



**PROCEEDINGS**

**Seminar on**

# **EVOLVING STRATEGIC SCENARIO IN THE BAY OF BENGAL REGION: BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE**

**14 May 2023**

**Organised by**

**Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)**



NATIONAL DEFENCE COLLEGE



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## Seminar on

# Evolving Strategic Scenario in the Bay of Bengal Region: Bangladesh Perspective

14 May 2023



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a Seminar on “**Evolving Strategic Scenario in the Bay of Bengal Region: Bangladesh Perspectives**” on Sunday, 14 May 2023 at the National Defence College (NDC), auditorium, Mirpur Cantonment, Dhaka. The Seminar was organised for the visiting Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS) delegation led by **Lieutenant General (Retd.) Sir George Pemberton Ross Norton**, Commandant, RCDS. The Seminar was chaired by **Dr Delwar Hossain**, Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka and Member, Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC). **Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc**, Director General, BIISS, delivered the welcome address.

Three presentations were delivered in the Seminar. **Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf**, Research Director, BIISS, made a presentation on “***The Geopolitics of***

**the Bay of Bengal Region and Priorities of Bangladesh.” Dr Muhammad Shahadat Hossain Siddiquee**, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, presented a paper on “**Geoeconomics of the Bay of Bengal Region and Sustaining Bangladesh’s Development Amidst Looming Global Recession.**” **Ambassador M Humayun Kabir**, President of Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), presented on “**Rohingya Crisis and Responsibility of the International Community.**”

There was an open discussion session in the Seminar. RCDS faculty and course members from nine different countries participated the Seminar. They shared their valuable insights in the open discussion session.

## Welcome Address



**Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc**  
Director General, BIISS

On behalf of the BIISS and NDC, **Major General Sheikh Pasha Habib Uddin, OSP, SGP, BAMS, afwc, psc**, Director General, BIISS welcomed everyone to the Seminar. He expressed his heartfelt gratitude to Sir George Pemberton Ross Norton, Commandant, RCDS, United Kingdom (UK) for his kind presence. At the outset, he paid his sincere homage to the memory of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and millions of martyrs who made their supreme sacrifice during the struggle for national emancipation and War of Liberation in 1971.

The Director General commented that the evolving geopolitical order in the Asian region has substantiated the new reality of Asia's re-emergence as the global pivot. The rise of China and India as the major powers in regional and global power architecture have relocated the geostrategic gravity towards Asia. As the region is on its way to becoming a critical ground for collaboration and competition among the major powers, the Bay of Bengal region gained more strategic momentum. In his view, the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China and the idea of

the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) by the USA have added further strategic competition in the region, particularly in terms of connectivity, seaborne trade, energy supply, blue economy, and maritime security.



The Director General stated that the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal re-emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a result of the economic transformations of the littoral states and the connectivity impulse that came along with it. The “Act East” policies of the South Asian countries and the “Look West” policies of the Southeast Asian nations have paved the way for this economic growth. He further added that China’s dramatic rise in economic and strategic domains, and conversely, its vulnerabilities in the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) make the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal region a critical hub. Besides, the Bay has been operating as a hub of strategic communion between the South and Southeast Asian countries for 2000 years. The intersection of these countries as well as their strategic interests has made the region a locus of competition between the countries of the region and beyond. Therefore, balancing among the emerging realities, and enhancing cooperation by minimising competition within great power rivalry would be the major challenge for the countries of this region in the near future.

The Director General then mentioned the geographic position of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal region that bears great strategic importance. It is considered

the gateway to South and Southeast Asia, making itself a hub for regional and interregional trade and commercial activities. It also has become a pioneer of global peace and a role model for growth in the Asian region. As a key littoral of the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh always promotes its own priorities which have also been reflected in the recently published Indo-Pacific Outlook of the country. Bangladesh always maintains warm relations with the global community through its famous dictum coined by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, that is “Friendship to all, and malice towards none”. It always welcomes partnerships and promotes regional cooperation for its own development interests and peace for the region and beyond. It promotes multilateralism to find peaceful and sustainable solutions to regional problems. To keep its development momentum intact, Bangladesh is emphasising on engaging and strengthening economic cooperation with all stakeholders, promoting cooperation in climate change and disaster management, enhancing defence diplomacy and maritime cooperation, and ensuring the supply of energy to meet the energy demand, etc.



According to the Director General, the country is promoting its development agenda through active participation in regional multilateral arrangements like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative (BBIN), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), etc. Nevertheless, one

of the major concerns for Bangladesh as well as for the region is the Rohingya crisis.

He remarked that connected with regional security. Bangladesh sheltered them only on humanitarian grounds, but the delay in repatriation will escalate insecurity in the region. The country is focusing on engaging major regional and global powers to come forward to ensure stability in the region by ensuring sustainable repatriation of those displaced people to Myanmar.

The Director General concluded his remarks by reiterating that Bangladesh pursues a policy of mutual respect and benefit, the principle of tolerance and peace, and solving problems with dialogue and negotiations; thus, Bangladesh becomes a role model for peace in the region and beyond. Therefore, he commented that from this seminar, people would learn more from the learned panelists about the priorities of Bangladesh amid the evolving geopolitical and strategic scenarios of the Bay of Bengal region.

## **Presentation**

# **Geopolitics of the Bay of Bengal Region and the Priorities of Bangladesh**



**Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf**

Research Director, BIISS

**Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf**, presented on the topic titled, “Geopolitics of the Bay of Bengal Region and the Priorities of Bangladesh.” At the outset of his presentation, Mr Yousuf argued that for centuries, the Bay of Bengal has worked as a highway for trade, transport and cultural exchanges and the total Bay of Bengal region covers 2.173 million square kilometre (sqkm). Following the Second World War (WWII), there was a decline in the importance of the Bay of Bengal and now it has started to receive renewed attention. The prime reason for this shifted focus is the brewing geopolitical competition in this region. One of the leading British Historians Sunil S Amrit highlighted this notion, which argued that the key to understanding the future of Asia lies in comprehending the changes in the Bay of Bengal region. On the contrary, Robert D Kaplan vindicates this claim by saying that the Bay of Bengal will be the centre of contestation in the Asia-Pacific region.

For centuries, the Bay was used by the Indian and Malayan traders, while the Chinese trading can be dated from the 12th Century and during this period, the Bay was known as the “Chola Sea”. With the Europeans’ arrival, the gamut of geopolitics in this region started to change. Vasco da Gama led the first European voyage into the Bay in 1498. Then, as a battleground for European empires—the Portuguese were followed by the Dutch, the British, and the French—shaped by the monsoons and by human migration. By the 1930s, however, economic, political, and environmental pressures began to erode the Bay’s centuries-old patterns of interconnection, and these were broken by the incident of the WWII. The Area Studies divided it into South and Southeast Asia. The term “Southeast Asia” was first coined by the British Southeast Asia Command during the WWII and interestingly, the headquarter of the British Southeast Asia Command was stationed in Sri Lanka. Due to renewed attention of the Indo-Pacific region, the Bay of Bengal started to get prominence since it is one of the major maritime basins along the vast Indo-Pacific.



Mr Yousuf identified the re-rise of China as one of the main reason for the renewed attention. In the Bay of Bengal’s history, major powers came from the West, but China is coming from the East for its strategic expansion and power projection. On the other hand, the US’s “pivot to Asia” turned the Indo-Pacific and the Bay of Bengal into the centre of attention. Secondly, he identified the global energy trade route where China, as well as South and Southeast Asian countries, use this route for their energy imports. Finally, Mr Yousuf commented that the Bay of Bengal is home

to some of the most dynamic and emerging economies that attract the attention of the major powers.

To amplify his argument, Mr Yousuf mentioned the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy, Defense Strategy 2022, National Security Strategy 2022 and US's BURMA Act. All these strategy documents and policy papers suggest that the US is rigorously coming back to this region due to the growing geostrategic competition. Although there are differences of opinion among the scholars, many believe these are efforts by the US to contain China. On the other hand, China already has BRI which has geostrategic significance and now with the newly unveiled Global Security Initiative (GSI), geostrategic environment is getting competitive. Japan already has a strong investment in the Bay of Bengal region and with its Big-B initiative, the competition for strategic influence might get intensified. India, despite being a strong competitor of China in the region and its membership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (commonly known as Quad), its desire to safeguard its strategic autonomy will make this competition an complex one. Unlike the Cold War period, the competitors of this geostrategic competition are highly interconnected and interdependent through trade and this adds to the complexity of the competition.

## The Transformations of Bangladesh

- “underdeveloped country” to “Asian tiger”
- “small state” to “connectivity hub”
- “disaster-prone country” to “model for disaster management”
- “poverty-prone country” to “global peacekeeper”
- “encircled country” to “protector of humanism”



Then Mr Yousuf discussed the narratives of the smaller rising nations of the Bay of Bengal region that have greater economic integration among the littoral countries of the Bay of Bengal that used to exist until the WWII; dealing with common challenges collectively such as climate change and other non-traditional

security issues. Hence, despite the competition among global and regional powers, regional countries are trying to increase cooperation and trying to get the best out of this situation. In this connection, he also discussed the success story, transformation and priorities of Bangladesh.

As one of the rising Bay of Bengal littorals, Mr Yousuf further added that Bangladesh has been receiving increasing global attention and C. Raja Mohan has also argued that due to Bangladesh's rise as the second biggest economy of the region, the centre of gravity of South Asia has moved from the West to Eastward. Bangladesh will have more influence in the region as a potential connectivity hub. The blue economy sector contributes almost US\$ 6 billion to the GDP. In the recently published Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO), Bangladesh prioritised economic development and security and stability of the region, which needs to be inclusive.

## Continue...



- “densely populated country” to “hub for human resources”
- “aid dependent” to “model for development”
- “higher illiteracy” to “digital Bangladesh” and towards “Smart Bangladesh”
- “passive audience” to “strong negotiator”
- “post-colonial country” to “self-esteemed nation”

In this connection, Mr Yousuf discussed the strategies of Bangladesh, which has been following a foreign policy based on the motto of “Friendship towards all, and malice toward none.” This entails that all the development and negotiation processes should be inclusive so that this can facilitate the peaceful rise for all the countries of the Bay of Bengal region. Bangladesh's participation and pattern of engagement in regional and sub-regional forums such as IORA, BIMSTEC, and BBIN suggest it promotes multilateralism, economic prosperity for all and security as well as stability for the whole region. There is hope among scholars that such cooperation

among the countries might have a spillover effect and lead to the formation of a Bay of Bengal Community. Therefore, with the economic rise and increased influence in the region, Bangladesh can act as a conduit among the regional and global powers to achieve a peaceful, prosperous, stable and secured Bay of Bengal region. In conclusion, Mr Yousuf summed up that, for centuries, the littoral and land-locked countries such as Bhutan and Nepal have depended on the Bay of Bengal. However, with the growing strategic competition in this region, Bangladesh has challenges and opportunities. Bangladesh's commitment to multilateralism and a strong desire for inclusiveness provides it with leverage to be a conduit among the global and regional powers to tap into the opportunities and deal with the challenges.



# **Geoeconomics of the Bay of Bengal Regions and Sustaining Bangladesh's Development amidst Looming Global Recession**



**Dr Mohammad Shahadat Hossain Siddiquee**  
Professor, Department of Economics  
University of Dhaka

**Dr Mohammad Shahadat Hossain Siddiquee** made his presentation on “Geoeconomics of the Bay of Bengal Regions and Sustaining Bangladesh’s Development Amidst Looming Global Recession.” He started his presentation by explaining the concept of geoeconomics. According to him, geoeconomics basically covers economics, politics, and geography. Although there are clear distinctions between geoeconomics and geopolitics, but due to the interdependence, these two concepts are difficult to distinguish from each other. However, the general definition of geoeconomics shows that it is a study of the spatial, temporal, and political aspects of economies and resources. He, then, made his discussion on the Bay of Bengal region which comprises South and Southeast Asia and lies at the centre of two huge blocs—the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The region also hosts a major regional bloc, known as BIMSTEC, that promotes regional engagement in the area. He commented that, there are two types of countries in this region. One type is littoral states which include Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand and the other type is land-locked states which include Bhutan and Nepal.

While discussing the geoeconomics of the Bay of Bengal region, Dr Siddiquee stated that there are three layers of the geoeconomics of this region. First is the policy layer which shows the type of regional and political economy this region has. The second layer is the integration layer which represents the economic geography and industrial organisation of the region. Finally, the third layer is the transaction layer which exemplifies transactions in the financial economies of this region. He also mentioned the law of geo-economic gravity which requires financial self-sufficiency and the existence of advanced, diversified energy and transportation infrastructure assets. He discussed the concept of the law of geoeconomic gravity to explain why economies are concentrated toward the Bay of Bengal region. Dr Siddiquee, then, discussed the economic importance of the Bay of Bengal region. In the discussion, he highlighted that the region is home to approximately 60 per cent of the world's population. The countries in this region have become robust market for economic partnerships. Although SAARC countries' total intra-regional trade accounts for only 5 per cent of their total global trade, ASEAN has a more respectable 25 per cent intra-regional trade. Therefore, an economically integrated Bay of Bengal community can also play a role in increasing SAARC's current comparatively low figure since SAARC countries have advantages in population, demography and entrepreneurial vigor. In this context, the Bay of Bengal region is emerging as a critical region in the competition for control of global trade. Moreover, this region hosts fast-growing economies. With a population of 1.7 billion and a GDP of US\$7.5 trillion, the region also hosts some of the world's busiest shipping routes. Around 40,000 ships use these busiest routes each year. Half of the world's goods and fuel shipments happen through these routes. The ports that are located in this region handle approximately 33 per cent of world trade.

Dr Siddiquee, then, highlighted the importance of the Bay of Bengal in the context of Bangladesh. Being situated at the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific, the strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal will make Bangladesh more prosperous in the region. Bangladesh has amicable relations with almost all the major powers of the Indo-Pacific region. For example, Japan attaches great importance to a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), region. Bangladesh is one of the partners of Japan's Big-B initiative in the Bay of Bengal. Under this initiative, Matarbari in Maheshkhali will be turned into a hub for the import and export, and generation of electricity. Bangladesh also trades about US\$ 900 million a year by sea routes and around 4,500 foreign ships transport these imported and exported goods to

and from Bangladesh. The country has made significant changes in the Maritime Act of 1974 and in addition, the Marine Economy Cell has been formed. Besides, a Maritime Economy Action Plan has been adopted to boost up economy. In this regard, harnessing the blue economy is another important aspect for Bangladesh. Blue economy for Bangladesh would encapsulate a large number of economic functions and activities, namely fishery, maritime trade and shipping, energy, tourism, coastal protection, and maritime safety and surveillance for economic development. Bangladesh has 450 miles of coastline with 200 nautical miles of exclusive economic jurisdiction. However, Bangladesh harvests only 0.70 million tons of the Bay of Bengal's estimated 8 million tons of fish stock. Bangladesh could also extract oil and gas resources worth about US\$ 1.2 billion. Additionally, the country has a number of outer islands that could be developed for domestic and foreign resort tourism.



According to Dr Siddiquee, the blue economy contributes over US \$6 billion to Bangladesh's GDP. Tourism and recreation account for 25 per cent, followed by marine fisheries and aquaculture 22 per cent, transport 22 per cent, energy 19 per cent, ship and boat building and breaking 9 per cent, and minerals 3 per cent. It is also worth mentioning that the fishery sector employs 17 million people. The Bay of Bengal is a repository of what is estimated to be vast deposits of hydrocarbon resources and mineral wealth. But in the context of Bangladesh, it is still the least

explored area for oil and gas reserves. Bangladesh is likely to have significant reserves, as the Bay is reportedly home to a rich core of solidified natural gas, it is likely to be at much greater depths than in the Arabian Sea area. Myanmar has already discovered significant gas reserves, as has India in the western and southern parts of the Krishna-Godavari and Bengal basins. Bangladesh is still a newcomer to this field.

Regarding intra-regional trade conditions, Dr Siddiquee highlighted the potential of intra-BIMSTEC trade. He showed that although there is potential, intra-regional trade is still very neglected within BIMSTEC. For example, there is zero intra-trade between Bhutan and Bangladesh although they both are BIMSTEC members. Then, he showed the barriers to inter-regional trade. The average amount of time needed to complete a cross-border trade transaction in South Asia is 53.4 hours, whereas the same process takes 16.1 hours in Europe and Central Asia (ECA), and just 12.7 hours in countries with high incomes that are members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). When it comes to border compliance costs, the cost for South Asia stands at US\$ 310; for ECA it is US\$ 150, and for OECD, it is nearly US\$ 136.8.

Dr Siddiquee, then, brought up the issue of the looming global recession and discussed what Bangladesh can do to cope with this emerging concern. According to him, Bangladesh must acquire the ability to harvest resources from the deep sea. It can open the way for Bangladesh to earn a huge amount of foreign exchange. It is worth mentioning that Bangladesh has three seaports. But due to depth constraints, large vessels (mother vessels) are still unable to be accommodated. The establishment of a deep seaport would help reap the maximum economic benefits from the Bay of Bengal as well as reduce the cost of transporting goods. Bangladesh has only 60 ships to transport goods at sea. In this case, Bangladesh has a serious limitation of capacity. Therefore, the country needs to increase its shipping capability to reduce the challenge of the forex reserve. Bangladesh needs training, education and infrastructure to increase its ability to extract resources from this vast ocean. At present, the country has a Maritime University, Oceanographic Department and Oceanographic Research Center. These institutions should also come forward to expand education and research in this sector.



Dr Siddiquee also stated that drug smuggling, piracy in the Malacca Strait, and pollution from ships or land are destroying the marine environment. Effective steps, thus, should be taken to address these crises jointly through BIMSTEC, SAARC and ASEAN. The Bay of Bengal, which is an integral part of the Indian Ocean with a population of 1.7 billion and a GDP of US\$ 7.5 trillion, can form a “community” of nations bridging SAARC and ASEAN regions, enhancing overall cooperation. In this regard, sub-regional cooperation could further contribute to regional cohesion. India is well-positioned in the Bay of Bengal to replace China as a growth pole in the next decade and emerging gradually as a global economic power. It needs to address, thus, two crucial aspects: the development of self-reliant and robust regional value chains; and the economic integration of the Bay of Bengal as an economic bloc into the global value chains for higher growth and economic convergence. To align its interests with those of its regional partners, India should prioritise three sectors—i.e., food, energy, and technology. Functional cooperation on connectivity issues will also be crucial to the Indian imperative of localising globalisation in the Bay of Bengal region.

Dr Siddiquee also suggested strong collaboration among countries in this regard. According to him, mutual assistance among these countries is crucial to address ecological threats and ensure a sustainable blue economy. He opined that the coastal shipping routes are slowly being reopened. Bangladesh and India have just

announced tourism along this coastal shipping route between them. Such a venture should be extended to embrace all countries and ports of the Bay of Bengal countries. Mechanised boats and industrial trawlers can catch fish up to 70 kilometres from the shoreline out of the total of 660 kilometres available. The rest of the area has not been explored, therefore, there is a huge opportunity to improve the technological capabilities and increase the production levels. Bangladesh still lacks the capacity or ability to harvest fish beyond 100 meters depth, or develop 'mariculture'. According to some preliminary estimates, Bangladesh could conceivably harvest around a trillion dollars from its blue economy.

In conclusion, Dr Siddiquee stated that a huge gap between potential and current reality exists. The region's economies have huge potential to invest in research for green technologies that can help them develop self-reliant energy markets. Regional integration, especially in the energy sector, requires support from multilateral agencies such as the Annual Development Bank (ADB) given the exceptionally large amounts of investments that countries like Myanmar and Nepal would not be able to finance on their own. Hence, it is of utmost importance to have a strong collaboration among countries to untap all the potential.

## **Rohingya Crisis and Responsibility of the International Community**



### **Ambassador M Humayun Kabir**

President, BEI

**Ambassador M Humayun Kabir** while delivering his presentation titled “Rohingya Crisis and Responsibility of the International Community” highlighted some of the issues from a strategic perspective. At the outset, he posed a question whether demography, rights, development, and connectivity are strategic assets or challenges. He noted that the forced displacement of 1.2 million Rohingyas to Bangladesh created various kinds of humanitarian, legal, and security challenges for Bangladesh and also for the entire region. He then mentioned some of the strategic dimensions of the Rohingya issue. One of the biggest challenges according to him, is the problem of nation-building meaning creating an inclusive and democratic nation. Until it is ensured, it will be really difficult to build up a sustainable state. The Rohingya issue more specifically demonstrates how a society or a state is struggling for decades to build up an inclusive and democratic society where different ethnic groups and stakeholders participate and move forward. He remarked that until and unless that happens, the problem will continue in the coming days in this region.

Thus, Ambassador Kabir added, nation-building is a strategic issue, particularly for this region. Then the issue of human rights and justice comes in, he further stated. Although the issue is widely discussed at the global level, in the case of the Rohingya, it is seen how violations of human rights can turn into a crime against humanity and genocide. As an outcome, it creates a new demand for justice. He added that in the Asian context, violations of human rights are becoming widespread and communities and ethnic groups are facing difficulties. Thus, the resolution of this issue and the application of the principles of justice have strategic implications beyond the Rohingya problem.



The next issue Ambassador Kabir discussed is related to development and connectivity. In the context of Myanmar, Rakhine is the least developed province of Myanmar. And some argue that this is the struggle between the local Rakhine people and Rohingyas and the struggle is observed mainly for modest resources. He further added that development and connectivity also could be a part of this issue. From a strategic point of view, the Rohingya issue has obstructed or created a big hurdle or roadblock in terms of creating seamless connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia. He mentioned that, Bangladesh is sitting in the middle of three major economies, China in the North and East, India in the West and ASEAN in the East. This is a large economic unit that can define the future of Asia, especially, Bangladesh due to its geographical position. Unfortunately, Bangladesh cannot

connect with this network of these economies because of the Rohingya issue. Thus, the Rohingya issue is not merely a small problem, it is also obstructing the country's expansion through connecting with the network of a large number of economies. Another point he mentioned is the climate and environmental issue and he noted that everyone knows that the presence of more than one million Rohingyas has caused grave deterioration of the environment and ecology of the Cox's Bazar district. It is a known fact that Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate-related disasters. Hence, the settlement of the Rohingyas in the southern part of Bangladesh could trigger further environmental degradation that might have a spillover effect on the region as a whole.



The last point Ambassador Kabir mentioned is geopolitics. The Rohingya issue has ingredients of geopolitics between China and India and this has created a division between the East and the West. It can be seen that China, India and Russia are on one side and the US, the EU and other countries are on the other side. For Bangladesh, the Rohingya issue is giving a picture of the divided one. Thus, it can be argued that how zero geopolitics can create a hurdle toward the resolution of a problem. He further added, everybody says that it should be resolved but geopolitics is making the thing an arduous task. Hence, the responsibility of the international community is vital. He admitted that although the international community has been supportive of the cause from the very beginning, not a single Rohingya was repatriated to their homeland till now. At present, Bangladesh wants

more intensified efforts from the international community to resolve the problem. He urged the international community to continue their food and financial support which are on a downward trend in recent years. As Bangladesh is already financially overburdened in terms of other resources, it will be extremely difficult for the country to provide support for the Rohingyas. And at the end of the day, the ultimate pressure falls on the Rohingyas themselves. So, considering the humanitarian cause, the international community should maintain its commitment and continue supporting the Rohingyas.

Ambassador Kabir mentioned that efforts have been made three times so far to repatriate the Rohingyas until now. Both Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed on the repatriation twice but the Rohingyas did not agree to go back to their country because of the lack of ensuring a conducive environment from Myanmar's side. Lastly, one group of Rohingyas visited Myanmar to see the updates and overall developments but regrettably, they were not satisfied with the existing circumstances. According to them, the situation in Rakhine province is still not congenial for them to return. That means, Myanmar has not prepared a safe environment for repatriating the Rohingyas. Hence, he remarked, it is necessary to continue international pressure on Myanmar. It is noticeable that although Myanmar committed several times, it did not keep its promises. He then proposed another probable solution which is using both carrot and stick or providing incentives to Myanmar if they repatriate Rohingyas. The issue is mainly related to the nation-building question of Myanmar and in this aspect, the international community has a crucial role to play. He opined that the entire UN system should work together and along with this support, the US, the EU and ASEAN can play an important role. He mentioned the last ASEAN Summit in which the Rohingya issue was discussed and the issue of the pilot repatriation effort between Bangladesh and Myanmar was mentioned with the utmost importance. However, Ambassador M. Humayun Kabir commented that, this venture is not enough since it will not produce any tangible outcome. If the pilot project does not work, then he viewed that third-country settlement or responsibility sharing can be an option that the international community has done for the Vietnamese refugees in the late 70s. Some countries have already expressed their interests and the Bangladesh government can think of those options. According to him, Myanmar is a hard-core country, so, it is the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) that can play the most important role along with the efforts of the UK, China and some other countries. To that end, the P5 country (namely China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) has to come to a consensus that they will give real pressure on Myanmar. Perhaps, that will give way to not only a solution to the Rohingya crisis but also the democratisation process of Myanmar and will also facilitate peace and stability from a strategic point of view in the South Asian and Southeast Asia region. Finally, in this way, the countries can work together and be a part of the productive Bay of Bengal and the larger Indo-Pacific region.

## OPEN DISCUSSION



### **Colonel Jason Ainley**

British Army

**Colonel Jason Angley** thanked the presenters for narrating the potential of Bangladesh that the country has due to the presence of the Bay of Bengal and the challenges it faced in materialising the potential. On that note, he mentioned the tremendous prospects of Bangladesh due to its geographical location in the Bay of Bengal. He opined that in spite of the presence of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) and BIMSTEC, realising the potential is difficult because of the slow pace of inter-regional trade. So, he wanted to know what lessons can be learned from SAFTA and BIMSTEC to take forward the Bay of Bengal economic community in the region to harness the potential.



**Group Captain Andrew David Turk**  
Royal Airforce, UK

**Group Captain Andrew David Turk** mentioned that Bangladesh being a small state tackled an enormous humanitarian issue. He was particularly interested in the issues of regional leadership and thus wanted to know Bangladesh's position in the context of regional leadership in Asia. He also wanted to know how Bangladesh views the relationship between India and Myanmar taking into account the issues of regional leadership.



**Captain Suzi Nielsen**

Royal Navy, UK

**Captain Suzi Nielsen** commented on the issues of the blue economy. She inquired about how Bangladesh is planning to protect the aspect of the blue economy considering the issues of climate change and port infrastructure. She wanted to know whether there is any coherent strategy to address it or whether the country is planning to do this independently.



**Colonel Mark James Austin**  
US Army

**Colonel Mark James Austin** said given the nature of geopolitics and geoeconomics within the Bay of Bengal region, Col. Austin asked about the Rohingya crisis and the ongoing situation in Myanmar. He also enquired about Bangladesh's strategy to achieve its Vision 2041 and to become a developed country by 2041.



### **Group Captain Simon Edward Blackwell**

Royal Airforce, UK

**Group Captain Simon Edward Blackwell** said that too many nations have an interest-based approach to the problem between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Hence, the Rohingya crisis seems like an unsolved problem as far as regional countries are concerned. Therefore, there is a need to reach back to the UN to look at more values-based approaches. He further enquired, since the regional countries are taking an interest-based approach and if the Western countries try to get involved with a value-based approach from the UN framework, would it not be considered an intervention by extra-regional powers?



**Captain Duncan James Thomas**  
Royal Navy, UK

**Captain Duncan James Thomas** said the trade routes from the Bay of Bengal region cross through some of the vital choke points such as the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal. Given the impacts of the wider global stability issues on the region, Mr Thomas asked Ambassador Kabir which one of those or which area would he think has the greatest impact on the Bay of Bengal. He also asked if Bangladesh has any economic leverage over those three choke points to try and ensure they are stable to minimise any impact on the region.



**Ruth Merifield**

Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK

**Ruth Merifield** made a comment on Mr Yusuf's argument regarding Bangladesh's transformation from being underdeveloped to an Asian tiger and the aim to transform 'Digital Bangladesh' into 'Smart Bangladesh'. She argued that this journey would require investment and Bangladesh has a very low debt-to-GDP ratio. Given this context, she asked how Bangladesh would manage the tension between its long-term economic stability and the short-term requirement of investment. Given the geopolitical situation between China and India, she also asked which country would be the top investor to transfer the smart technology to Bangladesh?



**Brigadier General A K M Sazedul Islam, ndc, afdc, psc, G**  
Ex-Faculty, NDC

**Brigadier General A K M Sazedul Islam** argued that the Indo-Pacific strategy is the pivot of Asia. In that case, the Bay of Bengal can also be defined as the pivot for both Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and BRI since both of these frameworks include the Bay of Bengal region. He said that Bangladesh has recently graduated from a least developed to a developing country and is looking forward to being developed by 2041. On the face of it, both IPS and BRI seem very innocent but eventually will not remain benign. Once strategic rivalry and competition start taking place, the Bay of Bengal will be affected from various corners. He asked, given the looming rivalry between the US and China, what will be Bangladesh's strategy to achieve developed country status by 2041? Regarding the Rohingya situation, he asked whether the international community has any plan to develop the situation in Myanmar to restore the confidence of the Rohingya community living in Bangladesh to start the repatriation process.

## Response from the Panelists



**Mr Abu Salah Md Yousuf** mentioned the major three points while answering the question on the Bay of Bengal economic community. He added that, for a long period, the Bay of Bengal is connecting South and Southeast Asia. He referred to a recent argument that the littorals of the Bay of Bengal have an urge and understanding among the countries that they have to work together to explore the resources of the region. Therefore, in that context, he stated that, within the complex geopolitical competition among regional and global powers, there is an understanding among the regional powers to be engaged in the Bay of Bengal region with each other. Hence, it is clear that this region has the strong potential to be integrated whatever the challenges the countries are facing at present.

Mr Yousuf also mentioned that Bangladesh promotes peace and stability. The country's strategic value increased due to the rise of its economic growth and geopolitical location. In addition to that, he pointed out the importance of sea power in the recent global context. He emphasised the significance of ensuring the flow of energy and trade. According to him, Bangladesh is aware of the great power politics in the Bay of Bengal. The country often plays the role of conduit between regional and great powers. Bangladesh is an active participant in regional forums like BIMSTEC and ASEAN on various security issues. The country believes in an

inclusive development of the region where all the stakeholders can be benefitted from cooperation.



While answering questions on the Rohingya issue, **Ambassador M Humayun Kabir** mentioned that everyone wants to take advantage of the Myanmar issue. However, it is really difficult to say how many of them have the intent to help Myanmar keeping aside their own interests. He mentioned that China has a big interest in Rakhine Province mainly because of its access to the Bay of Bengal. Already the country is importing oil and gas through Myanmar's Sittwe Port. He then adds that a few days ago, India opened the Sittwe Port as a part of its Kaladan Project and the country wants to provide services to its northeastern provinces using this port. Thus, both India and Myanmar are keen to take benefits from the Rakhine Province especially the latter is trying hard to take full advantage of it. He noted that a few days back, some insurgents of Myanmar attacked a power station in China. So, if Rakhine is unstable due to the Rohingya crisis then what kind of economic benefits they might get would be a big question. Interestingly, this is an issue of zero politics. India does not want to give space to China and it is a fact for China as well. They are pushing each other and as an outcome, the Rohingya issue is exacerbated. Interestingly, they both are on the Myanmar side and do not want to resolve the Rohingya crisis in the way the international community wants to resolve it.



When asked about the significance of choke points in the Bay of Bengal, Ambassador Kabir responded that among the three trade channels like Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Suez Canal, the Strait of Malacca is the most crucial despite the significance of the other two. On the issue of trade, he suggested that Bangladesh should keep all the options open. He mentioned that China is Bangladesh's biggest source of raw materials. Hence, Bangladesh needs to keep up its trade relations with all the countries including India, Japan, and the USA. On the Rohingya issue, he said both countries should increase connectivity and work towards shared growth. For example, Myanmar can be a good energy source for Bangladesh. He believes that over time, the issue will be resolved if the international community is on the same page.



**Dr Muhammad Shahadat Hossain Siddiquee** attempted to answer the question regarding the lesson learned from the SAFTA. He stated that SAARC and SAFTA are not functioning as expected. This is also determined by the geopolitics of the countries and their extent of involvement or engagement. Particularly, the relationship between India and Pakistan is not very sound which hinders in enhancing trade relations. Referring to his presentation, he mentioned that undoubtedly, the intra-BIMSTEC trade is mainly dominated by India. So, how countries can reduce inequality considering the comparative advantage needs to be explored through negotiations among the regional countries.

Regarding the question on the blue economy, Dr Siddiquee mentioned that this is also a thriving sector with huge potential because of unexplored mineral resources like oil and gas. But still, there are also a few questions that need to be addressed: whether Bangladesh has the capabilities to extract, how far the country can go to the depth of the sea to extract those resources and how much investments are required. In order to make it feasible, Bangladesh needs huge investments from various donor countries.



On the issue of Vision 2041, Dr Siddiquee responded by saying that Bangladesh's GDP does not give a positive notion. Whereas, the macroeconomic scenario gives a positive sense of becoming a developed country by 2041. In his view, though Bangladesh has little improvement in the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), it still continues to develop in the coming days. He mentioned that it is largely due to the country's underutilised resources. These resources do not match with development theories or other indicators for measurement. He highlighted the default loans or bad loans in the country as a challenge for progress. He also mentioned inflation as a major challenge to the desired economic growth of the country. He pointed out that the GDP growth is not reflected in the revenue collection of the National Board of Revenue (NBR). He then finally informed that the Bangladesh government has emphasised strengthening tax reform to make sustainable economic growth of the country.

## Closing Remarks



### **Dr Delwar Hossain**

Member, BPSC and Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka

To conclude the discussion, **Dr Delwar Hossain** opined that the Seminar has been a fascinating, engaging and productive discussion. He added that the recent history of interstate relations in the Bay of Bengal is important to understand the geopolitics in this region. He mentioned that from the 1970s till the 1990s, the littoral states, regional powers and global powers adopted a cooperative approach towards the Bay of Bengal region. But, the environment gradually transformed into a competitive one, and the region is dominated by interstate rivalry. He stated that a new Cold War has emerged in this part of the world. Now, the dynamics are more complex and Cold War-type. He pointed out that the regional dynamics transformed from cooperation to competition to rivalry, which concerns countries like Bangladesh.

Dr Hossain stated that the Bay of Bengal is a resource-enriched region. Hence, business, commerce, industry, and economic cooperation could help countries benefit from those resources. Unfortunately, the region is the least integrated and faces geopolitical challenges as a whole. Consequently, it gives countries both

challenges and opportunities. Dr Hossain also mentioned that Bangladesh is a paradoxical case when it comes to the tax-GDP ratio. But the fact remains that Bangladesh is the 35th largest economy in the world and the second largest in South Asia. Even though Bangladesh has a low tax-GDP ratio, it also has a moderate debt-GDP ratio which he referred to as a paradox case. According to Dr Hossain, Bangladesh's economy is self-developing with a strong garment sector, good remittance flow, and stable agriculture. It also has a demographic dividend that is pushing the country towards Least Developing Country (LDC) graduation in 2026 and will help achieve the goal of "Smart Bangladesh" by 2041. He also mentioned the two future directives for Bangladesh. First, the "Indo-Pacific Outlook" which provides an understanding of what Bangladesh wants to achieve in the future in the Indo-Pacific region. Bangladesh clearly identified 15 objectives that it wants to achieve through regional cooperation and partnership not only in the Bay of Bengal but also in the Indian Ocean region at large. In the same conference, the honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina mentioned six priority issues for Bangladesh in the future that include climate change, maritime diplomacy, equitable development and regional cooperation.

Dr Hossain then emphasised on collective efforts of the countries to overcome geopolitical realities. He believed that more cooperation initiatives in the region should be pursued in order to overcome the confrontational situation and intense political rivalry. Then he concluded the seminar by expressing his heartfelt thanks to the NDC for their support to host the programme. He expressed his gratitude towards the distinguished panelists, learned audiences and the BIISS team members for their efforts to make the event a success.

## **Vote of Thanks**



**Colonel Mark James Austin**  
US Army

**Colonel Mark James Austin** expressed his heartfelt thanks to BIISS for hosting the programme with the support of the NDC. He also expressed his gratitude towards the distinguished presenters, learned audiences and the BIISS team members for taking the initiative and making a meaningful event.

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