

Two Seas, One Future

The Mediterranean and the Bay of Bengal in Comparative Perspective

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Although a country with coastline, for most Bangladeshis, the Mediterranean Sea is a distant body of water and a topic that does not find mention in the public imagination. Its azure waters, ancient ruins and migrant-laden boats appear only in news headlines—refugee crises in Libya, gas disputes between Turkey and Greece, naval manoeuvres off the coast of Syria. It seems far removed from the Bay of Bengal, where cyclones gather, ships navigate the narrow Strait of Malacca and the mangrove forest Sundarbans stand guard against rising seas.

But distance is deceptive. The Mediterranean and the Bay of Bengal are not separate worlds. They are connected—through the Suez Canal—by the maritime routes that carry Asian goods to European markets, by the strategic competition between great powers, and by the shared challenges of climate change, migration and the search for stability in a fragmented but competitive world order marked by wars, conflicts, devastations and displacement.¹

A comprehensive research project conducted by the Department of Political Science at the University of Chittagong—synthesised in the forthcoming reference volume *The Mediterranean in World Order: Geopolitics, Crisis, Encounter, and Future*—examines the Mediterranean across five dimensions: its geography, its geopolitics, its crises, its civilisational history,

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and its future prospects. The project poses a question of direct relevance to Bangladesh: What can the Mediterranean teach us about the Bay of Bengal?² This paper, however, is an outcome of core values and insights of the above project that provides important perspectives and issues on discussions and coordination for the countries of the Bay of Bengal region.

THE MEDITERRANEAN AS A MIRROR OF WORLD ORDER

The Mediterranean Sea concentrates the defining dynamics of the contemporary era. Though it covers less than one per cent of the global ocean surface, it functions as a critical theatre where the forces shaping the 21st century converge.

Great power competition plays out in its waters. The United States maintains the Sixth Fleet, headquartered in Naples. China has invested in ports from Piraeus in Greece to Valencia in Spain, creating strategic footholds along the Maritime Silk Road. Russia, despite setbacks, continues to project naval power from its base in Syria. Turkey asserts its 'Blue Homeland' doctrine, challenging maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean. India, through its partnership with France, is emerging as a stakeholder in Mediterranean security.³

Migration crises unfold along its shores. Over 30,000 people have died attempting to cross the central Mediterranean since 2014—the world's deadliest border crossing. The European Union has constructed a regime of 'externalisation', delegating border control to authoritarian states in Libya and Tunisia, funding coast guards that return migrants to detention centres where torture and abuse are routine. The Mediterranean has become a laboratory for a new form of governance: the management of human life and death at the margins of Europe.⁴

Climate vulnerability is accelerating in the Mediterranean faster than almost anywhere else. The region is warming 20 per cent faster than the global average. Water scarcity, desertification and sea-level rise threaten coastal communities from Spain to Egypt. The Mediterranean is a climate hotspot—and a preview of what the Bay of Bengal will face in the coming decades.⁵

Civilisational encounter has defined the Mediterranean for millennia. Islam and Christendom, Europe and Africa, East and West have met, traded, fought and co-existed on its shores. The history of *convivencia*—co-existence in medieval Spain—and its violent rupture through the *Reconquista* and the Inquisition continues to shape debates over secularism, religious identity and migration today.⁶

These four dimensions—geopolitics, crisis, encounter and future—form the analytical framework of the University of Chittagong research project, which offers a comprehensive picture of a sea that is once again central to world order.

THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE BAY OF BENGAL: A COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

The research project's concluding analysis asks a question that brings the comparative framework to the fore: is the Bay of Bengal becoming the Mediterranean of Asia?

The parallels are striking. Both are semi-enclosed seas with narrow chokepoints—the Strait of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal in the Mediterranean; the Strait of Malacca and the Six Degree Channel in the Bay of Bengal. Both are spaces of dense maritime traffic, with global supply chains passing through their waters. Both are theatres of great power competition—the rivalry between the United States, China, Russia and regional powers in the Mediterranean; the competition between India and China, with the United States, Japan and Australia playing supporting roles, in the Bay of Bengal.

Both are vulnerable to climate change, with densely populated coastal zones facing sea-level rise, cyclones and extreme weather. Both are sites of migration and displacement—the Rohingya crisis in the Bay of Bengal, and the African and Middle Eastern refugees crossing the Mediterranean. Both bear the legacies of empire—Ottoman, British, French, Dutch—that continue to shape politics and identity.

Also, both are spaces where the future of world order will be contested. Will they become corridors of cooperation, linking economies and civilisations? Or will they become shatter belts of conflict, where great power rivalries and climate crises produce instability?⁷

FIVE LESSONS FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN FOR THE BAY OF BENGAL

The Mediterranean experience offers five key lessons that the Bay of Bengal littoral states—Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia—can draw upon.

Institutionalise Cooperation

The Mediterranean's most successful initiatives—the European Union's Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T), the 5+5 Security Dialogue

and the Union for the Mediterranean—have been those with durable institutions, clear mandates and sustained commitment.⁸

The Bay of Bengal has BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), but the organisation has made limited progress. Strengthening BIMSTEC—concluding its long-delayed free trade agreement, establishing a maritime cooperation framework and creating a climate adaptation fund—should be a priority for Bangladesh and its neighbours.

Balance Engagement with Strategic Autonomy

The Mediterranean has demonstrated the costs of great power competition—proxy wars, debt diplomacy and strategic dependence. The Bay of Bengal's littoral states, including Bangladesh, must engage with multiple partners—India, China, Japan, the United States and the European Union—while preserving policy space and avoiding exclusive alignments.⁹

The goal should be to leverage external investment for development while maintaining the autonomy to make decisions consistent with national interests. Bangladesh's strategy of maintaining balanced relations with major powers offers a model for the region.

Prioritise Climate Resilience

The Mediterranean's experience demonstrates that climate change is not a future threat but a present reality. The Bay of Bengal, with its millions of coastal inhabitants, is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions.

Bangladesh has pioneered climate adaptation—cyclone early-warning systems, cyclone shelters, mangrove conservation—but these efforts must be scaled up and regionalised. A Bay of Bengal Climate Adaptation Fund, supported by multilateral development banks and bilateral donors, could finance priority projects across the region.¹⁰

Avoid the Mediterranean's Migration Governance Failures

The European Union's externalisation regime—delegating border control to authoritarian states, criminalising search and rescue, allowing thousands to drown—is a moral and policy failure. The Bay of Bengal should not replicate these models.¹¹

Instead, a framework that recognises the right to stay—investing in climate adaptation in vulnerable areas—and provides legal pathways for those who must move would be more consistent with human rights and long-term stability.

Recover Histories of Encounter

The Mediterranean's history of *convivencia*—Muslim, Christian and Jewish co-existence—offers a counter-narrative to the clash of civilisations that dominates contemporary discourse. The Bay of Bengal has its own histories of encounter: Buddhist networks linking Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia, Chola maritime expeditions, Bengali merchant communities across the Indian Ocean.¹²

Recovering these histories can provide resources for imagining alternative futures and countering narratives of civilisational conflict.

Bangladesh's Strategic Position

For Bangladesh, the Bay of Bengal is not a distant sea—it is the country's geography, its economy, its destiny and a source of connectivity and worldview. The port of Chittagong along with emerging new ports, the world's largest mangrove forest Sundarbans (jointly shared by the Indian state of West Bengal), the maritime boundary settled with Myanmar and India, the strategic position between South and Southeast Asia—these are assets that can be leveraged for prosperity and stability.

However, these assets are also vulnerabilities. Climate change threatens coastal communities. Great power competition risks entanglement. Migration pressures, already evident in the Rohingya crisis, will intensify with climate displacement.¹³

The Mediterranean offers a mirror—not to be imitated uncritically, but to be studied for its lessons. What worked? What failed? What can Bangladesh and its neighbours do differently?

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the analysis above according to comparative perspective, the following policy recommendations are offered for Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal littoral states:

Strengthen BIMSTEC as the Institutional Framework for Bay of Bengal Cooperation

BIMSTEC is the prime organisation focusing on the BOB. Initially established on 6 June 1997 as BIST-EC and later renamed as BIMSTEC, the organisation has seven member countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The main focus of the organisation is Bay of Bengal-based regional cooperation in trade, investment, transport,

energy, technology and security. It is important to conclude the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement, which has been under negotiation for over a decade. Moreover, establishing a BIMSTEC Maritime Cooperation Framework addressing security, connectivity and sustainable development is essential along with creating a BIMSTEC Climate Adaptation Fund to finance regional resilience projects.

Develop a Bay of Bengal Security Dialogue

- As the Bay of Bengal is treated as an emerging flashpoint of conflicts and security treats, it is high time to consider establishing an inclusive security framework modelled on the Mediterranean's 5+5 Dialogue. It is crucial to address shared challenges; formulate firm responses to maritime piracy, illegal fishing and disasters; create maritime domain awareness; conduct joint naval exercises; and establish information-sharing mechanisms. Overall, the development of a Bay of Bengal security dialogue framework is essential to address ongoing and upcoming challenges.

Launch a Bay of Bengal Climate Adaptation Fund

Without doubt, climate vulnerability is one of the major problems in and around the Bay of Bengal region. To tackle climate issues, it is essential to mobilise resources from multilateral development banks, bilateral donors and private investors. For this purpose, it is essential to pursue finance priority projects, mangrove conservation (Sundarbans), climate-resilient infrastructure, early-warning systems and community-based adaptation.

Establish a Bay of Bengal Connectivity Corridor

Smooth connectivity among countries of the Bay of Bengal region will deliver immense mutual benefits. Therefore, the improvement of port infrastructure and harmonisation of procedures across Chittagong, Chennai, Colombo, Yangon and other ports require immediate attention. Parallel to the development of land connectivity through the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway, there is an urgent need to establish a Bay of Bengal connectivity corridor. In this connection, investment in digital infrastructure, including sub-sea cables and terrestrial fibre networks, is an important task for the countries in this region.

Engage Extra-Regional Partners While Preserving Strategic Autonomy

For strategic and security reasons, diversification of partnerships is necessary to avoid dependency on any single power in the Bay of Bengal. For the sake

of regional power balance, it is vital to establish transparent investment frameworks that protect sovereignty and ensure sustainability. Above all, strengthening of regional institutions to manage external engagement collectively is the need of the hour.

CONCLUSION

The Mediterranean and the Bay of Bengal are two seas, but they share one future—a future shaped by the choices made in today's global dynamics and regional realities. The Mediterranean offers lessons in what to emulate and what to avoid. Its successes demonstrate the value of institutionalised cooperation, balanced engagement and climate resilience. Its failures—particularly in migration governance—reveal the human costs of securitised borders and delegated violence.

For Bangladesh, the Bay of Bengal is not merely a maritime space but the foundation of national prosperity and security. Following the national elections of early 2026, a new government animated by popular support, democratic aspirations and geo-economic imperatives will face critical choices. The decisions made in strengthening BIMSTEC, balancing great power engagement, investing in climate resilience and recovering the region's rich histories of encounter will determine whether the Bay of Bengal evolves into a corridor of cooperation or devolves into a theatre of conflict.

The Mediterranean provides a mirror. It is time for the Bay of Bengal to learn from it. The learning is essential not only for particular countries of this region but for all the member countries collectively. As the Bay of Bengal constitutes an integral part of the broader Indo-Pacific—a theatre increasingly shaped by the strategic policies of global powers—the littoral must move beyond unilateral approaches. Framing coherent national agendas as well as simultaneously a unified regional response is no longer a matter choice but utmost necessity. Only through coordinated action can the countries of the Bay of Bengal effectively navigate the emerging geopolitical, economic and environmental challenges that lie ahead.

NOTES

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