



Geopolitics and Regional Integration in the Bay of Bengal: The Bangladesh–Myanmar Nexus

International Journal for Peace

and Public Leadership

Vol. 2 (2026): 9-36

ISSN: 3066-8336

<https://doi.org/10.63470/AIPW1355>

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Abstract

This study examines how geopolitical competition, security dynamics, and institutional frameworks shape regional integration in the Bay of Bengal, with the Bangladesh–Myanmar relationship as its central case. Drawing on qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources, we argue that while Bangladesh and Myanmar occupy positions of genuine strategic significance at the South Asia–Southeast Asia interface, their bilateral relationship has been structurally hollowed out by competing great-power pressures, the unresolved Rohingya refugee crisis, and chronically weak border governance. India–China rivalry has produced infrastructure investment in both countries while simultaneously discouraging direct bilateral engagement between them— an ironic dynamic in which external competition funds connectivity while foreclosing cooperation. Regional institutional frameworks, particularly the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the now-dormant Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, offer underutilized pathways for integration, though their effectiveness is constrained by overlapping mandates and uneven political commitment. We conclude that sustainable regional integration in the Bay of Bengal depends less on geographic proximity—already a given—than on resolving the political and security conditions that prevent Bangladesh and Myanmar

from functioning as genuine partners rather than parallel clients of larger powers.

Keywords: Bangladesh–Myanmar relations, Bay of Bengal, Geopolitics, Regional integration

I. Introduction

The Bay of Bengal has re-emerged as one of the Indo-Pacific's most consequential strategic spaces. Straddling the maritime routes connecting South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the broader Indian Ocean system, it carries an expanding volume of international trade, energy shipments, and regional commerce. Geopolitical competition among regional powers has intensified alongside this economic significance, drawing renewed attention from scholars of international relations, regional integration, and security studies.¹

Within this evolving landscape, the relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar presents an instructive and underexamined case. Geographically, both countries occupy the northern and eastern littoral of the Bay of Bengal, demarcating the transitional zone between South Asia and Southeast Asia.² Their shared maritime and land boundaries, complementary port infrastructure, and proximity to major sea lanes would seem to position them as natural partners in regional connectivity. Yet the bilateral relationship has remained remarkably thin—characterized by cautious diplomacy, weak institutional collaboration, and recurrent mistrust rooted in border disputes, unresolved humanitarian crises, and domestic political turbulence.³

The explanation for this gap between geographic potential and political reality lies, we argue, in a specific structural dynamic: both Bangladesh and Myanmar have been pulled into the strategic orbits of larger powers—India and China respectively—in ways that have oriented their foreign policies outward and upward rather than laterally toward each other. The result is that regional infrastructure investment has

increased substantially while genuine bilateral cooperation has not kept pace. The Rohingya refugee crisis, which has displaced over a million people into Bangladesh since 2017, has further entrenched mistrust at precisely the moment when cooperation would be most consequential. Myanmar's 2021 military coup and the ensuing civil conflict have added further uncertainty, raising serious questions about that country's capacity to function as a reliable partner in any regional framework for the foreseeable future.

Several multilateral frameworks—the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), BIMSTEC, and the BCIM Economic Corridor—nominally provide platforms for dialogue and cooperation. Bangladesh is a founding SAARC member; Myanmar is an ASEAN member; both belong to BIMSTEC and the BCIM framework. Yet membership has not translated into momentum, and the BCIM in particular has effectively stalled following India's withdrawal and China's strategic pivot toward the bilateral China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC).

Existing scholarship tends to address either bilateral issues—border disputes, the Rohingya crisis—or regional organizations in isolation, leaving underexplored the question of how geopolitical competition, security constraints, and institutional architecture interact to shape the Bangladesh–Myanmar relationship within the broader Bay of Bengal system.⁴ This study addresses that gap. We ask two questions: first, how do geopolitical and security dynamics constrain or enable regional integration between Bangladesh and Myanmar; and second, what role does the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus play—or fail to play—in shaping broader regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal?

The article proceeds as follows. Section II reviews the relevant literature on regional integration and regionalism across South and Southeast Asia. Section III presents our findings across four thematic domains: strategic geography, great-power competition, security

challenges, and connectivity prospects. Section IV draws conclusions and identifies directions for future research.

II. Geopolitics and Regional Integration

Regional integration among Asian countries has been characterized by a complex political and institutional landscape infused by diverse governance systems, historical legacies, and geopolitical interests. Countries in South and Southeast Asia demonstrate a wide variety of political systems, ranging from monarchies to democratic regimes and from military-authoritarian governments to rule-of-law-based systems. For many years, cooperation and collaboration across the Bay of Bengal countries remained very limited due to colonial legacies, historical contexts of independence, ideological differences, and interstate tensions. Nonetheless, increasing globalization, trade, and economic interdependence have encouraged regional cooperation through bilateral agreements and multilateral organizations.⁵ The 1985 establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the 1967 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) represent two key institutional efforts aiming at promoting political dialogue and economic integration across countries within these regions.

Both SAARC and ASEAN pursue regional cooperation, yet their institutional formations differ significantly. SAARC focuses on formal institutional collaboration and economic cooperation. On the other hand, ASEAN maintains the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs and consensus-based decision-making.⁶ ASEAN has been successful in maintaining institutional cohesion and promoting economic cooperation, whereas SAARC has been coupled with institutional limitations while advancing regional integration.⁷ Differences in their institutional principles reflect broader variations in their interactions across the two regions. Despite the institutional differences in respective organizations, both SAARC and ASEAN have

served as important platforms for promoting regional dialogue and cooperation in these countries.

Besides SAARC and ASEAN, several other regional initiatives were formed to strengthen cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region. BIMSTEC, the BCIM Economic Corridor, and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) are notable frameworks designed to promote connectivity and economic cooperation between South and Southeast Asia.⁸ BIMSTEC's focus on economic, energy, and security issues has offered potential to the member states in the strategic Bay of Bengal region. Due to SAARC's institutional limitations, BIMSTEC's importance has received sustained attention in promoting deeper regional integration between the two regions.⁹

Studies elaborate on the potential for increased trade and connectivity between Bangladesh and Myanmar, indicating that improved bilateral relations and free-trade engagement could expand cross-border commerce through improved transport linkages, port accesses, and border-trade facilitation.¹⁰ This connectivity could increase the movement of agricultural commodities, fisheries products, natural resources, and manufactured goods across Bangladesh, Myanmar, eastern India, and southwestern China.¹¹ In this regard, comparative trade-flow analysis, along with estimates of trade opportunities under reduced or non-tariffs, could help evaluate prospective trade volumes. Improved inland infrastructure and maritime connectivity through deep seaports of the two countries could serve as a gateway from Eastern States of India to the Kunming region of China expanding the regional and international trade and commerce, promoting broader regional and economic cooperation.¹² The BCIM initiative aimed to improve transportation infrastructure and trade routes linking Southwestern China with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India, facilitating trade, investment, and economic development across the region with nearly three billion people.¹³ The Trans-Asian Road network has been a key initiative to connect the broader region within the framework of the

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and revival of the historic Silk Road, to strengthen cross-border connectivity, trade facilitation, and economic integration across Asia.¹⁴

Earlier studies on regional integration in the Bay of Bengal note Myanmar's potential role to be a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia.¹⁵ Scholars suggest that its closer engagement with South Asian regional institutions could facilitate broader economic and political integration between SAARC and ASEAN.¹⁶ Also, Myanmar's gradual democratic transition during the late 2010s was perceived as political liberalization and as a doorway to engage in regional cooperation.¹⁷ Abundant natural resources—natural gas, timber, fisheries, and agricultural land—combined with geographic proximity to the vast ocean trade routes in the Bay of Bengal strengthened the argument that it could play a strategic role in regional cooperation.¹⁸ India's growing interest in engaging with Myanmar with major policies—"Look East" and later "Act East"—suggest that India seeks to strengthen strategic and economic cooperation with ASEAN countries through Myanmar.¹⁹ India's initiative as the major regional power in South Asia indicates the strategic importance of Myanmar, a gateway connecting South and Southeast Asia in the broader Indo-Pacific region.²⁰

From a borderland and transitional networks study perspective, the Bangladesh-Myanmar border region receives special attention. The border has been a demarcation between South Asia and Southeast Asia, separating the "SAARC world" and the "ASEAN world."²¹ The border areas have historically received limited international attention, leading to "lazy assumptions" about the dynamics of the region.²² But the border area, due to its rugged mountainous terrain and proximity to the "Golden Triangle," has long been characterized by complex socio-economic interactions such as informal trade, drug trafficking, smuggling networks, and cross-border migration.^{3, 23} These dynamics combined with the Rohingya refugee crisis present significant

challenges for political and economic integration between the two countries.

Forced displacement of Rohingya populations from time to time has created significant political, economic, and security challenges for both countries.²⁴ Humanitarian and security concerns caused by the Rohingya refugee crisis have created major obstacles in the bilateral diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The Rohingya crisis has been a critical security issue influencing regional stability and engagement in the Bay of Bengal.²⁵

For many years, Bangladesh has been perceived as belonging to India's strategic sphere, while Myanmar has largely aligned with China, leading both countries to orient their foreign policies more closely with their respective neighbors, India and China.²⁶ At the same time, both India and China, as major regional powers, seek to project their influence in the region and maintain Bangladesh and Myanmar within their strategic orbit by providing diplomatic and political support at both national and international levels.²⁷ This partial yet controlling support from the two major powers has discouraged deeper bilateral cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar, often resulting in the two neighboring states prioritizing their relations with larger powers rather than strengthening cooperation with each other.²⁸ Recently, diplomatic and military cooperation between the United States and Bangladesh has become a matter of concern for both India and China, further highlighting the strategic importance of Bangladesh's geographic location in regional geopolitics.²⁹ The United States' motivation to expand its strategic presence in South Asia through closer engagement with Bangladesh in turn adds another layer of competition and strategic pressure for both India and China in the region.³⁰ Therefore, the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus could provide a solid foundation for enhancing regional connectivity and cooperation instead of competition, especially in the context of geopolitics and regional integration in the Bay of Bengal.

Despite geostrategic importance and academic interest in regional integration, broader geopolitical dynamics, and humanitarian challenges, relatively few studies examine the Bangladesh–Myanmar relationship within the broader geopolitical context of the Bay of Bengal. Much of the existing research focuses either on bilateral issues such as border disputes and the Rohingya crisis, or regional organizations such as SAARC and ASEAN separately. Thus, a crucial gap remains in understanding how geopolitical competition, security challenges, and regional institutional frameworks collectively influence the role of the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus within broader regional integration processes. In this study, we examine the role of geopolitics and regional integration in the Bay of Bengal, with a particular focus on Bangladesh–Myanmar relations. We explain how the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus can influence regional cooperation and connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia.

III. Strategic Geography, Great-Power Competition, Security Challenges, and Connectivity Prospects

At the Crossroads of South and Southeast Asia:

The Strategic Location of Bangladesh and Myanmar

Within the Bay of Bengal maritime setting—a central position in the geopolitical and economic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region with increasing maritime commerce and energy flows—both Bangladesh and Myanmar hold strategically significant positions along the northern and eastern littoral of the Bay. Their geographic proximity brings them to the intersection of South Asia and Southeast Asia, enabling them to perform as the potential gateways for cross-regional trade, commerce, and connectivity. Bangladesh’s major ports—Chittagong and Mongla—alongside Myanmar’s ports, including Yangon and Kyaukphyu, serve as important nodes in emerging regional logistics and maritime networks,³¹ connecting major sea lanes traversing the Bay and linking the Indian Ocean to the Strait of Malacca.³² These coastal infrastructures

have attracted regional and global actors looking to expand trade routes and enhance connectivity across the Bay.

In addition to their role in maritime commerce, both countries have high potential to benefit from the natural resources in the Bay of Bengal region, which contains significant offshore reserves of hydrocarbons—natural gas and oil—fishing grounds, and seabed minerals. These resources are believed to have developed through sediment deposits carried over thousands of years by major river systems originating in the Himalayas.³³ The peaceful resolution of the maritime boundary dispute between Bangladesh and Myanmar under the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in 2012 signified a critical step in reducing bilateral tensions in maritime domains and enabling both countries to conduct resource exploration.³⁴ Since then, the Bay of Bengal has been an emerging resource frontier with importance as a transit corridor.

However, the strategic potential of Bangladesh and Myanmar to connect South Asia and Southeast Asia is only partially realized. Limited infrastructural connection, cautious bilateral engagement, and broader geopolitical and security constraints—further intensified by the Rohingya refugee crisis—have hindered the full utilization of their strategic potential. As the trade corridors in the Bay of Bengal gain prominence within the Indo-Pacific maritime framework, the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus is more likely to play an increasingly important role in influencing the region’s evolving geopolitical and economic landscape. Nonetheless, the realization of the potential of that nexus is dependent on the competition and geopolitics between two regional giants—China and India.

Between Regional Giants:

India-China Competition and the Geopolitics in the Bay of Bengal

Within the broader Indo-Pacific strategic landscape, the Bay of Bengal has emerged as a critical focal point of geopolitical competition among

regional powers, namely India and China. Since both countries seek to expand their strategic and economic influence, they engage in various infrastructure and connectivity development projects in neighboring countries.³⁵ This growing competition has positioned Bangladesh and Myanmar at the center of these evolving dynamics due to their strategic geographic locations.

China's expansive presence in the Bay of Bengal is reflected in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through the BRI, China aims to enhance connectivity between mainland China and global markets, relying on infrastructure development and economic corridors. Both Bangladesh and Myanmar play central roles in China's regional connectivity strategy through major projects such as China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the development of the deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, along with infrastructure development and port development at Chittagong and Payra in Bangladesh. The proposed BCIM Economic corridor linking Kunming province of China with West Bengal province of India via Bangladesh and Myanmar suggests another key initiative for regional connectivity. These projects would provide China with direct access to the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. Thus, these projects would reduce China's reliance on maritime routes passing through the Strait of Malacca and strengthening its strategic presence in the Bay of Bengal region.³⁶ Besides the infrastructure investments, China's engagement with Bangladesh and Myanmar includes energy cooperation, pipeline projects, and economic assistance, further tightening its influence.

In response, India has increased its engagement with Myanmar through its "Act East Policy," focusing on strengthening economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia. Key connectivity initiatives like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project are set to enhance regional integration and improve connectivity between India's Northeastern States and Southeast Asian countries.³⁷ In Bangladesh, being a major bilateral and

strategic partner, India has increased its investment in various sectors, including energy, transportation, and port development. Due to the strategic location of Bangladesh, India has invested in several connectivity projects like the Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala rail line and the Maitree Setu (Friendship Bridge) on the Feni River to connect its Northeastern States. These projects in Bangladesh and Myanmar reflect India's broader efforts to counterbalance China's growing influence in the region.

Beyond its strategic balancing role, India possesses the potential to strengthen Bangladesh-Myanmar relations, especially in addressing issues like the Rohingya crisis. Due to its sustained diplomatic engagement with both countries, India—a close ally of Bangladesh and with increasing cooperation with Myanmar under its “Act East” policy and initiatives such as the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project—could play an influential role in creating a practical framework for trilateral cooperation. Such cooperation could gradually reduce mistrust and build confidence, leading to conditions conducive to Rohingya repatriation, and subsequently, to broader regional integration.³⁸

Within this competitive geopolitical landscape, both Bangladesh and Myanmar have emerged as increasingly important actors. Their strategic locations along the northern and eastern coasts of the Bay of Bengal, combined with their expanding economies and maritime infrastructure, have attracted significant attention from both India and China. Bangladesh has simultaneously maintained close economic and strategic ties with both China and India through infrastructure, energy, and port development projects, pursuing a strategy of balancing relations between the two major powers.³⁹ Similarly, Myanmar has navigated its complex relationships with both China and India.⁴⁰ Myanmar has been engaged with India, China and other regional actors in an effort to diversify its external relations and strategic dependence on China.

The balancing strategies of both countries are shaped by their domestic governance conditions. Bangladesh's centralized administrative structure within an evolving democratic framework characterized by intense party polarization, highly contested electoral processes, and occasional governance disruptions significantly influence the policy continuity and external engagement. In contrast, Myanmar's prolonged military dominance, particularly the institutionalized role of the Tatmadaw in political decision-making, has resulted in a constrained diplomacy, even in its strategic engagement with the regional powers.⁴¹ These domestic governance conditions of both countries, in turn, influence how Bangladesh and Myanmar engage with China and India.

The dynamic of external influences by China and India has significant implications for the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus. The competing strategic interests of China and India have often led both Bangladesh and Myanmar to prioritize relations with larger powers over deepening bilateral ties and cooperation with each other. This has produced limited bilateral engagement between Bangladesh and Myanmar despite full potential for geographic and economic integration. On the other hand, the involvement of external powers has created opportunities for domestic infrastructure, energy, and regional connectivity projects, potentially benefiting both countries and leading to economic integration across the Bay of Bengal. However, the realization of these opportunities depends on how Bangladesh and Myanmar navigate issues of domestic political instability, border security, and the Rohingya refugee crisis in the realm of geopolitical competition across the Bay of Bengal.

Borders of Insecurity:

The Rohingya Crisis and Transnational Security Challenges

Security dynamics along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border represent one of the most significant impediments to bilateral cooperation and broader regional integration in the Bay of Bengal. Despite their economic potential and geographic ties, the relationship between these

two countries has been characterized by humanitarian crises, cross-border insecurity, bilateral mistrust, and weak border governance. The Rohingya refugee crisis emerges as the most critical factor shaping their bilateral relations and regional stability.

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority group primarily living in Myanmar's Rakhine State, became stateless constitutionally following the 1982 Citizenship Law, which excluded them from the list of ethnic groups recognized in Myanmar.⁴² Periodic waves of violence and military persecution in Rakhine State have forced the Rohingya people to flee across the border into Bangladesh. The first known Rohingya refugee crossed the border in 1978, after the Ne Win government denied their citizenship rights in 1974.⁴³ With relief operations coordinated by the United Nations and UNHCR, both governments agreed to repatriate these émigrés in 1992.⁴⁴

However, the most significant influx occurred after the 2017 insurgency attack on a military patrol post in Arakan by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).⁴⁵ Consequently, the Myanmar military's torment and harassment of the Rohingya people led to mass exoduses crossing the border into Bangladesh. Currently, over a million Rohingya refugees are staying in various camps in the Cox's Bazar region. This mass displacement has created significant humanitarian, economic, and security burdens on Bangladesh, intensifying diplomatic tensions between these neighboring countries.⁴⁶

The prolonged large presence of refugees has created issues associated with social stability, resource constraints, and potential radicalization, complicating domestic governance and regional security cooperation. Since 2017, several bilateral discussions aimed at repatriating the Rohingya refugees have produced no successful result. Political mistrust, security concerns in Rakhine State, and the absence of sustainable conditions have posed persistent setbacks to the repatriation process. The Rohingya crisis thus continues to be the most

prominent impediment to building mutual trust between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Besides the Rohingya issue, the 267-kilometer Bangladesh–Myanmar border region is characterized by a number of transnational security challenges. The rugged and mountainous terrain is difficult to monitor effectively,⁴⁷ leaving this area susceptible to various smuggling groups and drug-trafficking networks. These geographic environments have historically facilitated illicit cross-border activities including narcotics smuggling, arms trafficking, and human trafficking. The proximity to the “Golden Triangle”—one of the world’s most notorious narcotics production zones, ranging across the Myanmar-Thailand-Laos border regions—further exacerbates these issues, rendering the Bangladesh–Myanmar borders a significant transit route for illicit drugs.³⁴ Most of the narcotics trafficking originates in Myanmar’s border regions linked to the Golden Triangle, whereas Bangladesh serves as a transit corridor through which drugs are transported toward domestic markets, northeastern India, and wider regional destinations in other South and Southeast Asian countries.⁴⁸

The criminal activities of transnational networks are intertwined with broader regional security dynamics, including insurgent activities in northeastern India and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh.⁴⁹ Weak institutional coordination and border security management across Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India have effectively hindered appropriate responses to these challenges, breeding mutual mistrust and lessening the scope for deeper political and economic cooperation.

Domestic political environments in both countries further complicate bilateral diplomacy. The military takeover of 2021 and the internal conflicts that have followed in Myanmar, as well as the international isolation of the ruling entity, have created further uncertainty regarding Myanmar’s ability to engage constructively in diplomatic discussions

and regional cooperation.⁵⁰ The domestic political events in Bangladesh, especially in 2024, have diverted the interim government's attention toward holding elections rather than continuing bilateral cooperation with Myanmar in resolving issues including the Rohingya crisis. For both countries, these issues pose significant challenges to political and economic cooperation, pushing them further apart rather than enabling them to utilize the full potential of their trade, infrastructure, and connectivity corridors.

Corridors of Opportunity: Trade, Infrastructure, and Connectivity Prospects

Historically, prior to the 1947 India-Pakistan partition and Myanmar's emergence as a nation-state in 1948, there had been economic cooperation and people's movement across the region from Kolkata to Chittagong to Rangoon. However, economic cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar has been limited, despite some institutional efforts including the General Trade Agreement of 1973 and border trade agreements in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵¹ Structural constraints such as limited infrastructure, poor transport systems, and Myanmar's earlier economic isolation have been major impediments to bilateral trade growth. Thus, the volumes of trade and economic activity between Bangladesh and Myanmar have remained modest relative to their engagements with other regional partners.

In recent years, however, attention on regional connectivity—especially from India's and China's perspectives—has opened new horizons of opportunity for economic cooperation between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Connectivity initiatives such as the BCIM Economic Corridor, incentivized by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and India's "Act East" policy to connect with Southeast Asian nations via Myanmar highlight the potential for integrating transportation networks across South and Southeast Asia. These frameworks are designed to facilitate the movement of goods, services, and investments across a vast region linking Southwestern China with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Eastern

India.⁵² Improved road, rail, and port connectivity could significantly increase the volume of cross-border trade and regional supply chains serving more than three billion people.

Maritime connectivity offers a key area of opportunity for economic integration. Ports in Bangladesh—Chittagong, Mongla, and Payra—and ports in Myanmar such as Yangon and Kyaukphyu represent complementary advantages for expanding regional trade networks. Improved port connectivity and shipping routes across the Bay of Bengal could further facilitate trade flows across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Yunnan Province of China. In this regard, the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus has the potential to serve as important transit hubs within the broader Indo-Pacific trade architecture.⁵³

Regional frameworks like BIMSTEC further strengthen the prospects for connectivity-driven cooperation between South and Southeast Asia.⁵⁴ With its focus on sectors like transport, energy, and trade facilitation, BIMSTEC offers an institutional platform to advance infrastructure development and economic integration across the Bay of Bengal region.⁵⁵ As members of BIMSTEC, both Bangladesh and Myanmar, due to their strategic geographic locations, could benefit from ongoing and proposed initiatives while strengthening regional connectivity.

Beyond infrastructure and trade, the Bay of Bengal's resource potential provides further opportunities for economic collaboration. Offshore energy resources—oil and gas—along with fisheries and maritime industries offer avenues for joint development and investment. The 2012 maritime boundary resolution between these two countries has created a more stable foundation for exploring these opportunities and enhancing cooperation in maritime economic sectors.⁵⁶

Economic cooperation and connectivity initiatives represent a viable pathway for strengthening the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus and laying

the foundation for broader regional integration in the Bay of Bengal. By leveraging their strategic geographic advantages and actively participating in regional frameworks like the BCIM and BIMSTEC, both Bangladesh and Myanmar possess the potential to transform existing networks into engines of economic growth and cross-regional integration. However, the prospects of infrastructure, trade, and connectivity are highly dependent on institutional pathways, which regional organizations could integrate and maintain among member states.

Institutional Pathways:

Regional Organizations and the Future of Bay of Bengal Integration

Institutional frameworks are critical, influencing the prospects for economic cooperation and political integration across the Bay of Bengal. Regional organizations such as SAARC, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and the BCIM Economic Corridor lay important foundations for bilateral and multilateral dialogue, coordination, and connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia, including cooperation over transboundary natural resources such as freshwater among the interconnected basin states.⁵⁷ At the juncture of this institutional landscape, the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus stands in a pivotal position for potentially bridging these regional frameworks.

SAARC has historically sought to encourage economic integration and regional development through initiatives like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA).⁵⁸ ASEAN has succeeded in promoting regional cooperation through its consensus-based decision-making and non-interference principles. The Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus has been noted as having potential for promoting economic cooperation and political integration across the broader Bay of Bengal region, due to Bangladesh's and Myanmar's membership and important roles in SAARC and ASEAN respectively. This potential could be further strengthened by confidence-building measures and incremental cooperation within the BIMSTEC and BCIM frameworks. The BCIM

economic corridor represents a crucial mechanism for advancing connectivity through infrastructure and trade facilitation, highlighting the increasing importance of transnational economic corridors toward regional integration.⁵⁹ At the same time, BIMSTEC has been a key institutional platform for linking South Asia and Southeast Asia, aiming to promote cooperation across nations through trade, connectivity, energy, and maritime security.⁶⁰ For both Bangladesh and Myanmar, the BCIM and BIMSTEC offer important frameworks for enhancing bilateral cooperation and subsequently engaging in resolving issues between them.

Initiatives like BCIM and BIMSTEC underline the potential for connectivity-driven development toward regional integration in the Bay of Bengal. However, progress for both has been slow, uneven, and constrained by geopolitical competition, security challenges, and institutional limitations. As discussed in earlier sections, competition and tensions emerging from regional great-power rivalry, the Rohingya crisis, and border security issues continue to limit the ability of Bangladesh and Myanmar to fully engage in cooperative initiatives. Overlapping regional organizations and differing institutional approaches often create fragmented regional architecture, thus affecting the effectiveness of collective action among member states.

Nonetheless, the institutional pathways are key to the future of regional integration in the Bay of Bengal. Strengthening multilateral cooperation through institutional frameworks like BIMSTEC and BCIM could help member states work through existing barriers and pursue greater connectivity, following ASEAN's experience of gradual integration. For Bangladesh and Myanmar, bilateral engagement within these frameworks provides an opportunity to overcome constraints and make a significant contribution to broader regional integration.

IV. Closing Thoughts

This study has examined geopolitics and regional integration in the Bay of Bengal through the lens of the Bangladesh–Myanmar relationship—a bilateral nexus that is strategically significant in theory and persistently underdeveloped in practice. Our analysis suggests that the explanation for this gap is not primarily geographic or economic but political and structural.

Bangladesh and Myanmar share natural advantages: complementary port infrastructure, a shared maritime boundary whose 2012 ITLOS resolution removed a long-standing irritant, and positions astride the key connective tissue between South Asia and Southeast Asia. These advantages have not been idle—both countries have attracted substantial investment through China’s Belt and Road Initiative and India’s Act East Policy. But this investment has largely served the strategic interests of external powers rather than deepening bilateral ties between Bangladesh and Myanmar themselves. Great-power competition, in this case, has produced infrastructure without integration.

The Rohingya refugee crisis remains the most consequential impediment. With over a million displaced persons in Bangladesh, no viable repatriation framework in place, and Myanmar’s Rakhine State now embedded in active conflict, the humanitarian emergency has become structurally chronic. It forecloses the bilateral confidence-building that any deeper cooperation would require. Myanmar’s 2021 military takeover and the civil war that has followed compound this problem by removing a coherent interlocutor on the Myanmar side and deepening the country’s international isolation.

Regional institutional frameworks—especially BIMSTEC—offer the most plausible pathway forward, precisely because they provide multilateral contexts in which bilateral friction can be partially managed. The BCIM Economic Corridor, by contrast, must be assessed

realistically: with India disengaged and China pursuing the bilateral CMEC, the BCIM's transformative potential has substantially diminished. Policymakers and scholars who treat it as a live mechanism should proceed with caution.

The broader implication is that regional integration in the Bay of Bengal cannot be driven by geographic logic or infrastructure investment alone. It requires political conditions—minimally, a reduction in the Rohingya impasse and some stabilization of Myanmar's domestic situation—that are currently absent. Until those conditions improve, the Bangladesh–Myanmar nexus will remain more a geographic fact than a geopolitical force. Future research would benefit from longitudinal assessment of BIMSTEC's effectiveness under these constraints, and from closer examination of how sub-state actors—border communities, port operators, civil society organizations—sustain functional cross-border relationships even when interstate politics stall.

Notes

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