

# MARITIME SECURITY OF BANGLADESH: STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES

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## Abstract

*In terms of policy destiny, Bangladesh remains committed to a peaceful course, however, the strategic pathways require delicate, even calculated managing. Its maritime policy is largely geared towards meeting the developmental challenges it faces. The maritime security of the country is indivisible from the overall insecurities it confronts. It is, therefore, imperative for Bangladesh to strategize the policy, both internal and external. A credible security system, encompassing both land and maritime, can only be assured by democratic continuity and consensus. Deficits manifested in such areas must be overcome if Bangladesh is to play a credible regional maritime role and enhance its maritime clout regionally and internationally. The paper analyses maritime security concerns of Bangladesh and its evolving oceanic policies from a strategic vantage point. Towards such an end, it reviews the strategic analytical tradition from a maritime perspective and identifies the relevant approaches in this context. It then highlights a conceptual design encompassing applicable notions that look pertinent. The conceptual blueprint is then used for analysing the evolving pattern of the nation's maritime policies in terms of strategy and a secured developmental destiny. The nation's maritime insecurity concerns, both traditional and non-traditional, are reviewed; appraisals are also made of threat perceptions as well as perceptual interests, touching on its maritime clout. The findings of the paper are then summarised, with reflections on the emerging nature of the nation's maritime policies and the prospects that are offered.*

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## Introduction

Bangladesh gained accreditation as a maritime nation following successive international verdicts vis-à-vis Myanmar and India (2012/2014) in the contentious maritime claims by both the neighbours. The country's marine space now consists of 200 nautical miles of exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and a continental shelf extending up to 354 nautical miles, with sovereign rights on all living and mineral resources.<sup>1</sup> This constitutes a huge accomplishment. Until then, the country was spatially lodged in about 56,000 square miles of landscape for over 160 million people. For a nation-state in its current space, land, and aquatics, it is imperative for Bangladesh to be attentive towards conceptual barriers and bounds in light of emerging trends of maritime-strategic and security studies.

For Bangladesh, with its tumultuous past, it augurs well that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has led the nation towards amicably realising its due maritime rights. In doing so, she has fulfilled what was embarked upon and envisioned by her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, adorned as *Bangabandhu* ('Friend of Bengal'). She equally upholds the zeal required to pursue the nation's maritime objectives, going often around the country's coastal belt with a view to prompt all stakeholders towards securing the maritime gains. Since the verdicts, many of the nation's key stakeholders, including the Bangladesh Navy (BN), seem increasingly alive to the opportunities offered to and the challenges faced by the nation in consolidating the maritime gains.

However, the loftier dream of transforming the country into a 'trade-transit hub' and '*Sonar Bangla*' (Golden Bengal), as envisioned by the nation's founding father, cannot be attained without ensuring a sustainable maritime policy framework towards harnessing the marine resources for national development. Such a framework has to be backed up by strategic appraisals and a careful scrutiny by specialists in maritime fields. The country has to grasp the elements required to secure the vast sea now under its domain. A national awareness also

has to develop mirroring the nation's maritime destiny. Indeed, the policies have to evolve in line with the nation's strategic aspirations. The following questions arise in this context:

- What strategic interests does Bangladesh have in its newly acquired maritime space?
- How does the country conceptualise its strategic directions in terms of policy, strategy, and security for optimising its national maritime interests?
- What are the plausible threats that might constrain the nation's policy vision?
- What policy responses can be visualised to allay concerns, mitigate perceived threats, or identify elements of national interest?

This calls for unremitting maritime appraisals by concerned specialists and wider participation by all key stakeholders. The objective must be to advance a national maritime policy framework and chart a secure destiny. In this milieu, Bangladesh can ill-afford to lag behind. Being in a critically situated strategic maritime neighbourhood, it must appraise the multiple security concerns of diverse nature. Resource-wise, the aspects of exploitation and utilisation of everything in the newly acquired maritime territory also necessitate appraisals and warrant adoption of considered policy options towards the much cherished sustainable development.

Both Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal attracted a surge of analytical interest in recent years. Analysts have touched on a range of aspects, including projection of economic gains, geographic and strategic concerns,<sup>2</sup> geostrategic environment and significance,<sup>3</sup> and geopolitical and geo-economic impacts.<sup>4</sup> The emerging transnational and major powers' interests go beyond the Bay of Bengal and broadly encompass the entire Indo-Pacific zones and the

emerging sea lanes along both the oceans. The Bay of Bengal itself, located at the intersection of the expanding zones of strategic interest of China and India, is seen (like its Pacific 'twin', the South China Sea) as a key transit zone between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the main route for trade in energy to East Asia.<sup>5</sup> Whilst all the foregoing aspects are linked to pertinent geo-maritime and strategic-security issues, as well as developmental aspirations and ecosystem concerns, the credence of maritime Bangladesh and its consequent needs of policy synchronisation become even sharper. However, lacunae exist in the continuity of analytic dimensions and in conceptual linkages.

Key to strategic appraisals of relevant maritime concerns is an assessment of those notions pertinent to identifying conceptual frontiers and revisiting the challenging issue areas. It will then be helpful for the country to envisage how to overcome the strategic and security challenges facing the state in the maritime field. The next section of the paper reviews the strategic maritime analytical tradition and identifies the relevant approaches. Section three underlines a conceptual blueprint encompassing relevant notions that are applicable in Bangladeshi context. Section four utilises the conceptual design for analysing the evolving pattern of the nation's maritime policies in terms of strategy and a secured developmental destiny. The conclusion sums up the findings and reflects on the emerging nature of the nation's maritime policies and the way forward.

### **Strategic maritime approaches: Analytical tradition**

The challenges facing maritime-strategic perspectives are diverse. It is imperative, first, to reflect on 'maritime security'. The word 'maritime' now is a buzzword worldwide but it is a multifaceted field. The dimension of 'security' adjoins further complexities. Maritime studies represent an interdisciplinary field of academic pursuits. It takes in a new generation of scholarship from a wide range of disciplines with a variety

of interests—not bypassing the service professionals. It takes in diverse linkages from the military and naval defence, as well as economic development. It entails the resilience of seafaring and coastal populations as a starting point but envelops the destiny of all others in a nation whose interests, lives, and livelihoods are tied to its maritime destiny.<sup>6</sup> The maritime challenges faced by Bangladesh are entwined, encompassing all sectors perceptible in their overall manifestations.<sup>7</sup> Such sectors need to be understood in terms of both ‘security’ and ‘strategy’ for meaningful policy interpretation and action-planning.

In maritime affairs, as in strategic studies, conceptual ideas have evolved over millennia, but the maritime-related concepts merit focused attention. As an accredited maritime state, it is essential for Bangladesh to endow itself conceptually with a view to ensuring that the nation moves in the right direction towards optimising its maritime interests. Indeed, managing the ever-changing natures and interdisciplinary challenges of maritime sectors demand a complete understanding of the special characteristics of the nation’s current maritime space. The operations of ports, infrastructures, trade, and ships—both present and future—entail complexities. These include sea-transport/marine/shipping services within and beyond the uniquely crisscrossing coastal belt of the country. All these necessitate naval and coast guard maritime security operations. There is also the economic significance of business/trade requirements and the inherent security vulnerabilities of regional/global maritime trade. All this requires an adaptable understanding of concepts relevant to maritime-strategic and security phenomena, including defence, development, diplomacy, and similar fields.

Strategic studies originated in Asia. Sun Tzu (544–496 BC), the classical Chinese theorist, pioneered the field. He envisaged knowledge, strategic planning, judicious analysis, and wisdom as the keystones for a

mature policy. For attaining strategic objectives, he called for staying focused on policy ends.<sup>8</sup> Chanakya/Kautilya, the legendary Indian theorist (350–283 BCE), articulated the *mandala* doctrine of interstate relations. His notional ‘ideal kingdom’ was the centre of a circular *mandala*, consisting of 12 levels of concentric circles. For the ‘ideal kings’, Kautilya had set the traditions and virtues, specifying how to transact with each other amidst the layer they belonged to in the *mandala* construct. Metaphors like ‘*enemy’s enemy*’/‘*neighbour’s neighbour*’ is ‘*friend*’ are images his name conveys. The strategic facets of the ‘ideal king’ like gift, bribery, illusion, and show of strength whilst dealing with the neighbours are also manifested in his writings.<sup>9</sup>

Modern strategic thinking owes its genesis to the realist Prussian theorist Carl Von Clausewitz (1780-1831). In his masterpiece *On War*, he emerged as an exponent of absolute war. He saw war as the “continuation of politics by other means.”<sup>10</sup> His contemporary, Antoine-Henri Jomini (1779-1869) viewed war in its ensemble, *not* as “a science, but an art.”<sup>11</sup> Jomini’s works seeped into the maritime thoughts of the renowned exponent of sea power like the US naval specialist Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840 –1914).<sup>12</sup> His works over the years had an impact on the versatility and speedy global expansion of the US maritime power.

Amongst the British theorists, Julian Stafford Corbett (1854-1922) was the leading maritime exponent. Winston Churchill commended his works as ‘best accounts’.<sup>13</sup> Analysing theory and conduct of naval war and methods of command and control, Corbett stressed both limitations and scale of naval power in the national strategy. He emphasised coordination between land and naval strategy and considered defensive maritime strategy not only possible but sometimes prudent even for the UK, a major maritime power. The concept of a ‘blue water navy’, now widely used, did not feature in his works, but controlling lines of

communications with presaged role of naval power was his strategic priority.<sup>14</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart (1895–1970), another eminent British strategic thinker, did not specifically address maritime strategy as is associated with the ‘blue water navy’, but his military thinking, focused on ‘grand strategy’, has drawn the interest of maritime specialists in the reflective debate of the 1930s whether Britain should adopt a continental commitment or instead adopt a ‘blue water strategy’.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the evolving maritime-strategic analytical framework, a more focused perspective of strategy, security, maritime security, perceptions of threats and interests, spheres of influence/interest also warrants elucidation.

### **Strategy**

‘Strategy’ is a contested concept rooted in the Greek word ‘*strategia*’, meaning ‘generalship’.<sup>16</sup> Clausewitz relates it to ‘war’. He sees strategy as “the art of the employment of battles as a means to gain the object of war.”<sup>17</sup> Corbett pleaded for devising a *strategy* that would protect national interests. He focused on the perceived enemy and advocated manoeuvres for tactical advantage, with priorities placed on aspects of politico-economic and financial dimensions of waging war. Technological facets and material aspects of war also found weight in his strategy, so did the sustained efficiency in battle whilst preserving costly assets. He also differentiated between ‘major strategy’ and ‘minor strategy’: the former he saw as a branch of statesmanship dealing with the nation’s total resources, including all the disciplined services and diplomacy, seen as parts of one force; whereas the latter is more tactical in nature to him, which has for its province the plans of operations.<sup>18</sup>

Liddell Hart, a Clausewitzian, differed with his mentor’s equation of strategy. He defined strategy as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy.”<sup>19</sup> However, strategy no longer presages solely military means. It is widely used in contemporary contexts of business, development, diplomacy, and socioeconomic analysis. To attain such ends, as a prelude to victory, he sought to evade

direct confrontation, yet disrupt the perceived enemy's psychological-physical balance stressing diplomacy, movement, flexibility, and surprise. He viewed all this as a tonic for business and political planning.<sup>20</sup> Strategy thus emerges as the relevant means by which policy is implemented. He also introduced the notion of 'grand strategy' or higher strategy—more akin to Corbett's 'major strategy'—viewing it as 'policy in execution'. The objective is to establish and maintain peace. The notion of 'strategic' in this context becomes pertinent, as it enables its use in framing various methods for employing cultural, informational, diplomatic, military, socioeconomic, and political means towards attaining the objectives.<sup>21</sup>

All such concepts constitute the framework of strategy and hence may be applicable when required to attain the objectives in view. The vocabularies of policy, grand/higher strategy, strategy, and tactics, thus, form part of a strategic continuum. Both strategy and tactics represent facets of the same coin; tactics constitute the lower part of the spectrum, though. Indeed, he even sees the object of war as "a better state of peace."<sup>22</sup> His avowed emphasis on keeping peace as policy object and adjusting the means to the objects echoes Sun Tzu's insistence on policy ends. Thus, Liddell Hart's delineation of strategic domain sounds systemic for defence professionals, academia, and to all policymakers engaged in both security and governance. In decision-making, however, Corbett's view of 'major strategy' (i.e., grand/higher strategy that is reserved for statesmanship to ensure the security of national interest) and 'minor strategy' (a tactical area for security operations) should be kept in view.

### **Maritime security**

The concept of 'security' gets entwined with 'strategy' in maritime affairs, as in other contexts of military defence or peacebuilding. The former refers to a condition, the latter conveys a process; both are dynamic multidimensional concepts. Geopolitical considerations have their direct/indirect ramifications on maritime security objectives and interests, which bring into focus the conventional/traditional concerns of state security affecting maritime affairs, inclusive of perceptual issues relevant to the identification of threats and interests. However, 'maritime security' needs further illumination because it is a familiar expression



mainly with the maritime community. It refers to the security of maritime-geographic space, i.e., sea/ocean, with features dissimilar when compared to land. The location of such threats, often identified as non-traditional security, has an impact on the way states and non-state actors' security is affected. It has come into usage following 9/11 and subsequent terrorist and counterterrorist operations at sea. These included the surge of piratical attacks in the Strait of Malacca (2001-2004) and then Horn of Africa (2007-2012). Since then, specialists from related disciplines have been addressing the related issues from geostrategic, military, legal, and several other dimensions. Maritime security interests result in a practice, projecting security beyond their external boundary into the global maritime domain.<sup>23</sup>

However, there is no built-in architecture of security applicable in all cases. It can only be understood in the context in which it is used. In Bangladesh context, maritime security has been brought into view since the international verdicts. The milieu, thus, has emerged to project and protect the maritime interests of the country. It is for the specialists, however, to work out its appropriate relevance. Maritime security presently is often exhorted in a range of national policies concerning the maritime geography of every other nation. Such policies cut across the marine coasts, as well as territorial and open seas. All these serve as determinants of developmental aspirations and ecological concerns, resource and wealth creation, interstate and neighbourly affairs, and regional and international relations.

Several approaches are thus applicable in a matrix to assess maritime security in its relation to other relevant concepts. The webs of notions include brown, green, blue, and golden economy, marine safety, the projection of sea power, and business/trade buoyancy.<sup>24</sup> Second, the conceptualization of a security framework enables an insight into the developing nature of maritime threats or how these

can be perceived. There may also be follow-up contentious claims entailing disparate interests and divergent ideas, which need unfolding. Finally, there is the security practice theory that enables the analyst to identify what political players do when they make endeavours to enhance their respective maritime security.<sup>25</sup> All these constitute elements of a coherent framework that may enable the mapping of maritime security and charting the strategic course for effective policy action.

Strategy and security, therefore, get entwined: the former draws in the policy process. It deconstructs as part of a holistic process the insecurities or threats at all operational levels of armed/defence services, with whatever political, military, economic, and cultural ramifications. Strategies, after all, are the modes or means through which security objectives are achieved. Thus, security emerges as the end, whereas strategies provide the means. Approaches from security studies can illuminate the meaning of maritime security for players of different mindsets.

Strategies of mapping the meaning of maritime security are introduced, which, in Bangladesh context, seem urgent. Strategies are the modes or means through which the nation's security objectives would have to be achieved. Seen thus, security is the end or the condition, and strategies provide the means. Security arguably sets the form, but it may be combined with a strategy to set the contours of national security strategy of a country like Bangladesh. The maritime strategy has its direct bearing upon both national security and national strategy. The maritime/naval strategy consists of the set of principles that govern a maritime war. National strategy is conceptually a

sum-total of national interest encompassing the political, military, diplomatic, economic, commercial, cultural, regional, and international facets of the nation's strivings in regional and international relations.<sup>26</sup>

Security, whether military or developmental, works at all different levels: national, bilateral, sub-regional, regional, and international. There may be differences between theory and practice, as well as between cooperative or positive and negative security. There are various concerns, however, from developmental to ecological/environmental to business/trade to organisational to human security, and so on. The key objectives in every case must be to overcome the multiple challenges of insecurity and advocate effective policy measures or programmes of action aimed at achieving the nation's objective vision.

Thus, managing the ever-changing nature and interdisciplinary challenges of the maritime sector demands a complete understanding of the special characteristics of the nation's current land and maritime space. Conceptually, the concerns and questions relevant in this context include issues related to multi-dimensional aspects of peace, security, and strategy, national security and national maritime strategy, ecological and ecosystemic security, economic and developmental security, and national security. Such policies cut across the marine coasts and the open sea, perceived as a determinant of developmental aspirations and ecological concerns, resource and wealth creation, interstate and neighbourhood relations, as well as regional and international relations.

**Threat perceptions**

There are close interconnections between concepts of security and strategy on the one hand and threat perceptions on the other. Threat perception has a vital role in theories of diplomacy and functioning of interstate relations. Thucydides, the classical Greek scholar, required threat appraisal prior to policy action to balance against a power with threat potentials.<sup>27</sup>

The terms, 'threat' and 'perception' merit exposition. Threat perceptions are referred to in deterrence and balance of power contexts.<sup>28</sup> Conceptually, there is also 'perception' and 'misperception' of threats.<sup>29</sup> Threats do not explicitly speak for themselves, as a threat is mediated by the perception of the target, with the variance between what is perceived as threatening and what the evidence of intentions and military-strategic capabilities mean. Perception is the process of comprehending by means of the senses and recognising and interpreting what is processed.<sup>30</sup>

Threat perceptions are likely to be complicated by sets of variables, including 'status dilemmas' of the 'security seekers', changing the balance of power and the attendant difficulty the sender faces in making commitments credible to the perceiver, institutional interests, political culture, and violation of norms, etc.<sup>31</sup> Signalling and threat perception also become more difficult when motives are difficult to read because of the workings of the confronting security dilemma and the strategic decisions/actions that might be appropriate or required.<sup>32</sup> Being situated in a sensitive maritime neighbourhood, where the major global power players are set to play off each other in a strategic gambit, Bangladesh

needs to be watchful of every move of the contending strategic players.

However, threat perceptions need not be confined to state or similar type of corollaries. Bangladesh has multifaceted ecosystemic threat potentials. It needs to be alert about threats emanating from extensive hazards of nature: climate change, natural hazards, and seismic-quakes are increasingly called 'security' problems, as these impact upon the role of the state in development and peacebuilding. These often undermine the capacity of states to provide opportunities and services required for sustaining people's livelihoods. Security concerns also arise out of the vulnerability of local places/social groups to such occurrences in terms of their livelihoods and the possibility of violent conflicts among them.<sup>33</sup>

#### **Perception of interests**

Along with threat perceptions, Bangladesh, like all other countries, should also take into cognizance the perception of interest: the essence of national decision-making in the areas of strategy and security, or alternately, their ramifications on diplomacy and foreign policy prerequisites pre-emption of any kind of euphoria. Interests can be vital or non-vital, though vital interests have their major impacts on strategic formulations in maritime affairs, as in diplomacy/foreign policy. In such contexts, there are 'no eternal allies' and 'no perpetual enemies'. Only "the interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests" ought to be the shibboleth or guideposts for the policymakers to follow with moderation and prudence.<sup>34</sup> This spirit represents what Morgenthau viewed as power or

political realism that governs socio-psychological relations between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised. Politics appear more of an art than a science; mastery required in the realm is not just the reasoning of an engineer but also the wisdom and the moral potency of a statesman.<sup>35</sup> Again, the interests perceived ought to be relevant and identifiable in terms of geo-maritime, geopolitical, geoeconomic, geopolinomic, or ecosystemic concerns of the country itself, not governed by those of others.<sup>36</sup>

Succinctly, previews of the strategic imperatives of maritime security of a country like Bangladesh suggest that those are of interweaving nature, as specified underneath:

- Since maritime security is inextricably linked to the overall insecurity concerns of the state in terms of perception of threats and interests, so are the processes required in maritime strategy; and
- Since sustainable maritime development prerequisites an integrative approach of strategizing the policy agenda, so are the processes required in attaining the objective of peace and concurrent drives toward development and socioeconomic harmonising.

The following could be identified as action points for pursuing maritime strategy and peace/developmental objectives:

- Locate and trounce the perceived security threats or risks in relation to the state;
- Secure the nation from the emerging threats to the perceived interests;
- Identify strategic/tactical steps needed to secure those interests;
- Keep in view the shared threat perception whilst pursuing interests;
- Spot and prioritise the interests in terms of up-and-coming threat perceptions, whether geo-maritime, geopolinomic or ecosystemic concerns;

- Circumvent euphoria, adversary image/perception and/or personal dimensions whilst pursuing national maritime interests;
- Be vigilant about achieving the objectives that may be at risk; and finally,
- Focus on the levels of policy and stick to the strategic contours chosen, coupling with fine-tuning of the tactical preferences.

### **Strategic maritime security concepts:**

#### **A schematic model**

In the backdrop of the preceding strategic appraisals and analytical exposition of those concepts that are imperative, it is pertinent to chart a framework for analysing the emerging pattern of policies in the context of the strategic maritime situation facing Bangladesh. The objective is to underline those key concepts that are relevant to maritime policy formulation, governance, and effective decision-making at all levels in Bangladesh.

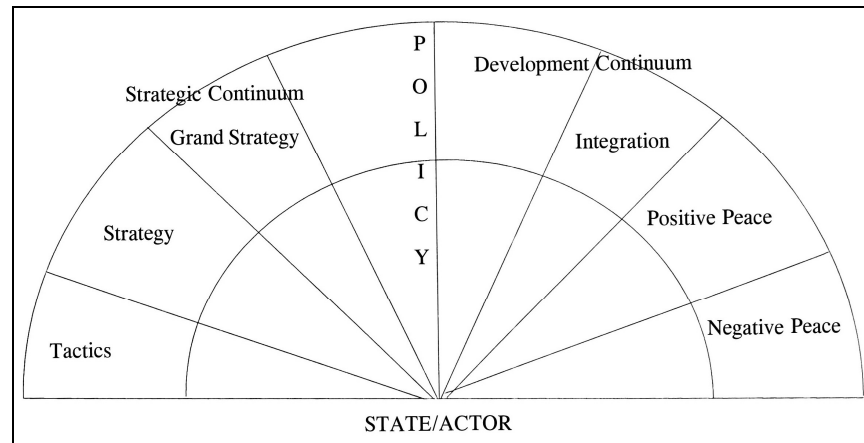
International maritime politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. National maritime policies of a country like Bangladesh have to evolve keeping in view the conceptual parameters, as appraised. Being in the unique context of its present maritime situation, Bangladesh does need an insightful conceptual framework for maritime policy planning and concrete actions to secure and enhance its maritime interests. But for all that, it has to keep in view the cross-functional nature of strategic prerogatives, institutive skills, and actions of wide-ranging nature required on the part of policymakers at all relevant levels of maritime decision-making. Similarly, concrete follow-up actions must be tagged all along at the levels of the marines and navigators, technocrats and engineering community, and businesses and traders concerned.

Chart 1 below identifies the state/actor levels of aspirations horizontally—from right to left, whereas policy levels are represented perpendicularly—top-down and vice versa. The half-globular twin direction of policy continuums, viz., *strategic continuum* and *development*

*continuum* are oriented towards shaping state's policy; such continuums may emerge correspondingly via strategic tracks (tactics, strategy, and grand/higher strategy), whereas the *development continuum*, may shape itself via peace routes (negative peace, positive peace, and integration) eventuating a momentum towards sustainable development. The idea inherent is to empower the state to choose the direction and outlook of policies at an appropriate level of options that may be required for implementation. The model thus contemplates a two-track policy dance of the state, but it ties together the notional combines and tags a mix of strategic thinking focused on levels of strategies, named *strategic continuum* (on the left) and then labels of state insecurities in a *development continuum* (on the right).<sup>37</sup>



**Chart 1: Schematic model of strategic analysis: Development continuum and strategic continuum<sup>38</sup>**



The foregoing two alternative, albeit interrelated, frames of continuums seem relevant for analysing the strategic situation in Bangladesh: the *development continuum* represents a peace paradigm that is applicable in Bangladesh context of its aspirations towards national development; whilst the *strategic continuum* represents a paradigm oriented towards managing/overcoming the challenges/situations of conflict. To sum-up, the model thus envisages a concurrent dual process—applicable towards strategizing policy ends of Bangladesh:

- A *strategic continuum* to beat the looming challenges through tactics and strategy—geared to attain the grand/higher strategy—moving towards reaching the pinnacle of state policy;
- A *development continuum*—moving from conflict to positive peace through negative peace towards integration, catered to reach the peak of the nation's developmental vision.

The framework largely borrows from Liddell Hart and Corbett, whose holistic thoughts concerning strategic processes and peacebuilding seem more akin to and are apt towards a step-by-step approach for attaining the objective ends of the policy of Bangladesh. It

also keeps in view the wiser strategic angles laid down by Sun Tzu and others, whereas Mahan made it relatable to the maritime affairs. The model combines strategy with development. Both are viewed as integrative continuums of state's policy pursuits: strategy without a peace and developmental objective is likely to be nihilist, whilst there can be no peaceable outcome without a malleable strategy. A framework such as this takes into cognisance the challenging courses lying ahead for a maritime nation such as Bangladesh. In both continuums, the objective is to reach the eventual policy end.

The framework, thus drawn, should help identify the nation's maritime destiny and steer it in choosing from the strategic options of its decisions at different maritime levels towards policy formulation/coordination and action-planning. Concurrently, it may also help select the levels of investigative analysis, whilst providing guidelines as inputs for research and policy advice.

### **Strategic maritime policies of Bangladesh:**

#### **Direction and outlook**

The strategic direction and outlook of Bangladesh's maritime space necessitate a considered preview of its strategic situation, inclusive of challenging realities at both national and regional/global levels. Naturally, the relevant strategic formulations have to consider policies encompassing geopolitics, geo-economics, or geopolinomics/geo-maritime contexts. Such blends of consideration are meant to enlighten all concerned about the maritime security objectives and strategic actions required. These include requirements for freedom of the seas and good governance at sea and attend to developed maritime geopolitical visions, aimed at securing adjacent and distant maritime spaces that will impact positively on the nation's maritime security. Furthermore, contributing to global maritime governance may well 'hide' more 'realist' policy agendas in the form of a justification for power and forces

projection beyond one's legal zone of competencies.<sup>39</sup> What cannot be hidden behaviourally by maritime states is the directions of policy in terms of either development continuum (negative peace, positive peace, integration) and/or strategic continuum (tactics, strategy, higher/grand strategy).

Maritime security intrinsically is a mix of strategic/security concerns, as it intends to project power both within and beyond the nation's frontiers, around the regional/global maritime domain. Quite often, these are identified as traditional security, i.e., those connected to military/naval strength and protection from external threats like coercive behaviour, aggressive incursions, attacks, and wars, etc., with a focus of security on the state. There are then non-traditional insecurity concerns such as ecology, environment, and human security where the focus shifts from the state to the effects on individuals, human and natural, or ecosystemic surroundings. Such non-conventional concerns of security recognise other aspects of insecurity, which are non-military in nature, socioeconomic, ecological and transnational in scope.

The schematic framework, shown above, manifests Bangladesh's need to be attentive to strategic/security concerns, both traditional and non-traditional, whilst being focused on enhancing its maritime interests in the newly acquired aquatic space. Over the last 45 years, Bangladesh did make strides in various fields of national development. The maritime gains, however, are more recent and require both conceptual planning and concrete policy actions in development, diplomatic, and strategic frame. For a country that has earned its independence through a struggle and underwent a tortuous course of history since its birth, it is not

easy to develop courses of development and strategic continuums that would be fitting and easily harmonise all the policy aspirations in both traditional and non-traditional areas of concern, given the sensitivities around its neighbourhood. Yet, some appraisals of the strategic trends are discernible.

### **Policy direction**

In the aftermath of its liberation, war-wrecked Bangladesh sought to dedicate itself to the task of rebuilding and chose a *development continuum*. It presaged embracing a *peace paradigm* that was framed and left behind by the nation's founding father ('friendship with all, malice towards none'). He himself practised the paradigm for ensuring the nation's sustained development, even though he had infinitely suffered during Pakistani period and the Bengalis went through a brutal process of the Liberation War. His strategic motto carried no semblance with either Clausewitzian or Kautilyan idioms; rather his chosen strategic policy route was to guarantee the nation a secured future by building a *Sonar Bangla* that could only be grasped by clinching a development continuum. Such an idealised policy dimension is more akin to Sun Tzu.<sup>40</sup> The processes towards such a policy destiny required an absence of conflict and violence and passing through phases of positive peace and integration before reaching the ultimate policy destiny. However, he also saw the looming processes of conflict and violence that gripped the nation since the days of the Liberation War, which needed to be trounced, moving through into a state of *negative peace* (i.e., absence of conflict) and then ultimately reaching the phases of positive peace on to integration through sustained development. All this was to enable the country to reach the state of positive peace, leading finally to integration and sustainable development.

The entire pedestal of policy aspiration was laid in the overall maritime contexts. The nation's maritime aspirations were concretised in the vital legislative piece 'Territorial Waters and Maritime Zones Act, 1974' and initiated a process of maritime dialogue with the contending neighbours. For a land-scarce country, such an envisioning was of multidimensional import. Conceivably, it took into account the country's population density, which might plausibly be alleviated by a planned

utilisation of possible gain in aquatic marine space, enabling an effective exploitation of maritime resources and/or building a viable oceanic economy.

For all this to materialise, the country needs to take proper policy planning towards the much-envisioned dream of '*Sonar Bangla*'; this forms the pinnacle of its policy aspiration. The driving process of development towards the end, as invoked by the country's founding father, is to transform Bangladesh into a 'trade-transit hub' or 'Switzerland of the East'. The strategic process was predicated upon 'connectivity', enabling Bangladesh to build bridges across the neighbourhood and the Muslim world and getting closer to the pinnacle of its development continuum.

Subsequent regimes, though critical of the pattern of politics set by the nation's founding father, did adhere to his developmental and peaceful policy motto. However, Sheikh Hasina, after her assumption of office, fully embraced her father's policy legacy, especially focused on maritime concerns that brought immense gains to the nation. The newly acquired maritime possessions have indeed, for the first time, significantly bestowed the country with wider openings to the world beyond. Bangladesh, with its maritime possessions, remains firmly wedded to peaceful development. It has taken a resolute position against conflict in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. It carries a legacy of resolving maritime concerns with the neighbours peacefully. Therefore, it can credibly call upon other countries to follow the "path of cooperation and collaboration, not competition and conflict" to tap into the full potentials of the region.<sup>41</sup>

However, keeping in view any possible situational adversity in an unpredictable world order, the nation must also be vigilant ('the price of liberty') and remain prepared for an alternative option of a 'strategic continuum' indicative of the pathways that may have to be substituted to surmount any adverse situation. Whilst Bangladesh remains wedded to a

vision of peaceful development in formulating its strategic policy, it cannot but be alert about the adversities, including militancy and terrorism. Hence, it has opted for means to beat such vices.<sup>42</sup> The strategic framework also has to keep in view the policy objectives, i.e., grand/higher strategy, strategy, and tactics Bangladesh puts in perceptual terms of threats and spheres of interests whichever notions seem relevant.

#### **Direction of grand strategy**

Bangladesh, a Bay of Bengal coastal country, is directly associated with the sea and its resources. It could not harness its resources earlier due to non-delimitation of the maritime boundary with the neighbouring countries. All that changed after the successive favourable verdicts that enabled Bangladesh to assert its sovereign rights over the living and non-living resources of the Bay of Bengal exclusively, and also to lay claim to sovereign rights on all living and mineral resources of the Continental Shelf extending up to 354 nm. For making such rights effectual, the country has adopted the key concept of 'blue economy' as a grand strategy, since it believes that as a coastal country this "could usher in a new horizon" for its economic advancement through utilisation of the sea and marine resources and could significantly contribute to the country's socioeconomic development. The rationale for such a conceptual embrace include the following elements:

- A historical awareness that the countries that utilised the sea and its resources became economically more prosperous than others;
- The seaborne nature of the fast-growing Bangladesh economy, which is currently export/trade-led and further streamlining towards achieving the nation's growth vision;

- A concern that the fish and other living and non-living resources in its maritime boundary/under the seabed and water column, which could contribute greatly to its economy, may remain unexplored or lost to others;
- Ensure protection of the ecological balance, including that of the Sunderbans and of marine environment and biodiversity of the Bay of Bengal, and
- Energise a sustainable course of development through utilisation of the existing natural and mineral resources in the Bay of Bengal and its adjoining areas.<sup>43</sup>

The BN's strength has been geared up as a potent force, as epitomised in its 'Forces Goal 2030'. The maritime-strategic outlook took into account, as the prime minister stated, the country's geo-strategic location and protection of its maritime space and resources, given its land-resource limitations.<sup>44</sup> Being in a sensitive neighbourhood, Bangladesh has also sought to co-opt support from major maritime powers, including the neighbouring giants, India and China.

#### **Strategic maritime security: Traditional concerns**

With the international award of a large chunk of the Bay of Bengal, it has emerged as Bangladesh's 'third neighbour'.<sup>45</sup> It is the world's largest bay; yet it is just a bay, *upa-shagar*, as the Bengalis call it, the soft underbelly that is bound up with the aquatic flow beyond the Indian Ocean (*Sagar*), world's third-largest ocean.<sup>46</sup> Again, this huge stream adjoins the world's largest Ocean, the Pacific, making up the entire marine chain, called Indo-Pacific Ocean.

Seen from the traditional security-strategic context, the Bay of Bengal—the northern extension of the Indian Ocean—is the most significant spatial phenomenon in the political and economic sense. Since its significance is packed with a geopolitical-strategic frame in the

current context of regional-global rivalries, it could emerge as an area of very exceptional concern. The key geophysical reality is that the Bay of Bengal has been of major anxiety not only for Bangladesh but also for both India and Myanmar. Due to security-strategic reasons, both India and Myanmar are equally cautious about the destiny of the Bay of Bengal under a range of circumstances.<sup>47</sup> Bangladesh itself has proved to be alert about enhancing both the capacity and manpower of the nation's maritime forces, coast guard, and BN. Efforts have been underway to enrich these forces with bases, training facilities, equipment, and supportive ships to overcome the challenges of multiple insecurity concerns of the nation.<sup>48</sup>

The Bay of Bengal has its wider strategic significance due to its central location in the region stretching from the Middle East to the South China and the Philippine Seas. That is equally true about its aviation's strategic aerial position. It lies at the dead centre of two huge economic blocs, the SAARC and ASEAN. It is accessible to China's southern landlocked region in the north and major sea ports of Bangladesh and India, the latter also having a major presence in the outlying Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The US, as the leading global actor, sees itself as a major stakeholder in the Asia-Pacific. It has held several major exercises with various Asian countries, including Bangladesh and India. It has also drawn many of its international allies in 'Malabar 2007', the largest ever wargame held in the Bay of Bengal. China has also sought to project its sphere of influence into the region through port visits and tie-ups with Bangladesh and Myanmar. There is thus little left in the presumed validity of the conceptual division between the Bay of Bengal and other Asian maritime regions. However, India's emergence as a major powerhouse may draw the Bay of Bengal to newer mental mapping as a coherent strategic region, where India has its image as a vital stakeholder.<sup>49</sup>

A shift in global strategic power rivalry away from Europe to Asia-Pacific, a steady emergence of China as a global politico-economic player, and an increasing trading/maritime activity focused on the Indo-Pacific region added to the strategic sensitivity of the entire region. South Asian sub-region forms part of all this. Added convolution to



the above is the competitive road and infrastructure planning such as the Maritime Silk Road by China, India's proclaimed cotton route, together with the developing hydrocarbon industry in the Bay of Bengal. This has led to economic, ecological/environmental, and politico-security implications for Bangladesh's position as a key South Asian maritime player. Bangladesh, now an accredited maritime nation, has a bulging population. As a trading state with its needs of shipping, transport, and navigation, Bangladesh cannot but be watchful about what goes around the Bay waters, across and beyond into the Indo-Pacific Oceans.

In this milieu, Bangladesh has been persevering to maintain harmonious ties with both the neighbouring power contenders, India and China. There is ample strategic rationale: both have a common association with bodies like Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). All countries in the groupings are likely beneficiaries in infrastructure projects such as highways and tunnel-building under the River Karnaphuly. China maintains a continuing interest in helping Bangladesh in its infrastructure projects for securing sea access for its own territories, India's landlocked areas, and for landlocked Bhutan and Nepal. It has also evinced an eagerness to help Bangladesh in building a floating oil terminal in the sea near Maheshkhali Island in the Bay of Bengal to unload imported fuel oil.<sup>50</sup> Such Chinese interest has raised India's strategic sensitivities due to its adversarial perception of China, a lingering Sino-Indian contention for primacy in Asia, and their bilateral contentious territorial claims across the Himalayan regions. India tends to view any kind of developing ties

between Bangladesh and China with some unease, apprehending that those would be to India's detriment and hamper its stakes in strategic planning as a leading global role player in the region. However, Bangladesh has been persistently committed to friendly relations with India based on mutuality, connectivity, and reciprocity.

The maritime verdicts accepted by all three countries with contentious maritime claims represent a 'win-win' product for all. It provides sufficient prospects for a cooperative destiny for all three neighbouring Bay of Bengal nations.<sup>51</sup> The maritime strategies for all three nations, seen thus, ought to be one of cooperative engagement for peaceful development and exploitation of relations between and among all three nations.

Beyond bilateral/trilateral mechanisms, there are other forums such as FAO/Global Environment Facility and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to deliberate upon mutual cooperation for the development of marine/maritime resources and resolving security concerns. The countries remain pledged to strengthening cooperation for 'security and prosperity' of the region.<sup>52</sup>

However, with the events in the South China Sea zone, including a row over the competitive artificial island-building and a follow-up competitive naval build-up in the wider Indo-Pacific region, there still remain areas with potential for maritime conflicts involving the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean region as well. New Moore, or as India calls it, South Talpatti Island, which both Bangladesh and India had claimed since the early 1980s, is now recognised as India's sea territory. The verdict has awarded India sovereignty over this disputed island, which is now under water. India also received nearly 6,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the contested zone including the area where once the island had existed. All this may have security ramifications for Bangladesh.<sup>53</sup> India may, for instance, plan artificial island-building for purposes similar to what is

happening in the South China Sea, including the setting up of air and/or naval bases. Such a possible adversarial scenario may grow in the backdrop of possible antagonism in broader relationships linking China, India, and the US.

The verdicts could also contribute towards the building of strategic partnership amongst the nations sharing the Bay of Bengal marine space. It assumes strategic significance against the backdrop of China's close ties with Bangladesh and its growing interests and activities in the Bay of Bengal region for which New Delhi may have its reservations or feel concerned. There is, however, a scope for more positive reflection: a settlement of maritime disputes between India and Bangladesh through legal means may have a restraining influence on any expansionist designs China may have.<sup>54</sup> Bangladesh may have a final point for future policy reflection: it has gained 19,467 km<sup>2</sup> in the EEZ but little of its claim in the continental shelf has been admitted, which might be a future source of contention. Contrarily, whilst India's rights over the extended continental shelf have largely been protected, Bangladesh has acquired an outlet in the continental shelf, which Dhaka insistently demanded and gained sovereign rights over all living and non-living resources in the seabed extending as far as 354 NM from the Bay of Bengal coast.<sup>55</sup>

#### **Non-traditional maritime security concerns**

Beyond the traditional threats of state-based maritime security, there has been an ever-increasing momentum of non-conventional maritime concerns causing insecurities in several areas. This originates from a conceptual division of the earth's water surface areas, using physiographic and/or geopolitical criteria.<sup>56</sup> A variety of security threats is posing danger to maritime peace and stability. Maritime terrorism has also surfaced as an omnipresent global and regional threat. Human trafficking and drug smuggling are the twin issues that have lately re-captured global attention. Piracy has emerged as one of the most worrisome maritime security challenges. All these emerging issues require a

strong commitment from all the nations of the region and beyond towards achieving their shared objectives and agreeing on a common cooperative approach to respond to the emerging challenges.<sup>57</sup>

With oceanic transport, in particular, there are spreading complexities of maritime safety and security, requiring shipping protection and protection of marine minerals and maritime resources, including all other living and non-living resources. There are also increasing phenomena of manmade threats, which include the following:

- Unregulated fishing;
- Wilful pollution through contamination and toxic waste;
- Terrorist acts, armed robberies, coercion, hostage-taking;
- Criminal trafficking of arms and weapons, as well as narcotic drugs smuggling;
- Trafficking of human and of psychotropic substances; and
- Damaging maritime/marine life environment.<sup>58</sup>

Other non-traditional areas of concerns include the following:

- Accidents;
- Transnational threats;
- Natural disasters; and
- Recurrent seismic shifts, tremors, and Tsunamis.

All such non-traditional maritime concerns hamper good governance at sea. The past few years witnessed an increase of maritime activity of the naval forces to counter such threats. Yet, further engagements seem essential to realise the full maritime potential. Enhancement of port facilities, shipping fleets, deep-sea fishing, and greater efforts for extracting marine resources are needed to ensure law and order at the sea. The sea is progressively becoming the bastion of the nation's economic system and its destiny depends ever more upon the effective and efficient use of the maritime resources.<sup>59</sup>

Such concerns call for cooperation, harmonisation, information-sharing, and such other coordinated actions within the nation's defence services, as well as between and among all maritime nations in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean neighbourhood. To perform all such actions, there are indeed a number of international/regional agencies, organisations, and entities to oversee ocean governance such as ensuring freedom of high seas, global commerce and trade, preservation of the marine environment, and equitable and sustainable exploitation of marine resources.<sup>60</sup>

For Bangladesh, maritime security, both traditional and non-traditional, has been the key policy concern since the days of the Liberation War. The BN, the key naval component of Bangladesh Armed Forces, is projected as an effective force to oversee the defence of the country's coastal belt and maritime territories. It is assigned to secure Bangladesh's maritime boundary, the defence of its harbours, military bases, and economic/continental zones.<sup>61</sup> Since independence, through the 1970s/80s, the BN adopted a steady naval equipment procurement policy. The Bangladesh Coast Guard (BCC), a naval paramilitary force, has been created as the maritime law enforcement force of the country on 14 February 1995, with a view to guarding the coastal-maritime waters. Its mission includes control over piracy and illegal trafficking, protection of fishery, oil, gas and forest resources, checking environmental pollution in Bangladesh waters and coastal areas, ensuring overall security and law and order through security assistance to sea ports, and conducting relief and rescue operation in the coastal areas during a natural calamity.<sup>62</sup>

The BN, as part of 'Forces Goal 2030', has acquired a *Limited Blue Water Navy* status with expanded naval fleet strength and capabilities to protect the country's economic-military interests at home, develop blue water economy, and enhance its regional position and peaceful image abroad.<sup>63</sup> Being an organised force now, with a three-dimensional deterrent force structure, it owns certain state-of-the-art warships, including survey vessels, fleet tankers, container vessels, and submarines. It also developed the local capability to build warships, patrol vessels, replenishment ships, and landing craft tank. All this is meant to significantly increase the length of stay of the BN ships in the deep sea. It is a frontline disaster management force in Bangladesh and also has several humanitarian missions abroad. It is a key regional player in counter-terrorism efforts and has engaged in sensitive locations for international peacekeeping. The BN ships regularly participate in exercises with other navies. A submarine base is under construction at Pekua in Cox's Bazaar and a new BN base with submarine berthing and aviation facilities is being established at Rabanabad in Patuakhali. It also has regular communication, interaction, and exercises with friendly navies, including China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore, and the US. In the process, it has gained significant experiences and improved combating capabilities (See Appendix 1).

#### **Threat perceptions: Ecosystemic**

The country's new maritime gains confer upon her added responsibilities to appraise the security predicament of its people and to fix the nation's self-destiny. This involves a deeper understanding of the causalities inherent in maritime ownership, the challenges that go with such ownership against the onslaughts of nature, and then, developing a measured sense of how to beat them. A maritime boundary generally is recognised by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to identify international waters. It includes areas of exclusive national rights over mineral and biological resources, encompassing maritime features, limits, and zones.<sup>64</sup>

All this has implications, both legal and practical. The Bay, together with the Indian Ocean, provides Bangladeshis with their life-support system, regulate the aquatic system, climate and weather, and regenerates the people with the required nutrients.<sup>65</sup> Along with defence, disaster/ecosystemic threats may be identified as the keystones of maritime security of Bangladesh. The ecosystemic threats have added a new dimension to the complexities of the evolving security milieu. The Bay is an extension of the Indian Ocean and shares many of its oceanic characteristics, including cyclones and the south-west monsoon. The Bay of Bengal countries are four times more likely to be affected by a natural catastrophe than those in Africa, and 25 times more vulnerable than Europe and North America.

Bangladesh is located at the frontline of Asia's ecosystemic vulnerabilities and natural hazards. It suffers acutely from recurring threats of multiple types. Historically, it has been a major victim of nature's onslaughts, including some of the deadliest cyclones and tornadoes (See Appendix 2). *The World Risk Report (WRR) 2013* places Bangladesh at one of the highest ranks with 19.81 per cent in the list of countries with risk of natural disasters.<sup>66</sup> Such cyclonic and tropical depressions have ecosystemic contexts. The Bay is the north-eastern extension of the Indian Ocean; both are enclosed on three sides by Afro-Asian and Australian land masses. There are also the Himalayas that hamper airflow in the north. The basin that includes Bangladesh has the warmest surface ocean temperatures because this zone lies within the tropics.<sup>67</sup> All these cause natural catastrophes along the Bay of Bengal coastal regions, particularly hitting Bangladesh's southern coastal zones. This oceanographic region also has relatively few islands and narrow continental shelves. Large rivers like the Brahmaputra (Padma) and the Ganges and their tributaries flow into Bangladesh from the northern Himalayan range and further into the Bay, carrying both sediments and polluting chemicals, adding vulnerability to the blue waters of the Bay.

Occupying low-lying floodplains and tidal plains, Bangladesh is indeed one of the largest and the most disaster-prone populous deltas in the world. Because of its unique geomorphologic-oceanic situation, Bangladesh is subject to recurrent climatic-topographical onslaughts. It is one of the tropical cyclone hotspots of the world, with two cyclonic seasons each year: May-June and October-November (as epitomised by 'Roanu', see Appendix 3).

There are also looming threats of climate change and resultant sea level rise, adding further to the vulnerabilities. Bangladesh is now even more exposed due to its legal ownership of a large portion of the Bay, which grabs parts of its lands. This, coupled with the miseries of the rise of sea level, faster ocean warming, more storm surges, and swelling of water induced by melting of the ice due to an unequivocal climate change and subsidence would make Bangladesh more vulnerable in future.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, there are projections of a ticking time-bomb of a natural holocaust and mega-thrust earthquakes that may stake lives of millions,<sup>69</sup> submerging probably one-third of Bangladesh.<sup>70</sup>

#### **Perception of interests: Strategic maritime clouts**

There are numerous corollaries for Bangladesh towards identifying its perceived political and economic interests as a Bay of Bengal littoral facing key challenges. It has maritime borders with two immediate neighbours. With its crisscrossing coastal belt, it is now open to embrace an expanded definition of neighbourliness. A direct neighbour of all Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean nations, it is also a global neighbour of all other adjoining nations in the international maritime system. It now appears as a strategic centrepiece in the global maritime rivalry. This enshrines a position of influence but also underpins responsibilities. Yet its policy must be how to capitalise on its national interest without becoming a tool in diplomatic squabbling or strategic gameplay.



Such reckoning has several dimensions. A keynote of its maritime policy must be to preserve or enhance its progressive national self-interest. But it must also take an enlightened view of how to advance regional stability and promote international peace, harmonising its own interests and common interests of all other nations involved in the maritime contentions emerging in the wider Indo-Pacific region. After all, the waves of the huge water mass, as well as the transit routes beyond, affect all aspects of Bangladesh, including people's life and living, geoeconomics and geopolitics, strategy and security, migration and Diaspora, culture and energy, business and trade, and shaping culture and outlook.<sup>71</sup>

The strategic clout of Bangladesh rests on its maritime contexts. It has especially wider openings to the open seas, being in closest proximity to the shores of other Asian countries. It is thus well situated to project its own economic clout, should it position itself persuasively to advance its marine know-how and skill, as well as technology and economic strength, and transform itself into a salient object for international business and investment. Bangladesh is no longer just an aid-dependent country. It has already emerged as a trading nation and enjoys total duty and quota-free access to Australia, Canada, the EU, Japan, and most other developed countries. It is a signatory to all the relevant multilateral/bilateral agencies, including the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). It also has institutional accords to promote and secure investment and to resolve possible disputes over matters. Bilateral agreements exist to

avoid double taxation with many countries and negotiations are also underway with many others to such ends.

However, the maritime strategic diplomacy of Bangladesh needs a realistic assessment. The Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean region attract world's major powers because of its strategic location and natural resources. With 66 per cent of the world's oil shipments, the oil arteries of the world run through the region. It has also emerged as the most prominent global economic highway, with 33 per cent of its bulk cargo and 50 per cent of the world's container traffic passing through its waters. For reasons of trade, economic competition has been growing among the major powers in securing a visible and credible presence in the region, which has combined and shaped the dynamics of the wider maritime territories, including the Indo-Pacific region. The lingering maritime territorial disputes between China and its regional neighbours vitiated regional relations. Major world powers are keen to develop new infrastructures and exhibit their strengths with naval exercises, drills, and wargames, etc.<sup>72</sup>

The wider strategic relations have been in a state of flux since the inception of the new millennium. Internationally the US has already waded into the maritime row against Beijing and has kept up its unipolar stance. Both are already embroiled in a struggle for positional advantage, influence, and interests in the Indo-Pacific region, which has emerged as the world's most dynamic geo-maritime zone.<sup>73</sup> This struggle encompasses both maritime and mainland. China, India, and the US have all exhibited their intent to turn the region into a strategic crossroads. Whereas the US has set itself for strategic 're-balance' in the region,<sup>74</sup> China sees the US as an extra-regional power with no legitimacy in dictating any terms on regional matters. However, India's regional role is beyond question, due to its geo-maritime positioning. The extent to which these powers co-exist or collide in the region could set

the agenda for global security in what many have dubbed as the 'Asian Century'. Doubtless, all three power-players seek economic affluence—China and India to develop, whereas the US, along with regional allies such as Japan, the EU, and the UK—to maintain its edge. In such a setting, conflict is not in any power's interests. A milieu such as this will require all the powers in the strategic contest to commit to mutuality, cooperative trust, and co-existence in the increasingly contested region.<sup>75</sup> In any strategic contest for positional advantage, whether in conflict or cooperative frame, Bangladesh was once perceived as one of the minnows in Asia's strategic backyard. With the owning of the vast maritime space beyond its shores, however, Bangladesh should no longer be viewed so, as it has the potential to emerge as a major player when it comes to its maritime neighbourhood.

Thus, as a maritime neighbour of many a nation, Bangladesh faces its watershed in diplomacy in a chain-link fashion. As a geoeconomic entity bordering the vast Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, respectively the world's third largest ocean and the largest Bay, Bangladesh could never distance itself from the geo-maritime and geopolinomic situations involving its neighbourhood. It has geopolitical proximity to both the major fast-growing regional economies having progressively prosperous populations, projected to grow to three billion. Bangladesh is an emerging economy with its sturdy domestic market of 160 million people. Already it has planned along its coastal belt 100 new EEZs; many of these are meant to draw in foreign investors, including those from the neighbouring giants.

China, the world's second-largest economy, perceived as a strategic rival by both India and the US, is eager to create new connectivity between its landlocked southern provinces and the Indian Ocean.<sup>76</sup> It is Bangladesh's largest trading partner (bilateral trade, between the two countries, though mainly in China's favour,

has increased to over \$12 billion).<sup>77</sup> It is a lead player in current international economic diplomacy, unveiling the 'string of pearls' and 'Belt and Road' policy. Bangladesh is not technically included in either, yet China is seen as Bangladesh's 'time-tested' friend and Bangladesh does feature importantly in China's strategic diplomacy.<sup>78</sup> It is also a leading weapons supplier to Bangladesh, supplying key systems of weaponry required for equipping the BN, and also a provider of training to the BN personnel. China is also a lead player in its connectivity and infrastructure projects, including railways, road transport, and power sectors, improving the standard of life, industries and fuel, as well as ICT and digital connectivity. Both the countries are active participants in the BCIM economic corridor linking all four regional countries (known earlier as the Kunming Initiative) and the AIB and the Trans-Himalayan Development Forum (launched in 2015). The construction of road and rail infrastructure connecting Chittagong with Kunming through Myanmar are meant for developing connectivity of all three countries<sup>79</sup> and offer prospects for connectivity with other South-east Asian countries and the Chinese mainland. China is also set to contribute to maritime undertakings that include Sitakunda-Cox's Bazaar marine drive expressway, coastal protection, and energy-related projects.<sup>80</sup>

There has indeed been a scramble by all the major powers to build 'connectivity' throughout the region. To what extent Bangladesh could benefit from such scrambling would depend on its policy dynamism and driving ability to benefit itself from the scrambling for positional advantage.<sup>81</sup> For materialising the developed vision by 2041, it is pertinent for Bangladesh to secure funding and technological support

from the richer development partners. However, should all these powers act to extend their current contentions in the South China Sea to the Bay of Bengal due to its propinquity, the Bay of Bengal could reel into Bangladesh's strategic hot-belly.

Bangladesh with its geo-maritime and trading orientation cannot be different from other maritime powers. Like all other trading nations, the geopolitics and geo-maritime objectives of the country need to be cushioned on objective considerations of its permanent interest. A wide maritime geography to the south and sharing of a long border with India on the rest of the three sides has led to its strategic portrayal as 'India-locked'. However, given the intensity of economic activity between China, India, and Bangladesh, coupled with the range of connectivity between and among them, any adversarial strategic scenario such as China's use of the 'chicken neck' via Siliguri Corridor through Bangladesh territory to encircle or to take on India<sup>82</sup> currently carries diminutive weight. Indeed, Kolkata, not any of Bangladesh's ports, has featured in China's 'string of pearls' for an extension of the latter's influence in the Indian Ocean region. As both the neighbouring giants are major trading/development partners of Bangladesh, it has nothing to gain from an enemy perception or imagining a conflict scenario between the two Asian colossi. Indeed, Bangladesh-India bilateral cooperation has been increasing at a faster pace than any other pair of countries in South Asia. Since 2010, the instigating intensity of trans-shipment operations, train and bus, as well as energy transmission services have radically raised the prospects of greater connectivity and trade/investment between the two

countries. Apart from these two neighbouring giants, Bangladesh has also been developing vital connectivities and trading relations with other neighbouring nations such as Bhutan, Myanmar, and Nepal—all of them have similarly important strategic and trading relations with both China and India.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, Bangladesh is gifted with geo-maritime/geo-physical proximity to Southeast Asia that confers upon it to emerge as a potential economic/strategic bridge between India and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, Bangladesh hosts its headquarters) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries.<sup>84</sup> Both the blocs are trade-oriented. It also shares coastal waters with the countries of East Asia, including China, Japan, and the countries of the Korean peninsula—all major trading nations.

In the foregoing backdrop, maritime security is very important for Bangladesh both in terms of economic and national security: fisheries protection in the territorial waters and EEZs, security of sea lanes of communication, energy security, as well as protection against drug trafficking and human trafficking, including women and children. It is time for Bangladesh to focus on strategizing its maritime policy and work towards securing its maritime interests.

### **Conclusion**

Whilst revisiting the findings, some remarks are due on the strategic imperatives of maritime policy and on how the nation could move on towards securing its development destiny. It is apparent that Bangladesh at this juncture faces the most defining moment in its strategic maritime journey

and in setting the tone and tenor of a secured development destiny. A revisiting of the strategic constructs seems proper in policy terms and action planning. The key is to view the regularity between peaceable developmental vision and the continuum of strategic permanence.

Being an independent country, vision-wise Bangladesh remains committed to a peaceful course set by the nation's founding father. But the strategic pathways require delicate calculated management, due largely to an innate militancy and political volatility worldwide, including Bangladesh. Such a contingent situation necessitates Bangladesh to take a firm position against any kind of violence and retain "every preparation to foil" any design against its "independence and sovereignty."<sup>85</sup>

Nationally, its development diplomacy is geared towards meeting the challenges of connectivities and associating chosen countries and selected companies considered competent and qualified for the infrastructure projects for maritime connectivities along its sea coasts. However, Bangladesh faces its greatest challenge in the maritime project planning process, which takes too long a time in contemplation, conjectures, and wandering before projects get the final nod for action-planning. When it comes to maritime security, it is imperative to strategize the policy process towards ensuring sustained momentum between policy initiation, appraisals, formulations, and action-planning.

Currently, with meagre resources, Bangladesh is not by any yardstick a major maritime power. Yet, for securing its maritime domain, it does have major strategic stakes, including protection of its fishing, the safety of its shipping

lanes, and preventing intrusive behaviour in the marine zones. In any scenario of a perceived threat, it has no option but to deploy its coastguard and naval capabilities to areas within its maritime space and to secure key chokepoints in order to understand and influence these areas towards enhancing its maritime interests.

Maritime security, region-wise, is vital for Bangladesh, as it helps build trust and assists her to develop and steers communication and information-sharing. A decade ago, the Straits of Malacca were well-known aquatic yards for pirates, but it is no longer so, as the major South-east Asian nations came together and employed a range of joint measures, including intelligence sharing and coordinating sea and air patrols. Bangladesh, as well as both of its Bay of Bengal neighbours, could also coordinate similar efforts to deal with maritime malevolence such as arms smuggling, drugs and human trafficking, and piracy. The Bay of Bengal countries are all fish-loving. They can join in designating a Bay of Bengal Marine Monument, like the US-led Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, off Hawaii, which now spans 1.5 million km<sup>2</sup>—the world's largest marine reserve where commercial fishing and new mining are banned.<sup>86</sup> Such measures in the Bay of Bengal need regional harmony. Over the past few years, Bangladesh-India relations have evolved in positive directions. But Bangladesh-Myanmar pair thus far remains cloudy, largely due to the mindset of an abusive junta in Yangon, now in civilian garb, that is engaged in spiteful acts against the minorities and also in the Bay of Bengal, such as shooting at Bangladeshi fishermen, thus denting peaceful maritime neighbourliness.<sup>87</sup>



Yet, Bangladesh has the potential to become a regional harmoniser, given its geo-maritime strategic location, the warmth and even-handed nature of its relations with the regional giants, India and China, and equally warm relations with all other global powers drawn into maritime contentions in the Indo-Pacific region. Both the UK and the US have important maritime-strategic relations with Bangladesh: both provided naval equipment and maritime training to Bangladesh. Japan, another Chinese rival, though not an arms supplier to Bangladesh, has been a major development partner and is also drawn into infrastructure and maritime-linked energy projects in Bangladesh.<sup>88</sup> As a maritime nation, Bangladesh needs to enlarge its profile in maritime-related industries and skill-enhancement but also act rationally. It has to reassess the role of the Bay, the Indo-Pacific Ocean, as well as the possibilities, limitations, security, and the related concerns of both traditional and non-traditional natures. The Bay and the Indian Ocean serve as its fluid bridge to connect itself via navigation with diverse and distant lands of the global system.

The vital interest of Bangladesh as a trading nation lies in keeping freedom of navigation for safety and security of its cargo/trading/fishing vessels. Equally vital is to ensure the security of its coasts and fishing preserves, get access to superior equipment and higher technology, better-quality investment, franchising for the qualitative production of apparatus, and paraphernalia for connectivity and relevant competence-building. Such objectives are achievable not through 'hard power', but 'soft power'—peaceable means without being drawn into squabbling or wrangling. Such an option, as Joseph Nye implores,<sup>89</sup> presages co-opting rather

than coercing others for positional advantage by generating a continuum of power based on the tools useful for implementing policy aspirations and objects that are controlled and regulated. For all this, Bangladeshi maritime specialists have to work towards setting the national agenda and styling policy in a fashion that would provide useful analytical variables mastering international relations and providing policy recommendations for attainable policy means. Soft power thus lies in subtleness to attract and persuade, with attainable means for success in maritime diplomacy.

Bangladesh-India diplomatic pair emerges as a test case. Bilateral ties fluctuated depending on regime perceptions across the fences, the respective perception of interests, and the strategic policies pursued. Political barometers used such as 'time-tested ally', 'honeymoon period', engineering 'aggressive diplomacy to dominate', are some of the passé and clichés used to project the pair of relations.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, notions like 'game changer' or 'personal chemistry' of top brasses are used in unfolding strategic linkage in bilateral relations. India's fable-like self-image as a 'benevolent elephant' placed across the geo-maritime sprawling lawn, comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka seems contrary to objective realities. Often such images may feature as the grace of sagacity and togetherness to project as a counterweight to the Sino-Pak 'all weather relationship'.<sup>91</sup> Such facets are of sheer 'irrelevance of morality'. Similarly, an emerging Indo-US concord directed against China won't help peacebuilding or cooperative relationship in Asia or the world.<sup>92</sup> Diplomatic subtlety and the ideal of regional peace require Bangladesh to circumvent any such knots.

Internally, Bangladesh has to mend some of its strategic ways. Its use of the 'blue economy model' for the BN has a strategic content meant professedly to develop its natural marine resources. However, such an espousal as a grand strategy needs to take into account the contexts of the

country's southerly flow of rivers and soil-water dispersal systems, which affect the coastal belt, the territorial sea, the EEZ, the continental shelf, and the open sea. Its procurement policy, which so far has proved prudent, as it is *not* intended for missile-rattling but to equip its forces for due operational purposes and enabling the naval forces to overcome the country's challenging traditional and non-traditional maritime security needs.

On ecosystemic matters Bangladesh, particularly its tropical coastal belts, is enriched with mangrove thickets and animal life specific to that environment (such as Sunderbans, a UNESCO World Heritage), these are characterised by numerous corals and other organisms capable of building reefs and coral islands. Such mangrove thickets also stabilise the land along the coastal margin, serving as important breeding and nursery grounds for offshore species,<sup>93</sup> adding also geomorphologic spaces, together with their ecosystemic values. However, the government's ecosystemic policy needs reassessment, much as its planned construction of a coal-fired power plant near the Sunderbans at Rampal, has come under fierce opposition from the environmentalists at home and abroad under the banner of the 'Save the Sunderbans Movement'.<sup>94</sup> The Bengal Delta and Bay coasts are highly flood-prone and tide-dominated, where flood and wandering tides play a key role in the sediment dispersal process and in the shaping of the delta.<sup>95</sup> There are then seismic projections of megathrust proportions. However, the Bengalis, carrying their proud tradition of living with nature, would find ways of how to adjust with the qualms of nature. In planning any challenging schemes, Bangladesh could benefit itself from the delicate learning and planning experiences of 'living with nature/water' of countries such as Singapore and The Netherlands.<sup>96</sup> An integrated maritime policy could map joining the maritime and other service professionals to carry forward the nation's proud legacies in disaster management.

Bangladesh's economy currently enjoys positive signals with leveraging impacts of strategic location and productive dynamics, which attract foreign investors and international community, but the country is yet to surmount problematic macro-political atmospherics. It continues to

suffer from myriad deficits in several fields of maritime security. These include areas such as credibility and a commonality in mindset—both with and without a lack of steady harmony in the physical and socio-psychological environment. All cycles of maritime doings need to be geared-up and redrawn if the nation is to overcome and realise its vision of sustained development and a secured maritime destiny. Just as the sea can bring Bangladesh affluence, any deficiency in coping with the entwining challenges ahead could leave the nation behind in a competitive world that is becoming very volatile.

The country's maritime security is inseparable from the overall insecurities it faces. A credible security system, encompassing both land and maritime, can only be assured by democratic continuity and consensus. Deficits manifested in such areas must be overcome if Bangladesh is to play a credible regional maritime role. Tough on terrorism and violence, tenderly towards the autistic and the disabled, such an image of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina does raise expectations. The country's governance requires democratic fine-tuning and strategizing. The 'opposition', consisting of a political hodgepodge, is in total disarray, enabling the ruling regime to monopolise governance and ensure regime continuity. No ruling regime would conceivably fix the opposition's problem; yet Sheikh Hasina, as the standard-bearer of her father's charismatic legacies, with her wide-reaching statesmanship image and lustrous role in the maritime gains, owes the nation some obligations for integrative reasons. These include help to harmonise debates over Rampal, institutionalise democratic governance in Bangladesh, and inculcate populist seeds across the grassroots and party levels, as well as campuses and professional bodies.

Maritime strategies are imperative in the nation's larger policy planning because they provide the means to apply power to areas of interest along coastlines, beyond coastal belt along the territorial sea, EEZ, and the continental shelf, as well as the open sea. The first line is called the littoral, "the areas to seaward of the coast which are susceptible to influence or support from the land and the areas inland from the coast which are susceptible to influence from the sea."<sup>97</sup> Strategic policies concerning the

coastal belt and the delta, disaster and environmental management, and sustainable development require effective role projection of all service professionals. Bangladesh as a maritime state ought to formulate a 'national maritime security strategy', mitigating the needs of all force components and related services and ensuring the connectivities and development needs of the entire nation.

**Appendix 1**

**BN exercises with foreign friendly navies**  
**[Towards enhancing interoperability between the participating navies]**

Years	Exercise	No. of days	Participating Units	Total Units	Area of Ex
1992	Joint Ex Sea Bat	07	BD & US Navy	01	At Sea within Bangladesh EEZ area
1993	Joint Ex Sea Bat	04	BD & US Navy	01	At Sea within Bangladesh EEZ area
1994	Joint Ex Sea Bat	11	BD & US Navy	01	At Sea within Bangladesh EEZ area
1995	Joint Ex Sea Bat	08	BD & US Navy	01	At Sea within Bangladesh EEZ area
1998	Joint Ex Sea Bat	08	BD & US Navy	01	At Sea within Bangladesh EEZ area
2009	EX Tiger Shark-1	46	BD Navy & US Special Force	07	CTG Outer Anchorage area
2010	EX Tiger Shark-2,3,4,5	86	BD Navy & US Special Force	02	CTG Naval area
2011	Joint EX CARAT, & Tiger Shark-8	23	BD Navy & US Special Force	15	At Sea within Bangladesh EEZ area

2012	Joint EX CARAT & Tiger Shark-12,14	32	BD Navy, JAPAN & US Navy	13	At Sea
2013	EX Tiger Shark-15,16,18 87	87	BD Navy & US Special Force	02	CTG Naval area
2014	Ex MILAN-14	16	BNS Sangu	01	Port Blair, India
	WPNS China-14	08	BNS Abu Bakr	01	Qingdao, China
	Ex CARAT-14	13	BD Navy & US Special Force	02	CTG Naval area
	Ex Tiger Shark-20, 22 & 24	64	BD Navy & US Special Force	02	CTG Naval area
2015	Ex LIMA-15	07	BNS Abu Bakr	01	Langkawi, Malaysia
	Ex Ferocious Falcon-15	14	BNS Somudra Joy	01	Doha, Qatar
	IMDEX ASIA-15	05		01	Singapore
	Ex CARAT-15	06	BD Navy & US Special Force	05	CTG Naval area
	Ex Tiger Shark-26 & 28	38	BD Navy & US Special Force	02	CTG Naval area
	Ex Cope South-15		BD Navy, BAF & US Special Force	03	Sylhet

**Source:** <[http://www.navy.mil.bd/ex\\_foreign\\_country.php](http://www.navy.mil.bd/ex_foreign_country.php)> (last accessed on 25 Oct 2016)

**Appendix 2****Recurrent deadliest tropical cyclones/tornadoes  
affecting Bangladesh***A: Tropical Cyclones*

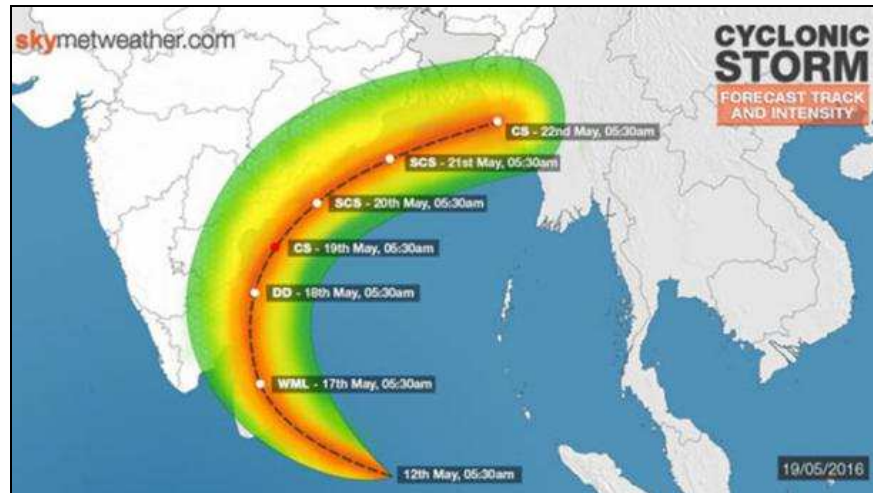
Deaths 375,000 (250,000– 500,000)	Event Rank <u>Bhola Cyclone</u> , Nov 13, 1970 1	<u>Location</u> <u>Pakistan (Bangladesh)</u>
138,866	<u>Bangladesh Cyclone</u> , April 29, 1991 7	<u>Bangladesh</u>
200,000	<u>Great Backerganj Cyclone</u> , 1876 5	<u>India (now Bangladesh)</u>

**B: Deadly Tornadoes**

Death 1,300	Event <u>Daulatpur-Salturia Tornado</u>	Location Rank <u>Manikganj, Bangladesh</u> 1	Year 1989
440	The Tangail Tornado	Bangladesh 9	1988
681	Dhaka Tornado	<u>Bangladesh</u> 4	1973
500	East Pakistan Tornado	(now <u>Bangladesh</u> ) 7	1969
923	The Narail-Magura Tornadoes	<u>Jessore</u> (E now <u>Bangladesh</u> ) 2	Pakistan, 1964

**Source:** <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_natural\\_disasters\\_by\\_death\\_toll#Ten\\_deadliest\\_tropical\\_cyclones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_natural_disasters_by_death_toll#Ten_deadliest_tropical_cyclones)> (last accessed on 23 August 2016).



**Appendix 3****Cyclonic storm 'Roanu': Forecast track and intensity,  
May 12-21, 2016**

**Source:** "Cyclone Roanu: 20 killed in 5 districts," *The Daily Star*, 21 May 2016.

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