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## **Introduction: Fostering Cooperation to Connect the Bay of Bengal Region**

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### **Abstract**

Despite being at the heart of what is now called the Indo-Pacific region, the Bay of Bengal has long been more of a geo-economic divider than a link between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. From India and Sri Lanka to Indonesia's Sumatra and from the Ganges and Irrawaddy deltas to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, this is a geography marked by abysmal levels of connectivity, missed economic opportunities, and rising security risks. This introduction addresses the sources of these gaps, identifies solutions to mitigate challenges and proposes ways to cooperatively enhance connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region.

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In its most narrow scientific definition, the Bay of Bengal includes the littoral states of Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia. Yet in a wider environmental and economic sense, any development in the Bay of Bengal is also intertwined with the destinies of the Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan, the Maldivian archipelago and the Malacca Strait's funnel state of Malaysia. Over two billion people live in and around this region which has recently seen unprecedented economic growth but also persistent challenges to sustainable development, including devastating cyclones and military conflicts.

From the broadest geostrategic lens, the Bay of Bengal is also a constituent of the Eastern Indian Ocean which connects to the Pacific Ocean via the neighbouring South China Sea and the twelve seas and two gulfs of the East Indian Archipelago, mostly part of Indonesian waters. This wider space is assuming increasing centrality as the world's demographic and geo-economic weight shifts to the East, predominantly shaped by the economic and security interests of India, China, Japan, and other Asian actors but also those of other extra-regional actors, including the United States, Europe, Russia, and Australia.

### Reviving connectivity: Opportunities and risks

The Bay of Bengal was once one of the most connected, integrated regions of the world, featuring an enviable density of interactions and exchanges. Until the mid-20th century, it was the hub of a thriving Indian Ocean region, knit together through dense economic, social, and political interdependencies (Amrith, 2015). The Bay of Bengal was then a pivotal part of global supply chains, a period when the prosperity of a South-eastern Indian city like Madras was deeply tied dependent on that of its intra-regional peers such as Calcutta or Rangoon. The Bay of Bengal was then a region in its own right, featuring high levels of intra-regional connectivity, as well as inter-regional connectivity with the rest of the Indian Ocean

and Asia. This economic centrality naturally found geopolitical expression in the visions of "one Asia" that drove the developmental and foreign policy visions of regional leaders like Nehru in the 1950s (Singh, 2011). Of the five co-sponsors of the Bandung Conference, four were leaders of Bay of Bengal countries: Jawaharlal Nehru (India), Sukarno (Indonesia), U Nu (Burma), and John Kotelawala (Ceylon).

Today, however, the contrasting reality is rather different and grim. Whether it is trade or transportation, people to people exchanges, or cooperative institutions and frameworks, the Bay of Bengal continues to feature deep divides and formidable barriers. From New Delhi it is often still faster and cheaper to ship a container all the way to Singapore than to the geographically closer cities of Dhaka or Yangon. While one of South Asia's once busiest railway routes (Kolkata-Dhaka) was restarted in 2008, after 43 years, dozens of links between India and Bangladesh remain inactive (Xavier, 2018).

The same barriers are also apparent in today's limited air connectivity, contrasting with the 1970s when the Northern Sri Lankan city of Jaffna had direct flight connections to several South Indian cities and one could also fly from Burma's Sittwe across to Chittagong, in Southern Bangladesh. Human mobility poses a further challenge to intra-regional connectivity: for example, it is easier for a citizen of China to get visas for countries in the Bay of Bengal region than for most people from *within* the region to cross borders to visit the neighbouring country (Xavier & Sinha, 2020). By most definitions of integration and criteria of connectivity, the last few decades have eroded the reality of the Bay of Bengal as a distinct region.

These barriers to mobility reflect almost half a century of economic and strategic divergence between the states of the Bay of Bengal, from the late 1950s until the 1990s. For decades, India found refuge in the comfort of economic insulation and subcontinental isolation, drifting apart from the rest of Asia. The Western and security-oriented focus on

Pakistan also led India to neglect its eastern borderlands, including the landlocked North-eastern states. During much of the late Cold War period, after the 1970s, India perceived the Bay of Bengal as a buffer region separating the subcontinent from the US-centric security alliances and increasingly China-centric economic developments to the east, in Indochina and Southeast Asia. The idea of regional cooperation and integration in South Asia, which made a belated institutional appearance in the 1980s in the form of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), was thus naturally a controlled experiment limited to the Indian subcontinent.

India's economic opening after 1991 was the precondition for change, leading New Delhi to adopt the Look East policy and a variety of new sectoral, dialogue, and summit partnerships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The most visible expression of this economic reorientation towards the Bay of Bengal came with the formation of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 1997. Founded in Bangkok and initially premised as a sub-regional initiative, BIMSTEC was more of an inter-regional initiative, seeking to transform the Bay of Bengal into a bridge between the two geo-economic poles of South and Southeast Asia. On the other hand, in tandem with a strong economic embrace of China, Myanmar's entry into ASEAN in 1997 reflected the military regime's priority towards Southeast Asia. BIMSTEC was meant to balance that with a Westwards focus to the subcontinent, but this met with limited success.

Twenty five years later, the idea of a connected and cooperative Bay of Bengal as a pivot between South and Southeast Asia remains to be fulfilled. As a regional organization, BIMSTEC remains weak, understaffed and unable to deliver on the promise of a free trade agreement that all members committed to back in 2004. And despite cyclical military rule and political strife, Myanmar's economic

and strategic outlook has determinedly shifted eastwards, towards the East Asian growth engines and the Southeast Asian regional integration process.

While progress since the late 1990s has thus been limited, there are a few positive trends emerging with the promise to correct the Bay of Bengal's connectivity gap. The last few years have seen a flurry of new initiatives. They are creating new interdependencies and throwing up opportunities to accelerate integration but, at the same time, they are also increasing new tensions and risks. Witnessing a moment of convergence, driven by economic and geostrategic interests, the region's states and other stakeholders are finding ways to enhance interdependence (CUTS International, 2019).

For instance, regional transport infrastructure is witnessing rapid development, with a record number of new deep sea ports being planned or established along the littoral, including in India (Paradip and Kamarajar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota, Colombo), Bangladesh (Matarbari), Myanmar (Sittwe, Kyaukphyu, Dawei), Thailand (Ranong) and Indonesia (Sabang). States are also investing in new road, rail and air linkages with their neighbours, including under the Asian Development Bank's initiative for South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC). The region's large consumer markets and consistent growth rates, most notably in India and Bangladesh, are driving new demands to link up the Bay of Bengal through new supply chains with Southeast and East Asia. This positive trend towards connectivity is bringing countries closer together, but it also brings up the challenge of coordination to explore these opportunities and expand cooperation. The consequent policy paradox is clear: *while the Bay of Bengal is seeing rising levels of physical infrastructure connectivity, this has not been commensurately matched by new cooperative habits. There is a manifest lack of cooperative mechanisms to manage and sustain regional connectivity.*

While the deficit of such collective governance instruments may decrease developmental benefits, growing regional interdependencies also generate risks and costs that are less visible. This is a negative side-effect of growing connectivity that is often neglected but warrants urgent attention. New areas of friction and tension are emerging as the Bay of Bengal shrinks as a geo-economic, cultural, and political space. Competition and conflict over resources will pose an added burden if not addressed jointly. The rising complexity and disruptive effects of such transnational challenges require cooperative solutions.

Climate change is having a disproportionate destabilizing impact on the region, affecting weather patterns, forcing population displacement and aggravating the destructive impact of cyclones. Political conflicts have generated refugee waves, as most recently seen with the Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The lack of coordinated action between different naval forces and coast guards continues to enable various transnational criminal networks to operate across the Bay of Bengal, from illegal fishing to the trafficking of people, narcotics, and weapons (Stable Seas, 2020). *The gap between rising connectivity initiatives and absent cooperation habits risks slowing down the developmental convergence for the entire region, with negative consequences for the rest of Asia.*

This reports addresses these two contrasting facets of growing interdependence in the Bay of Bengal region. It reviews both the positive (opportunity) and negative (risk) dimensions of rising connectivity and suggests ways to address them cooperatively, between different states and institutions that shape the region's rapidly changing reality.

## Proliferation of connectivity initiatives

Reducing the connectivity-cooperation gap in the Bay of Bengal is particularly urgent now that the region is becoming the site of growing global attention and competition. The

proliferation of connectivity initiatives risks turning into a policy burden for countries whose state capacity remains limited and increasingly exposed to external pressures. Sri Lanka's systemic collapse in 2022 serves as an apt reminder of how perennial state fragility poses a major threat for countries navigating the turbulent regional context, including rising expectations demanding difficult strategic choices. Other countries in the Bay of Bengal region, including Myanmar and Bangladesh, are among Asia's worst performers on economic, political or security resilience, with frail governance frameworks (OECD, 2022).

This institutional fragility is particularly challenging as countries in the region are witnessing a rapid change, moving from the past problem of scarcity to a new problem of plenty: Which of the many connectivity initiatives to engage, and with what priority and on what terms? How to scrutinize, implement, and sustain infrastructure projects with external assistance even while not falling into a debt trap or other forms of dependency that impinge on sovereignty? How to coordinate across different, often also competing bilateral, regional, and multilateral connectivity initiatives?

First, at the country- and bilateral level, there is a flurry of new initiatives, including the India-Bangladesh connectivity partnership, or the modernization of Sri Lanka's port sector. India, Bangladesh, and Thailand have all realized the importance of interdependence, devoting growing priority and resources to foster regionalism. New Delhi has reoriented its Neighbourhood First policy eastwards, manifest in its developmental focus on the Northeast region, as well as new lines of credit and other economic instruments to support Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.

The landlocked Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan have prioritized energy and transportation links with the Bay of Bengal littoral to stimulate exports and access the ASEAN markets. Despite the coup in 2021, Myanmar's military regime has continued

to push for more connectivity projects with India, including the India-Myanmar-Thailand highway or the Kaladan multi-modal project. And Thailand is betting on a land bridge and a new deep sea port on the Andaman Sea to foster trade opportunities between Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

Second, at the regional level, there are also several new developments, including the revitalization of BIMSTEC and its growing focus on regional connectivity since 2016. The organization has streamlined and reduced the number of its focus areas from 14 to 7, adopted a new charter and held more regular summits, and adopted a more realistic and practical agenda of cooperation. The 2022 BIMSTEC Masterplan for Transport Connectivity reflects the regional focus on the fundamentals of upgrading physical infrastructure before seeking to reach higher hanging fruits such as a free trade agreement. BIMSTEC has also been making progress on developing a sub-regional power grid and it has served as an important socialization platform for officials from across the region to share best practices and institutional expertise on a wide range of sectors, from disaster management to tourism and cybersecurity.

Third, and most importantly, there is a new extra-regional dimension to connectivity in the Bay of Bengal. Following their economic opening, countries have diversified their trade baskets and investment partnerships. Their growing consumer markets are attracting a variety of global stakeholders. And the rise of Sino-American tensions in Asia has increased the Bay of Bengal's strategic importance, as a site for economic power projection and strategic influence (Raja Mohan, 2020). Such centrality was last seen during World War II, albeit then with a military focus and largely destructive effects. Today, *the Bay of Bengal is the object of growing economic attention, but that will only translate into beneficial impact if states in the region are able to make informed, independent, and strategic choices.*

China's Belt and Road Initiative had the most important extra-regional role in spurring the

agenda of growth and connectivity in the Bay of Bengal. Driven by massive investments in new trade and infrastructure initiatives that connect China's hinterland to the Eastern Indian Ocean, Beijing has persistently delivered where many others had failed in the past. Wherever China found obstacles to connect with the Bay of Bengal, for example via an economic corridor from Yunnan to Bangladesh via Myanmar and India (the BCIM corridor), it developed alternatives, especially by bypassing India. The record is mixed, as apparent in the ongoing debate about the causes of Sri Lanka's debt, but it is now clear the BRI played a catalyst role in accelerating connectivity in the Bay of Bengal.

This encouraged several other extra-regional players to deepen their own engagement. Japan has been pushing its vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific through an emphasis on what it calls "quality infrastructure." With Bangladesh and like-minded partners, Tokyo has pursued the vision of BIG-B (The Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt), which is being implemented since 2014 with support from Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and The Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). Japanese investments in the transportation sector span the entire Bay of Bengal littoral, including the construction of the first deep sea port at Matarbari, in Bangladesh, and various economic initiatives to enhance connectivity through new supply chains between India, Bangladesh, and the Southeast and East Asian manufacturing hubs.

Tokyo has also coordinated its Bay of Bengal engagement with India, Australia, and the United States. The Quad has featured exercises on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the Eastern Indian Ocean, as well as discussions on infrastructure financing and supply chains. The United States has also been deepening its engagement with the Bay of Bengal, most notably through new USAID-financed development and connectivity initiatives focused on Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.



The region's new geostrategic and economic importance has also attracted the attention of other, traditionally less visible actors. In 2022, Australia announced a new financial programme to foster connectivity in the Eastern Indian Ocean focused on maritime shipping, disaster resilience, and information sharing. And guided by the European Union's new Indo-Pacific strategy, the European Investment Bank is also now on the lookout for strategically salient projects in the region, mostly focused on Bangladesh and the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) sub-region.

All these new, extra-regional and bilateral connectivity engagements are developing in parallel to similar efforts by international financial institutions and multilateral groupings. The Asian Development Bank has played a pioneering role with the SASEC initiative, since 2001. The World Bank, traditionally focused on encouraging South Asia's Western connectivity initiatives between India and Pakistan, has also been redirecting its efforts eastwards. And most recently, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has also entered the Bay of Bengal race to connect South and Southeast Asia.

## Lagging capacity and cooperation

The recent financial collapse of Sri Lanka does not augur well for other states in the region seeking to navigate this increasingly competitive context of contending connectivity initiatives. *A more crowded region with competitive connectivity pressures from extra-regional powers will further stress state capacity and institutional resilience to make and enforce strategic choices for sustainable development.*

As with the resource curse for many African countries in the past, which stifled their developmental prospects after the focus on oil and other natural resources, states in the Bay of Bengal risk turning into the victims of an analogous connectivity curse. Burdened by external pressures to align with one or the other connectivity initiative, states have often

succumbed to policy paralysis or top-down, short-sighted political decisions. Lack of technical expertise and eroding institutional and technocratic autonomy have all led to missed opportunities and new risks, exposing the region's systemic frailties.

With rising competition between different connectivity initiatives, especially between China and the Indo-Pacific powers, there are growing concerns about conflict over natural resources, securitization of sea lines of communication, and environmental sustainability. These Bay of Bengal commons now risk being depleted or fragmented, reducing the prospects of stability and welfare in the region.

*Connectivity will not have the desired developmental and stabilizing effects in the Bay of Bengal unless there are commensurate cooperative and coordination mechanisms between different states and extra-regional stakeholders. Yet this gap is growing by the day, leaving the regional commons unregulated and ungoverned.*

Habits of cooperation remain largely absent from this region, creating a vacuum for competition and growing unilateral behaviour. Institutionally, organizations like BIMSTEC remain weak and under-resourced to address these transnational challenges. From India and Sri Lanka up to Thailand and Indonesia, the maritime space of the Bay of Bengal and Eastern Indian Ocean continues to lack basic governance mechanisms. *Whether to regulate fishing and shipping, to respond to non-traditional security challenges such as refugee flows or natural disasters, or to coordinate infrastructure financing in ports or underwater sea cables, the cooperation deficit is rising.*

## Geography, infrastructure and the regional commons

This report is the outcome of a two-year-long research project under the Sambandh Initiative of Regional Connectivity at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress in New Delhi.

The main objective was to generate actionable policy recommendations, based on evidence-based research, to bridge the Bay of Bengal's connectivity gap in different sectors through cooperative mechanisms. By engaging experts principally located in this region through research workshops and policy dialogues, the project also aimed at building capacity and habits of collaboration between scholars in South and Southeast Asia.

We asked contributing experts to focus on one sectoral issue in the Bay of Bengal region that reflects a cooperation deficit. Each brief thus focuses on three dimensions—1) identify a specific, sectoral connectivity and cooperation gap in the region and describe its implications for the region; 2) set a policy target or objective within a specific time horizon to correct this cooperative deficit; and 3) recommend a policy path with actionable steps towards achieving that objective. We organized the nine papers in three clusters: leveraging geographic location, building transportation and regulatory infrastructure, and managing the region's non-traditional commons.

The first set of three papers explores ways for the Bay of Bengal to reclaim its past centrality by leveraging its geography. First, at the broadest level, how can the region play a more prominent role in a rapidly changing global context? Chapter 2 by Amitendu Palit offers a macro picture, situating the Bay of Bengal in an increasingly competitive geo-economic environment. He argues that the Bay of Bengal could a) emerge as a new regional hub for global supply chains that are in the process of restructuring and reshoring; b) that the regional organization BIMSTEC should play a central role in anchoring these new regional supply chains; and c) that their implementation should rely on significant investment from global financing partnerships, including from India, Japan, and Australia.

Second, how can the Bay of Bengal region correct its internal connectivity gaps? Rather than an impediment, can its geographic diversity be transformed into strength?

Chapter 3 by Pritam Banerjee focuses on this intra-regional dimension, arguing that the Bay of Bengal requires a collaborative approach between border, transport, and regulatory operations to link up the hinterland's economic clusters to the coastal areas and Indian Ocean's sea lines of communication. Banerjee recommends the establishment of Highly Facilitated Trade Corridors to bridge this gap, with a strategic and holistic approach to multi-modal transportation and communication.

A third, an even closer geographic lens shows that the Bay of Bengal is also composed of multiple sub-regions. Such clusters offer distinct comparative advantages but their political economies often also transcend political borders. In Chapter 4, Shahidul Haque focuses on the most significant case of the BBIN sub-region, with special emphasis on India's North-eastern states. Haque explains why it is in Bangladesh's developmental interest to leverage its location as a maritime link to these landlocked areas and proposes policies to enhance such sub-regional connectivity between East South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific.

The report's second section then moves on to the critical challenge of building truly transnational and regional infrastructure to correct the inter-country connectivity gaps. This requires a dual focus on "hard" or physical infrastructure—from ports to roads, rail and digital—as well as on the "soft" or regulatory infrastructure, including joint standards and the digital realm. Free trade agreements, for example, have proven largely futile when not matched by improvements in trade facilitation, especially through transportation, logistics, and regulatory cooperation. Building the Bay of Bengal's infrastructure is thus a fundamental precondition to lock in patterns of interdependence and integration.

Chapter 5 by Riya Sinha and chapter 6 by Chathumi Kavirathna focus on the "hard" dimensions of railways and ports respectively. Kavirathna makes the economic case for more strategizing and cooperation on developing

trans-shipment hubs in the Bay of Bengal. Amidst rising competition between major ports, her case studies suggest that there is significant potential to develop a hub and spoke system with smaller ports and coastal shipping feeding into global maritime routes.

Sinha, on the other hand, argues in chapter 5 that the region's developmental ambitions, including through export-oriented manufacturing hubs, will also rely on a rail route to the Southeast Asian markets and beyond. Railways are the last, missing transportation link to connect South and Southeast Asia over land. While the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway (IMT) is making slow but steady progress, Riya Sinha shows that it must be complemented with a railway link, especially for India and Bangladesh to truly act East.

Chapter 7 by Subhashini Abeysinghe and Hasna Munas focuses on the “soft” dimension of connectivity infrastructure. They show how rather than large and complex tariff-focused agreements, small and targeted policy initiatives can work wonders to enhance economic interdependence in the Bay of Bengal region. Their case study on processed food exports from Sri Lanka to India examines the benefits of mutual recognition agreements in testing and standards and argues for replicability between other Bay of Bengal countries.

The report's third section focuses on ways for states along the Bay of Bengal to cooperatively manage the regional commons. Connectivity initiatives cannot be thought of in a vacuum, divorced from political ground realities and the security environment. The governance deficit is large in the region, marked by a myriad of active conflicts, latent civil wars, and cyclical humanitarian and environmental crises. The Rohingya refugee crises have made this apparent in recent years, stalling several important land connectivity projects. While connectivity and interdependence are often seen as enhancing the prospects for interstate peace and cooperation, the opposite also

applies: connectivity projects will not progress unless there is political stability and popular support on the ground.

Chapter 8 by Collin Koh Swee Lean examines the maritime space of the Bay of Bengal as a regional common that requires more cooperative approaches, especially in the Andaman Sea. He proposes better maritime domain awareness and information-sharing mechanisms to address irregular human migration and illicit drug trade. Beyond a sum of bilateral initiatives, he also emphasizes the need to improve upon existing regional initiatives such as the Bali Process and BIMSTEC.

Chapter 9 by Bhanubhatra Jittiang lays out the growing systemic failures in the region and how a “complex emergency” exposes regional governance deficits to address social, economic, and political turbulence. He argues that states in the Bay of Bengal region should recognize the limitations of non-interference and their adamant adherence to the national security agenda and instead adopt new cooperative principles like ASEAN's “flexible engagement.”

Finally, chapter 10 by Aaron Savio Lobo takes on an “aquascape” approach that looks at the Bay of Bengal from a natural resources angle, with a focus on its waters as an environmental common. He cautions that states are competing to safeguard their dwindling fish stocks, leading to a blind competition that impedes the sustainable management of blue foods. Lobo proposes a multi-level, coordinated governance approach at the local, national and regional levels to manage the Bay of Bengal marine ecosystem that considers the entire watershed from the Himalayan mountains to the Indian Ocean.

## **Policy parameters to foster cooperation**

From leveraging geography to building the infrastructure and managing the commons,



the nine papers in this report contain valuable and practical recommendations to bridge the gap between growing connectivity and lagging cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region. While they address different sectors and geographies, there are five lines of continuity that stand out in these contributions.

First, all papers alert to the rising costs of non-cooperation between different states and other stakeholders in the region. *The failure to collectively address the region's transnational policy challenges represents a growing loss of welfare.* The European Union, for example, regularly estimates the quantitative “cost of non-Europe” in different sectors, from the single market, to energy, environment, or justice (Mayer, Vicard, & Zignago, 2019). In the Bay of Bengal, these costs are even more significant. While the much wealthier EU member-states may be willing to absorb the costs of non-cooperation or integration for political reasons, in a least-developed region like the Bay of Bengal this an unsustainable proposition. Whether it is on trade, climate or mobility, lack of cooperative habits will stifle development and, in some cases, also increase the risks of conflict with severe repercussions for regional stability.

Second, the papers also refer to the changing global context, marked by an economic slowdown and growing geostrategic competition. The pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war have hit developing countries in the Bay of Bengal particularly hard, as manifested in the Sri Lanka crisis, and mounting economic stress in Bangladesh and Nepal. *The economic slowdown will continue to have political implications across the region, with inflationary pressures, growing inequality, social discontent and governance instability that deter much-needed external financing.*

Geostrategic competition is also expected to accelerate in the region. China's subdued response to Sri Lanka's financial collapse has left many wondering to what extent Beijing is either unable or unwilling to support developing countries in hard times

such as these. This has also generated much introspection on whether countries in this region are sufficiently equipped to manage external offers, expectations, and pressures. If one looks, for example, at professional debt management as a critical indicator of state capacity, the panorama in the Bay of Bengal region looks rather bleak. *Extra-regional actors will have to consider the decreasing marginal utility of more financing for big-ticket infrastructure projects and how to shift resources to the increasing need to build institutional capacity and resilience through technical assistance.*

Third, several contributions refer to the neglected normative dimension of connectivity. Trade and infrastructure are often described as neutral elements that are fungible, developed in an ideological vacuum. In fact, however, even physical infrastructure is developed in a deeply political context that varies according to regime type: building a bridge either in China or in Bangladesh is a fundamentally different exercise that is shaped by contrasting governance realities and political principles.

Setting standards and reforming regulatory contexts are processes that require states to make informed choices, for example on the degree of accountability and transparency during environmental and social assessments of infrastructure connectivity projects. In line with the Sustainable Development Goal principle 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, the *Bay of Bengal states will have to find ways to ensure that connectivity initiatives are developed through decision-making that is responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative at all levels* (United Nations, 2022).

Fourth, many of the recommendations in these papers also stress the importance of regional institutions to foster connectivity in the Bay of Bengal. While bilateral initiatives may be tempting for they often offer quick solutions, they are not always perfect substitutes for minilateral or multilateral settings. The sum of

several bilateral relations does not amount to a multilateral process. *Almost all contributions stress the importance to strengthen formal top-down organizational initiatives like BIMSTEC or more flexible cooperative platforms like BBIN.*

There are also recommendations for the Bay of Bengal states to adopt and adapt different cooperation mechanisms from the far more advanced ASEAN framework. Especially in larger countries like India, policy-makers will naturally be inclined to follow the more expedient bilateral route, but there will also be occasions where they must adopt a longer horizon to realize more sustainable, inclusive connectivity initiatives through larger, regional cooperation frameworks.

The exact modalities of cooperation depend on the issue area and actors involved. In some cases, cooperation can start with the low-hanging fruit of bilateral agreements that can be replicated in succession. In other cases, cooperation can be fleshed out as flexible minilateral initiatives, focused on consultations and coordination in a specific sector, without formal agreements. This is the case of the BBIN initiative on water or transportation connectivity. Finally, at the highest level,

cooperation in the Bay of Bengal can assume an institutionalized and multilateral form, such as through BIMSTEC or other regional organizations.

Fifth and finally, the nine contributions also reflect the reality of an increasingly open, inclusive Bay of Bengal. As with the outdated xenophobic mantra of “Asia for Asians,” which even China has begun to abandon, there is no value to insist on keeping the Bay of Bengal closed to extra-regional, global influences. *Historically at the cross-roads of different economic, social and political currents, the region will only develop and thrive if it returns to its role as a connector with adjacent regions and the rest of the world.*

This condition of geo-economic and strategic openness was presciently noted by Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina back in 2011: “the South Asia of the future has to be a region connected by physical linkages as well as through ideas, individuals and initiatives within and *beyond* South Asia.” (Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019, emphasis added). The same holds true today for the Bay of Bengal: deeper connectivity *within* the region will require more cooperation *beyond* the region.

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