Can Bangladesh capitalise on the Bay of Bengal's strategic rise?

SUJIT KUMAR DATTA

The Bay of Bengal is emerging as a strategic hotspot in the Indo-Pacific and a focal point of great-power competition. It hosts vital sea lanes and natural resources while playing an increasingly important role in energy security, connectivity, maritime security and the wider regional economy.

Bangladesh sits on the Bay of Bengal and plays an important role in the physical and economic connections between South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. It has major ports in Chattogram and Mongla, as well as the emerging deep-sea port of Matarbari, which can actively support maritime trade and connectivity, as well as regional supply chains. These expanding port facilities and multimodal transport links could improve access to the hinterlands of Northeast India, open up new economic opportunities for Nepal and Bhutan, and strengthen Bangladesh's connectivity with Myanmar and Southeast Asia. The challenge is to turn this geographical advantage into sustainable economic gains without intensifying strategic competition or undermining the benefits of greater regional cooperation.

The Bay of Bengal's growing strategic significance has inevitably drawn the attention of major powers. For India, the Bay is central to its maritime security and its wider Indian Ocean strategy. New Delhi has strengthened coastal surveillance and naval capabilities while placing greater emphasis on maritime connectivity and regional cooperation. India's geography gives it an important role in shaping developments in the Bay, but the region is not India's domain alone. Any viable regional architecture must also accommodate the interests and concerns of Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and other countries in the region.

China, meanwhile, has steadily expanded its presence around the Bay of Bengal through trade, infrastructure and connectivity projects, including those under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For Beijing, greater maritime connectivity offers opportunities to diversify trade and energy routes while deepening economic ties with South Asia and the wider Indian Ocean region. China has therefore become an important part of the Bay's changing geopolitical landscape.

The United States increasingly views the Bay of Bengal within the broader framework of its Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). Washington has interests in maintaining open sea lanes, freedom of navigation, maritime security and resilient supply chains. It has also expanded maritime partnerships and military exercises with countries across the region.

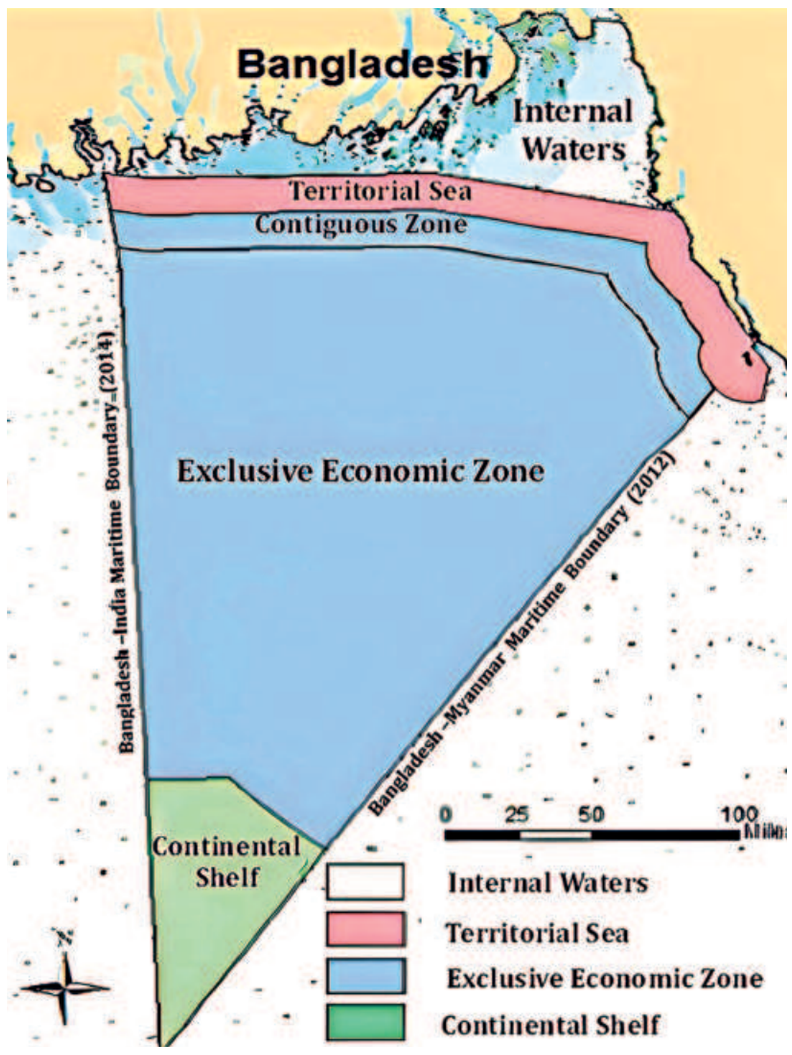
Amid intensifying great-power competition, the countries of the Bay of Bengal can strengthen their collective agency by building a more cohesive regional community based on economic cooperation, connectivity and joint action on shared challenges. Home to more than 1.7 billion people and economies worth an estimated US$7 trillion, the region has considerable potential for deeper economic integration. Greater cooperation could also strengthen links between South Asia and Southeast Asia, positioning the Bay of Bengal not as a dividing line between the two regions, but as a bridge connecting them.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) already provides an institutional platform for such cooperation. Established in 1997, it brings together Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. With members spanning South and Southeast Asia, BIMSTEC has considerable potential to bring the two regions closer together. Yet its performance has often fallen short of its strategic promise. To become more effective, it needs stronger institutional capacity, better mechanisms for implementing agreements and a greater emphasis on practical areas of cooperation.

There is also a broader question of whether BIMSTEC's current configuration adequately reflects the economic and strategic geography of the Bay of Bengal. Despite their considerable economic interests and close connections to the Bay's maritime routes and the wider Indo-Pacific, important regional states such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are not BIMSTEC members. Building a more comprehensive Bay of Bengal community through greater economic cooperation is therefore likely to be an incremental process. Such a community need not resemble the European Union. Instead, it could adopt a functional approach centred on shared and immediate interests.



A map of the Bay of Bengal, a strategically important maritime space connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific.



Maritime boundary of Bangladesh.

Whether the Bay of Bengal becomes a space of strategic competition or one of shared development will ultimately depend on the choices made by the countries of the region. On peace, connectivity, development and environmental protection, much will depend on their willingness to recognise that shared interests can outweigh differences.

For Bangladesh, the transformation of the Bay of Bengal presents an opportunity that should not be missed. Its geographical position gives it the potential to serve as an important link between the two regions. But geography alone cannot deliver that advantage. Bangladesh needs to invest in modern port infrastructure, efficient customs procedures, multimodal transport, marine research, fisheries management and maritime resilience. Improving maritime domain awareness and strengthening institutional coordination across the maritime sector will be equally important. At the same time, Bangladesh's foreign policy must carefully navigate relations with competing major powers.

Bangladesh's national interest is better served by building constructive and mutually beneficial relationships with a range of global and regional powers rather than becoming dependent on any single country. Preserving strategic autonomy will require Dhaka to navigate its relations with China and India, the United States and Japan, the European Union and other important partners. Each relationship offers different opportunities in trade, investment, infrastructure, technology, development cooperation, security, education and other areas. A diversified foreign policy would also give Bangladesh greater flexibility as regional and global dynamics continue to change.

Such an approach should not be mistaken for passivity. Strategic autonomy requires an active foreign and maritime policy that places national development priorities at its centre. Bangladesh can attract investment and develop connectivity with multiple partners in a transparent and economically sustainable manner while retaining the autonomy to make decisions based on its own national interests. The "Bangladesh First" principle should therefore guide how Dhaka engages with competing powers and evaluates opportunities in the Bay of Bengal.

The Bay's growing strategic importance consequently presents Bangladesh and the wider region with both an opportunity and a responsibility. As great-power rivalry intensifies, the Bay could increasingly become a theatre of strategic competition. But if regional states prioritise cooperation, it could instead emerge as a major driver of economic integration across the Indo-Pacific. A stronger community around the Bay could facilitate trade and maritime connectivity while promoting environmental protection, disaster preparedness and response, and the sustainable use of marine resources. BIMSTEC, IORA and other regional organisations can help advance this agenda, while deeper integration between South and Southeast Asia could help overcome some of the divisions that have historically limited regional cooperation.

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Who pays for Israel's nuclear dominance?

JAMAL KANJ

Since the start of the latest made-for-Israel war, Donald Trump and his surrogates have repeatedly promised Americans that it would be a matter of a few weeks before oil prices crashed below prewar levels. Instead, it was every promise that crashed. When those promises failed to materialise, the message shifted: the war is worth the price to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear power.

But what if Iran did become a nuclear power? How would that pose a greater threat to the US than North Korea or Russia already do? Or is the real concern not a risk to America, but a challenge to the regional hegemony of a foreign nuclear power, Israel?

For more than thirty years, according to Israel's fiction, Iran has been on the verge of becoming a nuclear-armed state. That fictitious deadline has come and gone repeatedly, yet Benjamin Netanyahu has been recycling the same claim since 1992. The Israeli claims and deception persisted even though, unlike Israel, Iran's nuclear programme was subject to strict international monitoring.

Still, Trump, at Netanyahu's urging, walked away from an agreement that imposed some of the most stringent and verifiable restrictions ever placed on a country's nuclear programme. Now Americans are being asked to pay in blood and billions of dollars for abandoning a diplomatic agreement that had kept Iran's nuclear programme under unprecedented international scrutiny and helped contain the very threat now being used to justify the war.



US President Donald Trump gives a thumbs-up as he welcomes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House in Washington, DC, on September 29, 2025. PHOTO: REUTERS

The hypocrisy is impossible to overlook. Iran has been subjected to relentless demands for transparency and inspections, while Israel's own nuclear arsenal, built in part with materials stolen from the US, remains shielded from international inspection. Yet somehow Iran's nuclear ambitions and know-how are the existential nuclear threat, not Israel's nuclear bombs.

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American consumers have long been the victims of a disinformation campaign, and now they are being forced to pay the price for a war sold to them on false pretences. The most recent misinformation is the claim that the Strait of Hormuz is open and oil is flowing. The president said it on Fox, and the outgoing White House press secretary told Fox & Friends that the US is essentially controlling the strait and that it remains open. These claims leave only two possibilities: either the statements are outright lies, or oil companies are gouging consumers.

The UK Maritime Trade Operations Centre reported that commercial traffic through the strait remains about 75 percent below pre-conflict levels. It also tallied dozens of projectile strikes on vessels in just the past two months. Three-quarters less traffic is not a sign of an open strait. Shipowners and insurers know this, traders know this, and so do consumers watching the climbing numbers at the petrol pump. The market has already made its judgement, and every American who fills a tank can see it. It is past time for Washington to stop misleading the public.

For the average consumer, the petrol pump is where the impact is felt. Regular gasoline was below $3 a gallon before the US was dragged into another one of the made-for-Israel wars. Families are paying more to get to work, truckers are paying more to move goods, and those costs show up in the price of groceries.

Meanwhile, American oil companies are pumping at record levels. Exxon and Chevron are producing record volumes from oilfields on American soil, thousands of miles from the Strait of Hormuz. Their production costs have not changed. What has changed is Israel's war surcharge that consumers are being forced to pay.

Chevron reported the largest quarterly net profit in its history, $12.1 billion. Exxon made $14.5 billion in the same quarter, about $160 million a day. Refining has become more lucrative. Gross refining margins more than doubled, soaring from a typical $20 crack spread to as much as $60.

Meanwhile, Trump dangles a pie-in-the-sky deal with Venezuela as a distraction from consumers' mounting anxiety, while his administration stands by as oil companies exploit an overseas crisis for record profits. These companies have no reason to lower prices when war has handed them a windfall. This is what a war of choice looks like on the ground: American consumers are forced to pay the price, while oil executives in Texas turn a crisis into a lucrative business opportunity.

American consumers deserve more than false promises. If the Strait is open, then oil prices should be coming down. If it is not, then stop treating consumers as an audience whose emotions must be managed rather than as citizens entitled to hear the truth. Since the war started, every week, like millions of Americans, I fill my petrol tank, and the Israeli war tax is higher than it was the week before.

No, Mr President, that is not "worth the price" of a war fabricated in Israel, a repeat of the made-for-Israel war in Iraq 23 years ago. This is not a war to end Iran's supposed nuclear threat. It is a war paid for with taxpayers' money and American blood to ensure that Israel remains the only nuclear-armed power in the Middle East.

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