

## Maritime Security for Bangladesh: Geopolitical, Geoeconomic, and Media Imperatives in the Bay of Bengal

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### *Abstract*

Bangladesh's maritime security is becoming increasingly important to its national strategy, with sovereignty and economic growth closely linked to the Bay of Bengal. The maritime area offers strategic opportunities, such as key sea routes, fisheries, hydrocarbons, and Blue Economy resources, but also exposes the country to climate challenges, illegal fishing, and great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific. This study explores how historical legacies, current geopolitics, and emerging geoeconomic trends influence Bangladesh's maritime security. Guided by the question, "What defines maritime security for Bangladesh and its future trajectory?" The research employs a multidimensional security framework (Buzan 1991; Till 2009) and qualitative methods, including document analysis and expert reflections. Findings show that maritime security extends beyond naval defense to encompass geopolitical balance, economic influence, and societal engagement. The study emphasizes that promoting ocean literacy, strengthening institutions, and developing a resilient maritime strategy are crucial for protecting Bangladesh's national interests and capitalizing on its strategic position in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** *Maritime Security, Bay of Bengal, Indo-Pacific, Ocean Literacy, Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, Media*

### **1. Introduction**

Bangladesh stands at a critical maritime juncture, where its future development, security, and economic prosperity are inseparably linked to the Bay of Bengal. The nation possesses a 710-kilometer coastline and sovereign rights over more than 118,000 square kilometers of maritime territory, following the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) ruling with Myanmar in 2012 and the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) settlement with India in 2014 (Alam 2016; Rahman 2015). These legal victories have transformed the Bay from a peripheral concern into a central axis of Bangladesh's strategic horizon.

Historically, Bangladesh's security policy has been land-focused, shaped by the 1971 liberation war and post-colonial territorial priorities (Chowdhury 2017). Still, its delta geography, extensive river networks, and strategic location at the northern end of the Bay highlight its inherent reliance on the sea for trade, food security, and connectivity (Chakrabarti 2005; Ray 2012). As Alfred Thayer Mahan once noted, "Whoever controls the sea has command of the world's trade" (Mahan 1890, 1), a maxim that aligns with Bangladesh's modern ambitions for maritime sovereignty, economic durability, and strategic importance.

Maritime security for Bangladesh goes beyond traditional naval defense. It includes energy security, protecting fisheries, developing a sustainable blue economy, securing critical sea routes,

and managing geostrategic relationships within the broader Indo-Pacific region (Till 2009). The Bay of Bengal has become both a focal point for geopolitical rivalry and a hub of geoeconomic opportunities. India's Act East policy and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative, China's Belt and Road maritime investments, and U.S.-Japan efforts to promote a rules-based Indo-Pacific all highlight the growing strategic competition (Brewster 2018; Kaplan 2010; Scott 2012). Meanwhile, fisheries, hydrocarbons, shipping lanes, and undersea cables hold significant economic promise, even as threats like piracy, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, maritime boundary disputes, and climate-related hazards test national resilience (IPCC 2021; Khan 2020).

Given this complex and multidimensional context, the study is guided by two central research questions:

- What defines maritime security for Bangladesh in the twenty-first century, taking into account both traditional and non-traditional aspects?
- How does the changing geopolitical and geoeconomic environment of the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indo-Pacific influence Bangladesh's maritime strategy and future outlook?

The research objectives are threefold:

- To conceptualize maritime security for Bangladesh through a multidimensional lens, bridging classical naval thought and contemporary security studies (Buzan 1991; Till 2009).
- To analyze the geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of the Bay of Bengal, situating Bangladesh within Indo-Pacific strategic and economic currents (Brewster 2018; Kaplan 2010).
- To recommend strategic approaches—including naval modernization, regional cooperation, and promotion of ocean literacy through media and education—to secure Bangladesh's maritime future (Ahmad 2021; Musa 2025).

By addressing these questions and objectives, this research fills a significant gap in the existing literature. While existing scholarship explores regional geopolitics, classical naval strategy, and the blue economy separately, integrated analyses of Bangladesh's maritime security—linking legal, operational, environmental, societal, and geopolitical dimensions—remain scarce. This study contributes theoretically by offering a tailored, multidimensional conceptualization of maritime security and practically by informing strategic frameworks essential for sustainable national development and resilient maritime governance.

The strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal to Bangladesh is effectively highlighted in *Solicited Sovereignty: Essays on Bangladesh's National, Foreign, and Maritime Affairs* by Commodore Syed Misbah Uddin Ahmad, retired, published by Ilan Noor Publications. It states that "The Bay of Bengal is no longer a peripheral sea; it is Bangladesh's lifeline, proving that a nation's future is inseparable from the waters it calls its own." While this quote is not from a prominent international authority, it captures the country's evolving maritime reality. It illustrates Bangladesh's shift from a primarily land-focused security outlook to a maritime-centered strategy, emphasizing that national prosperity, sovereignty, and development are increasingly connected to the security,

governance, and sustainable utilization of the Bay's resources. This emphasizes the need to view maritime security not only as naval defense, but also as a multidimensional approach that encompasses geopolitical, economic, and societal factors. The research provides a foundation for systematically exploring Bangladesh's maritime history, current situation, and future opportunities, helping scholars and policymakers gain a comprehensive understanding of the nation's maritime priorities.

## **2. Literature Review**

Maritime security has evolved into a multidimensional concept, encompassing traditional state-focused defense issues as well as non-traditional challenges such as environmental hazards, resource competition, and societal resilience (Buzan et al. 1998; Till 2009). Research on maritime security encompasses classical naval theory, modern strategic studies, regional analyses such as the Bay of Bengal, and domestic studies on Bangladesh's evolving maritime role. This review combines these areas to position the study within an established yet evolving body of literature and to emphasize the specific contributions of this research.

### **2.1 Classical Maritime Thought**

Foundational studies by Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Corbett remain essential for understanding the ongoing importance of seapower. Mahan (1890) argued that national prosperity and global influence come from a mix of commercial activity, naval strength, and maritime infrastructure. He stated that "control of the sea is indispensable to the creation of national power" (Mahan 1890, 12). Corbett (1911) supported this view by emphasizing the integration of maritime strategy with national policy, noting that naval forces achieve strategic goals not only through combat, but also by influencing communications and maritime trade. Modern scholars, such as Geoffrey Till (2009), build on these classical ideas, acknowledging the dual role of navies in policing, diplomacy, and combat—a framework especially relevant for smaller countries like Bangladesh that seek strategic importance without extensive fleet capabilities.

### **2.2 Security Studies and the Multidimensional Approach**

The Copenhagen School of Security Studies provides a theoretical framework for understanding maritime security as encompassing multiple aspects beyond just military threats (Buzan et al. 1998). Security is viewed at three connected levels: individual (human security), state (national security), and international (regional stability). Applied to Bangladesh, this framework highlights the link between coastal livelihoods, naval sovereignty, and regional maritime governance. Vego (2009) notes that the operational art of naval warfare bridges strategic planning with tactical execution, highlighting the importance of integrating doctrine, capabilities, and geopolitical awareness. Freedman (2013) also describes strategy as "the art of creating power in conditions of uncertainty," which aligns with Bangladesh's need to manage both environmental and geopolitical challenges.

### **2.3 Geopolitics of the Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific**

The Bay of Bengal has garnered increasing scholarly attention as a strategic hub in the Indo-Pacific region. Kaplan (2010) describes the Indian Ocean region as "the hinge of geopolitics," where trade, resources, and demographic pressures converge, creating a complex security landscape. Brewster (2018) analyzes the Bay of Bengal in detail, highlighting the growing competition between India

and China, as well as the United States' efforts to promote a rules-based maritime order. Holmes and Yoshihara (2008) contend that smaller littoral states, such as Bangladesh, face both opportunities and vulnerabilities in navigating great-power rivalry, as strategic alignment with one actor may limit autonomy with others. These studies underscore that Bangladesh's maritime strategy must strike a careful balance between sovereignty, economic interests, and regional diplomacy.

## **2.4 Geo-economics and the Blue Economy**

The literature on geo-economics emphasizes the strategic use of economic tools to accomplish national objectives (Blackwill and Harris 2016). For Bangladesh, the Bay of Bengal is not only a security issue but also a region of economic potential. Fisheries, offshore hydrocarbons, undersea cables, and renewable energy opportunities illustrate the economic significance of maritime security (Alam 2014; Khan 2019). Mohanty (2017) warns that climate change and unsustainable resource utilization could exacerbate vulnerabilities, underscoring the need for a comprehensive approach that integrates geoeconomic development with environmental sustainability.

## **2.5 Bangladesh-Specific Scholarship**

Bangladeshi scholarship increasingly places the nation within a maritime security framework. Ahmad (2021) argues that "Bangladesh's maritime future hinges on a balance between strategic autonomy and cooperative security in the Bay of Bengal," highlighting the relationship between national ability and regional diplomacy. Islam and Rahman (2020) emphasize the importance of UNCLOS III boundary settlements in establishing legal sovereignty over maritime resources. Karim (2018) examines the challenges of translating legal rights into operational capabilities, highlighting gaps in maritime domain awareness, institutional coordination, and resource management capacity. Syed Misbah Uddin Ahmad (2020) emphasizes the importance of ocean literacy and media engagement in shaping public understanding, arguing that a maritime-aware society is essential for informed policy decisions and strategic resilience.

## **2.6 Synthesis of Literature**

The literature review yields three interrelated insights:

Maritime security is inherently multidimensional. Traditional military aspects (sovereignty, naval defense, deterrence) coexist with non-traditional challenges (climate vulnerability, illegal fishing, resource management), requiring an integrated approach (Buzan 1991; Till 2009).

The Bay of Bengal serves as both a geopolitical and geoeconomic center. Great-power rivalry and regional alignment patterns significantly influence Bangladesh's strategic considerations, while economic opportunities in fisheries, hydrocarbons, and trade underscore its geoeconomic importance (Brewster 2018; Khan 2019).

Bangladesh-specific considerations are not well explored. While the general literature covers regional dynamics, few studies combine legal, operational, societal, and technological aspects into a cohesive framework for Bangladesh (Ahmad 2021; Karim 2018).

## 2.7 Research Gap

Despite considerable research, three gaps still exist:

- Conceptual clarity for Bangladesh – Few works explicitly define maritime security in a way that combines both traditional and non-traditional aspects specific to Bangladesh (Buzan et al. 1998; Till 2009).
- Underrepresentation in Indo-Pacific analyses – Bangladesh's role as a smaller littoral state, rather than a middle power maritime nation, is often marginalized in Indo-Pacific discourse, limiting the understanding of its strategic options and constraints (Brewster 2018; Holmes and Yoshihara 2008).
- Societal and normative dimensions – Ocean literacy, media engagement, and public awareness are scarcely examined, despite their centrality to sustaining maritime governance and strategic resilience (Ahmad 2021; Musa 2025).

This research addresses these gaps by providing a multidimensional framework that combines classical naval thought, contemporary security theory, geo-economics, and societal engagement, thereby offering a holistic conceptualization of maritime security tailored to Bangladesh's unique geographic, strategic, and developmental context.

## 2.8 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive analysis, appropriate for examining complex security phenomena that involve strategic perceptions, institutional practices, and evolving geopolitical contexts. The research is guided by a multidimensional security framework drawing on security studies and maritime strategy literature (Buzan 1991; Till 2009).

The primary method employed is document analysis, involving systematic review and interpretation of publicly available and authoritative sources. These include international legal judgments (UNCLOS-related cases), national policy documents, official strategy papers, naval and maritime security doctrines, academic journal articles, and policy-oriented monographs relevant to Bangladesh, the Bay of Bengal, and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Documents were selected based on relevance, credibility, and consistency with the research questions, and were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to sovereignty, geopolitics, geoeconomics, and societal dimensions of maritime security.

In addition, the analysis is informed by expert reflections, understood here as the author's structured analytical insights derived from long-term professional engagement in maritime security, naval strategy, and maritime governance. These reflections do not constitute formal interviews or human-subject research; rather, they represent informed synthesis based on professional experience, participation in policy forums, strategic dialogues, and operational-level exposure within Bangladesh's maritime security institutions. To ensure analytical rigor, such reflections are triangulated against established academic literature and documented policy sources.

This methodological approach prioritizes analytical depth and contextual accuracy over generalizability. The study does not seek to produce statistically representative findings but aims to generate policy-relevant insights and conceptual clarity regarding Bangladesh's maritime security challenges and future trajectory.

### 3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this research rests on the premise that maritime security is inherently multidimensional. For Bangladesh, this complexity is amplified by its strategic geography. As Tim Marshall (2015) emphasizes in *Prisoners of Geography*, a nation's physical location shapes its security imperatives, economic opportunities, and foreign policy options. Bangladesh's position at the northern apex of the Bay of Bengal situates it at the crossroads of South Asia and Southeast Asia, bordering India and Myanmar, and in proximity to China, Nepal, and Bhutan, while connecting to the "Seven Sisters" of India's northeastern states. Kaplan (2010) similarly underscores the Indo-Pacific as a theatre where geographic corridors determine strategic influence, economic connectivity, and great-power contestation. In this context, Bangladesh's maritime security is not merely a matter of naval defense; it necessitates integrated attention to military preparedness, geoeconomic management, environmental resilience, and societal awareness, recognizing that geography both constrains and enables national strategy. Consequently, safeguarding the nation's maritime domain and ensuring the Bangladesh Navy's readiness are non-negotiable imperatives, as they directly underpin sovereignty, economic growth, and the country's strategic autonomy.

#### 3.1 Security as a Multilevel Concept

Reflecting Buzan's multilevel security theory (1991), maritime security can be understood across three interconnected levels.

**Individual/Human Security** – Protecting coastal populations, particularly fisheries-dependent communities, from environmental hazards, piracy, and socio-economic disruptions. Human security emphasizes livelihood resilience, disaster preparedness, and community-based resource management, which are vital in the Bay of Bengal, given its vulnerability to cyclones, rising sea levels, and overfishing (Brewster 2018; Buzan 1991; Till 2009).

**National Security** – Safeguarding sovereignty, enforcing legal rights over the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and maintaining credible naval and coast guard capabilities. This includes maritime domain awareness (MDA), fleet modernization, strategic infrastructure protection, and law enforcement to deter illegal exploitation of resources (Kaplan 2010; Mahan 1890; Till 2009).

**International and Regional Security** – Ensuring the safety of sea lanes, preventing interstate conflicts, and promoting cooperative resource management through regional forums such as BIMSTEC and IORA. Regional security links Bangladesh's interests with broader Indo-Pacific dynamics and great-power competition (Brewster 2018; Kaplan 2010).

These levels are interconnected; insecurity in one domain can cascade into others, underscoring the need for integrated strategy and governance.

### 3.2 Maritime Security Defined

According to Till (2009), maritime security is defined as the protection of a state's maritime interests from threats that originate at, through, or from the sea. For Bangladesh, this research interprets it as explained below:

**Naval defense and sovereignty enforcement** refer to the Bangladesh Navy's role in protecting the nation's territorial waters, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and maritime boundaries from external threats or intrusions. It involves safeguarding maritime trade routes, deterring potential aggression, securing offshore resources such as fisheries, hydrocarbons, and seabed minerals, and ensuring compliance with both national and international maritime laws and regulations. This function is crucial not only for defense but also for maintaining Bangladesh's legal rights and operational control over its maritime domain.

**Addressing piracy, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and maritime terrorism** requires proactive efforts by Bangladesh's maritime forces to defend its waters from non-traditional security threats. This includes stopping armed robbery that threatens shipping and coastal communities, enforcing regulations to prevent illegal and unsustainable fishing, and countering extremist or terrorist acts that use the maritime domain for attacks, smuggling, or destabilization. These actions collectively protect economic resources, uphold law and order at sea, and maintain the safety and integrity of Bangladesh's maritime environment.

**Ensuring the use of the sea and its resources, and safeguarding Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)**, means protecting Bangladesh's maritime rights and keeping open, secure routes for commerce, trade, and energy movement. It involves defending shipping lanes from disruption, maintaining access to fisheries, hydrocarbons, and other marine resources, and preventing coercion or blockades by state or non-state actors. Securing SLOCs is essential not only for economic stability and international trade but also for projecting maritime presence and supporting national resilience in the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

**Sustainable management of maritime resources and the Blue Economy** align closely with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 14 (Life Below Water). Responsible fisheries, marine biodiversity protection, and regulated resource use enhance food security, improve livelihoods, and promote ecosystem resilience, thereby supporting SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Developing a sustainable Blue Economy, including offshore renewable energy, maritime transportation, and coastal tourism, also promotes SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Incorporating these aspects into maritime security planning ensures that Bangladesh's economic growth, environmental stewardship, and strategic security are mutually supportive, demonstrating that maritime security is closely tied to sustainable development.

These definitions emphasize that maritime security extends beyond defense, incorporating economic, environmental, and societal dimensions.

### 3.3 Geopolitics and geo-economics of the Bay of Bengal

The Bay of Bengal serves as both a geopolitical arena and a geoeconomic hub. Geopolitically, the region experiences growing competition among India, China, the United States, and regional actors, each pursuing strategic influence through maritime presence, port diplomacy, and regional initiatives (Majumder 2023; Scott 2012). Geoeconomically, the Bay of Bengal hosts:

- Fisheries that underpin coastal livelihoods.
- Offshore hydrocarbons and seabed mineral prospects.
- Critical communications infrastructure, including undersea cables and energy transit routes.

The geostrategic and geoeconomic significance of the Bay creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities for Bangladesh. Strategic oversight, coupled with capability development, is therefore essential for national resilience (Ahmad 2021; Khan 2019).

### 3.4 Strategic Dilemmas and Foresight

Bangladesh needs to overcome the classic small-state strategic dilemma: how to maintain autonomy and safeguard interests while navigating the pressures of great-power rivalry. Freedman (2013) asserts that strategy is “the art of creating power in conditions of uncertainty,” which aptly describes Bangladesh’s maritime context. The country must:

- Maintain an equidistant position among competing powers to avoid entanglement.
- Prioritize investments that yield robust benefits across multiple scenarios (e.g., MDA, coastal protection, legal frameworks).
- Leverage diplomacy, naval capability, and regional cooperation to maximize influence without overextension.
- Strategic foresight is critical for anticipating shifts in the Indo-Pacific balance, environmental disruptions, and technological change.

### 3.5 Societal Dimension: Ocean Literacy and Media

A key feature of this research framework is the inclusion of societal awareness as a security enabler. Ocean literacy, defined as understanding the ocean’s impact on humans and vice versa (UNESCO 2017), remains largely unexplored in Bangladesh, despite the country’s extensive dependence on maritime resources. The media plays a central role in:

**Awareness Campaign** – Educating the public about maritime threats, opportunities, and policy initiatives fosters ocean literacy and societal resilience. As Cicin-Sain and Knecht (1998) emphasize in their work on integrated coastal and ocean management, informed citizens are vital stakeholders in sustainable maritime governance.

**Accountability and Advocacy** – Promoting transparency in governance, port operations, and environmental responsibility is central to reducing corruption and ensuring compliance with maritime law. Rosenberg (2009) argues that accountability mechanisms in ocean governance are indispensable for balancing national interests with global norms.

**Narrative Framing** – Positioning Bangladesh as a responsible maritime player within the Indo-Pacific context strengthens its identity and international leverage. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle’s *Strategic Narratives* (2013) demonstrate how states utilize storytelling to shape the international order and perceptions of legitimacy (Ahmad 2021; Musa 2025).

By integrating media and public understanding into maritime security, this framework emphasizes that societal engagement is not auxiliary but central to sustaining policy and operational initiatives.

### 3.6 Schematic Representation

The conceptual framework can be visualized as a flow of analytical domains linking research questions to objectives in the Table 1.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework of Analytical Domains Linking Research Questions to Objectives

Research Question	Analytical Lens	Conceptual Domain	Research Objective
<b>What is maritime security for Bangladesh?</b>	Security studies (Buzan, Till)	Human, national, and regional security	Define a multidimensional scope
<b>Why is the Bay of Bengal important geopolitically and Geoeconomically?</b>	Geopolitics and geo-economics (Kaplan, Brewster)	Great-power competition, Blue Economy	Analyze the dynamics of the Bay of Bengal
<b>How can Bangladesh prepare for future maritime security?</b>	Strategy and foresight (Freedman, Vego)	Indo-Pacific Rivalry	Propose strategies for resilience and modernization.
<b>Why promote media and ocean literacy?</b>	Communication and Security Theory (Ahmad, Musa)	Public engagement	Highlight society's role in security

This framework ensures that maritime security is recognized not only as a military issue but as a multi-layered, society-wide necessity. It also directly addresses the identified research gaps, linking theory, policy, and practice in a clear analytical model.

This conceptual structure directly informs the empirical analysis in Section 4 by guiding the historical assessment, evaluation of present geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics, and the development of forward-looking strategic scenarios.

## 4. Main Analysis

An analysis of Bangladesh's maritime security reveals its historical legacy, current geostrategic trends, and future policy requirements. The analysis is divided into three sections: historical development, current factors in the Bay of Bengal extending logically to the Indo-Pacific, and upcoming strategic considerations. Each section includes the research questions, objectives, and conceptual framework introduced earlier.

#### 4.1 Historical Background: From Riverine Polities to a Maritime Nation

Bangladesh's maritime history is deeply tied to its ancient delta geography and traditional riverine culture. The Bengal delta, with its vast waterways, has been an active hub in Indian Ocean trade networks since ancient times. Archaeological and textual evidence show that Bengal engaged in extensive trade with Southeast Asia, China, and the Middle East, exchanging goods such as rice, textiles, saltpeter, and timber (Chakrabarti 2005; Ray 2012). Additionally, its ports have been connected to Lisbon in Portugal, as well as to ports in Mozambique and Brazil, including Salvador da Bahia, Pará, and Rio de Janeiro (Ahmad 2025, 253–54).

Pre-modern polities—the Pala (8th–12th centuries) and Sena (11th–13th centuries) dynasties—maintained maritime contacts for economic, cultural, and defensive reasons. Regional naval powers, including Chola expeditions and Arakanese forces, periodically reshaped littoral balances (Ahmad 2025; Chaudhuri 1985; Ray 2012).

Colonial rule fundamentally transformed maritime governance. Under the British Empire, the sea mainly served as a route for extractive trade centered on Kolkata. Indigenous shipbuilding and local naval independence declined as the Royal Navy assumed control of regional sea power (Subrahmanyam 1996). This created a legacy of substantial coastal populations but weak indigenous maritime institutions, a lasting structural challenge that continues after independence (Ahmad 2025).

Partition and subsequent independence in 1971 further reduced maritime focus. East Pakistan, later Bangladesh, received few naval assets and had limited institutional emphasis on maritime security, as defense policy prioritized land borders and internal stability (Ahmad 2025; Chowdhury 2017).

The 2012 ruling by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in the Bangladesh–Myanmar case and the 2014 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) award in the Bangladesh–India maritime dispute together secured for Bangladesh sovereignty over 118,813 square kilometers of maritime zones (ITLOS 2012; PCA 2014). These landmark decisions not only resolved long-standing boundary disputes but also provided a legal basis for exercising sovereignty and advancing Blue Economy prospects. However, as scholars note, institutional weaknesses in maritime governance and limitations in naval capability continue to limit Bangladesh's ability to fully capitalize on these gains (Hossain 2019; Manzoor 2020).

**Key Historical Insights:** The important historical insights include the following:

- Economic Dependence on the Sea – Trade and fisheries have long linked Bangladesh to maritime networks, underscoring the economic rationale for robust maritime security (Khan 2020).
- Legal foundations – UNCLOS settlements establish formal authority, but operational ability is needed to turn legal rights into security and development outcomes (Ahmad 2017; Rashid et al. 2024).
- Lack of Institutional capacity – Centuries of limited indigenous naval development and colonial centralization left policy and enforcement gaps.

These insights underscore that historical experience both constrains and enables contemporary maritime policy.

#### 4.2 Present Dynamics: Geopolitics, Geo-economics, and Maritime Governance

#### 4.2.1 Geopolitical Environment

The Bay of Bengal now functions as a crucial strategic area in the Indo-Pacific. Nearby powers, such as India and Myanmar, as well as outside regional players like China, the United States, and Japan, exert influence through naval presence, infrastructure investments, and multilateral initiatives (Brewster 2018; Kaplan 2010).

India aims for regional leadership through its SAGAR doctrine and “Act East” policy.

China utilizes the Belt and Road Initiative to expand dual-use infrastructure and port access (Zhao 2019).

The United States emphasizes a free and open Indo-Pacific and supports capacity-building for smaller littoral states (Scott 2012).

Bangladesh’s strategic position demands a balancing act: engaging multiple partners without compromising sovereignty, avoiding entanglement in great-power rivalries.

#### 4.2.2 Geoeconomic Imperatives

The Bay is vital for Bangladesh’s economy: more than 90% of trade is seaborne, with Chattogram and Mongla ports serving as lifelines (Ahmad 2025). The Blue Economy potential—including fisheries, hydrocarbons, and seabed minerals—remains untapped mainly but holds promise for sustainable GDP growth (Khan 2019). Key non-traditional security threats include:

- IUU Fishing and Resource Competition – Cross-border exploitation threatens livelihoods and ecosystem sustainability (Rahman and Al Amin 2024).
- Climate change – rising sea levels, cyclones, and coastal erosion pose existential risks (Ashikur et al. 2025; Islam and Alam 2020).
- Critical infrastructure like ports, undersea cables, and shipping routes need cybersecurity and resilience measures (Ahmad 2025).

#### 4.2.3 Maritime Capability and Governance

Bangladesh has responded with institutional and capability-building measures:

- Maritime boundary resolution and EEZ enforcement.
- Naval modernization under Forces Goal 2030 (submarines, patrol craft, surface combatants) (BN 2021).
- Coast Guard capacity enhancement.

However, critical gaps remain; incomplete maritime domain awareness (MDA), fragmented governance across multiple agencies, and insufficient data-sharing platforms (Amir 2024; Hossain 2017; Kislu n.d.). Adequate maritime security requires not only hardware but integrated institutional coordination.

### 4.3 Future Prospects: Strategic Foresight, Balancing, and Modernization

Bangladesh’s future maritime security depends on three pillars: strategic posture, capability development, and societal engagement.

#### 4.3.1 Strategic Posture and Diplomatic Balancing

Bangladesh should maintain strategic autonomy by actively engaging with multiple partners while avoiding binding alliances that could compromise its sovereignty. Key measures include:

- Confidence-building with India and Myanmar to reduce incidents and institutionalize information sharing.
- Leveraging multilateral fora (BIMSTEC, IORA) for cooperative maritime security, SAR operations, and resource management (Majumder 2023).
- Diversifying external partnerships to prevent overreliance on any single power (Ahmad 2024; Hossain 2017).
- A maritime partnership with Pakistan is a strategic choice, considering the current geopolitical shifts.

#### **4.3.2 Capability Development and Technological Leapfrogging**

Bangladesh does not need to compete with regional powers in numbers; there is no need to calculate the possibilities of war by algebra. Instead, it must develop credible, sustainable capabilities.

- MDA – Coastal radar chains, AIS fusion centers, satellite imagery access, and AI analytics for predictive maritime policing (Amir 2024; Talpur et al. 2025).
- Balanced Fleet Composition – Integrated offshore patrol vessels, multi-role corvettes/frigates/destroyers, Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, and optimum submarine capability. (Ahmad 2025).
- Cyber and Infrastructure Protection – Safeguarding ports, shipping registries, and undersea cable nodes. (Ahmad 2025).

#### **4.3.3 Societal and Institutional Resilience**

Technological capability alone is insufficient; societal engagement and governance are equally critical:

- Integrated Maritime Governance – Centralized Maritime Security Council for whole-of-government coordination (Ahmad 2017).
- Ocean Literacy and Specialist Journalism – Training journalists and academics to understand maritime security, the Blue Economy, and climate risks (Musa 2025).
- Community Resilience and Climate Adaptation – Linking mangrove restoration, fisheries management, and coastal development with national security objectives. (Ahmad 2025).

#### **4.3.4 Strategic Foresight Scenarios**

While precise prediction is neither possible nor desirable in strategic studies, scenario-based analysis provides a structured way to assess plausible futures and test policy robustness. Based on current geopolitical, geoeconomic, and environmental trends, three strategic scenarios for the Bay of Bengal are envisaged:

**Cooperative Bay** – In this scenario, regional states prioritize confidence-building measures, information sharing, and functional cooperation in areas such as maritime domain awareness, search and rescue, disaster response, and fisheries management. Enhanced coordination through BIMSTEC, IORA, and bilateral mechanisms reduces misperceptions

and transaction costs, enabling Bangladesh to accelerate Blue Economy development while maintaining strategic autonomy. Indicators of this trajectory include expanded joint exercises, interoperable surveillance arrangements, and institutionalized crisis-management mechanisms.

**Contested Bay** – This scenario emerges if great-power competition intensifies, leading to increased naval deployments, competitive port diplomacy, and strategic signaling in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh would face heightened pressure to balance external partnerships while avoiding alignment entanglements. Triggers include militarization of dual-use infrastructure, erosion of regional trust, and increasing strategic conditionality attached to economic or security cooperation. In such a context, credible deterrence, maritime domain awareness, and diplomatic agility become critical.

**Climate-Stressed Bay** – Under this scenario, climate change acts as a primary security driver, with more frequent cyclones, sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and fisheries stress generating humanitarian crises and economic disruption. Maritime forces are increasingly tasked with disaster response, humanitarian assistance, and protection of displaced coastal populations. Early warning indicators include repeated climate-induced emergencies, declining fish stocks, and rising competition over marine resources. Adaptation, resilience planning, and civil–military coordination dominate the maritime security agenda.

Effective maritime strategy for Bangladesh should be robust across all three scenarios, prioritizing low-regret investments that enhance resilience, situational awareness, and strategic flexibility.

#### **4.4 Section Summary**

The primary analysis shows that historical legacies, current geostrategic trends, and future policy decisions influence Bangladesh’s maritime security. Legal EEZ rights offer geoeconomic benefits, but these can only be achieved through integrated maritime management, credible capabilities, and societal involvement.

The Bay of Bengal offers both opportunities and risks; Bangladesh’s future hinges on how effectively it manages this duality through diplomacy, modernization, and ocean literacy. By doing so, the country can evolve from a traditionally riverine, land-centered nation to a maritime-focused middle power, ready to harness its Blue Economy and strengthen its strategic position.

### **5. Findings and Discussion**

This section synthesizes the analysis into five key findings. It contextualizes them within contemporary literature and interprets their implications for Bangladesh’s maritime security policy. It also addresses research questions regarding the multidimensional nature of maritime security and the influence of evolving geostrategic decision-making dilemmas evolving from the geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics.

#### **5.1 Finding 1: Maritime Security Is Multi-Dimensional**

**Evidence:** Historical development and current trends show that Bangladesh's maritime security includes more than just traditional defense. While sovereignty and naval protection remain important, non-traditional aspects—such as climate resilience, fisheries management, energy security, and blue economy growth—are also vital (Ashikur et al. 2025; Khan 2020; Rahman 2015).

**Discussion:** This aligns with modern scholarship emphasizing holistic maritime security. Mahanian sea power concepts, traditionally focused on fleet strength, now need to be complemented by integrated maritime governance, environmental stewardship, and economic exploitation (Mahan 1890; Till 2013). Non-traditional threats, particularly climate change and IUU fishing, necessitate cross-sectoral coordination among the Bangladesh Navy, Coast Guard, fisheries authorities, and environmental agencies (Amir 2024; Rahman and Al Amin 2024).

**Implication:** Policy development must employ a multidimensional approach to maritime security, combining hard and soft power, economic growth, and climate adaptation, thereby transforming the legal authority gained from EEZ settlements into tangible national security outcomes.

## 5.2 Finding 2: The Bay of Bengal's Geopolitical Salience Is Increasing

**Evidence:** The analysis reveals that Bangladesh plays a pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific, situated between India, Myanmar, and the strategic interests of extra-regional powers such as China, the US, and Japan (Brewster 2018; Kaplan 2010; Zhao 2019). Increasing naval deployments, port infrastructure projects, and regional connectivity efforts create both opportunities and risks.

**Discussion:** Geostrategic theory, including Vego's operational art framework and Freedman's conflict studies, emphasizes that small maritime states in strategic chokepoints must use balancing strategies to maintain their independence (Freedman 2017; Vego 2015). Bangladesh's position exemplifies this approach: the country should not compete with the naval capabilities of its neighbors, but can utilize diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and targeted capability modernization to reduce its vulnerability.

**Implication:** Bangladesh must maintain a strategic balancing approach, enhance maritime diplomacy while ensuring operational readiness, thereby deterring coercion without entangling itself in great-power competition.

## 5.3 Finding 3: Legal Sovereignty Alone Does Not Ensure Security

**Evidence:** The 2012–2014 maritime boundary agreements with India and Myanmar established formal EEZ and continental shelf rights (Karim n.d.). However, analysis shows that territorial rights without enforcement mechanisms, institutional capacity, or domain awareness remain aspirational. IUU fishing, illegal resource extraction, and limited surveillance highlight this challenge (Amir 2024; Hossain 2017).

**Discussion:** The findings align with Vego's conceptualization of maritime power, which argues that merely possessing space is insufficient without proper control and influence (Vego 2015). Likewise, classical thinkers such as Corbett and modern analysts like Till highlight the importance of legal rights, capability, and political will in defending maritime interests (Corbett 1911; Till 2013).

**Implication:** Policy must focus on institutional integration, technological modernization, and maritime domain awareness to turn legal sovereignty into practical security results.

#### 5.4 Finding 4: Capability Development Requires Technological Leapfrogging

**Evidence:** Analysis shows that Bangladesh's naval modernization under the Forces Goal 2030 is significant but limited by resource constraints. Expanding the traditional fleet alone is insufficient; utilizing AI-enabled surveillance, coastal radar networks, satellite imagery, and modular offshore patrol assets can compensate for the numerical shortfalls (Amir 2024; Talpur et al. 2025).

**Discussion:** Modern naval theory increasingly emphasizes asymmetric strategies, technological enablers, and networked maritime operations as force multipliers for smaller states (Till 2013; Vego 2015). By focusing on quality, interoperability, and intelligence-driven operations, Bangladesh can effectively secure its maritime space without trying to match regional maritime powers ship-for-ship.

**Implication:** Investment in technology and human capital, including training personnel in AI-assisted MDA and cybersecurity, is essential for sustainable maritime security.

#### 5.5 Finding 5: Societal Engagement and Ocean Literacy Are Critical

**Evidence:** Historical and contemporary perspectives indicate that societal awareness, academic engagement, and media literacy regarding maritime issues remain underdeveloped in Bangladesh (Ahmad 2024; Musa 2025).

**Discussion:** Contemporary literature in strategic studies emphasizes the importance of public knowledge and institutional cohesion in maintaining long-term security (Freedman 2017; Till 2013). Civil-military coordination, participatory governance, and ocean literacy initiatives enhance societal resilience and foster informed policymaking.

**Implication:** A national strategy should include educational initiatives, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge dissemination as key parts of maritime security policy, thereby promoting a maritime culture that supports hardware-based measures. (Ahmad 2025).

#### 5.6 Synthesis of Findings

Collectively, the findings illustrate that Bangladesh's maritime security is:

- Multidimensional, combining traditional defense with economic, environmental, and non-traditional security factors.
- Geopolitically limited but strategically ready, requiring balanced diplomacy and targeted capability growth.
- Dependent on how legal rights are defined, it requires governance, domain awareness, and enforcement mechanisms.
- Technologically dependent, where modernization should prioritize asymmetric and intelligence-driven capabilities.
- Societally rooted, where ocean literacy, academic research, and public awareness enhance state capacity.

These insights reinforce the central thesis: Bangladesh cannot rely solely on historical claims or conventional naval presence; adequate maritime security demands an integrated, multi-stakeholder, and future-oriented approach.

## **6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

### **6.1 Conclusion**

This study reveals that Bangladesh stands at a pivotal maritime crossroads. The Bay of Bengal presents both opportunities and vulnerabilities, where geostrategic, geoeconomic, and environmental factors converge. Historical legacies—from riverine trade to colonial maritime neglect—have influenced current issues, including institutional fragmentation, limited maritime awareness, and capability gaps.

Analysis demonstrates that maritime security for Bangladesh is inherently multifaceted, encompassing not only naval defense but also climate adaptation, fisheries management, energy security, cyber infrastructure, and societal engagement. The legal rights granted by UNCLOS-based boundary agreements lay a foundation for sovereignty and resource use; however, operational capacity and governance are essential to turn these advantages into practical results.

Geopolitically, Bangladesh's position in the Indo-Pacific demands careful strategic balancing. It must navigate great-power competition, manage regional partnerships, and pursue cooperative initiatives while safeguarding its autonomy. Technologically, modernization through maritime domain awareness, intelligence-based surveillance, modular fleet expansion, and cyber infrastructure is essential. Societally, ocean literacy and media engagement are vital enablers, ensuring maritime policy has public support, transparency, and sustainability.

Essentially, Bangladesh's maritime future hinges on its ability to integrate legal authority, capability, governance, diplomacy, technology, and societal awareness into a cohesive and forward-looking maritime strategy. Without this integration, the country risks missing out on its geoeconomic potential and remaining susceptible to external pressures and environmental shocks.

### **6.2 Policy Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed for Bangladesh to strengthen its maritime security and advance its strategic objectives:

#### **a. Strengthen Institutional Integration**

Establish a National Maritime Security Council to coordinate the efforts of the Navy, Coast Guard, fisheries authorities, environmental agencies, port authorities, and civil society stakeholders.

Develop clear mandates, protocols, and inter-agency information-sharing mechanisms to reduce operational overlaps and enhance response capacity.

#### **b. Prioritize Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)**

Invest in coastal radar networks, AIS fusion centers, satellite imagery access, and integrated command centers.

Utilize AI and predictive analytics to monitor IUU fishing, maritime trafficking, and emerging threats.

**c. Pursue Targeted Naval Modernization**

Highlight modular and versatile platforms, such as surveillance systems, drones, offshore patrol vessels, multi-role corvettes, frigates, destroyers, and top submarine capabilities for defending sovereignty.

Develop cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection for ports, undersea cables, and maritime communication networks.

Focus on developing human capital, including specialized training in maritime operations, intelligence, and technological applications.

**d. Leverage Diplomacy and Strategic Balancing**

Strengthen bilateral confidence-building measures with India and Myanmar, including preventing maritime incidents and conducting joint exercises.

Engage multilateral organizations (BIMSTEC, IORA) in cooperative security, search and rescue, and resource management efforts.

Maintain equidistance among great powers to safeguard autonomy while accessing capacity-building partnerships.

**e. Promote Ocean Literacy and Societal Engagement**

Integrate maritime studies, data journalism, and policy research into higher education curricula and professional development programs.

Encourage media campaigns and public discourse on maritime security, blue economy opportunities, and climate adaptation.

Foster community-level resilience initiatives including mangrove restoration, sustainable fisheries, and disaster preparedness.

**f. Implement Scenario-Based Strategic Planning**

Develop policies robust across plausible futures:

- Cooperative Bay: Strengthening Multilateral Collaboration to Maximize Resource Use.
- Contested Bay: Enhance deterrence, intelligence, and diplomatic strategies.
- Climate-Stressed Bay: Focus on humanitarian aid, coastal protection, and adaptive strategies.

**6.3 Limitations of the Study**

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research relies exclusively on qualitative analysis and publicly available sources; as such, it does not incorporate classified data, operational metrics, or quantitative modeling of maritime threats. Second, the use of expert reflections is inherently interpretive and grounded in professional experience rather than formal interviews, which may limit replicability while enhancing contextual depth. Third, the

analysis adopts a national-level strategic perspective and therefore does not provide detailed operational or tactical assessments of specific maritime incidents. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating empirical fieldwork, stakeholder interviews, or quantitative risk assessments to complement the conceptual and policy-oriented insights presented here.

#### **6.4 Final Remarks**

Bangladesh's maritime security is closely connected to national development, sovereignty, and resilience. An active, multi-dimensional strategy; covering governance, capabilities, diplomacy, technology, and social awareness, is essential; the country aims to become a middle-power maritime nation by 2040-41.

As Mahan (1890) emphasized, control of the sea shapes a nation's destiny. For Bangladesh, realizing this potential requires a mix of legal rights, operational skills, strategic planning, and societal participation. The Bay of Bengal is not just a maritime area; it is the country's strategic border, economic engine, and a key part of national identity in the twenty-first century.

#### **Declarations**

##### **Author Contribution Statement**

The sole author conceptualized the study, conducted the analysis, and prepared the manuscript.

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**Data Availability Statement:** All data supporting the findings of this study are contained within the article.

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