



# IJMRRS

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**THE TUG OF SEA**  
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In the churning geopolitics of South Asia, a new maritime twist has arisen between Bangladesh and India, one that's more complex than merely oceanic borders - it's a knot of trade, strategy, soft power, and realigning loyalties in the Bay of Bengal. It all began with a thunderbolt statement by Bangladesh's interim Foreign Minister, Muhammad Yunus, who in his bold but diplomatically unseasoned language, proclaimed India to be "landlocked" in a strategic context and implied Bangladesh's role as a sea gatekeeper of India's Northeast implicitly.

Now, at first glance, that may be a boast from a small neighbour, but if scratched beneath the surface, it reflects a tectonic plate movement: Dhaka is no longer happy merely to be a passive buffer. With a rapidly booming economy and increasing clout, Bangladesh is indicating that it wishes to be a part of the bigger game of maritime diplomacy - and this time around, it is positioning itself increasingly within the China-Pakistan camp, of which India grew uncomfortable. The consequences were quick. India, traditionally the senior partner in Indo-Bangla ties, revoked a precious transshipment privilege it had granted Bangladesh via Indian ports, essentially strangling a critical logistics pipeline. This was accompanied by a subdued but firm imposition of trade barriers on more than \$770 million worth of Bangladeshi imports, further tightening the economic noose. In turn, Dhaka struck where it symbolically hurt - calling off a ₹179 crore contract for a naval tugboat with India's GRSE shipyard, with less economic but greater political symbolism.

What is interesting is that while the upper echelons are throwing diplomatic grenades at each other, the two countries' navies continue to maintain the veneer of cooperation. The *Joint Bongosagar naval exercise*, which was held earlier this year, is the pick of the lot like a forced handshake between estranged relatives at a family wedding. It's symbolic, but also necessary. India cannot afford to lose Bangladesh's sea access completely, particularly how much its northeastern connectivity initiatives rely on friendly port access. Bangladesh, however, wishes to project independence without alienating India, the largest of neighbours and still an important trade partner. Caught in the middle are the fishermen, literally. Both nations agreed to a cross-border humanitarian exchange this year, releasing 95 Indian fishermen and 90 Bangladeshi counterparts detained for accidental maritime trespasses. It was a subtle but powerful gesture - almost like both sides whispering, "We'll fight, but we'll still talk".

But here's the catch - Pakistan and China are observing all this with a bag of popcorn. On June 19, a new diplomatic alignment was completed in Kunming, China, as Bangladesh, China, and Pakistan signed an agreement to strengthen cooperation in commerce, defense, and importantly - maritime affairs. That's no coincidence. That's a well-planned move to realign power equations in the Bay of Bengal and South Asia at large. China has already invested billions in the infrastructure of Bangladesh under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), constructing ports such as Payra and Matarbari with the discreet strategy of a chess mastermind executing a checkmate. Pakistan's interest, while not openly maritime, is strategic: closer naval conversations and reciprocal visits with Bangladesh present Islamabad a mechanism to prod India from the east, something that had not been occurring this actively since the early 1970s. And amidst all this, Europe is also slipping into the equation - not gunships, but green diplomacy. Germany has just offered a €181 million package of aid to Bangladesh on sustainable energy and vocational training. This is not merely development - it is Europe making the message clear that Dhaka does not have to depend entirely on Beijing or Delhi if it wants to grow.

So, what we're witnessing isn't just a diplomatic tiff. It's the beginning of a potential realignment. Bangladesh is emerging as a swing state in South Asia's maritime politics - no longer India's baby brother, but a sovereign voice with options, alliances, and leverage. India, for its part, is recalibrating. The days of Big Brother diplomacy are over; instead, there is a more strategic, multi-layered effort that has firmness (curbs on imports) and cooperation (joint maneuvers). Both countries are highly interdependent. Economically, culturally, even geographically - they can't quite have a clean break. But the new era, characterised by strategic jostling in the Bay of Bengal, is something more than a sea fret. It's all about identity, influence, and the future of regional order. In an era where access to the ocean determines geopolitical clout, the Bengal waves suddenly sound a great deal like drums of change. Whether it's for harmony or heat, only time - and a couple of naval exercises more - would explain.