Executive Summary | January 2020

Stable Seas: Bay of Bengal addresses maritime security challenges in the Bay of Bengal through a holistic analysis of maritime governance and its effects on regional stability. The study of regional maritime security dynamics is important to the region and timely for the following reasons:

- Illicit maritime activities are intrinsically linked to land-based issues like coastal economic welfare, illicit economies, and the rule of law.

- The improvement or worsening of conditions in any one issue area can have important follow-on effects which impact wider regional maritime security and governance.

- Increasing climate vulnerability threatens the health of fisheries and coastal welfare across the Bay of Bengal.

- Although piracy and armed robbery incidents have declined in the first half of 2019, in 2018 almost a third of all reported maritime incidents in the Indo-Pacific occurred in the Bay of Bengal.

- Recent outbreaks of political violence in areas have contributed to maritime mixed migration, the escalation of which could generate instability in the wider region.

- Regional states have placed an increased emphasis on maritime domain awareness to counteract illicit maritime activities such as piracy, armed robbery, and kidnapping; illicit trades; human smuggling; illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

- Bay of Bengal littoral countries are strengthening their maritime ties through a series of bilateral and multilateral alliances, naval exercises, and memorandums of understanding.

- The region is increasingly becoming an area of strategic interest for major external powers through diplomatic and economic engagement on maritime issues.

- This report can help identify priorities to revive the Bay of Bengal’s long history of strong maritime connectivity by facilitating deeper cooperation across governments on maritime issues.
Rapid improvements in economic security for coastal communities in the Bay of Bengal have resulted in steadily increasing coastal welfare.

To build on the positive trend, countries need to ensure growth is inclusive across regions and resolve insecurity resulting from outbreaks of political violence.

However, limited port capacity, low levels of intra-regional economic integration, the need for infrastructure investment, and environmental damage pose challenges to realizing the region’s blue-economic potential.

The abundance of small vessels, the difficulty in monitoring the movement of such vessels, port corruption, and threats to the welfare of local fishing communities create an enabling environment for illicit trades.

The region also exhibits pockets of inequitable service provision and socioeconomic exclusion which threaten to isolate certain coastal communities. Weak rule of law can drive communities towards illicit maritime activity for survival.

Coastal conflict and pockets of coastal economic insecurity generate a market for maritime mixed migration. Migrants remain vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers and smugglers.

Multilateral initiatives like BIMSTEC and IORA work to improve regional cooperation on maritime issues.

Although overall, piracy, armed robbery, and kidnapping for ransom have declined, incidents continue to be recorded in Chittagong anchorages and the Sundarbans.

Addressing marine pollution and developing coordinated fisheries management will be vital to the long-term sustainability of regional fisheries.

Multilateral and bilateral initiatives, led largely by India, are proactively addressing limitations in maritime domain awareness and coordination.
One Earth Future (OEF) is a self-funded, private operating foundation seeking to create a more peaceful world through collaborative, data-driven initiatives. OEF focuses on enhancing maritime cooperation, creating sustainable jobs in fragile economies, and research which actively contributes to thought leadership on global issues. As an operating foundation, OEF provides strategic, financial, and administrative support allowing its programs to focus deeply on complex problems and to create constructive alternatives to violent conflict.

Stable Seas, a program of One Earth Future, engages the international security community with novel research on illicit maritime activities such as piracy and armed robbery, trafficking and smuggling in persons, IUU (illegal/unregulated/unreported) fishing, and illicit trades in weapons, drugs, and other contraband. These activities perpetuate organized political violence and reinforce each other to threaten economic development and the welfare of coastal populations.