within frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the Bay is transforming into a theater of strategic competition between China and other Indo-Pacific powers, where infrastructure becomes an instrument of geopolitical influence rather than mere economic development.

At the same time, the economic interdependence of the BRI member states serves as Beijing's subtle yet powerful instrument of influence. Through concessional loans, port development, and industrial projects, China deepens the economic reliance of smaller littoral states, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, on its financial ecosystem.<sup>27</sup> While such investments enhance connectivity and create employment, they also risk institutionalising dependency, as seen in Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port lease or Myanmar's growing debt exposure. These dynamics allow

<sup>25</sup> Jie and Wallace, "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative".

<sup>26</sup> Carolijn van Noort, "Strategic Narratives, Visuality and Infrastructure in the Digital Age: The Case of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 05 (2020): 734–751.

<sup>27</sup> Asad Ullah and Li Xinlei, "Navigating Complex Interdependence: An In-Depth Analysis of Iran and Saudi Arabia's Strategic Engagement with the BRI in the Middle East," *Chinese Political Science Review* 10, no. 01 (2025): 72–100.

Beijing to exercise leverage without direct coercion, aligning with what scholar's term "*economic statecraft*."<sup>28</sup> The dual nature of developmental and strategic, thus blurs the line between cooperation and control, raising questions about whether China's engagement in the BoB is fostering inclusive regional growth or embedding new hierarchies of dependency.

### **3.3 India's Transitory Strategy: From Non-Alignment to Assertive Security Politics**

Historically, India adhered to a policy of non-alignment, but the changing dynamics of regional security and economic challenges have compelled New Delhi to adopt a more assertive posture in the BoB. India's strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific and the BoB is deeply tied to its Act East Policy (AEP), which has evolved over the past decade. AEP, launched in 2014, marks a significant shift from India's previous Look East Policy, placing a greater emphasis on Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region in India's geostrategic outlook. One of the key components of AEP is its alignment with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) political vision of the Indo-Pacific, particularly through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). India's commitment to ASEAN centrality and unity has driven its diplomatic engagement in the region, enhancing its strategic partnerships and fostering high-level exchanges, with Prime Minister Modi's 26 visits to ASEAN countries being a notable indicator of India's growing presence in the region from 2014 to 2024.<sup>29</sup> India's strategic interests are also deeply rooted in its SAGAR initiative, which was first articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 12, 2015, during his visit to Mauritius. Recognising that 90 per cent of India's trade and energy imports transit through the Indian Ocean, India has prioritised securing vital sea lanes by strengthening maritime security, regional stability, and economic cooperation.<sup>30</sup> This commitment is evident in joint naval exercises such as Bongosagar 2025 with Bangladesh,<sup>31</sup> as well as through agreements like white-shipping information sharing, signed between India and Mauritius to enhance maritime domain awareness.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mengshuang Du, "The Belt and Road Initiative and National Economic Development: A Multidimensional Power Analysis," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* (2025): 01–29.

<sup>29</sup> Abhishek Sharma and Pratnashree Basu, "Ten Years of India's Act East Policy," Observer Research Foundation, Last modified October 10, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/ten-years-of-india-s-act-east-policy>.

<sup>30</sup> G. Padmaja, "Revisiting 'SAGAR' – India's Template for Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region," National Maritime Foundation, Last modified April 25, 2018, <https://maritimeindia.org/revisiting-sagar-indias-template-for-cooperation-in-the-indian-ocean-region>.

<sup>31</sup> Rajat Pandit, "India, Bangladesh Conduct Naval Exercise amid Diplomatic Chill," *The Times of India*, Last modified March 13, 2025, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/118980068.cms>.

<sup>32</sup> Anirban Bhaumik, "India Upgrades SAGAR Doctrine to MAHASAGAR, Steps Up Maritime Security Ties with Mauritius to Counter China's Indian Ocean Forays," *Deccan Herald*, Last modified March 12,

Beyond maritime security, India has sought to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the BoB. China's BRI has led to increasing infrastructure investments and naval engagements, prompting India to bolster its regional presence through strategic infrastructure projects. Mauritius remains a critical partner in India's Indo-Pacific strategy, serving as a key node in its SAGAR framework. During his visit to Mauritius on March 11–12, 2025, Prime Minister Modi reaffirmed Mauritius's importance to India.<sup>33</sup> India has deepened its ties through defence cooperation, providing Mauritius with support for the refitting of Coast Guard ships and assisting in establishing the National Maritime Information Sharing Centre to improve maritime security. This increasing alignment between India and Mauritius is a direct response to China's expanding presence in the region. Recognising the broader geopolitical challenges, India's vision has evolved beyond SAGAR into Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR), as announced by Prime Minister Modi on 12 March 2025.<sup>34</sup> This expanded strategy aims to reinforce India's leadership role in the Indo-Pacific while ensuring that no single power, especially China, dominates the region's strategic and economic landscape.

### **3.4 *Japan's Role: Economic Investments and BIG-B***

Japan's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific and the BoB are deeply connected with its economic diplomacy and regional connectivity initiatives, primarily through the BoB Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B). This initiative was first introduced by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during his visit to Bangladesh in September 2014, following a bilateral summit in Tokyo in May 2014 with high officials of Bangladesh, where both countries agreed to strengthen ties through the Japan-Bangladesh Comprehensive Partnership. Under BIG-B, Japan committed 600 billion Yen (approximately US\$ 6 billion) in official development assistance (ODA) loans over four to five years, emphasising infrastructure development and industrial connectivity in Bangladesh.<sup>35</sup>

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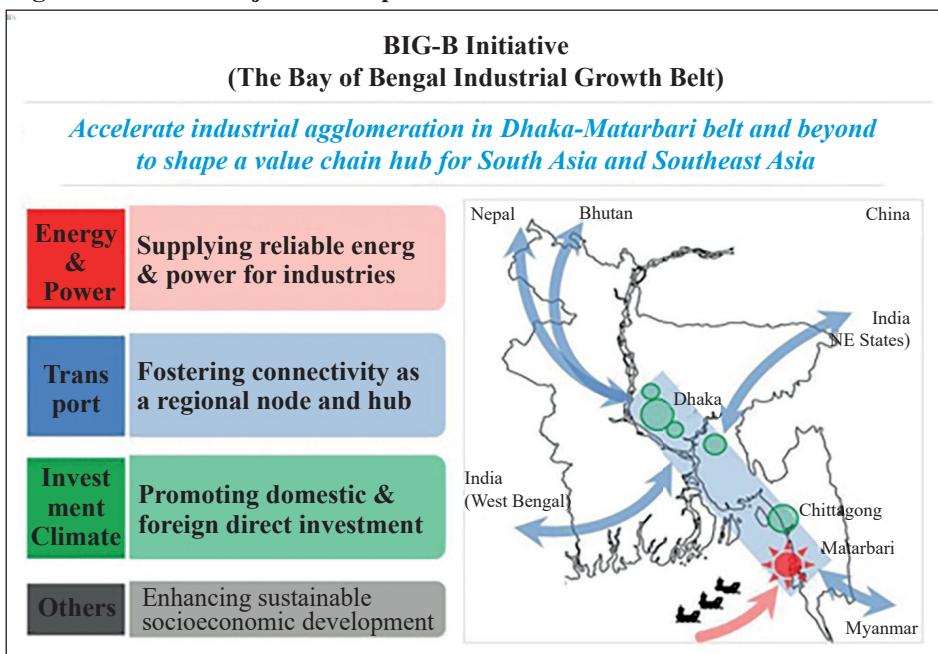
2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-upgrades-sagar-doctrine-to-mahasagar-steps-up-maritime-security-ties-with-mauritius-to-counter-chinas-indian-ocean-forays-3443307>.

<sup>33</sup> “India-Mauritius Joint Vision for an Enhanced Strategic Partnership,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Last modified March 12, 2025, <https://www.meaindia.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/39159>.

<sup>34</sup> Bhaumik, “India Upgrades SAGAR”.

<sup>35</sup> “The Initiative of BIG-B,” Japan International Cooperation Agency, Last accessed July 13, 2025, <https://www.jica.go.jp/english/overseas/bangladesh/activities/initiative.html>.

Figure 3: BIG-B Projection Map<sup>36</sup>



A critical aspect of Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy is its focus on enhancing Bangladesh's role as a regional industrial and trade hub, particularly through the development of the Dhaka-Chittagong-Cox's Bazar corridor (see Figure 3). The Matarbari Deep Sea Port, a key Japanese-backed infrastructure project, is positioned to serve not only Bangladesh but also facilitate trade and industrial supply chains with Northeast India. This aligns with Japan's broader strategy, as outlined by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in 2023, during his visit to India, where he emphasised the "BoB-Northeast India industrial value chain."<sup>37</sup> The proposed Japanese industrial hub in Bangladesh is expected to integrate Northeast India's natural resources with Bangladesh's growing manufacturing sector, enhancing economic interdependence. Japan's engagement in the region also serves its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, countering China's BRI while ensuring resilient and sustainable infrastructure in Bangladesh and the broader BoB region. Japan's involvement in infrastructure development in Northeast India, including highways, bridges, and energy projects, reflects its strategic interest in reducing logistical bottlenecks and securing stable industrial supply chains across South and Southeast Asia.

<sup>36</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency, "The Initiative of BIG-B".

<sup>37</sup> Syed Akhtar Mahmood, "The Japan Connection: Can Japan's Increased Presence in South Asia Be a Blessing for Bangladesh?" *Dhaka Tribune*, May 09, 2023, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/longform/310709/the-japan-connection>.

The economic partnership between Japan and Bangladesh has grown significantly, with over 350 Japanese companies operating in Bangladesh, contributing to an annual bilateral trade volume of US\$ 4 billion.<sup>38</sup> During a meeting on 15 January 2025, President Mohammed Shahabuddin urged Japanese Ambassador Shinichi Saida to enhance Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Bangladesh's emerging industries, such as automobiles, information and communication technology (ICT), medical equipment, consumer electronics, and tourism.<sup>39</sup> The BIG-B initiative, with its emphasis on connectivity, modern infrastructure, and industrial development, is crucial for integrating Bangladesh into global value chains. As Bangladesh aspires to position itself as a "sparkling trading nation,"<sup>40</sup> Japan's FDI and advanced industrial technology will be key enablers. However, for this vision to materialise, Bangladesh must implement policy reforms, improve its investment climate, and develop a skilled workforce capable of meeting the demands of high-tech manufacturing and export-oriented industries.

#### **4. Priorities and Challenges for Bangladesh in the BoB**

Bangladesh finds itself at the apex of the inverted funnel-shaped water body of the BoB, a region that is a crucial nexus of maritime and economic activity in South Asia. Bangladesh is uniquely positioned to leverage its geographical advantages with a "blue economy" that contributes over US\$ 6 billion, amounting to roughly 3.3 per cent of the country's total gross value addition, as of the 2014–15 fiscal year.<sup>41</sup> However, the country stands at the crossroads of both immense prospects and significant challenges.

##### **4.1 *Prospects: Hydrocarbon Resources, Mineral Wealth, and Regional Connectivity***

One of the most promising prospects for Bangladesh lies in the vast untapped resources of the BoB. Geological studies have repeatedly suggested that beneath the Bay's surface lie extensive deposits of hydrocarbons and mineral wealth. The Bay is believed to host a rich core of solidified natural gas, commonly referred to as "Diamond," "Gas hydrates," or gas pods, which although located at much greater depths compared to similar reserves in the Arabian Sea, could prove transformative

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<sup>38</sup> "President Seeks Increased Japanese Investment in Emerging Sectors," United News of Bangladesh (UNB), Last modified January 15, 2025, <https://unb.com.bd/category/Bangladesh/president-seeks-increased-japanese-investment-in-emerging-sectors/151255>.

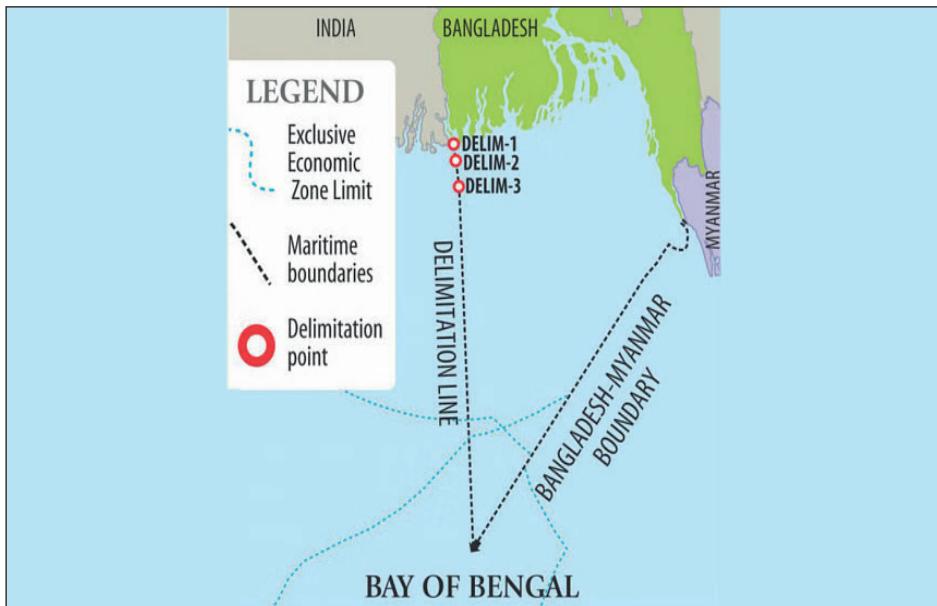
<sup>39</sup> "President Seeks Increased Japanese Investment in Emerging Sectors".

<sup>40</sup> Syed Akhtar Mahmood, "The Japan Connection".

<sup>41</sup> "Blue Economy Worth \$6.2bn," *The Daily Star*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/blue-economy-worth-62bn-1704688>.

for Bangladesh's energy sector.<sup>42</sup> While neighbouring Myanmar and India have already discovered significant gas reserves, Bangladesh remains a relative newcomer in deep-sea exploration. The potential discovery and exploitation of these resources could not only secure a stable energy inflow for Bangladesh but also significantly boost its industrial base and export earnings.

**Figure 4: Position of Potential Gas Reserve of 103 Trillion Cubic Feet in the BoB<sup>43</sup>**



Beyond hydrocarbons, the BoB holds promise as a repository of various mineral nodules. As global demand for raw materials intensifies, harnessing these resources could lead to substantial economic benefits. However, realising these benefits will require comprehensive surveys, advanced technological interventions, and a regulatory framework that encourages both state-led and private investments in exploration and extraction activities. Another significant prospect for Bangladesh is its strategic position as a connecting route between South and Southeast Asia.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Tariq Karim, "Importance of the Bay of Bengal as a Causeway between the Indian and Pacific Oceans," East-West Center, Last modified May 12, 2021, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/importance-the-bay-bengal-causeway-between-the-indian-and-pacific-oceans>.

<sup>43</sup> "Up to 103tcf Potential Gas Reserve in Bay," *The Daily Star*, January 06, 2022, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/103tcf-potential-gas-reserve-bay-2933241>.

<sup>44</sup> Tariq Karim, "Connectivity and Cooperation: The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific Region," ISAS, August 03, 2023, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/connectivity-and-cooperation-the-bay-of-bengal-and-bangladesh-in-the-indo-pacific-region/>.

Bangladesh's unique geographical location makes it an indispensable node and hub in regional connectivity. With the BoB serving as a natural corridor, Bangladesh is well placed to facilitate trade and commerce between diverse regional markets. This connectivity extends not only to neighbouring South Asian countries but also to Southeast Asia, enhancing Bangladesh's role in inter-regional economic integration. The ongoing development of transport and logistics infrastructure, including ports, roads, and rail links could further cement this role, transforming Bangladesh into a critical transit hub that supports both regional trade and global supply chains.

#### **4.2 *Challenges Amidst Emerging Geopolitical Rivalries and Non-Traditional Security Threats***

While the prospects are considerable, Bangladesh faces a multifaceted set of challenges that stem from both traditional and non-traditional security dimensions. One of the primary challenges is adapting to the renewed rivalries among major powers in the Indo-Pacific region. In recent years, the BoB has witnessed an intensification of great power competition, with the US, China, and India each pursuing divergent strategic visions. This renewed rivalry threatens to fragment the region's cooperative framework, potentially sidelining the interests of littoral states like Bangladesh. The moment for regional integration in the BoB is slipping away because external powers like China and India increasingly pursue their own strategic interests, prioritise bilateral projects, and exert influence over regional agendas. This results in a fragmented approach where smaller littoral states, such as Bangladesh, see their interests sidelined, and opportunities for cooperation and shared development are undermined by geopolitical competition and a lack of regional consensus.<sup>45</sup>

These challenges are further intertwined with several non-traditional security challenges. For example, climate risks, environmental disasters, and resource management are now influenced by wider geopolitical interests. Because of this connection, Bangladesh now faces a more complicated security environment where geopolitical tensions and non-traditional risks reinforce one another.<sup>46</sup> Since the BoB is essential for Bangladesh's energy, trade, and fisheries, any rise in military activities, competition for maritime influence, or poorly planned infrastructure projects by external actors can directly affect Bangladesh's economic stability and environmental health. In this context, ensuring energy security from the BoB becomes even more challenging. While offshore resources have great potential, their development is limited by high costs, a lack of advanced technology, and political

<sup>45</sup> "Bay of Bengal Conversation," Centre for Governance Studies, Last modified October 09, 2023, <https://cgs-bd.com/article/733/Bay-of-Bengal-Conversation>.

<sup>46</sup> S. M. Ahmed, "Non-Traditional Security Threats of Bangladesh: Challenges and Policy Options," *BISS Journal* 39, no. 02 (2018): 01–21.

pressures surrounding foreign investment and exploration rights. At the same time, weaknesses in infrastructure and logistics further slowdown progress, preventing Bangladesh from fully benefiting from the Bay's energy resources.<sup>47</sup>

#### **4.3 Economic Development as a Priority**

Given these challenges, Bangladesh's foremost priority remains economic development. The country has experienced rapid growth in recent decades, emerging as a dynamic and increasingly resilient economy in South Asia. With the blue economy contributing to the sectors such as tourism, marine fisheries and aquaculture, transport and offshore oil and gas extraction, it holds tremendous potential for further growth. A 2018 World Bank report underscored the importance of a coordinated planning process and a long-term strategy for transitioning to a fully-fledged blue economy. The report emphasised the need to remove bottlenecks and constraints in resource exploitation while advocating for a systematic assessment of the natural capital inherent in the BoB.<sup>48</sup>

For Bangladesh, economic development is not just about increasing GDP; it is also about creating a sustainable framework for inclusive growth. This involves modernising existing industries, developing new ocean economy sectors, and integrating into global value chains. There is a pressing need for government policies that incentivise investments in technology and innovation, particularly in sectors that can harness the Bay's resources efficiently. Such policies should focus on enhancing infrastructure, streamlining regulatory processes, and fostering partnerships between the public and private sectors. By doing so, Bangladesh can unlock the full potential of its maritime assets and transform its economy into a competitive and globally integrated hub. Moreover, regional connectivity plays a vital role in economic development. Bangladesh's position as a transit hub between South and Southeast Asia can be leveraged to boost trade, facilitate the movement of goods, and create new market opportunities. Strategic investments in ports and transportation networks are essential for improving logistics and reducing trade costs. These investments would not only enhance Bangladesh's economic prospects but also contribute to regional integration and cooperation, making the BoB a vibrant corridor of economic activity.

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<sup>47</sup> S. K. Paul, "Maritime Non-Traditional Security Threats against the Blue Economy: Collaborative Approach of Maritime Agencies in Bangladesh," *Bangladesh Journal of Public Administration* 31, no. 01 (2023): 47–67.

<sup>48</sup> Syed Ershad Ahmed, "Blue Economy for Bangladesh's Sustainable Development," *The Daily Star*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/blue-economy-bangladesh-sustainable-development-3523101>.

#### **4.4 *Security and Regional Stability as Imperatives***

While economic development remains paramount, ensuring security and stability in the region is equally critical for Bangladesh. The security challenges faced by Bangladesh are complex and multifaceted, ranging from conventional maritime threats to non-traditional challenges such as cyber-security, environmental degradation, and transnational crime. The BoB, despite its relatively peaceful history compared to regions like the South China Sea, is not immune to the emerging security risks posed by the shifting geopolitical landscape.

Historically, the maritime boundaries in the BoB have been relatively well managed, with disputes between India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar being resolved through international arbitration, largely thanks to proactive initiatives by Bangladesh.<sup>49</sup> This cooperative approach has fostered a positive environment for building a regional community, enabling the creation of forums such as BIMSTEC. However, the re-emergence of intra-regional conflicts, most notably the enduring Rohingya crisis, has the potential to destabilise the region and hinder the process of regional integration. Continued instability in Myanmar, for example, the current presence of the Arakan Army in Rakhine state, leads to unpredictable security threats that could spill over into neighbouring countries, further complicating the security architecture of the Bay.

#### **5. *Strategy of Bangladesh: Minimum Risk, Maximum Benefit***

Given the strategic importance of the BoB, it is imperative that Bangladesh adopts a proactive stance in shaping regional security dynamics. This includes engaging in multilateral security cooperation with neighbouring states, strengthening maritime surveillance and defence capabilities, and participating actively in regional security forums. By doing so, Bangladesh can not only protect its own interests but also contribute to the collective security of the entire BoB region. The challenge, however, lies in balancing national priorities with regional obligations, a task that requires careful diplomacy and strategic foresight.

Bangladesh has already adopted a balancing approach to deal with the matter of BoB for a prosperous Indo-Pacific and BoB. One of the core tenets of Bangladesh's foreign policy is fostering peaceful and inclusive rise. By participating in key regional organisations and promoting multilateralism, Bangladesh seeks to harness collective benefits for economic growth while minimising the risks of over-dependence on any single nation or geopolitical bloc. Bangladesh's diplomatic

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<sup>49</sup> C. Raja Mohan, "The Bay of Bengal in the Emerging Indo-Pacific," Observer Research Foundation, Last modified May 12, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-bay-of-bengal-in-the-emerging-indo-pacific>.

strategy is that it avoids unnecessary confrontation, aligns national interests with global norms, attracts foreign investments, and capitalises on regional opportunities. Additionally, the interim government has shifted towards a diversified diplomacy, focusing on strengthening relations with neighbouring countries, including Pakistan, to balance its foreign policy. This strategic recalibration is particularly significant, as it enables Bangladesh to retain its strategic autonomy while mitigating the risks that arise from over-dependence on India. This strategic balancing act also reflects Bangladesh's desire to maintain its domestic development goals while participating in global and regional forums. For instance, Bangladesh is looking to be a sectoral dialogue partner in ASEAN.<sup>50</sup> The country is also focusing on achieving substantial economic growth through multilateral cooperation, aligning its interests with organisations such as the BoB Initiative for BIMSTEC, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) framework. Despite these existing policies, several policy directions for Bangladesh can accelerate the 'minimum risk and maximum benefit' approach in an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific environment.

### **5.1 Formulating a Comprehensive National Maritime Strategy**

Scholars highlight that great-power rivalry has narrowed the strategic space for smaller littoral states, and Bangladesh's lack of a unified maritime framework increases its vulnerability. Besides amid increasing geopolitical rivalry, Bangladesh's balancing acts may go to be challenging to pursue in the future. To address this, Bangladesh should develop a National Maritime Strategy that integrates security priorities, blue economy goals, and diplomatic engagement. Such a strategy would streamline interagency efforts, guide long-term resource management in the maritime domain. It would also enhance strategic predictability, improve crisis preparedness, and reduce the risk of Bangladesh being drawn into zero-sum rivalries among major powers.

### **5.2 Expanding Diversified and Issue-Based Partnerships**

Scholars have argued that smaller Indo-Pacific states benefit most from diversified cooperation rather than alignment with any single major power. Bangladesh's existing balancing approach provides a solid foundation for this, but future conditions will require even more flexible and issue-based engagements. Accordingly, Bangladesh should deepen cooperation with a broad group of partners—including India, China, Japan, the European Union (EU), and the United States—

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<sup>50</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, *Bangladesh Seeks ASEAN's Support to Become Its Sectoral Dialogue Partner* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: June 09, 2024).

based on sector-specific needs and opportunities for sustainable gains. Priority areas include maritime domain awareness, climate adaptation, high-quality infrastructure development, technology transfer, and digital innovation. At the same time, sustained participation in BIMSTEC, IORA, and ASEAN-led mechanisms will be essential for reinforcing multilateralism, strengthening regional norms, and ensuring that Bangladesh remains embedded within a broader cooperative architecture.

### **5.3 *Strengthening Sustainable Blue Economy Development***

Research on blue economy governance indicates that Bangladesh's maritime potential including offshore energy, fisheries, shipping, and logistics, cannot be fully realised without overcoming technological, financial, and environmental constraints.<sup>51</sup> Bangladesh should therefore prioritise climate-resilient investments and enforce strict environmental and social safeguards in all coastal and maritime projects. Strengthening regulatory oversight, promoting innovation in marine resource management, and supporting community-centred livelihoods will be vital for sustaining long-term economic benefits. These measures would not only reduce ecological risks but also limit strategic vulnerabilities by ensuring that external investments align with Bangladesh's national interests and environmental commitments.

### **5.4 *Enhancing Institutional Capacity for Maritime Governance***

To implement these strategic priorities effectively, Bangladesh must strengthen institutional capacities across maritime agencies, research institutions, and regulatory bodies.<sup>52</sup> This includes improving interagency coordination, investing in modern surveillance and monitoring systems, and expanding training programmes to build technical expertise. Strengthening academic and policy research on maritime issues will further support evidence-based decision-making and enhance Bangladesh's ability to anticipate emerging challenges. A more capable institutional ecosystem would also improve Bangladesh's bargaining power in negotiations with external partners and enable the country to manage its maritime domain with greater autonomy and strategic confidence.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research has analysed the geopolitical interests of key players in the Indo-Pacific, namely the US, China, India, and Japan, and the challenges

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<sup>51</sup> Tahsina Khan and Md Mehedi Hasan Emon, "Exploring the Potential of the Blue Economy: A Systematic Review of Strategies for Enhancing International Business in Bangladesh in the Context of Indo-Pacific Region," *Review of Business and Economics Studies* 12, no. 02 (2024): 55–73.

<sup>52</sup> Khan and Emon, "Exploring the Potential of the Blue Economy".

faced by Bangladesh to understand possible ways forward. First, while the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific policy was focused on countering China by strengthening partnerships, its strong emphasis on India risked sidelining Bangladesh's hopes for a balanced and peaceful regional order. Going forward, a more inclusive US strategy that recognises the strategic importance of Bangladesh and other smaller Indo-Pacific countries beyond just India and China is essential for encouraging long-term stability, economic growth, and cooperation in the BoB. Secondly, China's investments in port facilities, logistics hubs, and energy projects across the Indo-Pacific aim not just to secure trade routes but to create a network of strategic dependencies. These developments have allowed China to expand its presence around the BoB, surrounding it with various projects. While these projects bring connectivity and economic benefits, they also raise concerns among regional countries about China's growing influence that might translate into long-term strategic control. Thirdly, India has responded to China's regional expansion by deepening its partnerships, exemplified by its growing alignment with Mauritius and the evolution of its SAGAR policy into MAHASAGAR, which seeks to extend India's leadership role in the Indo-Pacific and prevent dominance by any single country, particularly China. This would be challenging for Bangladesh to balance Sino-Indian geopolitical interests. Fourthly, Bangladesh aspires to become a "sparkling trading nation," closely linked with Japanese FDI and advanced technology, that offer critical support to reach the goal. However, for Bangladesh to realise this vision, it must reform policies, improve the investment climate, and develop a skilled workforce capable of meeting emerging economic demands.

Therefore, the BoB has witnessed increased competition from the US, China, and India, each pursuing different strategic goals. This competition threatens to weaken the regional cooperative framework, leaving smaller states like Bangladesh marginalised. The moment for greater regional integration risks being lost as external powers prioritise their own agendas, pushing smaller countries' interests aside and reducing chances for shared development. But the geopolitical rivalry is further complicated by non-traditional security threats affecting Bangladesh's maritime interests, such as the need for investments in deep-sea resource exploration, sustainable extraction techniques, and resolving financial and technical challenges. Infrastructural constraints also hamper Bangladesh's ability to fully utilise the Bay's natural wealth and potential. However, some recent diplomatic changes may not be fully reflected due to the fast-changing geopolitical situation. Limited access to detailed data means reliance on secondary sources, which might have gaps or biases. Domestic political shifts in Bangladesh's interim government have also made it difficult to identify long-term trends. Certain areas, like environmental impacts, technology transfer, and local social effects, have not been covered in detail, which can be addressed in future studies.

Nevertheless, this study has recommended that Bangladesh needs to adopt a pragmatic strategy to ‘minimum risk, maximum benefit’ by focusing on four key areas, due to contemporary development in domestic politics and geopolitics in BoB. First, it should develop a comprehensive national maritime strategy that unifies security, economic, and diplomatic goals to manage rising great-power rivalry effectively. Second, the country should expand diversified, issue-based partnerships with multiple regional and global powers tailored to sectoral needs, while actively engaging in multilateral platforms like BIMSTEC and IORA to strengthen regional cooperation. Third, Bangladesh must prioritise climate-resilient and sustainable blue economy development by investing in technology and enforcing strict environmental safeguards to ensure long-term resource sustainability and reduce dependence on external actors. Finally, enhancing institutional capacity for maritime governance through better coordination, research, and expertise will empower Bangladesh to assert its strategic interests and negotiate confidently in the evolving geopolitical environment.