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International Law as an Enabler of Maritime Cooperation: A Legal-Geopolitical Analysis of Bangladesh-China Relations in the Bay of Bengal

Rubel Mehedi[1], Muhammad Saqib[2], & Saba Muhammad Hussain[3]

Abstract

Over five decades, Bangladesh and China have built an increasingly deep strategic and economic partnership, and the Bay of Bengal has become one of the main stages on which that relationship now plays out. This article asks how far international law chiefly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) together with bilateral instruments and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), actually structures and constrains maritime cooperation between the two states. After situating the inquiry within the Bay of Bengal's geopolitical, economic and environmental significance, it traces the historical evolution of Bangladesh-China maritime relations and reviews the literature on international maritime and environmental law. From this base, it develops an integrated theoretical framework combining sovereignty-based realism, institutionalist regime theory, and sustainable-development and resilience perspectives, and it sets out a qualitative, document-based and case-study methodology for tracing how legal frameworks translate into cooperative outcomes across boundary delimitation, resource management, port development and environmental protection. The article goes on to evaluate existing bilateral instruments, identify the legal and geopolitical constraints on cooperation, and examine the Sonadia Deep Sea Port project and BRI-linked infrastructure as illustrative case studies. Its central argument is that UNCLOS and complementary regional arrangements furnish a workable normative architecture, but durable cooperation ultimately depends on aligning legal compliance with the strategic and developmental interests of both states. On this basis, the article offers policymakers a structured way of balancing legal obligation, national interest and regional stability in the Bay of Bengal.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Over the past five decades, Bangladesh and China have moved from cautious diplomatic contact to what both governments now describe as a "strategic partnership of cooperation." Within that relationship, the maritime domain and the Bay of Bengal above all has become one of the principal theatres in which it now plays out (Sarker, 2014; Hasan & Lim, 2024). The bay performs several functions at once: it is a trade corridor linking South and Southeast Asia to the wider Indian Ocean, a source of fisheries, hydrocarbon and mineral wealth, and a space in which the political and security interests of littoral and extra-regional powers overlap (Sengupta, 2020). Roughly ninety percent of world trade moves by sea, and the wider Indian Ocean corridor carries a large share of the world's

[1] Dalian maritime university, Email: rubelmehedi@hotmail.com
[2], Shanghai ocean university. saqibayoub7890@gmail.com
[3] Advocate high courts. sabahussain9211@gmail.com

seaborne oil trade one reason why control of, and cooperation over, this space matters well beyond the two states most directly concerned (Davis & Balls, 2019). For Bangladesh, whose 2041 development vision depends on governing roughly 207,000 square kilometres of maritime territory effectively, and for China, whose Maritime Silk Road runs directly through the bay, getting this cooperation right carries considerable stakes (Talukdar & Lamagna, 2024; Sayed, Chowdhury & Saharuddin, 2025).

Because neither country can unilaterally determine how the bay is used, governed or protected, their cooperation is necessarily mediated by law. UNCLOS remains the principal instrument allocating rights and obligations over territorial seas, exclusive economic zones and the continental shelf, and it supplies the default vocabulary baselines, innocent passage, dispute settlement through which Bangladesh and China negotiate overlapping interests (Treves, 2015; Rahman, 2023). Yet UNCLOS operates alongside a dense layer of bilateral agreements, regional arrangements such as BIMSTEC, and the BRI, which since 2013 has recast much of the bilateral relationship around infrastructure, investment and connectivity (Yang, 2024; Kamal Ahamed, 2019). How these overlapping instruments interact reinforcing, qualifying or occasionally straining one another is the central puzzle this article addresses.

1.2 Historical Evolution of Bangladesh-China Maritime and Diplomatic Relations

Formal diplomatic relations between Dhaka and Beijing date to 1976, though China's material engagement began slightly earlier, with humanitarian assistance following the 1974 floods (Sarker, 2014). Vice Premier Li Xiannian's 1978 visit to Dhaka the first by a senior Chinese leader produced an early economic and technical cooperation agreement, and defence ties deepened through the 1980s, when Bangladesh sourced roughly three-quarters of its arms imports from China (Sarker, 2014; Sachar, 2004). Relations broadened after Bangladesh's return to democratic governance in 1991, consolidating around the country's "Look East" policy and mutual recognition of core sovereignty interests, including Dhaka's consistent support for the "One China" principle (Bhuiyan & Islam, 2025).

The relationship's economic centre of gravity shifted decisively once Bangladesh joined the BRI, an inflection marked by President Xi Jinping's 2016 visit to Dhaka, during which twenty-seven agreements worth approximately US$24 billion were signed (Choudhury, 2023; Hossain & Islam, 2021). China has since become Bangladesh's largest trading partner, its principal source of foreign direct investment, and a major supplier of military hardware (Hasan & Lim, 2024; Akter et al., 2023). Table 1 summarises the principal milestones in this evolution, from the earliest diplomatic contacts to the 2023 renewal of the two countries' Strategic Partnership of Cooperation.

Table 1. Timeline of Key Bangladesh-China Diplomatic, Defence and Economic Milestones

	stone	ce
	a provides flood-relief assistance to Bangladesh, an early gesture eding the establishment of formal diplomatic ties	er (2014)
	ladesh and China formally establish diplomatic relations	er (2014)
	Premier Li Xiannian's visit to Dhaka the first by a senior Chinese r produces an early economic and technical cooperation agreement	er (2014)
–	a supplies approximately 78% of Bangladesh's arms imports	ar (2004)
	ladesh returns to democratic governance after 15 years of military consolidating bilateral engagement	yan & Islam 5)
	ladesh and China sign a bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreement	ar (2004)
–	a supplies approximately 82% of Bangladesh's arms imports via t and soft loans	ar (2004)

	stone	ce
	a launches the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), later joined by ;ladesh	; (2024)
	dent Xi Jinping visits Dhaka; 27 agreements worth approximately 24 billion are signed, elevating the relationship to a Strategic nership of Cooperation	ıdhury (2023); ain & Islam 1)
	;ladesh orders 23 Hongdu K-8W training aircraft in a deal exceeding 200 million	in, Sakib & ıir (2023)
	e Minister Sheikh Hasina visits China; nine bilateral agreements are ed, covering Rohingya-related aid, investment and cultural eration	ze & Akbar 5)
	a grants duty-free access to 97% of Bangladeshi export items under sia-Pacific Trade Agreement	ı, Fatema & r (2024)
	a and Bangladesh renew their Strategic Partnership of Cooperation; ese investment reaches approximately US$1.4 billion across 700+ prises; BEZA and BCCCI sign an MOU on investment promotion	n & Lim (2024)

Read together, these milestones trace a relationship that has evolved from asymmetric aid dependence toward something more structurally interdependent, in which infrastructure finance, defence procurement and trade preferences increasingly reinforce one another. That trajectory matters for the analysis that follows: it means legal questions about maritime cooperation can rarely be separated from the broader economic and strategic relationship within which they are embedded.

1.3 Linking the Belt and Road Initiative to Maritime Cooperation

The BRI's Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road runs through the Bay of Bengal, and Bangladesh's geographic position gives it an outsized role in that corridor relative to its size (Sayed, Chowdhury & Saharuddin, 2025). Chittagong port modernisation, digital-connectivity financing and the Padma Bridge rail link are among the more consequential BRI-linked investments, and they sit alongside Bangladesh's own Vision 2041, which pairs industrial upgrading with an explicit maritime-development agenda (Talukdar & Lamagna, 2024). The convergence of these two agendas one Chinese, one Bangladeshi creates practical opportunities for cooperation, but it also raises a legal question this article treats as central: whether infrastructure and investment cooperation under the BRI is, and ought to be, disciplined by the same international legal norms UNCLOS foremost among them that govern boundary delimitation, resource exploitation and environmental protection in the bay (Liu & Harrington, 2024).

1.4 Problem Statement, Objectives and Research Questions

Despite the depth of the bilateral relationship, the legal architecture underpinning Bangladesh-China maritime cooperation remains comparatively under-examined in the scholarly literature, which has tended to treat BRI-related infrastructure and UNCLOS-based ocean governance as separate fields of inquiry rather than as an interacting whole (Islam & Tang, 2016; Chowdhury, Hamid & Mohd Salleh, 2024). This article addresses that gap by examining how international law shapes, enables and constrains maritime cooperation between the two states, pursuing five objectives:

- to map the international and bilateral legal instruments relevant to Bangladesh-China maritime relations;
- to assess how these instruments have been applied in practice, including in boundary delimitation, port development and environmental protection;
- to identify the principal legal and geopolitical obstacles to deeper cooperation;
- to examine representative case studies, including the Sonadia deep-sea port project and BRI-linked infrastructure; and

- to derive policy-relevant recommendations for both governments.

These objectives are operationalised through the following research questions:

1. What role does international law play in structuring Bangladesh-China maritime cooperation?
2. How do unresolved or historically contested maritime boundaries affect cooperative initiatives between the two countries?
3. What legal frameworks govern resource exploitation and management, and how do they shape bilateral cooperation?
4. What obligations and mechanisms exist for marine environmental protection, and how are they integrated into cooperative practice?
5. How do navigation rights, freedom-of-the-seas principles and maritime security concerns affect cooperation?
6. What dispute-settlement mechanisms are available to the two states, and how effective have they proven?
7. Which existing cooperative mechanisms and legal instruments could be strengthened, and how?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework of the Review

The literature relevant to this article spans international law, maritime economics and South Asian geopolitics. Rather than reviewing it field by field, this section organises it around a single analytical model. Figure 1 sets out that model, treating three categories of legal instrument UNCLOS and customary international law, bilateral and regional agreements, and BRI-linked commitments as inputs that jointly shape a single bilateral cooperative relationship, which in turn produces observable outcomes across five domains: boundary delimitation and dispute resolution, resource and fisheries management, environmental protection, port and infrastructure development, and regional security and connectivity. The subsections that follow review the literature underlying each element of this model, before Section 2.5 identifies the gaps the remainder of this article addresses.

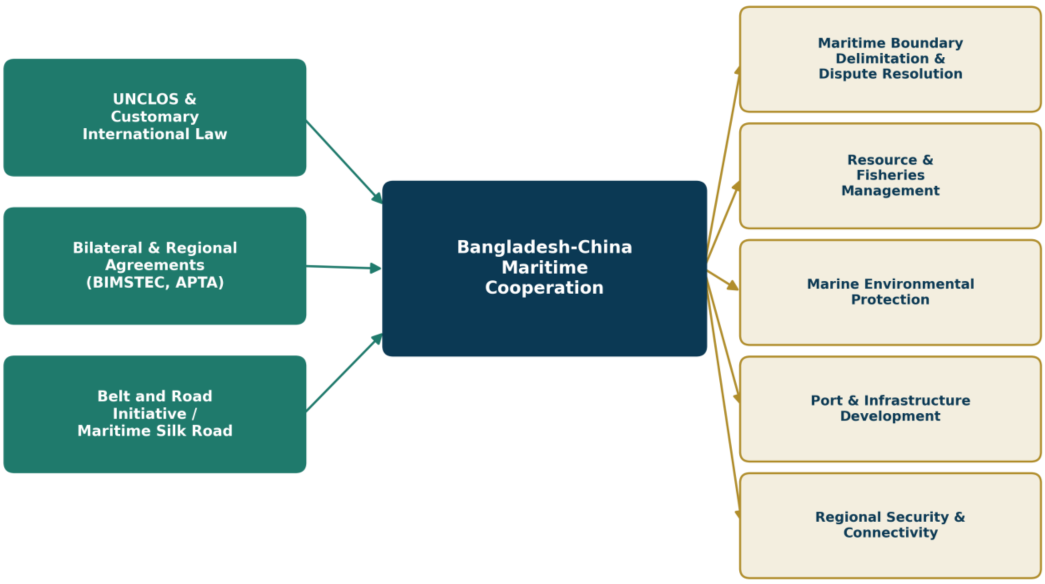

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking International Legal Instruments to Bangladesh-China Maritime Cooperation Outcomes

2.2 Technology, Governance and the Evolving Ocean-Policy Landscape

A growing body of literature treats technological change and international law as jointly constitutive of contemporary ocean governance, rather than as separate domains (Bilawal Khaskheli et al., 2023). Satellite monitoring, automated vessel-tracking systems and autonomous underwater vehicles have improved states' capacity to observe and enforce maritime rules, strengthening compliance with fisheries and pollution regimes even as they raise new questions about data ownership and liability that existing instruments were not drafted to answer (Ditria et al., 2022; Nicholson & Healey, 2008; Orofino et al., 2023). UNCLOS remains the reference point for this literature, but scholars increasingly argue that its 1982 text requires continuous reinterpretation, rather than renegotiation, to stay fit for purpose as monitoring and enforcement technology advances (Lescrauwaet et al., 2022).

2.3 International Maritime and Environmental Law: Foundations

International maritime law encompassing UNCLOS, International Maritime Organization (IMO) instruments and customary practice allocates jurisdiction across a graduated series of maritime zones: a twelve-nautical-mile territorial sea in which coastal states exercise near-plenary regulatory authority, and a two-hundred-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone in which they hold sovereign rights over resource exploration and exploitation while remaining bound to respect navigation and other high-seas freedoms (Paul, 2019; Rahman, 2023). The IMO, established in 1948, supplements this territorial architecture with functional standards governing vessel construction, crew competency and pollution prevention (Eruaga, 2024; Basaran, 2016). Figure 2 summarises the principal functions this body of law performs in marine policy: standard-setting, dispute resolution, resource-management norms, environmental obligations, capacity-building, and the facilitation of cooperation each of which recurs in the empirical analysis presented later in this work.

Figure 2. Core Functions of International Law in Marine Policy Governance

International environmental law runs alongside this framework, addressing marine pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change through instruments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Basel Convention, organised around the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (Ahmed, 2019; Nanda & Pring, 2012). For a coastal state such as Bangladesh, whose economy and food security depend heavily on marine resources, and for China, whose economic footprint in the bay has grown rapidly under the BRI, this environmental layer is not peripheral to maritime cooperation it is a condition of its long-term sustainability (Shamsuzzaman & Islam, 2018; Bhuyan et al., 2022).

2.4 The Bay of Bengal in the Literature on Regional Maritime Cooperation

A substantial literature documents the Bay of Bengal's strategic and economic weight: its littoral states are together home to roughly 1.7 billion people and a combined GDP of some US$7 trillion, the bay carries a large share of global containerised trade, and it sits above proven oil and gas reserves of regional significance (Sengupta, 2020; Bhuyan et al., 2022). Scholars have examined regional cooperation vehicles BIMSTEC in particular as partial, still-developing complements to a fully institutionalised regional order (Kamal Ahamed, 2019). A parallel literature on the BRI documents its scale an estimated sixty-five percent of world population and one-third of global GDP among participating states and its implications for recipient states' sovereignty, debt exposure and strategic autonomy (Liu & Harrington, 2024; Ahmad & Hoque, 2024).

2.5 Gaps in the Existing Literature

Three gaps recur across this literature. First, studies of UNCLOS-based ocean governance and studies of the BRI have developed largely in parallel, with comparatively little work examining how the two interact within a single bilateral relationship (Islam & Tang, 2016). Second, empirical assessment of how legal frameworks actually shape cooperative outcomes as distinct from normative accounts of what the law requires remains thin, particularly for Bangladesh-China relations specifically (Chowdhury, Hamid & Mohd Salleh, 2024). Third, the geopolitical dimension of enforcement how the power asymmetry between a middle power and a much larger regional actor affects compliance with formally neutral legal norms is underexplored (Yasmin, 2023). The remaining sections of this article are designed to address each of these gaps in turn.

3. Theoretical Framework

Analysing Bangladesh-China maritime cooperation requires a framework capable of holding two things in tension: the formally neutral, rule-based character of international law, and the asymmetric power relationship between a middle power and a much larger regional actor. No single theoretical tradition captures this tension fully, so the article draws on four complementary perspectives.

The first is sovereignty-based realism, which treats states as primarily self-interested actors that comply with international law when doing so serves strategic and economic interests. This perspective helps explain instances such as China's more assertive posture elsewhere in the South China Sea, where legal compliance appears to yield to strategic calculation, and it cautions against assuming that legal obligation alone determines state behaviour in the Bay of Bengal (Shaffer & Ginsburg, 2012).

The second is institutionalist regime theory, which explains cooperation as the product of shared rules, norms and decision-making procedures that reduce transaction costs and uncertainty even among states with divergent interests. This perspective is well suited to explaining why UNCLOS and regional arrangements such as BIMSTEC continue to structure bilateral engagement despite periodic friction, and it underpins much of the empirical analysis in later sections of this article (Soma, van Tatenhove & van Leeuwen, 2015; Menzel & Otto, 2020).

The third and fourth perspectives sustainable-development theory and adaptation-and-resilience theory shift attention from state behaviour to outcomes, asking whether cooperative arrangements produce environmentally and socially sustainable results, and whether coastal communities and institutions can adapt to the pressures that maritime development generates (Winther et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2023). Together with the first two perspectives, they complete the analytical model set out in Figure 1: legal instruments are treated as inputs whose effect on the five outcome domains identified there depends jointly on state interest (realism), institutional design (regime theory), and the sustainability and adaptive capacity of the outcomes produced (sustainable-development and resilience theory).

This integrated framework does not assume that legal compliance and strategic interest pull in opposite directions. Rather, following the institutionalist literature, it treats compliance as most likely precisely where it serves the strategic interests of both parties, and treats instances of non-compliance or under-implementation as diagnostic of a misalignment between legal obligation and national interest a misalignment later sections of this article examine in more empirical detail (Yasmin, 2023).

4. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, doctrinal and case-study-based research design, appropriate to a question that is fundamentally about how legal texts are interpreted and applied within a specific bilateral relationship, rather than one that lends itself to large-N statistical testing (Shaffer & Ginsburg, 2012). Three complementary methods of data collection and analysis are used.

Document analysis forms the primary method. Primary sources include the text of UNCLOS and related IMO instruments, publicly available bilateral agreements between Bangladesh and China, and official statements and joint communiqués issued around key diplomatic milestones such as the 2016 and 2019 state visits. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed literature on international maritime and environmental law, Bangladesh-China relations, and the BRI, retrieved through systematic searches of relevant academic databases. Collected material is organised thematically and interpreted using a doctrinal legal method reading treaty text against its negotiating history and subsequent state practice combined with qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across the secondary literature (Van Aaken, 2009).

Case-study analysis supplements the document review. Cases are selected purposively rather than randomly, on the basis that they represent significant, well-documented instances of Bangladesh-China maritime cooperation with a discernible legal dimension. The Sonadia deep-sea port project and BRI-linked port and connectivity infrastructure, examined later in this work, were selected on these grounds; each case is assessed for its legal basis, the manner of its implementation, and its outcomes.

Policy analysis, the third method, is used in the concluding sections of this article to translate the legal and case-study findings into actionable recommendations, following an approach common in applied international-law scholarship of moving from doctrinal assessment to reform proposals (Van Aaken, 2009).

This design carries identifiable limitations, which are acknowledged rather than resolved. International maritime law is not static: UNCLOS provisions are subject to ongoing reinterpretation through state practice and dispute-settlement decisions, so any doctrinal snapshot risks dating quickly (Petrig, 2020). Maritime affairs also intersect with sensitive security and commercial information that neither government routinely publishes, which constrains the depth of case-study evidence available from open sources (Van Aaken, 2009). Finally, a legal-institutional analysis of this kind cannot fully capture the informal, personalised diplomacy that often drives bilateral relations between Bangladesh and China; where this matters for interpreting the case-study evidence in later sections, it is flagged explicitly rather than assumed away.

5. Legal and Institutional Architecture Governing Maritime Cooperation

5.1 UNCLOS as the Constitutional Framework

Bangladesh-China maritime cooperation does not occur in a legal vacuum. It is structured, from the outset, by the layered jurisdictional architecture that the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) establishes for every coastal state, and by the complementary body of instruments administered by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). UNCLOS allocates a graduated series of rights across four principal zones the territorial sea, the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the continental shelf, and the high seas each carrying a different balance between coastal-state sovereignty and the navigational and resource-related freedoms retained by other states (Treves, 2015; Rahman, 2023). Within twelve nautical miles of the baseline, the coastal state exercises near-plenary authority, subject to the right of innocent passage; within the 200-nautical-mile EEZ, it holds sovereign rights over resource exploration and exploitation without the same regulatory latitude over navigation; and on the continental shelf, those resource rights can extend beyond 200 nautical miles where the geological criteria in UNCLOS Article 76 are satisfied (Anderson, 2012).

This zonal structure matters directly for Bangladesh, whose concave coastline placed it at a structural disadvantage under the equidistance methods that neighbouring states initially favoured for boundary delimitation, and it is the backdrop against which the bilateral and institutional arrangements discussed later in this part have to be read. Table 2 summarises the zones most relevant to the Bay of Bengal context and the corresponding rights they confer.

Table 2. UNCLOS Maritime Zones Relevant to Bangladesh-China Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal

time Zone	nt and Coastal-State Rights	ary Legal Basis
torial Sea	› 12 nautical miles from baseline; near-plenary eignty subject to innocent passage of foreign vessels	LOS Arts. 2–3, 9
usive Economic	› 200 nautical miles; sovereign rights over living and living resources, retained high-seas freedoms for other s	LOS Arts. 55– ahman (2023)
inental Shelf	ed and subsoil rights, extendable beyond 200 nm e geomorphological criteria are met	LOS Art. 76; rson (2012)
Seas / national Seabed	to all states; seabed resources beyond national diction treated as the common heritage of mankind	LOS Arts. 87, 137

5.2 IMO Instruments: Safety, Pollution Prevention and Enforcement Capacity

Alongside UNCLOS, the International Maritime Organization established in 1948 and operative since 1958 administers the technical conventions that give the zonal framework operational content (Blanco-Bazán, 2004; Abeyratne, 2024). Two instruments matter most for the Bangladesh-China relationship. The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), adopted in the aftermath of the Titanic disaster and periodically amended since, sets construction, crewing and navigational-safety standards for the vessels that move between the two countries' ports (Baumler, Arce & Pazaver, 2021). The International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) supplies the corresponding environmental baseline, structured through annexes addressing oil, noxious liquids, packaged harmful substances, sewage, garbage and air emissions (Fitzmaurice, 2023; Tsimplis, 2025).

Enforcement, however, is where the gap between global standard-setting and regional practice becomes visible. Recent empirical work on MARPOL compliance in Bangladeshi port areas finds that domestic reception facilities, monitoring capacity and inter-agency coordination lag behind the formal ratification of MARPOL's annexes, producing a compliance deficit that is administrative rather than normative in origin (Saikot, Shaheen & Saha, 2025). The IMO itself has acknowledged this pattern more broadly: its institutional strategy increasingly emphasises capacity-building and technical assistance through vehicles such as the IMO International Maritime Law Institute, precisely because many states party to SOLAS and MARPOL possess the legal obligation but not yet the full administrative capacity to discharge it (García-Carriazo, 2023; Lagdami & Baig, 2024). For Chinese-built or Chinese-financed vessels and port facilities operating in Bangladeshi waters a growing category given the port investments discussed in Part 3 of this article this compliance gap is a live issue rather than a theoretical one: infrastructure cooperation under bilateral and BRI-linked agreements needs to be read alongside, not instead of, Bangladesh's SOLAS and MARPOL obligations (Eruaga, 2024).

5.3 Dispute Settlement: UNCLOS Part XV and the Bangladesh Precedent

UNCLOS Part XV establishes one of the most elaborated compulsory dispute-settlement regimes in international law, offering states a choice among the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), the International Court of Justice, Annex VII arbitration, and the less commonly invoked Annex V conciliation (Nguyen, 2018). Bangladesh's own practice under this regime is directly relevant to the present analysis, even though the dispute in question involved Myanmar and India rather than China. Facing overlapping claims arising from its concave coastline, Bangladesh brought its maritime boundary dispute with Myanmar to ITLOS, which delivered its judgment in 2012 delimiting the territorial sea, EEZ and continental shelf between the two states, including the shelf area beyond 200 nautical miles (Shah, 2013; Elferink et al., 2016). A parallel dispute with India was subsequently resolved through Annex VII arbitration in 2014.

These outcomes matter for the present article in two respects. First, they demonstrate that Bangladesh treats UNCLOS dispute-settlement mechanisms as a credible and effectively binding forum rather than a merely aspirational framework a track record that gives weight to Bangladesh's insistence, examined further in Part 4, that any future maritime friction with China be channelled through law rather than power asymmetry (Butt et al., 2022). Second, the ITLOS and arbitral judgments fixed Bangladesh's maritime boundaries and, with them, the outer limits of the EEZ and continental shelf within which port development, resource exploration and Chinese-linked infrastructure investment now occur; the legal certainty those judgments produced is itself a precondition for the port projects examined later in this article. The Timor-Leste/Australia conciliation under UNCLOS Annex V the first use of that mechanism, concluded by treaty in 2018 offers a useful comparator: it shows that consent-based, non-binding procedures can still produce durable settlements, and it is cited here as an illustration of the range of tools UNCLOS makes available should Bangladesh-China maritime relations ever require formal dispute resolution, which to date they have not (Tamada, 2020; Peters, 2003).

5.4 Bilateral Legal Instruments Between Bangladesh and China

Global and regional legal architecture supplies the outer boundaries within which Bangladesh and China cooperate; the substance of that cooperation is carried by a comparatively thin but steadily thickening layer of bilateral instruments. The earliest of these with direct maritime relevance is the 2002 Defence Cooperation Agreement, which established the institutional channel through which subsequent naval procurement, training and maritime-security dialogue have been conducted (Sarker, 2021). Economic instruments followed a similar trajectory: the 2016 state visit produced twenty-seven agreements worth an estimated US$24 billion, and subsequent memoranda have extended cooperation into scientific and technical domains, most notably the August 2022 Memorandum of Understanding on Marine Science and Technology Cooperation between the University of Dhaka and China's First Institute of Oceanography, which formalised joint marine research capacity in an area where Bangladesh has historically lagged (Sarker, 2021; Razzaque, Rahman & Akib, 2020).

Port-related instruments constitute a third and increasingly consequential category, discussed in full in Part 3 of this article but worth flagging here for their legal character: the contracts and financing agreements underlying projects such as Payra and Chittagong are commercial and administrative instruments rather than treaty-level agreements, which gives them flexibility but also leaves them more exposed to unilateral reconsideration, as the 2020 cancellation of the Sonadia deep-sea port project by the Bangladeshi government illustrates (Rahman, Saha & Blanchard, 2024). This asymmetry between the durability of treaty-based defence and scientific cooperation on one hand, and the comparative fragility of commercial port agreements on the other is a recurring theme in the constraints analysis presented in Part 4.

Table 3 sets out the principal bilateral legal and institutional instruments identified in this review, in chronological sequence.

Table 3. Timeline of Principal Bangladesh-China Bilateral Legal and Institutional Instruments

	ument	l / Institutional Significance
	;ladesh-China Defence Cooperation ement	utional channel for naval procurement, training naritime-security dialogue (Sarker, 2021)
/	)S judgment (Bangladesh v. Myanmar) nnex VII arbitration (Bangladesh v.)	l Bangladesh's maritime boundaries and outer /shelf limits within which cooperation occurs h, 2013; Elferink et al., 2016)
	bilateral agreements (state visit), port and infrastructure financing	ated relationship to a Strategic Partnership of peration (Rahman, Saha & Blanchard, 2024)
	ellation of Sonadia deep-sea port ement	rates the non-treaty, commercially revisable acter of port-level instruments
	J on Marine Science and Technology peration (Dhaka University / First ute of Oceanography)	nalises joint marine-research capacity-building ker, 2021)
	wal of Strategic Partnership of peration	firms the framework agreements underpinning ime and port cooperation

5.5 Synthesis: From Global Framework to Bilateral Practice

The picture that emerges from this section is one of layered legality rather than a single governing instrument. UNCLOS supplies the constitutional vocabulary zones, rights, obligations within which any Bangladesh-China maritime activity must sit; IMO instruments supply the technical and environmental standards that give day-to-day shipping and port operations their content, albeit with an enforcement gap that domestic capacity constraints have yet to close fully (Saikot, Shaheen & Saha, 2025); UNCLOS Part XV supplies a credible, precedent-tested avenue for resolving disputes, one that Bangladesh has already used successfully against other neighbours; and a comparatively thin layer of bilateral treaties, memoranda and commercial agreements carries the specific content of Bangladesh-China cooperation itself. Figure 3 represents this layered structure schematically, and it is the same structure that organises the remainder of this article: Part 3 examines how the practice layer port development, resource exploration and connectivity infrastructure has actually unfolded within this architecture; Part 4 turns to the legal and geopolitical constraints that limit how far this layered framework can be relied upon; and Part 5 presents the Sonadia and Belt and Road Initiative case studies before concluding with policy recommendations.

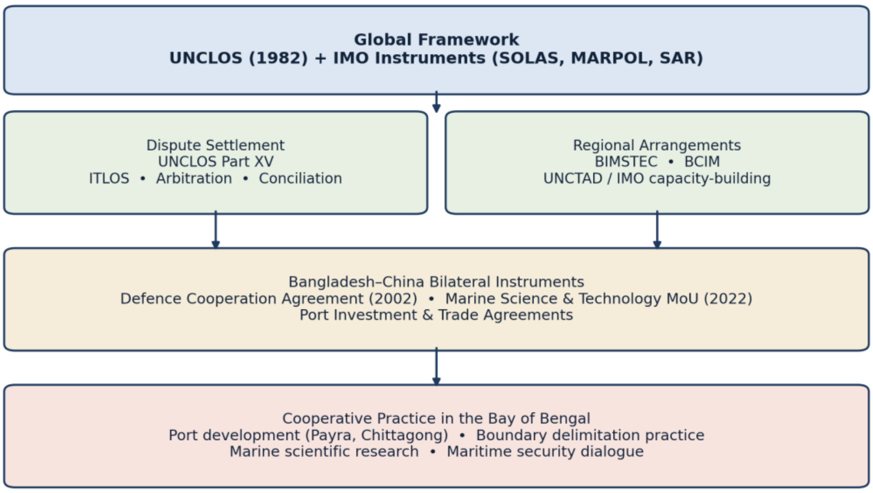

Figure 3. Layered Legal Architecture Governing Bangladesh-China Maritime Cooperation

6. Practical Cooperation: Port Development, the Blue Economy and Environmental Governance

6.1 Regional Platforms as Enabling Architecture

Bilateral cooperation between Bangladesh and China does not occur in isolation from the region's wider institutional landscape. BIMSTEC bridging South and Southeast Asia since 1997 and the more loosely institutionalised Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum both supply venues in which infrastructure, connectivity and environmental questions relevant to the two countries are discussed alongside other regional partners (Kamal Ahamed, 2019). BCIM is notable, in particular, for having originated in the 1990s as a Track II, expert-led dialogue rather than a formal intergovernmental body, which has allowed it to function as a proving ground for connectivity proposals including the BCIM Economic Corridor linking Kunming and Kolkata through Bangladesh and Myanmar, later absorbed into the Belt and Road Initiative's broader architecture (Marchang, 2021). Neither platform has produced a binding maritime instrument specific to Bangladesh and China; their significance for this article lies instead in the diplomatic and technical groundwork they provide for the bilateral projects examined below.

6.2 Port Development and Infrastructure Cooperation

Port development is the most tangible expression of Bangladesh-China maritime cooperation, and it is also the domain in which the tension between commercial opportunity and legal-political constraint is most visible. The **Payra Deep Sea Port**, in Patuakhali district, was awarded to a joint venture of China Harbour Engineering Company and China State Construction Engineering Corporation in 2016 at a cost of approximately US$510 million, and has since been developed as a multi-terminal facility intended to reach a channel depth of 10.5 metres following capital dredging, enabling vessels of up to 40,000 deadweight tonnes (Rahman, Saha & Blanchard, 2024). The project is explicitly linked, in Bangladeshi planning documents, to the goal of a 2 percent GDP contribution and to the government's Vision 2041 development targets.

The **Chittagong Port**, Bangladesh's principal container gateway, has received a smaller but still significant volume of Chinese-linked investment aimed at modernising terminal capacity and container-handling equipment; it handled approximately 3.2 million TEU in 2022, with independent projections putting throughput at 5.6 million TEU by 2036 as capacity expansion continues (Saha, 2023; Monir, 2017). Both projects illustrate a broader pattern documented in the literature on Chinese port investment in South Asia: financing and construction are typically structured as commercial contracts between state-owned Chinese enterprises and Bangladeshi port authorities, rather than as treaty-level bilateral instruments a distinction already flagged in Part 2 for its legal implications (Rahman, Saha & Blanchard, 2024).

The clearest illustration of that distinction is the **Sonadia Deep-Sea Port project**, initially proposed for Cox's Bazar with Chinese financing and construction interest following a 2009 feasibility study, but formally cancelled by the Bangladeshi government in August 2020, officially on environmental grounds relating to the island's biodiversity. Because Sonadia is examined in detail as a case study in Part 5 of this article including the geopolitical dimension of the decision it is treated here only as evidence that commercially structured port agreements remain reversible in a way treaty-based defence and scientific cooperation (Part 2, Table 3) are not. Partly in response to the gap Sonadia's cancellation left, Japan has since financed the **Matarbari Deep-Sea Port**, whose multipurpose terminals are designed to handle 80,000–100,000-tonne cargo vessels, compared with the 20,000–30,000-tonne capacity of existing Bangladeshi ports, and which is projected to handle between 1.4 and 4.2 million TEU by 2041 (Ferdous & Islam, 2020). Figure 4 sets out these throughput projections for Chittagong and Matarbari.

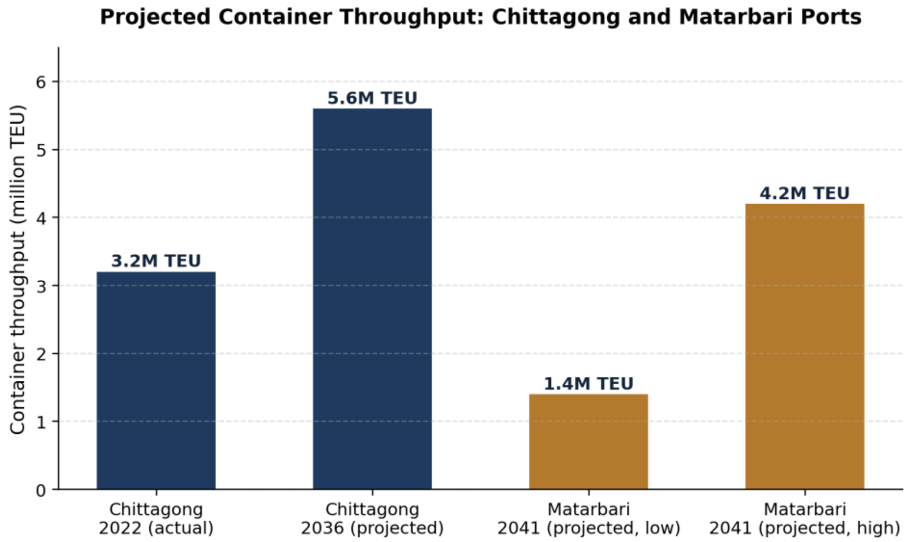

Figure 4. Projected Container Throughput at Chittagong and Matarbari Ports

Table 4. Principal Deep-Sea Port Projects in the Bay of Bengal Relevant to Bangladesh-China Cooperation

ct	ncing / Partner	is (as of 2024)	egic Significance
a Deep Port	a Harbour Engineering Co. / a State Construction Eng. . (~US$510m)	ational; dredging erminal nsion ongoing	l major seaport; anchors linked port cluster (Rahman, & Blanchard, 2024)
agong	ese-linked terminal ernisation financing	ational; capacity nsion to 2036	ipal container gateway; I TEU (2022) → 5.6M TEU 6 proj.) (Saha, 2023)
dia Deep- Port	osed Chinese financing (China or Engineering Co.)	elled, August	rates reversibility of nercial port agreements; iined as case study in Part 5
rbari Sea Port	n (JICA-linked financing)	er construction	capacity gap left by dia; 80,000–100,000 MT l capacity (Ferdous & n, 2020)

6.3 The Blue Economy, Marine Scientific Research and Capacity Building

Bangladesh's maritime zone, fixed by the 2012 ITLOS judgment and the 2014 arbitral award discussed in Part 2, is roughly equivalent in area to 80 percent of its land territory, and the government has since treated its exploitation as a distinct policy priority under the 7th Five Year Plan and the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 (Bakshi & Aktar, 2023). China's own experience is instructive here: its marine economy's contribution to GDP grew by an estimated 7.6 percent in a single year in the early 2010s, driven disproportionately by tourism and newer activities such as marine bioprospecting and seabed mining, rather than by traditional oil and gas extraction, whose growth has been comparatively flat. This experience underlies China's interest in supporting Bangladesh's own blue-economy ambitions, most concretely through the August 2022 Memorandum of Understanding on Marine Science and Technology Cooperation between the University of Dhaka and China's First Institute of Oceanography (see Part 2, Table 3), and through capacity-building programmes aligned with the IOC-UNESCO's maritime spatial planning initiatives, in which Bangladesh has participated as it builds domestic ocean-governance capacity (Quesada-Silva et al., 2021).

6.4 Fisheries and Marine Environmental Cooperation

Fisheries and coastal aquaculture remain central to food security and livelihoods on both sides of this relationship, and both countries confront distinct but related sustainability pressures: Bangladesh's fisheries sector is dominated by largely unregulated small-scale and inland operations vulnerable to overexploitation, while China's much larger industrial fishing fleet faces its own overcapacity and depleted-stock problems (Hossain, 2014). The scope for cooperation identified in the underlying research spans four areas: knowledge exchange on bycatch reduction and ecosystem-based management, joint stock-assessment and satellite-monitoring research, harmonisation of fishing-quota and marine-protected-area regulation, and community-level engagement of small-scale fishers in decision-making (Shamsuzzaman et al., 2017).

Marine pollution control presents a parallel set of concerns. Bangladesh's domestic legal framework comprising the Marine Fisheries Ordinance, the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, and the 2021 amendment to the Territorial Waters and Maritime Zones Act sits alongside its obligations under MARPOL and UNCLOS, but enforcement continues to be constrained by limited reception facilities and monitoring capacity, a gap already noted in Part 2 with respect to MARPOL compliance specifically (Alam & Xiangmin, 2019). China's more developed waste-management and pollution-monitoring capacity makes technology transfer a plausible area of cooperation, and both governments have signalled interest in joint environmental monitoring of the kind already piloted through the marine-science MoU discussed above (Aziz & Kabir, n.d.).

6.5 Synthesis: Practical Cooperation as a Test of the Legal Architecture

The practical record surveyed in this part is, on balance, more uneven than the legal architecture described in Part 2 might suggest. Port development has advanced furthest where projects are commercially self-contained (Payra, Chittagong) and stalled where they intersect with third-country sensitivities and domestic environmental politics (Sonadia). Marine scientific and capacity-building cooperation has advanced through discrete, technical instruments the 2022 MoU being the clearest example precisely because such instruments avoid the higher-stakes sovereignty and geopolitical questions that complicate port and boundary-adjacent projects. Fisheries and pollution-control cooperation, meanwhile, remains largely at the level of identified opportunity rather than binding commitment. This pattern sets up the analysis in Part 4, which examines directly why legal and geopolitical constraints bite harder in some of these domains than in others, before Part 5 returns to the Sonadia project and Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure as detailed case studies.

7. Legal and Geopolitical Constraints on Cooperation

7.1 Asymmetric National Legal Frameworks

Bangladesh and China approach maritime law-making from structurally different positions, and that asymmetry conditions everything examined in this part. Bangladesh's domestic framework the Territorial Waters and Maritime Zones Act 1974 (amended 2021), the Admiralty Court Act 2000, the Bangladesh Coast Guard Act 1994 and the Marine Fisheries Ordinance 1983 was substantially shaped by the 2012 and 2014 boundary rulings discussed in Part 2, which expanded Bangladesh's exclusive economic zone by an area commonly cited at roughly 118,813 square kilometres (Khan, 2022; Haque, 2019). This body of law is oriented toward consolidating and administering newly secured maritime space, rather than projecting power beyond it.

China's framework serves a different function. Its 1992 Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone, 1998 Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf Act, and the 2021 Coast Guard Law together constitute an increasingly assertive legal toolkit the Coast Guard Law in particular authorises the use of force against foreign vessels China considers to be operating unlawfully in waters it claims (Wang, Zhang & Xi, 2024). This posture is best documented in the South China Sea, where China has continued to assert claims under the so-called Nine-Dash Line notwithstanding the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in *Philippines v. China* rejecting the legal basis for those claims (Cruz & Castro, n.d.; Seymour, 2023). China has not adopted a comparably assertive posture toward Bangladesh or in the Bay of Bengal, and no equivalent dispute exists between the two states; the relevance of the South China Sea precedent for this article lies in what it signals about China's general preference for managing maritime disagreements bilaterally rather than through binding third-party adjudication a preference that sits uneasily against Bangladesh's own successful reliance on ITLOS and Annex VII arbitration.

7.2 Compliance and Enforcement Gaps

Formal treaty membership is not the same as enforcement capacity, and the gap between the two is where much of the practical friction in Bangladesh-China maritime cooperation resides. Bangladesh's Coast Guard and Navy operate across a coastline of roughly 710 kilometres and an EEZ several times larger following the 2012 and 2014 rulings, but institutional fragmentation across the Ministry of Shipping, the Ministry of Fisheries, the Navy and the Coast Guard each with overlapping but uncoordinated mandates constrains effective monitoring, leaving illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing a persistent problem regardless of the flag state involved (Al Arif & Karim, 2022). This is the same institutional-capacity constraint already identified in Part 2 with respect to MARPOL compliance specifically, and it recurs here at a broader scale.

China's enforcement posture presents the opposite problem: not insufficient capacity, but capacity whose scope of application is legally contested. The 2021 Coast Guard Law's extraterritorial reach its stated willingness to use force well beyond what UNCLOS commentators consider consistent with peaceful dispute settlement has not been invoked against Bangladesh, but its mere existence shapes how Bangladeshi policymakers assess the risk profile of deepening dependence on Chinese-financed port infrastructure discussed in Part 3 (Wang, Zhang & Xi, 2024). Table 5 summarises this asymmetry.

Table 5. Asymmetries in Bangladesh's and China's Domestic Maritime Legal Frameworks

ension	gladesh	a
domestic uments	torial Waters and Maritime Zones Act /2021; Admiralty Court Act 2000; Coast d Act 1994	torial Sea Law 1992; EEZ and inental Shelf Act 1998; Coast d Law 2021
ntation	olidating and administering newly secured time space	rting and, where contested, nding expansive maritime ns

ension	gladesh	a
erred dispute n	ilateral adjudication (ITLOS, Annex VII ration) used successfully against Myanmar ndia	eral negotiation preferred; ted 2016 PCA ruling in ppines v. China
cipal cement traint	utional fragmentation and limited eillance/monitoring capacity	e of extraterritorial cement authority contested r UNCLOS

7.3 The Regional Power Triangle: India, the United States and Bangladesh's Hedging Strategy

No account of Bangladesh-China maritime cooperation is complete without India, whose sensitivity to Chinese activity in the Bay of Bengal shapes Bangladeshi decision-making even when China and Bangladesh have no direct disagreement between themselves. India has historically read Chinese port investment across the Indian Ocean rim including in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Myanmar through the lens of a "String of Pearls" strategy of encirclement, a framing that, whatever its analytical merits, has real policy consequences: it has driven India to expand its own naval presence around the Andaman and Nicobar Command and to deepen defence cooperation with Bangladesh through joint exercises such as Bongosagar (Chakraborty, 2020; Bisen, 2022). Bangladesh's 2017 acquisition of two Ming-class submarines from China a legally unremarkable arms transaction was read in New Delhi as exactly this kind of strategic signal, prompting India to accelerate its own naval modernisation in response (Mcdevitt & Hashimova, 2020; Upadhyaya, 2019).

The clearest evidence that this pressure shapes outcomes, rather than merely accompanying them, is the Payra Port financing decision discussed in Part 3. What began as a project with substantial Chinese financial and technical involvement was restructured in 2016 to include contractors from India, the Netherlands and South Korea alongside Chinese firms, diversifying control in a way that reduced the project's exposure to being read as a purely Chinese strategic asset (Alam, 2019; Rahman, Saha & Blanchard, 2024). This pattern welcoming Chinese capital while deliberately diluting single-country control over strategically sensitive infrastructure is consistent with Bangladesh's stated "friendship to all, malice to none" foreign-policy posture, and with the broader hedging strategy documented in the literature on Bangladesh's response to Sino-Indian rivalry (Amin, 2025). The United States adds a further layer of pressure through its Indo-Pacific strategy and Freedom of Navigation Operations, without Bangladesh being a formal treaty partner in that architecture (Park & Wisuttisak, 2023). Figure 5 represents the resulting position schematically.

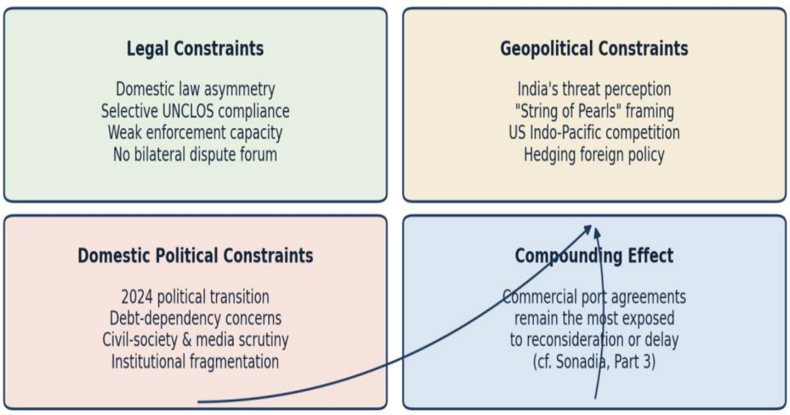

Figure 5. Geopolitical Pressures Shaping Bangladesh's Maritime Hedging Strategy

7.4 Domestic Political Volatility

Bangladesh's own domestic politics compound these external pressures. The mass protests that led to Sheikh Hasina's departure from office in August 2024, and the transition to an interim government, introduced a period of political uncertainty that inevitably affects the continuity of long-horizon infrastructure and defence commitments, including those tied to Chinese-financed projects (Mukherjee, 2025). Debates over debt dependency and the transparency of Belt and Road-linked financing, already present under the previous government, have continued into this transitional period, and opposition and civil-society scrutiny of major port projects Payra and Matarbari among them has repeatedly featured in Bangladeshi public debate. On the Chinese side, decision-making is comparatively insulated from public opinion but not from the Chinese Communist Party's own strategic priorities, including its stated ambition to expand naval capacity substantially by mid-century, an objective that shapes how selectively Chinese state-owned enterprises now assess politically sensitive overseas port investments (Chawla, 2024).

7.5 Dispute-Settlement Asymmetry: What Happens If Bangladesh and China Actually Disagree

Part 2 established that Bangladesh has a credible track record of using UNCLOS dispute-settlement mechanisms against Myanmar and India. What that track record cannot establish is how a dispute between Bangladesh and China specifically would unfold, because no such dispute has yet arisen. This is a genuine gap in the empirical record rather than a rhetorical one, and it matters because the two states' revealed preferences point in different directions: Bangladesh has shown a willingness to litigate to a conclusion and abide by the result, while China's conduct in the South China Sea shows a willingness to accept UNCLOS's zonal architecture while declining to accept adverse binding rulings on the specific claims that architecture is meant to adjudicate (Seymour, 2023). Should a dispute ever arise over, for example, the terms of a port concession, an EEZ resource-exploration licence, or the passage of Chinese survey or fishing vessels through Bangladeshi waters, Bangladesh's comparatively limited naval and diplomatic leverage would make enforcement of any favourable ruling dependent on diplomatic pressure or coalition support, rather than on any binding mechanism internal to UNCLOS itself.

7.6 Synthesis: The Limits of the Legal Architecture

This part has argued that the layered legal architecture described in Part 2, and the practical cooperation surveyed in Part 3, both operate within and are ultimately bounded by a set of constraints that are only partly legal in character. Domestic legal asymmetry between Bangladesh and China, uneven enforcement capacity, the regional triangulation with India and the United States, and Bangladesh's own domestic political volatility together explain why cooperation has advanced furthest in technically self-contained, low-sovereignty-sensitivity domains (marine science, commercially structured port finance) and stalled where sovereignty, strategic signalling or third-country perception are directly engaged (Sonadia). Part 5 now turns to two case studies the Sonadia Deep-Sea Port project and Belt and Road-linked infrastructure more broadly that illustrate this dynamic in detail, before concluding with policy recommendations for both governments.

8. Case Studies

8.1 Case Study I: The Sonadia Deep-Sea Port Anatomy of a Cancelled Project

Sonadia Island, off Cox's Bazar, was identified as early as the 2000s as the most promising site for a deep-sea port capable of accommodating the mega-container vessels that Chittagong Port's shallower draft could not (Abedin, 2013). Following a 2010 feasibility study, China Harbour Engineering Company emerged as the leading candidate to finance and build the facility as part of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, and the project was framed domestically as central to Bangladesh's Vision 2041 ambitions. It was never built. Tracing why offers the clearest single illustration, among the material examined in this article, of how legal, environmental and geopolitical constraints treated separately in Part 4 interact in practice.

Three distinct legal obstacles emerged in parallel. First, Sonadia Island's mangrove forests, coral formations and status as habitat for endangered species, including the spoon-billed sandpiper, brought it within the ambit of the Ecologically Critical Area designation under the Bangladesh

Environment Conservation Act 1995, triggering an environmental clearance process that early project planning had not adequately anticipated (Chowdhury & Foysal, 2017). Second, the Bangladesh Territorial Waters and Maritime Zones Act 1974 left the legal status of foreign operational control over port facilities insufficiently defined, complicating approval. Third, and most consequential for the final outcome, the negotiation process attracted sustained criticism over its departure from the competitive tendering procedures set out in the Public Procurement Act 2006 and the transparency standards expected under the Foreign Private Investment (Promotion and Protection) Act 1980 (Ahammed, 2015).

These legal frictions were compounded, rather than caused, by geopolitics. India's reading of Sonadia as a node in a Chinese "String of Pearls" a framing this article has already traced to its origins in Indian strategic writing (Part 4, Section 7.3; Dixon, 2014) generated diplomatic pressure that Bangladeshi decision-makers could not ignore, given the country's broader dependence on stable relations with India (Vaughn, 2018). Japan's near-simultaneous offer to finance a comparable facility at Matarbari, on more concessional terms and without the same strategic baggage, gave Bangladesh a face-saving alternative that made walking away from Sonadia a far less costly decision than it would otherwise have been (Ferdous & Islam, 2020). The government formally shelved the project in August 2020, citing environmental grounds; the geopolitical and procurement dimensions, while less publicly emphasised, are, on the evidence reviewed here, at least as important to the outcome.

Sonadia's significance for this article is not that it represents a failure of Bangladesh-China cooperation in general bilateral ties continued to deepen afterward through the channels examined in Part 3 but that it demonstrates, concretely, the proposition advanced in Part 2: commercially structured, non-treaty port agreements are legally and politically reversible in a way that treaty-based defence cooperation and the 2022 marine-science MoU are not. As of the most recent reporting available, the project remains formally inactive rather than cancelled outright, and the site continues to be the subject of mangrove-conservation initiatives that make any large-scale industrial revival increasingly unlikely (Mannan, 2019).

8.2 Case Study II: The Belt and Road Initiative and Bangladesh's Maritime Development

Bangladesh formally joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2016, four years after President Xi Jinping launched the initiative's transcontinental framework in 2013 (Bhattarai, 2019). Since then, Chinese investment and lending to Bangladesh spanning energy, transport and maritime infrastructure has been estimated in the tens of billions of dollars, with the Maritime Silk Road component directly implicated in the Payra, Chittagong and (initially) Sonadia projects examined in Part 3 (Jahan & Hossain, 2024). Unlike Sonadia, the BRI relationship as a whole has proven durable, and the reasons why are instructive for the constraints framework developed in Part 4.

Legally, BRI-linked projects in Bangladesh are typically structured through commercial contracts or memoranda of understanding between Chinese state-owned enterprises and Bangladeshi counterparts, arrangements that Xiong and Tomasic (2019) characterise as an emerging body of soft law specific to Belt and Road financing, sitting outside conventional public international law while still shaping state behaviour. This structure has drawn domestic criticism in Bangladesh particularly where projects have been awarded government-to-government rather than through the competitive tendering the Public Procurement Act 2006 otherwise requires but it has also given the relationship the flexibility that a treaty-based framework would not (Hossain, 2019). Where large-scale construction intersects with sensitive coastal environments, Bangladesh's Environment Conservation Act 1995 and Environmental Court Act 2000 continue to apply in parallel, and compliance with these domestic environmental requirements has become a de facto precondition for BRI project continuity after Sonadia demonstrated the political cost of not securing it.

Geopolitically, the pattern already described in Part 4 recurs: Indian anxiety about Chinese port access, framed through the String of Pearls lens, and Japanese counter-investment through concessional financing (the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure) together constrain how far Bangladesh can lean into BRI financing for any single project without triggering a corrective response from other partners (Pal, 2021). Bangladesh’s own account of its BRI participation consistently framed as economically motivated rather than as strategic alignment with China is broadly consistent with the hedging behaviour identified in Part 4, Section 7.3, and with the pattern visible in Payra’s 2016 restructuring to include non-Chinese partners. Regional reactions elsewhere in South Asia have been more polarised: Pakistan and Sri Lanka’s deeper BRI engagement, and India’s rejection of the initiative outright over sovereignty concerns tied to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, together illustrate that Bangladesh’s comparatively cautious, multi-vector approach is neither the only nor the most common regional response (Ali et al., 2023).

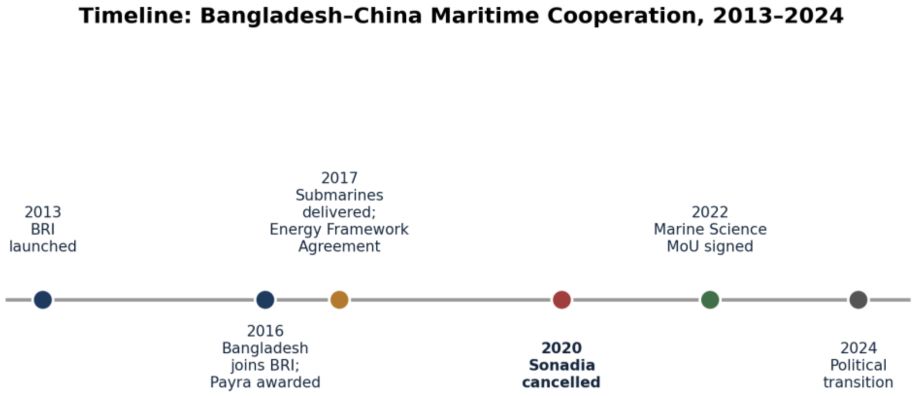

Figure 6. Timeline of Key Events in Bangladesh-China Maritime Cooperation, 2013–2024

8.3 Cross-Case Synthesis

A third, more briefly noted line of cooperation joint offshore hydrocarbon exploration through the 2017 Framework Agreement on Energy Cooperation, and continued interest from China National Petroleum Corporation and China National Offshore Oil Corporation in Bangladeshi offshore blocks after several Western firms withdrew follows the same pattern as the BRI case: technically demanding, commercially structured cooperation that has advanced steadily precisely because it has stayed outside the sovereignty-sensitive, high-visibility category that undid Sonadia (Meidan, 2016). Table 6 draws these threads together.

Table 6. Comparative Outcomes Across Bangladesh-China Maritime Cooperation Instruments

	ument Type	ome	anatory Factor
dia Deep-Sea	mercial (proposed, treaty)	elled,)	ronmental-clearance failure + Indian olitical pressure + procurement parency concerns
and Road tive (general)	d: MoUs, mercial contracts, law instruments	oing, nding	bility of instrument form; post- dia environmental compliance pline
hore energy ration	ework Agreement mmercial PSCs	oing, mental	nical/commercial character avoids -visibility sovereignty questions

	ument Type	ome	anatory Factor
nce cooperation / he science MoU 2)	ty-level / formal J	ble since / 2022	utionalised, lower geopolitical nce than port control

9. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

9.1 Summary of Findings

This article set out to examine how international law shapes, enables and constrains maritime cooperation between Bangladesh and China in the Bay of Bengal. The analysis across the preceding parts supports three central findings. First, UNCLOS and the IMO's technical instruments supply a genuine and operative legal architecture for this relationship, not merely a rhetorical one: Bangladesh's own successful use of ITLOS and Annex VII arbitration against Myanmar and India gave it both the maritime zones within which subsequent cooperation occurs and the diplomatic credibility to negotiate from a position of legal, rather than purely economic, strength. Second, the durability of any given instance of cooperation correlates closely with its legal form: treaty-level and formal memoranda defence cooperation, marine scientific research have proven far more resilient than the commercial, non-treaty agreements that structure most port development, a pattern the Sonadia case demonstrates with unusual clarity. Third, geopolitical constraints, principally India's threat perception and the wider India-China-United States triangle, condition nearly every major decision examined in this article, from Payra's 2016 ownership restructuring to Sonadia's cancellation to the generally cautious, multi-vector character of Bangladesh's engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative.

9.2 Policy Recommendations

Building on this analysis, five recommendations follow for policymakers in Bangladesh, and, where relevant, for their Chinese counterparts:

- Favour treaty-level or formal memorandum instruments over purely commercial agreements for any project with strategic or sovereignty-sensitive dimensions, given the demonstrated durability gap identified in Part 2 and Section 8.3 of this article.
- Front-load environmental clearance and stakeholder consultation before, not during, project negotiation the single most consistent lesson of the Sonadia case being that environmental review conducted late in the process becomes a vehicle for geopolitical and procurement objections, rather than a genuine safeguard.
- Continue and formalise diplomatic diversification, ensuring that major infrastructure projects retain participation from multiple international partners (as with Payra's post-2016 restructuring), which reduces both geopolitical exposure and dependency risk.
- Strengthen domestic enforcement capacity for existing legal obligations MARPOL compliance, IUU fishing enforcement, and coordinated inter-agency maritime governance since Part 2 and Part 4 both identify capacity, not legal commitment, as Bangladesh's principal compliance gap.
- Expand cooperation in the technical, lower-salience domains identified in Section 8.3 marine scientific research, capacity building, and offshore energy exploration where the evidence reviewed here shows cooperation has proven most durable, rather than concentrating diplomatic capital on high-visibility port projects alone.

9.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This analysis has limitations worth noting for future work. It relies substantially on secondary and documentary sources rather than original interviews with Bangladeshi or Chinese officials, which would allow more direct assessment of the negotiating dynamics behind decisions such as Sonadia's cancellation. It also does not address, in the depth the subject deserves, the labour conditions attached to Chinese-financed infrastructure projects, an area where the underlying evidence base remains thin and where further empirical research including on displacement, gender dynamics and environmental justice in coastal communities affected by port development would meaningfully extend this article's findings. Finally, as climate change increasingly affects the distribution of marine resources and the stability of existing legal boundaries, future research should examine whether the delimitation framework that has served Bangladesh well since 2012 remains adequate to a Bay of Bengal whose physical and ecological baseline is itself changing.

9.4 Concluding Remarks

Bangladesh's experience since 2012 offers a case study in how a comparatively small coastal state can use international law not merely defensively but as an active instrument of maritime diplomacy: securing its own maritime zones through peaceful adjudication, then using the legal certainty this produced to attract, structure and, where necessary, decline foreign investment on its own terms. Its cooperation with China has been most successful where it has followed this logic durable where anchored in formal legal instruments, more fragile where left to purely commercial arrangements exposed to geopolitical headwinds. As both countries' maritime ambitions in the Bay of Bengal continue to grow, the choice of legal form treaty, memorandum, or commercial contract is unlikely to remain a technical detail. On the evidence presented in this article, it is close to the central variable determining which cooperative initiatives endure.

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