

## “BIMSTEC towards enhancing Myanmar’s National Maritime Interests”



### Importance of Bay of Bengal

The Bay of Bengal is the largest bay in the world, surrounded by the countries of Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka, and divided by the chain of islands of Andaman and Nicobar in the east. The Bay of Bengal covers about 2.2 million km<sup>2</sup>, where around one-fourth of the world’s population resides, and one-fourth of global marine trade flows, amounting to over 3 trillion USD in the total GDP of the regional countries. This makes the area a critical passage for important

energy lifelines. The Bay of Bengal is an area rich in natural resources and highly suitable for a Blue Economy. It serves as a connecting hinge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and holds strategic importance within the Indian Ocean Region. Approximately 6 million tons of fish and 50 trillion cubic feet of hydrocarbons could be harvested annually. It is also home to a diverse range of fish species, coral reefs, rivers, and biodiversity, making it a Large Marine Ecosystem (LME) region, ranked 64th in the world. Important ports in the region include Colombo, Chennai, Kolkata, Visakhapatnam, Chittagong, Mongla, and Yangon, making it a crucial area for food and energy security.

India is a leading power in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, aligned with its Neighborhood First Policy, Act East Policy, and the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative. This is evident through its proactive and assertive maritime strategies in the Bay of Bengal. The Kaladan project and Sittwe port are strategically important for India, as they would provide a maritime route connecting India's landlocked Northeast with Southeast Asia. The strategic importance of this region is also critical for China, with the Kyauk Phyu Port and fuel pipeline project being key to its fuel imports. Large oil tankers from the Middle East pass through the Bay of Bengal daily to meet China's energy needs. As of today, a total of 316 crude oil tankers have entered the Kyauk Phyu and Ma-De Deep Sea Port in Rakhine State.

Bangladesh is primarily focused on the sustainable exploitation of the Bay of Bengal to serve its national interests and social development through the Blue Economy. As a result, the Bay of Bengal is now referred to as the "Collective Destiny" of the region. The interactions within the bay are shaped not only by geographical conditions, religion, trade, and commerce, but also by the natural forces that offer opportunities to overcome evolving challenges and emerging threats. These interactions emphasize the strength of unity and mutual understanding among the nations in the region.

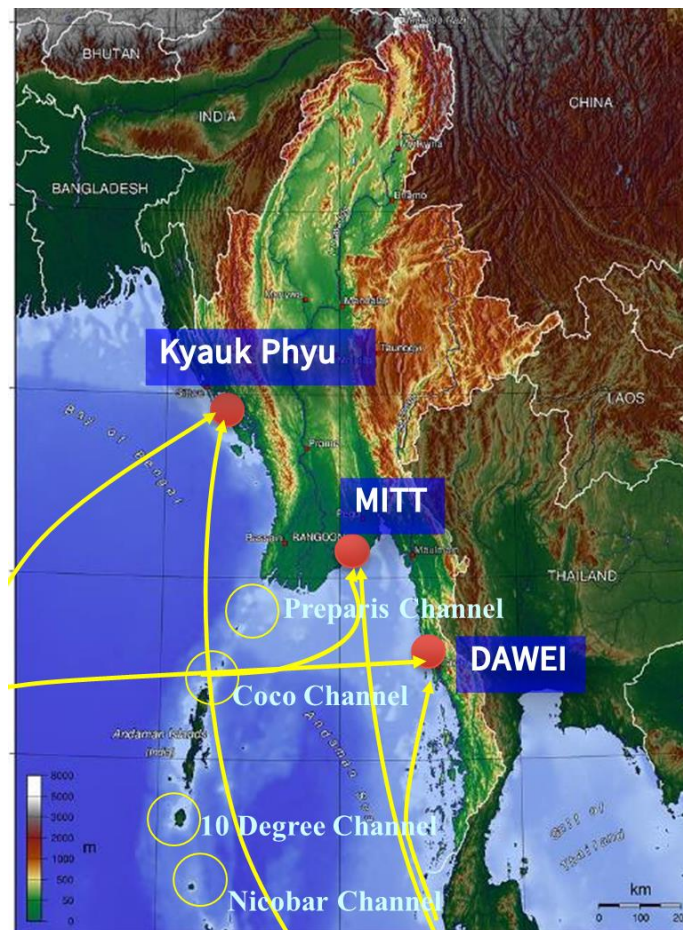
The regional countries in the Bay of Bengal are experiencing high growth rates and play a critical role between emerging India and rising China. India, in particular, is implementing a maritime strategy that positions it as a security provider for regional stability, especially in the context of evolving threats to human security. The Bay of Bengal is of significant importance to India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar due to its strategic sea lanes, natural resources, energy sector, and oil and fuel exploitation. This region also sees a mix of conflict, competition, and cooperation under political, military, and economic strategies, particularly around the unresolved grey areas at the tri-junction of Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India.

### **Myanmar Waters in the Bay of Bengal**

Myanmar is a country with a vast coastline, facing the Andaman Sea to the south and the northeastern part of the Bay of Bengal. The Indo-China Peninsula is divided into two by Myanmar's geographical position. To the east lies the Pacific Ocean and the ASEAN countries, while to the west is the Indian Ocean, including South Asia, effectively dividing the two major oceans and regions. Alternatively, Myanmar can be seen as a land bridge connecting these two oceans and regions. Kyauk Phyu port, Dawei port, and Thilawa Deep Sea Port, located along a coastline of 1,260 nautical miles and covering waters spanning 144,912 square miles, form the rim of the Indian Ocean. These ports are geographically significant and hold great potential as transit hubs for the development of regional trade.

Moreover, Myanmar has met several key requirements to become a major player in maritime trade in the region. For example, it has a long coastline with important ports, which could be linked to China's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road plans, positioning them as regional business hubs. Kyauk Phyu Port is the most strategically located port within the Bay of Bengal, among Myanmar's natural ports, and is the closest to China's Yunnan province. Myanmar is connected to the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal by three main navigational channels: the

Preparis Channel, the Ten Degree Channel (between the Andaman and Nicobar Islands), and the Great Channel (between Great Nicobar and Sumatra Islands). As a result, Myanmar's deep-sea ports and port cities are well-positioned to facilitate maritime traffic, with vessels passing through the Indian Ocean to Myanmar via either the Arabian Sea–Sri Lanka waterway or the Malacca Strait.



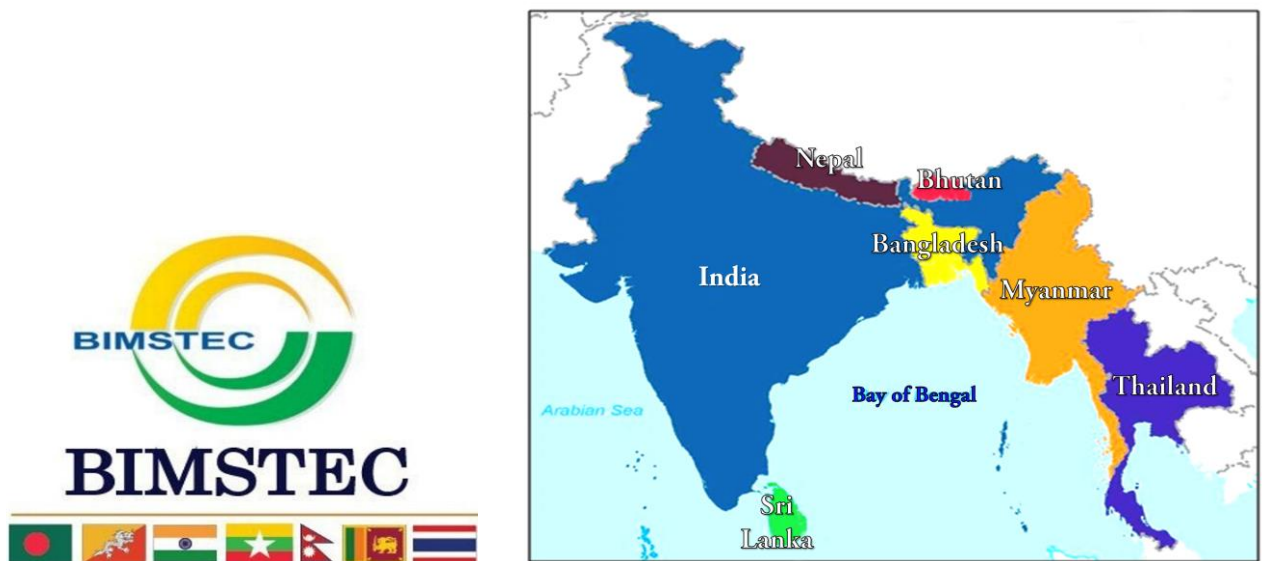
*Four Vital Sea Lanes of Myanmar*

### **Establishment of BIMSTEC...**

In 1997, Bangladesh India Sri Lanka Thailand Economic Cooperation - BIST-EC was established by the Bangkok Declaration. After Myanmar became a member at the special ministerial meeting held in 1997, the name was changed to Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC). Then, Bhutan and Nepal became members at the 6<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC Foreign Ministerial meeting held in 2004 and the name of organization was changed to the



Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) at the first summit of BIMSTEC.



*Geographical Layout of BIMSTEC Countries*

The BIMSTEC Charter has been endorsed and approved by the heads of member countries, and BIMSTEC is an organization with legal personality, operating based on established rules and regulations. Cooperation within BIMSTEC is grounded in the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs, non-aggression, peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and mutual benefit. It is also stipulated that all decisions within BIMSTEC shall be made by consensus. The BIMSTEC chairmanship rotates among member countries, and Myanmar has held the position of chair twice, with Thailand currently in charge.

BIMSTEC marked its 27<sup>th</sup> anniversary on June 6, 2024 and the leaders of all BIMSTEC member States sent congratulatory messages and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the Chairman of State Administration Council, mentioned in his excellency's message as **"I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate all Member States for the collective efforts exerted under the BIMSTEC framework in addressing various challenges. I believe that our solidarity and systematic cooperation, guided by the BIMSTEC Charter. I wish BIMSTEC to be a stronger and more effective**

organization and to have every success in future endeavors of promoting the socioeconomic livelihoods of the peoples in the Bay of Bengal Region.” And he spotlighted the importance of BIMSTEC in the region.

### **The 4<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs' Meeting Towards Enhancing Regional Cooperation**

Myanmar successfully hosted the 4<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs' Meeting from July 24 to 26, 2024. National security chiefs from member countries participated in the meeting, where they had constructive discussions on several key issues: combating drug-related challenges; maritime security and cybersecurity threats; improving information sharing across relevant security sectors; the current security situation in the region; preparing for potential security challenges; and identifying effective methods for addressing these issues.





*Memorable Group Photo of State Administration Council Chairman, Prime Minister, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and National Security Chiefs of BIMSTEC Member States*

Successfully hosting the event not only strengthens the legitimacy of the State Administration Council government but also enhances cooperation with regional countries in the political, economic, and security sectors. The meeting also provided an opportunity to discuss approaches for jointly combating armed conflicts and drug smuggling in the border areas. Representatives from Thailand, Bangladesh, and India, who are indeed the neighboring countries of Myanmar, participated in the discussions





*Holding the 4<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs' Meeting*

The entire BIMSTEC region has a population of 1.8 billion and it has been accounted for 22 percent of the world's population. The combined GDP of the BIMSTEC countries is over 3.6 trillion USD. Although BIMSTEC is different from other organizations as it was established by countries with different culture, language and lifestyle, all member countries are actively participating in economic, social science and technology sectors for their mutual benefits as the saying goes, **“Unity is Strength”**. BIMSTEC member countries include countries that are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as well as countries that are members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). And therefore, BIMSTEC can also be assumed as a connecting bridge of the two major associations in the region.





*Group Photo of National Security Chiefs of BIMSTEC Member States*

### **Maritime Security Sector of BIMSTEC**

At the BIMSTEC 4<sup>th</sup> Summit in 2018, Indian Prime Minister Modi highlighted the importance of the maritime sector for socio-economic development and the future food security of the region and the importance of the Bay of Bengal as **“our region's geographic location links global maritime trade routes and the Blue Economy is of particular importance to all of our economies.”** Therefore, according to the importance of the role of maritime security in the Bay of Bengal, the role of the National Security Chiefs has included the maritime security sector and discussed and addressed it extensively.

As the Bay of Bengal is directly adjacent to the five BIMSTEC member countries and provides access to the two remaining landlocked countries, Bhutan and Nepal, it offers opportunities to connect and create multi-sectoral cooperation across the entire Indian Ocean region, positioning the Bay of Bengal as the "Heart of BIMSTEC." While the Bay of Bengal has many opportunities for socio-economic development for BIMSTEC member countries, many conventional and non-conventional threats in there are also needed to be faced and overcome together.

Port and trade routes security, fisheries protection and natural disaster management processes are included in coping with that. Efforts are being made to promote the maritime security sector, which is directly or indirectly supporting all seven areas of cooperation within the BIMSTEC organization, beyond normal security measures and into proactive cooperation activities that include diplomacy.



*Photo of 3rd Meeting of the Expert Group on Maritime Security Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal*



*Myanmar-India Navy Ships conducting Coordinated Patrol in the Bay of Bengal*

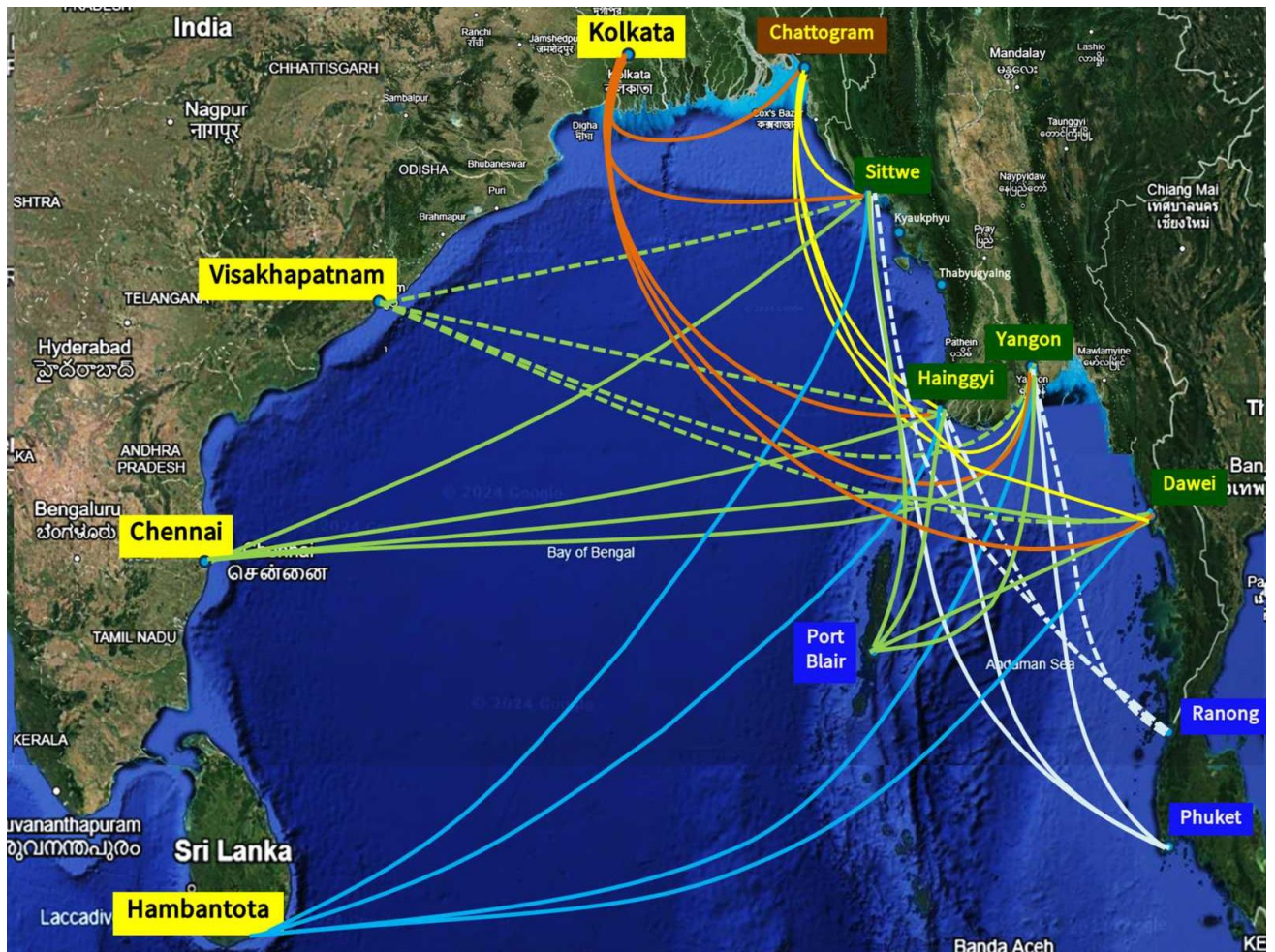
BIMSTEC is indeed elevating trade, investment and connectivity among member countries which leads to promoting regional economic development. In doing so, the Maritime Transport Agreement (MTA) would be able to sign at the BIMSTEC summit to be held in the near future and there would be good opportunities for mutual trade between the ports of member countries, and the flow of goods in the region would be rapidly improved by this agreement. Maritime

trade among the member countries of the region, as well as opportunities to trade goods through Myanmar to the ASEAN countries and Asian countries, would also be flourished by centrally passing through the Bay of Bengal. Along with the development of maritime trade routes, the roles of navies in each respective country for maritime security would also become more important. Today, Myanmar Navy together with the navies of BIMSTEC countries are actively cooperating in Navy To Navy Staff Talks, CORPAT, Maritime Security Conclave, Maritime Security Exercise and other maritime security issues in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea within the Indian Ocean.

### **BIMSTEC Towards Myanmar's National Maritime Interests**

Myanmar has a great and solid basic for economic development through maritime trade as if the abundance of its natural resources, a reasonable population ratio, a long coastline and good ports can be used effectively. There are many fish resources, natural gas resources, also numerous highly valuable mineral resources beneath the shallow seabed of Myanmar together with great opportunities like presence of good ports like Kyauk Phyu and Dawei Deep Sea Port and being close to the world's trade routes. Moreover, there are very beautiful and attractive islands, underwater coral reefs, and many scuba diving sites with amazing underwater scenery for maritime or nautical tourism, so-called “smokeless industry”. Although the sea provides opportunities and interests for the respective countries, the waterways can become vulnerable entrances that can be easily penetrated by force in the absence of properly established defense measures for maritime security.





*Maritime Trade Routes between Regional Ports and Myanmar Ports*

As everything that happens in the Bay of Bengal impacts Myanmar's seas, it is closely related to the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal. Therefore, it is crucial to seize the opportunity provided by the geographical advantage of being adjacent to both the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, which connect Asia and South Asia. Additionally, Myanmar serves as a land bridge, acting as an intermediary between ASEAN and BIMSTEC countries. To further develop the maritime trade sector, regional maritime networks must be connected, enabling communication between the ports of regional countries. This can be achieved by upgrading key port cities such as Sittwe and Kyauk Phyu on the Rakhine coast, Patheingyi and Yangon in the Delta region, and Mawlamyine, Dawei, Myeik, and Kawthaung on the Tanintharyi coast. Such development will reduce dependence on border trade, which is currently limited by security restrictions.

Today, eastern coast ports of India such as Visakhapatnam, Kolkata and Chennai ports; Chittagong port of Bangladesh; Hanbantota port of Sri Lanka; Yangon, Patheingyi and Sittwe ports of Myanmar could be connected as a route for coastal shipping sector which all countries are the members of BIMSTEC in the Bay of Bengal. Although international maritime trades are conducted under the regulations of International Maritime Organization (IMO), Coastal Shipping Agreement is much simpler than the process of IMO which can be negotiated by bilateral consensus and new coastal maritime trade routes will be implemented quickly and simply. Therefore, **a wish for Myanmar Navy, Myanmar Coast Guard and Maritime Police to actively involve in the maritime security sector while safeguarding maritime interests of the Bay of Bengal, which is connected to the Myanmar Sea together with the cooperation of BIMSTEC and to contribute to Myanmar's national maritime interests by a guarantee for a safe and secure maritime domain.**

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