

Report on

Roundtable Discussion

on

Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Emerging Threats and

2024



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Organised by BIIS

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Roundtable Discussion
On
**Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Emerging Threats and
Strategies of Bangladesh**

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a Roundtable Discussion on “Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Emerging Threats and Strategies of Bangladesh” on Wednesday, 20 November 2024 at the BIISS auditorium. **Admiral M Nazmul Hassan, OSP, NPP, ndc, ncc, psc**, Chief of Naval Staff, Bangladesh Navy graced the occasion as the Chief Guest. **Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BIISS, Chaired the session and **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General of BIISS, delivered the welcome address. Three presentations were made in the Roundtable Discussion. The Keynote Speech on “Emerging Maritime Security Threats in the Bay of Bengal: Unfolding the Multilevel Strategies” was delivered by **Ms Moutusi Islam**, Research Fellow, BIISS. **Professor Dr Rashed Uz Zaman**, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka spoke on “Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Geopolitical and Strategic Implications” and **Rear Admiral Mohammad Musa, OSP, NPP, rcds, afwc, psc, PhD**, Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Personnel) and Chairman, Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD) presented on “Emerging Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Policy Options and Strategies for Bangladesh”. There was an Open Discussion session following the presentations. Senior officials from different ministries, former diplomats, senior civil and military officials, academia, researchers, and faculties from various universities participated in and enriched the discussion by presenting their valuable questions, comments, suggestions, and observations during the open discussion session.





Welcome Address

Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng

Director General, BIISS

On behalf of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng, Director General of BIISS, welcomed the distinguished guests to the roundtable discussion. He extended his heartfelt gratitude to the respected Chief Guest, Admiral M Nazmul Hassan for gracing the occasion despite his hectic schedule.

General Anis stated that the Bay of Bengal holds extraordinary strategic, economic, and environmental significance. For centuries, it has been a bridge of connectivity and a corridor of opportunity for the littoral nations. In recent years, its importance has grown even further, shaped by the rise of blue economy, increasing trade and commerce, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. However, this potential is not without challenges. Maritime security, once considered solely a matter of safeguarding territories and protecting vessels, has become a far more complex and multidimensional concept. He opined that it encompasses traditional threats such as piracy, territorial disputes, and military competition, alongside non-traditional threats such as IUU fishing, marine pollution, human trafficking, and the growing impacts of climate change in the present time. These challenges transcend national borders, affecting the collective well-being of all nations in the Bay of Bengal.

The Bay of Bengal faces unique vulnerabilities that demand our immediate attention. There is growing concern that the sea could resemble the Pacific Garbage Patch, with devastating consequences for our environment and economies. Similarly, IUU fishing poses a major challenge, undermining the sustainable use of marine resources, jeopardising the livelihoods of fishing communities, and threatening the region's food security. Major General Anis opined that these issues, coupled with the impacts of climate change create existential risks for the millions who live along the Bay of Bengal's coasts. He believed that the growing importance of the Bay of Bengal in global geopolitics also brings opportunities and challenges. As nations vie for influence in this strategically critical region, the potential for tension increases. In this context, maintaining peace, stability, and cooperation is paramount.

Bangladesh has always played a constructive role in promoting peace, stability, and regional cooperation. Bangladesh's maritime policies are grounded in adherence to international laws including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and are driven by its commitment to peaceful coexistence. He recalled that the country's successful resolution of maritime boundary disputes with India and Myanmar is a testament to its dedication to resolving issues through dialogue and mutual respect. However, it is recognised that the nature of maritime security threats is evolving. To address them effectively, there is a need to embrace innovative approaches and build strong partnerships—both within the region and beyond.

General Anis believed the roundtable offered a valuable platform to engage in meaningful discussions about the threats faced and the strategies that must be adopted. He was optimistic that through collaboration and dialogue, complex and interlinked challenges of the maritime domain could be effectively addressed. Finally, he encouraged everyone to bring their expertise, insights, and innovative ideas to the table to shape the future of maritime security in the Bay of Bengal.

Keynote Speech

Emerging Maritime Security Threats in the Bay of Bengal: Unfolding the Multilevel Strategies



Moutusi Islam

Research Fellow, BIIS

Ms Moutusi Islam began her presentation by stating that she would address two key questions: what are the primary maritime security threats in the Bay of Bengal, and what multi-level strategies—national, regional, and international—can effectively address these threats? She outlined her approach, which included discussing the concept of maritime security, analysing current threats in the Bay of Bengal, and identifying multi-level strategies to respond to them.

She started by defining maritime security as a fluid concept with no fixed meaning, varying based on the actor defining it. However, it broadly involves addressing traditional and non-traditional issues to secure maritime spaces. She elaborated on three theoretical approaches to maritime security. The realist school views it as a matter of sea power, emphasising national security and power accumulation, with naval forces as the central actors. However, the liberal school focuses on international regimes governing maritime activities, particularly promoting a stable maritime regime underpinned by the principles of the UNCLOS. While the constructivist school deconstructs maritime security, identifying humans, naval forces, and maritime regimes as key actors, and emphasising capability-building at different levels. She stressed that these approaches are not mutually exclusive and that maritime security strategies often incorporate elements from all three perspectives. Understanding these frameworks helps policymakers and stakeholders address maritime challenges in a comprehensive and nuanced manner.

She then moved on to current maritime security threats in the Bay of Bengal, beginning with territorial disputes and naval militarisation. Increased naval presence and competition from regional and extra-regional powers pose significant challenges. While Bangladesh's disputes with Myanmar and India were resolved in 2012 and 2014, respectively, issues persist regarding overlapping continental shelves and exclusive economic zones. In 2020, Bangladesh submitted an amended maritime boundary to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), but the process was complicated by India's 2021 opposition to Bangladesh's baseline, submitted via a letter to the UN. This opposition slowed progress and hindered cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. These disputes not only strain bilateral relations but also impede the potential

for collaborative efforts in resource management. Resolving these issues requires sustained diplomatic dialogue and a commitment to adhering to international legal frameworks.

On piracy and armed robbery, she clarified that piracy, as defined by international law, occurs on the high seas and is uncommon in the Bay of Bengal. Instead, the region experiences armed robbery and petty theft. Over the past decade, there have been 141 incidents of armed robbery and theft, with Bangladesh accounting for 64 incidents and India 71. Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand had 3, 1, and 2 incidents, respectively. She pointed out that most incidents in 2024 occurred in Bangladeshi waters, near ports such as Chittagong (3 incidents), Kutubdia (4), and Mongla (1), as well as Indian waters near Kakinada port (2). This aligns with previous trends. Of these incidents, 67 per cent involved petty theft, while 33 per cent were armed robberies. While piracy is less prevalent, she noted its potential threat, citing the 2010 hijacking of a Bangladeshi merchant ship by Somali pirates and a similar incident in 2024. She emphasised that the policy approach to piracy in the Bay of Bengal should differ from that for the Indian Ocean.

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is another major problem. She cited a 2015 Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) assessment estimating illegal catches valued between US\$3.35 billion and US\$10.40 billion annually. According to the 2023 *IUU Fishing Index*, Bangladesh ranked 59th globally. This places Bangladesh behind Sri Lanka (77th), Myanmar (84th), and Thailand (105th), which are performing relatively better, while India ranked 4th, reflecting one of the worst situations globally. This low ranking highlights the scale of challenges Bangladesh faces in managing and monitoring its fisheries effectively. Illegal fishing by Indian fishermen in Bangladeshi waters remains a persistent issue, with over 1,009 Indian fishermen arrested over the past decade. She identified the lack of a coordinated fishing ban between Bangladesh and India as a major impediment.

Discussing drug trafficking, she explained that the Bay of Bengal's proximity to the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent makes it a hotspot for narcotics trafficking. Fishing vessels are often exploited to transport drugs, taking advantage of gaps in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), which undermine the region's ability to detect and interdict such activities effectively. She noted that drug networks not only disrupt local governance but also fuel organised crime and exacerbate security challenges in coastal areas. Additionally, the Bay of Bengal faces critical environmental threats, including rising sea levels, intensified cyclones, and coastal erosion due to climate change. These environmental challenges displace millions and threaten livelihoods. Marine pollution from both land- and sea-based sources, such as untreated industrial waste, agricultural runoff, and oil spills, continues to degrade marine ecosystems, posing a severe threat to biodiversity and the sustainable use of marine resources.

To address these challenges, Ms Islam outlined a multi-level strategy encompassing regulatory frameworks, organisational structures, and resources. In terms of regulatory framework, at the national level, she advocated for formulating specific maritime security strategies and strengthening domestic legal frameworks. She noted that while India, Thailand, and Indonesia have national maritime strategies, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar do not. At regional level, she suggested developing frameworks under the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and establishing bilateral codes of conduct or memorandums of understanding for dispute resolution and fisheries management. Internationally, she emphasised the importance of ratifying treaties. India has yet to ratify the 2016 Agreement on Port State Measures, in which countries agree to deny port entry to vessels engaged in IUU fishing. Similarly, India, Bangladesh, and Thailand have yet to ratify the 2003 United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Compliance Agreement. However, she acknowledged the challenges posed by the limited acceptance and implementation of these agreements.

In terms of organisational structures, she recommended streamlining fragmented national agencies to improve coordination at the national level. Regionally, she proposed enhancing navy-to-navy and coastguard-to-coastguard collaboration and establishing mechanisms for information sharing. Internationally, she suggested leveraging forums like the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) for dialogue on maritime security, advocating for joint exercises and capacity-building initiatives to enhance collective preparedness. In this regard, she noted the challenges being overlapping mandates and weak coordination, which often result in inefficiencies and duplication of efforts. To overcome these hurdles, she called for clearly defined roles, improved legal frameworks, and sustained political will to ensure effective multilateral cooperation.

Regarding resources and technology, she emphasised the need to enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) through ships, radars, Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), and satellites at the national level. She also called for modernising coastal security with advanced surveillance and personnel training. Regionally, she suggested developing standardised procedures for information sharing and joint operations, particularly for combating transnational crimes like IUU Fishing and smuggling. Internationally, she proposed building a global maritime security infrastructure, including robust port security measures, improved navigation systems, and coordinated disaster response capabilities to address maritime emergencies effectively. However, she acknowledged the challenges posed by limited resources and uneven technological capacity across countries, which could hinder equitable implementation. To bridge this gap, she recommended fostering public-private partnerships, seeking international funding support, and sharing best practices to enhance technological capabilities across the Bay of Bengal region.

Ms Islam concluded by stressing that addressing the Bay of Bengal's maritime challenges requires a holistic approach integrating regulatory, organisational, and technological strategies at all levels. She emphasised the need for seamless cooperation among national, regional, and international stakeholders, highlighting that a shared vision is essential for fostering trust and collective action. However, she cautioned that divergent maritime security policies, resource constraints, and geopolitical tensions could pose significant obstacles, necessitating diplomatic efforts to build consensus and ensure equitable resource allocation.

Presentation on

Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Geopolitics and Strategic Implications



Dr Rashed Uz Zaman

*Professor, Department of International Relations,
University of Dhaka*

Dr Rashed Uz Zaman spoke on 'Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Geopolitics and Strategic Implications'. Bay of Bengal is the biggest bay in the world, and the Bay of Bengal region is defined by five countries. Among them are India, the world's most populous country, and Bangladesh, the eighth most populous country globally. Logic says, this bay should be a natural and thriving economic space, binding South and Southeast Asia into one. Unfortunately, it is relatively a backwater region, geopolitics of and conventional geopolitics are trying to change that. He, therefore, endeavoured to see what challenges lay ahead. In other parts of the globe, there were macro regions that were closely connected, with common needs and challenges. The European Union (EU) was a classic example where countries came together as they shared a more or less similar economy, history, social interactions and so on. In the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), there were USA, Canada, Mexico in North America, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Southeast Asia, but in South Asia, it seemed as if they had drifted the other way. Following independence from colonial rule in the late 1940s, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar turned inwards, protectionism and animosity became norms as far as this region was concerned. Despite being located near one of the busiest shipping routes in the world, trade conducted by Bay of Bengal countries with the outside world remains relatively small compared to other blocs. Far worse is, they trade very little amongst themselves. It is only 6 per cent of their total trade compared with about 23 per cent of that of ASEAN. Hence, one could see the regional economy was fragmented. But there were attempts to correct this fragmentation. The impetus came mostly from India and was motivated not only by the desire to foster regional development, but also to counter China's efforts to increase its own influence in its backyard. In other words, things fall back to traditional geopolitics. At the same time, these littorals have mostly understood that connectivity and trade are key to prosperity. One indication was the huge amount of money being spent on infrastructure development, particularly

focusing on ports, power and similar sectors. These range from construction of Bangladesh's first deep sea port at Matarbari at the top of the Bay of Bengal, to the vast expansion of Colombo Port that sits on major transoceanic shipping routes at the bottom. The Matarbari project is being backed by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) while one part of Colombo Port is being developed by China; the other part is being developed by India's Adani Group and American Development Financing, which was an interesting aspect. According to Dr Zaman, without being physically present at the place, it was very difficult for most people to comprehend what the Bay of Bengal meant in reality. It resembles a triangle, where Bangladesh is at the top, Sri Lanka on the left, Thailand and Myanmar on the right-hand side.

An interesting yet often ignored issue which Dr Zaman highlighted was the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Andaman Sea. There remained a need to come out of this compartmentalisation. These two islands are called "God's gifts to India". In spite of such developments, all that had taken place, e.g., increase of port facilities, generation and transfer of power across borders, grounds for skepticism remained. In 2007, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) laid out a plan, which detailed the links needed for boosting regional connectivity. Nonetheless, for years, the plan remained neglected and neighbours did not bother to inform each other about infrastructure projects, let alone cooperate on them. Even if the political will for deeper integration is somehow decided upon, two huge challenges loomed and these were geopolitical in nature. The internal one was in South Asia, i.e., Myanmar, which is the link among South Asia, Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia. Here, Dr Zaman drew attention to maps, showing the country being a link between South and Southeast Asia. The country is now at war with itself. Given the fluid nature of the situation, the junta in charge, neither has the will, nor expertise to think about long-term planning. A vital question remained: would Myanmar break up in the near future? A tenuous ceasefire between Myanmar military and the Arakan Army (AA), a predominantly Buddhist ethnic armed group, broke down in November 2023, leading to a major escalation of conflict in Rakhine. Since resumption of the fighting, the AA made rapid gains in territory, claiming full control of 10 out of 17 townships in Rakhine, including a town in Chin State and partial control of several others. In Myanmar's history, it was now that the AA controlled more territory and larger population than any other non-state armed group in the country. This should be kept in consideration. What would be Myanmar's future, how that would impact the Bay of Bengal region, if Myanmar would fragment and the problem continue, which outside actors might get involved, and what Ms Islam referred earlier to, i.e., piracy and other problems, should also be kept in mind. These problems do not originate in the sea, but on land instead, and then tend to move to the sea. The other challenge is traditional geopolitics. Bay of Bengal is an important place in the rivalry being played out across the Indo-Pacific.

It is alleged China is increasingly interested in Myanmar as a way to get access to the Indian Ocean, particularly for Southwestern China. Power rivalry also triggered the need of getting good space so that it can spy on rival navies. This is one reason some

names are often heard but are very difficult for finding on maps, e.g., Coco Island, as opposed to Colombo or Hambantota, in both print and electronic media. These names are being pushed forward. Even if Bay of Bengal littorals would find greater means to cooperate, contestation seemed also to become a permanent feature in the region and this deserved serious consideration from Bangladesh. One evidence in this regard came from the results of the latest US elections of November 2024: the excitement and speculations ended with victory of the Republican candidate Donald J. Trump. While his victory would surely have significant consequences domestically, results of these elections would produce ripple effects across the globe. South Asia would be no exception and impacted by Trump's 'America First' approach in foreign and security policy domains.

On the crux of the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), Dr Zaman said in 2017 in Vietnam, Trump came up with this idea: ensure a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific against China's revisionist and coercive behaviour with help from allies and partners, as was propounded by the first Trump government. The Biden government, in spite of its hostilities towards the Trump government, took the whole approach a step further by pursuing strategic competition with China, terming it as a pacing threat, i.e., a near consequential, large threat, and enacting measures to curtail its dominance in various strategic sectors. The second Trump government would continue with the threads of Biden's policies but also adopt a more hardline approach on China. India's role as a cornerstone in the US' IPS under both Trump and Biden governments suggests it would be a crucial partner in Trump's second term. The confluence of interests between India and the US, particularly challenges coming from a rising China, has been a key driver of this relationship. The Indo-Pacific strategic partnership flourished under the previous Trump government, with the two countries signing various foundational defence agreements. In the last 15 years, India bought nearly US\$20 billion worth of weaponry from the US, including a US\$ 3.5 billion helicopter deal. The US approved key arms sales to India and provided support during India-China border standoff, e.g., electronic UAVs, winter clothing, surveillance and intelligence reports as India was facing Chinese troops in the Galwan Valley. All these resulted in the US putting India on high pedestal and is expected to continue to do so, which will have repercussions for US engagement with the Bay of Bengal littorals. In other words, it concerns Bangladesh.

On the other hand, in the Indian Ocean, the engagement of the Trump government will primarily rely on reinforcing supply chains, connectivity, technological collaboration with India to counter China's economic influence in the region, involve regional partners like Australia and Japan bilaterally through the QUAD format and it is likely to complement the security-oriented approach in the Indo-Pacific. On 17 November 2024, the US Defence Secretary was in Australia where he met his Japanese counterpart. As Japan, Australia and the US talked about more collaboration in the defence sector, India was also invited, particularly focusing on its maritime surveillance role in the Indian Ocean region. Bangladesh must take notice of these

things. With Trump in power, India's focus will be on defence, space and technology; in many ways, roadblocks to India-US ties under the Biden government just concerned on India's stance vis-a-vis Russia amidst Western pressure to isolate Moscow and differing views on shared values, but this will no longer be constraining the two countries in the days ahead. More importantly, the Indian-American community has become extremely powerful in the US as evident from their successes. Along with Nigerians, Indian-Americans are the most successful immigrant community in the country. As large numbers of immigrants are voting for Republicans these days, this also means socially conservative choices may now be seen as shared transnational values between the US and China. Here, Dr Zaman raised an important question: how should Bangladesh cope with such changes in the days ahead? Did the country take these changes into consideration, what would these mean in the Bay of Bengal region and overall, for its foreign policy in coming days?

Dr Zaman stated that geopolitics is not only about alliances which are coming up, but Bangladesh also needs to look into its own capabilities and this reflects into hardcore geopolitics. He suggested taking a look at Indian ports; there are often discussions on Northeast India and Bangladesh connectivity, but connectivity would not simply come if ports would not be efficient or competitive enough, something that should be kept in consideration. Indian ports have improved their efficiency and capacity; enormous progress has taken the capacity to more than double in one decade, from 745 million tonnes to 1600 million tonnes. The turnaround time plummeted from 127 hours to about 53 hours in 2022. The Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPA) is India's most efficient public port with a turnaround time of about 21 hours, less than a day. Half of India's container traffic and quarter of customs revenue are generated at this port. Bangladesh needs to take three important things done by India into consideration: A private sector has been brought in with the landlord model in public ports. In this system, the government owns everything, but operation is handed over to private sector organisations, including logistics, electronic tolling, national tax regime and modernisation. In JNPA, 90 per cent of consignments are never physically inspected. Still, one should never do away with traditional geopolitics and should always keep it in mind instead. Dr Zaman highlighted a significant event that was taking place but there was very little to no discussion of it in Bangladesh.

Old style geopolitics matters as well and that is why the Galathea Bay in the Nicobar Islands is becoming a major hub as India makes use of this "Gift from God". What they are trying to do is to make an international mega container transshipment port at the Galathea Bay at greater Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal and this can be a game changer. The bay, with a natural draught of 20 metres will be strategically placed on east-west international trade and shipping routes in proximity of transshipment terminals like Singapore, Klang (Malaysia), and Colombo. It is also a part of a rapidly evolving Indo-Pacific geopolitical region and in this regard, geopolitics has to be remembered. As a gateway to the region, it is projected to capture transshipment cargo from India's east coast ports and also from Bangladesh and Myanmar. He raised a

question again: did Bangladesh really take the Galathea port into consideration as the country continues to make future plans? Then he showed the port on maps. India is developing it and looking at the projection, one can immediately understand it is only 40 miles away from the Strait of Malacca. This bears tremendous geopolitical implications, particularly in a world where the IPS is again going to be important and at the forefront. Speaking on where Bangladesh is standing, Dr Zaman said all was not still lost. The Chittagong Port is coming up. Bangladesh is trying to improve; there has been success in carrying more goods in fewer ships, increasing the cargo, containers, and ships. The draught has also increased but it is an ongoing issue and not something about which there is any room for complacency.

He said this because he was trying to make the audience understand that when people talk of trade or geopolitics, they often tend to look at the world through a black and white lens, which may not be so. When two countries are looked at, i.e., India and China, they are fighting with each other, but at the same time, their bilateral trade also has grown exponentially, in particular, after the Galwan Valley standoff in 2019 and up to 2023. Today, India's dependence on Chinese imports has only grown. In FY 2023-24, China edged past the US to reclaim its position as India's top trading partner. India's imports from China rose to US\$ 102 billion, a 55.6 per cent increase than that of 2020, out of US\$118 billion in their total bilateral trade. The benefit is for the Chinese side, but India has still gone ahead. China was India's biggest source of India's major industrial products in 2023, accounting for around 30 per cent in categories, such as electronics, machinery, cars, textiles and chemicals, etc. Overall evolving geopolitics would significantly shape the security and economics of South Asia, where China, Japan, India and the US would all have a dominant role by virtue of their interest in the Indo-Pacific. Bangladesh needs to remember that and make its policies accordingly. The country would likely have to walk on a tightrope, balancing its relations with Beijing, New Delhi, Tokyo and Washington in the days ahead. Dr Zaman concluded the presentation by citing a line from the Merchant of Venice, where Antonio, the man who gave the money, says "thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea, neither have I money nor commodity to raise a pleasant sum". Bangladesh's situation is not as bad as Antonio's, but it will still need a lot of deft handling, good charts, and sound seamanship to traverse the waters ahead.

Presentation on

Emerging Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Policy Options and Strategies for Bangladesh



Rear Admiral Mohammad Musa, OSP, NPP, rcds, afwc, psc, PhD

*Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Personnel)
Chairman, Bangladesh Institute of Maritime
Research and Development (BIMRAD)*

Rear Admiral Mohammad Musa presented the paper on ‘Emerging Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Policy Options and Strategies for Bangladesh’. The Bay of Bengal is a maritime nexus that links the Middle East, Africa, South and Southeast Asia through critical trade routes. It represents a vital artery for global commerce and energy transportation. For Bangladesh, the Bay holds economic, strategic, and environmental significance. However, this vital maritime expanse is fraught with traditional and emerging security challenges that demand robust and dynamic policy responses. Addressing these concerns requires Bangladesh to adopt an integrated approach that combines national capabilities with regional and global cooperation. He discussed maritime security in the context of Bangladesh in the first section of his presentation and believed that, in the context of Bangladesh, it is a comprehensive concept. It entails the protection of national sovereignty, safeguarding of maritime resources, and promotion of safe trade routes. It also encompasses mitigating threats such as piracy, illegal fishing, and smuggling while ensuring sustainability of marine ecosystems. For Bangladesh, this multifaceted responsibility extends to leveraging its maritime domain for economic growth, addressing climate-induced vulnerabilities, and fostering regional stability. The nation must simultaneously address immediate security concerns while developing long-term strategies to harness blue economy's potential.

In the second part, he discussed maritime security challenges of Bangladesh elaborately. Bangladesh's maritime security is constrained by several overlapping challenges. Traditional threats, such as unresolved territorial claims and maritime crimes, persist alongside newer challenges like climate change and geopolitical rivalries. The country's submission to the CLCS, which aims to secure extended maritime boundaries, remains unresolved, which limits its capacity to fully explore and utilise offshore resources. The Bay of Bengal's frequent natural disasters, such as

cyclones and flooding, further complicate maritime security efforts. These disasters exacerbate vulnerabilities, disrupt livelihoods, and damage marine ecosystems. Additionally, overfishing and pollution threaten the sustainability of marine resources, while global warming accelerates these risks by impacting biodiversity and increasing the frequency of extreme weather events.

Geopolitical rivalries in the region have intensified, with the growing presence of extra-regional powers like China and the US. Military alliances and exercises, like the Malabar Exercise involving the US, Japan, India, and Australia, reflect these nations' strategic competition. While these developments highlight the Bay's geopolitical importance, they also increase regional tensions, complicating cooperative security efforts. Bangladesh's limited maritime infrastructure and resources hinder its ability to effectively address these challenges. The aging fleet of naval and coast guard vessels, coupled with insufficient surveillance systems, undermines its ability further to protect its maritime interests. Lack of an integrated governance framework among maritime agencies, research institutions, and ministries has led to inefficiencies in policy implementation and operational coordination.

In the third section, the presenter focused on current capabilities and limitations of maritime security strategies. Bangladesh has made significant strides in maritime security through efforts by its Navy, Coast Guard, and participation in regional platforms. However, these efforts are constrained by several limitations. The nation's maritime forces are operating with outdated assets, which are inadequate to meet the demands of modern maritime challenges. Surveillance and monitoring capabilities remain insufficient, leaving vast areas of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) vulnerable to illegal activities. Furthermore, the absence of scientific research vessels restricts Bangladesh's ability to explore and exploit maritime resources effectively. Lack of integration among stakeholders further compounds these challenges, as fragmented governance hampers the ability to respond to threats cohesively.

Rear Admiral Musa suggested some policy recommendations for ensuring maritime security of Bangladesh. To address these multifaceted challenges, he believed the country must adopt a series of strategic measures. Strengthening maritime defence capabilities is paramount. This involves modernising naval and coast guard fleets, upgrading surveillance systems, and investing in cutting-edge technologies such as UAVs and artificial intelligence. These enhancements will improve operational efficiency and enable the maritime forces to address threats in real time.

The presenter opined that regional cooperation is another critical pillar for Bangladesh's maritime security strategy. By actively engaging in regional organisations such as the BIMSTEC and IORA, Bangladesh can foster collaboration in areas like disaster response, maritime crime prevention, and resource management. Joint naval exercises, intelligence sharing, and coordinated patrols can further enhance regional stability.

He also suggested that blue economy holds immense potential for Bangladesh's sustainable development. A comprehensive evaluation of the nation's blue economy roadmap is necessary to ensure its effectiveness. Focused investments in maritime tourism, sustainable fishing, and energy exploration can create economic opportunities while preserving ecological balance. Additionally, robust policies and enforcement mechanisms are needed to combat marine pollution and overfishing, ensuring the sustainability of marine ecosystems. Improving maritime governance is essential for addressing the systemic inefficiencies that currently hinder Bangladesh's security efforts. Establishing a centralised National Maritime Authority can provide the leadership and coordination necessary for effective maritime management. This body should integrate efforts across ministries, ports, research institutions, and international partners to streamline decision-making and operational execution. Education and research play a crucial role in supporting maritime security and development. Investments in maritime education and the acquisition of oceanographic research vessels will enable Bangladesh to address knowledge gaps and develop innovative solutions. Besides, enhanced collaboration between universities, research institutions, and government agencies will further strengthen the nation's scientific and technical capabilities.

Rear Admiral Musa concluded his presentation by raising the point that Bangladesh's maritime security is at a crossroads, with significant challenges that require immediate and sustained attention. Addressing these challenges will necessitate a comprehensive approach that combines modernisation of defense capabilities, regional cooperation, and strategic investments in blue economy. Effective maritime governance, driven by a centralised authority, can ensure these efforts are coordinated and impactful. Keeping these in mind, Bangladesh can transform its maritime potential into a reality through them, securing a sustainable and prosperous future in the Bay of Bengal. The nation's ability to adapt and innovate in the face of evolving maritime challenges will define its trajectory as a maritime power in the region.

Open Discussion



Ambassador (Retd) Tariq A Karim

*Director, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies and
President, Bay of Bengal Institute
Cosmos Foundation*

Ambassador (Retd) Tariq A Karim said that security is categorised into two types: traditional and non-traditional. It has been assumed that traditional security concerns were largely obsolete; however, developments over the past half-decade indicate a resurgence, despite the existence of customary international laws under the framework of the United Nations. Instances such as the Russian aggression against Ukraine and Israel's plans for the annexation of Gaza and the West Bank exemplify this resurgence and highlight challenges faced by international organisations.

He noted the significance of geographical location must also be considered, particularly in relation to maritime security. National interests of states are prioritised in international engagements, often leading to competition rather than cooperation. He added that thus, internal resilience needs to be strengthened to attract external assistance. Through internal development, opportunities for collaborative efforts can be enhanced. It is anticipated that traditional security threats may reemerge. The Bay of Bengal, along with other water bodies, remains a region of unresolved disputes.

Non-traditional security threats, such as those stemming from environmental issues and climate change exacerbated by global warming, have demonstrated their impact over the past three decades. The environmental consequences, combined with population growth, are expected to result in resource depletion. Such depletion may trigger internal disputes over resource allocation, which, over time, could escalate into traditional security threats. Therefore, continuous engagement with all states is essential to address these challenges. From his past experience as a junior diplomat, it was observed that engaging with and understanding adversaries was critical. He suggested that collaboration with other states to build coalitions and frameworks that align with national interests has been consistently advocated as a strategic approach. Regional cooperation is considered a constructive approach for progress and establishing strong connections with neighboring states, particularly through the Bay of Bengal, offers opportunities to strengthen relationships.

He emphasised that organisations such as BIMSTEC, identified as important for the Bay of Bengal, were mentioned during the roundtable. However, he underscored it is important to note that Malaysia, Indonesia, and China—key players in the region—are not included. The Malacca Strait, critical for regional connectivity, underscores the necessity of their involvement. Additionally, he reminded the increasing presence of non-regional powers, such as China and the US, in the region necessitates their inclusion in discussions. He concluded with a suggestion that a balanced approach to regional cooperation and engagement with external powers is essential for addressing emerging security challenges.



Ambassador M Shameem Ahsan

Ambassador M Shameem Ahsan reflected on a recurring issue in such discussions: a tendency to focus on external challenges while neglecting internal issues. Drawing attention to the repetition of similar discussions over time, he questioned whether stakeholders and institutions have collectively revisited past recommendations and evaluated their implementation. He stressed the need for an incremental approach, suggesting that sustained efforts are required to assess progress over five- or ten-year periods for specific policy areas.

Ambassador Ahsan highlighted the importance of strengthening Bangladesh's position to foster meaningful connections with other states. He also raised concerns about piracy and armed robbery in maritime zones, emphasising their critical implications for trade security. While acknowledging that Bangladesh recorded relatively lower incidents of piracy, he questioned whether there were statistics to demonstrate a significant decline in such incidents over the years.

He also underscored the importance of learning from past incidents and asked whether Bangladesh established Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to manage such events effectively. Proactive measures and preparedness are crucial, as the possibility of future incidents cannot be ruled out. Lastly, he called for a structured and forward-looking approach to address these challenges comprehensively.



**Commodore Syed Misbah Uddin
Ahmad, (C), NUP, ndc, awfc, psc, BN
(Retd)**

Director General, BIMRAD

Commodore Syed Misbah Uddin Ahmad expressed his concerns about the growing geopolitical complexities in the Bay of Bengal, drawing a parallel with the Balkanisation of Central Europe a century ago, which eventually contributed to the outbreak of World Wars I and II. As an avid supporter of realism and a naval officer, he highlighted the intense geopolitical interests of both regional and extra-regional powers in the Bay of Bengal.

Commodore Ahmad elaborated on two key points: maritime security and Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook. He emphasised the necessity of enhancing Bangladesh's naval capabilities, asserting the Navy must be equipped to operate beyond the Bay of Bengal wherever Bangladesh's maritime national interests lie. He compared the Navy's strategic importance to an insurance premium, underscoring it should not be treated as just another maritime agency or be equated with other national forces such as the Army or Air Force. The Navy is the net provider of security for Bangladesh, given that the country's fortunes are closely tied to the sea.

He proposed establishing a separate maritime ministry where the Navy could contribute its expertise. This initiative should begin with defining a maritime doctrine, followed by the development of a comprehensive maritime policy and strategy, within which the Navy could refine its own policies and strategies. Commodore Ahmad noted that while the Bangladesh Navy currently possesses conventional capabilities, it must transition toward strategic deterrence, requiring significant budgetary support. He emphasised that this budget should focus on achieving strategic goals rather than merely increasing manpower.

On Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook, he pointed out that maritime dependencies, such as 19 per cent of container trade and 94 per cent of total trade, have not been adequately addressed. He argued for revisiting the Indo-Pacific Outlook to provide greater clarity, specificity, and inclusivity, highlighting Bangladesh's limited involvement in regional initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). He emphasised the need for a more vibrant and active presence in such platforms to advance the country's interests.

Finally, he called for Bangladesh to maintain a ‘sophisticated balance’ in its foreign policy, particularly in its relationships with neighbouring India and China. He acknowledged the strategic importance of India as a neighbour while noting China’s significant economic offers, such as US\$ 40 billion in joint venture projects. He underscored the necessity of navigating these relationships carefully to safeguard Bangladesh’s strategic and economic interests.



**Rear Admiral A S M A Awal, ndc, psc
(Retd)**

Rear Admiral A S M A Awal acknowledged the significance of the event and congratulated the presenters. He highlighted key points from presenter Ms Moutusi Islam’s keynote speech, particularly her emphasis on the historical interconnectedness of the Bay of Bengal region, characterised by commerce, connectivity, and culture during the sailing age. However, he lamented the erosion of these connections in contemporary times, noting the lack of robust linkages between South Asia and Southeast Asia. He identified Bangladesh and Myanmar as potential bridges between these regions, though he criticised Myanmar’s stance, which he suggested undermines regional cooperation.

Rear Admiral Awal emphasised the need for greater regional cooperation, first within the Bay of Bengal and subsequently across the wider Indian Ocean region. He outlined two primary issues for consideration: exploring opportunities for development and cooperation among states and addressing non-traditional security threats through collaborative efforts. He also pointed to the resurgence of geopolitical rivalries reminiscent of the 19th-century ‘Great Game’, highlighting the roles of India as a resident actor, China as an adjunct actor, Japan as an external actor, and the United States as a dominant external power in the region.

In addressing maritime defence, he stressed the importance of enhancing awareness and strengthening security measures, which are essential for supporting blue economy. Bangladesh’s economic dependence on the sea—over 90 per cent of its trade relies on maritime routes—necessitates the protection of maritime interests as part of its foreign policy priorities. Furthermore, he underscored the need for strategic reassessment, suggesting that Bangladesh revisit its maritime force structure, naval

strategy, and broader maritime policy aligns with contemporary security and economic challenges.

Reflecting on the concept of blue economy, Rear Admiral Awal recounted Bangladesh's leadership role in hosting a seminar on this subject in 2014, inspired by discussions at the 2012 Rio+20 Conference. Despite the passage of time, he observed a lack of significant progress in implementing blue economy initiatives and called for a renewed focus on addressing these issues to achieve sustainable development.

Finally, he referenced Article 25 of the Bangladeshi Constitution, emphasising the country's obligation to protect its trade and territory. He advocated for immediate and proactive measures to safeguard Bangladesh's maritime interests and ensure the strategic alignment of its policies with national priorities.



Air Cdre (Retd) Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury

Treasurer, East West University

At the roundtable, Air Cdre (Retd) Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury shared his perspectives on the remarkable growth of the Bangladesh Navy and the challenges ahead. Drawing from his experiences since 1971, he highlighted the Navy's progress from its early days of limited resources and personnel to its current stature as a robust and modern force.

He began by recounting the Navy's humble beginnings, noting that in 1972, it lacked officers and even struggled to pay its sailors. Back then, an Air Force officer had to facilitate salary distribution using handwritten lists. Despite these constraints, the Navy laid a strong foundation, with petty officers stepping into leadership roles to ensure operations continued smoothly.

Reflecting on broader military advancements of the 1970s, he contrasted the Navy's progress with the Air Force, which had acquired state-of-the-art MiG-21 fighter jets in 1973. This was a source of pride, as these aircraft were among the most advanced in South Asia at the time. However, he underscored that the Navy's growth trajectory over the last 50 years, especially the past three decades, had been nothing short of extraordinary. He praised the expansion of naval facilities, including advanced bases and submarine bases in Chattogram and Cox's Bazar, as well as the induction of

modern vessels like the *BNS Umar Farooq* and *BNS Abu Bakr*. Acknowledging the contributions of the Navy's early leaders, he highlighted the pivotal roles played by the first three chiefs in shaping the force. Their leadership and vision ensured that the Navy grew steadily, even in the face of limited resources. He encouraged today's naval officers to appreciate how far the force has come.

Turning to current challenges, Air Cdre (Retd) Choudhury stressed the importance of inter-service collaboration. He expressed concern about the relative underdevelopment of the Air Force compared to the Navy and Army, particularly in providing air cover for naval operations. Long-range fighters and maritime patrol aircraft were essential for protecting fleets at sea, as shipborne defences alone could not counter advanced aerial threats. Drawing comparisons with neighbouring countries, he noted that both India and Pakistan had dedicated air assets to support their navies, a gap that Bangladesh needed to address urgently.

He also emphasised the need for more joint service initiatives and strategic planning. He lamented the lack of integrated efforts across the Army, Navy, and Air Force, urging greater coordination to maximise the efficiency of defense spending. Given the significant allocation of nearly US\$ 5 billion to defence in the last year, he advocated for a balanced approach that prioritised both operational capabilities and administrative support.

In a broader context, he called for stronger diplomatic and security ties with the AA to address regional challenges, particularly issues related to the Rohingya crisis and cross-border tensions. Fostering cooperation with regional stakeholders was vital for ensuring long-term stability and protecting Bangladesh's maritime interests. He concluded his remarks by commending the Navy's efforts to project its capabilities effectively and its commitment to safeguarding the nation's sovereignty. He encouraged continued strategic advancements, expressed optimism about the Navy's future role in national and regional security.



Rear Admiral (Retd) Mostafizur Rahman, cd, ndu, psc

Rear Admiral Mostafizur Rahman emphasised the significance of traditional maritime security in safeguarding Bangladesh's sovereignty and economic interests. Drawing on his extensive experience, he highlighted key incidents where the Bangladesh Navy demonstrated its capability to assert control over territorial waters, showcasing the importance of maritime forces. Traditional maritime security often takes a backseat in such discussions and he stressed its critical role in maintaining sovereignty and facilitating economic activities in Bangladesh's maritime zones.

Citing two significant instances of 'gunboat diplomacy,' he illustrated how the Bangladesh Navy had successfully defended the nation's maritime claims without escalating to full-scale conflict. The first incident involved the Indian naval ship *INS Sandhayak* which entered disputed waters near Talpatti Island. In response, Bangladesh deployed a small, converted naval ship—a former deputy commissioner's boat equipped with a single gun and weighing just 100 tons. Despite the disparity in size and capability, the Bangladeshi vessel stood firm, compelling India to agree to joint surveys to resolve the dispute. Rear Admiral Mustafizur, who personally participated in this operation, underscored the symbolic and strategic importance of such actions.

The second incident involved Myanmar, which had begun conducting surveys in contested waters in 2008. Bangladesh responded by deploying the naval ship *BNS Umar Farooq* to assert its claim, leading Myanmar to withdraw its French survey vessel. He credited diplomatic and military coordination for the successful resolution, highlighting the role of traditional security measures in protecting national interests. He also pointed out that while Bangladesh's current economic activities are limited to shallow waters of 30 to 60 meters depth, the nation's vast EEZ holds immense potential for future exploration. Preparing for traditional security threats in these deeper, economically significant zones is crucial, especially along the borders with neighbouring countries.

He further emphasised the strategic importance of regional developments, particularly the proposed port in the Nicobar Islands. He noted that while Sri Lanka currently serves as a hub for transshipment, the operationalisation of the Nicobar Port could

shift the regional dynamics. Positioned at the mouth of the Malacca Strait, this port could attract significant maritime traffic, excluding Chinese vessels, which are likely to continue using Sri Lankan facilities.



Dr Mohammad Zahidul Islam Khan

*Research Fellow, UOR, and
Registrar, American International University
Bangladesh (AIUB)*

Reflecting on his 36 years of military service, Dr Mohammad Zahidul Islam Khan moved beyond historical recollections to address pressing geopolitical issues and their implications for maritime security.

Highlighting the blurred lines between traditional and non-traditional security threats, he pointed to the securitisation of climate change as a recent example. He discussed the United Nations Security Council's efforts to frame climate vulnerability as a security issue, aimed at incorporating it into conflict prevention strategies. However, resistance from key global players, including vetoes by India and Russia and abstention by China, underscored the disagreement between multilateral commitments and bilateral relationships. This divergence, he argued, complicates the alignment of national strategies with international obligations.

On the topic of engagement, he emphasised the need for a cautious approach. While engagement with external powers is essential, he warned against 'unrestricted engagement' which could undermine Bangladesh's strategic and policy sovereignty. He cited instances where treaties and MOUs allowed foreign powers to establish infrastructure, such as radar systems along the coastline, potentially binding Bangladesh to external spheres of influence. Such developments, he noted, can compromise the country's autonomy and strategic flexibility.

To address these challenges, he advocated for formulation of a comprehensive National Maritime Strategy or National Maritime Policy, ratified by Parliament, to guide external engagements. This strategy would define parameters for partnerships, ensuring they align with Bangladesh's national interests and obligations under international treaties. He specifically highlighted concerns about initiatives like the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a non-UN instrument led by the United States, which permits intervention in high seas operations. He urged policymakers to

carefully evaluate such engagements to avoid inadvertently subscribing to the strategic priorities of other nations, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or India's *Sagarmala* project.

Lastly, he called for a balanced approach to maritime policy, informed by expertise and rooted in Bangladesh's long-term interests. By combining historical context with strategic foresight, he stressed, Bangladesh can maintain its autonomy while fostering meaningful international collaboration.



Captain Md Abdus Samad (N), PSC, BN

*Blue Economy Cell
Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources
Division*

Captain Md Abdus Samad shed light on the government's current and planned initiatives to harness the potential of Bangladesh's maritime resources. He highlighted that the government has already drafted two key policies: the Maritime Military Security Policy and the Maritime Non-Military Security Policy. These drafts, incorporating input from various ministries, are expected to be implemented soon. While traditional maritime security, managed by forces such as the Navy, Coast Guard, and River Police, remains important, non-traditional, non-military security is increasingly critical. For Bangladesh, as a resource-stricken nation, the sea represents a vital opportunity for economic growth.

Despite the delimitation of maritime boundaries and the clear potential for resource extraction, he noted that efforts to explore and emphasize these resources remain inadequate. Neighbouring countries have been actively extracting maritime resources since 2012, leaving Bangladesh lagging behind. He urged that the maritime strategy should focus on tapping into the ocean's energy and fisheries resources, among others, and called for actionable plans to translate discussions into concrete outcomes.

Drawing comparisons, he mentioned that India shifted its maritime security focus from 'using the seas' to 'securing the seas' in 2015, while China's strategy revolves around 'near-sea defense' and 'far-sea protection.' Bangladesh, he argued, should develop similarly specific and actionable strategies, as maritime geopolitics requires both long-term planning and immediate action.

Captain Samad also detailed the government's efforts to implement its maritime strategies through 372 action plans distributed across 24 ministries and departments. These plans, emphasized into short, medium, and long-term goals, are being regularly monitored to track progress. He expressed hope that forums like this roundtable would occur more frequently, encouraging collaboration among policymakers, experts, and stakeholders.

In his suggestions for maritime strategy, he advocated for a non-aligned approach to resource management. He proposed distributing Bangladesh's maritime assets—such as energy, fisheries, ports, and shipping—across partnerships with multiple countries. This diversification, he argued, would not only prevent over-dependence on a single nation but also foster shared interests among various players, reducing security risks and creating mutual benefits.

Finally, he introduced the government's initiative on Marine Spatial Planning (MSP), a concept yet to be discussed in the roundtable. The MSP project, forwarded to the planning ministry, aims to zone the sea for specific uses, ensuring disciplined and sustainable management of resources. This would address issues like illegal unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and marine pollution. The government plans to employ international consultants to develop the MSP framework, which he described as a potential game-changer for Bangladesh's maritime governance.

In conclusion, Captain Samad emphasised that while the government is making progress, more frequent dialogues and collaborative efforts are essential to realise the full potential of Bangladesh's maritime domain. His comments served as a call to action, urging stakeholders to prioritise resource management, strategic partnerships, and sustainable development in shaping the nation's maritime future.



**Rear Admiral Md Ziaul Hoque OSP,
ndc, afwc, psc**

Director General, Bangladesh Coast Guard

Rear Admiral Mohammad Ziaul Hoque, OSP, ndc, afwc, psc, Director General, Bangladesh Coast Guard acknowledged the enriching nature of such discussions, which have long been a focus in professional circles. Drawing on his experiences at the Staff College and as Senior Directing Staff (SDS) at the National Defense College (NDC), he noted that while similar discussions have taken place in Bangladesh, the implementation of recommendations remains a persistent challenge. He emphasised the need for actionable outcomes to ensure progress.

Rear Admiral Hoque highlighted the critical role of the Bangladesh Coast Guard in ensuring law and order in coastal areas, managing disasters, controlling pollution, and monitoring infiltrators. Despite these extensive responsibilities, he pointed at limited resources available to the Coast Guard, including only 4,000 personnel, a small fleet of ships and boats with basic surveillance capabilities. He underlined the importance of addressing these resource constraints to effectively manage the country's 710 kilometers of coastline, which extends to 1,340 kilometers when including islands and estuaries.

Discussing blue economy's potential, he noted that land-based resources are depleting, and there is a growing need to explore marine resources using advanced technologies and sustainable practices. He recounted his efforts to engage with stakeholders like the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), where he faced challenges convincing businesses to invest in blue economy due to a lack of guaranteed returns. This, he argued, underscores the need for greater government involvement and a structured approach to maritime development; meaningful progress would require active government participation in discussions and decision-making processes. He recommended inclusion of government representatives in future seminars and roundtables to ensure key recommendations would be noted and acted upon. Furthermore, he proposed the appointment of a maritime advisor to the Chief Advisor, particularly in the current context of a non-political interim government, which includes military and police advisors. He strongly advocated for establishing a dedicated ministry or division for maritime affairs. Such a body, he argued, would ensure effective governance and investment in maritime security, integral to the country's economic processes. He also highlighted ongoing

collaborations with countries like Australia and Japan, expressing optimism that these partnerships would enhance Bangladesh's maritime security capabilities in addressing both traditional and non-traditional threats.

In conclusion, Rear Admiral Hoque reiterated the need for immediate government involvement to implement the recommendations arising from such discussions. While many points had already been addressed, the critical takeaway was the necessity of integrating governmental support to achieve tangible outcomes.



Mr Abdul Motaleb Sarker

*Director General (SAARC & BIMSTEC)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

Mr Abdul Motaleb Sarker, provided an overview of developments in regional cooperation in the security sector, emphasising the progress made in recent years. Security issues had long been considered a sensitive topic in both SAARC and BIMSTEC. However, significant changes began in 2016 during the BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat in Goa, India, where security cooperation prominently featured in the 'Goa Declaration'. A new mechanism was established for meetings of National Security Chiefs from member states, and designated officers attended in the absence of specific security chiefs in some countries. Since then, four such meetings have taken place, with the first in India (2017), Bangladesh (2018), Thailand (2019) and the latest in Myanmar in 2024.

Mr Sarker highlighted the expansion of security cooperation under BIMSTEC. At first, only counterterrorism and transnational crime were included as areas of collaboration in 2004, limited to meetings, seminars, and symposiums. Over time, the scope has grown to include working groups on various critical issues, such as anti-money laundering, preventing terrorism, combating illicit drug trafficking, legal and law enforcement issues, intelligence sharing, and addressing human trafficking.

In subsequent meetings, new mechanisms and sub-mechanisms were developed to enhance cooperation. These include expert groups on maritime security, cybersecurity, and space security, along with initiatives like the BIMSTEC Track 1.5 Security Dialogue Forum and think-tank dialogues on regional security. An expert

group on the Himalayan Science Council was also established. These initiatives aim to strengthen regional collaboration on diverse security issues.

Mr Sarker further elaborated on the legal frameworks developed under BIMSTEC. The BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime, and Illicit Drug Trafficking came into force on March 16, 2021. Similarly, the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, signed during the fifth BIMSTEC Summit in 2022 in Colombo, has been ratified by most member states, with Nepal and Bhutan expected to finalise their ratifications soon. The BIMSTEC Convention Against Trafficking in Persons is nearing finalisation, pending comments from member states.

Additionally, Mr Sarker discussed the progress made in maritime security cooperation, including the preparation of SOPs for maritime law enforcement agencies and guidelines for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. The final drafts of these guidelines are expected to be approved at the next BIMSTEC Summit. An action plan for cybersecurity cooperation has also been shared with member states for feedback, and a draft MoU for establishing the Himalayan Science Council is under review.

He also noted ongoing discussions on several other frameworks, such as the BIMSTEC Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, Convention on Extradition, action plans on drug control and human trafficking in the Bay of Bengal region, and mechanisms to combat the illicit flow of funds. Efforts are underway to finalise a concept note on countering radicalisation and terrorism and to publish an annual BIMSTEC drug report. Mr Sarker also mentioned the finalisation of an MoU between BIMSTEC and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and ongoing discussions with development partners like the World Bank and ADB.

While outlining these achievements, he highlighted some challenges, particularly the lack of coordination and differing opinions among stakeholders within member states. For instance, during discussions on Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and IUU fishing, varying perspectives emerged, creating hurdles for regional and international cooperation. He emphasised the need for regular discussions among stakeholders to build consensus and streamline efforts. In conclusion, Mr Sarker reiterated the importance of addressing these challenges and ensuring cohesive decision-making for effective regional security cooperation.



Ambassador Mashfee Binte Shams

*Rector, Foreign Service Academy (FSA),
Bangladesh*

Ambassador Mashfee Binte Shams emphasised the critical interconnection between economic prosperity and national security. She highlighted the pivotal role of the Bay of Bengal in driving Bangladesh's economic growth, focusing particularly on maritime trade. While Bangladesh is making strides in developing its ports and infrastructure, a key gap remains in how these ports are linked to others globally. The country continues to rely heavily on transshipment hubs such as Singapore, Colombo, and Dubai, rarely exploring direct shipping routes beyond these traditional centers. Recent direct shipping initiatives with countries like Italy and Pakistan demonstrate the potential for broader connectivity. However, such efforts remain limited. Ambassador Shams explained that the lack of direct connectivity often hinders trade opportunities, citing the Maldives as an example. Trade with Maldives could expand significantly if there were regular, predictable maritime linkages.

Ambassador Shams also addressed the 'chicken-and-egg' dilemma cited by the shipping ministry and corporations, wherein they argue that establishing direct shipping links is unfeasible due to insufficient cargo, while the lack of direct connectivity itself stifles trade growth. This dynamic highlights the need for proactive measures to break this cycle and enhance trade opportunities.

Then she turned her focus to coastal shipping, which has been a much-discussed but underutilised aspect of regional trade within SAARC and BIMSTEC. She shared the example of proposed coastal shipping agreements between Thailand's Ranong Port and Bangladesh's Chattogram Port, which faced significant resistance.

The Chattogram Port Authority expressed concerns over smaller coastal vessels occupying berthing spaces meant for larger, more revenue-generating ships. In this regard, she suggested exploring solutions such as creating separate berthing areas for coastal vessels, referencing Dubai's successful implementation of such infrastructure. Promoting coastal shipping could greatly enhance trade within the region, particularly with Thailand and Colombo. It would also provide more affordable trade options for smaller businesses, facilitating economic growth at various levels.

In conclusion, Ambassador Shams urged participants not to lose sight of the Bay of Bengal's vital role in ensuring Bangladesh's economic sustainability while focusing on maritime security. She stressed the importance of integrating economic considerations into discussions about maritime policy and development to maximise the region's potential for prosperity.

Remarks by the Chief Guest



Admiral M Nazmul Hassan, OSP, NPP, ndc, ncc, psc

Chief of Naval Staff, Bangladesh Navy

Admiral M Nazmul Hassan began with a tribute to the martyrs of Bangladesh's War of Independence and those of the recent anti-discrimination movement in July-August. He acknowledged the extensive discussions on the Bay of Bengal's importance, quoting strategist Robert Kaplan, who described the Indo-Pacific as the strategic and demographic centre of the 21st century. Bangladesh, he observed, lies at the heart of this critical region.

Admiral Hassan shared personal experiences. Highlighting the strategic competition in the region, he referenced the US policy of rebalancing towards Asia, evolving into the Indo-Pacific Strategy and Economic Framework. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road as counter-efforts. India's SAGAR initiative and the Indian Navy Chief's MASS initiative were also cited as evidence of India's significant regional role. He underscored how other players, including Australia and European nations, have been increasing their engagement in the region.

Admiral Hassan noted the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal, emphasising that while great power competition is evident, there are also opportunities for cooperation. Fora such as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) enable states to collaborate on maritime security. He recounted attending an Indo-Pacific Conference in Australia, where over 40 naval and coast guard leaders gathered to discuss strategies for maintaining stability, illustrating the need for a strategic balancing act in international relations.

He elaborated on his experiences as a diplomat in the Maldives, where he observed the dynamics of strategic competition among China, India, and the US. He cited examples such as former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's 2021 visit to the Maldives, underscoring how even small nations hold strategic significance.

On maritime security, Admiral Hassan agreed with the keynote speaker on its multifaceted nature, spanning both traditional and non-traditional dimensions. He outlined Bangladesh's efforts in regulatory updates, citing legislation such as the

Territorial Waters and Maritime Zones (Amendment) Act (2021), the Marine Fisheries Act (2020), the Bangladesh Lighthouse Act (2020), and the Bangladesh Flag Vessel (Protection of Interests) Act (2019). Internationally, he highlighted Bangladesh's ratification of UNCLOS in 2001 and its recent signing of the Agreement on Marine Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) in September 2024.

Admiral Hassan applauded the Maritime Affairs Unit's collaboration with the Australian National University (ANU). He highlighted the work of Dr David Brewster, who has been involved in formulating Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) Action Plans and maritime strategies for countries such as Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India. Dr Brewster recently presented a report on his findings, which Admiral Hassan encouraged maritime practitioners to review, as his work included contributions to strategy formulation across military and non-military aspects.

Admiral Hassan then discussed ongoing policy developments involving two distinct documents—one labelled as a military strategy and the other as a non-military strategy. He suggested that these would be better termed as 'Maritime Security Strategy' and, on a broader scale, a 'National Ocean Policy' or 'National Maritime Strategy.' He pointed out that using the term 'military' in such contexts can skew perceptions and potentially alienate stakeholders. Admiral Hassan acknowledged the challenges inherent in his role as the Navy Chief, where responsibilities often overlap with those of other maritime organisations, but emphasised the importance of proceeding with their duties in the nation's interest.

Turning to piracy, he noted that while traditional piracy, such as the hijacking or disappearance of ships, does not occur in Bangladesh's waters, incidents of armed robbery and petty theft remain as concerns. He stressed the need to address these issues, as a rise in such activities would increase insurance costs, subsequently raising commodity prices and burdening the public.

The speaker highlighted a critical but less-discussed security concern, i.e., presence of forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals (FDMNs), or Rohingyas. He framed this issue as not just a domestic security challenge but a regional one, noting the risks of these populations becoming breeding grounds for human trafficking, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling—serious concerns for both maritime and land-based security.

On coastal infrastructure, he addressed security challenges related to investments along the coastal belt. He echoed Ambassador Mashfee's observation that while infrastructure development has advanced, it is not always seamlessly integrated with a logistics chain for exports. He emphasised the Navy and Coast Guard's role in securing these assets, including undersea communication lines and the single-point mooring system, which require continuous protection despite being out of sight.

Regarding external collaborations, Admiral Hassan underlined the importance of Information Fusion Centres (IFCs) in Gurgaon, India, and Singapore. He noted Bangladesh's naval representation in Gurgaon and advocated for a similar presence in Singapore, citing the need for pre-emptive action based on early intelligence. He described Bangladesh's own initiatives, such as the Information Fusion Centre in Chattogram, with a command centre at Naval Headquarters, and the Directorate General of Shipping's implementation of the GMDSS (Global Maritime Distress and Safety System) and the Integrated Maritime Navigation System (IMNS) project. He highlighted the training of 12 naval personnel and the establishment of seven coastal radio stations, enhancing maritime security and lifesaving operations.

Admiral Hassan emphasised Bangladesh's active engagement in regional and international maritime cooperation through platforms like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS). He noted Bangladesh's participation in bilateral exercises with friendly navies and other forums that focus on regional and global maritime issues, extending beyond the Bay of Bengal to reflect a broader strategic vision.

He concluded his address with several considerations for future action. First, he called for the formulation of a National Ocean Policy or National Maritime Strategy, as well as a National Maritime Security Strategy. Second, he advocated for a whole-of-government approach, suggesting that Blue Economy Cell could be expanded into a Blue Economy Unit or a National Maritime Authority or Division. While the idea of creating a dedicated ministry has been discussed, he opined that a division or authority would suffice for now. Third, he stressed the importance of maritime domain awareness, including establishing coastal radar stations to provide a comprehensive security picture encompassing both sea and airspace.. Fourth, he encouraged institutions such as BIMRAD, the National Defence College (NDC) and BIIS to host similar roundtable discussions to generate ideas and forward recommendations to the government. Finally, on the international front, Admiral Hassan underscored the importance of balancing strategic interests while maintaining regional engagement with partners in peace.

Remarks by the Chair of the Session



Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker

Chairman, BIISS

Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker said that access to seas and oceans is an invaluable privilege for any country. Not only does it facilitate unrestricted navigation and business opportunities at very low cost but also offers vast prospects of economic prosperity by exploring and utilising resources from these water bodies themselves. Largest economies in the world have well-secured access to seas and oceans, who use this benefit for their fullest advantage, e.g., the US, China, India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, etc.

The Bay of Bengal, a strategically significant maritime region in South Asia, holds immense importance for Bangladesh due to its geographic location and economic relevance. Hence, to ensure seamless maritime connectivity and trade in the Bay of Bengal, the issue of maritime safety and security is of paramount importance and is a significant pre-requisite of growth and stability in this region. Maritime safety and security encompass all the operations that are being carried out to ward off threats from the sea, defend sovereign rights at sea and control risks relating to maritime activities such as fisheries patrol, accidents at sea, pollution, sea rescue/shipwreck and assistance, legacy munitions clearance, etc. Emerging threats in the Bay of Bengal maritime domain include the rise of piracy and armed robbery, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, plastic pollutions, complex maritime boundary disputes among the littorals, climate change and natural disasters and last but not the least increasing threats of terrorism and transnational crime.

The waters of the Bay are not only essential for trade and transportation but also play a crucial role in fisheries, energy resources, and environmental sustainability. However, as mentioned, the Bay of Bengal is facing a range of emerging threats that pose challenges to its maritime security. Hence, it is essential to identify the threats and outline the strategies for Bangladesh to safeguard its maritime security. The strategies of the Bay of Bengal littoral countries should be articulated aiming at supporting regional and global security and stability by augmenting preparedness and response capabilities and enhancing prevention measures in responding multifaceted

challenges faced by the coastal countries. The rim countries of the Bay of Bengal should strive for an overarching maritime safety and security strategy against all types of challenges from the global maritime domain that may affect people, activities or free trade. It should be developed upon closer cooperation within the region and at national levels with an ultimate objective to protect the maritime interests of all coastal and hinterland countries and increase maritime domain awareness among all stakeholders of the bay.

Ambassador Sarker believed that by ensuring maritime safety, security and harnessing the full potential of blue economy, regional blocs can play the game changer's role. Bangladesh is a member of two regional blocs that focus extensively on broader maritime cooperation, namely the IORA and the BIMSTEC. As an Indian Ocean littoral, Bangladesh can seek collaboration with other members in different sectors, e.g., disaster management, pollution control, maritime piracy and other security risks, resource exploration, developing renewable energy, curtail illegal migration, drugs, weapons trafficking, and many similar concerns. These threats are multifaceted, continuously evolving and can be addressed through existing frameworks of cooperation or new ones can be undertaken to implement these goals. Involved parties can try to establish initiatives that align with their national and global development needs. Investing in ocean economy sectors and building capacity will be crucial steps towards realising the prospects.

In that context, he mentioned that another bloc namely, the D8 also can play an instrumental role in enhancing maritime security and augmenting sea-borne trade and tourism as all eight member countries are maritime nations. As D8 member states like Iran and Turkey are emerging global powers can play a huge role in facilitating and enhancing safety and security among the littorals. The D8 member states are also members of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) which is a very positive attribute in case of financing in maritime issues. He shared his experience as a D8 Commissioner from 2015 to 2019 about the initiative of arranging brainstorming sessions to find out the ways of enhancing cooperation among the member states. And it was identified that the members have enormous opportunities to exploit their maritime domain.

Ambassador Sarker concluded the roundtable discussion by thanking all participants who enriched the programme with their wise remarks, opinions, suggestions, and everyone else to make all arrangements in successfully hosting the programme.



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