



New Indo-Pacific Partnership: Building Australia-Bangladesh Security Ties

David Brewster

Key points

- As part of its Indo-Pacific strategy, Australia needs to broaden its engagement in South Asia to complement its current focus on India.
- Bangladesh, with a thriving economy and a population of more than 160 million, has the potential to become the next 'Asian tiger'.
- Australia has many strategic equities in the northeast Indian Ocean, including in maintaining maritime security and supporting regional states to build resilience against external coercion.
- Australia should develop its defence and security relationship with Bangladesh as part of broader political and economic engagement with that country.

Policy recommendations

- Australia needs a Defence Advisor on the ground in Bangladesh.
- Australia should build relationships with the Bangladesh military through military education opportunities and targeted exchanges.
- The Australian Navy should make a visit to Bangladesh.
- Australia should help build Bangladesh's maritime capacity in selected areas.

The 2020 Defence Strategic Update identifies the northeast Indian Ocean as an important area for enhanced defence and security engagement. For at least a decade, Australia has rightly concentrated on its partnership with India, but it is now time to broaden that strategy to include other countries in that region.

Bangladesh should be an important part of that new focus.

An enhanced defence and security relationship with Bangladesh should be part of comprehensive engagement that also targets economic opportunities. Strengthening connections with Bangladesh would also fit well with Australia's approach to developing a web of relationships with Indo-Pacific middle powers.

Australia's strategic equities in the northeast Indian Ocean

Australia has significant strategic equities in Bangladesh, reflecting potential economic opportunities as well as potential risks emanating from the northeast Indian Ocean region. Bangladesh is one of the big economic success stories in Asia. Over the last several decades, Bangladesh has grown from one of the poorest countries in the world to a middle-income country. In the years prior to the COVID crisis, its economic growth

averaged around 7-8% per annum. It could well become one of Asia's new economic 'tigers' and a key trading partner for Australia.¹ An agreement to facilitate economic engagement is currently under negotiation.

But these opportunities are also accompanied by risks. Bangladesh is located at the fulcrum of the Bay of Bengal, between

India and China, and is the subject of growing strategic competition. The northeast Indian Ocean region also faces a range of transnational security threats, including from climate change, people and drug smuggling, violent extremism and illegal fishing. All these could have a significant impact on Australia.

The ethnic cleansing of Rohingya people from Myanmar has resulted in more than 1 million refugees in Bangladesh camps. This creates risks from unregulated population movements and violent extremism. Attempts by extremist groups to radicalise Rohingyas have so far had limited success. But their poor living conditions and the unlikelihood of their repatriation any time soon means that the situation could deteriorate. Australia is a major provider of humanitarian assistance and can work further with Bangladesh to help find practical solutions to this issue.²

Climate change, including sea level rise, storm surges and severe weather events, is also expected to have a major impact on Bangladesh in coming years. According to some estimates, a 1 metre sea level rise would inundate 17% of Bangladesh land area, potentially displacing more than 15 million people. This could have a severe impact on regional stability in addition to large-scale population movements.³ Australia can help build collaborative regional responses to these and other environmental threats.

Recent developments in Myanmar also create new risks for the region. Extended civil unrest in Myanmar could lead to a surge in drug smuggling or refugee movements towards Australia. Myanmar's ungoverned spaces have long been a major source of opium and now methamphetamines. Myanmar is the largest source of these drugs for Australia and there is now potential for them to flood the Australian market. Australia may increasingly

need Bangladesh as a regional partner to help counter these and other threats.

This is not the first time Australia has had to act in the region in recent years. A surge in refugee arrivals in Australia in 2013-14 led to a step-up in Australia's engagement with Sri Lanka, including the placement of defence and police representatives in Colombo and capability-building initiatives. This significantly reduced the flow of refugees and led to a valuable regional partnership.

India is without doubt Australia's most important partner in South Asia and has been one of Australia's key foreign policy focuses for some years. But India's neighbours also have important roles to play. They can provide valuable heft to regional relationships and additional options for Australia in the event of contingencies. In practice, good relations with India's neighbours can also usefully complement and support Australia's strategic partnership with India.



Bangladesh and the northeast Indian Ocean | Source: Australian National University

The current state of engagement

Australia's current defence and security engagement with Bangladesh is very thin. Despite being one of the first countries to recognise an independent Bangladesh in early 1972, we have not sought to properly develop the relationship.

Official military visits are very rare and the last visit by the Australian Navy was in 2014. There is no resident defence representative. Australia currently provides no material assistance to the Bangladesh armed forces. No Bangladesh military officers receive professional military education in Australia.

But there appears to be attention to the relationship from the Bangladesh side. Official visits to Australia in 2019 by senior

Bangladesh officers, Lieutenant General Md Mahfuzur Rahman (Head of the Armed Forces Division in the Bangladesh Prime Minister's Office) and Admiral Aurangzeb Chowdhury (Chief of Naval Staff), flagged Bangladesh's interest in developing a closer defence and security relationship as part of a more comprehensive relationship with Australia.

Bangladesh is increasingly finding itself under pressure from competition between major powers. Dhaka sees countries like Australia and Japan as valuable and benign regional partners that can potentially mitigate some of those pressures and add further ballast to Bangladesh's regional relationships.

Opportunities for enhanced engagement

Much can be done to kick-start defence and security engagement at relatively low cost. Australia should build the foundations for a long-term engagement by focusing on 'low hanging fruit', particularly on transnational security issues and initiatives that play to Australia's strengths.

Key themes should include:

- building defence relationships;
- building Bangladesh's maritime security capabilities in selected areas;

- enhancing engagement on regional security; and
- building relationships with Bangladesh civil society.

Any enhanced engagement should be pursued on a whole-of-government basis. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) will play a leading role in defence engagement, but the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and other agencies also have important roles to play in transnational security and building a broader political-security relationship.

Build defence relationships

Bangladesh has a large, professional and well-funded military. Although Bangladesh has a democratic civilian-led government, the Armed Forces play a prominent role in public affairs. Good relationships across the Bangladesh military are not only essential for defence and security cooperation, but would also be a valuable element in broader engagement with Bangladesh.

Australia's initial focus should be on developing personal relationships and networks with the Bangladesh military. This is a long-term undertaking, but can provide significant benefits in times of crisis, when personal relationships can count far more than formal institutional agreements.

Post a Defence Advisor to Dhaka

Current arrangements for servicing the relationship through Australia's Defence Advisor (DA) in Colombo are far from optimal. Australia needs a defence representative on the ground to have credibility as a defence partner, fully engage with the Bangladesh military and explore further opportunities. This should include opportunities for Australia as a potential supplier in niche defence technologies or surplus equipment in light of the Bangladesh military's major modernisation program. A resident DA would also improve Australia's visibility of security developments in Bangladesh and the northeast Indian Ocean and have positive implications for the relationship far beyond defence.

Military education in Australia

Australia has long used military education as a tool for developing long term relationships with regional partners. Alongside the efforts of likeminded partners such as India and the United States, Australia should provide the following education opportunities to senior Bangladesh officers (including on a paid basis):

- Undertaking military professional training at ADF institutions such as the Australian War College or the Capability and Technology Management College, which provides specialist training in project management, sustainment, logistics and defence acquisitions.

- Graduate education at institutions such as the ANU National Security College (in national security) or the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources & Security (in maritime governance).

Exchanges of military personnel

Networks and sharing of perspectives could also be developed through targeted exchanges of personnel. This could include:

- Inviting a Bangladesh Naval Officer as a Visiting Naval Fellow at the Sea Power Centre – Australia as a way of building our understanding of Bangladesh perspectives on shared maritime concerns.
- Placing an Australian officer at the National Defence College, Dhaka.
- Short-term secondments of Australian lecturers (whether civil or military) to the Defence Services Command and Staff College and the National Defence College.
- Mutual exchanges between the Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operations Training and Australia's Peace Operations Training Centre. Bangladesh is one of the largest and most experienced contributors to UN Peacekeeping Operations, and has been a leading voice on the women, peace and security agenda in that regard. Engagement with Bangladesh could be of considerable benefit to the ADF especially in the event that Australia again ramps up its contribution to international peacekeeping operations.⁴

Naval visit to Bangladesh

A naval visit to Bangladesh would be an important statement of our interest. A port visit by one or more Australian ships could be undertaken as part of a future *Indo Pacific Endeavour* activity in the northeast Indian Ocean. This could include an offshore exercise, potentially also involving the Indian Navy.

Build maritime security capabilities

Australia should undertake targeted capability-building activities with Bangladesh government agencies on selected transnational security issues where Australia has direct interests. Capability-building initiatives should not initially involve providing equipment, but rather should focus on playing to Australia's strengths in experience and expertise.

Develop maritime domain awareness

Responsibility for security and law enforcement over Bangladesh's exclusive economic zone is currently spread across several government agencies and ministries with little coordination or information sharing. The lack of a comprehensive picture of its maritime domain is a major hindrance in combating criminal activities and protecting maritime resources. Australia is among the leading countries in this field, including building a successful whole-of-government system for fusing information on civil-

maritime threats through the Australian Border Operations Centre. Any work in this area should also be undertaken in coordination with the Bali Process as well as initiatives of partners such as India or the EU.

The Bangladesh Navy, Coast Guard and Police have considerable needs in search and rescue, including in respect of fishermen and refugees, and lack a national centre to coordinate operations among the various agencies involved. The Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) has useful experience in assisting partners in the region to develop unified national response systems that involve multiple national agencies with responsibilities and capabilities. In 2015, AMSA undertook a highly successful capability-building program with counterpart agencies in Mauritius, Maldives and Sri Lanka and a similar program could be offered to Bangladesh.

Improve port security capabilities

Bangladesh's ports are highly porous, creating considerable risks for Australia in people and drug smuggling as trade continues to develop between the two countries. Authority is currently

split between multiple agencies with gaps in areas of responsibility. Australia's Department of Home Affairs has previously provided assistance to other regional neighbours in developing their port security capabilities and could be a useful partner for counterpart agencies in Bangladesh.

Engagement on regional security

Initiatives with Bangladesh should be positioned as much as possible as part of enhanced regional engagement in the northeast Indian Ocean area. Some of the maritime capability-building initiatives noted above could be undertaken as part of combined activities with Sri Lanka, Maldives and, potentially, India, as part of a regional engagement program.

IORA as a platform for regional collaboration

Bangladesh's assumption of Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 2021 provides a valuable opportunity to frame the relationship as part of wider efforts. Australia could co-sponsor initiatives through that grouping, including on maritime safety and security, the blue economy and environmental security.

Bangladesh is a regional leader in the field of the blue economy.⁵ Australia's CSIRO is currently working with Bangladesh on IORA blue economy initiatives, and there is potential for further collaboration in areas such as blue carbon, fisheries and ocean renewables in the Bay of Bengal.

Bangladesh also has significant interests in addressing environmental security threats, not least because of its own vulnerabilities to climate change. There are considerable opportunities for bilateral cooperation in proposing regional arrangements to address environmental security threats.

Notes

1. D. Brewster, "Australia should pursue opportunities in a booming Bangladesh" *Lowy Interpreter*, June 2019.
2. D. Brewster, "The Rohingyas: the security dimension of a deep humanitarian crisis" *Lowy Interpreter*, May 2019.
3. A. Bergin et al, *Environmental security in the eastern Indian Ocean, Antarctica and the Southern Ocean: A risk mapping approach* (National Security College, 2019).
4. Bangladesh sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and places considerable emphasis on this issue as part of its peacekeeping activities as well as in other fields.
5. The Blue Economy involves the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems.
6. Members of The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation include Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan.
7. SAARC has long been seen as the principal regional political grouping for South Asia. Unlike BIMSTEC, its membership includes Pakistan.

Engage with BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the regional political grouping in the northeast Indian Ocean, could also be a useful vehicle for Australia.⁶ For some years, India has promoted BIMSTEC as its preferred vehicle for regional engagement as an alternative to the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation⁷ which has long been paralysed by India-Pakistan rivalry. Australia should review options for formal or informal engagement with BIMSTEC as an observer which would demonstrate Australia's renewed interest in the region and offer a platform for sharing perspectives.

Relationships with Bangladesh civil society

Enhanced engagement on defence and security should be accompanied by initiatives to develop relationships with Bangladesh think tanks and other influential elements of Bangladesh civil society. The sponsorship of Track 1.5 security dialogues among leading think tanks is a useful way of developing relationships, sharing perspectives and generating ideas. An exchange of strategic insights involving officials and leading analysts would help promote the relationship and build shared perspectives on developments in the region.

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