



RCAS Commentary

Bangladesh's Blue Economy Ambitions: Geopolitical Hurdles and Opportunities

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Bangladesh, as a nation, was formed out of a riverine delta surrounded by the Bay of Bengal, and over the years, the country has continued to show great interest in its oceanic domain. Bangladesh has given a central position to the concept of Blue Economy in its national development toolbox, where the sea is viewed as a means of sustainable economic growth, improved livelihoods, and the preservation of ocean ecosystems. The total length of the coastline is over 710 kilometers, and the total size of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is 118,813 square kilometers, which Bangladesh has gained after maritime disputes between Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India were resolved.



▲(Times of Bangladesh).

As such, Bangladesh can now leverage a substantial maritime space with considerable potential for exploration. However, the process of bringing such dreams into reality is not purely an economic one, as it is closely related to complex geopolitical problems, regional disputes, and the strategic interests of the two superpowers. In the case of Bangladesh, the crucial issue is to navigate this web with caution while safeguarding its national interests.

The Blue Economy has the potential to be more than just significant in the case of Bangladesh; it represents a revolutionary change. It is in its immense possibilities of resource extraction. The bay has abundant fishing resources, and when these resources are exploited sustainably, it will play a crucial role in improving

Bangladesh's food security, not to mention the export earnings it is capable of generating. In addition to the fisheries, it is believed that there are significant deposits of oil, natural gas, and minerals distributed along the seabed and the continental shelf. These non-living resources have the potential to be utilized effectively and efficiently to generate energy in Bangladesh, which may lead to the replacement of energy-importing countries and establish a sustainable industrial base.

Another opportunity brought about by the Blue Economy is economic diversification, where the paradigm shifts to garments and remittances as the backbone of this economy. There are possibilities for new businesses, such as shipbuilding, marine biotechnology, aquaculture, and coastal tourism, which will generate millions of job opportunities and provide resilience and diversification to the country's economy. However, it is also imperative to keep in mind that all these opportunities need to be embraced by practicing sustainable activities, thereby ensuring the health and sustainability of the oceans.

Another strategic location is the head of the Bay of Bengal, which is the location of Bangladesh, making the country a key point in trade and maritime connections. The construction of Matarbari and Payra deep-sea ports, which are in continuous development, together with the development of Chittagong port, is projected to introduce Bangladesh as a regional-level transshipment hub. The enhanced port facility would not only be in a position to facilitate greater trade with landlocked neighbours like Nepal and Bhutan, but it would also offer an opportunity for products to flow in and out of the northeastern states of India. In addition to increasing national revenues through the services and logistics provided in the ports, the developments place Bangladesh at a deeper level in the regional and global supply chain, thereby making it a stronger geopolitical entity.

The other potential, which has yet to be fully utilized, is economic activity, which could receive a boost through foreign investment and local employment, especially in coastal and marine-based tourism. This industry is located in areas with the cleanest beaches and mangrove forests, boasting high biodiversity.

However, on the way to cashing in on this blue promise lie potent geopolitical impediments. It is not a stretch of water in the Bay of Bengal, but rather a sphere of intense strategic competition and overlapping interests. Bangladesh has had to navigate intricate relations with its neighbours, India and Myanmar, throughout its history. Despite the settlement of the controversies surrounding the maritime rivalries amicably, sensitivities and rivalry persist in terms of competition for resource potentials.

Both India and Myanmar have interests in the blue economy, and Bangladesh should maintain a careful balance, as pursuing the same may give rise to new tensions and

conflicts. The governance of common fish stocks, delimitation of prospective oil and gas blocks in the vicinity of the tri-junction area, and the elimination of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing all require ongoing discussion and joint planning. In addition to local politics, the great power rivalry between China and the United States has turned the Bay of Bengal into a zone of interest, with the entry of Japanese forces in the region.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has witnessed significant Chinese investments in infrastructure in Bangladesh, including the development of ports, as illustrated by the deep-sea port at Payra and facilities in Chittagong. Although these investments are essential in terms of Bangladesh's developmental needs, they also raise concerns among certain foreign observers regarding the potential debt trap and the dual use of this infrastructure for both civilian and military purposes. Bangladesh should carefully screen such investments and make them only to the extent that they serve the long-term interests of the nation, without impairing national sovereignty or inducing excessive economic and strategic reliance.

In the meantime, speaking of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States emphasizes the importance of the free and open Indo-Pacific, conventionally regarded as a bulwark against Chinese expansion. The US interests in the region include expanding security relations, ensuring democratic rule, and promoting regional economic cooperation. Sharing infrastructure, Japan is another important development partner that is particularly active in the Matarbari deep-sea port in Bangladesh and tends to emphasize the need for quality infrastructure and transparency. Bangladesh is currently in an uneven balancing act, where it is forced to accept investment and technological assistance from the central power without becoming a literal pawn in their geopolitical feuds. A non-aligned and non-partisan attitude toward foreign countries, a greater focus on economic relations with other countries rather than security ones, and diversifying development partners are key steps that Bangladesh needs to take to maintain its strategic autonomy and reap maximum benefits.

In addition, any security-related issues at the maritime sector level are major setbacks. The problem of piracy is of minor scale, but still concerns piracy. Of more concern are the problems of illegal fishing by foreigners, drug trafficking, and human smuggling, which weaken the sovereignty of Bangladesh and its economic interests.

To protect its maritime interests and maritime territories, as well as the application of its legal rules and regulations to its EEZ, Bangladesh needs an efficient and modern maritime security force of the navy and the coast guard with appropriate equipment. It typically involves international collaboration, including the exchange of intelligence and joint patrols. This collaboration should be managed tactfully to maintain Bangladesh's national security without compromising the country's sovereignty.

Finally, there is the factor of the environment. The Bay of Bengal is also vulnerable to climate change-related impacts, including rising sea levels, intensified cyclone activity, and ocean acidification. Attaining an optimal balance between the exploitation of marine resources and the necessity to sustain them and to protect the environment, and the consistency with international laws, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is an inseparable component of the blue economy, and one that could propel sustainability in Bangladesh. The right approach is to have an all-inclusive and wide-ranging strategy that can break down such barriers and render them as opportunities based on Bangladesh's national interests. First of all, it is a matter of strategic diplomacy. Bangladesh needs to continue actively participating in bilateral and multilateral events, promoting maritime collaboration with India and Myanmar on marine matters of mutual interest, such as resource management, maritime security, and other related issues.

At the same time, it must make itself heard by the major powers in the world on its terms, with a special focus on economic cooperation and development assistance to the world, and a strong resistance to any calls for security alignment with other powers at the expense of its strategic autonomy. Second, there should be substantial capacity building. It involves the promotion of marine scientific research, the adoption of more advanced technologies for exploring and monitoring resources, and the upgradation of its maritime security forces.

It will also be important in ensuring that new marine industries have a skilled workforce that is developed through education and vocational training. Third, all Blue Economy activities should be sustainable. It implies that the adoption of sound regulatory regimes in fisheries, oil and gas exploration, and seabed mining, as well as the exploitation of resources, will have no adverse environmental impacts.

A sustainable future for the Bay of Bengal ecosystem can be ensured by adhering to international environmental standards and investing in ocean conservation activities. Finally, regional cooperation, including BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association), should be promoted to promote the emergence of the Bay of Bengal as a zone of peace and prosperity where there is more convergence of interests than the existence of competitive impulses. At a geographical and strategic point of interest, a pragmatic non-aligned foreign policy will enable Bangladesh to attract a variety of investments, expand its connectivity, and secure its future at sea.

Concisely, the prospective Blue Economy strategy in Bangladesh can yield unprecedented levels of utility in both economic and strategic dimensions for this nation. Tapping this potential, however, can be a challenging endeavor due to the sophisticated way of thinking about the intricate currents of geopolitics that swirl around in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh will be able to tackle the geopolitical

challenges, turn its maritime space into a driver that it has long aspired to become, and ensure a brighter future for its people through its national interests, prudent diplomacy, capacity building, and sustainable activities.

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