



## Strategic Importance of the Indo-Pacific and the Bay of Bengal: Navigating Geopolitical Challenges

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### *Abstract*

The Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) has become a key focus of 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitics. In its waters, maritime trade, power projection, and strategic rivalry come together. This article examines the geostrategic and economic significance of the Indo-Pacific and the Bay of Bengal, emphasizing how Bangladesh's maritime position impacts its role in great-power competition. Using realist, liberal, and constructivist theories, the article analyzes power distribution, institutional resilience, and identity politics in the IPR. The study employs a qualitative research approach that combines document analysis, secondary literature review, and interpretive geopolitical mapping to trace the development of alliances, non-traditional security (NTS) issues, and blue economy opportunities. Results indicate that Bangladesh's balanced diplomacy, maritime modernization, and multilateral engagement enhance its strategic independence within the Indo-Pacific framework.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific Region, Bay of Bengal, Geopolitics, Maritime Security, Bangladesh, Strategic Rivalry

### Introduction

The Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) has emerged as the central geopolitical pivot of the twenty-first-century geopolitics, where competing visions of order, maritime dominance, and regional connectivity converge. Encompassing a vast maritime expanse stressing from the eastern coast of the African continent to the western part of the Pacific Rim, the IPR includes a major significant sea line of communications (SLOCs), fastest-growing economies, and most volatile strategic rivalries (UNCTAD, 2023). This expansive zone comprised vital chokepoints, for instance, the Strait of Malacca which handles the 30% of global trade. Moreover, the Lombok Strait, and the Bab el-Mandeb, has been disbursing the vital to global energy and commercial flows (EIA, 2023).

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The term “Indo-Pacific” significantly evolved as a dominant geopolitical concept, reflecting a shift in global power and economic distribution regarding how nations conceptualize power, geography, and security (Marshall, 2021). As Tim Marshall describes in his famous book of “Prisoners of Geography”, “The Indo-Pacific is an idea whose time has come. In the twenty-first century’s globalized and cyber-connected world, the economic engine is the center, and that center is the Indo-Pacific” (Marshall, 2021).

This reconfiguration of strategic thinking reflects the intensifying Sino-US power competition as well as rivalry for regional dominance. With China’s rapid militarization, especially naval expansion at the Pacific with presently the world’s largest navy by fleet size, and the U.S. revitalizing the neo-containment policy through alliances and partnership building in the form of Indo-Pacific Strategy, QUAD, and AUKUS to countering the assertive expand of China (peer competitor of the USA) at the IPR (CSIS, 2024). The Bay of Bengal (BoB), a vital water of the IPR connects the South and the Southeast Asia. The BoB is currently witnessing growing naval deployments from India, China, and Western powers. Some major geopolitical initiatives are central to the maritime space, including China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), India’s Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine etc.

Understanding the Indo-Pacific requires revisiting classical and modern geopolitical theories. From the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE) to the Strait of Malacca’s contemporary significance, control over space has shaped world politics. As argue, “World history is the story of competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space” (Toal et al., 1998). This lens connects historical determinism with contemporary power transitions, such as China’s Maritime Silk Road and the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (Gökmen, 2010).

The conceptual underpinning of the Indo-Pacific geopolitics echoes Thucydides’ realism: “Right is only a question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides, 431 BCE/1954). This maxim remains relevant as middle powers (e.g., Australia, Japan) and smaller states (e.g., ASEAN members) navigate U.S.-China rivalry (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). Thus, the Indo-Pacific is emerging more than a geographic construct to a grand strategic idea—a space where geography, power, and identity intersect (Marshall, 2021).

The study focuses on analyzing the following key questions, namely: How does the Indo-Pacific framework reshape the geopolitical and economic landscape of the Bay of Bengal? What are the key strategic challenges and opportunities that Bangladesh faces in navigating great-power competition? How do realist, liberal, and constructivist perspectives explain power dynamics and institutional resilience in the Indo-Pacific?

The key objectives of the study are to analyze the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific and the Bay of Bengal in contemporary geopolitics; to examine Bangladesh's role as an emerging maritime nation amid evolving regional power structures; and to assess how theoretical perspectives explain the interplay between security, economy, and diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific order. The study begins its deep dive with the hypothesis that Bangladesh's strategic location and balanced diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific framework strengthen its maritime security and economic opportunities while reducing the risk of great-power entrapment.

Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, analyzing policy documents, academic literature, and international reports through the lenses of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. The methodology integrates thematic content analysis and comparative geopolitical mapping to identify patterns in maritime strategy, power alignment, and regional cooperation frameworks within the Indo-Pacific and Bay of Bengal contexts.

## **The Indo-Pacific: Strategic Significant**

The Indo-Pacific Region became the pivot of the 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitics, where economic dynamism merged with power politics. With growing times, the geopolitical equation of the IPR becomes more complex. Therefore, for delving deeper into the Indo-Pacific geopolitics, a reader needs to be few interconnected pillars that define the region's complexity and future trajectory:

### **(a) Indo-Pacific: Economic Powerhouse of the World**

The IPR is considered the economic powerhouse of the world. It encompasses over 60% of the global population and contributes nearly 2/3rds of global economic growth (World Bank, 2023). Spanning from the eastern coast of Africa to the Americas, the Indo-Pacific has become a central arena for global trade, innovation, and maritime connectivity. As Tim Marshall aptly observed, "In the twenty-first century globalized and cyber-connected world, the economic

engine is the centre, and that centre is the Indo-Pacific” (Tim Marshall, 2021). Its growing influence is defined by five key pillars: demographics, trade interdependence, energy security, regional economic frameworks, and chokepoints critical to global commerce.

Demographically, the IPR comprised some of the world’s most populous countries. India, Indonesia, and Bangladesh maintain median ages under 30, supporting rapid urbanization, industrialization, and a thriving digital economy. India is projected to become the world’s third-largest economy after the US and China in terms of PPP by 2030 (UNCTAD, 2023). Although China is experiencing demographic decline, it remains a global leader in advanced manufacturing and technological innovation.

Trade and investment define the Indo-Pacific’s economic strength. The region handles over 60% of global maritime trade and nearly 40% of energy shipments (IEA, 2023). IPR Countries including Japan, South Korea, and Singapore serve as established financial and production giants in the region, while nations like India, Vietnam, and the Philippines are benefiting from shifting supply chains and decoupling strategies aimed at reducing dependency on China.

To sustain the economic progress of the region energy security remains vital. With Japan, China and India importing their majority of oil supplies by sea, thus the security of maritime transit routes, particularly the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea is preconditioned. These chokepoints are susceptible to disruption from geopolitical tensions, prompting strategic diversification efforts. For instance, China’s Belt and Road’s maritime wing the “String of Pearl” offers overland alternatives, while India has expanded its strategic reserves and naval footprint to mitigate risks.

Several competing economic frameworks shape regional economic dynamics. China’s BRI is focused on facilitating infrastructure connectivity, but such support is not beyond question. Huge Chinese investment disburse has raised debt sustainability concerns among the BRI members across the region (Cordesman, 2020). In contrast, the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) targets supply chains, digital standards, and clean energy but lacks market access incentives. Meanwhile, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) links 15 countries in a trade bloc covering 30% of global GDP. Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision aligns with the QUAD nations in promoting sovereignty, maritime freedom, and the rule of law.

Key strategic chokepoints further support the economic facilitation of the region. The Strait of Malacca channels nearly one-third of global trade and a quarter of seaborne oil. The South China Sea, although contested, facilitates \$3.5 trillion in annual trade. The Bay of Bengal, increasingly active in regional connectivity, connects South and Southeast Asia. External chokepoints i.e., the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb also impact energy imports for Indo-Pacific nations.

## **Theoretical Perspectives on Indo-Pacific Geopolitics**

The Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) has become a key example of both global power distribution and economic competition. It reflects the complexities and contradictions of today's international politics, where strategic and economic interests are closely linked. Three major International Relations (IR) theories: Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism can be helpful to understand and analyze the Indo-Pacific geopolitics deeply.

### **(a) Realism: Security Dilemma and the Multipolar Maritime Contest**

Anarchy lies at the core of the Realist tradition in International Relations. Realist theory assumes that anarchy is the permanent condition of the international system, where states must rely on power projection and, at times, economic dominance to ensure survival. China's rapid modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), particularly its naval forces, reflects a classic struggle for power aimed at securing strategic interests, including control over vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) such as the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait. The steady expansion of the PLA Navy (PLAN) highlights Beijing's ambition to establish itself as both a maritime power and a continental superpower in Asia. This shift marks a significant change in global geopolitics, directly challenging the long-standing U.S. naval dominance in the Pacific.

The resulting security dilemma mirrors the classical "Thucydides Trap," where rising and established powers come into conflict. Such tensions are further intensified by technological advancements and new domains of warfare, including cyber and space, where defensive actions by one state are often perceived as offensive by others. The United States views China's military rise, supported by its strong economic base, as a threat to its political interests in the Indo-Pacific Region. In response, Washington has adopted a neocontainment approach, forming strategic partnerships and initiatives such as AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), while increasing naval deployments in the region to balance Chinese influence. However, this military build-up risks escalating mistrust and

miscalculation, potentially leading to a dangerous security spiral.

Realism must also account for the growing diversity of regional actors. India's increasing maritime presence, Vietnam's resistance to Chinese claims, Japan's gradual shift from pacifism, and Australia's active role in regional security highlight an emerging multipolar order in the Indo-Pacific. Although these middle powers do not match the military strength of China or the United States, they contribute to balancing through alliances, partnerships, and capability-building. Their involvement complicates the traditional realist view of a binary great-power rivalry and adds new layers to the strategic landscape.

### **(b) Liberalism: Institutional Resilience amid Strategic Rivalry**

Liberalism highlights the role of institutions, norms, and economic ties in promoting stability in the Indo-Pacific, though it is not without limitations. Regional frameworks like ASEAN, RCEP, and CPTPP show that countries can work together to manage tensions and avoid direct conflict. These institutions help facilitate dialogue, resolve disputes, and support shared goals such as trade and maritime security.

However, the approach faces challenges when major powers do not fully follow international rules. For example, China's rejection of the 2016 UNCLOS arbitration ruling shows that legal frameworks may be ignored when power interests are at stake. This reveals a tension between liberal ideals and the realities of international politics.

Economic connections also offer mixed results. Trade and investment can encourage cooperation, but growing U.S.–China rivalry has led to “decoupling” and competition in technology and supply chains. Initiatives like the U.S. Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) aim to promote rules-based governance but fall short of matching China's Belt and Road Initiative. These trends show that economic integration can exist alongside strategic competition, challenging liberal predictions about peace through interdependence.

### **(c) Constructivism: The Power of Ideas, Identities, and Narratives**

Constructivism highlights how perceptions, identities, and historical experiences influence the behavior of Indo-Pacific states beyond material power. China's assertiveness is tied to the idea of “National Rejuvenation” and overcoming the “Century of Humiliation,” framing its rise as restoring its rightful status rather

than simple expansion. This identity-driven motivation complicates strategies based only on military balance.

Japan's changing security posture shows how its pacifist identity is being reconsidered in response to regional threats, while India's maritime ambitions reflect a self-image as a regional balancer and "Net Security Provider," linking strategic choices to broader narratives of leadership and responsibility.

Even the term "Indo-Pacific" reflects competing ideas. The U.S. and its allies use "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) to promote liberal order and maritime freedom, whereas China prefers "Asia-Pacific," emphasizing regional institutions it can influence. Smaller states adopt flexible policies based on identity, history, and practical survival rather than strict alliances.

Constructivism shows that regional contests are as much about legitimacy and competing visions as about material power. Understanding these narratives is key to conflict prevention and effective diplomacy, revealing the limits of approaches that focus only on military or economic strength.

No single theory fully explains Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Realism emphasizes power competition and security dilemmas, liberalism highlights the role of institutions and economic ties in reducing conflict, and constructivism focuses on identities and narratives that shape cooperation and rivalry.

For middle powers such as Australia, Indonesia, South Korea, and Bangladesh, managing this environment requires strategic flexibility: balancing security and economic priorities, engaging in multilateral forums while maintaining sovereignty, and recognizing how identity and narrative shape regional dynamics.

### **Small States in Great Power Competition: Maritime Delimitation Problems in the Indo-Pacific**

The Indo-Pacific region is a key area of great power rivalry, where small and middle powers face complex maritime disputes, especially in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea. These disputes involve overlapping sovereignty claims and competition for rich resources, creating challenges for both international law and regional stability. Countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei confront China's Nine-Dash Line claim, which overlaps with their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and heightens geopolitical tensions (PCA, 2016).



The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982) provides a legal framework for maritime boundaries, defining territorial seas up to 12 nautical miles and EEZs up to 200 nautical miles. Articles 15, 74, and 83 emphasize resolving disputes through negotiation or arbitration. However, enforcement is limited when major powers reject rulings, as demonstrated by China's dismissal of the 2016 PCA decision that invalidated its claims, weakening the authority of international law (PCA, 2016).

In the South China Sea, small states face coercive tactics including Chinese Coast Guard harassment and "Gray Zone" operations challenging their sovereignty (Hayton, 2020). Vietnam and Malaysia have submitted claims to the UN Commission on Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), seeking recognition of extended continental shelves amid persistent Chinese pressure. Although the Philippines won the PCA case, it remains vulnerable to China's militarization and naval presence, relying heavily on U.S. security guarantees (CSIS, 2024). As noted by former Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario, China's refusal to comply threatens regional stability.

In the East China Sea, the dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands reflects similar maritime delimitation challenges. Both countries claim sovereignty based on historical narratives and legal principles under UNCLOS, with the U.S. acting as a security guarantor under the U.S.-Japan treaty to deter conflict (Smith, 2019).

Strategic waterways like the Strait of Malacca, vital for energy transit, also witness jurisdictional tensions. Despite ASEAN's Tripartite Maritime Patrols, differing national perspectives on foreign naval presence highlight intra-regional fragmentation (Thayer, 2020).

Small states face structural asymmetries in military capacity and economic dependencies, making them vulnerable to coercion (Thayer, 2020). They respond with legal multilateralism (UNCLOS and PCA arbitration), minilateral cooperation (e.g., Vietnam-Philippines-Malaysia dialogues), and external balancing partnerships with powers like the U.S., Japan, and India. However, approaches vary; for example, Brunei prefers economic accommodation over confrontation (Medcalf, 2020).

Despite limitations, small states exercise agency in shaping maritime norms. ASEAN's ongoing negotiations on a Code of Conduct with China, the Philippines' landmark legal challenges, and Indonesia's firm stance near the



Natuna Islands exemplify proactive normative engagement (Medcalf, 2020).

Maritime delimitation disputes in the Indo-Pacific reveal the fragile intersection of law, power, and diplomacy. The future stability of the region depends on equitable and enforceable solutions respecting small states' sovereignty amid persistent great power competition.

## **Nuclear Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific Region**

The Indo-Pacific is a critical arena for evolving nuclear dynamics marked by multipolar strategic competition among major powers—primarily China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, Russia, and the United States—and the consequential roles of non-nuclear middle powers like Japan, South Korea, and Australia. This complex landscape is characterized by nuclear modernization, shifting doctrines, and persistent regional rivalries, heightening strategic uncertainty and risks of escalation.

### **(a) China's Expanding Nuclear Arsenal**

China is rapidly expanding and modernizing its nuclear forces, moving beyond its traditional minimum deterrence posture. The U.S. Department of Defense (2023) estimates China's nuclear warheads exceeded 500 by early 2024, with projections of over 1,000 warheads by 2030. Beijing is developing a full nuclear triad including land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), nuclear-capable bombers, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), alongside hypersonic missile technology (Pant & Joshi, 2021). China's increasing warhead count and ambiguous doctrine, combined with dual-use missile deployments, raise concerns over strategic stability and escalation control in the Indo-Pacific.

### **(b) India and Pakistan: A Volatile Nuclear Dyad**

India and Pakistan maintain tense nuclear postures shaped by their long-standing rivalry. India's nuclear strategy is based on credible minimum deterrence and a declared No First Use (NFU) policy, supported by land-, sea-, and air-based delivery systems, including Agni missiles and the submarine-launched weapons of INS Arihant (Pant & Joshi, 2021). However, recent strategic discussions in India indicate a possible shift toward a more flexible deterrence posture, partly in response to China's growing capabilities and the Pakistan-China strategic partnership.

Pakistan, conversely, maintains a more ambiguous nuclear doctrine, with no NFU commitment and a focus on tactical nuclear weapons intended to offset India's conventional military superiority. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal continues to grow and diversify, contributing to regional instability and increasing the risk of nuclear escalation, especially in crises (Sagan & Waltz, 2017).

### **(c) North Korea: The Most Volatile Nuclear Actor**

North Korea remains the most unpredictable nuclear state in the Indo-Pacific, conducting numerous nuclear and missile tests including advanced solid-fuel ICBMs (CSIS, 2024). Despite international sanctions, Pyongyang pursues an aggressive doctrine that includes threats of preemptive nuclear use against South Korea, Japan, and U.S. assets. This volatile posture destabilizes regional security, undermining deterrence and crisis management efforts.

### **(d) U.S. Extended Deterrence and Regional Allies**

The United States underpins the regional nuclear balance through extended deterrence commitments to Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Washington's strategic posture involves deploying nuclear-capable assets, enhancing military cooperation, and reaffirming security guarantees amid China's and North Korea's advancements (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review outlines the challenge of deterring simultaneous threats from China and Russia, reflecting the multipolar complexity of Indo-Pacific security.

### **(e) Non-Nuclear Powers and Proliferation Risks**

Japan and South Korea, while non-nuclear, possess advanced nuclear technology and face rising public and political calls for independent nuclear deterrents amid regional threats (Asan Institute, 2022). Both remain under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, balancing non-proliferation commitments with strategic anxieties. Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines through the AUKUS pact enhances regional deterrence but fuels tensions with China (MFA China, 2023).

The Indo-Pacific nuclear environment is shaped by a dynamic interplay of modernization, doctrinal shifts, and strategic mistrust. The India-Pakistan dyad, China's expansion, North Korea's unpredictability, and U.S. extended deterrence create a multipolar nuclear order fraught with risks. Addressing this requires

robust arms control, confidence-building, and crisis management to avoid escalation and maintain regional stability.

## **Maritime Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Challenges in the Indo-Pacific**

The Indo-Pacific, encompassing critical sea lanes and over half the world's population, faces a range of Non-traditional Security (NTS) threats that transcend conventional military concerns. These challenges include piracy, illegal fishing, climate change, marine pollution, human trafficking, and natural disasters—issues that jeopardize regional stability, economic prosperity, and the health of the global maritime commons (World Bank, 2020).

### **(a) Piracy and Armed Robbery**

Piracy remains a significant problem in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the Strait of Malacca and the waters around Indonesia and the Philippines. After a decline in the early 2010s, piracy incidents increased by 15% in 2023 according to ReCAAP (2024), fueled by weak law enforcement, complex geography, and economic hardship in coastal areas. While regional cooperation through the Malacca Strait Patrols and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) has improved surveillance, sovereignty issues and limited maritime awareness restrict effective countermeasures.

### **(b) Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing**

IUU fishing threatens maritime food security and biodiversity, accounting for about 30% of global catch (FAO, 2022). China, Vietnam, and Thailand operate distant water fleets beyond their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), causing tension with coastal states. Indonesia's practice of sinking foreign IUU vessels underscores the severity. Regional mechanisms like the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA) and cooperation within ASEAN, Fisheries Forum Agency, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association aim to address the issue but enforcement remains inconsistent, particularly for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) with limited monitoring capacity.

### **(c) Climate Change and Sea-Level Rise**

The Indo-Pacific is disproportionately vulnerable to climate change impacts, including sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and stronger cyclones. The IPCC (2023) reports sea levels rising at 4.4 mm per year—higher than the global average. Cities like Jakarta and Manila face flooding threats, while island nations

such as Tuvalu risk becoming uninhabitable. These environmental stresses increase displacement risks, threaten fisheries, and may provoke new conflicts over resources. International frameworks such as the Sendai Framework and Green Climate Fund exist but face challenges from geopolitical competition and funding gaps.

#### **(d) Marine Pollution**

The region is the world's largest contributor to marine plastic pollution, with China, Indonesia, and the Philippines among the top polluters (Jambeck et al., 2015). Over eight million tons of plastic waste annually enter regional waters, harming ecosystems and livelihoods. Despite ASEAN's Framework of Action on Marine Debris and UNEP campaigns, national-level implementation and waste management infrastructure remain inadequate.

#### **(e) Human Trafficking and Maritime Migration**

The Indo-Pacific is a transit hub for human trafficking and irregular maritime migration, including forced labor on fishing vessels and smuggling. UNODC (2021) reported over 60,000 cases between 2015-2020. Efforts by BIMSTEC, ASEAN, and the Bali Process address these issues, but coordination gaps persist in surveillance and legal harmonization.

#### **(f) Natural Disasters**

The region is highly prone to natural disasters such as tsunamis and cyclones, which disrupt maritime trade and humanitarian operations. Institutions like ASEAN's AHA Centre and the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System provide frameworks, though uneven capacity limits effectiveness.

### **Maritime Delimitation Problems**

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a primary theatre for maritime disputes, particularly involving overlapping claims over EEZs and continental shelves. These delimitation problems are not only legal in nature but are also deeply embedded in power asymmetries and great power rivalries. While the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides a legal framework for maritime boundary settlement, its effectiveness is often undermined by political coercion and selective compliance, especially by major powers like China (Beckman, 2017).

The South China Sea serves as a prominent example where small coastal states such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei face challenges in asserting their legal maritime claims. Despite the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling that invalidated China's "Nine-Dash Line" claim in favor of the Philippines, China continues to assert expansive maritime jurisdiction, using gray-zone tactics, artificial island construction, and coast guard deployments (PCA, 2016). This illustrates how legal victories do not always translate into strategic leverage for smaller states.

Small states are thus compelled to engage in strategic hedging. Vietnam and Malaysia have submitted extended continental shelf claims to the United Nations to reinforce their legal positions (Bateman, 2020). Indonesia, although not a direct claimant in the South China Sea disputes, has taken a firm stance in defending its EEZ near the Natuna Islands, showcasing growing maritime assertiveness among smaller Indo-Pacific nations (Storey, 2020).

Furthermore, the Bay of Bengal is not immune to these tensions. Although Bangladesh peacefully resolved its maritime disputes with both India and Myanmar through international arbitration, maritime insecurity persists due to growing Chinese naval influence and strategic posturing by India and the United States (Mohan, 2022).

In navigating such geopolitical turbulence, small states rely increasingly on multilateralism, legal diplomacy, and balancing partnerships with middle and great powers such as India, Japan, and the U.S. However, their bargaining power remains limited by economic dependencies and a lack of naval capabilities (Wirth, 2021). Upholding a rules-based maritime order thus requires consistent international support for UNCLOS-based arbitration and the protection of small state rights.

### **Strategic Significance of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific Region**

Bangladesh, located at the apex of the BoB, holds a vital position in the geopolitical and economic landscape of the Indo-Pacific. The Bay of Bengal, the largest bay in the world, serves as a critical maritime junction connecting South Asia to Southeast Asia and beyond. With over 710 kilometers of coastline and recent maritime boundary settlements with Myanmar and India, Bangladesh now commands an EEZ of 118,813 km<sup>2</sup> (ITLOS, 2012; PCA, 2014). This significant maritime domain enhances its potential influence in maritime trade, resource extraction, and regional connectivity.

Bangladesh's geographic location provides it with strategic leverage in the evolving Indo-Pacific architecture. It offers access routes to Northeast India and China's Yunnan Province through initiatives like the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), and lies adjacent to one of the world's busiest maritime chokepoints—the Strait of Malacca—through which over 60% of global maritime trade passes (Kaplan, 2010). Moreover, Bangladesh features prominently in China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and regional groupings such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Its ports—Chattogram, Payra, and the under-construction Matarbari Deep Sea Port—have the potential to serve as logistical hubs linking inland South Asia with the broader Indo-Pacific (Mohan, 2019).

Economically, the Bay of Bengal is emerging as a frontier for the blue economy. Bangladesh is positioning itself to capitalize on marine fisheries, offshore energy resources, and maritime logistics. Over three million people rely on marine fisheries for livelihood, and the newly secured maritime boundaries open up opportunities for exploration of underutilized resources (World Bank, 2018). Offshore gas blocks have attracted foreign investment interest, particularly in deep-sea hydrocarbon exploration. Bangladesh's growing seaborne trade—comprising over 90% of its total trade—is set to benefit from port modernization, especially through Japan-assisted projects like Matarbari Deep Sea Port, capable of handling large container vessels.

Beyond trade, Bangladesh is increasingly viewed as a strategic connector in regional connectivity plans. It is a partner in India's Act East Policy, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. Through special economic zones (SEZs), transit corridors, and cross-border infrastructure, it is emerging as a key node in the Indo-Pacific's economic geography. According to the World Bank (2017), the sustainable development of the blue economy could contribute 4–6% of Bangladesh's GDP by 2030 and generate over 10 million jobs.

Thus, Bangladesh's strategic geography, growing maritime capabilities, and economic ambitions make it a pivotal actor in the Indo-Pacific. Its ability to maintain balanced partnerships among major powers like China, India, Japan, and the U.S. positions it as a "Swing State" whose alignments can significantly shape regional power dynamics (Roy, 2021). As Marshall asserts, "The Indo-Pacific is the economic engine of the 21st century"—and Bangladesh stands at its crossroads.

## **Major Powers' Interests in the Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh**

The BoB, once a relatively calm maritime space, has emerged as a critical arena of geopolitical competition among global and regional powers. Bangladesh, situated at the northeastern edge of the BoB, plays an increasingly central role in this evolving strategic landscape. Major actors—including the United States, China, India, Japan, and others—have converging interests in the region, from maritime security and economic connectivity to infrastructure development and strategic influence.

The United States views the BoB as a vital component of its broader Indo-Pacific Strategy, which seeks to ensure a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (The White House, 2022). Washington has strengthened military ties with Bangladesh through maritime domain awareness programs and humanitarian cooperation. Additionally, the U.S.-backed Quad (U.S., India, Japan, and Australia) recognizes the BoB as a critical juncture linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

In contrast, China prioritizes the BoB through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), specifically the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road. Beijing has invested heavily in Bangladesh's infrastructure, such as the Payra Port and Karnaphuli Tunnel, and recent Mongla Port development leverage the strategic depth in the Indian Ocean (Panda, 2020). China's access to the BoB is part of its broader "Two-ocean Strategy," aimed at ensuring secure maritime routes and naval presence beyond the South China Sea. India, as a regional hegemon, sees the BoB as a maritime buffer critical to its national security. It is countering China through regional initiatives such as BBIN and the Kaladan project, and maintains strong defense ties with Bangladesh, including naval exercises and coordinated patrols (Mohan, 2019).

Japan, under its FOIP vision, has promoted high-quality infrastructure in the BoB. It leads major investments like the Matarbari deep-sea port and the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) to boost connectivity while countering Chinese influence (Terada, 2021). Meanwhile, Australia and ASEAN have growing stakes in the BoB through naval dialogue, trade, and regional integration initiatives like RCEP.

Given these dynamics, Bangladesh adopts a careful balancing act—engaging with all major powers while maintaining its non-aligned foreign policy. As Roy (2021) notes, "Bangladesh is a geopolitical swing state whose



choices will shape the outcome of the Indo-Pacific contest for influence.”

## **Geopolitical Challenges for Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal**

The BoB, once seen as a relatively peaceful maritime area, has become a center of strategic competition within the Indo-Pacific. Bangladesh, located at the heart of this region, faces several geopolitical challenges affecting its national security, sovereignty, and regional diplomacy. These challenges arise not only from traditional state rivalries but also from emerging and non-traditional maritime issues.

A major concern is the growing rivalry among powers such as the United States, China, and India. The U.S.-China competition extends into the BoB, with the United States promoting its “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) and China advancing its BRI. Bangladesh must carefully balance its relations with China, its largest trading partner and infrastructure investor, and India, a key neighbor and security partner. This balancing act is further complicated by Japan’s BIG-B initiative and India’s Act East policy, both of which seek to enhance regional connectivity through Bangladesh. The Lowy Institute (2023) describes Bangladesh as being at the crossroads of these competing corridors, making it a “geopolitical hotspot.”

Although Bangladesh resolved its maritime delimitation disputes with Myanmar (ITLOS, 2012) and India (PCA, 2014) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), challenges remain in the enforcement and monitoring of its newly acquired maritime zones, which span over 118,813 km<sup>2</sup>. The Bangladesh Navy and Coast Guard currently lack the capacity for deep-sea patrols, leaving the EEZ vulnerable to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing by foreign vessels (Chowdhury, 2021). This vulnerability increases the risk of future conflicts over maritime resources, particularly hydrocarbons and fisheries.

Bangladesh depends heavily on critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) through the BoB and the Strait of Malacca, with over 90 percent of its trade and energy imports passing along these routes. Any disruption caused by regional instability or great-power competition could severely affect the country’s economy. Increasing militarization in the Indo-Pacific, including naval exercises by the U.S., India, and China, has made the BoB a more contested space. The Center for Strategic and International Studies notes that the BoB now serves as a

platform for naval power projection, creating operational risks for smaller littoral states like Bangladesh (CSIS, 2021).

The regional naval buildup has also pressured Bangladesh to modernize its maritime forces. India's nuclear submarines and China's access to strategic ports in Myanmar and Sri Lanka are changing the naval balance in the BoB. Bangladesh has started modest modernization efforts, acquiring submarines and patrol vessels. However, the widening technological and capability gap raises concerns about national deterrence and sovereignty (Brewster, 2020).

Non-traditional security threats further complicate the situation. Climate change—through rising sea levels, salinity intrusion, and coastal erosion—threatens Bangladesh's maritime baselines and long-term EEZ claims. Climate-induced displacement and stronger cyclones could damage port infrastructure and deplete marine resources (IPCC, 2022). Grey-zone tactics such as covert surveillance, cyber-attacks, and paramilitary fishing also pose risks. Underdeveloped port cybersecurity, particularly in Chattogram and Mongla, leaves Bangladesh vulnerable to digital threats (World Bank, 2021), while transnational crimes like trafficking and smuggling exploit weak maritime governance. Limited regional intelligence-sharing worsens these challenges.

Finally, Bangladesh is excluded from key multilateral frameworks like the Quad, AUKUS, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), limiting its influence in regional security and policy-making. This exclusion may force the country into difficult alignments as strategic dynamics evolve. Rahman and Ahmed argue that exclusive Indo-Pacific frameworks risk undermining the sovereignty of smaller states unless inclusive institutions are strengthened (Rahman and Ahmed, 2023).

## **Bangladesh in Navigating the Geopolitical Challenges**

As the Indo-Pacific becomes the central stage of global geopolitics, Bangladesh, located on the northeastern edge of the BoB, faces increasingly complex strategic challenges. Its strategic location, growing economy, and evolving maritime ambitions require careful management of issues arising from great-power competition, maritime security, and regional connectivity initiatives.

### **(a) Strategic Positioning Amidst Great Power Rivalry**

Bangladesh's location between South and Southeast Asia places it at the

center of multiple regional strategies, including India's "Neighborhood First" and "Act East" policies, China's BRI, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision (Mohan, 2020). These overlapping initiatives draw Dhaka into competing spheres of influence. At the same time, Bangladesh has maintained its longstanding foreign policy principle of "friendship to all, malice to none," engaging pragmatically with all major powers.

Its participation in China's BRI is complemented by deepened ties with India, the US, Japan, and the EU. Such calibrated diplomacy helps Bangladesh attract infrastructure investment without becoming entangled in zero-sum rivalries (Rashid, 2021).

### **(b) Maritime Security and Blue Economy Aspirations**

After securing over 118,813 km<sup>2</sup> of maritime jurisdiction through landmark verdicts against Myanmar and India (ITLOS, 2012; PCA, 2014), Bangladesh has shifted focus toward maritime economic potential. The government's Blue Economy vision seeks to unlock fisheries, ports, offshore energy, and marine biotechnology (MOFA, 2017).

However, the growing military presence of regional and extra-regional navies in the BoB—India, China, the US, and Japan—introduces strategic competition. In response, Bangladesh has undertaken naval modernization under Forces Goal 2030 and invested in maritime domain awareness systems to protect its interests (Rahman, 2022).

### **(c) Economic Connectivity vs. Strategic Entrapment**

Bangladesh is transforming into a connectivity hub through projects like Padma Bridge, Payra and Matarbari ports, and trans-border corridors. While these initiatives bolster regional trade, they also bring risks of strategic dependency. For instance, Dhaka has rejected Chinese proposals for exclusive zones and opted for multilateral financing in key infrastructure—reflecting a maturing foreign policy (Daily Star, 2021).

### **(d) Climate Change and Non-Traditional Security**

Bangladesh is acutely vulnerable to climate change, facing rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and salinity intrusion. These challenges amplify non-traditional security (NTS) risks such as displacement and resource scarcity

(World Bank, 2021). As a vocal advocate of climate-security linkages, Bangladesh commands moral leadership in Indo-Pacific discourses. It also actively engages in forums such as IORA, BIMSTEC, and IONS, addressing maritime piracy, illegal fishing, and disaster relief (Karim, 2020).

### **(e) Leveraging Middle Power Partnerships**

Strategic cooperation with middle powers like Japan, South Korea, and the EU enables Bangladesh to avoid binary alignments. Japan, in particular, has been instrumental in funding the Matarbari Deep Sea Port—a vital component of Dhaka’s trade diversification strategy (JICA, 2021). Additionally, engagement in IPEF dialogues and ASEAN-led mechanisms shows Bangladesh’s growing regional ambition.

### **Reflections**

Michel Foucault’s remark, “I’m no prophet. My job is making windows where there were once walls,” captures the challenge of understanding the Indo-Pacific. The region is often portrayed as a single geopolitical bloc, where a new Cold War between China and the United States is unfolding. However, this perspective risks oversimplifying the complex realities on the ground, especially the experiences of smaller states like Bangladesh, which are caught in the middle of great-power competition.

Treating the Indo-Pacific as a fixed, unitary space can erect analytical “Walls” rather than open “Windows.” In reality, the Indo-Pacific is a constructed political and strategic concept, shaped by major powers to organize influence, security, and economic competition. Recognizing this constructivist insight enables policymakers and scholars to adopt more nuanced strategies that move beyond simplistic rivalries and address the interests and agency of all regional actors.

The United Kingdom’s evolving Indo-Pacific policy illustrates this complexity. The UK seeks to strengthen its capacity to respond to opportunities and challenges in the Indo-Pacific and the Bay of Bengal. Similarly, the Labour Party’s approach toward China—“co-operate where we can, compete where we need to, and challenge where we must”—reflects the careful balancing required in a multipolar world.

Lord George Robertson, former Defence Secretary and NATO Secretary-General, noted that “what happens in the Asia-Pacific can happen in the

Euro-Atlantic very quickly afterwards,” emphasizing the global interconnectedness of regional dynamics. The China–U.S. rivalry risks testing established alliances such as the European Union, which was shaped under Cold War bipolarity and later unipolar American dominance, and now faces renewed bipolar competition with China.

Realist thought highlights that great-power rivalry drives history, with China’s rise shaping this century’s geopolitical narrative. Yet the future depends on how Beijing and Washington manage their competitive relationship, which is marked by both risk and opportunity. Historical metaphors, such as the “Tragedy of Xerxes and the Victory of Themistocles,” warn against overconfidence and rigid thinking in the face of fluid geopolitical challenges.

Leadership in the Indo-Pacific requires a balance of focus and adaptability. Isaiah Berlin’s typology suggests that effective strategy combines the hedgehog’s clear direction with the fox’s flexibility. Likewise, the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) must embody the “coup d’oeil”—the ability to quickly perceive the overall situation and navigate complex challenges with both vision and agility.

A successful IPS must reconcile multiple priorities: asserting geopolitical goals while respecting regional diversity, combining deterrence with diplomacy, fostering alliances without alienating non-aligned partners, and integrating realism with pragmatism. Strategic leadership of this kind will determine how the Indo-Pacific navigates its risks and opportunities.

In conclusion, moving beyond rigid narratives of rivalry and simple power binaries is essential. Recognizing the Indo-Pacific as a complex, constructed space opens “Windows” for fresh insights and innovative policy approaches. The agency of Bangladesh and other smaller states must be central as the region collectively navigates this evolving strategic environment.

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