

Connectivity and Cooperation: The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific Region

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Summary

Our planet Earth is an Oceanic planet in which all the oceans are connected. Sea power and the ability to keep the sea lanes open with unhindered passages remain key to development as well as in enabling persuasive or extractive power over others. The vast volume of trade was historically conducted across the sea lanes, and this is even more relevant today. Since the early 1970s, the locus of competing power play has shifted to the Indian Ocean. The Indo-Pacific narrative of today is at the centre stage of global discourses. In this context, we see the rising emergence of the Bay of Bengal in the continuing competition or contestation for control of sea lanes and the reviving importance of the region for global trade and development.

The growing importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the deepening interest of various competing powers – external and internal to the IOR – are indicative of the burgeoning centrality of the Bay of Bengal’s historical legacy as an important bridging region and a facilitator of connectivity for economic and civilisational progress and development. Therefore, Bangladesh’s geolocation at the apex of the Bay of Bengal lays upon it great responsibilities as a facilitator and connector between regions and, indeed, between competing powers. Bangladesh’s critically important role in recent times in reviving regional connectivity that has global significance is contextually explained in the Indo-Pacific narrative of today.

Our Oceanic Planet

The Indian Ocean, the third largest ocean in this configuration, by virtue of its geographical location, is sometimes referred to as the ‘Great Middle Bay’. It has become a dominant global geopolitical and economic force and arena for contestation in the 21st century. Its geopolitical importance is dramatically increased by its gaining centrality in global trade, industry, labour, environment and security issues. The Bay of Bengal, in turn, is a central and pivotal part of the Indian Ocean. It is the largest Bay in the world, measuring 2.17 million kilometres in area¹ and may well be viewed as the ‘central bay’ within the ‘Great Middle Bay’, which is the Indian Ocean.

Viewed from this perspective, what we refer to in our discourses as the Indo-Pacific and, within that, the Bay of Bengal, is located at the epicentre of this oceanic planet. Significantly, an important American strategic thinker in the late 19th century, Alfred Thayer

¹ International Institute for the Law of the Sea, “About Bay of Bengal, Facts and Maps”, 11 February 2023, <https://iilss.net/about-bay-of-bengal-facts-and-maps/>.

Mahan,² had presciently posited that after his times, whoever controlled the Indian Ocean would dominate Asia.

Colonisation resulted in the European powers competing for access to resources and new domains as markets overseas, far from their native shores, conducting extensive trade with or economically exploiting those regions, mostly using the sea lanes. Their quest for extractable resources and markets was essentially enabled by sea power. Successive colonial powers – the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British – used the sea lanes to foray into the IOR to establish colonies in the 18th and 19th centuries. British colonial power asserted itself the most using this newfound sea power. By 1900, Britain had turned the Indian Ocean, by their ability to dominate the sea lanes, virtually ‘into a British Lake’.

Admiral Mahan strategically foresaw the importance of the oceans for nations when he famously enunciated:

“Let us not shrink from pitting a broad self-interest against the narrow self-interest to which some would restrict us....Let us start with the fundamental truth, warranted by history, that the control of the seas, and especially along the great lines drawn by national interest or national commerce, is the chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations. It is so because the sea is the world’s great medium of circulation....”³

Mahan’s logic was derived from his perception that Britain had wrested world power status in the 19th century primarily from establishing dominance on or a monopoly of the seas. Maritime commerce involved the exchange of finished products for the supplies and raw materials extracted, either by extortion or under the agreement, from the overseas domains – the basic tenet of colonialism. This could only be secured by ensuring a command of the seas, whether in war or peace. He concluded that it is sea-borne commerce that makes a nation great. From this hypothesis, he posited and advocated forcefully that the United States (US) should have a navy second to none to acquire great power status.

Mahan’s strategic philosophy at that time was primarily for the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and coal as the main energy source. However, the discovery of vast oil reservoirs in the Persian Gulf-Arabian Peninsula regions at the turn of the 19th or early 20th century gave increasing pre-eminence of oil over coal as a fuel for industrial development and growth. The Indian Ocean, inevitably, catapulted to centre stage in recent times, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal and its command of the gateway to Persian Gulf hydrocarbon resources.

“It is only since the beginning of the 1970s that the Indian Ocean and its littoral states, which belong predominantly to the Third World, have begun to take on the characteristics of a major political region. The main factor

² Lieutenant-General Prakash Katoch, “Sea and Space Power”, *Net Edition*, 14 November 2020, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/sea-and-space-power/> and Amrita Jash, “India’s Ocean: The Story of India’s Bid for Regional Leadership by David Brewster”, 2015, pp. 466-467.

³ Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, US Naval Historian and Strategist, *Army & Navy Journal of London*, January 1898.

contributing to this development was the assertive global strategy of the two superpowers (the US and the Soviet Union)...Conflicts with their origin outside the area (East-West and Sino-Soviet)...spread to the Indian Ocean Area....”⁴

Applying the Mahan paradigm exponentially enhanced the importance of the Indian Ocean, progressively since the 1970s in the 20th century and now well into the 21st century.

The Indian Ocean: Relevance for Global Trade, Energy and Food Security

Today, over 90 per cent⁵ of global trade, by volume, uses sea routes. Notably, over 80 per cent of global maritime oil trade crosses the Indian Ocean. Over 95 per cent of China’s trade with the Middle East, Africa and Europe transits the Indian Ocean, while India’s total maritime trade is over 95 per cent, by volume, and 70 per cent, by value.⁶

The IOR states hold more than 58 per cent of the world’s proven oil and over 46 per cent of the world’s gas reserves.⁷ The Persian Gulf, globally, emerged as the most important source of crude oil. The eastern African coast on the Indian Ocean also emerged as another major petroleum frontier. The seabed beneath the Timor Sea and the Bay of Bengal also contains substantial hydrocarbon (petroleum and gas) reserves. The competition between India and China over access to Myanmar’s offshore gas fields is partly attributable to the same compulsions.

The Northern Indian Ocean constitutes a key passageway in global east-west-east trade. Maintaining an unimpeded flow of crude oil from producing to consuming countries in the IOR and across to other oceanic regions through gateways or chokepoints is a *sine qua non* for all major, middle or minor powers. Hence, the likelihood of strategic competition spiralling into active contestation is an underlying danger that all need to avoid.

The Indian Ocean also contains non-energy renewable and non-renewable resources. Fisheries and minerals are the most commercially viable resources. Since more than a billion people globally rely on marine fish as the main source of protein, this adds strategic value to this oceanic region which hosts 45⁸ per cent of the world’s fisheries and accounts for 15.5 per cent of total global fish catch.⁹ Increased production is sustainable, according to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, provided the member states of the region the opportunity to undertake concerted measures for enhanced fisheries

⁴ Dieter Braun, *The Indian Ocean—Region of Conflict or ‘Zone of Peace?’*, Wissenschaft Stiftung und Politik, Munich, Hurst 1983, p.5 .

⁵ Ocean and Shipbuilding, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, <https://www.oecd.org/ocean/topics/ocean-shipping/#:~:text=The%20main%20transport%20mode%20for,can%20create%20economic%20value%20added.>

⁶ Ports and Shipping, Invest India, <https://www.investindia.gov.in/sector/ports-shipping>

⁷ Rupert Herbert-Burns, “Energy in the Indian Ocean Region: Vital Features and New frontiers, British Petroleum Statistical Review of World Energy, June 2011”, in *Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime Security and Policy Challenges*, David Michel and Russell Sticklor (eds.), Stimpson Center, July 2012, p. 88

⁸ Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) information page on Fisheries Management of the IOR as a priority and focus area, <https://www.iora.int/en/priorities-focus-areas/fisheries-management>.

⁹ The World Factbook, CIA, US, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>.

cooperation, improving the management of common resources and greater efficiency in the fight against IUU fishing (illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing).¹⁰ The seabed also contains an abundance of golf or tennis ball-sized polymetallic nodules¹¹ containing nickel, cobalt, iron and manganese, and polymetallic massive sulphide deposits that contain gold and greater copper, all of which exponentially increase the strategic value of these waters.¹² Coastal sediments along many coastlines of this ocean contain titanium and zirconium, mainly off South Africa and Mozambique; tin placer deposits, off Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia; and zinc and copper ore in heavy mud in the Red Sea.

Extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean are primarily the US, the United Kingdom (UK), and France, which still have island possessions; the European Union (EU) and Japan, which have declared their interest in this increasingly important region. China, which has for quite some time since the latter half of last century and increasingly in the current century, declared its ambitions of being viewed as an Indian Ocean power through promulgating and embarking on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the possibilities of resurgent Korea and recent statements and moves by Taipei also place them in the category of contending external powers with interest.

Among the Indian Ocean regional powers with large naval forces are South Africa (potentially an Atlantic power), India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran, Singapore, Bangladesh and Australia (a Pacific power). The external powers with growing interest in the IOR – also the principal Pacific powers – are the US, China, Japan, the two Koreas and possibly an awakening Taipei. The UK and France are other external powers foraying into this region with varying degrees of demonstrating robust interest. Jockeying for comparative and competitive advantage has led to a kaleidoscopically changing alliance-like configurations, primarily the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also called the Quad), AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) and now an Anglophobic US-UK-Australia with nuclear capabilities of various kinds.

Strategic Importance of the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean

Within the IOR, the Bay of Bengal is regaining historically critical importance again as an economic highway for commercial shipping routes between the eastern and western hemispheres. About half the world's container traffic passes through this region,¹³ while its ports handle approximately 33 per cent¹⁴ of world trade. This may be expected to increase exponentially, with Bangladesh poised to assume a lead role soon, considering the draft capacity it is developing to handle the growing volume of the high-tonnage ocean-going

¹⁰ FAO's Indian Ocean Commission's Regional Fisheries and Aquaculture Strategy (2015-2025), <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/3665124b-630c-40c3-8ddc-bb505fbae15c>.

¹¹ Ibid; and Mineral Commodity Summaries, US Geological Survey, <https://www.usgs.gov/centers/national-minerals-information-center/mineral-commodity-summaries>.

¹² Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Earth Science, "Polymetallic Nodules Programme", 12 December 2012, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=90533>.

¹³ Anu Anwar, "Positioning the Bay of Bengal in the Great Game of the Indo-Pacific Fulcrum", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, US Air Force Journal, 1 April 2022.

¹⁴ Ibid.

container and oil-gas tanker vessels, as may be gauged from a routine glance of the major ports in this Bay:¹⁵

Table 1: Drafts of some important ports of the Bay of Bengal/Indian Ocean region

Singapore	17.8 metres (Port of Singapore Authority)
Chennai	18.6 metres (Chennai Port Authority)
Colombo	18 metres (Sri Lanka Ports Authority)
Haldia/Kolkata	8-11 metres (World Port Source)
Mongla	8.50 metres (Mongla Port Authority)
Chittagong	9.5 metres (Chittagong Port Authority – enhanced to 10 metres)
Payra	9.5-10.5 metres (Maritime Gateway, citing port authorities)
Matarbari	16-18.5 metres (Under construction, likely to be fully operational by 2026)

Sources: See Footnote 15.

Kyaukphyu, south of Sittwe on the Arakan coast of Myanmar, under construction by China, ambitiously aims to have a draft capacity of 20 metres at high tide and 10 metres at low tide,¹⁶ enabling China to access to the Bay of Bengal and through it into the Indian Ocean.

According to research conducted by the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research in 2011, 124 political conflicts were recorded in the IOR – more than a third of the conflicts worldwide. These conflicts were directly related to the fiercely rising flows of commerce, investment and people; the IOR being a primordial artery for carrying Persian Gulf oil, a principal conveyor belt for international coal trade (with India and China being the highest consumers) and a major source of global thermal coal exports, a conduit for swelling migrant labour flows and remittance flow and, increasingly, a fount for new oil and gas discoveries in South and Southeast Asia.

The Bay of Bengal and the Shaping of the Bangladeshi Perspective

Bangladesh has its own perception of the region, derived from its historical legacy as part of the greater pre-partitioned Bengal of the historical, civilisational Indian subcontinent. Its location at the apex of the Bay of Bengal, which derives its name from ancient Bengal, confers a special locational advantage not just in the Bay of Bengal region but also, very importantly, as a hub of connectivity linking the Western and Eastern hemispheres and the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Oceanic regions. From time immemorial, travellers between West and East would find in the Bay of Bengal – the largest bay in the world and the middle bay in the Indian Ocean – a welcoming, safe harbour. These overseas travellers established numerous trading posts and settlements along the coastline of the Bay of Bengal, from Sri

¹⁵ <https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ports/290?name=SINGAPORE&country=Singapore;> [https://www.chennaiport.gov.in/content/port-details;](https://www.chennaiport.gov.in/content/port-details) [https://www.slpa.lk/port-colombo/terminals;](https://www.slpa.lk/port-colombo/terminals) [http://www.worldportsource.com/ports/review/IND_Port_of_Haldia_3509.php;](http://www.worldportsource.com/ports/review/IND_Port_of_Haldia_3509.php) [http://cpa.portal.gov.bd/;](http://cpa.portal.gov.bd/) [https://www.maritimegateway.com/payra-port-welcomes-deep-draft-vessels/;](https://www.maritimegateway.com/payra-port-welcomes-deep-draft-vessels/) and [https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/infrastructure/matarbari-port-development-project-approved-54286.](https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/infrastructure/matarbari-port-development-project-approved-54286)

¹⁶ Ports in Myanmar, Myanmar Port Authorities information page, [http://www.mpa.gov.mm/ports/kyaukphyu-deep-sea-port/#ports.](http://www.mpa.gov.mm/ports/kyaukphyu-deep-sea-port/#ports)

Lanka to Indonesia and, thence, on through the Malacca Straits to Singapore, the gateway to the Pacific. Its southern limit may be described by the line drawn from the southernmost extremity of Sri Lanka across to the north-western tip of Sumatra.

In undivided Bengal, Kolkata (Calcutta) was the capital of the Bengal Presidency of colonial British India. Between 1905 and 1911, during the first Partition of Bengal, Dhaka became the capital and Shillong the summer capital. Bengal Presidency was the largest and most prosperous of the three presidencies through which the British ruled and administered colonial India. Its superbly integrated network of connectivity using the rivers, railways and roads economically integrated the Bengal Presidency and drove its prosperity. However, tragically, the Partition of 1947 overnight severed all connectivity linkages.

The Strategic Importance of the Bay of Bengal Ports in Colonial Times

It was the British who first attributed the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, and particularly the Bay of Bengal, by setting up their 'British chain of pearls', with upgrading and developing ports from Karachi in the west, traversing down to Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai); around Cochin (Kochi) to Vizag (Vishakhapatnam), Puri, Calcutta (Kolkata), Narayanganj and Chittagong (Chattogram); via Rangoon (Yangon) in Burma, Penang and Kuala Lumpur in Malaya through the Straits of Malacca to Singapore, their major entrepôt. The Calcutta-Dhaka ports had stood at the very heart of the chain of ports (coastal and inland) and, by virtue of their geolocation, served as the fulcrum of the British colonial trading route through the Bay of Bengal, facilitating the extraction of wealth from their overseas colonial possessions as well as for marketing British finished products from their industrial and manufacturing bases in Britain. For the British and other competing European powers like Portugal and France, and Holland, who forayed into these regions, the control of the sea lanes connected by these ports was vital to their control of the greater IOR as well as economic prosperity.

Just as the discovery of rich hydrocarbon deposits in the early 20th century had spurred the shift in the strategic gaze of the colonial powers competing and jostling with each other for access to and control over these strategic resources, the more recent discovery of large hydrocarbon deposits in the Bay of Bengal region has served to shift the gaze of the competing 21st century neo-super colonial powers to this region and increased its strategic importance. The presence of large reservoirs of hydrocarbons, oil and gas in the Bay of Bengal and some of its littorals, significantly commencing with Sumatra in Indonesia as well as in Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and Brunei, spurred Dutch colonisers into the formation of Royal Dutch Shell. The factors that helped to shift the gaze eastwards to this region were rapid impetus from technological innovations in this industry, enabling extraction of these resources from offshore areas, fluidity of political developments and deterioration in political stability and security in the Persian Gulf and Central-West Asia regions, continuing turbulence in the West Asian region's socio-political environment (Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria and the Levant), China and India's rise as global powers in growing fierce competition. All these played into the geopolitical and commercial calculus of the US, EU, Japan and China, all vying for regional hegemon spot. The increasing interest in exploring and exploiting the Antarctic's still virgin territory in the quest for new strategic resources

enhances the Indian Ocean's importance of being the connector with the Southern Ocean of the Antarctic.

Bangladesh has acquired strategic importance and increasing interest in recent times by dint of its transformation from being contemptuously described as a "basket case" in 1971 to attracting riveting attention from others as an aroused Asian Tiger today. With almost 40 per cent of its 165 million population between ages 15 and 45 years,¹⁷ it has a youth dividend that properly tapped into lends it a huge advantage. It is already a medium Human Development Index (HDI) country, with a total HDI value of 0.661 (2021), ranking 129 out of 191 countries (United Nations Development Programme), compared to India, ranking 131, Pakistan 161 and Afghanistan 180 in the same list.¹⁸ It has demonstrated better performance than most other South Asian countries, where the regional value is 0.632.¹⁹ Hydrocarbons – existing and potential – add to Bangladesh's strategic value. Bangladesh has coal, oil and gas, but these are grossly insufficiently explored.

Bangladesh also defies global expectations and predictions by doing the unthinkable. Its construction of the almost seven kilometre-long Padma Bridge over the Padma, Ganges – one of the most turbulent and fiercely unmanageable rivers in the world after the Amazon – has shattered several glass ceilings in the way of thinking about the country abroad and, more importantly, within Bangladesh. The Padma Bridge, at six kilometres across, is the longest and only bi-level bridge in Bangladesh and the deepest bridge in the world. While China's Railway Major Bridge Engineering Group was the lead contractor, many sub-contractors were local, imparting confidence in the indigenous ability to undertake any mega project. This bridge exponentially enhances connectivity within the country and intra-regional connectivity in eastern South Asia, reducing distance and cost.

Bangladesh, having demonstrated itself as one of the fastest-growing economies in the last decade, today is no longer an inconsequential country.

Bangladesh as the Champion of Regional Cooperation: Awakening a Sense of a Bay of Bengal Community?

Bangladesh has consistently punched above its weight, displaying vision and bold initiatives for fostering regional cooperation in South Asia that puts larger powers in the region to shame. It played a leading role in the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. Subsequently, frustrated by the almost total lack of meaningful progress of SAARC, it led to table the proposal for sub-regional cooperation that resulted in the formation of the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1997. The SAGQ initiative relapsed into dormancy but Bangladesh's robust attempts with bold visionary leadership and imaginative diplomacy led to its reincarnation as the Bangladesh-

¹⁷ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Preliminary Report, *Population and Housing Census, 2022*, <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/site/page/47856ad0-7e1c-4aab-bd78-892733bc06eb/Population-and-Housing-Census>.

¹⁸ United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report Country Data, 2020-21, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) intergovernmental cooperation in 2015. Mercifully, although facing many hiccups, the BBIN initiative has demonstrated significant progress in its attempts to revive severed multi-modal connectivity. Bangladesh has palpably demonstrated its willingness to revive and reassume its historically important role as a hub of connectivity. It has proved its credentials as a bulwark against terrorism and fundamentalism. Bangladesh's continuing and future prosperity depends more than it imagines on the Bay of Bengal.

India's 'Act East' policy aims to link South Asia with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) 'Look West' aspirations and dovetails with Bangladesh's own growing interests. This realisation and appreciation of each other's complementarity in the larger connectivity ambitions of both resulted in the dramatic upswing in Bangladesh-India relations since 2009, provided the critical steppingstone for forging forward, enabling both to meaningfully work together in consonance to ensure their connectivity aspirations to be fulfilled. It made it possible to forge forward with many old projects and dreams that had become moribund because of dormant missing links between South Asia and Southeast Asia. The identified South Asian Road Corridors, viz, SAARC Corridor 4: Kathmandu (Nepal)-Kakarbita (Nepal)-Panitanki (India)-Phulbari (India)-Banglabandha (Bangladesh)-Mongla-Chittagong (Bangladesh); SAARC Corridor 8: Thimpu (Bhutan)-Phuentsoling (Bhutan)-Jaigon (India)-Changrabandha (India)-Burimari (Bangladesh-Mongla/Chittagong); Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project: Mizoram (Hmawngbu/Mobu)-Moreh (Myanmar); and Asian Highway 2: Northeast India-Myanmar are in the process of being made operational once again, despite lurches, stop-and-go interruptions. Bangladesh has requested to be a part of the contemplated India-Myanmar-Thailand highway. A critical enabling factor would be for Bangladesh and Myanmar to get their relations right.

However, the current internal instability within Myanmar and the fact that over a million Myanmar Rohingyas have been driven out of their homeland and forced to seek refuge in Bangladesh has become a serious impediment to some, if not all, these projects, stalling them. Bangladesh and Myanmar are the western and eastern spans of the land bridge connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia. Right now, the two spans of this land bridge are in flames where they meet, and these flames need to be doused quickly, without further delay. Continuing instability inside Myanmar will lead to unpredictable security threats arising that will not leave any of the surrounding countries untouched and may even result in BIMSTEC finding itself, like SAARC in South Asia, lying comatose in the regional intensive care unit.

Of the South Asia rail corridors, quite significant progress has been made within eastern South Asia. Operationalising the Kolkata-Agartala route will shorten the distance from 1,590 kilometres to 550 kilometres.²⁰ When the new additional railway line on the Padma Bridge is completed and commissioned in early 2024, the route will be further shortened and the

²⁰ "Reach to and from Kolkata and Agartala in 10 hours, new rail line to connect Bangladesh and WB", *The Times of India*, 18 May 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/destinations/reach-to-and-from-kolkata-and-agartala-in-10-hours-new-rail-line-to-connect-bangladesh-and-wb-/articleshow/64220223.cms>.

travel time reduced to about 3.5 hours,²¹ making travel easier and faster, and the cost of goods cheaper and accessible more quickly. However, the South Asia-SEA rail corridor of 4,430 kilometres (Kolkata-Ho Chi Minh City corridor), envisaged in the original United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Trans-Asian Railway, is hostage to difficulties in the geomorphological challenges in terrain as well as the political instability in Myanmar.²²

Inland waterways are the arterial connectivity route most in consonance with the geomorphology for this deltaic region. Both India and Bangladesh embarked on reviving their national waterways, and these are being linked at the borders with the active support of international lending agencies, particularly the World Bank, towards transforming the respective national waterways into sub-regional waterways, linking the lower Brahmaputra Basin network (Arunachal-Assam-Meghalaya-Bangladesh). It is considered feasible to revive the Bhutan-Assam-Bangladesh link as well. If revived, the Ganges Basin network will reconnect Nepal, India and Bangladesh once again.

Coastal shipping and direct maritime shipping agreement, disrupted during the Partition, between India and Myanmar, and India and Bangladesh are now being contemplated for expansion under BIMSTEC, transforming these current strictly bilateral agreements into a truly subregional arrangement. Air corridors, however, remain very inadequate.

Similarly, an integrated energy and power trade corridor is feasible since, bilaterally, power grids between Bhutan and India, Bangladesh and India, and India and Nepal currently exist and are operational. However, they subject to bilateral constraints. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi have recently inaugurated the first oil pipeline between Northeast India and Bangladesh – another glass ceiling shattered that could be the harbinger of similar pipelines for transmission of liquified petroleum gas or liquified natural gas as well. Linking these separate bilateral grids into an integrated sub-regional grid would provide collective energy security through symbiotic interdependence and exponentially transform the economies of the entire sub-region. However, this will require the political will of the member states to work in concert with boldness and far-sighted vision.

Considering all these developments described above and contrasting with what did not exist a decade and a half ago and was even unthinkable, do we dare contemplate slowly expanding current cooperation to embrace larger regional horizons now, like a Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation (BoBEC) regional framework?

²¹ “New Padma Bridge will shorten Dhaka-Kolkata travel time: Railway officials”, *Bangladesh Live News*, 19 June 2021, <https://www.bangladeshlivenews.com/en/bangladesh/details/new-padma-bridge-will-shorten-dhaka-kolkata-travel-time-railway-officials>.

²² Ganeshan Wignaraja Peter Morgan and Mike Plummer, *Connecting Asia, Infrastructure for Integrating South and Southeast Asia*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK, 2016, <https://www.think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/6494/adbi-connecting-asia-infrastructure-integrating-south-southeast-asia.pdf?sequence=1>.

Towards Greater Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Regions in the Age of ‘Neo-Super Colonialism’

If the creation of the Westphalian order triggered the era of colonialism, dominated by competing European great powers, the fall of the colonial powers at the end of World War II heralded the rise of two new superpowers, triggering what may be described as the beginning of the era of ‘neo-super colonialism’. Lesser or middle powers must define their strategies of survival and thriving without being crushed by any of the super giants that dominate the world today. Just as earlier European colonial powers had used the method of ‘divide-and-rule’ over their subjugated colonised subjects, what we witness today is the deployment of the same analogous tools by the neo-super colonialists who now dominate the global power play, dividing nations of the world against each other in an analogous manner.

The IOR is a vast oceanic region, home to many competing, and some contesting and even conflicting visions. Efforts to engender and foster cooperation with the 22-member Indian Ocean Region Association (IORA) continue, but real progress is still somewhat unremarkable, even elusive. If our gaze pans beyond the limits of the Indian Ocean to also embrace the vast region of the Pacific Ocean and contemplate Indo-Pacific cooperation, it poses additional challenges, particularly spawned by current shifting geopolitical configurations and shifting power balances.

The Bay of Bengal is an integral part and virtually at the centre of the Indian Ocean that is the Great Middle Bay in our Oceanic planet. Just as the perception of slow movement or outright failure of SAARC prompted the efforts at sub-regional cooperation within SAARC, efforts that have met with reasonable, if not outstanding, measure of success so far as described above, perhaps a similar sub-regional approach would make the larger overarching cooperation within IORA more successful. The Bay of Bengal embraces a vast geo-spatial area and is home to over a quarter of the total global population. A nascent BoBEC configuration would embrace the greater part of SAARC and a significant part of the ASEAN region, forming virtually a bridging Bay of Bengal community of nations – as may be seen from Table 2.

Table 2: Who could comprise the BoBEC?

Countries	Population (2022) Millions (World Population Review)*	Total Coastline Kilometres)**	Current Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (2022) Million \$ (WB)***	GDP Growth (2022) Annual % (WB)****
A. Core Littoral States				
Bangladesh	171.186	580	460.201	7.1
India	1,417.173	7,000 (combined east and west coasts)	3,385,089.88	7.0
Indonesia	275.501	54,716 (combination of all islands)	1,319,100.22	5.3
Malaysia	33.938	4,675	406,305.92	8.7
Myanmar	54.179	1,930	59,364.36	3.0
Sri Lanka	21.832	1,340	74,403.58	- 7.8
Thailand	71.697	3,219	495,340.59	2.6
Sub-total of A	2,045.506		5,740,064.75	
B. Adjacent States with Interest (ASEAN)				
Cambodia	5.975	443	29,956.77	5.2
Laos	98.186	0	15,724.38	2.7
Singapore	7.529	193	466,788.54	3.6
Vietnam	16.767	3,444	408,802.38	8.0
Sub-total of B	128.457		921,272.07	
C. Adjacent States with Interest (SAARC)				
Bhutan	0.782	0	2,539.55	4.1 (2021)
The Maldives	30.547	644	6,189.87	12.3
Nepal	0.523	0	40,828.25	5.6
Sub-total C	31.852		49,557.67	
Grand Total of A+B+C	2,205.815		6,710,894.49	

Sources:

* <https://worldpopulationreview.com/>** <https://www.worlddata.info/>*** <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>**** <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>

The Political Economy of a Probable Bay of Bengal Community

Tabulating from Table 2 the Bay of Bengal countries, comprising such an imagined economic community, would account for a population of over 2.2 billion people and an aggregated gross domestic product (GDP) of nearly US\$7,000 billion (S\$9,297 billion), ranking it fourth in the global economy after the US (US\$ 25,462,700.00 million²³ [S\$34 trillion), China (US\$17,963,170.52 million²⁴ [S\$24 trillion]) and the EU (US\$16,641,391.92 million²⁵ [S\$22.6

²³ "National Accounts Data, and OECD National Accounts Data", The World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

trillion]). Given their comparative advantage in population, demography and demonstrated entrepreneurial vigour, imagine what the future of a Bay of Bengal community could be. The major superpowers have competing narratives of self-promotion and projection that come and meet and compete (and may even clash) in the Bay of Bengal through the two GDP prevailing narratives – the Chinese BRI and the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. The Bay of Bengal region, of which several countries boast the fastest growth rates, is still a dispute-free maritime region, and all Bay of Bengal states are members of IORA. Most, if not all countries of this sub-region have, if not aspiring to equally good relations with the competing superpowers, would be loath to be drawn into taking sides with one against the other. Perhaps, the Bay of Bengal countries can collectively transform their shared commons into a mediating and reconciling space.

However, the Bay of Bengal countries do not yet have a self-conception of themselves forming a cohesive community. If nothing else, all the countries need to collaborate and examine the several ecological threats (notably marine plastic, a growing dead zone and depleting mangrove forests) to ensure that they have a sustainable blue economy that can be harvested for their collective well. If the Bay of Bengal littorals could evolve towards such self-perception comprising a Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation Association that could then organically evolve into a Bay of Bengal Community, replicating the European Economic Community and ASEAN evolution, possibilities for prosperity for all the littorals would be almost limitless.

Can the Bay of Bengal countries try and arrive at a regional governance framework for this microcosmic entity of the oceanic commons that could be applied elsewhere? Bangladesh may be expected to be a pro-active player in fostering greater Bay of Bengal economic cooperation, geared to larger Indo-Pacific linkages through actively espousing greater multi-modal peaceful connectivity, greater trade and economic and social development of peoples and avoiding conflict of any nature. It has played such a leadership role in trying to promote and foster such cooperation, albeit on a much smaller scale, not merely in its own self but in the collective regional interest that will complement and enhance its own sense of security. After all, it is situated at the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific.

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