

The ICJ ruling on climate action can boost Global South’s voice

Dr Ridwanul Hoque,
a former professor of law at the University of Dhaka, is a governance and legal consultant based in Melbourne.

Shamir Shehab
is a public policy analyst focused on the intersection of climate change, environmental sustainability, and development. He is managing partner at Catalyzing Sustainable Transformation (CaST) Network.

**SHAMIR SHEHAB and
RIDWANUL HOQUE**

On July 23, 2025, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) delivered one of the most important judicial opinions in the history of international environmental law. In a landmark advisory opinion, the World Court clarified the legal obligation of states to address the climate crisis the world faces. The UN General Assembly requested the opinion through resolution 77/276. It requested the court to answer two questions regarding climate change. The court commenced by first determining that the questions were legal in character and that providing opinions on them was under its jurisdiction.

The ICJ concluded that states have explicit legal duties to safeguard the climate system against anthropogenic (caused by humans) greenhouse gas emissions. These responsibilities are not merely abstract or theoretical but rather based on the laws of state responsibility, human rights, and the international environment.

The implications of the ICJ opinion are far from symbolic, even though it is not legally binding. However, the opinion is likely to change the global climate politics, litigation tactics, and diplomatic discourses. It also establishes the foundation for a reorganisation of international climate accountability.

The advisory opinion highlights several important points, including the following: first, states must take precautionary and equitable measures, such as regulating private sector actors whose emissions significantly contribute to climate change; second, states must prevent significant harm to the environment and climate system in the interest of both present and future generations; and, third, states may be held internationally responsible when significant environmental harm occurs, particularly if the affected parties include small islands, developing states, or vulnerable populations.

Despite arguments from major emitters of greenhouse gases such as the United States and China, the ICJ ruled that obligations to

protect the climate extend beyond the Paris Climate Agreement. This greatly supports future legal claims by establishing the binding authority of both customary international law and general international law norms (such as human rights law and the law of the sea rules).

The opinion represents the highest degree of legal consensus within the main judicial body of the United Nations, having been unanimously adopted by all sitting judges. Only five times in the 79-year history of the ICJ has an opinion been unanimously adopted, which is a remarkable indication of moral urgency and legal clarity.

Although the opinion clarifies and elevates current legal duties, it does not create a new law. Nevertheless, the clarity the court gave to the legal obligations of states in respect

just cut emissions as a result of this clear language. As a result, countries like the USA, Canada, Australia, and those under the EU are probably going to face more pressure. Even though some of these countries have made net-zero commitments, their delayed implementation and ongoing support of the fossil fuel sector risk being interpreted as breaches of their international legal duties.

Another important thing is that the ICJ opinion may serve as a legal foundation for a surge in climate litigation, particularly in European domestic courts. It will certainly add strong support to domestic decisions, such as in the Urgenda case in the Netherlands that compelled the state to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 25 percent by 2020. ICJ's opinion will inspire and allow national courts to require more aggressive national

infrastructure or paying compensation to affected people. For small island and climate-vulnerable countries like Bangladesh, Chad, Ecuador, the Maldives, and other Global South states, this opinion offers a potent legal tool. With the support of the highest court in the world, these states can now contend that wealthier countries have a legal and moral obligation to take decisive action and support climate mitigation and adaptation, and loss and damage due to climate change.

Additionally, this could open the door for interstate climate litigation. The legal doctrines of transboundary harm and state responsibility may now give affected countries the confidence to file lawsuits against high-emitting countries. Their long-standing call for climate justice is now a matter of legal entitlement, thanks to the advisory

Even though the ICJ’s opinion was presented clearly and legally, its application may give rise to some geopolitical tensions. At the UN’s upcoming Conference of the Parties (COP) 30 in Belém, Global South nations will probably use this decision to push for faster climate finance, debt relief, and reparations. With wealthier countries unwilling to take on additional financial or legal responsibilities, this will exacerbate tensions.



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of climate change will be felt at several governmental and legal levels.

For example, in its opinion, the court names certain activities as possible transgressions of international law, including the production, subsidies, and exploration of fossil fuels. States are now under more pressure to dismantle fossil fuel industries rather than

climate policies. The opinion will act as new legal fuel for lawsuits against large polluters, both public and private.

The ICJ’s clarification for the first time that states must both prevent and repair climate damage opens the door for legal demands for reparations or compensation, such as repairing ecosystems or damaged

opinion. The opinion may inspire formal legal cases by climate-impacted nations against high-emitting states, asserting breach of international law duty and seeking reparations.

Activists, lawyers, and civil society groups now also have a global legal standard to invoke when challenging national climate

breaches or inaction. In terms of corporate accountability, multinational fossil fuel companies may be subject to new lawsuits based on their complicity in states’ failure to effectively regulate emissions. And states can be asked to regulate or/and stop their corporations from emitting greenhouse gases. These probable consequences of the opinion will energise global climate litigation.

Even though the ICJ’s opinion was presented clearly and legally, its application may give rise to some geopolitical tensions. At the UN’s upcoming Conference of the Parties (COP) 30 in Belém, Global South nations will probably use this decision to push for faster climate finance, debt relief, and reparations. With wealthier countries unwilling to take on additional financial or legal responsibilities, this will exacerbate tensions. The geopolitics surrounding fossil fuels are expected to intensify as the court’s opinion subtly criticises the ongoing growth of fossil fuel production, rendering the climate policies of oil exporting countries (such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Canada, and the United States) politically and legally open to questions. This might hasten future conflicts over resources and trade tensions among states in the backdrop of the rising protectionism and anti-globalisation wave.

The ICJ’s advisory opinion is a watershed moment in international climate governance. It means that the Global South can shift its approach to climate justice from simply asking for assistance to demanding legal action. The ultimate success, however, will depend on how the wealthier nations with a greater emitting record respond to the call by the World Court.

Why Bangladesh needs a national maritime roadmap



Mohammad Raad Sarwar
is the director of Finance and Strategy at Prantik Group.

MOHAMMAD RAAD SARWAR

There is something quietly dignified about the way a vessel enters port. Precision. Momentum. Timing. A ballet of steel and water.

It’s an apt metaphor for where Bangladesh stands now—on the edge of something far greater than what our coastal skyline presently reveals.

For a country crisscrossed by rivers, bracketed by the Bay of Bengal, and reliant on maritime trade for over 90 percent of its economic throughput, Bangladesh remains paradoxically ill-prepared for the future of the ocean economy. Our ports are congested. Our vessels are outdated. Our policies are often detached from operational realities. And our systems, if they can be called that, function in fragmented silos, operating closer to analogue than digital. It is time for the story to change.

Bangladesh’s coastline spans more than 700 kilometres. Our inland waterways stretch over 24,000 kilometres, forming one of the largest navigable river networks in the world. Chittagong Port, despite chronic backlogs, remains among the busiest in South Asia. Mongla and Payra sit strategically near regional trade corridors and domestic industrial zones. Matarbari, with deep sea capacity, will soon be able to berth mother vessels.

But geography, while a gift, is not a guarantee.

Without institutional will, policy coordination, and technological foresight, strategic location alone will not deliver the maritime future Bangladesh is capable of building.

This is why I am advocating for Bangladesh’s first National Maritime Roadmap—a data-driven, institutionally coordinated, multi-phase plan to transform the country from a passive trade corridor into a strategic maritime nation.

This roadmap is not a wishlist of terminals and tugs. It is a long-overdue blueprint to align the moving parts of our maritime economy,

from ports and policy to people and platforms, under a single national vision.

It is built on eight strategic pillars, each informed by international benchmarks and real-world relevance.

A unified maritime authority
Fragmentation is our ‘Achilles’ heel. Core mandates such as port operations, shipbuilding policy, and maritime education remain scattered across disconnected authorities, while trade bodies, labour unions, and industry associations operate in silos, seldom aligned under a common strategy. To unlock the sector’s full potential, we must consolidate these functions under a single, empowered entity that fosters coordination, transparency, and ease of doing maritime business. The establishment of the Bangladesh Maritime Commission—a one-stop authority for national nautical affairs, modelled after the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore or the Norwegian Coastal Administration—would provide the institutional clarity and unified leadership needed to drive meaningful, long-term execution.

Infrastructure that speaks to the 21st century

We must move beyond viewing ports as isolated assets. The objective is not merely capacity expansion, but the development of a networked maritime ecosystem: one that integrates digitised ports, high-throughput shipyards, and inland terminals seamlessly connected to coastal feeder routes, all underpinned by enabling regulatory frameworks. Initiatives such as the proposed Laldia container terminal and Bay Terminal signal a positive step towards decentralising vessel berthing capacity. Yet, this ambition must extend further, encompassing smaller-scale and inland infrastructure projects within a unified national strategy. The Netherlands and the UAE have successfully built such integrated systems. Bangladesh must do the

same with intention and urgency.

PPPs and maritime investment zones
Maritime growth is not the sole responsibility of the state. It is fundamentally a private-sector growth engine. To unlock its full potential, Bangladesh must attract and deploy international capital across shipyards, terminals, and logistics corridors through public-private partnerships, sovereign maritime bonds, and blended finance mechanisms. Global players such as Red Sea Gateway Terminal, Maersk, and DP World have committed and are in discussions to invest in Bangladesh’s maritime infrastructure, offering optimistic signals of foreign direct investment appetite. While the long-term success of these models remains to be seen, the upside—capital infusion, technology transfer, and operational

Our strategic posture must evolve from reactive to proactive. The US offers a compelling model through its National Response Framework, which coordinates oil spill containment, maritime firefighting, and search and rescue through structured inter-agency collaboration between public institutions such as the US Coast Guard and private responders such as Resolve Marine.

efficiency—is undeniable. India’s Sagarmala programme stands as a compelling case study in maritime-led development.

Sovereign maritime capability through policy reform

Maritime sovereignty begins with ownership, and Bangladesh must take bold steps to increase its share of nationally owned vessels across cargo, offshore, and support segments. To achieve this, the government should implement a suite of targeted policies—including duty and VAT exemptions on vessel imports, access to low-interest financing, and guaranteed charter opportunities for domestically owned ships. Additionally, a Bangladesh Ship Finance Facility, capitalised

through public-private partnerships, could provide long-term lending to emerging shipowners, enabling the growth of a truly diversified national fleet. Increasing the percentage of trade carried on Bangladeshi-flagged vessels not only enhances economic resilience but also keeps freight earnings and strategic control within our borders. As India and China have demonstrated, enabling domestic fleet expansion is both a commercial and geopolitical imperative.

Digitisation of the maritime chain

The global maritime economy no longer runs on paper and neither should ours. Bangladesh’s ports must be fully integrated through a Port Community System (PCS)—a unified digital platform encompassing berth planning, customs clearance, crew management, vessel tracking, and intermodal coordination. The transformative impact of real-time data exchange between terminal operators, customs authorities, and inland transport networks on local commerce is undeniable. At the heart of this shift lies the digitisation of legacy systems, which forms the backbone of any serious modernisation effort. Asian countries such as Singapore and South Korea are already deploying advanced artificial intelligence to optimise port operations through predictive analytics, while terminals in China operate on fully paperless, automated infrastructures.

Green shipping and environmental compliance

Regulations such as IMO 2020 are not abstract ideals; they are non-tariff trade barriers in disguise. As an illustration, without scrubbers, ballast water treatment systems, and compliant waste management infrastructure, Bangladeshi vessels will increasingly be denied access to regulated ports and markets. The impact of environmental non-compliance is already visible: our \$3 billion ship recycling industry, which underpins critical domestic supply chains such as steel re-rolling and engineering, is facing mounting pressure to modernise or be marginalised. Countries such as Norway and Japan have embraced green compliance not as a burden, but as a pillar of national industrial policy.

Emergency maritime response and salvage

No country that moves the vast majority of its trade by water can afford to improvise disaster response. Bangladesh urgently needs a national maritime emergency response framework:

anchored by strategically positioned depots, modern salvage equipment, and rapid-response teams based in Chittagong, Mongla, and Payra. The risks are not theoretical; we’ve seen the global consequences when a single vessel blocks a critical shipping lane. Our strategic posture must evolve from reactive to proactive. The US offers a compelling model through its National Response Framework, which coordinates oil spill containment, maritime firefighting, and search and rescue through structured inter-agency collaboration between public institutions such as the US Coast Guard and private responders such as Resolve Marine. Adapting this public-private model to Bangladesh’s context could dramatically enhance our preparedness and resilience in the face of maritime emergencies.

Maritime education as economic strategy

The average age of marine engineers in Western economies is steadily rising. Bangladesh, with its youthful population, holds a clear demographic advantage—but only if we make the necessary investments in training, simulation, and certification. With the right infrastructure in place, we have a realistic opportunity to build a globally competitive maritime workforce. This means establishing new maritime colleges not only in major urban centres but across key coastal and riverine regions. High-quality training delivers long-term dividends: both for the individuals it empowers and for the country as a whole. A skilled maritime workforce working abroad sends back remittances that strengthen our foreign reserves, stabilise the economy, and reinforce our position in global labour markets. The Philippines and Indonesia have shown what’s possible. Bangladesh has every reason and every resource to go further.

This roadmap does not call for miracle budgets: it calls for institutional courage.

We have the rivers. The coastline. The people. The market access. What we lack is not capacity, but cohesion.

Bangladesh is not a landlocked country, yet without strategic vision, we risk operating like one. The moment is ripe for both local and foreign enterprises to rise, invest, and deliver the maritime capabilities this nation urgently needs. We stand on thousands of years of maritime legacy, shaped by trade, craftsmanship, and resilience. Now is the time to build upon it. Not in theory, but in action.