

Mapping India's footprint in BIMSTEC

by Gopika Shinghal



For India, the establishment of BIMSTEC, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation was yet another platform to engage with Southeast Asia. The scope for direct connectivity with Southeast Asia via the Northeast India, the potential access to energy resources in Myanmar and the potential economic opportunities available in the ASEAN had evoked New Delhi's interest to be a part of this regional grouping. It started off as the BIST-EC, the Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation Group in June, 1997. While Myanmar joined later in 1997, Nepal and Bhutan joined during the first summit at Bangkok in 2004, thereby establishing the seven-nation intra-regional grouping. BIMSTEC can be described as a synthesis of India's 'Look East Policy' of the 1990s, and Thailand's 'Look West Policy'.

Though this year we have marked the 21st Anniversary of the establishment of BIMSTEC, yet the organization has not seen many high profile engagements and was off to a rather modest start and only saw ministerial meetings for a very long time. However, the escalating pressures in the neighbourhood of South Asia and Southeast Asia have renewed pragmatic hope for stronger ties between BIMSTEC member states. On the 20th Anniversary of BIMSTEC in 2017, PM Modi remarked that "With shared values, histories, ways of life, and destinies that are interlinked, BIMSTEC represents a common space for peace and development."¹ For India, BIMSTEC stands not only at the very important intersection of its 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East Policy' but also connects the ecologies of the Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal.

BIMSTEC is an important organization in India's ongoing efforts to map out new pathways of geo-economic cooperation among countries in the region. India sees BIMSTEC as part of its extended neighbourhood. Indian efforts at making the Bay of Bengal community more integrated also arise from its concerns on China which has made significant inroads into the region. Also, stimulating India's role in BIMSTEC is the

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In keeping with the growing dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise as a leading power. To support that goal, the DPG undertakes research and organizes policy interactions across a wide canvas, including strategic and geo-political issues, geo-economic issues and defence and security issues. DPG does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

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**Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
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larger national goal of transforming the landlocked north-eastern states as it could be a potential game-changer in their quest for prosperity. With SAARC being in doldrums due to the India-Pakistan bilateral ties, BIMSTEC can be expected to play a greater role in intra-regional integration in the foreseeable future.

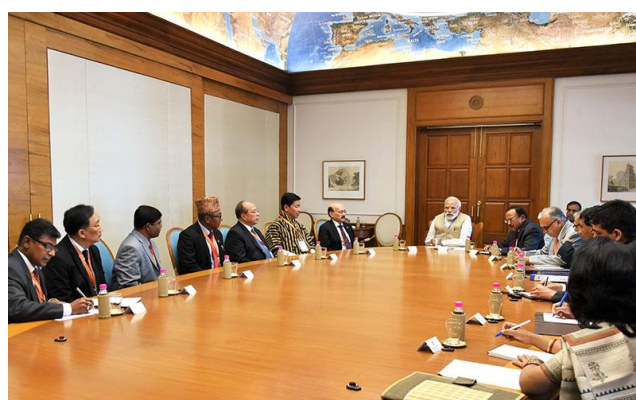
The renewed foreign policy initiative and strategic focus signalled by India at the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit in Goa on October 16, 2016 rejuvenated the organization and demonstrated India's potential to play the role of a regional leader. BIMSTEC is a sector-driven organization, a rarity among regional groups and over-time, it has steadily expanded its agenda to identify fourteen priority areas. India is the lead country in four priority sectors, namely, transport and communication, tourism, environment and disaster management, and counter-terrorism and transnational crime. India has also been more than willing to back initiatives by other member countries in diverse areas, including energy, public health and agriculture. Its contributions across the four lead sectors and others since the grouping was formed have been listed below.

Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime:

Though many issues were discussed at the BIMSTEC Leaders Retreat at Goa in October 2016, the highlight was the open discussion on combating terrorism in the region in all its forms and manifestations, which stressed that there can be no justification for acts of terror on any grounds whatsoever. The Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crimes (CTTC) is the platform for discussions on counterterrorism related issues between BIMSTEC member countries.. There are six Sub-Groups, each working on a specific aspect of CTTC cooperation, and they all report to the BIMSTEC Joint Working on CTTC. India is the lead in two categories: the Sub-Group on Legal and Law Enforcement Issues (SGLLEI) and Sub-Group on the Cooperation on Countering Radicalization and Terrorism. Even though India is not the leader of the sub-group on Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his desire to host a conference under the BIMSTEC frame-work on narcotics trafficking related topics at the Kathmandu Summit. "This is not a law and order problem of one country. We must unite to tackle these problems," he said.

By signing the BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking in 2009 the group has made significant advances in building the legal architecture to combat the menace of terrorism. The Convention is currently awaiting

ratification by Bhutan and Nepal. Another legal instrument, namely the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters is ready and is awaiting signature by Member States. To boost intra-regional security cooperation, the first meeting of the BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs was held in New Delhi, India on 21st March 2017 and it adopted a holistic approach to tackle traditional and non-traditional security challenges that threaten the region. In the words of Sushma Swaraj, the External Affairs Minister of India, "We worked out collective strategies to counter the scourge of terrorism, violent extremism and transnational crimes, as also to strengthen our maritime and cyber security cooperation. Specific follow-up measures in these areas are now under progress".²



The First BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs Meet was held in New Delhi in March 2017 where a holistic approach to tackle traditional and non-traditional security challenges threatening the region was adopted. The BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs are seen calling on Prime Minister Modi in this photograph. Source: Himalayan Times

The first Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Security Dialogue Forum was held in New Delhi, India on 22 September 2017. To further encourage closer cooperation and promote strategic alignment in matters of regional security, India will host the first military exercise of BIMSTEC focussing on counter-terrorism at Pune in September 2018. As a part of this, a conclave of the Army Chiefs of the member states is being planned. As a lead country in this sector, India urges for active participation by all member states.

Environment and Disaster Management:

The tsunami in December 2005, which unleashed mayhem and destruction across some of the countries in the region, prompted India to take the initiative to forge regional mechanisms of cooperation in the sphere of environment and disaster management. The collective efforts culminated in setting up a Tsunami Warning Centre for data sharing. The Eighth BIMSTEC Ministerial

Meeting held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 18-19 December 2005 decided to add Environment and Disaster Management as one of the priority areas of cooperation of BIMSTEC. Disaster Management has now become a high priority area of coordination and cooperation for BIMSTEC as it is home to approximately 1.5 billion people and is amongst the most disaster prone regions in the world, facing frequent natural disasters such as flood, cyclones and earthquake. PM Modi has called for intra-regional coordinated synchronization of resources, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts (HADR).

During the 1st BIMSTEC Summit, India had proposed cooperation in information sharing on Remote Sensing for the purpose of agricultural, environmental, and catastrophe management. Additionally, India's Ministry of Earth Sciences put forward a plan to establish the BIMSTEC Centre on Weather and Climate in New Delhi. The Memorandum of Association (MoA) on the establishment of BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC) was signed in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar on 04 March 2014 at the Third BIMSTEC Summit. The Centre has been functioning in National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF), Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India. The first meeting of the Governing Board and Scientific Advisory Council of the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather & Climate was held in New Delhi, India on 30 July 2018 & a Workshop entitled 'Severe Weather/Climate Disaster warning for BIMSTEC Region' was held in New Delhi, India on 31 July 2018. At the Kathmandu Summit, PM Modi also talked about the effects of climate change on farming and urged the member countries to work together to counter global warming. Specifying the need to counter the effects of climate change on farming, he announced that India will organize an International Conference on the issue of climate-smart farming.

The Leaders of BIMSTEC at their Retreat in Goa, discussed closer cooperation in disaster management through joint exercises, sharing of information including an early warning system, the adoption of preventive measures, joint action on relief and rehabilitation, and capacity building. During the informal consultations at the Retreat, PM Modi proposed the organization of the BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise annually. Accordingly, the First BIMSTEC Annual Disaster Management Exercise was held in New Delhi, India on 10-13 October 2017. A total number of nineteen representatives, from each of the Member States participated in the Exercise. The main Exercise conducted by the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) as the nodal agency in Delhi and the National Capital Region, consisted of three components, i.e., Table Top Exercise (TTX), Field

Training Exercises (FTXs) on Earthquake and Flood and an After Action Review (AAR).

Tourism:

People-to-People contacts are very important for bolstering intra-region tourism as they bring together our cultural experiences, nurture the bonds of heart and mind and promote a cooperative spirit amongst the people. Recognising this, India has taken up initiatives to celebrate the common heritage and boost tourism through stronger people-centric ties. As a part of the celebrations to mark the 20th Anniversary of BIMSTEC, India hosted the 'Bodhi Parwa: BIMSTEC Festival of Buddhist Heritage' from 8-10 December, 2017. The Festival had diverse components including an exhibition of international and Indian Buddhist art and architecture, discourses by eminent scholars and practitioners of Buddhism, guided meditation and chanting by Buddhist monks and choir, screening of films on Buddhism, dance and music performances.



BIMSTEC was reinvigorated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the Leader's Retreat in Goa on October 15-16, 2016. It is the only organisation that links South Asia with South East Asia. Source: Himalayan Times

Acknowledging the deep-rooted civilizational and historical contacts of kinship and culture, the Leaders of the BIMSTEC at the Goa Retreat recognized the rich potential for development of tourism and reiterated their keen interest in taking concrete steps to promote intra-BIMSTEC tourism including specialized tourist circuits and eco-tourism. In particular, the Leaders encouraged the development of Buddhist Tourist Circuit and Temple Tourist Circuit within the region. To further augment this goal, PM Modi at the Kathmandu Summit extended an invitation to BIMSTEC members for being part of the International Buddhist Conclave (IBC) to be

held in August 2020. The Union Ministry of Tourism, India has been organising the IBC biennially. The last Conclave was held in New Delhi in 2018.

New Delhi hosts the BIMSTEC Information Centre which was established after the Ninth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting held in New Delhi, India on 09 August 2006. It administers the BIMSTEC Tourism Fund which was established at the First Meeting of BIMSTEC Tourism Working Group held in India on 23 September 2013. The fund received one-time contribution by each Member State and supports the activities approved by the Tourism Working Group. The Fund assists to facilitate joint tourism related activities within the BIMSTEC region and is helpful for promoting tourism, a sector of great potential considering that all regional countries comprising the grouping are known for a stunning array of tourist attractions. The First Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Tour Operators was organized in New Delhi on 07 July 2017. It focussed on preparing a common tour package, preparing webpage of BIMSTEC tour operators and simplifying visas for citizens of member states to increase movement of tourists in the region.

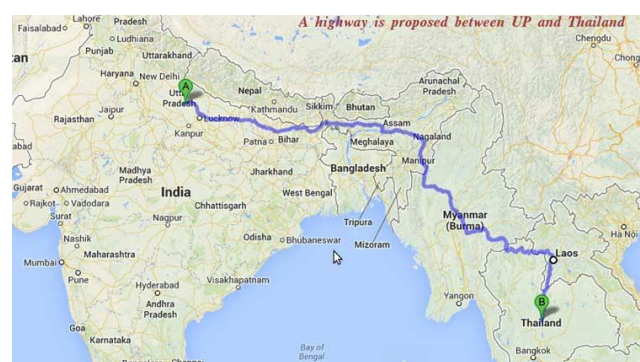
To strengthen the close religious and cultural ties and boost tourism between India and Nepal, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister K P Oli launched Nepal-India Ramayana Circuit connecting Janakpur, the birthplace of Sita, with Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Ram. At Janakpur in May, 2018, the two Prime Ministers flagged off the inaugural direct bus service between Janakpur and Ayodhya. Also, along the sides of the Kathmandu Summit, the two Prime Ministers jointly inaugurated the four hundred bed 'Nepal-Bharat Maitri Pashupati Dharmashala' at Kathmandu. Construction of the project had commenced in September 2016 and on inaugural was officially handed over by the Government of India to the Pashupati Area Development Trust, which will be responsible for managing the Dharmashala facility for pilgrims visiting the Pashupatinath Temple area.

Transport and Communication:

BIMSTEC was in fact once a well-connected region through the littoral waterways and seaports up until the middle of the 20th Century. The current efforts at bolstering connectivity are not only focussed on the 'rediscovery' of the old routes but also on establishing digital connectivity in the region. In the words of Prime Minister Modi, the region's "biggest opportunity is Connectivity - Trade connectivity, Economic connectivity, Transport connectivity, Digital connectivity, and People-to-People

connectivity".³ At the Kathmandu Summit, he declared that India is ready to host a BIMSTEC Start Up Conclave to increase connectivity among entrepreneurs of the region.

To bolster road linkages, India, Thailand and Myanmar are working on a 1,400-km long trilateral highway that would link India with Southeast Asia. The highway would boost trade, business, health, education and tourism ties among the three countries. Thailand and India have more-or-less completed construction of road on their side. Some portions of the internal road connectivity in Myanmar remain to be completed, and Myanmar has made requests for grants and funding to enable this project to be completed, which are under consideration by both India and Thailand. For the free flow of goods, services and investment in the region it is important that the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement and the Coastal Shipping Agreement are finalized without any further delay.



The India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, which links India to Myanmar and then further to Thailand in Southeast Asia, is expected to be completed by December 2019. Source: Indian Express

India is also involved in a variety of cross-border development projects with Myanmar aimed at improving connectivity between North-eastern India and Western Myanmar and are expected to give an impetus to the local economies as well as bilateral trade. Probably among the most important initiative is the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Facility. An MOU between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal regarding preliminary engineering-cum-traffic survey of the broad gauge line between Raxaul (India) and Kathmandu (Nepal) has already been established. The Raxaul-Kathmandu rail line is expected to expand connectivity by enhancing people-to-people linkages between the two countries and promoting economic growth and development.

Apart from developing road links, efforts are underway to have a rail link from Jiribham in Assam to Hanoi in Vietnam passing through Myanmar. The Government of India is also channelling more resources to improve connectivity within India's Northeast. By 2022 all state capitals in the Northeast except Shillong will be linked by railways to Guwahati. Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) is being utilized to speed up road-building in the region. India's US \$ 8 billion Line of credit to Bangladesh is being utilized to enhance rail, overland and coastal connectivity with Bangladesh. By 2020, nine of the eleven railway links between India and Bangladesh severed in 1965 will be restored.

In today's technological age, it is equally important for countries to be linked to one another digitally. To further this goal, an optical fibre cable link is being established between Moreh in Manipur and Mandalay in Myanmar. India also remains committed to connecting the country's National Knowledge Network to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. The Indian Mobile Congress is being organized in Delhi in October 2018 which will focus on promoting skilling, local manufacturing & entrepreneurship, attracting investments, driving Policy and Regulatory dialogue, supporting technology exports, encouraging R&D efforts and enhancing digital cooperation not just across the South Asian region but across the world. This Congress also includes the BIMSTEC Ministerial Conclave.

India's recent initiatives in improving connectivity also include the establishment of transparency via a single market through Goods and Services Tax (GST). India also possesses a Customs Single Window Interface for Facilitating Trade (SWIFT) and has ratified the TIR Convention and the WTO FTA. The adoption of SWIFT by all member countries will ease cooperation in common challenges.

Other Sectors:

India strives towards promoting economic growth and stability, enhancing energy and food security, and linking people through sustained and collaborative efforts, with the aim of overall development of our region. In the area of public health, India has set up a network on traditional medicine for BIMSTEC partners and is seeking a more robust engagement in the field of generic pharmaceuticals. JIPMER BIMSTEC Telemedicine Network was launched at Puducherry, India in 2017 with the aim to improve regional cooperation in the field of health care by strengthening telemedicine-based patient care services and share medical knowledge among the BIMSTEC countries.

India's Ministry of Power has established a BIMSTEC Energy Centre in Bengaluru, which helps stimulate the development of regional energy resources and grids. Agriculture is another promising area for intra-regional cooperation within the BIMSTEC. In this context, India has offered support for cooperation on biotechnology, seeds and control of trans-boundary diseases and linking of agricultural institutes. At the Kathmandu Summit, Prime Minister Modi offered to host a conference in the areas of agricultural research. He also committed to set up a 'Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies' at the Nalanda University for research on art, culture and related other subjects.

Against the backdrop of a shared history and recognising the importance of forging new connections between students and young entrepreneurs, youth icons, cultural and literary role models and elected representatives, Modi at the Kathmandu Summit announced scholarships, research fellowships, and short-term training courses. Twenty four scholarships were announced to researchers, students, and professors from BIMSTEC members at India's North Eastern Space Application Centre. Thirty scholarships were offered to students from BIMSTEC nations at Nalanda University and twelve research fellowships for advanced medicine were also announced apart from hundred short-term training courses on Tourism, Environment, Disaster Management, Agriculture, Renewable energy, trade etc. He also proposed that a special forum for women parliamentarians from BIMSTEC countries should be formed.

In conclusion, BIMSTEC provides a unique linkage between South Asia and South East Asia, and is an ideal platform for promoting opportunities for trade, investment and tourism between these two regions. Given the compelling strategic challenge posed by China and Pakistan, the salience of BIMSTEC has grown for India to secure its strategic space in its neighbourhood. India needs to adopt a pragmatic approach and should be willing to invest in the regional synergies and work towards utilising the available resources in the most optimal manner as this grouping holds catalytic potential to create an integrated neighbourhood. However, the road from potential to reality will be successfully traversed only when both, India and its neighbours are willing to come together to achieve a shared dream for peace, stability and prosperity for this dynamic region.

Endnote:

¹ Prime Minister's message on 20th anniversary of establishment of BIMSTEC. URL: https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28514/Prime_Ministers_message_on_20th_anniversary_of_establishment_of_BIMSTEC

² "BIMSTEC Summit 2017: Undertaking strategies to counter terror, extremism says Sushma Swaraj", Financial Express. URL: <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/bimstec-summit-2017-undertaking-strategies-to-counter-terror-extremism-says-sushma-swaraj/804307>

³ Translation of Prime Minister's Statement at BIMSTEC Plenary Session. URL: https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30332/Translation_of_Prime_Ministers_Statement_at_BIMSTEC_Plenary_Session_August_30_2018

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