



Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue

23 - 24 May 2023



Cover Photo: Stilt fishing on the Southern Coast of Sri Lanka. ©Val Shevchenko

Third Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue 23-24 May 2023

Outcome Document

On 23 and 24 May 2023, the Pathfinder Foundation (PF) and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) co-hosted the Third Track 1.5 Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to promote greater regional maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. Participants included government officials, independent maritime experts, and representatives of prominent think tanks from the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand). The Dialogue was held under Chatham House Rules.

Participants acknowledged the progress made since the first and second dialogues in 2021 & 2022, including the adoption of outcomes at the official level. The establishment of informal channels between maritime law enforcement agencies (MLEAs) at the level of Directors of Operations consequent to the Bay of Bengal Tabletop Exercise in New Delhi in November 2022 and the issuance of the Kochi Declaration that provided the foundation for the creation of a Bay of Bengal Marine Research Network were therefore welcomed.

This outcome document summarizes the key takeaways of the discussion and recommendations for greater regional maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. As in previous Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogues, the outcomes of the latest Dialogue will be made available to the governments of the region as well as relevant regional organisations.

Regional cooperation for stable waters

1. Participants agreed on the urgent need to strengthen regional cooperation and increase regional management to address maritime security challenges in the Bay of Bengal, including marine environmental challenges, depletion of fish stocks, extreme weather-related events, trafficking drugs and arms, and illegal migration. Considering the transboundary nature of these challenges, it was considered imperative for the littoral states to work more closely together to address these issues.
2. Participants acknowledged the ongoing efforts and potential of multilateral organisations such as BIMSTEC (particularly the Maritime Security Working Group), IORA, IONS, and BOBP-IGO. Despite these efforts, there were still gaps in regional coordination mechanisms to manage the maritime security challenges of the Bay of Bengal.

Managing incidents at sea in the Bay of Bengal

3. Following up on the outcomes of the Bay of Bengal Tabletop Exercise for Maritime Law Enforcement Agencies (MLEAs) held in New Delhi in November 2022, progress has been made in establishing channels of communication between the MLEAs and developing (non-legally binding) standard operating principles (SOPs) to mitigate (the risk of) conflicts arising from interactions between MLEAs, as well as between MLEAs and foreign fishing vessels crossing maritime boundaries in the Bay of Bengal.

4. Participants acknowledged the value of these SOPs, and it was agreed that they should be presented to the authorities of the Bay of Bengal littoral states for consideration, revision, and possible-adoption within the framework of BIMSTEC (especially the working group on maritime security) and other appropriate bilateral and multilateral fora such as IORA and the Colombo Security Conclave.
5. In addition to the increase in informal communication between MLEAs of the Bay of Bengal following the Tablet op Exercise in New Delhi in 2022, participants also highlighted the need to establish formal channels of communication and hotlines between the MLEAs of the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal.

Regional synergies to mitigate marine environmental degradation

6. Greater regional cooperation on marine scientific research was considered an important starting point for regional science-based policies that address marine environmental degradation and depletion of fish stocks in the Bay of Bengal.
7. Participants welcomed the progress made in promoting greater regional cooperation on marine scientific research since the Second Bay of Bengal Maritime Dialogue, including the Kochi Declaration and subsequent creation of a Bay of Bengal Marine Research Network under the BOBP-IGO Agreement (including fellowships for researchers of Bay of Bengal littoral States).
8. To further strengthen cooperation on marine scientific research, it was suggested to strengthen research networking between the Bay of Bengal littoral states and build the capacity for research on IUU fishing, data gathering and sharing (especially regarding fish stock assessments), and marine nature conservation. The need for more international funding to support such region-led initiatives was also highlighted, along with the need to find synergies between ongoing efforts of regional organisations, including BOBP-IGO, IORA, BIMSTEC, and the next phase of the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project (BOBLME).
9. Participants suggested convening a tabletop exercise or other knowledge-sharing sessions on regional responses to environmental disasters like oil spills. There was significant interest from all countries to document and share the lessons learnt from recent incidents like Sri Lanka's response to the X-Press Pearl maritime disaster.
10. Participants expressed great concern about the increasing number of 'marine environmental dead zones' in the Bay of Bengal. They indicated there should be greater regional attempts to study the phenomenon and monitor its growth.
11. IUU fishing was identified as yet another significant threat to the marine environment and fish stocks of the Bay of Bengal, while some of the Bay of Bengal littoral states have banned unsustainable fishing methods such as bottom trawling and using dynamite and cyanide. The meeting discussed that such agreements should be expanded to cover the entire region and that implementation should be sped up.
12. While steps such as coordinated seasonal fishing bans were also identified as potential measures that can be undertaken regionally, a more immediate need was initiating joint stock assessments for the region as a starting point for thinking about coordinated fishing bans. It was suggested that littoral states work towards a regional data depository to incorporate the fish stock data already available in the public domain and other data available to individual littoral states.

13. BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate, BIMSTEC Maritime Security Working Group, and other regional platforms were identified as avenues for further discussion on identifying and agreeing upon the next steps that can be implemented in the Bay of Bengal region. The need to arrive at distinct regional mitigation and adaptation strategies was identified as a necessary step and the possibility of a legally-binding agreement in the future. Further on-the-ground research and inclusion of perspectives from fishermen and coastal communities were also recommended to supplement engagement with experts and governments.
14. Participants reiterated their support for implementing the recently concluded High Seas Treaty. They stressed how its practical implementation in the region could help minimise further environmental degradation in the Bay of Bengal waters. Platforms that help with data sharing and serve as a unified voice for the Bay of Bengal to address the above concerns must be encouraged.

Humanitarian treatment of fishermen

15. Participants stressed the importance of maintaining the humanitarian treatment of fishers during interactions between fishing vessels and maritime law enforcement agencies, noting that the humanitarian treatment of fishers is an interest that all littoral states have in common.
16. Facilities such as Information Fusion Centres and MRCC can help collect and analyse information related to IUU fishing fishermen involved in such activities. Informal networks, including a WhatsApp Group between Directors of Operations of the MLEAs of the Bay of Bengal that was established after the Table top Exercise in New Delhi, have served as quick and immediate channels of communication in such situations.
17. Participants discussed the importance of developing agreements between countries to take humanitarian measures, including notifying the respective countries within 24 hours of an arrest of their fishermen, facilitating communication between fishermen and their families, providing food, water and other necessities etc. Speeding up the repatriation process was seen as an urgent priority.
18. Skill development and vocational training for fishermen were identified as aiding their livelihood and leading them away from the need to engage in IUU fishing.
19. Participants emphasised the importance of implementing Article 73 of UNCLOS, which stipulates the conditions under which maritime law enforcement concerning (foreign) fishing vessels should take place.



Pathfinder Foundation is a premier think tank that has played a catalytic role in research and analysis aimed at contributing to economic policy reforms in Sri Lanka. Over the years, it has established a wide network of partner organizations worldwide, thereby enhancing bilateral and multilateral partnerships to promote economic, social and political development, in addition to its security and strategic focus. Serving as a platform to engage in critical thinking and cross-disciplinary analysis, Pathfinder Foundation aims to increase knowledge and raise awareness of salient issues with relevant stakeholders locally and internationally.



The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a Swiss-based private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. HD's mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation. HD uses the tools of private diplomacy to expand the space for the non-violent resolution of armed conflict. It opens channels of communication and mediates between parties in conflict, facilitates dialogue, provides support to the broader mediation and peacebuilding community, carries out capacity building work, and conducts research on mediation issues. HD deploys its expertise to support local processes that protect civilians and foster lasting and just peace.