

Connectivity And Cooperation In The Bay Of Bengal Region

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Introduction:

The Bay of Bengal region has long been called as the geo-economic divider rather than a link between Southeast Asia and the Indian Subcontinent according to geopolitical experts. This vast expanse of water from the coasts of India and Sri Lanka to Indonesia and far stretched to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has been calm but the tides are changing in the 21st century. This region has been slowly but surely occupying an important space in the foreign policy of not only the regional players but also the global players. The modernisation of Southeast Asian architecture has played a key role in the regional integration of the Bay of Bengal Region. The region has acted as a bridge of connection between the Indian and Pacific ocean. India's growing engagements with the East Asian countries is a testimony to the region's importance in India's foreign policy. The various international organisations have been also contributing to the growth and development of the region. Multilateral cooperation is an important factor in facilitating greater regional connectivity in the region. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has not been successful in realising the aspirations of this region, so Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a regional initiative, is an excellent opportunity to reimagine the region. The region has been overcoming the fragmentation and neglect post the second half of the 20th Century and is poised to become a regional economic hub in the 21st century, thereby realising the idea of regionalization being the new globalisation. The robust economic growth, active leadership of regional countries and the emerging dimensions of security, new technologies, new areas of convergence of interests are the key drivers for regionalisation in this region. Therefore, development and cooperation in this region is imperative for bringing about the peace, prosperity and unity in South Asia.

Importance of the Bay of Bengal Region

- **Geographical Importance of the Bay of Bengal Region**

Geographically, the Bay of Bengal is surrounded on three sides by India (West and Northwest), Bangladesh (North) and Myanmar (East). The region is surrounded by several islands like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Sri Lanka, Sumatra and Irrawaddy Delta. Around 22% of the world's population live in the Bay of Bengal Region with a combined GDP close to USD 2.7 trillion.



Figure: The Bay Of Bengal Region (Source: WorldAtlas)¹

Agriculture is the lifeline for the people living along the Bay of Bengal coast. It is also India's agricultural lifeline as it is the main source of the South East winds for regular monsoons. The region is a tropical wetland which is home to numerous delta systems and rich biodiversity of marine and coastal ecosystems. Secondly, this region plays an important role in maintaining heat balance and the region's weather pattern. The region serves as a trade route with the east, southeast and Asia Pacific region. The northern waters of the Bay of Bengal region is the main source of communication in the Indian Ocean connecting the dynamic economies of East Asia with the traditional markets of Europe via the oil-rich gulf and rapidly growing Africa. Currently, about half the world's container traffic passes through this region while its ports handle about 33% of the world trade. The Bay of Bengal Region countries include core littoral states like Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand and including Adjacent states with interest (ASEAN) like Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Vietnam and SAARC states like Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal.

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<https://www.worldatlas.com/bays/bay-of-bengal.html#:~:text=The%20Bay%20of%20Bengal%20is,maximum%20depth%20of%204%2C694%20m>

- **Geopolitical Importance of the Bay of Bengal Region**

The Bay of Bengal region is a constituent of the Eastern Indian Ocean connecting to the Pacific Ocean via the neighbouring South China Sea, the Twelve Seas, the two gulfs of the East Indian Archipelago and most part of the Indonesian waters. The calm waters of the Bay of Bengal region had not seen any major rivalries in the recent past but this is changing and it is slowly but surely becoming a hotbed of geopolitical rivalry among major global powers as well as a hotbed for regional conflicts. This region is already a major part of the Indian Ocean, so the power play in the Indian ocean region will have a significant impact on the geopolitical architecture of this strategic region. The protection of the Sea Lines of Communication has become a priority for the Asian Countries to secure their energy demands. For example, recently China has been pursuing the 'look South Policy' as it has been investing in infrastructure investment in the countries of the Bay of Bengal Region via its Belt and Road Initiative and also attempting to isolate India in its backyard.

- **The Bay of Bengal Region and the Indo-Pacific Region**



Figure: The Bay of Bengal Region, The Indian Ocean, and the Indo-Pacific Region connect. (Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/aCijgASSmTNpJyvEA>)

The Bay of Bengal Region has emerged as a critical theatre in shaping the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region. It is the channel of communication² between India and Southeast Asia—two pivots around which the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region evolves. The opening up of Burma and its integration into South Asia reconstructed the idea of this region as a connector sea between regions in the eastern India and western Pacific ocean. Japan and the US have drawn Australia and India into the latest multilateral debate in the Indo-Pacific region. As the Indo-Pacific region has been the major focus of the major powers and its geographical scope has expanded covering the entire stretch of waters from the East Coast of Africa to the Western Pacific. The geographical proximity between the regions is a

² The Bay of Bengal Importance for the Indo-Pacific Region

https://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=AwrKEpmQ4MBkbuwOsZ27HAX.;_ylu=Y29sbwNzZzMEcG9zAzEEdnRpZAMEc2VjA3Nj/RV=2/RE=1690390801/RO=10/RU=https%3a%2f%2fwww.jstor.org%2fstable%2f48684188%23%3a~%3atext%3dAs%2520a%2520maritime%2520link%2520between%2520the%2520Indian%2520and%2cStraits%2520C%2520the%2520region%2520has%2520grown%2520in%2520strategic%2520importance./RK=2/RS=4DgNbqgiN68vSVie.3rpW09ic08-

factor. The landlocked Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan have prioritised energy and transportation links in the Bay of Bengal region to stimulate exports and gain access to the ASEAN markets.

Existing Connectivity and Cooperation in the Bay Of Bengal

In the 1990s, the countries surrounding the Bay of Bengal region started participating in the Global Value Chains for free flow of goods, services, technology and information. This region is home to 60% of the world's population and is home to the world's fastest growing emerging market economies and one of the world's busiest trade routes. This has portrayed the Bay of Bengal region as the centre of gravity for global trade and economic activities. The Bay of Bengal is one of the world's least integrated regions with lower levels of cooperation and trade. For example, From New Delhi, it is cheaper to ship goods all the way to Singapore than Dhaka or Yangon.

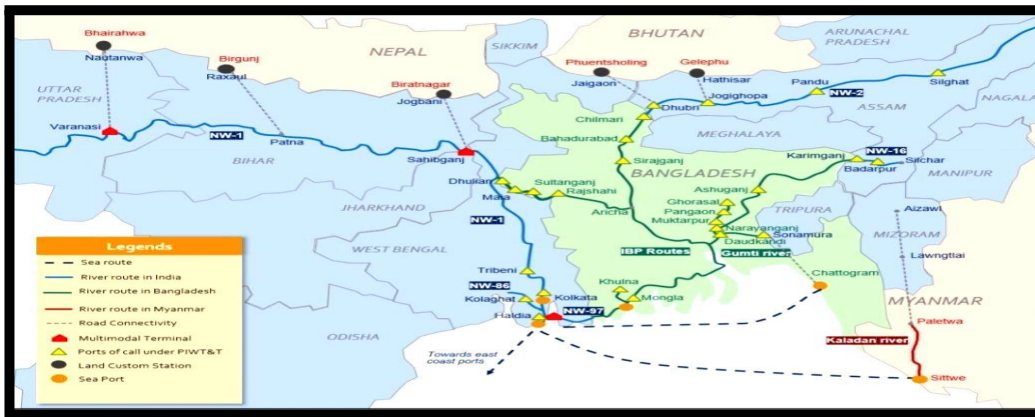


Figure: Existing Connectivity Routes in the BoB region (Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/qBfQeJ31XD17DV6H6>)

Transport Connectivity projects include the India-Myanmar-Thailand highway, the Kaladan multimodal project, South Asia's first petroleum pipeline with Nepal, and the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem among others as shown in the images. **Energy cooperation**³ is an important aspect of cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region. SAARC has a Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation and creates a market for Electricity. The Bangladesh-India Power Grid as well cross-border pipeline from a refinery in North East, India are examples. Recently, in August 2023, India, Japan and Bangladesh are partnering to create multiple connectivity corridors and industrial value chains, is surely a gamechanger in the Bay of Bengal region. Currently, a total of 16 transit routes have facilitated the movement of cargo transportation from the Chattogram and Mongla port which would open up India's landlocked region to the water routes, saving the time and resources of India.

³ Energy Security for BIMSTEC

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BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional multilateral organisation established in 1997, comprising members namely, India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Nepal and Bhutan, though landlocked in the Indian subcontinent, are located at the head of the rivers of the Himalayas and the interlinkages between the Himalayan and the Bay of Bengal ecosystem. The main aim is to overcome the long-standing divide between South and Southeast Asia. The 2022 Masterplan for Transport Connectivity⁴ aims to bring about regional economic integration covering roads, railways, civil aviation, maritime transport and building of multi-modular infrastructure. It is also moving towards collaboration and sharing of knowledge from disaster management, tourism and cybersecurity. This 10-year masterplan There is a call for synergy between the master plans of BIMSTEC and ASEAN to promote the growth of the entire region. The BIMSTEC Trade Facilitation Strategic Framework 2030 is a milestone document for furthering trade connectivity in the region.



Figure: BIMSTEC countries (Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/5JNkiBbag2gp9WnU8>)

India's Foreign Policy in the Bay of Bengal Region

Historically, India's economic, cultural and ideational exchanges have been facilitated by the Bay of Bengal region. New Delhi has been focusing in this region for naval exercises as a tool of naval diplomacy to counter China as well as establish its due place in this region. For example, in 2021, France and India demonstrated synergy through the La Perouse Exercise in the Bay of Bengal region. This is also evident in the sudden upswing of India-Bangladesh relations since 2009. Both the countries have realised each other's complement in this region. India's naval engagements in the Bay of Bengal region as a member of the QUAD comprising India, the United States, Japan and Australia demonstrate the significance of the region for India in the broader context of the Bay of Bengal Region.

⁴ 2022 Masterplan for Transport Connectivity BIMSTEC

https://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=AwrKDgrk48BkT6MPRTC7HAX.;_ylu=Y29sbwNzZzMEcG9zAzEEdnRpZAMEc2VjA3Ny/RV=2/RE=1690391653/RO=10/RU=https%3a%2f%2fwww.adb.org%2fdocuments%2fbimstec-master-plan-transport-connectivity/RK=2/RS=gZoO3fTyUG634Bc3kDS5p5Gv.os-

India needs to take up the leadership for the development of self-reliant and robust regional value chains and the economic integration of the Bay of Bengal as an economic bloc and integrate this into the global value chains for higher economic growth which is secure from geopolitical volatilities. Prime Minister announced the opening of the Bay of Bengal Studies at Nalanda University. India's role in India's immediate eastern and strategic neighbours is termed as an "enhanced Look East" and "Act East" policy. New Delhi has adopted the Look East policy and engaged in summit partnerships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁵ India's neighbourhood as well as the immediate neighbourhood has been of the utmost priority of India's foreign policy recently. It has initiated new lines of credit with Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. In 2016, India also took the initiative of bringing together BIMSTEC members to address the challenge of non-traditional security threats in the region at the joint BIMSTEC-BRICS summit. The BIMSTEC-Leader's Retreat 2016 was a milestone to take joint action against international terrorism and radicalisation. India has also made efforts for BIMSTEC for example, the BIMSTEC Energy Centre and Business Council. New Delhi plays a constructive role by being the lead security provider in the Bay of Bengal which regularly patrols and monitors the Sea Lines of Communication. One of the successful initiatives of India has been the constitution of platforms like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and hosting of MILAN, a biennial naval exercise. Currently, India has also given due importance to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India is a rising force to reckon with in South Asia.



Figure: Countries surrounding the Bay of Bengal Region (Source: CUTS International)
<https://images.app.goo.gl/irZAjTHEuRSCx5W66>

Issues of the Bay of Bengal Region

The Bay of Bengal region is currently facing multifaceted challenges caused by social, economic and political turbulence, conflicts, political turbulence, and atrocities. The Bay of Bengal hosts a diverse range of complex non-traditional security threats .

● **Connectivity Issues**

1. **Lack of facilitated trade corridors:** Pritam Banerjee, Senior Consultant at Asian Development Bank, in his chapter of Conceptualising Highly Facilitated Trade Corridors in Southern Asia Points out the connectivity related challenges like border regulations and procedures for goods, trade and immigration policy regimes.
2. **Inadequate Infrastructure:** The hard connectivity linkages include cross border transport infrastructure. Trucks take around 60 to 100 hours to cross the India-Bangladesh border. There is a lack of adequate infrastructure such as the Bangabandhu Bridge in Bangladesh. The connectivity projects have been time and again delayed due to paucity of resources.
3. **Poor intra-regional trade and Foreign Direct Investment :** Infrastructure and connectivity are the main ingredients for trade facilitation at the borders and the trade between the BIMSTEC countries has not reached its optimum levels. The share of all BIMSTEC countries is less than 4% in world trade. The BIMSTEC intra-regional trade was only \$70 billion significantly lower than ASEAN's \$600 billion. FDI in developing Asia has hit a record breaking \$619 billion in 2021. There is a need for a flexible visa regime to increase intra-regional investments and attract FDI. There is a need for BIMSTEC-FTA ⁶ and India-Sri Lanka FTA to be implemented at a faster pace.

● **Illegal and Unregulated Fishing**

1. **Contravention of International Guidelines:** The Bay of Bengal is a hotspot for illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing.⁷ There is underreported and non-reporting to the authorities, vessels operating under the flags of convenience, stateless vessels using falsified registry including without proper documentation of vessels on the high seas in contravention of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission conservation guidelines.
2. **Unsustainable fishing:** The unsustainable fishing industry, especially the fast growing poultry and aquaculture industries, has a detrimental effect on the ocean ecosystem. An example being the Mergui

⁶ BIMSTEC-FTA

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⁷ Illegal Fishing in the BoB region

https://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=AwrKDgrM5MBkFh4OOLq7HAX.;_ylu=Y29sbwNzZzMEcG9zAzEEEdnRpZAMEc2VjA3Nj/RV=2/RE=1690391884/RO=10/RU=https%3a%2f%2fwww.intrafish.com%2fnews%2filllegal-fishing-in-bay-of-bengal-threatens-resources%2f1-1-516550%23%3a~%3atext%3dAbout%252040%252C496%2520mechanized%2520and%2520on-mechanized%2520boats%2520are%2520illegally%2cresources%2520in%2520the%2520Bay%252C%2520informe-d%2520sources%2520said%2520today./RK=2/RS=qB.1pgRMLIa2CoqfQ94DYO4doQM-

Archipelago once known for its coral reefs have been devastated by dynamite-fishing and climate-change induced bleaching. Several large rivers empty into the bay of bengal, carrying vast amounts of untreated sewage, plastic, industrial and agricultural waste. This has led to what is called the dead zone of the Bay of Bengal. The damage was caused by the trawling industry and the fast growing poultry and aquaculture industries. The governments have taken various measures to regulate overfishing but that has largely been ineffective in nature for ensuring long-term environmental sustainability.

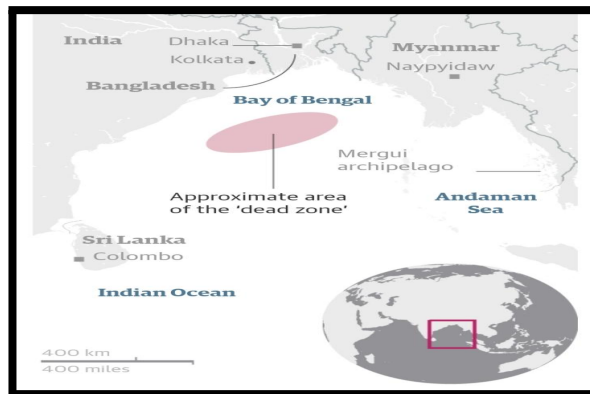


Figure: The Dead Zone Area in the Bay of Bengal Region (source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/WS2TfWE4esJB5E827>)

- **Rohingya Crisis, Human Trafficking, Illegal Arms Trade and Terrorism**

1. **Irregular Migration:** The Bay of Bengal is also an emerging hotbed of maritime security threats. The Rohingya Crisis⁸ has a direct implication on the maritime security of the Bay of Bengal region. The mass exodus of refugees have created disastrous implications for the bilateral relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh. This has created a humanitarian crisis as well as a security challenge in South and Southeast Asia. The Rohingya Refugees have been seeking refuge in neighbouring states like Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. There has been a development of the complex of terrorism, illegal arms trade and human trafficking. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates as of June 2022, 1.1 million people from Myanmar have become refugees.

⁸ The Rohingya Refugees: Regional Responses and Ramification

<https://maritimeindia.org/the-rohingya-refugees-regional-responses-and-ramifications/>

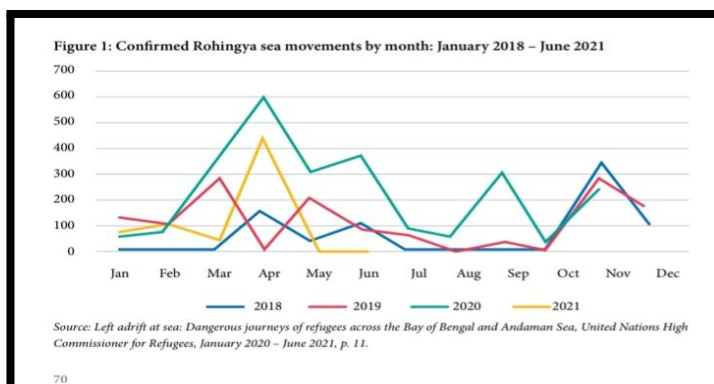


Figure: The Irregular Rohingya Migration in the Bay of Bengal Region (source : <https://www.unhcr.org/asia/media/left-adrift-sea-dangerous-journeys-refugees-across-bay-bengal-and-andaman-sea>)

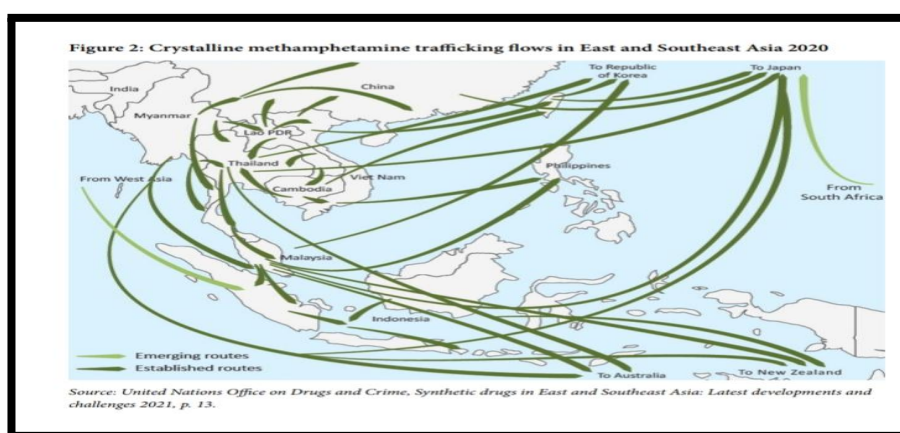


Figure: The illegal Drug Trade flows in the Bay of Bengal Region (source⁹)

- Lack of proper framework for refugees in South Asia:** The countries around the region lack the political connectivity to address this challenge as the majority of the South Asian countries are not signatories to the Refugee Convention. Except for Australia, the other SouthEast Asian countries are not signatories to the Status of Refugee and Protocol 1967. The Rohingya are exploited by the extremist Islamist outfits leading to illegal arms trafficking. This has also led to the growth of terrorism in the region. ASEAN's response to the crisis is slow paced and limited. The Bay of Bengal states, most of them, are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention. There's a lack of proper institutionalised framework to deal with the refugee problems as these countries including India. The statements of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organisations have called for the regional states to uphold the 2016 Bali Declaration for solving the issues of people smuggling, trafficking of persons and related transnational crimes.

⁹<https://www.unodc.org/roseap/2023/06/regional-synthetic-drugs-report-launch/story.html#:~:text=Released%20today%2C%20the%20report%2C%20%E2%80%9C.trafficking%20routes%20have%20shifted%20significantly>

● Climate Change

1. **Disaster-prone region:** The Bay Of Bengal's sprawling expanse has been rendered vulnerable to the far-reaching consequences of global warming. It is one of the world's most active areas for cyclone formation, for example, cyclone Mocha, cyclone Biparjoy among others. Recently in June, 2023, a low 3.9 magnitude earthquake jolted Bay of Bengal. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees provides for asylum rights to those affected by political persecution but there is no international legal provision for the protection of people displaced by Climate Change. This shows the lack of an institutionalised framework to address climate change¹⁰. This is also one of the non-traditional security threats in the Bay of Bengal region. The coastal areas surrounding the Bay of Bengal region, as shown in the map below, is prone to sea-borne natural disasters due to rising sea levels. This problem spills across the man-made national boundaries, therefore calls for a regional initiative for climate action. According to the [report](#) Assessment of Climate Change over the Indian Region, the Bay of Bengal region has a history of a high number of cyclones between 1891 and 2018.

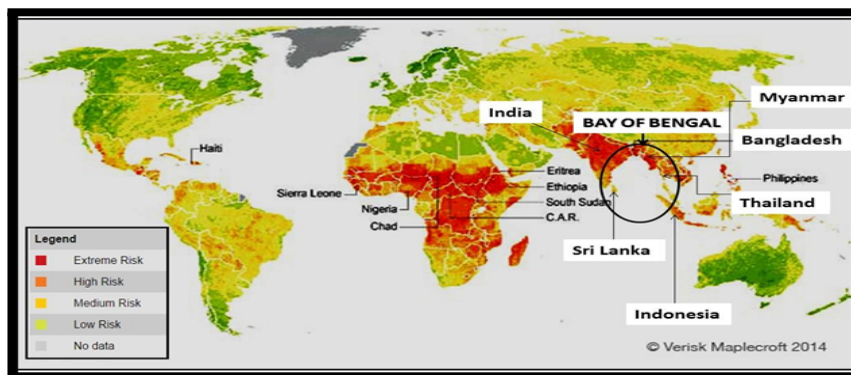


Figure: Figure: High Climate Vulnerability in the Bay of Bengal Region (Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/mt4pXxiH6E34kvJC7>)

2. **Lack of proper policy for climate refugees :** The current framework doesn't provide for the strategy of immediate relief and security for the creation of climate refugees and leading to cross border migration. Myanmar had one of the world's most devastating cyclones in the recent past. There have been efforts to build regional consensus through the BIMSTEC. However, no concrete steps had been taken towards climate-induced migration and mitigation. The agricultural communities who completely depend upon the coastal ecosystem are grappling with the issues of increased flooding and salinization, which is disrupting their food security and perpetuating poverty cycles.

¹⁰ Climate Change Security Threats in the Bay of Bengal region
https://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=Awrx.sZZ5cBk2VUOfy7HAX.:_ylu=Y29sbwNzZzMEcG9zAzIEdnRpZAMEc2VjA3Ny/RV=2/RE=1690392025/RO=10/RU=https%3a%2f%2fwww.sciencedirect.com%2fscience%2farticle%2fpii%2fS2211464515300129/RK=2/RS=X34wl2GSmFy9G.LUsxODiiF0E74-

RECOMMENDATIONS

● **Better Connectivity and Improvement of Trade Logistics**

1. **Cooperation between regional and international organisations** : There is a need for streamlining of customs procedures, simplification of regulations and the greater role of the private sector for facilitating investment. Experts suggest cooperation among regional organisations such as the IORA, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, IOC as well as international organisations like United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and United Nations Conference on Straddling Fish Stock. Maritime security is the prerequisite to the blue economy. SASEC can work with the BIMSTEC infrastructure, would help in the development of a continuous geo-economic space for Bangladesh and Northeast India. The Teesta River Agreement would be a joint water agreement in transboundary rivers adding to productive connectivity in the subregion. The governments around this region need to invest in telecommunication, cold storages, and regular power supply.
2. **Making BIMSTEC-FTA a reality**: There are also possibilities for linking road, rail and sea transport to enable seamless continuity of trade flows to make BIMSTEC-FTA a reality. This also requires the improvement of trade logistics. The availability of the cargo shipping routes linking the waters of the Bay of Bengal strait to the strait of Malacca and the Pacific Ocean to the east, the Indian Ocean to the South. And the Gulf of Mannar and the Arabian Sea to the West. It connects the stretches of maritime traffic across the eastern and western hemispheres.
3. **Diversification of Trade** : The trade is dominated by low-technology tradable products. There needs to be diversification of the trade products alongside coordinated marketing. The potential sectors include textile and garments, leather goods, tea and jute products, rice and spices, and traditional medicines. There is a need to augment and create regional supply chains. The BIMSTEC countries also need to remove and reduce the various non-tariff barriers and better cross-border logistics facilities for trade facilitation and attractive for FDI.

● **Prospects of Blue Economy in the BoB Region:**

1. **Climate Security**: The existing migration networks such as Bangladesh to India or emigrants from Indonesia and Myanmar to Thailand and Malaysia, mainly the economic migration framework. The resources of this region is a global commons region. A multi-faceted response to the threat of climate change induced migration would go a long way in addressing the issue of climate change in the region. The dimensions of food security, fisheries and promotion of the blue economy can provide a sustainable development of the region. The terminology of “climate refugees” should be brought into existence in different treaties for cooperation signed by the Bay of Bengal regional countries.
2. **Regional Fisheries Surveillance**: There is a need to integrate climate change policies into the regional climate strategies. For solving the problem of illegal fishing, the Regional Fisheries Surveillance can be set up

as in the case of the Solomon Islands. The concept of blue economy¹¹ refers to the ocean based economies, it is aimed at conservation in tandem with sustainable usage of maritime resources through seamless and integrated spatial planning. It aims to transform the ocean's resources into development instruments.

3. **Investment in R&D:** The Bay of Bengal region is a region for the global commons. Currently, the engagements are only at the unilateral and bilateral levels, which needs to become multilateral in nature. Ocean governance, with the help of gaining the knowledge of best practices from the relevant international organisations like the Global Environment Facility, Food and Agricultural Organisation among others. The governments need to invest in climate change modelling and collection of data, data monitoring and evaluation systems for the ocean environmental data through the usage of GIS technology and Maritime Spatial Technology.

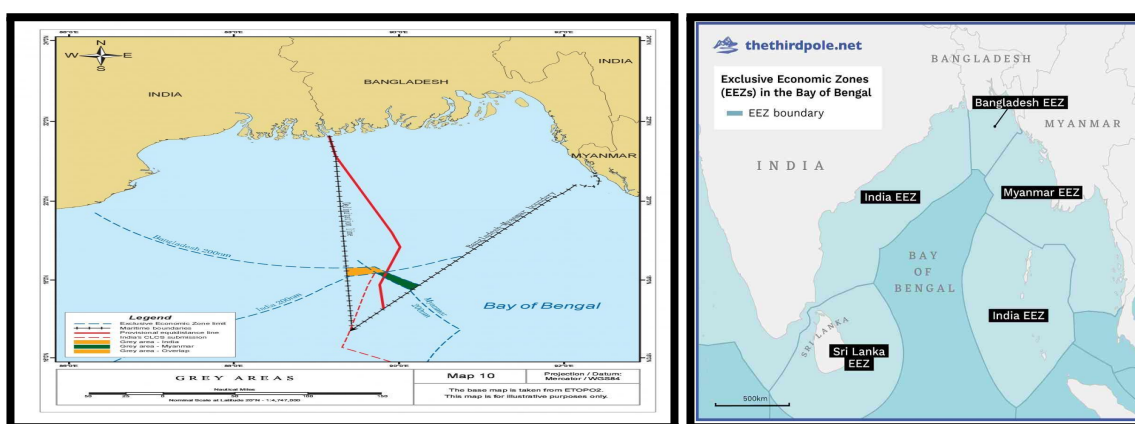


Figure: The existing exclusive zones in the Bay of Bengal region and the consequent areas of conflict (source: https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789004323445/B9789004323445_016.xml?language=en)

- **Improvement of Financial, Technological and Digital Connectivity**

1. **Financial Connectivity:** As we move towards de-dollarization, India has been taking active steps to settle trade in local currencies. This can be extended to South Asian and South East Asian countries. Bangladesh and India launched the trade in local currency. India and Myanmar have been exploring the possibilities of trade in national currencies, implementation of Kaladan Multimodal Project. This would lead to further enhancement in terms of trade promotion and have potential for direct maritime trade measures.
2. **Digital Connectivity:** The digital and financial connectivity has deep connection with the technological connectivity leading to greater cooperation in the region. This would also require the regional countries to build the digital connectivity infrastructures and training of human capacities through human resource

¹¹ Towards an integrated 'Blue Economy' Framework in the BoB Region
https://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=Awrx.cu3NsFkpaFWXUW7HAX.;_ylu=Y29sbwNzZzMEcG9zAzEEfnRpZAMEc2VjA3Ny/RV=2/RE=1690412855/RO=10/RU=https%3a%2f%2fwww.orfonline.org%2fwp-content%2fuploads%2f2020%2f10%2fOR_IssueBrief_411_BIMSTEC-BlueEconomy.pdf/RK=2/RS=tgdgwC7gYIL51PXanH5efnm4AE8-

engagements. There are also potential opportunities to boost people to people connectivity through regional tourism, cross-border river cruisers, heritage tourism, religious circuits and Bollywood Tourism through a common circuit of tourism. The region has a potential of earning around US\$ 200 billion through the tourism sector in the region.

3. **Technological Connectivity:** The intra-regional connectivity would get a good boost through usage of modern technology. This would help in seamless connection and cooperation among the customs, transport, border security, land-port agencies and regulations. The recently launched PM Gati Shakti Initiative which aims to provide seamless multi-modal connectivity including the last mile linkages to the major land border gateways for integrated corridor development including the completion of development of economic corridors in Bangladesh and Nepal. The technology cooperation would be an excellent step for better connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region. A BIMSTEC venture fund can provide for the seed funding of technology startups and the emerging areas in technology and science.

- **Towards a better Regional Energy Connectivity**

1. **Regional Grid Network:** The BIMSTEC countries released a ‘Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation in BIMSTEC¹²’ in October 2005, and signed a Memorandum of Understanding for establishing the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection in 2018. The absence of required infrastructure and adaptive power market, the lack of synchronisation of the grid system, grid codes to electric power, absence of proper financial policies, natural gas pipeline technology are the factors for better regional energy connectivity. India’s National Green Hydrogen Mission and boosting of green hydrogen for decarbonisation of the sector. The work on the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Master Plan Study needs to be completed and implemented soon enough.

2. **Scope for Renewable Energy:** There needs to be exploration of marine renewable energy like offshore wind energy, tidal energy, wave energy. There are also prospects of rich hydrocarbon reserves in this region, which can accelerate the oil and gas industry. For example, Nepal-Bangladesh and India have been recently working on the hydropower transmission lines for export of electricity from Nepal via India to Bangladesh. The success of this project can set an example for other BIMSTEC nations to follow

¹² BIMSTEC countries Power Grid

https://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=AwrKDgqcOcfKy9UWPJm7HAX:._ylu=Y29sbwNzZzMEcG9zAzEEdnRpZAMFc2VjA3Nj/RV=2/RE=1690413596/RO=10/RU=https%3a%2f%2fenergy.economictimes.indiatimes.com%2fnews%2fpower%2fcabinet-approves-signing-pact-for-bimstec-countries-power-grid%2f58150456%23%3a~%3atext%3dThe%2520BIMSTEC%2520is%2520an%2520international%2520organisation%2520involving%2520a%2520cheld%2520in%2520New%2520Delhi%2520on%2520October%25204%2520C%25202005./RK=2/RS=9aBLO4tUdkr.dNYCr4qTwAo9Tis-

3. **Funding Resources:** A regional development bank should be established to fund renewable energy projects in the Bay of Bengal region. The emerging economies of the BoB region can make significant improvements in their economies. Currently, India has power links with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. These projects have limited connectivity. The region has the great potential for hydropower resources generation. The funding problems can be solved through the setting up of an infrastructural bank focused on regional connectivity projects like power grids and pipelines.



Figure: Prospects of the gas reserves in the BoB region (source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/WQ6uKT3zc8SAbKGEA>)

- **Disaster Management and Climate Security in the BoB region**

1. **Uniform and Proper Coordination:** Bhanubhatra Jittiang of Chulalongkorn University, suggests that an institution like the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management can be established as an intergovernmental organisation for effective and proper coordination for emergency response to disasters. This would also help in the addressing of complex emergencies like the Rohingya Migration and establish cross-bloc connectivity to deal with the transnational challenges. The mandate of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre can be expanded to monitor the vulnerable groups in the context of climate change. 2
2. **Expansion of the definition of natural disasters:** Currently, the idea of this institutionalised mechanism is limited to natural disasters. This should be expanded to take into account the evolving security threats due to man-made induced climate change issues. Secondly, the definition is narrowed down to “ non-conflict related disasters’ ’, this has been a roadblock in creating a common framework for addressing the Rohingya issue. The EU disaster term and specifications can be adopted as it includes the disasters having “multi-country transboundary effect”. The SARRAND should be modelled on the 2005 Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response adopted by ASEAN countries as a regional approach to

disasters. There should be regular mock drills to test the country's preparedness to climate change disasters. There needs to be a comprehensive SoP for receiving and giving humanitarian assistance.

3. **Role of BIMSTEC:** The BIMSTEC can play a major role in the creation of a separate working group and fast track the Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Security Dialogue Forum. It is also to be noted that the climate security nexus in the region calls for proper training of the military forces to deal with climate change as a national security issue.

- **Potential Role of India's Northeast in the BoB regional security infrastructure**

1. **India's Act East Policy:** India has taken initiatives to establish links with Myanmar, Bangladesh and Thailand under the purview of the Act East Initiative. India's northeastern states offer an opportunity for enhancing economic connectivity in the region. The northeast is crisscrossed by multiple rivers like Lohit, Noa, Tirap and Subansiri in Arunachal Pradesh, the main rivers namely the Brahmaputra, Barak rivers. Thus, there is a need for improving the riverine linkages in this region, opening up the way for the entire Bay of Bengal region. Japan has [invested](#) around \$2 billion in India's NE infrastructural development. India's Northeast has emerged as an important determining factor in the India-Japan Relations.

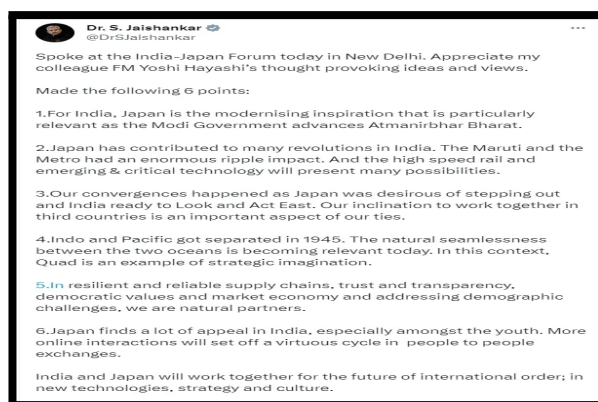


Figure: Dr. S Jaishankar's tweet on India-Japan Relations (Source: Twitter)

2. **Increased Connectivity in India's Northeast:** The connectivity in India's Northeast Region ¹³ can be improved through better connectivity routes to promote tourism in the Bay of Bengal region. This would help in the economic development across the region. For example, there is a need for better implementation of the 2018 Standard Operating Procedure for seamless movement of passengers and coastal shipping vessels. India's Northeast is a gateway to the BoB region. The picture below shows the potential of India's northeast

¹³ Role Of India's Northeast in the Regional Cooperation Architecture

https://r.search.yahoo.com/_ylt=AwrPo5xxOsFkAvQWvFm7HAX.;_ylu=Y29sbwNzZzMEcG9zAzEEdnRpZAMEc2VjA3Ny/RV=2/RE=1690413810/RO=10/RU=https%3a%2f%2fwww.orfonline.org%2fresearch%2fthe-role-of-indias-northeast-in-t-he-regional-cooperation-architecture%2f/RK=2/RS=simHiB7qtelSvxPBxgDtxUNyB3o-

for regional integration of the BoB region. The ongoing Matarbari Deep Sea Port (DSP) on the Bangladesh's coast with the assistance from Japan will be operational in 2027 is a key as this can make Bangladesh and India's Northeast a key industrial corridor. This era also marks a new troika for India-Japan-Bangladesh relations for greater connectivity and cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region. However, this relationship needs to be viewed from the lens of BIMSTEC.

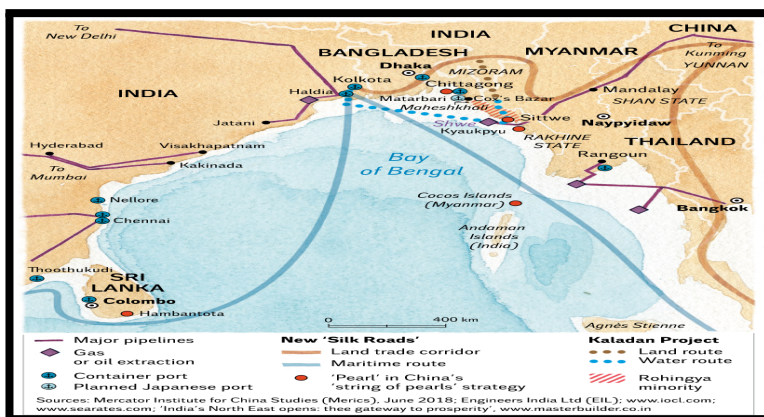


Figure: Potential role of India's Northeast in the Bay of Bengal region (source: ¹⁴)

● Improvement of Maritime Security in the region

1. **Regional Mechanism for Implementation of the Bali Process:** Collin Koh Swee Lean, Research Fellow, Nanyang Technological University, in chapter Promoting Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, in the CSEP book, suggests that promotion of maritime domain awareness and information-sharing among the countries can be a viable head start for promotion of maritime security in the region. The [Bali Process](#) refers to the mechanism for the promotion of maritime security challenges on account of the Rohingya boat crisis in 2015. It is recommended that within the Bali Process, signatories should work towards a regional mechanism for solving the Rohingya Crisis and proportional distribution of responsibility.
2. **Role of BIMSTEC:** The possibility of Indonesia and Malaysia getting the membership of BIMSTEC. This would lead to the comprehensive coverage across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea littorals as an institutionalised mechanism in ensuring more information and burden sharing.
3. **Role of Exclusive Economic Zones:** There needs to be greater surveillance in the littorals of the bay especially the important Exclusive Economic Zones so that the Maritime Awareness Team(MDA) can play a

more proactive role in the curbing of drug and human trafficking. The [cases](#) of Indian fishermen being arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy is not uncommon for alleged violation of the International Maritime Boundary Line. India-Srilankan relations are an important factor for India's rise in this region in the context of Asia. With adequate investment and cooperation, this can also be a potential blue economy. Lastly, there is a need for greater cooperation for solving the current problem of the grey areas in the region.

Conclusion: Reimagining the Bay of Bengal Region

Globalisation and the rise of economies of Asia have provided for revival of old linkages in the 21st century as there is a lot of scope for economic regeneration and revival of this region. India has a great opportunity to localise globalisation in the BoB region so as to emerge as the regional power and economic powerhouse globally. The Covid 19 pandemic gave us some valuable lessons, the first one being the lessening of over-reliance on the Chinese Economy and the establishing of strong regional supply chains in the region, which can help in derisking China. Efforts should be made for making the region as an economic bloc. The BoB countries need to better engage with the US and EU for bolstering trade which remains limited and less than that of China. The Bob Economic bloc would comprise India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand, would lead to the promotion of self-reliance across the sectors. The current situation is that the countries are also facing food insecurity issues due to the volatile market and the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The idea of the food bank for the BIMSTEC based on a similar ASEAN model can be a good policy to deal with food insecurity. The BIMSTEC has the potential to play an important role in enhancing the cooperation and connectivity in this region. The existing international and national regional organisation can play a more proactive role in this region. This also calls for the need for an Institutionalised and multilateral governance framework in the context of the Global South. Therefore, the concept of localising globalisation also holds true in the Bay of Bengal region.

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