



Shared Waters, Contested Horizons: India–Bangladesh Maritime Security Cooperation and the Blue Economy in the Bay of Bengal

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the maritime dimension of the India–Bangladesh bilateral relationship, with a focus on two interconnected domains: maritime security cooperation and the emerging blue economy of the Bay of Bengal. The two countries share a 180-kilometre maritime boundary whose final delimitation was settled by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) only in 2012, opening a new chapter in bilateral maritime governance. Since then, the Bay of Bengal has moved to the centre of both countries' strategic and economic planning — India through its Act East Policy and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine, Bangladesh through its Blue Economy Cell and Delta Plan 2100. Drawing on official policy documents, maritime security assessments, and a wide body of existing scholarship, the article analyses how cooperation and competition have developed simultaneously across four key areas: maritime boundary management and exclusive economic zone governance, joint fisheries and resource extraction, non-traditional security threats including piracy, human trafficking, and climate-induced displacement, and naval and coast guard cooperation within the broader Indo-Pacific framework. The article argues that while the structural foundations for meaningful maritime partnership exist — including shared interest in Bay of Bengal stability, complementary resource profiles, and overlapping institutional



memberships — genuine cooperation has been constrained by asymmetries of power and capacity, divergent strategic alignments, and the absence of a comprehensive bilateral maritime framework. The article concludes by identifying the policy conditions under which more effective India–Bangladesh maritime cooperation is achievable.

1. Introduction

When the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea delivered its judgment in the case of *Bangladesh v. India* on 7 July 2012, it resolved a maritime boundary dispute that had been outstanding since Bangladesh's independence in 1971. The ruling awarded Bangladesh an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of roughly 118,813 square kilometres in the Bay of Bengal, along with a substantial portion of the extended continental shelf. India retained approximately 106,631 square kilometres of its claimed maritime territory. For both countries, the judgment was significant not just as a diplomatic milestone but as an economic one: it brought legal clarity to a body of water increasingly understood as a zone of strategic resources, trade routes, and security challenges that neither country could manage alone (Chowdhury, 2016; Rothwell & Stephens, 2016).

The Bay of Bengal is one of the world's busiest maritime corridors. Each year, an estimated \$400 billion worth of trade passes through it, connecting South and Southeast Asia to global markets (BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2020). The bay contains substantial fish stocks — fisheries alone support the livelihoods of around 35 million people across the coastal communities of the two countries (FAO, 2022). Beneath its seabed lie hydrocarbon reserves whose full extent remains under-explored, along with polymetallic nodules and other mineral resources of growing commercial interest. Above the surface, the bay is a corridor for everything from commercial shipping to narcotics smuggling, irregular migration, and the illicit trafficking of arms and people.

India and Bangladesh are connected to this shared maritime space in different but complementary ways. India, with a coastline of over 7,500 kilometres, a substantial naval force, and an explicitly stated interest in becoming the preferred security partner in the Indian Ocean region, approaches the Bay of Bengal as both a strategic priority and an arena for projecting regional influence. Bangladesh, with a 580-kilometre coastline, a growing but limited naval capacity, and one of the world's most climate-vulnerable coastal populations — approximately 30 million people live within 10 metres of sea level — approaches



the bay primarily through the lens of economic development and survival (World Bank, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, 2019).

This article examines the India–Bangladesh maritime relationship across its security and economic dimensions. Section 2 reviews the ITLOS ruling and its aftermath. Section 3 examines India's maritime doctrine and what it means for the bilateral relationship. Section 4 looks at the blue economy framework in both countries. Section 5 analyses non-traditional maritime security threats. Section 6 examines institutional cooperation frameworks. Section 7 addresses the constraints that have limited deeper partnership. Section 8 offers conclusions and policy reflections.

2. The ITLOS Ruling and the Maritime Boundary Settlement

Before 2012, the maritime boundary between India and Bangladesh had never been formally delimited. Bangladesh filed its case with ITLOS in December 2009 under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), after bilateral negotiations over several decades had failed to produce agreement. The core disagreement was over the method of delimitation: India favoured an equidistance line, which would have given it a larger share of the bay, while Bangladesh argued for equity-based delimitation that reflected its geographic disadvantage as a concave coastal state sandwiched between India and Myanmar (Saleem, 2013; Chowdhury, 2016).

The tribunal sided broadly with Bangladesh's equity argument, applying an adjusted equidistance line that gave Bangladesh a significantly larger EEZ than India had proposed. Crucially, the ruling also awarded Bangladesh a portion of the outer continental shelf beyond the 200-nautical-mile EEZ limit — a first-of-its-kind outcome in ITLOS jurisprudence that set an important precedent for future maritime boundary cases (Rothwell & Stephens, 2016). The disputed South Talpatti (New Moore) island, which had been the subject of a separate territorial dispute between India and Bangladesh, had by this point disappeared beneath rising sea levels — a fact that both removed one source of conflict and underlined the vulnerability of both countries' coastal geography to climate change.

India accepted the ruling without public protest, and diplomatic commentary on both sides emphasised that the resolution had been arrived at peacefully through international legal mechanisms — a point both governments presented as a model for resolving maritime disputes in the region (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2012). In practical terms, the ruling created a clear legal framework for resource extraction, fisheries management, and maritime policing within each country's EEZ. It also placed



pressure on both governments to develop the capacity to actually govern and exploit their newly clarified maritime zones — a challenge that has proven easier to declare than to achieve.

The ITLOS ruling did not resolve all outstanding issues. Overlapping claims to certain hydrocarbon blocks had complicated the activities of energy companies operating in the bay for years, and the post-ruling clarity took time to translate into operational agreements on exploration rights. The broader question of how the two countries would jointly manage shared fish stocks, coordinate responses to illegal fishing, and govern maritime traffic in adjacent zones was left entirely to subsequent bilateral negotiation — and those negotiations have proceeded slowly (Shahriar, 2020).

3. India's Maritime Doctrine and the SAGAR Framework

3.1 From Look East to Act East

India's strategic interest in the Bay of Bengal has grown substantially over the past two decades, driven by economic growth, expanding naval capacity, and the perceived need to respond to China's increasing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean. The shift from the Look East Policy, launched in 1991, to the Act East Policy announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 represented a sharpening of India's strategic focus on its eastern maritime neighbourhood. Where Look East was primarily economic in orientation — seeking trade and investment links with Southeast Asia — Act East is more explicitly security-conscious and includes a naval dimension (Scott, 2013; Brewster, 2014).

The strategic framework that most directly defines India's maritime posture toward Bangladesh and the wider Bay of Bengal region is the SAGAR doctrine, announced by Modi during a 2015 visit to Mauritius. SAGAR stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region. It frames India as a preferred security partner for Indian Ocean nations — offering maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and naval cooperation — while presenting India's growing naval power not as a threat to regional states but as a stabilising force (Mohan, 2015). For Bangladesh, SAGAR has meant a sustained Indian effort to deepen bilateral naval and coast guard cooperation, share maritime domain awareness data, and position Indian naval assets as the first responders in regional contingencies.

3.2 India's Naval Expansion

India's naval expansion over the past decade provides the hard-power context for its maritime diplomacy. The Indian Navy operates three aircraft carriers — INS Vikramaditya, and the newly



commissioned INS Vikrant which was inducted in 2022 — along with fifteen submarines, eleven destroyers, and over a hundred surface combatants and patrol vessels (Indian Navy Annual Report, 2023). The navy's budget has grown from approximately \$2.4 billion in 2010 to over \$4.6 billion in 2023, reflecting sustained political priority (SIPRI, 2023). India has also invested in maritime patrol aircraft, underwater surveillance systems, and coastal radar networks that collectively give it a level of maritime domain awareness in the Bay of Bengal far exceeding that of any regional neighbour.

This capacity asymmetry shapes the India–Bangladesh maritime relationship in important ways. Bangladesh's navy and coast guard, while growing, operate at a fraction of India's scale. The Bangladesh Navy operates around thirty-five surface combatants, two frigates, and a handful of submarines acquired from China, with a total budget in the range of \$400 million annually (IISS, 2023). This gap means that Bangladesh is necessarily a junior partner in any bilateral maritime security arrangement — a position Dhaka has sometimes found uncomfortable, particularly given the political complexities of accepting Indian security assistance while simultaneously managing a defence relationship with China.

4. Bangladesh's Blue Economy Framework and Delta Plan 2100

4.1 The Blue Economy Vision

Bangladesh's engagement with the blue economy concept has been enthusiastic and policy-rich since at least 2014, when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government established the Blue Economy Cell under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and subsequently integrated blue economy thinking into multiple national planning documents. The concept — broadly understood as the sustainable economic use of ocean resources including fisheries, aquaculture, shipping, offshore energy, seabed minerals, and marine tourism — appealed to Bangladesh for obvious reasons: the ITLOS ruling had expanded its maritime territory significantly, and the bay offered resources whose development could contribute substantially to the country's economic ambitions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, 2019).

Bangladesh's blue economy planning has identified several priority sectors. Marine fisheries currently contribute approximately 1.02 percent of the country's GDP and provide employment to around 1.4 million fishermen and a further 20 million people in downstream processing and trade (Department of Fisheries, Bangladesh, 2022). The potential for expansion is considerable: Bangladesh's EEZ is estimated to contain around 260 species of fish, including commercially valuable species that remain significantly under-harvested due to limited deep-sea fishing capacity. The government has set targets for expanding



its deep-sea fishing fleet, developing modern fish processing facilities, and rationalising the licensing framework for commercial fishing operations.

Offshore hydrocarbon resources represent another major component of the blue economy agenda. Bangladesh's EEZ is believed to contain significant natural gas reserves — estimates from the Geological Survey of Bangladesh suggest the potential for up to several trillion cubic feet of gas in certain offshore blocks — though commercial-scale exploration has been slow. Bangladesh has licensed offshore blocks to international energy companies including Conoco Phillips and various state-owned entities, but progress has been hampered by the complexity of deepwater exploration, financing constraints, and the residual ambiguity about certain block boundaries that persisted even after the ITLOS ruling (Shahriar, 2020; Islam, 2021).

4.2 Delta Plan 2100

Delta Plan 2100, formally approved by the Bangladesh government in 2018, is perhaps the most ambitious long-term planning document produced by any South Asian government on the question of climate adaptation and coastal management. The plan, developed with Dutch technical assistance, sets out a comprehensive vision for managing Bangladesh's delta geography over an 80-year horizon, integrating water management, agricultural adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and coastal zone governance in a single framework. It carries an estimated price tag of \$37 billion for its first investment phase (General Economics Division, Bangladesh, 2018).

The maritime dimensions of Delta Plan 2100 are substantial. The plan acknowledges that under high-end climate projections, approximately 17 percent of Bangladesh's territory could be inundated by 2050, displacing tens of millions of coastal residents and destroying livelihoods built on coastal fisheries and agriculture (General Economics Division, Bangladesh, 2018; IPCC, 2022). Managing this displacement — including the question of whether some climate-affected Bangladeshis might cross into Indian territory — has obvious implications for the bilateral maritime security relationship. The plan calls for investments in coastal embankments, polders, cyclone shelters, and managed retreat, but the scale of the challenge and the financing gap between what is needed and what is available leave a substantial residual risk that climate displacement will become a major maritime governance issue in the coming decades.

For India, Bangladesh's Delta Plan 2100 is both a document about a neighbour's internal planning and a statement of the scale of climate-related risk in the shared coastal geography. The Bay of Bengal's



coastal zone is an integrated ecosystem: cyclone tracks, storm surge dynamics, and sea-level rise affect Indian and Bangladeshi coastal communities without reference to the international boundary. This shared vulnerability is an argument for joint maritime planning and climate adaptation cooperation that has so far been only partially taken up in bilateral conversations.

5. Non-Traditional Maritime Security Threats in the Bay of Bengal

5.1 Fisheries, Illegal Fishing, and Resource Competition

Fisheries are the most economically significant source of maritime tension between India and Bangladesh. The Bay of Bengal is among the world's most productive fishing grounds, but fish stocks have been under severe pressure from decades of overexploitation. The FAO estimates that over 60 percent of fish stocks in the bay are either fully exploited or overfished (FAO, 2022). Against this backdrop, incidents of fishing vessels from one country crossing into the other's EEZ are common, and arrests of fishermen on both sides have been a persistent source of bilateral friction.

Indian fishermen from West Bengal and Odisha regularly cross into Bangladeshi waters, and Bangladeshi fishermen operating near the maritime boundary frequently stray into Indian EEZ. The Bangladesh Coast Guard reported over 400 incidents of illegal fishing in its EEZ in 2022 alone, with a significant proportion involving vessels from India and Myanmar (Bangladesh Coast Guard, 2022). Arrested fishermen face detention, loss of boats and gear, and prosecution under domestic fisheries law — outcomes that are not just economically devastating for poor coastal families but that generate diplomatic complaints from both sides and periodically attract media attention.

Attempts to address this problem bilaterally have been limited. A Joint Fisheries Committee has existed in various forms since the 1990s but has produced no comprehensive fisheries management agreement. The absence of a bilateral mechanism for the prompt release of fishermen and their vessels — something that has been achieved in other bilateral maritime relationships — means that fishermen pay the price of the governments' inability to agree on shared rules for a shared resource. This is both a humanitarian gap and an indicator of the broader shortcomings in bilateral maritime governance.

5.2 Human Trafficking and Irregular Maritime Migration

The Bay of Bengal is one of the world's most significant corridors for irregular maritime migration and human trafficking. The Rohingya refugee crisis has dramatically intensified this problem



since 2017: with over a million Rohingya confined to camps in Cox's Bazar with limited legal status and no clear path to resettlement, a significant number have turned to smuggling networks to attempt maritime journeys to Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. The UN Refugee Agency estimates that between 2020 and 2023, over 3,500 Rohingya undertook dangerous boat journeys in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, with multiple vessels sinking and significant loss of life (UNHCR, 2023).

India occupies an awkward position in this dynamic. Many irregular migration routes pass through or near Indian territorial waters, and the Indian Coast Guard has been called upon both to conduct search and rescue operations for distressed vessels and to intercept boats before they reach Indian shores. India's official policy is not to accept Rohingya on its territory, and there have been documented cases of Indian maritime authorities pushing boats back toward Bangladesh or Myanmar — practices that raise serious concerns under international maritime law, including the duty to render assistance to persons in distress at sea regardless of their legal status (Bose, 2018; UNHCR, 2023).

Human trafficking networks operating in the bay also move labour migrants from Bangladesh, Myanmar, and other regional states to Southeast Asian countries under conditions of extreme exploitation. The International Labour Organization estimates that approximately 3.5 million people are victims of forced labour in Southeast Asia, many of whom were trafficked via maritime routes from the Bay of Bengal region (ILO, 2022). India and Bangladesh have both signed bilateral agreements on combating trafficking, but the maritime dimension — coordinating coast guard interceptions, sharing intelligence on trafficking networks, and ensuring that anti-trafficking operations do not criminalise genuine refugees — has received less systematic attention than the land border.

5.3 Piracy, Arms Smuggling, and Organised Crime

The Bay of Bengal has historically been less severely affected by piracy than the Gulf of Aden or the Straits of Malacca, but the problem is not absent. The International Maritime Bureau recorded 46 incidents of piracy and armed robbery in the Bay of Bengal between 2018 and 2022, concentrated primarily around the approaches to Chittagong and Mongla ports and in the waters off Myanmar's Arakan coast (IMB, 2022). These incidents range from opportunistic theft from anchored vessels to more organised attacks on fishing boats and small commercial craft. The Sundarbans mangrove delta — which spans both India and Bangladesh and is the world's largest mangrove ecosystem — provides natural concealment for criminal operations and has been a corridor for arms and narcotics smuggling as well as cross-border organised crime.



Arms smuggling through the maritime and riverine networks of the Sundarbans has been a documented security concern for both governments. Indian security agencies have linked maritime smuggling networks in the Sundarbans to insurgent groups operating in northeastern India, and Bangladesh has faced the challenge of governing a remote and economically marginal coastal zone that is beyond the effective reach of routine policing. Joint patrols by the Indian Coast Guard and Bangladesh Coast Guard in the Sundarbans area have been discussed and partially implemented but have not yet produced a systematic, sustained bilateral maritime policing operation in this sensitive zone (Ganguly, 2017; Ministry of Home Affairs, India, 2021).

5.4 Climate Security and Disaster Response

Climate change has to be understood as a maritime security issue in the Bay of Bengal context, not just an environmental or developmental one. The bay is one of the world's most cyclone-active regions: between 1990 and 2022, it experienced over 90 named cyclones, with average intensities increasing as sea surface temperatures rise (IMD, 2023; Knutson et al., 2020). Both India and Bangladesh have invested substantially in cyclone early warning systems, cyclone shelters, and disaster response capacity, reducing cyclone mortality dramatically over the past three decades — Bangladesh's death toll from Cyclone Bhola in 1970 was estimated at 300,000 to 500,000; comparable recent storms have killed hundreds rather than hundreds of thousands (Paul, 2009).

Despite this progress, the scale of climate-related maritime risk is growing faster than adaptation capacity. Storm surges penetrating further inland, saltwater intrusion destroying agricultural land, and the slow-onset impacts of sea-level rise are undermining the livelihoods of coastal communities even when the storms themselves are survived. India's National Disaster Management Authority and Bangladesh's Disaster Management and Relief division coordinate bilaterally on cyclone response, and both countries participate in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) disaster management framework. But the institutional mechanisms for joint climate-maritime planning remain relatively underdeveloped compared to the scale of the shared vulnerability.

6. Institutional Frameworks for Bilateral Maritime Cooperation

6.1 Existing Agreements and Mechanisms

The formal architecture of India–Bangladesh maritime cooperation includes a range of bilateral agreements, joint working groups, and institutional linkages that have accumulated over five decades of



independent statehood. The most significant in the maritime security domain is the Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) arrangement between the Indian Navy and Bangladesh Navy, which has been in place since 2018. Under this mechanism, the two navies conduct synchronised patrols along their shared maritime boundary on a semi-annual basis, improving maritime domain awareness and reducing the risk of accidental encounters at sea (Indian Navy, 2022). The arrangement is less formal and comprehensive than India's similar CORPAT agreements with Southeast Asian states like Thailand and Indonesia, but it represents a meaningful baseline.

The Indian Coast Guard and Bangladesh Coast Guard maintain a separate bilateral cooperation framework, including joint exercises, capacity-building programmes, and information sharing. India has provided patrol vessels to the Bangladesh Coast Guard under its defence cooperation programme — two Inshore Patrol Vessels were transferred in 2020 — and has offered training to Bangladeshi coast guard personnel at Indian Maritime Training Centres (Ministry of Defence, India, 2020). This form of asymmetric cooperation, where India provides capacity and Bangladesh accepts it, reflects the power dynamics of the bilateral relationship and has at times generated Bangladeshi discomfort about the terms of the arrangement.

On the economic side, the two countries are both members of BIMSTEC, which includes a Maritime Transport Working Group and a Fisheries Cooperation mechanism. BIMSTEC's Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) project, implemented with FAO support, has produced important baseline data on fish stocks, ecosystem health, and sustainable yield estimates that should inform bilateral and multilateral fisheries management. The project identified that 73 percent of the marine fishery resources in the bay are shared across national boundaries, making unilateral management fundamentally inadequate (BOBLME, 2021). The data exists; what is missing is the political will to build management frameworks on it.

6.2 The China Factor and Strategic Hedging

No analysis of India–Bangladesh maritime cooperation can ignore the China dimension. China has been Bangladesh's largest defence supplier since around 2010 and has provided the Bangladesh Navy with two Ming-class submarines, two frigates, and a range of smaller surface combatants, along with associated training and maintenance support. China's strategic interest in Bangladesh's maritime geography is transparent: Chittagong port sits at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal and has been identified in Chinese strategic writing as a key node in the Maritime Silk Road component of the Belt and Road



Initiative. Chinese investment in Chittagong port infrastructure, while commercially framed, carries obvious strategic implications (Islam, 2021; Brewster, 2014).

For India, Bangladesh's defence relationship with China represents the most significant constraint on the depth of bilateral maritime security cooperation. India is unwilling to share the most sensitive maritime domain awareness data or to integrate Bangladesh into the highest-level maritime security networks if Bangladeshi systems are built around Chinese hardware and communications infrastructure, given the possibility of Chinese intelligence access. Bangladesh, for its part, uses its relationship with China partly as a hedge against Indian dominance — a way of preserving strategic autonomy in a bilateral relationship where India is dramatically more powerful (Riaz & Rahman, 2016).

This dynamic has real consequences for maritime cooperation. The kind of deep interoperability that India maintains with the United States, France, or Australia under the QUAD and associated frameworks is not available with Bangladesh as long as the Chinese submarine and frigate relationship continues. India and Bangladesh can conduct coordinated patrols and share some information, but they cannot integrate their naval command and control in the ways that genuine maritime security partnership would require. Managing this tension — neither pushing Bangladesh so hard toward India's strategic orbit that Dhaka feels cornered, nor accepting a level of Chinese maritime presence in the bay that India considers strategically unacceptable — is one of the more complex challenges in the bilateral relationship.

7. What Has Held Back Deeper Maritime Partnership

7.1 Capacity Asymmetry

The fundamental asymmetry of maritime capacity between India and Bangladesh shapes every dimension of the bilateral relationship. India's navy is the fifth largest in the world by tonnage, operates sophisticated undersea surveillance systems, and maintains a maritime air patrol capability spanning the entire Indian Ocean Region. Bangladesh's navy is a coastal force with limited blue-water capability, dependent on India and China for its most significant platforms, and operating with a budget roughly twelve times smaller than India's naval expenditure (IISS, 2023; SIPRI, 2023). This is not a relationship between equals, and pretending otherwise would distort the analysis.

Capacity asymmetry creates dependencies that are politically uncomfortable for Bangladesh. When India offers capacity-building — patrol vessels, training, surveillance technology — the offer



cannot easily be separated from the strategic relationships and intelligence-sharing norms that accompany it. Bangladesh needs the capacity but is wary of the strings. India wants Bangladesh to benefit from Indian assistance but is also aware that pushing too hard on the security dimension of the relationship risks confirming Bangladeshi perceptions of India as a regional hegemon seeking to limit Bangladesh's strategic autonomy. The result has been a pattern of cooperation that is real but calibrated — enough to maintain the relationship, not enough to fundamentally transform Bangladesh's maritime capacity.

7.2 The Absence of a Comprehensive Maritime Agreement

Despite the volume of bilateral interaction on maritime issues, India and Bangladesh have no comprehensive maritime cooperation agreement analogous to what either country has with some other partners. There is no bilateral fisheries management treaty. There is no search and rescue agreement specifying each party's responsibilities and geographic zones. There is no joint maritime patrol agreement with defined protocols for shared operations, information sharing, and incident response. The CORPAT arrangement is a step in the right direction but falls well short of what a full maritime partnership framework would require (Indian Navy, 2022; Shahriar, 2020).

The absence of these agreements is partly a reflection of the broader state of the bilateral relationship — which, as discussed in the preceding sections, has been marked by cooperation in some domains and persistent friction in others — and partly a reflection of the institutional capacity constraints on both sides. Negotiating a comprehensive maritime framework requires sustained diplomatic attention, technical expertise in maritime law, and political leadership willing to trade off competing interests to reach agreement. These conditions have not consistently been present simultaneously on both sides.

7.3 The Fisheries Impasse

The failure to reach a bilateral fisheries management agreement is perhaps the most glaring specific gap in the maritime cooperation framework. With over 60 percent of Bay of Bengal fish stocks under stress, and with both countries' coastal communities dependent on fisheries for food security and livelihoods, the absence of coordinated stock management is economically irrational and ecologically damaging. The problem is not a lack of data — the BOBLME project and FAO have produced extensive assessments of stock status and sustainable yield — but a lack of political agreement on how to divide the available catch and how to enforce shared rules.



The difficulty is compounded by the social and political weight of the fishing community. In both countries, coastal fishermen are a politically significant constituency. Any agreement that limits their fishing grounds or imposes new restrictions on their activities faces domestic political resistance. Governments on both sides have found it easier to make bilateral declarations of intent than to conclude enforceable agreements that would constrain domestic fishermen — and this political calculation has reproduced the status quo of uncoordinated fishing and recurring incidents of fishermen arrested across the maritime boundary.

8. Conclusion: The Conditions for Meaningful Partnership

The India–Bangladesh maritime relationship is one of genuine strategic importance and real unrealised potential. The two countries share a bay whose resources, trade routes, and security challenges they cannot manage effectively in isolation. The legal foundations for maritime governance have been in place since the ITLOS ruling of 2012. Both countries have adopted ambitious maritime economic frameworks — India's SAGAR doctrine and Bangladesh's blue economy vision — that point toward the bay as a priority domain. And both face shared threats, from illegal fishing to cyclone risk to climate-driven coastal displacement, that are severe enough to demand cooperative responses.

What has held cooperation back is a combination of the familiar and the structural. Power asymmetry makes Bangladesh wary of dependence. The China factor complicates deep security integration. The absence of comprehensive bilateral frameworks means that individual areas of cooperation — coordinated patrols, coast guard capacity-building, disaster response coordination — remain stand-alone rather than components of a coherent maritime partnership. And the fisheries impasse shows that even where the economic logic of cooperation is overwhelming, domestic political constraints can prevent agreement.

None of these constraints is immovable. The conditions for more effective maritime partnership would include, at minimum: a comprehensive bilateral fisheries management agreement built on the available stock assessment data and providing for the prompt release of detained fishermen; a search and rescue agreement with defined zones and protocols that integrates the coast guard capabilities of both countries; a sustained investment by India in Bangladesh's maritime domain awareness capacity in ways that do not require Bangladesh to choose between its Indian and Chinese relationships; and an honest acknowledgment by both governments that climate-related maritime displacement is a shared challenge that requires joint planning rather than separate, uncoordinated responses.



The political transition in Bangladesh following the departure of Sheikh Hasina's government in August 2024 adds uncertainty to these prospects in the short term. The interim government led by Muhammad Yunus has signalled a desire to review the terms of the bilateral relationship with India, and it is not yet clear what this means for the maritime cooperation agenda specifically. What can be said is that the structural factors driving the need for maritime cooperation — the shared bay, the shared resource pressures, the shared climate vulnerability, the shared interest in stable sea lanes — do not change with governments. The question is whether political leadership on both sides will be willing and capable of building the frameworks that the strategic logic demands.

For scholars of South Asian political science and international relations, the India–Bangladesh maritime relationship offers a rich case study in how power asymmetry, strategic hedging, and the legacies of complex bilateral history interact to constrain cooperation even where the material incentives for it are clear. Understanding this case — in its historical depth, its legal texture, its security dimensions, and its economic stakes — is essential not just for understanding India–Bangladesh relations but for thinking seriously about the conditions under which smaller maritime states in the Indo-Pacific can manage their security relationships with major naval powers in ways that preserve strategic autonomy while still achieving the practical benefits of cooperation.

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