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CONNECTIVITY AND COOPERATION

The Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific region



THE ICONOCLAST FILES
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TARIQ KARIM

Our Planet Earth is predominantly made up of oceans, with 71 percent of its surface covered in water. The Indian Ocean, the third largest ocean, is often referred to as the "Great Middle Bay" due to its location. The Bay of Bengal, the world's largest bay, measuring 2.17 million sq-km, can be seen as the central bay within the "Great Middle Bay" of the Indian Ocean.

As the Indo-Pacific narrative takes centre stage in global discussions, the Bay of Bengal is emerging as a critical region in the competition for control of sea lanes and global trade. Bangladesh's strategic location at the apex of the Bay of Bengal brings significant responsibilities as a facilitator and connector between regions and competing powers. Bangladesh's role in reviving regional connectivity holds global significance in the Indo-Pacific narrative, making it a key player in shaping the future of the region.

The Indian Ocean: Relevance for global trade, energy, and food security

Over 90 percent of global trade uses sea routes, with over 80 percent of maritime oil trade passing through the Indian Ocean. China's trade with ME, Africa, and Europe transits the Indian Ocean, while India's maritime trade is over 70 percent by volume. The Indian Ocean also holds valuable resources such as fisheries and minerals.

The Northern Indian Ocean is a crucial passageway for global east-west-east trade. Ensuring the uninterrupted flow of crude oil across the Indian Ocean and other oceanic regions is essential for major, middle, and minor powers. However, the risk of strategic competition escalating into active contestation is a danger that all must avoid.

Strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean and power dynamics

The Bay of Bengal regains historically critical importance as an economic highway for commercial shipping routes between the Eastern and Western hemispheres. About half the world's container traffic passes through this region, while its ports handle approximately 33 percent of world trade.

The competition between India and China for access to Myanmar's offshore gas fields is driven by the quest for strategic resources such as oil and gas reserves and other minerals. The Northern Indian Ocean is a crucial trade route for global east-west-east trade. Ensuring the smooth flow of oil from the IOR to other oceanic regions is vital for major, middle, and minor powers. The risk of strategic competition escalating into active contestation is a looming danger that must be avoided.

The Bay of Bengal and the shaping of the Bangladeshi perspective

Bangladesh's historical legacy as part of pre-Partitioned Bengal shapes its perception of the region. Its strategic location at the apex of the Bay of Bengal positions it as a hub of connectivity between the Western and Eastern hemispheres, as well as the Indian Ocean and Pacific Oceanic regions.

With a significant youth population of nearly 50 percent of its over 170 million people, Bangladesh's demographic dividend is a potential force multiplier for even more accelerated growth in the future if effectively tapped into. It is a medium HDI country, ranking 129 out of 191 countries on UNDP's HDI list, outperforming other South Asian countries like India (131), Pakistan (161), and Afghanistan (180). Bangladesh's strategic value is further bolstered by its abundant hydrocarbon resources, including coal, oil, and gas, with significant potential.

The strategic importance of Bay of Bengal ports in colonial times

The discovery of hydrocarbon deposits in the Bay of Bengal region has shifted the focus of 21st-century neo-super colonial powers to this area, increasing its strategic significance. Enormous oil and gas reservoirs in the Bay of Bengal and its littorals, such as Sumatra, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Brunei, prompted Dutch colonists to form Royal Dutch Shell. Bangladesh, too, is believed to have abundant reserves of hydrocarbons, but inadequately explored.

Technological innovations enabling offshore resource extraction, political instability in the Persian Gulf/Central-West Asia regions, turbulence in the West Asian socio-political environment, and the rise of China and India as global powers have influenced the geopolitical and commercial strategies of the US, EU, Japan, and China in the region.

Bangladesh as a champion of regional cooperation

Bangladesh has been a proactive champion of regional cooperation in South Asia, showing vision and bold initiatives. It led to forming Saarc in 1985 and proposed sub-regional cooperation resulting in SAGQ (South Asian Growth Quadrangle) and Bimstec (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation) in 1997. Bangladesh's visionary leadership led to the reincarnation of SAGQ as BBIN in 2015, making significant progress in reviving severed connectivity.

However, internal instability in Myanmar and the Rohingya crisis severely impedes these projects, stalling progress. Considering recent progress, expanding cooperation to

embrace a Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation (BoBEC) framework could be possible. Challenges like the Rohingya crisis and instability in Myanmar must be addressed for seamless regional connectivity and cooperation.

Towards greater cooperation in the Indo-Pacific regions

The Westphalian order led to European colonialism, while the fall of colonial powers after World War II marked the rise of new superpowers and the era of "neo-super colonialism." Lesser powers must strategise for survival in a world dominated by global giants. Similar to the "divide and rule" method of European colonial powers, neo-super colonists use similar tools to divide nations against each other in today's global power play.

The Bay of Bengal, an integral part of the Indian Ocean with a population of 1.7 billion and a GDP of \$7 trillion, can form a "community" of nations bridging Saarc and Asean regions, enhancing overall cooperation. Sub-regional cooperation within Saarc and IORA could further contribute to regional cohesion.

The political economy of a probable Bay of Bengal "community"

The Bay of Bengal countries, with a population of 1.7 billion and a GDP of \$7 trillion, can become a formidable "community." The region has a dispute-free maritime environment and fast-growing economies and is a battleground for competing narratives from significant superpowers. Collaboration among these countries is crucial to address ecological threats and ensure a sustainable blue economy.

A cohesive community of Bay of Bengal littorals, initially through a Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation Association (BoBECA) that could evolve into a Bay of Bengal Community (BOBC), could unlock limitless possibilities for prosperity. Bangladesh has proactively fostered greater Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation, promoting peaceful connectivity, trade, and social development. This leadership role would serve Bangladesh's self-interest, contribute to the collective regional interest, and enhance its sense of security. A regional governance framework for the Bay of Bengal microcosmic entity could serve as a model for other regions.

The Bay of Bengal countries have the potential to form a cohesive community that fosters economic cooperation, promotes peaceful connectivity, and addresses common challenges, charting a path towards prosperity and security for the region and beyond. And Bangladesh, as a bridging nation and a rising middle power, is well poised to play a leadership role, enjoying as it does equally good overall relations with all powers, whether competing or not.

After all, Bangladesh is situated at the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific!

This article is drawn from the 8th ISAS Public Lecture delivered by the author on January 26, 2023 in Singapore on the subject "Connectivity and Cooperation: Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific Region."

Imran Khan's arrest had little to do with the constitution

And everything to do with fear and intimidation

Sarah Eleazar is a journalist and activist, currently based in Lahore.

SARAH ELEAZAR

Consider the logic of politics of spectacle. Within hours of former prime minister Imran Khan's arrest at Islamabad High Court on Tuesday, videos showing dozens of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) workers storming the premises of GHQ in Islamabad and Lahore corps commander's residence began making the rounds on social media.

In Karachi, videos of police firing shells at protesters on Sharea Faisal circulated on all media channels. In Multan, protesters blocked Bahawalpur Bypass Chowk and Nawab Shehar and agitated against the police deployed there to arrest the protesters under Section 144.

In Peshawar, protesters clashed with journalists, injuring several. The Swat Motorway toll plaza was set alight. Protesters and residents from these cities complained about tear gas wafting in the air even in places where the protests weren't happening.

If anything, the imposition of Section 144 in all major cities in hopes of maintaining public order almost ensured the virality of these images and videos. In a political culture where corruption alone becomes the *raison d'être* for politics, it quickly becomes the method of politics itself – the art of electoral wins and defeat loses meaning. What we are left with is a game of semiotics: empty gestures, institutions without integrity, and players strategising to lose.

There should be no doubt that Imran Khan's arrest had little to do with upholding the constitution and everything to do with fear and intimidation. Former *Herald* editor Badar Alam said unless all institutions come clean, the cases against Imran Khan will be nothing more than a witch hunt by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) whose role has, since its formation, been exactly this – to hold witch hunts against political rivals.

"Any arrest by NAB is unconstitutional. The brainchild of a military dictator, it exists to allow selective corruption to take place and to target political rivals," he said.

The events of May 9, 2023 will have important repercussions on the direction this country's politics will take. The instability and destabilising impacts of Imran Khan's own politics and political machinery will ensure that the political crisis and PTI's street power pick up momentum in the following weeks. Arresting Imran Khan will lead to no fruitful impact.

In fact, Alam says, it may further steer politics firmly into the realm of spectacles where every move happens on whims and fancy with no institutional separation of power.

Crossing red lines

Earlier, before departing for his hearing in Islamabad, the PTI chief recorded a video of himself reasserting his earlier claims against DG C Maj Gen Faisal Naseer, whom he has accused of being involved in an assassination attempt against him in Wazirabad.

Earlier at a rally on Saturday, the PTI chairman had again named

the senior intelligence officer for planning to assassinate him. "My question is: [Despite being] a country's ex-prime minister – because this man's name has come forward – [why was] I unable to register a first information report (FIR)?" he asked in the video on Tuesday. He went on to say that even when his party was in power in Punjab, they were unable to name the officer in the FIR.

Responding to Khan's claims, on Monday, the military's PR wing stated that Khan's claims against the intelligence officer were "irresponsible and baseless."

The statement went on to say that the PTI chairman had levelled baseless charges against the intelligence officer without evidence. "This fabricated and malicious allegation is extremely unfortunate, deplorable and unacceptable," the statement said.

On Tuesday, Khan responded to this statement saying, "ISPR *sahib*, listen to me carefully. Respect is not [confined] to a single institution; respect should be for every single citizen."

doesn't matter anymore because the distinction itself has been blurred," he said.

Politics of spectacle

Imran Khan was arrested for the purpose of investigation in the Al Qadir Trust case on orders of NAB chairman. The PTI chairman and his wife were accused of corruption in exchange for land to build a university near Islamabad.

On social media, it is the legality of the arrest and not the case itself – which involves certain real estate tycoons nearly all politicians have been reluctant to name – which has been the subject of debate and discussion.

Under the NAB Ordinance, lawyer Asad Jamal explained, the bureau has powers to arrest an accused for inquiry. This was established in 2002 when Asfandiyar Wali had challenged it and the Supreme Court had upheld these powers. Rangers can be called in to act "in aid of" civilian law and order forces under Article 245 of the constitution.

The government will have to provide evidence of having complied

There should be no doubt that Imran Khan's arrest had little to do with upholding the constitution and everything to do with fear and intimidation. Former Herald editor Badar Alam said unless all institutions come clean, the cases against Imran Khan will be nothing more than a witch hunt by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) whose role has, since its formation, been exactly this – to hold witch hunts against political rivals.

It is possible that the ISPR statement was taken to mean a green signal from the military establishment to go ahead and take punitive measures against Khan.

Professor of political science at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, Muhammad Waseem, said prior to Imran Khan's statements and ISPR's response to it, the establishment had tried to cultivate an image of neutrality. "However, there seems to be a turn of the tides," he said.

Sensing green signals

Ever since Khan's ouster through a no confidence motion in April 2022, the PTI chairman has tried to sustain his popularity through populist narratives. Prof Waseem, who is currently researching Imran Khan's populist expatriate base, said, "I look at Imran Khan as someone brought from outside the system to put an end to the domination of two parties and dynastic politics... hence the PTI emerged as the King's Party."

His entire branding as a national hero, famed cricketer-turned-philanthropist, ensured his rise to fame, especially among the expatriate classes. A section of the PTI cadre has previously worked with Khan on the Shaukat Khanum Hospital project as well, and most of that cadre is abroad.

Themes of distance nationalism spurred PTI's popularity in a way that the law itself became an institution of politics. "Whether something is constitutional or not, it

with rules of the ordinance and show that they had issued warrants and informed the PTI chairman of the warrant earlier.

The optics of Tuesday's arrest cast a shadow on NAB. Khan was arrested as he was providing his biometric data ahead of another hearing, which did not take place.

The connection of this arrest to the ISPR's statement from a day before, and the presence of Rangers and police prepared to take down protesters with water cannons and tear gas, indicate malicious intent on behalf of the sitting government.

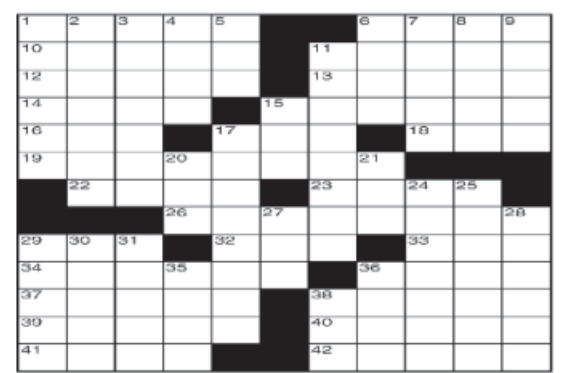
It appears that the current government might seek to remove Imran Khan from the political scene, by either disqualifying him from contesting by ensuring conviction in one of the hundred cases filed against him, or send him and then keep him behind bars.

Badar Alam cautions against such tactics. PTI's protesters have come a long way from where they began 15 years ago. They have faced repression like this before and police action is not enough to take them down. As images of protesters stealing peacocks from the Lahore corps commander's house and setting a portion of the house on fire circulate and take on new meanings for supporters within the country and outside, Alam insists that the only way forward from here is politics.

This article was first published in Dawn, an ANN partner of The Daily Star, on May 10, 2023.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Trance
 - 6 Toy store buy
 - 10 Wary
 - 11 Not dissonant
 - 12 Pond growth
 - 13 Half of Hispaniola
 - 14 Pool tool
 - 15 Rich travelers
 - 16 Great serve
 - 17 Truck part
 - 18 Needle feature
 - 19 Roared
 - 22 Criticize harshly
 - 23 Lascivious desire
 - 26 Like old newspaper pages
 - 29 Crater part
 - 32 Holds
 - 33 Period
 - 34 Not digital
 - 36 Poet
 - Sandburg
 - 37 Play the banjo
 - 38 Lethal
 - 39 Tag number
 - 40 City on the Mohawk River
 - 41 Drench
 - 42 Jottings
- DOWN**
- 1 Sacred beetle
 - 2 Royal homes
 - 3 Ovum
 - 4 Pipe problem
 - 5 Caustic stuff
 - 6 Nanny or billy
 - 7 Biscotti flavor
 - 8 Pirate address
 - 9 Chosen few
 - 11 Poe poem
 - 15 Mouth part
 - 17 Return from the war zone
 - 20 Put down
 - 21 Twosome
 - 24 Worry
 - 25 Patio's kin
 - 27 Fall back
 - 28 Cowboys' home
 - 29 Some files
 - 30 Lead-in
 - 31 Opera's Callas
 - 35 Gambler's aid
 - 36 Roman censor
 - 38 Amusement



MONDAY'S ANSWERS

L	A	M	A	S	S	A	T	U	P
A	W	A	S	H	A	L	O	N	E
B	A	S	K	E	T	B	A	L	L
O	R	T	L	O	L	K	I	T	
R	E	S	I	D	U	E	I	K	E
			C	O	T	B	E	E	R
B	A	R	O	N	W	A	N	D	S
O	P	E	N	S	I	R			
A	P	P	V	E	N	T	N	O	R
T	E	A	E	N	D	O	L	E	
M	A	S	K	E	D	B	A	L	L
A	S	T	A	R	A	W	A	I	T
N	E	S	T	S	G	E	N	E	S

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