

REIMAGINING BIMSTEC

STRENGTHENING
REGIONAL SOLIDARITY
ACROSS THE BAY OF BENGAL

EDITORS

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FOREWORD

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) for taking the initiative to publish this volume of essays on strengthening BIMSTEC solidarity, as part of the Kolkata Colloquium that it organised in November 2019 in collaboration with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, New Delhi, the Centre for New Economic Diplomacy, and the UK's Department for International Development.

The Kolkata Colloquium brought together a large number of eminent scholars, academics, journalists, and diplomats who take keen interest in the activities of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) which began its journey in 1997 to promote regional cooperation among the littoral and adjacent countries of the Bay of Bengal. BIMSTEC brings together five countries from South Asia and two countries from Southeast Asia to strengthen economic and physical connectivity to enhance regional trade, investment, travel, technology, energy trade and other exchanges. The forum also seeks to address, through joint efforts, common vulnerabilities including poverty, natural disasters, climate change, pandemics, terrorism and transnational crimes, and food security. The discussions at the Kolkata Colloquium helped identify the strengths and weaknesses of BIMSTEC and advocated for the organisation to strengthen cooperation and translate their political commitment to concrete programmes

and projects that will produce tangible economic benefits for the peoples of the region.

Needless to say, the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our peoples' health, economies and societies has created a renewed sense of urgency for leveraging geographical advantage and available resources in the BIMSTEC region to spur economic activities and address vulnerabilities in the post-COVID 19 recovery and rehabilitation process.

I am confident that this publication will serve as a valuable reference for the BIMSTEC governments as well as other stakeholders who are the driving force behind the slow but steady progress of regional integration process in the Bay of Bengal region under the framework of BIMSTEC.

M. Shahidul Islam

Secretary General, BIMSTEC

December 2020

PREFACE

Connectivity—critical to building communities and societies, and for their economic and social development—has always been central to human enterprise. Sadly for South Asia, however, the region's history of colonisation turned connectivity on its head, making it a predatory exercise that disrupted the vibrant cultural, economic and social linkages that had sustained this part of the world for centuries. Even as the previous century saw the region emerge into a modern community of nations, both the renewal of old networks and the establishment of meaningful new networks became subservient to more immediate national concerns.

Regional groupings like BIMSTEC are therefore significant attempts at reinvigorating the economic and social life of a region that has essentially been part of an integrated network. As a bridge between two vibrant regions, South Asia and South East Asia, BIMSTEC offers the institutional basis through which countries can undertake efforts towards the enhancement of connectivity for regional development. By facilitating dialogue and creating opportune environments and institutions for cross-border cooperation, organisations like BIMSTEC are uniquely poised to further multiple interactions that stand to create an impact on all dimensions of human endeavour. It is from this perspective that Observer Research Foundation has taken this initiative to uncover the various facets of connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region under the purview of **Kolkata Colloquium 2019: Reimagining BIMSTEC**.

The volume in your hands is a result of those deliberations.

Asia is at a crossroads: It is a dynamic region, powered by the energy of its youth. At the same time, it confronts a moment in history being defined by serious disruptions caused not only by technology, but by a massive pandemic that has hobbled even the strongest and most powerful of nations.

How do nations, economies, and societies adapt to both the most primeval and the most modern technology-induced transformations? In a world where multilateralism is seeing signs of flailing, can regional institutions such as BIMSTEC step up to serve as vanguards of efforts to respond to these unprecedented challenges? Can such regional institutions help catalyse the latent potential of individual countries towards achieving collective goals? This volume of essays cuts across various issues related to politics, society, economy, culture, public health, connectivity and strategy. It is an attempt to understand BIMSTEC and help determine its potential. I have no doubt that this volume will make a significant contribution to the larger focus on a sustainable future for the BIMSTEC countries.

Sunjoy Joshi

Chairperson, Observer Research Foundation

December 2020

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This collection is a result of an international conference entitled “Reimaging BIMSTEC,” held on 28-29 November 2019 in Kolkata, West Bengal as part of Kolkata Colloquium 2019. Observer Research Foundation (ORF). Kolkata chapter organised this flagship programme in collaboration with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), New Delhi and Centre for New Economic Diplomacy and Department for International Development (DFID), U.K. We are indebted to the collaborators for their support for the Conference. We extend our sincere gratitude to Mr. Peter Rimmele, Resident Representative, KAS; Dr. Pankaj Madan, KAS, New Delhi; Dr. Duncan Overfield, Head, DIFD, New Delhi and M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General, BIMSTEC, Dhaka, Bangladesh for their encouragement and support. We are thankful to all the contributors for sharing their valuable views in this volume. We owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Sunjoy Joshi, Chairman, ORF; Dr. Samir Saran, President, ORF; Professor. Harsh.V. Pant, Director, Studies & Head, Strategic Studies Programme, ORF, New Delhi and Dr. Nilanjan Ghosh, Director, ORF, Kolkata Chapter without whose constant cooperation and encouragement it would not have been possible to complete this volume. Finally, we wish to thank all our colleagues for their support and particularly, Sohini Bose and Sohini Nayak, Junior Fellow, ORF, Kolkata Chapter for their editorial help.

Introduction

**Rakhahari Chatterji and
Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury**

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was established in 1997, and over the next 23 years, its membership has expanded, declarations were made and intentions expressed. However, not much has changed on the ground, even as the world has gone through drastic changes—marked by a huge push towards globalisation, a global financial crisis, China’s departure from its “hide your strength, bide your time” strategy to the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these events have changed the face of the world, perhaps irreversibly.

In the global strategic environment, some changes are noteworthy. First, the previously familiar process of unrestricted globalisation has come to a halt and is unlikely to restart any time soon. In its place is newfound nationalism and renewed desire for self-reliance. Second, the conflict between China and the United States has intensified over the last few years, and it is still unclear how the tensions will unfold and shape the world in the future. This alone drives an uncertainty through all other inter-state relations in the world. Third, as Ashley Tellis, the research director of Strategic Asia Program at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace points out, in times of such uncertainty, the “competition for public resources between non-defense and defense goods is likely to intensify” for almost every country.¹ Compounded by the COVID-19

pandemic, this intensification will likely be acute, with trade and development suffering immensely.

Under such circumstances, what should a country like India do? Until now, India has been only a casual participant in regional arrangements. While the policies aimed at achieving strategic autonomy and economic self-sufficiency were helpful in the past, they were short-lived—disrupted by wars, oil shocks, and terrorism, from the 1960s through the 1980s. The prospects held out by globalisation from the 1990s to the first decade of the present century have dwindled drastically. Situated in this new strategic and economic environment, India must reconceptualise its role within the neighbourhood. Incidentally, this problem is not limited to India and also affects neighbouring states in the region. These countries, which together make up BIMSTEC, should therefore work towards a strategy of “institutional hedging,”² to protect their individual interests as well as shape up a regional order that works for all the members involved.

This, in sum, is what drives the imperative for a “reimagining” of BIMSTEC.

Much of BIMSTEC’s objective of ensuring shared and accelerated growth through mutual cooperation, by utilising regional resources and geographical advantages, has remained only on paper. Amongst economic agreements, the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is particularly important for all member states. However, despite several rounds of talks, the FTA has not established a framework, although renewed attempts are underway. Moreover, the focus in the Bay region remains primarily on enhancing bilateral ties, with multilateralism yet to gain ground despite common ecological concerns and a shared past. There is both need and scope for improving people-to-people connectivity in the region, as well as facilitating tourism diplomacy, academic and student-exchange programmes, and cross-border public health initiatives. Another salient, but often neglected, aspect of regionalism in this part of Asia is the lack of leadership. Good leadership, while representing one country, can rise above national concerns and take care of the entire region.³ As portrayed in the 1957 treatise, *The King’s Two Bodies*,⁴ a good leader displays two

bodies: the national as well as the regional. Unfortunately, BIMSTEC is yet to find such leadership.

Despite these concerns, there are grounds for optimism for the future of BIMSTEC. The recent resurgence of strategic and economic interests in the Bay, as part of a larger maritime strategic space, namely, the Indo-Pacific, has helped BIMSTEC gain salience as a promising sub-regional grouping. The Bay, being the key transit route between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, is located at the intersection of Indian and Chinese strategic interests, affecting all other BIMSTEC member-countries. Additionally, the Bay is plagued by a variety of non-traditional security threats, such as illegal migration and armed piracy. Consequently, the important issues of freedom of navigation in the waters, controlling transnational threats, harnessing and sharing the Bay's natural wealth, and promoting infrastructural and people-to-people connectivity become common to the BIMSTEC member countries.

With regard to India's role in the region, it has been argued that the country must refrain from assuming a "big brother" posture, instead projecting itself as a compatriot and an equal partner to other BIMSTEC member-countries. This will help reduce its trust deficit and ensure better integration in the region. Considering its "Look/Act East Policy," India has a major stake in bringing together South and Southeast Asian countries in this common endeavour, which will have long-term consequences for the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

To truly integrate the region, rigorous and sustained initiatives by states must be complemented by popular enthusiasm and national civil society initiatives. Suitable institutional innovations are necessary to rejuvenate the organisational structure, which will be aided by official commitments as well as popular interest. Media can play a crucial role in this context, tapping into the rich repository of culture, heritage, political history and the prospect of a common future that the countries share. However, media enthusiasm will be determined by on-ground activity.

Calling for a reimagination of the BIMSTEC, this volume collates a variety of papers, each contributing to the initiative. The goal is not to promote the brand value of BIMSTEC, but to generate a purposive and healthy deliberation on the present and future of the regional body.

About the Compendium

This volume builds on the international conference “Reimagining BIMSTEC,” organised by Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in collaboration with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in New Delhi, ORF’s Centre for New Economic Diplomacy, and the UK’s Department for International Development, under the purview of Kolkata Colloquium 2019. The present volume incorporates various issues that were not discussed in the Colloquium but are relevant for a holistic understanding of the sociopolitical, geostrategic and geoeconomic dimensions of BIMSTEC.

The volume is divided into eight sections, following the introduction. Section 1, titled “Historical and Cultural Linkages,” deals with issues related to historical and civilisational connectivity between India and the other Bay littorals and examines the reasons behind the limited awareness on the subject. This section discusses the ways to improve the state of affairs as well as the role that tourism can play in strengthening inter-littoral relations. In his paper entitled “Looking East: A Brief History of Connections in the Bay of Bengal Region,” Ronojoy Sen deals with four broad themes, namely, trade, the role of the empire, the movements of people, and the circulation of ideas. In “Cultural Linkages through Popular Interactions: Written Testimonies in Colonial-Era Vernacular Periodicals,” Sarvani Gooptu analyses how cosmopolitan and nationalist ideas come together in India’s quest for history. Lipi Ghosh, in her paper “Incredible India and Marvellous Myanmar: Prospects in Cultural Tourism,” focuses on the importance of cultural tourism, with special emphasis on heritage architectures in India and Myanmar. In “Revitalising BIMSTEC through Cultural Connectivity from Northeast India,” C. Joshua Thomas analyses various facets of cultural connectivity amongst the BIMSTEC member states, with a focus on India’s Northeast.

Section 2 of the volume is titled “Connecting Nations” and covers the issues of physical and infrastructural connectivity, along with the scope of digital and technical connectivity. The section raises the following key questions: What are the main impediments to the development of infrastructural connectivity? How can existing constraints be resolved to strengthen connectivity amongst the member states? Against this backdrop, Ashish Banik, in his paper “BIMSTEC and Regional Connectivity: Opportunities for Bangladesh,” explains Bangladesh’s role in the organisation, urging for an operational convergence in political, security and economic outlook for expediting the process. In their joint paper “Towards a Tech-Driven BIMSTEC: Prospects and Challenges,” Soumya Bhowmick and Pratinashree Basu explain how technological solutions can bring nations together. In “Strengthening Connectivity in BIMSTEC,” Nisha Taneja and Samridhi Bimal identify the challenges to transport connectivity, while discussing the framework agreements in place. K. Yhome, in “Understanding Myanmar’s Role in BIMSTEC Connectivity,” situates Myanmar in the road transport, energy and maritime connectivity within the BIMSTEC. In “From Words to Action: Creating a BIMSTEC for the Future,” Sujeev Shakya argues that the time is opportune for reviving BIMSTEC and suggests key action points for the same. In his paper “Towards Greater BIMSTEC Cooperation: The Need for Values Connectivity,” Robin Ramcharan argues that BIMSTEC lacks a clear framework on human rights and values, which is essential for the grouping to transcend its role as a mere vehicle for functional connectivity. Such a values framework may be found in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Section 3, “Maritime Order, Connectivity and Blue,” discusses issues such as maritime trade and connectivity, the scope of cooperation in maritime safety, security amongst the Bay littorals in the face of both traditional and non-traditional threats, and the sustainability of a blue economy. In “Connecting the Coasts: The BIMSTEC Experience,” P.V. Rao analyses how the Bay of Bengal region is best suited to synergise land and sea into a cohesive regional trade-and-transport hub. Rohan Masakorala, in “Understanding the Global Shipping Industry and Connectivity in the Indian Ocean,” argues that understanding maritime geography is crucial

to planning connectivity and infrastructure development that can achieve economies of scale. In “Blue Economy in the Bay of Bengal,” Abhijit Singh opines that the blue economy model is unlikely to deliver results in the Bay of Bengal, unless implemented in a way that balances between the need for economic growth and sustainable ecosystems.

Section 4, “Climate Change, Disaster,” focuses on a central question: Does climate change as an exogenous force feature in the equations of connectivity initiatives between the nations of the regions? While discussing various ways of climate-change mitigation and adaptation, the section evaluates the scope and feasibility of trans-boundary cooperation between nations. In her paper “BIMSTEC: Finding a Coordinated Approach to Climate Change,” Runa Sarkar urges for a coordinated approach to climate-change mitigation and effective disaster management. In “Climate Change in the BIMSTEC Region: Responding to Rising Sea Levels,” Anamitra Anurag Danda examines some of the vulnerabilities caused in the region due to the rise in sea levels. K.M. Parivelan in “Climate Change, Disaster Management and BIMSTEC,” indicates that *climate change and natural disasters are cross-cutting issues that must be addressed in a holistic and integrated manner.*

Section 5, “Analysing Human Capital” deals with human capital, and the ways to strengthen it in the Bay littorals. In his paper, “Reimagining BIMSTEC’s Health Futures,” Oommen C. Kurian makes a comparative analysis of the human-capital situation of the BIMSTEC region, with a focus on the health component, while in “Education as a Pivot in India’s Cooperation with BIMSTEC Countries,” Vivek Mishra and Suranjan Das outline the different facets of educational cooperation between India and other BIMSTEC nations. Both Amena Mohsin and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury deal with gender in their papers: Mohsin’s paper “Gender Issues in BIMSTEC” reviews the broad issues within BIMSTEC, while Chaudhary focuses on the vulnerabilities related to organised international crimes such as women trafficking, in “Trafficking of Women, Precarity, and BIMSTEC.” Pinak R. Chakravarty, in “COVID-19 and the Changing Geopolitical Order: Challenges to BIMSTEC,” deals with the impact of COVID-19 on social capital.

Section 6 is entitled “Enhancing Trade.” This section focuses on commercial connectivity amongst the member states and raises the following key questions: What hinders trade linkages from developing, despite the availability of abundant opportunities? Can the movements of investments across economies be accentuated through structural economic measures? Are the political, strategic and security concerns so overbearing that they erode the growth of trade and investment linkages across the region? In “Enhancing Trade in the BIMSTEC Region,” Damaru Ballabha Paudel discusses the challenges and opportunities of BIMSTEC FTA and BIMSTEC Customs Cooperation Agreement, in the context of intraregional trade volume. Suthiphand Chirathivat, in “Rethinking Enhanced Trade within BIMSTEC: An ASEAN Perspective,” examines the various facets of economic connectivity between BIMSTEC and ASEAN. In “Trade and Investment in BIMSTEC: Challenges and Opportunities,” Nilanjan Ghosh argues that trade and investment within the BIMSTEC bloc are critical in enabling regionalism and regional development.

Section 7, “The Indo-Pacific,” addresses the following key questions: In what ways can BIMSTEC enter into collaborative ventures with other regional/subregional organisations to further integrate the Indo-Pacific? What are the multiple avenues in which BIMSTEC members can increase or initiate cooperation for impact that goes beyond the Bay? In a situation where many non-littoral powers are now major stakeholders in the Bay, what is the possibility of extending the Bay in the broader context of the Indo-Pacific? Looking beyond the institutional dimension of BIMSTEC, C. Raja Mohan, in “The Bay of Bengal in the Emerging Indo-Pacific,” discusses the growing strategic significance of the Bay against the backdrop of the new and increasingly contested geography of the Indo-Pacific. In “BIMSTEC’s Future within the Geostrategic Narrative of the ‘Indo-Pacific,’” Gareth Price discusses the challenges to BIMSTEC in the context of the fast-changing international milieu in the Indo-Pacific. In their joint paper “BIMSTEC Plus: Towards a Bay of Bengal Community,” Sohini Bose and Sohini Nayak explore the idea of “BIMSTEC Plus” and granting Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore the status of observers within the BIMSTEC. Christian Wagner, in “BIMSTEC: Regionalism,

Connectivity, and Geopolitics,” outlines the prospects and challenges of BIMSTEC in the changing geopolitical landscape, with increasing tension between China and the United States.

The final section of the volume, “Voices from Media,” examines the role of media and its assessment of BIMSTEC. What is its perception of BIMSTEC as a new strategic framework in the region? What role can the media play in bringing BIMSTEC closer to the people? Which sectors of BIMSTEC have received the most media attention from the media? In this section, leading media practitioners address these and other questions, attempting to find possible answers: Bertil Lintner in “BIMSTEC and the Role of Media,” Haroon Habib in “Developing a Role for the Media in BIMSTEC,” Subir Bhaumik in “Encouraging Media Development and Cooperation in the BIMSTEC Region,” Tshering Dorji in “Finding Solutions to BIMSTEC Region’s Challenges: How the Media Can Help,” and Chandni Jayatilleke in “Resurrecting BIMSTEC through the Media.”

Reimagining BIMSTEC: Strengthening Regional Solidarity across the Bay of Bengal provides a comprehensive view of the significance of BIMSTEC as a trans-national organisation as well as the opportunities and challenges presented by the changing geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic landscape, where the politics of resource consternation dominates the logic of cross-border cooperation. This monograph may be used for reference and will serve as a useful resource for academic institutions, think tanks, and government and non-government agencies in the area of foreign-policy formulation. Indeed, connectivity is now one of the dominating agenda of development cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region, and this volume will be of value to current literature.

Endnotes

¹ Ashley Tellis, “Covid-19 Knocks on American Hegemony,” *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, May 04, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/04/covid-19-knocks-on-american-hegemony-pub-81719>.

² Mie Oba, “Further Development of Asian Regionalism: Institutional Hedging in an Uncertain Era,” *Journal of Contemporary East Asian Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2019.1688905>.

³ Mark Beeson, “Why has leadership in the Asia Pacific proved to be so elusive?” *Chin. Polit. Sci. Rev.*, doi 10.1007/s41111-017-0074-y.

⁴ See, Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

SECTION 1

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL LINKAGES

Looking East: A Brief History of Connections in the Bay of Bengal Region

Ronojoy Sen

Introduction

For long, the Bay of Bengal was regarded as the “neglected” sea. However, a series of recent studies, notably Sunil Amrith’s work, have thrown the spotlight on the Bay.¹ This essay identifies four broad themes to map the history of the Bay of Bengal and its role in connecting the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia: trade or movement of goods; the role of empire or imperial ambitions; the migration or movement of people; and the circulation of ideas. None of these, however, are discrete themes; they are intimately intertwined.

This essay will try to expand the last point by focusing on the idea of ‘Greater India,’ which grew out of the Greater India Society founded in Calcutta (now Kolkata) on 10 October 1926 and its journal, *the Journal of Greater India Society*, which was published from 1934 to 1959. The ‘Greater India’ idea significantly influenced India’s engagement with Southeast Asia in the 20th century. Arguably, it also provides an unstated context for India’s current foreign policy initiatives in the wider Bay of Bengal region.

Trade, Empire, Migration, Ideas

First, this section will focus on the importance of trade. The nature of the monsoon winds has for centuries facilitated the movement of ships across the Bay of Bengal, and beginning in the 6th century, trade between India and Southeast Asia had flourished. Spices were the most profitable goods that were exported from Southeast Asia, while cloth was one of the principal exports from India along with other produce such as pepper. The Sinologist Haraprasad Ray has documented as many as six varieties of textile that were being exported from Bengal in the 15th century. The trade networks also provided a vehicle for the spread of cultural influences, as well as religious—Hindu, Buddhist and later Muslim—from the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia.

Second is the role of empire. Before British colonialism, the Bay of Bengal was often characterised as a Chola Lake (even before the Chola empire reached its peak in the 11th century, the Pallavas were already trading with Southeast Asia from the 6th century) and the Cholas could rightfully claim to be the first Bay of Bengal empire. The 1025 CE military expedition launched by Rajendra Chola against the Srivijaya Empire was possibly the first attempt to assert naval supremacy in the Bay of Bengal. From the 16th century onwards, a succession of European powers entered the Bay, beginning with the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and the British. By the 1820s, besides large parts of the Indian subcontinent, the British controlled three strategic locations in the Bay of Bengal: Singapore, Penang (in Malaysia) and Ceylon (today, Sri Lanka).

Third, it is worth noting that the movement of people across the Bay increased significantly from the 19th century. An estimated 30 million people crossed the Bay of Bengal from 1840 to 1940. Much of the migration, however, was a circular one. The introduction of steamships by British India Steamship Company in the 1860s revolutionised the scale of migration. The annual number of passenger journeys between South India and Malaya (today's Malaysia) in both directions grew from

an average of 15,000 in the 1870s to nearly 40,000 by the end of the 1880s. The numbers would peak in the mid-1920s, with 150,000 people arriving in Malaya from India and 300,000 in Ceylon.

Along with migrants, notable figures such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879-1973) and Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) also visited Southeast Asia in the early 20th century and carried with them ideas that both provoked and inspired the people they interacted with. The following paragraphs will briefly outline Tagore's ideas, and the Greater India movement that he inspired—it was influential in its time and continues to cast its shadow in contemporary times.

The 'Greater India' idea

Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali cultural icon and Nobel laureate, had a fascination with Southeast and East Asia. His ideas of Pan-Asianism would inspire the members of the Greater India Society. At the beginning of the 20th century, he wrote: "If we can see that our ancient civilisation has spread to China and Japan then we can understand that it has a great place as an expression of human nature, that it is not merely the words of manuscripts. If we can see that China and Japan have experienced success within this civilisation, then our own inglorious and impoverished condition disappears, and we can see where our real treasure lies."² In 1904, he would reiterate: "China, Japan and Tibet, who are so careful to bar their windows against the advances of Europe, welcomed India with open arms as their guru, for she had never sent out armies for plunder and pillage, but only her messages of peace and good will. This glory, which India had earned as the fruit of her self-discipline, was greater than that of the widest of Empires."³

Tagore's many journeys eastward, particularly his 1924 visit to China and his travels in 1927 to Singapore and then onwards to Malaya, Bali and Java, also had an enormous influence on the ideas of the Greater India Society. Tagore wrote about his travels in Southeast Asia in *Java Yatrir Patra or Letters from Java*. The Greater India Society was inaugurated in 1926 by a group of Bengali intellectuals who invited Tagore to be its *Purodha*

or spiritual head. In a foreword to the journal, he wrote: “To know my country one has to travel to that age when she realized her soul, and thus transcended her physical boundaries; when she reveals her being in a radiant magnanimity which illumined the Eastern horizon making her recognized as their own by those in alien shores who were awakened into a great surprise of life; and not now where she had withdrawn herself into a narrow barrier of obscurity, into a miserly pride of exclusiveness, into a poverty of mind that durably revolves round itself in an unmeaning repetition of a past that has lost light and has no message to the pilgrims of the future.”⁴

Subsequently, in his evocative poem *Sri Vijayalakshmi*, written in 1927, Tagore would lament the withdrawal of Indian civilisation from the region: “The time wore on, the dark night came upon us/ And we knew not each other/ The seat we shared was buried under the Dust/ raised by Time’s chariot wheels./ By the receding flood of oblivion I was borne back/ To my own lonely shore--/ my hands bare, my mind languorous with sleep.”⁵

The goals of the Greater India Society were summed up by Kalidas Nag, one of its founders, in a 1922 lecture called ‘Greater India,’ which he had given the telling subtitle: ‘A Study in Indian Internationalism.’ He said, “This grand movement of spiritual conquest, this noble dynamic of cultural imperialism – a legacy of Ashoka – soon won for India the inalienable empire over the vast continent, right across Tibet and China to Korea [sic] and Japan on the one hand and across Burma and Indo-China to Java and Indonesia on the other. The history of this phenomenal progression has yet to be written. It is full of profound lessons for students of internationalism... It is through years of international collaboration that we may hope to reconstruct this long-forgotten history and to trace the specific contributions of India to this grand passion-play of Humanity.”⁶

The notion of “cultural imperialism” was articulated by Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, one of the most prominent scholars of the Greater India collective, in his works on Southeast Asia. In his preface to the second edition of *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*, Majumdar wrote,

“Since the achievement of independence by India, Indonesia and Indo-China, political relations between them have assumed a new importance, and this small book may contribute to the growth of fellow-feeling among the peoples of these regions by revealing the part played by India in the cultural development of Southeast Asia for a period of more than fifteen hundred years.”⁷ Talking about the Champa dynasty, he wrote: “The regeneration of the Cham power in the second century AD was due to the introduction of a new element in her politics, viz, the Indian colonists... They were politically merged in the Indian elements and there was a complete cultural fusion between the two races.”⁸

These views were different from Tagore’s. As historians, Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tine noted, “Tagore’s spiritual understanding of Asia embedded in the postulate of a universal synthesis of East and West, did partly inspire the seemingly nativistic panegyrics on the accomplishments of ‘Greater India,’ but it ultimately had little in common with them.”⁹

Though this message of cultural imperialism and appropriation was problematic, elements of it appealed to figures as diverse as Jawaharlal Nehru, ‘Netaji’ Subhas Bose, and V.D. Savarkar. It also continued to influence independent India’s foreign policy. Thus, historian Susan Bayly has observed, “In the 1950s and 1960s, Greater India thinking underpinned many expressions of the Nehruvian goal of establishing India’s leadership over the alliance of newly independent ex-colonial states which in 1961 became known as the Non-Aligned movement, under the sponsorship of the Third World’s leading modernist statesman of the twentieth century.”¹⁰ Arguably, it also provides the context for India’s current foreign policy initiatives in the wider Bay of Bengal region.

Conclusion

The Second World War and the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia shattered the balance of power in the Bay of Bengal region. Because the Japanese did not advance beyond the eastern frontiers of India, an imaginary line was drawn across the Bay between India and Southeast Asia. The establishment of the Southeast Asia Command under Lord

Mountbatten in 1943, headquartered in Ceylon, gave the idea of Southeast Asia an administrative reality. There were some exceptions to this separation, such as Bose's Indian National Army, which was founded in Southeast Asia and declared the Provisional Government of Free India in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, in the heart of Bay of Bengal and which serves as the easternmost maritime frontier of India.

The division between South Asia and Southeast Asia lasted well beyond the Second World War and the creation of nation-states in the wake of decolonisation. Regional institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the way area studies was structured during the Cold War years, solidified this division. BIMSTEC is one attempt to revive the long moribund connections, whose loss Tagore had lamented and the Greater Indian Society had somewhat problematically sought to study and valorise.

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Cultural Linkages through Popular Interactions: Written Testimonies in Colonial-Era Vernacular Periodicals

Sarvani Gooptu

Introduction

The concept of 'regional cooperation' refers to the political and institutional mechanisms that countries in a geographical region devise to find and strengthen common interests as well as promote their national interests, through mutual cooperation and dialogue.¹ Perhaps the easiest way to establishing commonalities in order to ensure stability of cooperation is through the reiteration of shared histories and heritage; the caveat is that in remembering the past, one needs to be conscious of the sentiments of peoples and nations.

Colonial rule, despite its noxious impact on the political and economic life of the colonised, aided the spontaneous desire of the colonised to use the tools of imperial communication, i.e. road and water transport, to explore their neighbouring countries. This essay examines memoirs, travelogues and analyses published in Bengali periodicals and books in the period 1870s to 1940s to show the emergence of cosmopolitan and nationalist ideas amongst the colonised people of the subcontinent in their quest for discovery of the similar within the dissimilar.

Vernacular Periodicals reflecting contemporary trends

Though travel was among the subjects of medieval literature, in the British colonial period, writing about this activity became a ritual in the format of entertainment with education in the vernacular literary periodicals (Samayik patra/patrika) that became popular along with western literature and newspapers from the first half of the 19th century. News from Asia as well as the West, along with the archaeological discoveries in Asia of that era, connected the newly educated Bengali elite to a new focus on neighbourly interactions and invoked both nationalistic fervour and a cosmopolitan outlook. In 1926, the Greater India Society in Calcutta (now Kolkata) was established to promote research by both Indian and European scholars on Indic cultural connections. It was a volte face move that subverted existing British imperial ideology on Greater Indian connections. This essay, however, argues that discussions in the vernacular journals on Asian interactions already existed decades before these nationalistic impulses took shape. These efforts occurred simultaneously with a pan-Asian experiment led by Japan and which inspired other countries as well.

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To be sure, these cultural explorations had political implications: they brought in mistrust and served as a barrier to a culturally 'United Asia' concept being visualised by the intelligentsia of different countries. While 'Pan-Asianism' had a more cultural inclination in intellectuals like the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and the Sri Lankan Ananda Coomaraswamy who brought the world of Asian art and culture to the world's notice, modern historians have also taken note of the political implications of Pan-Asianism. Among others, T.A. Keenleyside (1982) referred to this as being initiated by Japan and then becoming popular in all Asian lands, as a "sense of solidarity to counter the omnipresent colonial manacles."² Ashis Nandy, in an article in 1998, spoke about the idea of Asia emerging as an artefact of Asian reaction to Western colonialism.³ In an anthology of Greater India articles published in 2013, Prosenjit Duara brought out the role of the journal *New Asia* in furthering Sun Yat Sen's idea of great Asianism in 1925 at the same time as the Greater India society was showcasing India-Asia linkages.⁴

Moreover, Birendra Prasad in 1979 (*Indian Nationalism and Asia*) explored this “cult of Asianism”⁵ while Prosenjit Duara in 2001 spoke of an “alternative discourse of civilization” which was not western. Sugata Bose (2006) in *A Hundred Horizons*, citing examples of sea voyages of Curzon, Tagore, Gandhi and many unknown merchants, labourers, soldiers and pilgrims, argued about an “extra-territorial and universalist anti-colonialism that co-existed and contended with territorial nationalism.”⁶ Burmese writers like Aung San Suu Kyi and Thant Myint-U also explored these connections and their implications.⁷

It was not simply a nationalistic atavism that motivated Indians to explore the past beyond territorial boundaries. Many Asian intellectuals expanded their multi-cultural sensibilities to find the spread of Asian spirituality and culture. Keshab Chandra Sen and Swami Vivekananda explored the power of Asian spirituality and intellectuals like Kakuzo Okakura (*Ideals of the East in 1904*) and Rabindranath Tagore (Nationalism in 1918)⁸ among others were committed to playing a role in leading Asia to a new and more just world while strengthening their own solidarity.⁹

In this context, this essay argues that the Bengali intellectuals writing in late 19th and 20th century and many more journalists and writers who were inspired by them found their source of inspiration in not only nationalism but also in universalism, in the creation of a noble/nobler India (Mahattara Bharat)¹⁰ which would provide leadership for a troubled Asia. This cosmopolitanism was less a political project or practice but more a philosophy or worldview or even an attitude or disposition as Vertovec and Cohen (2002),¹¹ and Ulrich Beck (2011) have similarly pointed out.¹²

Re-discovering Asia: Life and Places of Interest

If, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, considered to be a part of sub-continental geography of colonial India and not that dissimilar, did not arouse much curiosity, in the vernacular journals, Burma/ Brahmesha or Myanmar, Sri Lanka/Singhal/Ceylon and Thailand/Shyam became interesting places to visit, work in, understand the lives of the people and most importantly to write about. The writers wanted to discover

their affinity with the land they visited or resided in, as an extension of their homeland, as part of a common Asia and a part of the empire. Burma aroused greatest interest since it was a partner in the colonial agenda, modernised by British policies just like India was, but with the difference since its monarchy and the erstwhile ruling classes were displaced by an “aggressive British Indian state”¹³ and replaced with a huge administrative support staff as well as private players from India through a forced/encouraged migration policy.¹⁴ The focus on Sri Lanka was on its scenic beauty for travellers and on Buddhist pilgrimage sites due to a reawakened world interest in Buddhism. Thailand was “strange” to the writers, not simply due to differences in customs and behaviour but because of its miraculous escape from colonisation despite being a neighbour.

In the late 19th century, when Burma was linked with India by a common British imperial rule, it seemed imperative for those domiciled in Rangoon to “familiarize the readers (back home in India) with Burma whose fate is closely tied up with that of India, since the British are masters of both countries,” as Mrinalini Raha wrote in *Antahpur* in 1902.¹⁵ Others like Girindranath Sarkar, described the life and culture of Bengalis in Burma in *Prabashi*¹⁶ and another Rangoon resident, Pushpalata Debi wrote of her travels in Burma and Malaya in *Mahila* in 1903.¹⁷ There is a sense of belonging to Burma, not just due to territorial proximity but because as easterners they share certain values, and they were both suffering colonisation.

By the same yardstick, there was a sense of superiority among the Bengalis towards Burma: they were leaders of industry, agriculture, railways, and public works who considered themselves as partners of the colonisers. It was this very reason which made the Bengalis targets of the nascent Burmese nationalism developing in the 1920s and ‘30s. Though there was a curiosity regarding local customs and food habits, there was hardly any intermingling with local people nor any understanding of the sensibilities of the Burmese. Comparison between Calcutta and Rangoon was more a reality to them and strangely a similar approach is seen in the writings of some Burmese.¹⁸ To prove that it was a part of the British

empire, many conferences and exhibitions were organised there. Sarala Debi Chowdhurani's travelogues stand out, as she was the only woman in that entire century who travelled alone to Rangoon to attend one such conference in 1928. Her writings described meetings and meals shared with local Burmese men and women, her understanding of Burmese sentiments,¹⁹ and her commitment to Indian nationalism reflected in her lamentations about the loss of the Buddhist faith in India.²⁰

Sri Lanka (or the Singhal Kingdom) represents interest in being so close yet having differences in natural and human resources though there is a stress on comparative development which is ascribed to adherence to Buddhist principles. Anagarika Dharmapala's visits to India, and in particular, Calcutta, led to this interest in Sinhalese Buddhism. Comparing Calcutta's magnificence to that of Colombo in 1884, Ta Pra Cha (pseudonym) writes in his 'Travel to Singhal' in *Nabajiban*, that Colombo's importance is because it is a port where ships from all countries halt yet "it can hardly compare with the magnificence of Chowringhee, though Singhal is more well to do than Bengal..."²¹ A travelogue by Raja Munidra Deb describes the journey by a group of distinguished men to Sri Lanka who explore the magnificence of the Buddhist architecture there²² while Rukmini Kanta Chakraborty's description of travel by rail in Sri Lanka in 1892 compliments British initiative and Sinhalese virtues.²³ Even in children's magazines, Sri Lanka appears in translations of Sinhalese stories or in Buddhist stories based there.²⁴

Thailand was interesting for writers since it was little known to Indians as the series of translations of 'Travel in Siam' by Jyotirindranath Tagore shows, when he discusses the journey of the Grand Duke Boris Vladimirovich of Russia, as if he was a part of it,²⁵ or when Narendra Dev writes a descriptive series on Thailand.²⁶

Commonality of Thought and Culture

The rediscovery of Buddhism among the intelligentsia beginning in the mid-19th century had created for the Bengalis an imaginative space outside the reality of their own degraded existence under colonialism which

belonged to a glorious past, where India's contribution in the Asiatic religious world was at par with that of any world power. Travelling to visit Buddhist religious sites became an important 'pilgrimage' for the intellectual Buddhists who analysed and admired the tenets of Buddhism but rarely converted. All the three countries feature in these articles which always start with a background of how Buddhism was spread from India to that particular country and then give detailed descriptions of the architectural designs of important pilgrimage sites in these countries.

Descriptions of the culture, art and literature of these countries were also part of the programme of education of the readers undertaken by these literary figures. There was much greater concentration on discussion of art in the East Asian countries of China and Japan, whereas descriptions of dramatic performances in Burma and Thailand were an inevitable part of the travelogues.²⁷ Rabindranath Tagore played an important role in this sphere when he travelled to Burma three times in 1916, 1924, and 1927. By then he was already a world renowned figure whose deep appreciation for Burmese culture went a long way in popularising it. Besides Shwe Dagon and other pagodas, what struck all those writing on Burma were its people and their lifestyle. Not simply those living in Burma but even those visiting it for a short period mention what they call "women's freedom in Burma", albeit some of them in a disapproving tone.²⁸

Unique assimilation and implementation: The way ahead

Rabindranath Tagore's role as a modern cultural pilgrim in these countries, connected by familiar waters, was vital in creating for a whole generation, respect for Asian and Eastern values. He was so determined to undo the memories of India's past colonisation of Asia that he decided that the only way to mitigate it was through an inverse colonisation. Not content with simply creating awareness, Tagore devised a unique plan of cultural assimilation in his university curriculum. He invited scholars to lecture and teach various subjects and Asian languages at Vishva Bharati, Santiniketan. He had a massive repertoire of songs he set to tunes which were influenced by world music, and in his dance dramas he experimented with dance forms of Asia. An excellent description of this

has been given by Santidev Ghosh²⁹ who graduated from a student to a teacher around 1930s and was sent to Sri Lanka and Burma to learn basic techniques of Kandi and Rampoye dance which were then incorporated in Tagore's dance dramas. Cultural exchanges were also extended when the dance drama troupes were invited to Colombo and Rangoon for performances, and Tagore repeatedly reminded Indians of the intimate connections with these countries in the past that time had torn asunder and was a loss to civilisation.³⁰

Today, in pursuit of regional cooperation, there is need once again for the sage judgement of leading intellectuals and to remind ourselves of the fruitful personal interactions between Asian nations in the not so distant past.

About the Author

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Incredible India and Marvellous Myanmar: Prospects in Cultural Tourism

Lipi Ghosh

Introduction

Within a subregion such as BIMSTEC, with cross-border geographical linkages between the nations, culture transcends national boundaries. In reimagining BIMSTEC, the cultural history of its members can be used to forge contemporary convergences and strengthen people-to-people contact across the border. Against this background, this chapter focuses on the importance of cultural tourism in BIMSTEC. It is a subset of tourism that focuses on a country's or region's culture—encompassing lifestyle, art, architecture, religion and other elements of a nation's or region's identity. Cultural tourism has a positive social impact: it establishes and reinforces identity and builds new prospects in the tourism sector. This chapter on cultural tourism between India and Myanmar, based on the linkages between the two nations—specifically, heritage architectures.¹ In the heritage culture of India and Myanmar, ethnicity and religion are two of the most important aspects, with the majority of the structures pertaining to Hinduism, Buddhism and Taiism.

Historical Linkages and Geographical Transmission

Studies have found the following ancient overland routes connecting Myanmar with India's Northeast:

- Route of Ahom; Khamti and Phake exodus; John Deyell's account of three ancient routes between Assam and Myanmar (erstwhile Burma)
- Arthur Phayre on trans-Manipur routes to Myanmar (erstwhile Burma)
- Arthur Swinson and Fergal Keane on Nagaland's historic cross-border routes to Burma
- Southern "Silk Route" from Assam and Arunachal Pradesh to Myanmar
- Ralph Fytch and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier on Tripura–Arakan land routes

Interestingly, the Ahoms started their migration from Dehong in the Yunnan region of China, travelling through the Shan state in Burma and the Hukong Valley, and finally crossing the Tipam River to reach the Sibsagar area of upper Assam. John Deyell mentions three main land routes, as seen in Map 1.

Map 1: Overland Routes from Ancient Burma to Bengal



Credit: Pankaj Chakraborty

1. **The First Route:** This route started at Yongchang and ended at Momien. After crossing the Irrawaddy to reach Mogaung, the route went north through the Hukong Valley and passed through the Patkai Range to the upper Brahmaputra Valley. This was the eastern frontier of Kamarupa.
2. **The Second Route:** This route followed the Shweli River. After crossing the Irrawaddy at Tagaung, it went north along the Chindwin River. It then crossed the Imole Pass to enter Manipur. This was the eastern route approaching Bangla via Tripura.
3. **The Third Route:** This route crossed Irrawaddy at Tagaung, Ava or Pagan, and then went through Prome over the Arakan Range. This route went directly from Pagan to Arakan via the Aeng Pass.

Arthur Phayre wrote about the Burma–Manipur (Chin–Manipoor) connectivity. India and Myanmar share a border that is 1,643 km long, and touches four north-eastern states in India—Arunachal Pradesh (520 km), Nagaland (215 km), Manipur (398 km), and Mizoram (510 km)—and two regions in Myanmar—Sagaing Region and Chin State (See Map 2).

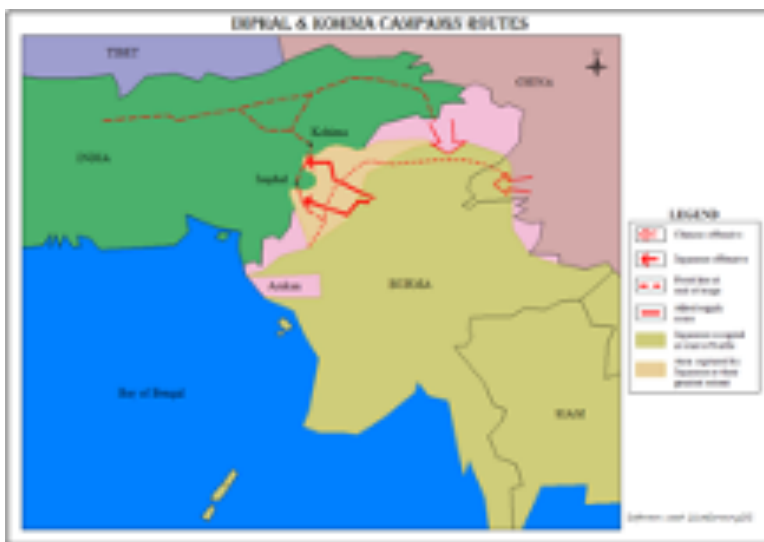
Map 2: Phayre on Burma–Manipur Physical Connectivity



Credit: Pankaj Chakraborty

In his book, *Kohima: The Story of the Greatest Battle*, Arthur Swinson writes about the decisive and historic battle of Kohima, fought during World War II, for the control of the strategic Moreh–Imphal–Kohima–Dimapur route. Fergal Keane’s book, *Road of Bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944 The Epic Story of the Last Great Stand of Empire*, is another pioneer work that throws light on the forest routes stretching from Kohima to Myanmar (See Map 3). In 1944, Subash Chandra Bose stayed in Naga Hills, which we know from reference of Veer Sambhudhan Phonglo and Jaya Thaosen.¹

Map 3: Imphal and Kohima Campaign Routes



Credit: Pankaj Chakraborty

The Southern Silk Route is another historically important route of connectivity. Of its 61 km, 30 km falls in Assam and 31 km in Arunachal Pradesh. A section of about 14 km is on the border between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Over the years, this road had needed extensive repairs; the construction of an international trade route is underway to link India with Myanmar at the Pangsau Pass. The historic Stillwell road stretched from Ledo in Assam to Bhamo (Myanmar), going through Kunming across the Patkai Range. From Kunming, Chinese railway lines spread all over China. From Ledo to Kunming, the road is approximately 1,726 km (See Map 4).

Map 4: Burma Road and Ledo Road in 1944



Credit: Pankaj Chakraborty

Ralph Fytch, an English missionary from the late Mughal period, wrote of Tripura's land connectivity to Chittagong. "From Satgaon, I travelled by the country of the king of Tiperra with whom the Mogen have almost continual wars."² Later, at the end of 17th century, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–89), a French traveller, wrote about Tippera and its extended connection with Arakan (See Map 5).

Map 5: Tripura–Arakan Connectivity



Credit: Pankaj Chakraborty

India–Myanmar Migration through History

Bengal and Burma (present-day Myanmar) have shared a strong connection throughout history. From Bengal, ancient Myanmar received the Pala culture. In Bengali, Myanmar is known as “Brahmadesh,” meaning “the land of Brahman.”³ The Sanskrit etymology of ‘Brahmadesh’ has been highlighted by several Indian historians such as Nihar Ranjan Ray and Kalidas Nag. In his book *Brahmanical Gods in Burma*, Ray discusses the different names for Burma, which, according to him, are all etymologically related to Sanskrit.

The Ahoms, also known as Tai-Ahoms, is an ethnic group originating in Myanmar, found today in the Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. They are the descendants of the Tai people who reached the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in 1228, from Shan State in Myanmar. Amongst other Tai groups, there were Khamtis, Khamyangs, Phakes, Aitons and the Noras.

In modern history, India has seen massive reverse migration and repatriation from Myanmar. “Burmese Indians” are a group of people of Indian origin who used to live in Burma. The outbreak of a series of anti-Indian violence in 1930, the mass emigration during the Japanese occupation of Burma, and the forced expulsion of 1962 resulted in ethnic Indians in Burma migrating back to India; repatriation continued till the 1990s.

Thus, through the movement of people across the India–Myanmar border over decades, significant cultural influences have been exchanged between the two nations.

India–Myanmar Heritage Culture

A prominent manifestation of culture in any civilisation is the evolution of different buildings, architecture and monuments. Monuments are symbols of historical events. These structures continue to represent cross-cultural heritage in the modern world, and stand testimony to the various cultures, habits and traditions witnessed by a nation across ages.

The heritage architectures of India and Myanmar are proof of the cultural interactions between the two nations and the transmission of Hinduism and Buddhism across their borders. These architectures can be classified under five categories.

1. Tai Heritage Culture: Monuments and Sites of Interest in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh



Ahom Architecture, Charaideo, Assam /
Photo Credit: Author



Ahom Architecture, Gargaon, Assam /
Photo Credit: Author



Ahom Architecture, Kareng Ghar, Assam /Photo Credit:
Author



Phake Architecture, Nam Phake, Arunachal Pradesh /
Photo Credit: Author



Khamti Monastery, Tinsukia, Assam /
Photo Credit: Author



Golden Pagoda Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh /
Photo Credit: Author

2. Tai–Shan Heritage Culture and Architecture in Shan State Myanmar



Shan State Pagoda Architecture, Myanmar /Photo Credit: Author

3. Hindu Heritage Culture in Yangon, Mandalay, Moulmein and Shan State



Shri Balmuneshwar
Temple, Hindu Temple
of Mandalay, Myanmar /
Photo Credit: Author



Hindu Temple,
Moulmein, Myanmar /
Photo Credit: Author



Yangon, Myanmar/ Photo
Credit: Author

4. Buddhist Heritage Culture and Monuments in Buddha Gaya, Varanasi and Tiperra, India



Mahabodhi Society,
Buddha Gaya, India /Photo
Credit: Author



Sarnath, Varanasi, India /
Photo Credit: Author



Unokoti Buddhist Heritage
India, Tripura / Photo
Credit: Author

5. Buddhist Heritage Culture in Yangon, Moulmein and Bagan, Myanmar



Kyaiktiyo Golden Rock Temple, Myanmar /
Photo Credit: Author



Pagoda Architecture in Bagan Ancient City
(erstwhile Pagan), Moulmein, Myanmar /
Photo Credit: Author

Recommendation

Based on the above discussion, this essay proposes three new types of tourism that should be promoted between India and Myanmar:

Hindu-Buddhist Pilgrimage Circuit

Both India and Myanmar have several significant Hindu and Buddhist heritage temple architectures, as noted above. Important sites of Hindu and Buddhist religious tours can be explored and developed for people of both countries, similar to the Buddha Gaya Pilgrimage Tours.

Tai Circuit Tourism

An inter-BIMSTEC Tai circuit tourism can be initiated, for the Tais in India and the Shans of Myanmar. Such tours can involve parts of the Mandalay Region, Kachin State, Kayin State, and the adjacent area of Thailand.

Further, a Tai circuit can include Taungyi and other major cities of Myanmar as well, such as Hsipaw, Lashio, Kengtungand Tachileik. It can connect these cities with Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Naharkatia and Mansai to complete an “India–Myanmar Tai Heritage Tourism.” Within this, heritage architectural sites can be lucrative tourist attractions, especially if combined with exposition about their historical and cultural significance.

Tourism Across the Trail of War Routes

The Stilwell Road, originally called Ledo Road, is a 769-km long highway that links Northeastern India with the Burma Road. If developed, this can become an attractive tourism trail, with several war museums in proximity. Further, BIMSTEC can consider reviving its Southern Silk Route.

In India, the Netaji Peak, near Chesezu, can be declared a “national heritage camp” and opened up for both tourists and researchers. Both Manipur and Nagaland have borders with Sagaing Region; additionally, Manipur borders with Chin State as well. Historically, Beihang, Tamu and Ukhrul in Manipur were the three points of Japanese inroads during World War II. These routes can be opened for tourism. While there are currently no war museums in the vicinity, private collections do exist and may be procured for building a museum for tourist attraction.

Conclusion

Since the inception of BIMSTEC in 1997, tourism has been one of the 14 sectors of cooperation amongst its member states. The first Roundtable and Workshop of Tourism Ministers, held in Kolkata in 2005, adopted the Plan of Action for Tourism Development and Promotion for the BIMSTEC region.

For India and Myanmar, in particular, heritage tourism will not only broaden the interaction between the two nations but also open up new avenues for soft-power diplomacy. This idea of heritage architecture and cultural tourism can further be extended to all countries of BIMSTEC, to encourage renewed peace and cooperation amongst the member countries.

About the Author

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Endnotes

¹ April 14, 1944, is a red-letter day for India. It was in Moirang in Manipur that the flag of India was first hoisted on Indian soil on April 14, 1944 by the Indian National Army. During World War II, Moirang was the headquarters of Azad Hind Fauz. Col. Shaukat Malik of the Indian National Army hoisted the Tricolour for the second time on Indian soil on 14 April 1944, in Moirang with the help of Manipuris like Shri Mairembam Koireng Singh who were members of the INA. Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, the enigmatic freedom fighter, stayed with the Nagas for over two months in 1944 during the invasion of British India by the Azad Hind Fauz. “Delhi Chalo Last Camp in Nagaland,” says Netaji was with the Nagas during the Battle of Kohima.

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³ G.E. Harvey, History of Burma (UK: Laurier Books Ltd: UK, 2000), 3-4.

⁴ www.google.com/search?q=Bagan+Ancient+City+pagoda+architect accessed on September 5, 2010.

Revitalising BIMSTEC through Cultural Connectivity from Northeast India

C. Joshua Thomas

Introduction

There remains a paucity of research on the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), established in June 1997 to secure “rapid economic development” and accelerate “economic growth and social progresses” of the sub-region.¹ More than two decades since the group’s inception, stakeholders are facing the challenge of reinforcing BIMSTEC’s strengths while addressing its weaknesses, so that it can fulfill its mission more effectively.

This essay examines the role of India’s Northeast region (NER) in strengthening the country’s relations with its partners in BIMSTEC. To be sure, there have been rapid changes in the NER over the past two decades, with a multitude of stakeholders contributing to such transformations: the Union and state governments, the private sector, and non-government organisations have all played a part in the region’s growth in recent years, particularly in the infrastructure and connectivity in the ‘3R’s+1A’ (road, railways, river and air connectivity).² Consequently, there has been increased attention on the region in recent years. Distinguished Indian diplomat, Ambassador Rajiv K. Bhatia once referred to NER as “where four countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar - ‘meet’, and where South Asia and Southeast Asia also intersect.”³

Ongoing Challenges to BIMSTEC's Growth

BIMSTEC's seven countries around the Bay of Bengal are home to around 22 percent of the world's population. These countries recorded a combined GDP of US\$ 2.7 trillion in 2016, and have sustained average annual rates of growth between 3.4 and 7.5 percent from 2012-2016. One-fourth of the world's traded goods cross the Bay every year.⁴ Since the time of its birth, BIMSTEC has been viewed as having tremendous potential to promote the progress of cooperation, development, and peace in Asia. It can play a key role in nurturing regional common prosperity, connecting the people across the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions, and exploring the centuries-old economic and cultural linkages for economic and other benefits for the people of the region. In the process, the landlocked region could open up and transform into a land-linked region, providing huge developmental gains for the entire sub-region. BIMSTEC is an important vehicle for promoting regional cooperation and economic integration in a range of areas. As Shashi Tharoor, Member of Parliament, once described BIMSTEC: “(it) is a unique link between South-Asia and South-East Asia. From the very beginning, it has been considered a powerful mechanism to promote opportunities for trade, investment and tourism between these two regions. Societies within BIMSTEC are pluralistic; our languages are rich and diverse and we have a shared cultural heritage.”⁵

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By sheer geography, India's Northeast region has served as the starting point of the country's engagements with BIMSTEC. There is a great deal of discussion on the principle of 'connectivity' in the context of the NER and its relations with India's immediate and extended neighbourhood. Connectivity encompasses various domains, including: physical, connectivity, connectivity, telecommunication and digital, and cultural connectivity.

'People-to-People' as Pillar of a Revitalised BIMSTEC

People-to-people engagements can play a pivotal role in deepening the relations between BIMSTEC countries. As Amb. Bhatia has argued, the

current imperative for stronger regional cooperation is “diplomacy for development”.⁶ Taking a cue from this, the following facets of diplomacy should be prioritised for the promotion of cultural connectivity amongst the BIMSTEC states.

a. Academic/Education Diplomacy

- ✓ Exchange of students and research scholars.
- ✓ Strengthening institutional linkages with universities and other institutions of higher learning, research institutes, and think tanks.
- ✓ Organising joint research projects, seminars and conferences.
- ✓ Exchange programmes for professionals like teachers, media practitioners, scientists, health workers, artists, entertainers, and administrative officials.
- ✓ Medical relief projects.
- ✓ Language diplomacy: programmes to promote the learning of each other's languages.
- ✓ Capacity building, especially in strengthening human resource.

b. Tourism Diplomacy

Close contacts amongst the people of BIMSTEC countries help in strengthening relationships by providing avenues for rediscovering shared roots, understanding common and different histories, and learning each other's cultures. M.P. Bezbaruah's work on tourism can be an eye opener.⁷ There are various aspects of tourism that have the potential to bring the people of BIMSTEC countries closer, including: religious tourism; adventure tourism; heritage tourism; eco-tourism and wildlife; and medical tourism.

To facilitate increased rates of tourism, policymakers should prioritise the easing of requirements for obtaining visas, even perhaps implementing visa-free travel or visa-on-arrival schemes for certain destinations. Efforts need to be made to showcase India's Northeast as a tourism hub

in order to create newer gateways for people-to-people contact which can prove instrumental in opening up the landlocked Northeast and driving its growth.

In 2017, the Union government set targets to double the tourism growth rate in the Northeastern states, from the 5.2 percent that they recorded between that year and 2020. Although the Ministry of Tourism has taken steps with BIMSTEC and ASEAN countries to devise packages to increase tourist inflow in India's Northeast, the results are yet to be seen. In 2017, the Northeastern states, combined, received 7.7 million domestic (Indian) tourists and 160,000 foreign tourists.

c. Festival Diplomacy

Pupul Jayagar's idea of organising a "Festival of India"⁸ in Europe may be a pointer. Such festivals can be organised in BIMSTEC countries more frequently, to showcase, for instance, the Northeast's food and cuisine, music, sports, films, and arts and craft. There are various examples of how, if given the chance, elements of cultural life in the Northeastern countries can have a receptive audience in other countries. The Shillong Chamber Choir, for instance, has a wide following amongst music lovers across the globe.

Various cultural events of the people of the Northeast—like the *Hornbill festival* in Kohima, the *Sangai festival* in Imphal, and the *Cherry Bloom festival* of Shillong—will no doubt attract visitors from the BIMSTEC countries. During the period January 14- 27, 2017, the North-Eastern Council sponsored an event called North-East India Cultural Festival - *Namaste Nepal* at Kathmandu,⁹ which proved to be a great success in showcasing the cultures of the region. Similar initiatives can be organised periodically in the BIMSTEC countries to nurture deeper appreciation and understanding of each other's cultures.

d. Publications Diplomacy

There should be no let-up in the publication of a BIMSTEC Journal akin to the *China Report* published by the Institute for Chinese Studies (ICS) in New Delhi; or *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, by the ICWA, New Delhi; and also *Man and Society: A Journal of North-East Studies* of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre (ICSSR-NERC) in Shillong. The BIMSTEC Secretariat should be more proactive in making innovations to these publications, and devise ways by which to disseminate them widely. It could explore channels for seeking the cooperation of leading think tanks in the member countries.

e. Health and Medical Diplomacy

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the fragilities of most countries' health systems; this is also true for India and its fellow BIMSTEC states. India should connect its Northeast region to the BIMSTEC states in the area of health and medicine.

The Way Forward

Although many have often dismissed BIMSTEC as little more than a “talk-shop” that accomplishes little concrete action, its potential cannot be altogether ignored. India's Northeast region could play a significant role in the country's relations with South East Asia, and with regional groups such as ASEAN and BIMSTEC. The Northeast has long been viewed as strategically important with regards to India's Act East Policy. Thus, it should be treated as the starting point of India's ASEAN and BIMSTEC engagement.¹⁰

BIMSTEC and Northeast India should nurture a symbiotic relationship that would bring mutual benefits through the various endeavours that are carried out by them. Because of the regions' shared cultural and historical ties, this subregional organisation should work in a manner that will lead to gains for all stakeholders coming under its purview. People-

to-people contacts, or cultural connections, are significant elements in the trust-building required to take BIMSTEC forward.

The Government of India should consider with renewed interest the BIMSTEC, BBIN and BCIM groupings as avenues for the development of the region. To be sure, the BCIM subregional initiative appears to have been relegated to the backburner. However, the other two, BIMSTEC and BBIN, continue to be treading in the right direction. Together they can help synergise relations between India and BIMSTEC countries and develop the landlocked peripheries and make them a land-linked, prosperous region.

As B.G. Verghese, an erudite scholar on India's Northeast, once wrote: "A border is not a dead end but marks a cultural, economic and environmental zone, a continuum divided by a political boundary. Culturally and ethnically, the Northeast is truly a part of South East Asia. This logic should drive Policy."¹¹ BIMSTEC provides an excellent opportunity for India to deliver development, peace, progress and prosperity to its landlocked, peripheral Northeastern region. Certainly, BIMSTEC could be a potential game-changer as countries in the subregion, along with the Northeast, are bound by geography and linked by history and heritage. This should enable India to invest more intensely in its policy with BIMSTEC. Further, for the Northeast to play a bigger role in India's Act East Policy, as it should, connectivity projects must be implemented as a priority. 'Act East' will need to look *through* the Northeast.

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⁸ Pupul Jayakar (1915 – 1997) was a distinguished cultural activist and writer, best known for her work on the revival of traditional and village arts, handloom, and handicraft in post-independence India. She organised a series of Indian arts festivals in the 1980s in France, the US and Japan that helped popularize Indian arts in the West. She was a founder and trustee of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) (1985), and the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) (1990). See, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pupul_Jayakar

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SECTION 2

CONNECTING NATIONS

BIMSTEC and Regional Connectivity: Opportunities for Bangladesh

Ashish Banik

Bangladesh has always been keen to promote regional and sub-regional initiatives, and has extended continuous support to endeavours to enhance connectivity under the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) framework. Bangladesh's active role during the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the promotion of the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative, and the establishment of the BIMSTEC agenda is widely recognised. BIMSTEC, designed to engage and connect South Asia and Southeast Asia, has offered Bangladesh unique opportunities to expand its 'Look East' policy by building a multi-layered connection with other countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia to attain their common aspirations of socio-economic development.

Renewed Interest in BIMSTEC

As SAARC remains hostage to India-Pakistan rivalry, ineffective to carry out major decisions and fails to yield any tangible results, BIMSTEC increasingly appears as an important platform for Bangladesh's economic development. However, BIMSTEC has only recently begun to receive due attention from its seven member states.

BIMSTEC was established in 1997, yet there were only three summits until 2017 and no ministerial meetings between 2014 and 2017.¹ The

changing geopolitical realities in Bay of Bengal and extended region and the growing importance of the new Indo-Pacific geographic construct has renewed interest among South Asian states to forge connections with Southeast Asia. There have been three significant developments on this front in recent years—BIMSTEC member states' participation in the grouping's first-ever military exercise in September 2018 in Pune, India, as part of building a coalition against terrorism; the signing of a memorandum of understanding on establishing a BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection during the 4th BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu in August 2018; and the finalisation of the draft of BIMSTEC Charter by the BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) in September 2020, after 23 years of its inception, which is expected to be approved at the next summit, scheduled for January 2021. The charter will be the guiding framework for forwarding the important agenda and issues under BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC also appears set to broaden and deepen its agenda to promote a culture of reciprocal concessions, which is needed to finalise issues relating to free trade agreements (FTAs) among its member states.

Several BIMSTEC member states already have bilateral and regional arrangements with each other, and have divergent views, priorities and interests on many issues, including national interest and regional and international aspirations. Nevertheless, it is imperative for the member states to reach a convergence, at least at the operational level, in their political, security and economic outlook to expedite the process of free trade agreement and security cooperation in the long run. Countries involved in BIMSTEC are not only divergent in views and outlooks on various issues but many of them are caught in the middle of overlapping spheres of influence due to the rise of China, and the role of EU, Russia and US in South and South East Asia. The condition itself requires a proactive role from the pivot states to promote the agenda of this regional grouping. Here, the role of a pivotal power, India, in the grouping to forward the development vision with other pivot states is vital and crucial. India, with its geographic size, economic opportunities, diplomatic assets, might take creative and innovative initiatives to generate dividend for partner countries to make this initiative a successful one.

Potential Areas for Cooperation through BIMSTEC

Bangladesh views BIMSTEC as a viable sub-regional platform to address some of its concerns, such as climate change, energy security, cross-border transport linkages, harmonising and liberalising trade procedures, and enhancing security cooperation in the neighbourhood. The economic uncertainties stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and the shrinking markets in Europe and the US have forced Bangladeshi policymakers to seek avenues for greater collaboration with their neighbouring countries. Importantly, not only is the BIMSTEC region one of the fastest growing in the world, with a population of over 1.7 billion and a combined gross domestic product of US\$3.7 trillion, it is also a key transit route between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.² As a result, the region offers immense economic opportunities for its member states, especially in four key areas:

- **Trade and Connectivity**

The BIMSTEC FTA and Agreements on Services and Investment and Trade Facilitation are yet to be finalised. M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC states that the implementation of the FTA is expected to boost intra-BIMSTEC trade to US\$240 billion from the current estimated US\$40 billion by linking the BIMSTEC connectivity plan with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Connectivity Plan 2025.³ Despite this potential, intra-regional trade is low due to many hurdles, such as tariff barriers, lack of connectivity and transportation problems.⁴ The BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) and Coastal Shipping Agreement, proposed, will contribute significantly to bypass these drawbacks and boost intra-regional trade. The implementation process of these agreements might have been planned drawing good lessons and experiences from the available regional and bilateral transit agreements on trade which will definitely reduce time, cost to expedite the process and easily contribute to develop consensus on contentious issues to move forward.⁵

These proposed agreements as an opportunity are offering benefits to its neighbours and vice versa. Under the BIMSTEC MVA agreement, the Chittagong and Mongla ports will be able to provide facilities to connect India's northeastern states, Nepal, Bhutan and the Southeast Asian countries. Bangladeshi policymakers, businessmen and investors have begun to see the importance of transport integration as an effective tool to attract investment and promote the market for export-led growth. To achieve this, establishing the necessary infrastructure and better connectivity within the region is vital. Institutional arrangements, backed by the appropriate rules and regulations, will be necessary to operationalise the MVA framework agreement. If the BIMSTEC MVA can generate consensus among concerned parties to allow freights and containers to transit countries with one single document; ensure customs formalities are performed at origin and destination to streamline border crossing procedures, and provide guarantee a uniform and transparent payment system, there are high possibilities to transform this region towards prosperity, development and growth. Political commitment of the member states would be vital in this regard.

- **Sharing of Power Grid Activity**

The rising demand for electricity in Bangladesh is estimated to reach 34,000 MW by 2030 to sustain the country's economic growth trajectory. To meet these needs, the Bangladesh government has been considering to finance roughly US\$70.5 billion over the next 15 years.⁶ The government of Bangladesh, therefore, plans to increase the power generation capacity by undertaking various measures to propel a fast-growing export-oriented economy. Bangladesh's power plants are heavily dependent on natural gas, which is not sustainable in the long run. Government is therefore exploring alternative sources of power generation, and the country is keenly interested in forming a cross-border sub-regional power grid to promote electricity sharing among the BIMSTEC member states. The member states have massive estimated hydropower generation capacity—India's northeastern states account for 58,000MW, while Bhutan has 30,000MW, Myanmar has 39000MW and Nepal 42,000MW.⁷ If these countries can be brought under one sub-

regional power grid, it will ensure a sustained flow of hydroelectricity at a market competitive price. This potential must be tapped by the BIMSTEC member countries to develop complementary benefits for all.

- **Basin-wide Management of Transboundary Rivers**

While the Joint River Commission is entrusted to deal with water related matters between India and Bangladesh, it has no mandate over similar issues with Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. BIMSTEC could provide the opportunity for Bangladesh to discuss water issues with these countries as well. A common understanding on water resources and its sharing throughout the region will help in flood control and management, and can ensure the continued availability of water in lean period for people in the region. In addition, the member countries can also explore the establishment of waterways to facilitate trade amongst themselves in the Ganga Brahmaputra and Meghna and Mekong Basin.

- **Security Cooperation**

About 854,704 displaced Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh's southeastern border area from Myanmar's Rakhine state since August 2017 to escape persecution. Bangladesh is now home to over a million displaced Rohingyas following earlier waves of mass exodus in 2012 and 2016. A report titled, "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (Rohingya) in Bangladesh: Governance Challenges and Way out" by Transparency International Bangladesh, has revealed that the hosting of the displaced Rohingyas for a prolonged period has created long-term financial, political and security challenges for the country. International efforts to pressure Myanmar to strike a deal to repatriate the Rohingyas have fallen short due to the nonchalant approach of some regional powers. BIMSTEC is the only multilateral platform that both Bangladesh and Myanmar are a part of, and where the other regional powers can take the lead in moving this process along.

South and Southeast Asia continue to face threats from terrorist organisations like AQIS and ISIS, as well as from cross-border drug

trafficking, an issue that has plagued the region for a long time. BIMSTEC member states must come together to eliminate these threats, and the BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking, signed in Myanmar in December 2009, is one way forward.

Developing Linkages and Networks with Other Regional and Inter-Regional Initiatives

Experts in Bangladesh hold the view that the BIMSTEC initiative might be a means to boost regional and inter-regional integration by connecting several initiatives. The multimodal BIMSTEC MVA can be linked to the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project and other sub-regional development projects to create shared opportunities for trade and investment, tourism, energy and resource management, and national security for all states in the region. From a wider perspective, BIMSTEC initiatives can fit well into the Asian Development Bank's proposed plans for trans-Asia road and rail networks. Bangladesh also sees BIMSTEC as an opportunity to bridge its trade gaps with other member countries. In 2018-19, Bangladesh's imports from India amounted to US\$ 8621 million and exports to India totaled US\$873.30 million.⁸ Similarly, Bangladesh's total imports from Bhutan in 2015 was around US\$25 million while its exports to that country were only around US\$2 million. Nepal's exports to Bangladesh totaled US\$35.6 million in 2015 compared to its imports amounted US\$26.41 million.⁹ The total trade deficit between Bangladesh and Myanmar was amounted BDT 3,091cr in view of the total exports and imports from the fiscal years 2010-11 to 2015-16.¹⁰

Challenges

The political environment in the member states will define BIMSTEC's destiny. Experts have argued that different perceptions among the member states are hindering progress. These issues include accessing finance, shortages of skilled workers, lack of

institutional mechanisms, the BIMSTEC secretariat's lack of authority, technological bottlenecks, lack of entrepreneurship and managerial skills, and high costs of doing business. Some of these perceptions are vastly different—for instance, the differences between Bangladesh and Myanmar over the Rohingya crisis, and China's growing influence in the region in the context of its rivalry with India. Member countries must not be hobbled by geopolitical conflicts and guard against periodic domestic unrest.

The Way Forward

Mutual trust and confidence among the BIMSTEC member countries will be key to the initiative's success. Private sectors, institutions and policymaking bodies in the seven member countries must explore new avenues for cooperation. A consensus is needed on standard operating procedures, the harmonisation of standards and customs procedures, and service charges and user fees for transit facilities. Significant investment will be required for trade facilitation and to upgrade border trade facilities at land ports, inland waterways, and seaports. There needs to be some policy integration among the BIMSTEC countries to attract investment from multilateral funding agencies like the World Bank and ADB. The seven countries should also consider a common communications strategy. Civil society and the media can also play a crucial role; if the people in the region find the initiative beneficial, BIMSTEC might be able to succeed in its programmes. BIMSTEC can only hope to create a peaceful strategic environment if it can fulfill the political and developmental aspirations of the people, forge cultural links, and nurture economic cooperation.

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Towards a Tech-Driven BIMSTEC: Prospects and Challenges

Soumya Bhowmick and Pratinashree Basu

Founded in 1997, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a seven-nation grouping that acts as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. BIMSTEC has 14 areas of cooperation, including technology and the associated fields of connectivity, biotechnology, information and communication technology and food processing.¹ Given the disruptions caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in several sectors, BIMSTEC countries are expected to be engaged in deeper technological cooperation since such solutions have the potential to mitigate economic disruptions and contribute to a ‘new normal’ in diplomacy in the post-pandemic world.

Technological cooperation is necessary for BIMSTEC countries to increase their footprint in global trade by making their domestic economies and regional networks more robust in the long term. How can Sri Lanka, the grouping’s technology lead, guide the BIMSTEC on this front? What challenges and opportunities has the COVID-19 pandemic presented for BIMSTEC member states? Can technology help in mitigating such crises by enhancing and better equipping healthcare access and infrastructure?

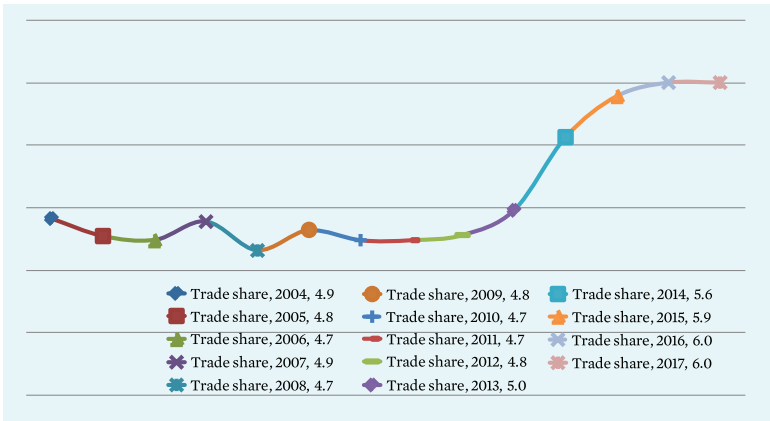
Contextualising BIMSTEC

The BIMSTEC region comprises seven countries with diverse social, industrial, technological and innovation capabilities; Sri Lanka and Thailand promote heavy industry, while Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan continue to rely on their agrarian sectors. Over the years, BIMSTEC countries have faced several economic challenges as technological evolution and foreign direct investment in the region has been limited.²

The proliferation of technology around the world has permitted the transmission of data across borders with the support of international trade.³ The recent thrust on information exchange can be explained by the ability of online platforms to cater to a wide range and volume of demand and supply measures for commodities, which would otherwise be infeasible in the physical markets. This is of key significance for developing countries with large product markets, such as the BIMSTEC member states. The internet has also allowed firms to grow rapidly and reach previously unexplored markets. The way forward for BIMSTEC lies in harmonising these ideas to create a strong framework that can achieve a rapid rate of trade volume and information exchange.

The percentage share of BIMSTEC's trade with the rest of the world has increased over the past two decades (see Figure 1). Although the figures had stagnated from 2004-2010 (with the global financial crisis causing a dip between 2007 and 2009), there has been a steady growth in the last decade. Technology is set to play an important role in shaping the region's global integration and its overall prosperity. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of digital technologies and, thus, technological cooperation is poised to become more important as the BIMSTEC countries try to increase their share in global trade and navigate towards holistic regional development.

Figure 1 - Percentage of BIMSTEC's trade share with the world (2004-2017)



Source: Authors' own, Asian Development Bank data⁴

Another key area of concern is the Blue Economy, which is important for the BIMSTEC member states for several reasons. The BIMSTEC countries' strategic maritime location and their proximity to major emerging markets makes trade a vital factor. In addition, Blue Economy related issues such as overfishing, illegal fishing and the depletion of other marine resources resonates among the people living along the coastal belt. These issues can be effectively addressed using modern technological tools, such as blockchain to manage trade movements and drone surveillance to track sea piracy and trafficking.⁵

With the fourth industrial revolution centered on digital transactions, the BIMSTEC member countries must also undertake substantial technological reforms and develop additive production systems. This is important to meet the countries' goal of transitioning their economies from factor-driven models to technology-driven ones. Although BIMSTEC showed promise in its early years, it has seen little success since then. As BIMSTEC chair, Sri Lanka has been less motivated in the grouping's development than the enthusiasm it has accorded the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).⁶

If the BIMSTEC hopes to overcome this stagnation, it must move beyond reactive regionalism.⁷ BIMSTEC, therefore, needs to carefully capitalise on its immense potential to serve as an appropriate medium in operationalising new frameworks of technology, digitalisation, geopolitics, environment and society.

Sri Lanka as Technology Leader

Sri Lanka is the lead country for BIMSTEC’s technology sector and its technological advancement indicators have been impressive in the last few years. Sri Lanka was ranked in AT Kearney’s Top 25 destinations to invest in their Global Services Location Index for 2017 and 2019, and this is mainly due to the country’s digital economy strategy.⁸ This is majorly due to its economic advantages owing to low labour costs, skilled talent base and strategic location.

The Network Readiness Report by the Portulans Institute and the World Information Technology and Services Alliance ranks countries based on their performance on four crucial pillars—technology, people, governance and impact.⁹ This ranking is important because of number of countries surveyed and its focus on the adoption of newer technology and traditional measures of digitisation. Although Sri Lanka is among the best performing BIMSTEC nations, it still ranks low globally.

Table 1: BIMSTEC Countries’ Ranking in the 2019 Network Readiness Index Report

BIMSTEC Nations	Index Scores (in percentage)	Global Rank (out of 121 countries)
Thailand	51.54	56
India	44.81	79
Sri Lanka	42.42	83
Bhutan	No Data	No Data
Bangladesh	34.48	101
Nepal	32.96	106
Myanmar	No Data	No Data

Source: Authors’ own, Portulans Institute data¹⁰

Although the Sri Lankan National Digital Policy (2020-2025)¹¹ has prescribed a roadmap for the development of a sustainable digital resource-enabled architecture in the country, political uncertainties pose a challenge to its realisation. Sri Lanka's digital rejuvenation plan, although robust in nature, is susceptible to the vagaries of alternate election cycles. The other challenges also impact much-needed reforms and paucity of funding for the development of educational opportunities for digital skilling. These broad challenges, once addressed, can fast track the process of establishing Sri Lanka as a digital hub in South Asia, which could serve as an apt guide for the BIMSTEC forum.

BIMSTEC Tech Developments

At the 2016 BRICS Trade Fair and Exhibition held in India, the BIMSTEC countries showcased their technological advances through innovators, startups and other companies. The aim of the exhibition was the exchange of technological expertise to overcome developmental challenges. The BIMSTEC countries also participated at the fair, discussing the scope of technological developments, essentially because of the SAARC's dormant nature.¹² These developments included basic research and development, and applied research and technology management, with a stress on intellectual property rights, technology forecasting and intermediation.¹³

Cooperation in science and technology must concentrate on the entire spectrum, from innovation processes and digital compliance to global structures and policy regimes. BIMSTEC's collaborations for cutting-edge technological advancement along with the development of a standard approach to international innovation regulations and related frameworks require particular emphasis.¹⁴ In the last 20 years, BIMSTEC has seen three crucial developments in science and technology cooperation:

First, in 2004, the member countries moved from traditional science and technology areas, such as agriculture and environment, to more advanced forms, such as food processing and clean energy. Emphasis was laid on information and communication technology to be used extensively through enhancing resource sharing.¹⁵

Second, the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility (TTF) in Sri Lanka was finalised in 2008 during the second summit. The focus of the TTF is to enable the exchange and transfer of technological innovations and ideas in the region. At the third summit in 2014, collaborations and partnerships were proposed for small and medium sized enterprises to accelerate the process of establishing the TTF, with leaders even emphasising the need for a legal framework to regulate the facility, for which an expert group was constituted.¹⁶ Finalised in 2016, the TTF has worked to multiply the intensity of links in the region, in pursuance of which vocational training and technology centres are being set up by India's Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in Myanmar and Sri Lanka.¹⁷

Third, technology-driven ideas for connectivity with respect to public goods were introduced during the third summit,¹⁸ followed by the inception of a working group at the fourth summit to facilitate communications technology and its transfer to smaller states to make it more affordable and increase accessibility. The intra-regional technology exchange included sectors like finance, IT, food packaging, production and waste management.¹⁹ The 2018 India Mobile Congress saw discussions between the leaders of the BIMSTEC countries and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on various challenges and opportunities, such as advancing the startup ecosystem in the participating countries, and the scope of catering to consumer needs in artificial intelligence, social networking and healthcare.²⁰

BIMSTEC's greatest drawback has been that its free trade initiatives overlap with those of ASEAN and SAARC. National, bilateral and regional priorities and initiatives must be aligned accordingly, and any overlaps with the ASEAN and the South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation groupings must be consistent with the integration objectives of the organisations.²¹

COVID-19 and the Way Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great disruption in trade and investments, and in sectors such as tourism and manufacturing. During the 2003 SARS outbreak, China only contributed to about 4 percent of global output, but this has now increased to a whopping 16 percent.²² Following criticism of China's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak,²³ investors have begun to consider shifting their manufacturing activities to some of the BIMSTEC countries, such as India, Bangladesh and Thailand.²⁴ If this were to happen, the region will see huge benefits in terms of foreign investments, job creation and shifting value chains to domestic economies. Countries like Japan are trying to encourage firms to invest there by pledging US\$2.2 billion to facilitate companies to transfer their production facilities out of China.²⁵ However, China possesses a high-tech ecosystem with suppliers and manufacturers that can offer competitive rates, skilled engineers and integrated logistics infrastructure.²⁶ The BIMSTEC countries must advance on these aspects to leverage available opportunities.

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The pandemic can prove to be a strong stimulus for groupings such as BIMSTEC to reflect on making regional economies self-sufficient for three key reasons:²⁷ first, in the event of a crisis, there should be a certain level of economic insulation to prevent the global economy from being detrimentally affected; second, economies should be robust enough to sustain short-term emergencies and supply chain disruptions; third, and most importantly, regional forums should work towards reducing their external dependency and increasing the efficacy of their domestic production and consumption processes. These aspects are shaped by the level of innovation and technological development in a country, and the BIMSTEC initiatives to strengthen partnerships on such lines can help countries enhance their productive capacities.

The COVID-19 crisis has increased the adoption of technological advances to reduce the harm to human lives and maintain economic flows. However, there are two critical challenges in transitioning to the digital

sphere, especially in developing nations—first, a substantial portion of the population are unable to afford and access digital technologies, and second, the levels digital skill among the population is fairly low. These factors are key in the BIMSTEC nations, which are not as technologically advanced as many other countries.

BIMSTEC's strong connectivity potential through maritime routes and its human resources are fundamental to make further gains in the fourth industrial revolution. There needs to be an additional thrust on scaling up the digitisation processes and inter-sectoral interactions in this part of the world. This needs to be done by considering relevant international legal frameworks and ensuring economic integration with other regional groupings. If these goals are achieved faster and cheaper, the BIMSTEC coalition could become a force to reckon with.

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Strengthening Connectivity in BIMSTEC

Nisha Taneja and Samridhi Bimal

In recent years, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has gained prominence and visibility. While India's oldest engagement has always been with its immediate neighbourhood in South Asia, the “dysfunctionality” of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation as a regional grouping has made BIMSTEC India's most “natural choice to fulfil key foreign policy priorities”.¹ Strengthening trade and connectivity among the BIMSTEC members are the priority areas for cooperation as these are crucial elements for facilitating greater regional economic integration.

In recent years, India has accorded the highest priority to investing in improving transport infrastructure in its neighbouring countries. India has extended lines of credit worth US\$13.11 billion for transport projects in BIMSTEC, which accounts for nearly half of the total cumulative value of lines of credit the country has extended to overseas countries for transport infrastructure development. However, regional trade still remains well below its potential and several connectivity challenges persist. Given this, the main objective of this report is to identify the challenges to transport connectivity, discuss the framework agreements in place or in discussion to strengthen connectivity, and suggest a way forward to strengthen regional connectivity in BIMSTEC.

Challenges to Transport Connectivity in BIMSTEC

Poor connectivity and high transaction costs are among the most critical barriers to regional trade in BIMSTEC. Except for Sri Lanka and Thailand, all other BIMSTEC member countries are connected via land ports, and landlocked Nepal and Bhutan also require transit access through their neighbouring countries to participate in international trade using the nearest seaports. The contiguous geography of the region makes land transport and transit especially important for connectivity. However, despite sharing common land borders, trade between India and Bangladesh, India and Myanmar, or even India and Thailand is currently largely undertaken by the sea route.

- **Road Transport**

The transaction costs of trading across land borders are high due to poor infrastructure, lack of automation and archaic transport protocols. The quality of the road network in the BIMSTEC region is poor and inadequate to operate modern transport. It has often been observed that while member states are developing their own national road networks, little attention is paid to the demands of the neighbouring country or its own international trading community.² The border link roads, port link roads, and arterial links to borders and ports are in poor condition and are congested. There are also some stretches with missing road links, which restricts the opportunities of land-based trade within the region. This is particularly true for road stretches in Myanmar. Although both India and Thailand have been providing technical and financial assistance to upgrade border roads in Myanmar, the progress has been limited.³

Trading goods across borders is also severely restricted by the lack of through transport agreements that would allow the seamless movement of goods across the region. At many of the BIMSTEC land borders, the cargo has to be unloaded from the truck of one country to that of the other, resulting in high transaction costs due to the increased risk of damage and pilferage, additional time taken in transit and additional charges incurred for labour and storage.⁴ The lack of enabling transport

agreements is a major constraint for regional connectivity. Poor infrastructure at land ports, lack of warehousing, asymmetry/absence in electronic customs systems of documentation and informal payments are some of the major issues resulting in the land ports functioning far below optimum in facilitating trade.⁵

- **Maritime Transport**

Maritime transport plays an important role in trade in all BIMSTEC countries. Most of each country's international trade is carried out by sea (except Bhutan and Nepal). This is also considered to be the most well-developed mode of transporting goods within the BIMSTEC region. Several projects, initiatives and reforms have been initiated at major seaports in the region. However, there continue to be several inefficiencies in using the maritime route for trade within BIMSTEC.

There are capacity constraints at many of the BIMSTEC ports, as well as heavy siltation at channels where depths fluctuate with tides. Within the BIMSTEC region, the Colombo port in Sri Lanka has served as the major hub due to its proximity to the mainline shipping routes between Europe and the Far East. However, over time, the Colombo port has started experiencing problems of congestion and capacity limitations. While other alternative ports, such as the Chennai port in India and the Laem Chabang port in Thailand, have emerged, these ports also face capacity limitations. Some of the physical barriers at major ports include old and poorly maintained cargo and ship-handling equipment, old floating craft, and poor road and rail connectivity.⁶ Ports in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal suffer from draft constraints, which limits the navigation and size of the vessels that can be accommodated at the key BIMSTEC ports of Chittagong, Haldia and Kolkata. As a result of the draught restriction, the region has continually relied on feeder rather than maritime services. The lack of port community systems in the major BIMSTEC ports further adds to the inefficiency, duplication, delays and transaction costs of trading.⁷

BIMSTEC Connectivity Agreements

Connectivity agreements enable seamless transportation. BIMSTEC member countries have engaged in four major agreements to strengthen road and maritime connectivity. These include the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA), which has been signed but is yet to be implemented; the India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement (CSA), which is in force; the BIMSTEC MVA and the BIMSTEC CSA, which are in the offing.

- **BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement**

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal signed the MVA in June 2015 to enable the seamless movement of passenger and containerised cargo vehicles across the borders of the four countries.⁸ Bangladesh, India and Nepal have already ratified the BBIN MVA and have agreed to begin implementing it even as they await Bhutan's ratification. Trial runs for cargo vehicles under the MVA were conducted in 2016.⁹ Even though the Asian Development Bank has been providing technical, advisory and financial support to the BBIN MVA, its implementation continues to stall.

- **India-Bangladesh Coastal Shipping Agreement**

The India-Bangladesh CSA is one of the few successful initiatives in the region. India and Bangladesh signed the CSA in June 2015, enabling direct sea movement of containerised/bulk/dry cargo between the two countries as opposed to having goods shipped via the ports in Colombo, Singapore or Klang (Malaysia), which was the process followed prior to the agreement.¹⁰ The standard operating procedure for operationalising it

was subsequently signed in November 2015.^{a,11} The two sides also agreed on the use of vessels up to 6000 gross tonnage of the river sea vessel category for bilateral coastal shipping.^b The agreement declared the Haldia Dock Complex as a transshipment port for containerised cargo originating from or destined for Bangladesh.¹² The shipping agreement has also made way for Indian goods reaching the Chittagong Port to be delivered to India's northeast.^{c,13}

Since its signing, the scope of the CSA has been expanded to cater to the growing needs of trade. In October 2018, the two governments agreed to increase ports of call and signed an agreement on the use of Chittagong and Mongla Ports in Bangladesh for the movement of goods to and from India.¹⁴ Recently, there have been concerns from India about the lack of cost-efficiency while adhering to the restrictions of using river sea vessels of only 6000 GT between India and Bangladesh. However, this restriction is also likely to be lifted when the agreement is due for renewal in 2020.¹⁵

- **BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement**

To facilitate the seamless movement of containerised cargo and passenger vehicles in the region, the BIMSTEC member countries are also discussing a MVA. In 2018, the BIMSTEC Working Group negotiated the draft text

^a The standard operating procedure contains provisions that stipulate that India and Bangladesh shall render the same treatment to the other country's vessels as it would to its national vessels used in international sea transportation.

^b Article II of the CSA covers only Indian and Bangladeshi flag vessels that comply with river sea vessel or equivalent standards to run services between the two countries.

^c For instance, cargo from Kolkata to Chittagong or Mongla can be delivered through multimodal transport (rail, road or inland waterways) to either destinations within Bangladesh or India's northeast. Bangladesh has allowed the use of the following routes for such purposes: Chittagong/Mongla to Agartala in Tripura, Chittagong/Mongla to Dawki in Meghalaya and Chittagong/Mongla to Sutarkandi in Assam.

of the MVA for the Regulation of Passenger and Cargo Vehicular Traffic between the BIMSTEC member countries. The text was drafted by India and is awaiting finalisation.¹⁶ The agreement also intends to integrate existing bilateral, trilateral and multilateral connectivity projects, such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the Trilateral Highway under the MVA.¹⁷

However, like the BBIN MVA, ratifying the BIMSTEC MVA might not be easy as Bhutan will likely have concerns, and the inordinate delays in implementing the BBIN MVA may be a drag on the BIMSTEC MVA.

- **BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement**

The success of the India-Bangladesh CSA has encouraged BIMSTEC member countries to initiate discussions on a CSA to promote coastal trade and shipping in the region. Once the agreement is ratified and implemented by the BIMSTEC member countries, “a lot of cargo movement between the member countries can be done through the cost-effective, environment-friendly and faster coastal shipping route”.¹⁸ Since coastal shipping requires smaller vessels and lesser draft, the agreement is expected to facilitate cargo movement along the coast at a lower cost. India’s Ministry of Shipping had prepared a draft agreement that was discussed during the first Working Group meeting held in 2017.¹⁹ The agreement also encompasses the “Connect the Connectivities” initiative proposed by Thailand to connect BIMSTEC members via a network of ports, commencing with a network that will connect the Ranong province in Thailand with Chittagong in Bangladesh. The network will then be expanded to include ports in India’s Kolkata, Chennai and Visakhapatnam, and Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka.²⁰

Way Ahead for BIMSTEC Connectivity

Regional integration within the BIMSTEC area is adversely impacted by sub-optimal levels of connectivity across the different modes of transport and their weak interlinkages. The signing of the BBIN MVA was instrumental in whittling a consensus for building an enabling

environment for seamless transport connectivity in the region. However, the agreement is still not operational. The only success the region has witnessed in terms of connectivity agreements is in the form of the India-Bangladesh CSA, which holds tremendous potential for boosting maritime trade and connectivity. Even though the BIMSTEC member states are discussing a MVA and a CSA, their implementation will require substantial institutional and regulatory reforms in each country.

Facilitating seamless transport connectivity and strengthening multi-modal connectivity is the key to deepening economic engagement within the region. To this end, the following policy recommendations should be considered:

- **Acceding to International Conventions**

Concerns regarding the implementation of the BIMSTEC MVA can be addressed by acceding to international instruments such as the Convention on International Transport of Goods Under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention), which allows for seamless transportation under simplified transit procedures through multiple territories with a single document under full customs security and international guarantee.²¹ The expansion of the TIR system to different regions, such as the European Union, Eurasian Economic Customs Union, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and West Asia, has illustrated persuasive benefits. It would augur well for the BIMSTEC countries to follow the TIR Convention at a regional level. India is already a member of the convention and it could lead other members to accede to it.

- **Infrastructure Upgradation**

As roads represent the dominant mode of both domestic and regional transportation, upgrading the trade-related infrastructure at borders and customs checkpoints is of utmost importance to strengthen overland connectivity in the BIMSTEC region. The border access roads and arterial road links need to be upgraded. Appropriate trade facilitative

infrastructure needs to be put in place at the land custom points to aid the smooth flow of cargo across the borders.

- **Greater Coordination Among Different Agencies**

Greater coordination is required among the BIMSTEC member countries on their national programmes. Also, there needs to be greater coordination between the states/provinces and the Centre and between the different agencies in each member countries. This will enable a more efficient implementation of projects.

Lastly, to strengthen maritime connectivity, it is important to develop deep-water ports in the northern Bay of Bengal that can handle large size container vessels, modernise operations at ports and increase their operational efficiency, enable ports to act as transit facilities servicing inter-modal transfer between maritime and land transport modes, and to develop and harmonise port community systems at the major BIMSTEC ports.²²

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Understanding Myanmar's Role in BIMSTEC Connectivity

K. Yhome

Located at the crossroads of Asia, Myanmar plays a critical role in connectivity networks in the north-south and east-west direction. The Southeast Asian nation is aware of its geostrategic location and has been actively participating in various bilateral, subregional and regional connectivity initiatives. One such project is the seven-member Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), of which Myanmar is a member. Myanmar shares land and maritime boundaries with three BIMSTEC members (Bangladesh, India and Thailand) and is a key connector of these countries, on land and at sea. This report situates Myanmar in road transport, and energy and maritime connectivity within the BIMSTEC region by assessing how dynamics within that country and cooperation with other BIMSTEC members in connectivity infrastructure are shaping the grouping's prospects of land connectivity.

Land connectivity

In the context of BIMSTEC's road connectivity, the most significant initiative is the ongoing India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project where Myanmar's location plays a crucial role in connecting the three nations. Myanmar is the only country besides India without whose participation it is difficult to imagine land connectivity of all BIMSTEC members. The BIMSTEC transport infrastructure report, prepared by the Asian Development Bank (ADB)¹ and approved by the BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting in 2017, identified six road initiatives in Myanmar

as priority projects. Of the six projects, five are part of the Trilateral Highway project—three projects connecting Myanmar to Thailand (new border link Mae Sot/Myawaddy, Myawaddy–Kawkareik road and the construction of Kawkareik–Eindu road) and two link Myanmar to India (Yagyi–Kalewa road improvement and bridges on the Kalewa–Tamu road).

The priority projects that will connect Myanmar with Thailand have been gradually upgraded in recent years, with funding from Thailand and the ADB. The second Thai–Myanmar Friendship Bridge, linking Mae Sot in Thailand and Myawaddy in Myanmar, opened to traffic in October 2019.² While the bridge is part of the East–West Economic Corridor (EWEC) that aims to link Myanmar and Vietnam through Thailand and Laos, it is also important in the context of BIMSTEC connectivity because it will link the remaining member countries to Thailand via Myanmar. Along with the opening of the new bridge, the implementation of the cross-border transport facilitation agreement between Myanmar and Thailand last year, which allows goods vehicles from both sides to cross the border and stay for 30 days, has further boosted cross-border trade between the two countries.³ The Mae Sot–Myawaddy route is the busiest trade point, carrying around 70 percent of trade between Myanmar and Thailand.⁴

The Myawaddy–Kawkareik road was officially inaugurated in July 2015 and opened for traffic a month later after construction of the Tanaosri–Kawkareik (26 kilometre) section of the road was completed.⁵ Earlier, the Myawaddy–Tanasri (17 kilometre) section of the road was constructed and opened. This new road bypasses the Kawkareik town and links straight to the Kawkareik–Eindu road in Myanmar’s Kayin State—the 64 kilometre stretch that has been undergoing rehabilitation and widening since December 2016 through a US\$100-million loan from the ADB, a US\$20-million loan from the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund and US\$1.8 million from Myanmar. The project is now expected to be completed by mid-2021.⁶ In February 2017, the upgradation of the 68-kilometre Thaton–Eindu section was approved by Myanmar,⁷ to be funded by the Thai government at a cost of US\$51 million.⁸ It is not clear how much progress this project has made in the last three years. However, in a

recent development with immense significance for Myanmar and Thai trade ties, Myanmar's parliament approved seeking a US\$483.8-million loan from the ADB to implement the 62-kilometre Bago-Kyaikhto expressway project.⁹ The Bago-Kyaikhto section is developed as part of the EWEC, but the Kyaiktiyo-Phaya Gyi section is part of the Trilateral Highway project.

On western side of Myanmar, which connects the Trilateral Highway to India, the two priority projects—Yagyi-Kalewa road improvement and bridges on the Kalewa-Tamu road—have also seen progress in recent years. In August 2016, India signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Myanmar to fund the construction of 69 bridges, including approach roads in the Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa section (149 kilometre) and to upgrade the Kalewa-Yagyi section (120 kilometre).¹⁰ In April 2018, the National Highway Authority of India signed a US\$170-million deal with Punj Lloyd and Varaha Infra Ltd for the Kalewa-Yagyi section in Myanmar. The project involves building three new major bridges and two new minor bridges, repairing four existing major bridges and nine existing minor bridges, and reconstructing six existing minor bridges, all to be completed by April 2021.¹¹

In the meantime, like at the Thai-Myanmar border, there have also been other important agreements between India and Myanmar in facilitating travel through the land border, such as the land border crossing agreement that was signed in May 2018.¹² India and Myanmar opened two land border crossing points at Tamu-Moreh and Rihkhawdar-Zowkhawthar as international border gates in August 2018.¹³ During the visit of Myanmar's President Win Myint to India in February 2020, the two countries committed to the early conclusion of discussions on the pending bilateral Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) to facilitate the cross-border movement of vehicles. Even as the MVA remains in the pipeline, other developments have indicated progress, such as the MoU signed between India and Myanmar private operators to launch a coordinated bus service between Imphal and Mandalay in February 2020.¹⁴ With Myanmar entering into new land border crossings with two

BIMSTEC members, this move should further facilitate the BIMSTEC MVA, which is currently under negotiation.

Energy cooperation

Recognising that a single electricity grid will benefit all member countries since it will ensure affordability and efficient power transmission, the BIMSTEC nations signed a MoU for the establishment of the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection in 2018. In what appears to be a major step towards achieving power exchange through cross-border interconnections, the subregional grouping has been working on connecting a 3,000-kilometre-long power grid from Myanmar and Thailand to India,¹⁵ which was announced at a conference on energy cooperation in the BIMSTEC subregion organised by the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka. Currently, power grid interconnections are operational between India and Bangladesh, India and Bhutan, and India and Nepal.¹⁶ Myanmar has cross-border electricity trade with two BIMSTEC members, India and Thailand. India has supplied electricity to Myanmar's border town of Tamu, which is not connected to the country's national grid, and Thailand's Chaing Rai has supplied electricity to Myanmar's border town of Tachileik.¹⁷ Of the three BIMSTEC members with which Myanmar shares a land border, there is no cross-border electricity trade with Bangladesh.

In terms of gas grid interconnections among the BIMSTEC nations, Myanmar has made some advances as it is the only country with cross-border gas pipelines that are currently operational—the pipelines that supply gas from Myanmar's Yadana, Yategun and Zawtika gas fields to Thailand.¹⁸ There have been reports of Indian and Bangladeshi oil and gas companies being interested in laying a 6,900-kilometre gas pipeline linking Bangladesh and Myanmar and India's West Bengal and northeast,¹⁹ but it is not clear if there has been any concerted effort in this direction since the reports first emerged.

In maritime connectivity, the BIMSTEC nations have been trying to ink a coastal shipping agreement. Given its geographical location and

its focus on port-led development, Myanmar plays a crucial role in connecting the subregional grouping in the Bay of Bengal. Myanmar has been developing three special economic zones (SEZs)—the Dawei SEZ in southern Tanintharyi region; the Kyaukphyu Economic and Technological Zone in western Rakhine state (a Chinese-led project that plans to build an industrial park and a deep-water port, the starting point of pipeline linking the coastal area with China's inland cities); and the Thilawa SEZ near Yangon, a Japan-led project. The SEZs have been created near the ports to develop these ports. Myanmar has proposed the Sittwe Economic Zone in Rakhine state where India has developed the port and from where the Kaladan multi-modal connectivity project plans to connect India's northeast region with the bay. The SEZ plan in Sittwe is yet to take off.

Geopolitical concerns

As much as Myanmar plays a pivotal role in BIMSTEC connectivity, the country also poses challenges owing to internal political and security dynamics (especially conflicts between the Myanmar army and ethnic armed groups in Rakhine state) that continue to shape several aspects of development, including connectivity infrastructure projects. The latest connectivity initiative to have been affected by the conflict is the India-funded Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which envisages connecting Sittwe port with Mizoram in India's northeast through a sea-river-land transport. Construction of the road section has been disrupted due to increased clashes between the Arakan Army²⁰ and the Myanmar army in the Rakhine and Chin states, where workers involved with the road and bridge construction have been kidnapped by the rebel group.²¹ Environment and social issues, including land compensation, have also long affected the progress of connectivity projects in Myanmar. For instance, the upgradation work of the Eindu-Kawkareik road has been delayed for over a year because the ADB loan was suspended in 2017 as the project reportedly breached environment conservation rules.²² It was only in May 2019 that the loan was released for the project.

With the country in the midst of major political, social and economic transitions, marked by conflicts between the Myanmar government and the ethnic minorities over resource sharing and social and environmental issues, connectivity infrastructure projects may continue to face delays. At the same time, as Myanmar gradually links itself with neighbouring countries, these will act as important nodes for connectivity schemes, including BIMSTEC connectivity. Myanmar's increasing bilateral agreements in strengthening connectivity with its neighbours could be steppingstones for subregional and regional connectivity. For instance, Myanmar's border land crossing agreements with India and Thailand will create the ground for a trilateral MVA and, thus, bilateral agreements can form the base for cooperation at the subregional and regional level.

A geopolitical dimension that is likely to become a bigger factor in subregional and regional connectivity in the context of Myanmar is the country's growing ties with its northern neighbour, China. Since the launch of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, Myanmar's geostrategic significance for Beijing has gained greater salience as an outlet to the Indian Ocean, with the two countries signing several new connectivity agreements, including the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor as part of the BRI, and establishing plans to build road networks and railway links. The two countries are already linked to each other through oil and gas pipelines. Myanmar has long been wary of growing over-dependence on its northern neighbours and has been trying to counter-balance its economic relations by diversifying its engagements. Strengthening connectivity with its eastern and western neighbours are part of this strategy, and this could be leveraged for BIMSTEC connectivity.

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From Words to Action: Creating a BIMSTEC for the Future

Sujeev Shakya

In South Asia, ceremonies are important, and ceremonial statuses even more so. It is difficult to convert ceremonial value into action and words from speeches and presentations into real action. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is now a 23-year-old club that has remained largely ceremonial. But there is now an opportunity to revive the grouping in its silver jubilee year in 2022 so that it does not face the same fate as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

It is “an opportune time for South Asia to integrate meaningfully and enjoy gains from regional trade. Nepal is uniquely positioned in this regard to leverage various regional markets and consortiums not only because it is a part of a sprawling market in South Asia but also because it is often envisioned as a potential link between China and South Asia.”¹

No Better Time

When a new world order is being established in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, five key factors will drive the recovery and realignment. First, the US and Europe have been exposed in terms of how governments and people handle situations during the pandemic, and this has resulted in a big hit on their soft power. The focus will shift to Asia as countries like Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar will be the ‘new kids on the global block’ to reckon with.

Second, China, which took on the mantle of custodian of globalisation since President Xi Jinping took centre stage at the World Economic Forum at Davos in 2017, will pursue its Belt and Road initiative (BRI) more aggressively and will power economic recovery in many countries.

Third, the loss of Hong Kong as a financial and business hub will make Singapore more important as it consolidates its status in the region. Singapore should capitalise on this by becoming the key interface for BIMSTEC business and economic ambitions.

Fourth, the new geopolitical alignment has placed renewed importance on the Indo-Pacific, and many countries within this group view the development of BIMSTEC and other similar platforms at a counter to China's BRI.

Finally, the recent standoff between China and India, which resulted in punitive economic actions, will likely push other countries in the region to build a 'third force' to maintain ties with both countries without necessarily aligning with either. Countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal will need to find a common way to handle their two big neighbours, China and India.

Towards East South Asia

The economic potential of East South Asia—the region spanning the Bay of Bengal, northeast India and its adjoining areas—makes a strong case for regional integration. Nepal, Bhutan, and the Himalayan region were historically connected via Kolkata and Dhaka to the Bay of Bengal until the middle of the 20th century. Organisations like BIMSTEC can play a key role in promoting integration in East South Asia.²

It is necessary to look at new ways of integration beyond the traditional perspective of business and trade. The definition of trade is changing with the advent of e-commerce and digital payment platforms, and traditional political borders do not have any meaning here. Cross-border trade is rampant, even if countries do not allow it legally. There

is information in the virtual world on prices, quantities and qualities that can be accessed by anyone with a phone and an internet connection. Data is the new currency, much like oil and gas was a few decades ago. Technology and artificial intelligence have enabled new forms of businesses that are location agnostic, and which have in turn led to major cross-border investments and businesses. The nature of physical trade is also changing, but there is a need for more radical ideas, such as Border Economic Zones.³

Tourism is the new way of connecting people and generating revenue, and new sub-regional markets are emerging. For instance, there is a big opportunity for countries in the region to work together to explore Buddhist circuits by connecting pilgrimages sites in Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and India. Similarly, new exploratory road trips can be made popular across the BIMSTEC countries where one can start a trip in the Indian Western Himalayas through Nepal and Bangladesh to move across Myanmar to Thailand. Tourism will also be a great way to connect people, and when there is a good people to people (P2P) connect, it makes connections at the business-to-business and government-to-government level possible in the long run, which is key to the survival and growth of any regional cooperation entity.

The East South Asia region has enormous potential that can best be harnessed through cooperative and competitive engagement amongst the constituent member states. It is imperative that the momentum created by the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative Motor Vehicles Agreement is carried forward and built upon. Given the geographical proximity of the countries, their similarities in culture and spending patterns, it makes good economic sense to strengthen connectivity in East South Asia.⁴

Areas of Opportunity and Increased Cooperation

The BIMSTEC countries must leverage the already built integrated border check-posts and containerised movement of goods, and must realign the tracking of all cross-border movements to prevent any misuse to take advantage of the world seeking to shift global manufacturing

hubs out of China in the post pandemic era. The BIMSTEC region is the ideal alternate location for this shift.⁵ Trade routes and supply chains will be the new business plans for multinational enterprises in the days to come. This is why increased cooperation is crucial so that resilient and reliable supply chains can be developed in the BIMSTEC region and turn it into a hub. The member countries must develop a sustainable regional group that can take advantage of the momentum on the diversifying manufacturing locations.⁶

Making It Happen

BIMSTEC has faced challenges in terms of the tardy nature of work due to the institutional set up involving governments. Innovative ways of cooperation must be carved out, through three clear actions. First is building a network of institutions—think tanks and businesses that are willing to create an informal forum that can emerge as an institution conducting deep research, analysis and advocacy, and not mired in ceremonial work. Second, this forum must push the P2P agenda with support from development partners, especially those who have a serious interest in the region. The key will be to get all countries in the region, including China, to agree to such an initiative. Finally, the sustainability of regional blocs depends on the growth in business and economic activities. The big global and regional companies as well as those with trans-border business interests must be convinced about the grouping, for it to be truly successful. The experiences of the Association of South East Asian Nations, the European Union and the East African Community show that the support of businesses and the opportunities they see in the grouping are more important for its success than being driven by governments.

The time is to think of new ways of engagement for BIMSTEC is now, and the grouping's silver jubilee in 2022 is the perfect target date by which to revive its scope.

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Towards Greater BIMSTEC Cooperation: The Need for Values Connectivity

Robin Ramcharan

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) lacks a clear human right and values framework, which is necessary if the grouping is to transcend being merely a vehicle for connectivity on functional lines. Such a values framework is found in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which has been adopted by all countries and encompasses the aspirations of BIMSTEC. Although it is not specifically stated, the SDGs aim to achieve fundamental human rights goals, which must be at the centre of all BIMSTEC endeavours under the purview of BIMSTEC.

There has been no scholarly writing on the values dimension—specifically, fundamental human rights—of BIMSTEC, although some have discussed culture as an “expression of Values”.¹ This is a glaring lacuna for a region that home to over 1.5 billion people (or 22 percent of the global population), with a combined gross domestic product worth US\$2.5 trillion.²

An analysis of the BIMSTEC instruments, documents from the SDG process, and other relevant documents will establish how the grouping lacks a values and rights based framework. This will also help lay out a roadmap for how to align BIMSTEC with such an overarching values-based system.

Absence of Values Based Connectivity

BIMSTEC's key instruments and summits have seldom articulated a shared vision around core human rights values. While the non-littoral states appear to be embracing certain core values in pursuit of their strategic objectives through the Indo-Pacific concept, BIMSTEC is lagging in this area.

The absence of a values-based connectivity was evident from the grouping's inception. The founding Bangkok Declaration provided two key rules—1) cooperation within BIMSTEC will be based on respect for the principle of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit; and 2) cooperation within BIMSTEC will constitute an addition to and not be a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation involving the member states.³

The 2014 Memorandum of Association on the Establishment of the Permanent Secretariat, located in Dhaka, provided for an office whose function was to coordinate the grouping's increased activities.⁴ No guiding values or principles were articulated in this document.

The 2018 Memorandum of Understanding for the Establishment of the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection recognised the need to enhance energy development in the region, specifically grid interconnection for the trade of electricity. It contains a nominal reference to “sustainable development” but does not adequately elaborate on this.⁵

The four BIMSTEC summits also did not articulate a shared set of values. At the first summit in Bangkok in 2004, BIMSTEC leaders resolved to foster a sense of community that will lead to the economic and social development of the entire region.⁶ They agreed to enhance “people-to-people contact” and to explore “the expansion of BIMSTEC cooperation into the areas of culture, education...” and other areas.⁷ The second summit in New Delhi in 2008 saw an agreement “to continue and strengthen our cooperation on poverty alleviation in the context of ensuring food security for the vulnerable people in the region”, “to

expand cooperation in culture to include cultural values, diversity and heritage...” and to “augment our efforts to further promote people-to-people contacts among our States and decide that India will take the lead to establish a BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks.”⁸ At the third summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, in 2014, the member states again agreed to enhance people-to-people contact and cultural cooperation, with a deal to establish the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission and BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory.⁹

It took until the last summit in Kathmandu, Nepal, in 2018 for an affirmation of the “solemn commitment to making the Bay of Bengal Region peaceful, prosperous and sustainable by building on our common strengths through our collective efforts,” the recognition that “the eradication of poverty is the greatest regional challenge in realization of development objectives and expressing firm commitment to working together for the implementation of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.” The member countries also stated their “faith unequivocally in the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations” and agreed to work together to present a united voice to safeguard collective interests for a just, rules-based, equitable and transparent world order. They also noted their commitment to the eradication poverty in the Bay of Bengal Region by 2030 in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, called for the effective implementation of the BIMSTEC Poverty Plan of Action and to gear up efforts of all sectors to contribute to the overarching goal of poverty alleviation.¹⁰

Ministerial declarations held between 1997 and 2018 also do not reveal any concern for values and rights.¹¹ Instead, the engagement centered on the 14 identified sectors of cooperation— trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism, fisheries, agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism, environment, culture, people-to-people contact, and climate change.

While no values dimension is provided in BIMSTEC, one can note a concern for sustainable development, poverty alleviation and for upholding the UN Charter. These are useful building blocks on which to craft a values framework.

Need for Rights Framework in Indo-Pacific Community

In the impending ‘Cold War’ between China and the US, battles over human rights will take a prominent place. There have been calls for an alliance of democracies to lead the world and counter the rise of autocratic global powers. According to former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a “D10,” akin to the G7 and including Australia, India and South Korea, is necessary because “authoritarian forces, such as in Russia and China.... geopolitically they have the wind in their sails. Free societies put the individual and freedom first; but autocracies put the regime first.”¹² BIMSTEC cannot avoid this tussle and must clearly articulate a human rights framework to establish where it stands.

BIMSTEC is a growing sub-regional organisation whose members are located in the Indo-Pacific area, which embraces countries including India, Sri Lanka, the ten Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan. India and ASEAN have embraced the concept, as has the US, which is intended to counter the Chinese political model and Beijing’s assertive influence in the region.

Countries in the Indo-Pacific are committed to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. While these countries may experience many rights challenges, most are strong or emerging democracies and fundamental human rights are part of their political culture. Despite a rocky road, the ASEAN Charter (2007) has helped its members, including Myanmar and Thailand, to follow the path towards democracy, rule of law, human rights and good governance.

Upholding human rights will play a key role in India’s attempts to counter Chinese influence in the region, especially in the Bay of Bengal. It is no coincidence that India took the initiative to reinvigorate a stalled BIMSTEC in 2016, by indicating an interest in making the grouping the locus of regional cooperation and moving away from the Association of South Asian Cooperation. While highlighting this geostrategic shift in June 2017, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted the “..shared

values, histories, ways of life, and destinies that are interlinked” and that BIMSTEC represents a common space for peace and development”. For India, “it is a natural platform to fulfill our key foreign policy priorities of “Neighborhood First” and “Act East” [emphasis added].¹³

In this geopolitical tussle, in which New Delhi seeks to counter Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative, India, as the most powerful player in BIMSTEC, will need to forge relationships with the other Indo-Pacific partners (Australia, Japan, the US) and thus advance the protection of human rights across the region.

This calls for the elaboration of a values framework, based on fundamental rights. This may seem a tall ask, given that many developing countries have been uncomfortable with explicit commitments to human rights protection and seek to protect themselves from external criticism. The elaboration of SDGs clearly reflected this discomfort but holds a promising basis on which to develop a values framework.

SDGs’ Values Framework

At the 2016 Leaders Retreat in Goa, India, BIMSTEC members exchanged views on important global and regional issues, including the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹⁴ Although the SDGs (adopted in 2015) were not framed in human rights terms, with the exception of SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), they still seek to achieve the fundamental goals of the international human rights regime. All BIMSTEC and ASEAN member states enthusiastically endorsed the SDGs.

The SDGs hold the potential to complement the regional rights regime, which is centered on the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and the ASEAN Declaration of Human Rights. The SDGs make some important connections between sustainable development and existing individual human rights obligations—SDG 2.1 (ending hunger and access to safe nutrition) reiterates obligations in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICESCR); and new

goals regarding global health in SDG 3, “roughly” resemble the right to health in Article 12 of ICESCR.¹⁵ The Danish Institute for Human Rights also concluded that 156 of the 169 SDG targets reflect human rights and basic labour standards.¹⁶

The potential for the SDGs, especially Goal 16, to advance human rights protection was captured by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which, commenting after the adoption of the SDGs, noted that “The novelty factor is heightened because this is no drab vision of institutions, but one that touches centrally on the connection between the structures of power and the people that they should serve.”¹⁷ Goal 16 marks a step forward inasmuch as it recognises the roles that peace, justice and good governance have to play in development. The UN Economic and Social Commission for the Asia Pacific has noted that SDG 16 provides “the framework for peace, justice for all, and strong institutions – which are fundamental for accelerating progress of other SDGs.”¹⁸

The SDGs are consistent with states’ preference for engagement in dialogue rather than confrontation over substantive and controversial rights issues. Dialogue is also the basic *modus operandi* of the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council, to which all states report every five years.¹⁹

Roadmap to a Values-Based Regime

BIMSTEC members ought to explicitly ground their functionalist agenda in the SDGs. In doing so, they will move closer to a human rights vision. The SDGs may be seen as a global moral responsibility and can provide states with a standard of appropriate behaviour.²⁰ How can this be achieved?

International institutions can shape the behaviour of states and steer them towards desired outcomes, such as the promotion and protection of human rights.²¹ As BIMSTEC becomes more institutionalised and assumes a greater coordination role, it must initiate a dialogue on

mainstreaming the SDGs into its core instruments, in its summits and in ministerial discussions. Several steps can be taken towards achieving this goal:

First, the BIMSTEC Secretary General must exercise leadership in initiating a dialogue on the SDGs. The Secretary General can discreetly consult with member states on wrapping BIMSTEC in a ‘SDG blanket’.

Second, the Secretary General should call upon the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks, established at the third Summit, to draft a concept note for discussion in workshops and conferences. In doing so, they can make linkages between each of the 14 sectoral areas of cooperation and the following SDGs that are directly relevant and can help establish a rights and values framework:

- SDG 1: No poverty
- SDG 7: Affordable and clean energy
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
- SDG 13: Climate Action
- SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Third, the Secretary General should offer the refined concept note for deliberation at a leaders’ retreat. India can play a leadership role given that it “accords utmost priority to BIMSTEC. It fulfills our key foreign policy priorities of “Neighbourhood First” and ‘Act East’”.²²

Fourth, summits, ministerial declarations and reporting should be framed explicitly in terms of progress towards achieving the SDGs. In so doing, a locally generated rights-oriented framework will emerge that firmly anchors BIMSTEC in the emerging Indo-Pacific order.

Conclusion

If BIMSTEC can develop a values dimension grounded in the SDGs, then developing a human rights framework in the wider geopolitical context should not be too much of a stretch. All BIMSTEC members are

democracies that have declared their adherence to fundamental rights and feature electoral political systems, however imperfect in some cases. They have all committed to core international rights conventions and hold obligations under international human rights law. Human rights values are not 'foreign' impositions but part of Asian values. India, after all, was a key drafter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), along with several other Asian states.²³

The collective development of an SDG values-based organisation should start with the elaboration of a declaration of principles on the implementation of SDG 16. Over time, BIMSTEC could pursue cooperative efforts focused on the protection of the rights of children, women and migrants; the implementation of the UN Universal Periodic Review system; the implementation of the right to development; the enhancement of national human rights institutions; the implementation of UN human rights treaties; the promotion of equality and non-discrimination; the protection of vulnerable groups; the prevention of conflicts and crises; and safeguarding human rights during natural and human-made disasters.

As part of this process, it is important to involve civil society organisations and national human rights institutions to elaborate and monitor the values framework. Business organisations, which will drive connectivity, must also be involved in upholding the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Together, these will lend greater credibility to this undertaking, are vital to its ultimate success and will follow internationally recognised good practices.

About the author

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SECTION 3

Maritime Order, Connectivity, and Blue Economy

Connecting the Coasts: The BIMSTEC Experience

P.V. Rao

Ports and ships are the key agents of a country's maritime transactions. An important aspect of the transport infrastructure is coastal shipping, which enables the speedy movement of cargo along the coastal domains. The same is true for the Bay of Bengal (BoB) where coasts are integral to the Bay's economic development. Plans are being made to increase the maritime connectivity of BIMSTEC's littoral states. Also assuming priority at both national and subregional levels are the multimodal transport modes linking BIMSTEC states across land and sea routes. Indeed, BoB is best suited to synergise the land and the sea into a cohesive regional trade and transport hub.

Coastal shipping is an important mode in multimodal transport planning. This mode of cargo carriage through inland waterways and coastlines is encouraged as it is economical, faster, and without encumbrances to movement, when compared to surface transportation by roads and railways. For people living along the coasts, ferrying goods through the adjoining waters has been a natural, traditional activity over the centuries. Coastal shipping, also called Short Sea Shipping (SSS), is defined as "the commercial shipment of cargo or passengers by domestic and international maritime transport. In general, this subsector of marine transportation operates in coastal and inland waterways, does not cross an ocean and often competes with road and rail networks." The socio-economic benefits of SSS include direct and indirect job creation,

reduction of accidents, lower emissions compared to land transport, and generation of revenues for government. This mode has been a fairly recent one adopted by developed countries such as the United States and in Europe. Compared to the international, long-distance shipping liners whose sailing time could take at least one month, the timeline for coastal shipping could be anywhere between a few hours to a maximum of one week, depending upon the coastline of the countries concerned. Moreover, coastal ships are much smaller in size and tonnage capacity, and easily manoeuvrable with frequent calls at national ports—unlike the large and very large ship (VVLs) with enormous tonnage capacity requiring higher draft at the ports.¹ Since five out of the seven BIMSTEC states are coastal frontiers, coastal shipping has immense potential in generating connectivity and commerce for the littorals.

Such potential for connecting BIMSTEC countries through multimodal modes has been well-recognised by national planners and regional think tanks. Among the original sectors of inter-regional cooperation designated by BIMSTEC, infrastructure has been identified as one. A study by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on BIMSTEC transport infrastructure, while recognising the imperative of upgrading intra-regional linkages for economic development, states: “Roads represent the dominant transport infrastructure used in all of the BIMSTEC Member States. They not only represent the primary means of domestic connectivity, but are also the main conduit for the movement of intra-BIMSTEC trade, either directly through land borders or via their connectivity to sea ports.” For the enhancement of the group’s transport infrastructure, this essay recommends the following measures:

- upgrading border linkages, including improving access to the maritime borders (ports);
- enhancing the arterial road links carrying significant volumes of intra-BIMSTEC trade; and,
- coordinating the scheduling of road programmes to assist in improving connectivity among the member states.²

BIMSTEC multimodal connectivity

Compulsions of the national liberalised economic policies, as well as the imperative of bridging closer trade relations with the major economies of the Asia-Pacific countries, are driving BIMSTEC countries to improve transport linkages with one another. Moreover, every multilateral agency or group with a specialised interest in BoB regional development – including the ADB, the (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal subregional grouping) BBIN, (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) BCIM, and the South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ)—have inculcated a sense of urgency in the BIMSTEC group to initiate the requisite policy measures and draw blueprints for intra-regional and multimodal transport networks which include the port network. Explaining the multiple benefits of maritime infrastructure for regional economic development, a study by the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) observes: “Increased port access and efficient port handling and terminal management not only enhance productivity of the maritime sector but generate ripple effects in other sectors of the economy. In a multimodal transport structure efficient port network may raise efficiency of other modes of transportation such as roads, railway and airways.”³ These networks, in turn, would provide important linkages to domestic and global value chains, as concluded by several regional economic studies. Driven by its own growth-led foreign trade objectives, India, BIMTEC’s premier member, has taken the lead in designing regional transport projects. Interestingly, India’s shipping ministry approached the ADB to conduct a study on improving the country’s port and shipping infrastructure. Accordingly, the ADB prepared an Action Plan for Coastal Shipping in 2019 which recommended infrastructure creation to increase the use of coastal shipping in India and linking its domestic and regional transport modes. The ADB also pointed out that India’s use of coastal and inland waterways is only a fraction of the available potential.

India’s *Sagarmala programme*, launched in 2016, is an ambitious and comprehensive transport networking programme which *inter alia* calls for encouraging “coastal shipping and inland waterways development transport to move cargo through the sustainable and environment-

friendly” mode. Such a mode should be supported by “enhancing port connectivity to hinterland by optimizing cost and timing of cargo movement through multi-modal logistics solution.”⁴ India, therefore, is busy exploring all means of building linkages between sea and land, connecting them with national and neighbouring destinations. Recently built modern ports like the Krishnapatnam Port (KPCL) are helping to bypass transshipments through foreign ports. A case in point is the cargo service between the ports of Bangladesh and India following the Indo-Bangladesh agreement on coastal shipping in 2015. Feeder service connecting their ports is slowly picking up. In 2016, a year after the bilateral pact, the first containerised vessel from the Chittagong port to KPCL was launched. This vessel was planned to touch en route a few coastal ports along the Bay of Bengal—Haldia, Paradip, Kakinada, Chennai in India, and Narayanganj, Ashugunj, Khulna, Mongla in Bangladesh.⁵ The fact, that it was flagged off hardly a year after the bilateral pact shows the urgency to execute it because the stakeholders involved in trade between the two countries are keen on expanding their transactions with the coastal and inland areas skirting the Bay. The Indian National Ship-owners Association (INSA) and the Container Shipping Lines Association (CSLA) have impressed upon the shipping ministry the need to create a conducive climate for coastal trade growth and specifically identify more coastal trade opportunities. INSA has highlighted the imperative of reviewing first- and last-mile logistics costs, as well as marine charges, to rejuvenate the coastal market sentiment. The government agreed to review domestic carrier concerns about the overall cost picture.⁵

The Indian Railways subsidiary CONCOR (Container Corporation of India) is the lead agency entrusted with plans to link rail, road and port connectivities. Carriage of goods by cargo train is cost-effective compared to the road lines—it is time-saving, with less bottlenecks apart from cost cuts. Apart from its growing surface carriage of cargo, CONCOR is fast expanding its port connectivities on the east and west coasts of late. It entered coastal shipping domain in 2019 when its inaugural sail was flagged off in 2019 from the Kandla port on the west coast to Tuticorin on the east. In the same year its first container train moved from Majerhat in West Bengal state to neighbouring Bangladesh, as another did so to

Nepal from the Kolkata port. A more recent instance is the delivery of dry chillies from the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh to Beanpole in Bangladesh.⁶ Indeed, Bangladesh of late has taken proactive measures to improve transport linkages with its immediate neighbours. India, Nepal and Bhutan are allowed to use the Chittagong and Mongla ports as transit routes to their overseas destinations. Dhaka allows India to use its Ashugunj river port to ferry basic commodities like food and cement to the NER states. The fact that 56 rivers flow between India and Bangladesh is seen as offering ample scope for interstate river transportation. While not all these rivers are useful for navigation, there are also geo-political and the security related issues that hamper the full potential of these rivers to ferry cargo between the adjacent BoB littorals. The drive to modernise Indian port capabilities is gradually releasing the pressure on road transportation, but more importantly reducing dependence on transit movement from Asian ports like Colombo and Singapore which have higher drafts and efficient logistics capable of saving shipping time and costs. The inability of Indian ports as well as those of Bangladesh to handle bigger vessels is forcing their trading communities to offload cargo at one of the advanced ports and ferry the goods by feeder services to their smaller ports like Chittagong or Mangalore. The rapid integration of national economies with the drivers of globalisation is transforming the coastal profile. Coasts are compelled to cater to transnational economic forces: FDI, free trade zones, mega ports and ship yards, containerised shipping, Multinational Companies dealing with energy, deep-sea fishing corporations and other foreign stakeholders.

The combined pressure of national and international traders is forcing coastal states to reshape their coastal infrastructure and amend regulations. India, the largest of the BoB littorals, in response to these forces is modifying rules relating to Coastal Zone Regulation (CZR), freight, cabotage, and flag ship participation. Independent research studies are also calling for reforms in India's coastal regulatory and shipping practices. For example, a recent study by ORF has recommended dedicated coastal ports to enable more movement of more coastal vessels, allowing foreign feeder vessels, relaxation of cabotage laws and sign bilateral and multilateral coastal shipping agreements with the BoB

maritime neighbours.⁷ In 2018, India's ministry of shipping announced the grant of permission to foreign flag vessels to operate in India's coast and carry commodities in Indian national waters; this used to be prohibited.

Regional connectivity constraints

Building bridges across borders is a derivative of the political milieu. The kind of bilateral political equation between the countries concerned casts a shadow on the possibility of linking their territories with interstate routes. BIMSTEC, though geographically an ideal region, is not necessarily matched with the requisite political cordiality between the neighbours. Illicit and irredentist operations across borders, national security sensitivities, some unsettled border disputes, regional geo-politics and extra-regional power play, domestic political instability and unstable regimes, grassroots protests against mega projects of roads and ports—are all highly characteristic of the BIMSTEC region. These factors tend to plague the construction and management of intra-regional transport connectivities. Yet, they all are the constituents of the interwoven fabric of the BoB region. Some of these variables are documented in published literature on South Asian and BIMSTEC development discourse. More of the same are candidly vented in workshops and debates relating to the region in general.

In addition to the above hurdles, financial burden-sharing is another challenge to the BIMSTEC transport networks. It does not need a detailed narrative on the structural weakness of the BoB economy, an inherent limitation on the financial viability of regional connectivity schemes is a stark reality.

True, India is BIMSTEC's economic giant, while some smaller members of the group like Sri Lanka and Thailand are the emerging regional manufacturing and transport hubs. But sound financial backing is the prerequisite for any regional multimodal transport project which none of these states can provide. Despite India's keener interest and involvement

in undertaking road and port development projects connecting two or more BIMSTEC states, their progress is rather tardy, thus sending mixed signals about the country's ability to complete them. The Trilateral Highway linking Northeast India, Myanmar and Thailand, and the Kaladan multimodal project connecting India with Myanmar are yet to be completed, lagging significantly behind their timelines. This is partly because of India's capital constraints and the paucity of mutual trust between the partner countries of the project. China succeeded where India failed in meeting the connectivity deadlines. BIMSTEC connectivities, therefore, are conditioned by changing regional political and economic dynamics.

About the Author

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Understanding the Global Shipping Industry and Connectivity in the Indian Ocean

Rohan Masakorala

Introduction

The transportation industry has four modes: ocean or waterways, air, road, and rail. The cheapest of them, which gives connectivity across continents, is ocean shipping. Indeed, 90 percent of global trade connects through a merchant shipping fleet which now consists of over 55,000 ocean vessels. These ships carry bulk cargo, break bulk cargo, liquid cargo, gas, and containerised cargo as commodities and finished and semi-finished cargo.

The shipping industry is a capital-intensive business, and it is not easy for all countries to own and operate major shipping fleets with scalable outputs and profits. Today there are about 10 major shipping lines that operate through alliances controlling 80 percent of the global trade transportation. There are also feeder services operating smaller vessels to facilitate global transportation hubs to connect to major shipping trade routes—this creates the global network of maritime transportation.¹

Figure 1: The Geography of Transport Systems

Source: <https://porteconomicsmanagement.org/>

Shipping Trade Routes

When one tracks global shipping traffic, major trunk lanes can be identified as well as sub-routes throughout the oceans of the world, along with a port network. It is the market size that first determines the global maritime traffic allocations. Bigger economies such as the US, Europe, China and Japan carry large volumes of maritime cargo through a number of mega ports to connect their large populations and facilitate global supply chains. As the buying power of consumers have increased over the years, so too have the size of markets and the volumes of trade. The Asian countries, led by China, have for many years served as the production centres of the world's merchandise cargo; the western markets, meanwhile, are mostly high-end industrial markets. However, this pattern is increasingly changing as Asia becomes more prosperous and consumption by the middle-class expands. Projections say that Asia will be home to nearly three billion middle-class people by 2030. This would be 10 times more than North America's middle-class population, and five times more than that of Europe paving the way for demand expansion for merchandise goods and raw material.²

Figure 2. Major maritime shipping routes and strategic passages

Connectivity Pattern of the World's Major Maritime routes and choke points



Source: Jean-Paul Rodriguez and Theo Notteboom, "International Passages and land corridors", https://porteconomicsmanagement.org/?page_id=317

The intra-Asia trade itself is growing manifold, creating new shipping opportunities and new markets, and developing supply chains that require enormous investments in transport-related infrastructure. Foremost is the requirement for modern ports, as more and more shipping opportunities are arising, and shipping companies are looking for ever-increasing economies of scale to transport goods across borders. Over the last two decades, the container shipping industry has massively grown, and today mega ships carrying up to 25,000 Twenty-Foot Equivalent (TEU) containers call on mega ports and transshipment locations. This is about four times the size of a ship that used to call on the same ports 20 years ago. Global port operators have had to increase port capacities to accommodate these mega ships for both transshipment and direct calls. Crucial investments have had to be done in both equipment and geographical infrastructure—including the deepening of the basins and channels to attract the major shipping companies to connect countries for trade.

Indian Subcontinent: Shipping and Connectivity

The Indian subcontinent is considered the least developed sub-region of Asia. Its contribution to global GDP is around four percent, even as it is home to 23 percent of the world's population. In the global connectivity index, specifically on infrastructure, almost 80 percent of the ports in the Indian subcontinent need massive investments for infrastructure as well as productivity and skills upscale in order for them to be well-connected and to facilitate trade growth with competitive pricing. At present, most of the Indian subcontinent's cargo moves through transshipment ports such as Singapore, Dubai, Oman, Malaysia and Colombo, through a number of feeder networks to connect to mother vessels that ply the East-West shipping highway. For the Bay of Bengal (BoB) states, they depend on the transshipment hubs in Sri Lanka, UAE, Malaysia, and Singapore for 80 percent of their cargo.

The BoB countries have been experiencing increased economic output and growth in trade volumes over the recent years. Consequently, they are recognising the need for greater investment and connectivity, including the upgrade of ports. The Indian subcontinent is one of the world's fastest growing regions, where growth in trade and port volumes has been relatively upbeat.

However, it is important that each country identifies its own strengths and weaknesses, when investing capital into mega infrastructure in the transportation sector. After all, not all countries are going to be chosen as port calls by international ship operators. Depending on four critical factors, they would do route planning, fleet allocation and port selection:

1. Availability of commercial cargo in volumes
2. Availability of infrastructure
3. Efficiency and technology to handle modern ships, which includes factors such as turnaround time, congestion and diversion time from major maritime corridors
4. Availability of ship's main cost factor—i.e., bunker—at reasonable prices³

Figure 3. Logistics of maritime connectivity

Source: Photo collected from Shippers Academy Colombo, <https://www.shippersacademy.lk>

The combination of these factors will determine what kind of a fleet is allocated to a country, depending on its geography and the proximity to major shipping lanes. The current logical shipping transportation model in the Bay of Bengal region for containerised cargo is based on coastal shipping services linking to regional gateway ports and connecting feeder services to international shipping hubs. Therefore, the investments on ports of the Bay of Bengal's littorals should be strategically planned to support the connectivity requirements of the shipping companies. Therefore, spatial planners of ports should not invest with the view that they could attract mega ships into every port; this would only lead to white elephants in the long run. The focus should be on developing suitable infrastructure that is required by ship operators depending on the fleet allocation. For example, the coastal port connectivity network will have container ships ranging from 500 TEUs to 2000 TEUs, whereas a regional port needs to develop capacity for ships carrying between 2000 TEUs to 6000 TEUs to accommodate modern feeder ships. Port authorities will have to upscale technology, increase turnaround times and remove congestion to be competitive to attract better connectivity and services. Meanwhile, ports that would want to have 6000 to 13000 TEU direct callers will need to continue investing on new infrastructure

and expanding port basins to facilitate trade. Transshipment ports will have to provide 10000 TEU to 25000 TEU vessel handling capacity to compete with other transshipment hubs.

To be sure, efficiency remains a crucial concern for all ports in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal region. A report by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank shows that except for Colombo, all other ports in the Indian subcontinent performed at only 50-percent efficiency.⁴ This is certainly not helpful to increasing trade and connectivity. After all, today's international competition for finished products depends on a key factor—"speed to market". This is a two-way competitive factor where raw material inputs must reach production centres on reliable supply chains and similarly finished and semi-finished products should reach markets on similar requirement. Sea ports are key in facilitating global connectivity and efficiency and such ports with efficiency bring the added advantage of "speed to market".⁵

Relevance to BIMSTEC

The BIMSTEC member states are among the countries dependent on the Bay of Bengal for maritime connectivity directly or via multimodal transport. Colombo is considered the only international transshipment hub port in the bay region whilst others fall on the regional or feeder ports category. The Bay region will continue to be dominated by feeder shipping serves for container traffic in the foreseeable future as the main East-West shipping route is well connected to the mother vessels via Colombo, Singapore and Port Kelang which will facilitate transshipment for the Bay littorals. However, there is greater potential to make traffic more efficient via coastal shipping among the Bay littorals so that operations can be scaled up among the smaller ports and achieve greater economies of scale, in turn, to increase high-quality feeder connectivity in the future. India's Sagarmala Project will be a key factor for increased efficiency among coastal ports linking Bangladesh. The ports in the Bay will have to improve both their soft and hard infrastructure in terms of depth / equipment and technology to handle bigger feeder services in the future. Port efficiency and availability of cargo will determine which

BIMSTEC maritime states will attract more shipping services to connect with international trade routes.⁶

Conclusion

Understanding maritime geography is an extremely important function to plan connectivity and infrastructure development to achieve economies of scale. Given the increased potential for manufacturing in the Bay of Bengal region and expanding consumption owing to middle class growth, all the littoral states will have to focus on trade facilitation by way of developing suitable hard infrastructure and soft infrastructure if they would want to be part of the global market.

To be globally competitive as a region, the Indian subcontinent must follow new trends in addition to speed. Near-shoring and e-commerce are becoming more relevant with new consumer behaviour and are transforming the trading landscape and transportation ecosystems. In addition to developing the ports for ocean shipping, other transport corridors such as air, inland waterways, road, and rail links will have to be upgraded to provide the increasing demand for multimodal transport, depending on the geography itself.

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Blue Economy in the Bay of Bengal

Abhijit Singh

Introduction

In recent years, 'Blue Economy' (BE) has emerged as a new paradigm for coastal management and development of marine resources. The concept, based on the idea of a healthy ocean supporting productive and sustainable ecosystems, is bringing about an integration of ocean activities with the principles of social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and innovative, dynamic business models.¹ BE's central proposition is that the ecological health and productivity of marine and coastal ecosystems can be increased by shifting to a more sustainable economic model that taps their national potential – from generating renewable energy and promoting ecotourism, to sustainable fisheries and transport.² The idea involves a transition from a conventional economy to a "Blue" or sustainable economy in the marine space involving significant investment. While promising, however, BE has risks and challenges.³

In the Indian Ocean Region, enthusiasm for the BE has been palpable. At the third ministerial conference of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in Dhaka in 2019, participants unanimously called for sustainable use of the blue economy resources.⁴ The Dhaka Declaration included ideas, principles and norms of BE, to ensure a balanced approach between conservation and development⁵ emphasising food and nutrition security, mitigation and adaptation of climate change, and generation of sustainable and inclusive livelihoods.

Similarly, BE cooperation has been a focal point of interest for BIMSTEC, the high-level multilateral grouping of states in the Bay of Bengal. At the 4th Ministerial Summit in Kathmandu in September 2018, BIMSTEC leaders agreed to establish an Inter-governmental Expert Group to develop an action plan on BE, keeping in mind the particular needs and circumstances of individual member states.⁶ Regional capitals have stressed the need for sustainable practices in harvesting the resources of the sea, flagging the potential risks of rampant exploitation of marine wealth.

A Collapsing Marine Ecology

The subject of ‘sustainable development’ is particularly resonant among Bay states. The Bay of Bengal community, comprising Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand, has a combined population of over 1.5 billion people that constitute 22 percent of the world population.⁷ Of these, almost 200 million live in coastal regions, of which a major proportion is either partially or wholly dependent on its fisheries. Rich in natural resources including energy and minerals, the Bay is not only a source of livelihood but also a valuable resource for foreign exchange. Its Large Marine Ecosystems (LME) support a wide range of habitats including extensive tracts of mangroves, coral reefs (eight percent of the world’s coral reefs) and sea grass beds.⁸ This area of high biodiversity is home to a large number of endangered and vulnerable species.

But marine harvesting has been a vexed issue in the Bay of Bengal. Since the late 1960s, the region has been plagued by a problem of overfishing. There are over 400,000 fishing boats, with over 4.5 million people employed in fisheries and associated activities and around 6 million tonnes of fish are caught annually, with a value of USD4 billion.⁹ Over the years, licensed fishing activities (both mechanised trawlers and non-motorised boats) have severely damaged the natural habitat of the region, leading to a sharp decline in fish stocks.¹⁰ Popular fish species such as the Hilsa, West Bengal’s favourite seafood, are on the verge of extinction. To make matters worse, devastating practices like bottom trawling and the use of seine nets in shallow spaces like the Palk Bay have further depleted

marine wealth. An expanding dead zone now spans an estimated 60,000 square kilometers in the middle of the Bay.¹¹

To add to the grim picture, many Bay countries, including India, run huge subsidy programmes to support smaller fishers.¹² The sops on offer such as supply of fuel, motorisation of boats, and provision of gear are helpful for the coastal communities, but have led to overcapacity and overfishing, resulting in a significant rise in illegal fishing. The other problem affecting the ecology of the Bay of Bengal is hydrocarbon exploitation. Rich in hydrocarbon (with oil and gas finds in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar), the Bay has witnessed oil and gas exploration on an unprecedented scale in recent years.¹³ A high-risk industry, oil and gas development causes much pollution and environmental hazard in the region.

Meanwhile, shipping activity along the coastline and in the busy Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) has contaminated the marine environment. Oil and residue discharge from cargo and feeder ships are a major contributor to pollution. The amount of synthetic trash generated in the Bay is also rising exponentially, with India's coastal regions witnessing their most rapid expansion of plastic pollution.¹⁴ Studies show that of the USD 13 billion in annual estimated damage to the marine ecosystem, a significant portion comes from Asia's seas, including the Bay of Bengal.¹⁵

Unfortunately, Bay states have not been able to arrest the decline in marine health. Notwithstanding nascent efforts to partner with international organisations such as the Global Environment Facility, the Asian Development Bank, and the Food and Agriculture Organization, the countries in the region have yet to come around to effectively addressing the challenges to marine governance: unsustainable fishing, pollution and destruction of habitat, and vulnerability of coastal communities to a changing climate.¹⁶

The problem, seemingly, is that many Bay states have policies that encourage resource exploitation, often in breach of sustainability norms.¹⁷ Despite pronouncements by national governments supporting BE goals and principles, ecosystem preservation and community development

remains a neglected area. As ocean activities have expanded in the Bay, so has the plunder of marine resources. In the rush to capture ocean resources and augment incomes, environmentalists say, sustainability issues are being overlooked.¹⁸

Ocean Governance

Projections of regional population growth in coming decades, suggests that the impact on food security and economy from depleting marine resources will be substantial.¹⁹ The Bay of Bengal faces multi-dimensional challenges from climate change impacts such as sea-level rise, ocean acidification, and extreme weather events, leading to changes in distribution of aquatic species, community structures due to migration, and decreased economic productivity. Under the circumstances, effective governance of sea spaces is going to be critical for Bay states.

Not only is ocean governance fundamental to maintaining the health of the marine habitat, it is a vital prerequisite for regional efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).²⁰ A comprehensive ocean governance framework in the Bay of Bengal could balance sustainable economic activity and marine conservation, and create a positive impact on the lives of coastal communities.²¹ It might also help Bay states in addressing the skills gap that is endemic in the region. The lack of innovation and technological developments in the BE sectors constitutes a significant barrier. Beyond a lacking proficiency in ocean-related vocations, it is the absence of awareness and limited ocean literacy that has hurt the prospects of marine conservation and industry in the region.

Some say that the situation vis-à-vis BE can only improve once the private sector agrees to participate. Private participation in important Blue areas, such as deep-sea mining and offshore energy, is crucial to creating the momentum needed by marine scientific and economic initiatives. Yet, industry has been skeptical, seeing little scope for profit generation. The private sector's reluctance in this segment is a key impediment in the larger BE endeavour.²² For instance, the three pillars of marine research — observation, experimentation and modeling — across the marine-

science disciplines — biology, chemistry, geo-science and physics — has suffered in recent years, due to lack of funding and support.

A Question of Priorities

Often, BE implementation is a matter of state priority. Not only do Bay countries have their own interpretations of BE, they also differ in their areas of focus. Of the 14 sectors of cooperation in BIMSTEC, at least eight—transport and communication, energy, tourism, technology, fisheries, counter terrorism and transnational crimes (CTTC), environment and natural disaster, and climate change—are linked to the BE.²³ Yet, each Bay state displays an independent approach.

Bangladesh, for example, has a pragmatic BE policy that focuses both on growth and sustainability. Dhaka has taken a number of steps such as establishing an Oceanographic Research Institute in the Maritime University, and a National Adaptation Program of Action as part of developing a strategy to better govern marine resources under its 7th five-year development plan.²⁴ It also has a SDGs Implementation Strategy and Climate Change Resilience Action Plan. The objective of Bangladesh's Blue economy initiative is to promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and employment opportunities in the short, medium and long-term.²⁵

Thailand, on the other hand, has prioritised sustainability over monetisation of resources. Bangkok views the BE as a means to advance conservation and sustainable management of oceans, fisheries and aquaculture in support of sustainable development and economic growth of the country.²⁶ With the fisheries and aquaculture sector playing an important role, the government has looked to promote BE models of investment and business, including district-level programmes for shrimp and seaweed aquaculture. Sri Lanka, too, has emphasised the reduction of ocean pollution, protection and management of marine resources and on the promoting sustainable fishing.²⁷

Meanwhile, India has sought to promote growth, sometimes at the cost of marine health. New Delhi has focused on port development through the Sagarmala initiative that has been the mainstay of India's BE efforts. Since 2017, eight ports—i.e. Kolkata, Paradip, Chennai, Cochin, New Mangalore, Mumbai, Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) and Kandla—have registered positive growth in traffic, which Indian officials see as a positive outcome of implanting the BE concept.²⁸ A 'Deep Ocean Mission' aims to explore the 75,000 sq km of sea bed that comes under India's purview for exploitation of mineral wealth.²⁹ The Indian government has also implemented a scheme on the development and management of the fisheries sector, even notifying in December 2015 a national policy on the subject, meant to usher in a nation-wide 'Blue Revolution' (*Neel Kranti*).³⁰

With more than 80 percent of Indian jobs generated in the informal sector, employment has been the focal area of Indian BE policymaking. The Indian government is also set to create a new ministry of Blue Economy to deal with issues such as strategy, security, energy needs, transportation, fisheries, and sea bed exploration under one umbrella.³¹

New Delhi's normative framework for BE, however, is not in keeping with the tenets of sustainable ocean systems, particularly in its failure to imbibe environment-friendly technology and ecosystem regeneration tools.³² Critics say India's Blue Revolution revolves around fisheries and port-building that has caused irreparable damage to the ocean ecology. The 'revolution' plans to usher in industrialisation, tourism and eventually growth through a crisscrossing of industrial corridors, port upgrade, raw material landing zones, and coastal economic zones that many see as a form of 'ocean grabbing'.³³

Since India's vision differs considerably from other Bay littorals, it has not been easy to develop a comprehensive pan-regional view of what constitutes sustainable processes. Notwithstanding grand declarations by national governments, the focus largely remains on leveraging resources, rather than on making good on the sustainability imperative. In the rush to harness ocean resources, the vital need for inclusive social development, environmental balance and ecological security is being

neglected, negatively impacting the regional ecological balance. The imperative is more public and private investment in a Blue architecture that is truly sustainable.

The Way Ahead

The Blue model is unlikely to deliver results in the Bay of Bengal, unless it is implemented in ways that truly balance between the need for economic growth and nurturing sustainable ecosystems. Bay states must move to harmonise their BE approaches to develop an integrated strategy. This goes beyond agreeing upon a common definition, syncing procedures and operating principles. What the capitals in the region need is to collectively invest in technology and innovation that would enable Blue sectors to develop processes and technologies to boost BE productivity, whilst still preserving the Bay's marine ecosystem. The Blue revolution must recognise opportunities to unlock the seas' latent potential, yet allow the regional habitat the space it needs to regenerate.

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The private sector must play a bigger role to support the nascent BE initiatives in the region. Governments must provide incentives to catalyse private investment in green infrastructure, technology, and innovative practices to reduce environmental risks and ecological stress, enhance sustainable development and human well-being, and sustainably manage coasts and oceans. There must be a framework in place, comprising green-friendly technology, as well as institutional processes and production and management systems to create new asset classes that would reduce investment risk, and help transition to a genuine Blue Economy future.

About the Author

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SECTION 4

Climate Change and Disaster Management

BIMSTEC: Finding a Coordinated Approach to Climate Change

Runa Sarkar

“**T**he acute impact of climate change on Asia, and on South Asia in particular, will play out across a landscape shaped by the past – shaped by the cumulative effects of social inequality, shaped by the borders of the mid-twentieth century, shaped by the infrastructures of water control. And it will be shaped by the legacy of ideas from the past, including ideas about climate and the economy,” says author Sunil Amrith.¹ Institutions like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Amrith says, “are focussed overwhelmingly on the development of infrastructure and promotion of trade.” Although environmental protection is not absent from their concerns, it is not a high priority. When policy documents refer to climate, it is often as a metaphor, as in the often-expressed hope of creating a “climate friendly to investment”.

Although the BIMSTEC member states are diverse with respect to their politics, culture or economic structures, the region faces the common challenges of the impacts of climate change and variability, poverty and inequity, and increasing vulnerabilities arising from rapid urbanisation, degradation of resources and unsustainable development. The BIMSTEC region comprises two sets of countries—one in the Himalayan Terai region and the other that are largely tropical and monsoonal, with contiguous landmasses sharing common borders and rivers or a common sea. Agriculture, fishing and tourism are the mainstay

for a large section of the population of many of these economies, making them vulnerable to climate change. According to some estimates, by 2080, nearly 55 million people in South Asia and 21 million people in Southeast Asia could be displaced by a 40-cm rise in sea levels.² The BIMSTEC region is expected to experience increases in the frequency and intensity of tropical cyclones, storm surges and flooding, signs of which are already evident. The increased variability in rainfall patterns across the region has resulted in droughts and disastrous floods in low lying areas and landslides in mountainous terrains. These impacts will exacerbate the existing problems of food insecurity, malnutrition, disease and vulnerable livelihoods across rural and urban areas. These issues will be further compounded by non-climatic stresses, such as globalisation, political insecurity, market pressure, weak institutions and poverty.

To address these threats, the BIMSTEC countries must consider strengthening and enabling the overall environment and its underlying components, such as transport and communication, and financial, institutional, health and social network systems. A governance structure must emerge that can support such processes and train and enable the diverse range of actors needed to achieve this. Under these circumstances, the need for a coordinated approach to the mitigation of climate change and effective management of disasters cannot be overemphasised.

Need for a Coordinated Approach

Climate change does not recognise national boundaries. The Himalayan range binds Bhutan, Nepal and north and northeast India into one common air shed. Common river basins, whether it is the Mekong or the Ganges, and the Bay of Bengal tie the remaining BIMSTEC nations into an inextricable net with respect to the impact of climate change. The carrying capacity (the maximum population size that can be sustained, given the natural resources available in an ecosystem) of each member state is affected by what happens in the neighbouring nations, and cannot be viewed or addressed independent of them. Thus, the geography of the region itself underlines the need for a coordinated approach.

Further, as the region progresses economically, the only way to meet its rising energy demands will be by exploiting its potential for hydroelectric power, despite the likely devastating environmental impacts, with hundreds of dams already planned in the Himalayan region over the next few years. Such initiatives will require cooperation from all countries to minimise the environmental impact and maximise sharing the economic benefits. Building a dam has far reaching impacts, from areas upstream of the dam getting waterlogged or rendered infertile to those downstream becoming drained of sediment and vulnerable to flooding. This is concerning since several of the affected areas are biodiversity hotspots that do not recognise manmade national boundaries.

The riverine ecosystem is interconnected too, and both natural calamities and national initiatives can have regional consequences. Significant portions of Bangladesh, India and Nepal are prone to recurrent flooding due to factors such as heavy monsoon rains, blocked natural drainage and low elevation. Bangladesh is particularly at risk as three large river systems converge there from a catchment area that is 12 times the size of the country. The recent increase in the intensity of tropical cyclones and storm surges, partly attributable to rising sea surface temperatures, raise the possibility of an even stormier future. Sri Lanka is susceptible to massive flooding as well. Global warming has also led to glacial melt; Nepal has 20 and Bhutan has 25 potentially dangerous glacial lakes that pose the flood risks for the neighbouring communities.³

Another compelling reason to address climate change in a coordinated manner is the possibility of building on each other's expertise and experience in developing proposals to attract resources for adaptation and mitigation. While requirements for accessing resources for development are usually transparently displayed by donor agencies, such as the United Nations Development Programme or the Global Environment Facility, on their websites and are routinely circulated, the requirements are not easy to meet. Further, the nature of activities under climate change adaptation and mitigation need a strong local presence. BIMSTEC can serve as a platform to attract local organisations from different nations to build transnational proposals based of regional synergies. It can serve as

a repository for proposal writing skills, leaving local entities free to work on implementation activities with limited resources.

BIMSTEC could also consider the creation of a knowledge management platform. Given the shared ecosystem and similar socioeconomic conditions, several experiences can be replicated across member nations without needing to reinvent the wheel. This will lead to efficacious implementation. A comprehensive analysis of the economics of climate change in South and Southeast Asia on the BIMSTEC knowledge management platform will help determine the least-cost mitigation and adaptation options that can be pursued by member nations.

Climate Change Mitigation: Possible Approaches

The BIMSTEC region has undertaken several initiatives to mitigate the long-term risks of climate change, such as reducing the extent of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and the use of clean and renewable energy to meet the increasing demand for power in the region. While population size and economic growth requires more energy to be available in additional locations, the region is constrained from pursuing low-carbon options that will help mitigate climate change because of population pressures and biodiversity concerns (to harness hydroelectric potential), unavailability of land (to harness abundant solar energy) and financial resources. In this context, there is some positive news with respect to the regional grid with the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal subregional grouping. The concept of the regional grid can be extended across the BIMSTEC member nations. At the same time, there is a need to curb energy demand by increasing energy efficiency, both in production and in the use of energy-efficient appliances. There are few initiatives at the regional level that look at improving energy efficiency from the end consumer point of view.

Another area for cooperation for the BIMSTEC countries is the development of low carbon transportation infrastructure. There has been some progress on streamlining vehicular movement across the region, in which BIMSTEC has played a nodal role. The use of the existing

riverine waterways connecting different countries, such as the Kaladan Multimodal Project, can reduce costs of transportation and the carbon footprint. However, several similar projects need to be initiated to have a sizeable impact on the reduction of GHG emissions. This also requires greater coordination on trade related issues, which in turn requires more trust among the countries involved.

Most BIMSTEC nations have concentrated urban agglomerations, and there are several mitigation strategies that can be implemented in cities across the region. The countries must cooperate to access sources of finance to build climate resilient cities and to share knowledge. Additionally, in the agricultural sector, “the adoption of better soil, water, nutrient management practices, and technologies has enormous potential to reduce GHG emissions from agriculture, thereby contributing to the mitigation of climate change”.⁴ BIMSTEC can play a crucial role in trying to address the financial and institutional barriers that may hamper the adoption of these novel agricultural practices.

Adaptation and Possible Approaches

Climate change has led to abnormal monsoon patterns, more frequent and intense storms, and has aggravated natural disasters in the BIMSTEC region. The most vulnerable are those who depend on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, forestry and traditional fishing. In addition to mitigation, adaptation measures to ensure the survival of the imperilled population are urgently required. In general, policymakers tend to adopt a linear approach to adaptation—first identifying expected climate related impacts, then determining vulnerabilities (primarily biophysical), and finally developing adaptation strategies.⁵ Such a strategy overlooks the interrelated economic, social and political stresses, and unequal adaptive capacities of the affected communities who are to be involved in the adaptation process. Adaptation strategies, if taken up locally, may affect disparities in living conditions across contiguous national boundaries, leading to migration and other political pressures. Because autonomous adaptation is an immediate response to the impact of climate change, many responses, at the household level (for instance, families using household

air purifiers in New Delhi), will result in the further exacerbation of the existing social, political, economic and environmental stresses within society by marginalising the have-nots. Hence, there is a need for planned adaptation measures across nations.

For adaptation measures to be successful, it is essential that the planned actions are local in nature, initiated and driven by the provincial, municipal or commune/village-level governments, or by non-governmental organisations. However, individual initiatives must be part of a larger master plan, which needs coordination across national boundaries. BIMSTEC can play a crucial role in providing an institutional mechanism for a more informed, aware and coordinated approach. For instance, the propensity of local governments, with strong support from national government, to employ purely technical fixes can be counterbalanced by the so-called 'soft technologies' for disaster preparedness. While physical structures such as seawalls and breakwaters are essential to counter rising sea levels, spreading awareness and building resilience in populations living in the coastal regions is just as important.

In addition, issues such as transboundary river basin management need to be dealt with regionally for effective climate change adaptation. Although there exist many water sharing arrangements between different countries in the region, climate change requires a new approach towards holistic river basin management through regional cooperation.⁶ BIMSTEC could also foster investments in adaptation by funding transitional programmes to enable future private sector investments. Through its connect with development agencies, BIMSTEC can play a crucial role in initiating partnerships between the private sector and farmer-producer organisations to reduce vulnerability to the vagaries of the monsoon. The grouping can use its influence to demonstrate how climate change adaptation measures can help national governments deliver on equitable growth, alongside discussions on green growth, low emission and climate resilient development, leading to the mitigation of climate change.

Conclusion

Adaptation measures deliver immediate results as compared to outcomes from mitigation, which could take decades to materialise. By focussing on adaptation, BIMSTEC can use this as a platform to build regional institutional mechanisms to further its larger objectives. Developing channels of communication across countries and building trust will be the cornerstone of BIMSTEC's involvement in fostering regional cooperation on addressing climate change. In the future, BIMSTEC could leverage its alliances to address more contentious issues, such as planned migration in some countries as the only way to deal with the impact of climate change. This could include developing a knowledge bank on mobility as an adaptive measure, with support systems such as transportation and banking services.

Developing trans-local and transnational social networks will also be important. The need for developing a social security net for vulnerable populations across the region, strengthening adaptive capacities to ensure livelihood security for subsistence farmers and fishermen, and addressing health related impacts of climate change should also be focus areas. Finally, BIMSTEC can focus on scaling up governance systems at multiple levels to facilitate effective linkages across its member countries. Most transboundary governance mechanisms have norms and procedures that are built in to protect and support the livelihoods of the poor. BIMSTEC can play a crucial role in influencing these established norms in the medium to long term to factor in strengthening climate resilience and the adaptive capacity of the poor as well.

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Climate Change in the BIMSTEC Region: Responding to Rising Sea Levels

Anamitra Anurag Danda

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) region—home to around 1.7 billion people, with a combined gross domestic product of US\$2.7 trillion—has seen an average economic growth of 5.6 percent over 2014-2018 despite global financial upheavals. The average annual population growth in the region is 0.91 percent (see Table 1).

Table 1. GDP growth, population and population growth of BIMSTEC Member States

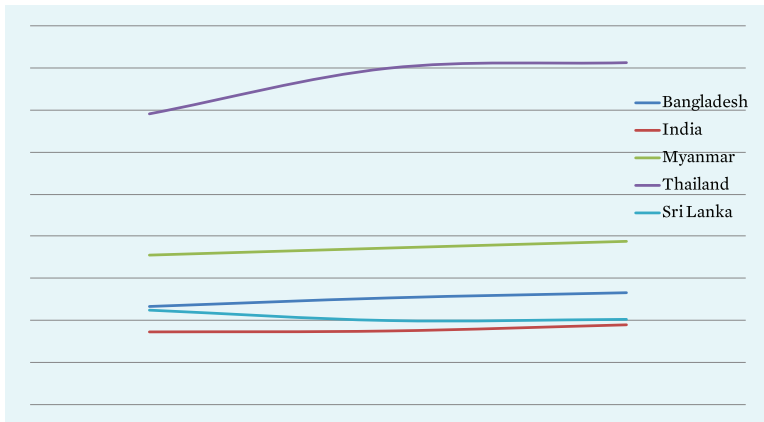
Member States	GDP growth (annual %)					Population (2019) mil	Population growth (annual %)				
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018		2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Bhutan	5.78	6.64	8.13	4.65	3.03	0.76	1.23	1.22	1.21	1.20	1.18
Nepal	5.99	3.32	0.59	8.22	6.70	28.61	-0.04	0.40	0.91	1.33	1.65
India	7.41	8.00	8.26	7.00	6.12	1366.00	1.15	1.12	1.11	1.06	1.04
Bangladesh	6.06	6.55	7.11	7.28	7.86	163.05	1.14	1.12	1.09	1.07	1.05
Myanmar	7.99	6.99	5.75	6.41	6.75	54.05	0.82	0.76	0.69	0.63	0.61
Thailand	0.98	3.13	3.43	4.07	4.15	69.63	0.43	0.40	0.37	0.35	0.32
Sri Lanka	4.96	5.01	4.49	3.58	3.31	21.80	0.93	0.92	1.11	1.13	1.05

Source: Author's compilation, World Bank data¹

The BIMSTEC region has experienced a wide range of severe weather events and climate extremes in recent years, and is amongst the most disaster-prone regions in the world. Over 80 percent of the global fatalities associated with tropical cyclones are seen in the Bay of Bengal region, even though only 5 percent of such storms occur here.² The impacts of global warming and climate change further threaten the lives and livelihoods of people in the region.

Worldwide, losses from natural catastrophes are on the rise due to economic growth in urban at-risk areas. Countries in the Bay of Bengal region have between 1.9 percent (India) and 8.1 percent (Thailand) of urban populations living in low lying areas where the elevation is below five meters (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Urban population (% of total population) living in areas below 5 meters elevation in BIMSTEC Member States



Source: Author's compilation, CEISIN³

Although the total percentage of population in extremely vulnerable low lying areas in these countries is relatively stable across decades, with the exception of Thailand (increasing) and Sri Lanka (decreasing), the rural-urban population proportion has undergone change; in Myanmar, Bangladesh and India, while the rural population in extremely vulnerable low lying areas has declined, the urban population has increased by an almost identical proportion.⁴

In the BIMSTEC region, losses from natural catastrophes are rising due to economic growth in urban at-risk areas and due to growing urbanisation in at-risk locations where elevation is one metre or less.^a While it is still possible to insure life and property against weather-related risks at such locations, insurability could be jeopardised in high-exposure urban areas due to the impacts of global warming and climate change.⁵

With about nine million people residing in extremely vulnerable low lying areas in the Bay of Bengal littoral states,⁶ it is important to understand past and projected changes in key climate variables such as warming, sea-level rise and tropical cyclonic storms.

Given ongoing and anticipated environmental changes and the consequences, particularly rising sea levels, key questions that need answers are: What are the in-situ response measures to sea level rise? Are these measures capable of ensuring non-diminishing socio-economic wellbeing during the 21st century? Could population withdrawal from certain vulnerable coastal locations be a way to adapt to climate change?

Climate Change Impacts in BIMSTEC Region⁷

The annual mean near-surface air temperature has warmed by around 0.7°C during 1901-2018, and is projected to be in the range of 2.4-4.4°C

^a According to the Center for International Earth Science Information Network, a Low Elevation Coastal Zone is a land area with elevation up to 20 meters.

by the end of the 21st century across warming scenarios, relative to the average temperature during 1976-2005. In recent decades, sea surface temperatures in the Indian Ocean have risen significantly, at a higher rate than the global average. Sea surface temperature in the tropical Indian Ocean rose by 1°C on average over the 1951-2015 period and is projected to increase further during the 21st century under medium (RCP4.5) and high (RCP8.5) emission scenarios. The rate of warming in the tropical Indian Ocean is the fastest among tropical oceans and accounts for about one quarter of the increase in global oceanic heat content over the last two decades.

Sea-level rise is closely related to thermal expansion due to rising sea surface temperature and heat content. During the 1993-2017 period, the North Indian Ocean rose at a rate of 3.3 mm per year, mostly due to thermal expansion of water. Rates of sea-level variations differ across regions, with the largest sea-level changes observed along the northern and eastern coasts of the Bay of Bengal.

Rise in ocean surface temperature and heat content is closely linked to the intensity of tropical cyclones, but long-term observations (1951-2018) indicate a significant reduction (-0.26 per decade) in annual frequency of tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal.⁸ However, over the 2000-2018 period, a significant rise (+0.86 per decade) in the frequency of very severe cyclonic storms was observed during the post-monsoon season (October-December). This implies that within the reduced number of storms in the BIMSTEC region, a greater number are of the very severe category. With continued global warming, the activity of very severe cyclonic storms over the North Indian Ocean is projected to further increase during the 21st century. About 80 percent of tropical cyclones (on an annual scale) in the North Indian Ocean basin occur in the Bay of Bengal and a major percentage of these evolve into severe cyclonic storms or a higher category. On average, about five or six tropical cyclones are generally observed in the Bay of Bengal every year, of which two or three reach severe stages; between 1981 and 2018, 40 percent of the time, the severe cyclonic storms in the Bay of Bengal transformed into very severe cyclonic storms. There were 15 extreme category storms in the Bay of

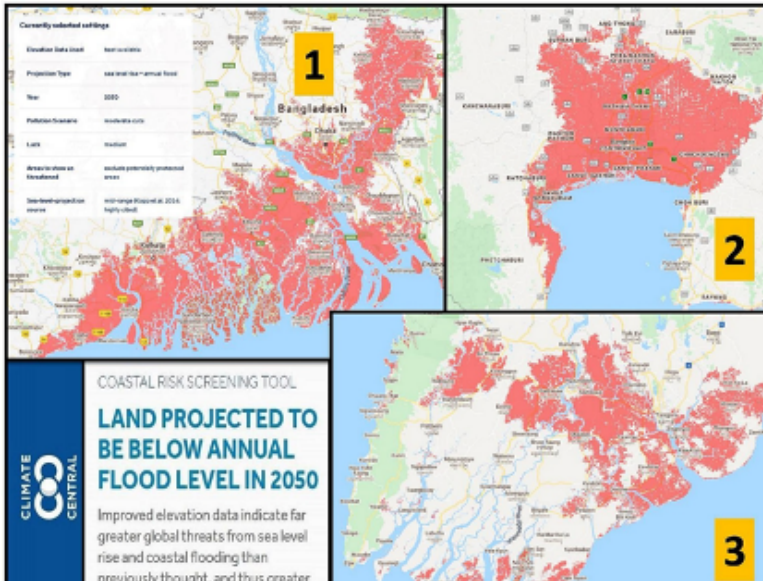
Bengal region between 2000 and 2018. Most severe cyclonic storms in the Bay of Bengal region attained very severe cyclonic storm or extremely severe cyclonic storm status during these seasons.

Based on long-period records, more than 60 percent of Bay of Bengal tropic cyclones make landfall in various parts of the Indian east coast, 30 percent experience recurvature and make landfall over other littoral states, while 10 percent generally dissipate over the oceanic regions. A significant eastward shift has been noted in tropical cyclone genesis locations in the Bay of Bengal region during post-monsoon seasons, which enhance the vulnerability for the coastal regions of Bangladesh and Myanmar in particular.

Consequences of Climate Change Impacts

One of the main consequences of mean sea-level rise on human settlements is a increase in flood risk due to an escalation in the intensity and frequency of extreme sea levels, exacerbated by tropical cyclones.⁹ Coastal areas become threatened when high tides coincide with acute weather events and drive extreme sea levels.¹⁰ Ocean warming affects extreme sea levels and intensifies coastal flood risk.¹¹ Extreme sea level projections for the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta show an increased likelihood of high water events through the 21st century,¹² partly due to the delta falling short of sediment that may not allow the maintenance of its current elevation relative to sea level.¹³ The experience in areas with similar elevation and delta/estuary characteristics in the BIMSTEC region is unlikely to be significantly different (see Figure 2). Given that the Bay of Bengal already witnesses over 80 percent of the total fatalities due to tropical cyclones, while only accounting for 5 percent of these storms globally,¹⁴ the frequency of tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal poses a serious threat to the BIMSTEC region.

Figure 2. Land projected to be below annual flood level in 2050 in and around Kolkata and Dhaka (Frame 1), Bangkok (Frame 2) and Yangon (Frame 3)



Source: Climate Central (Open access)

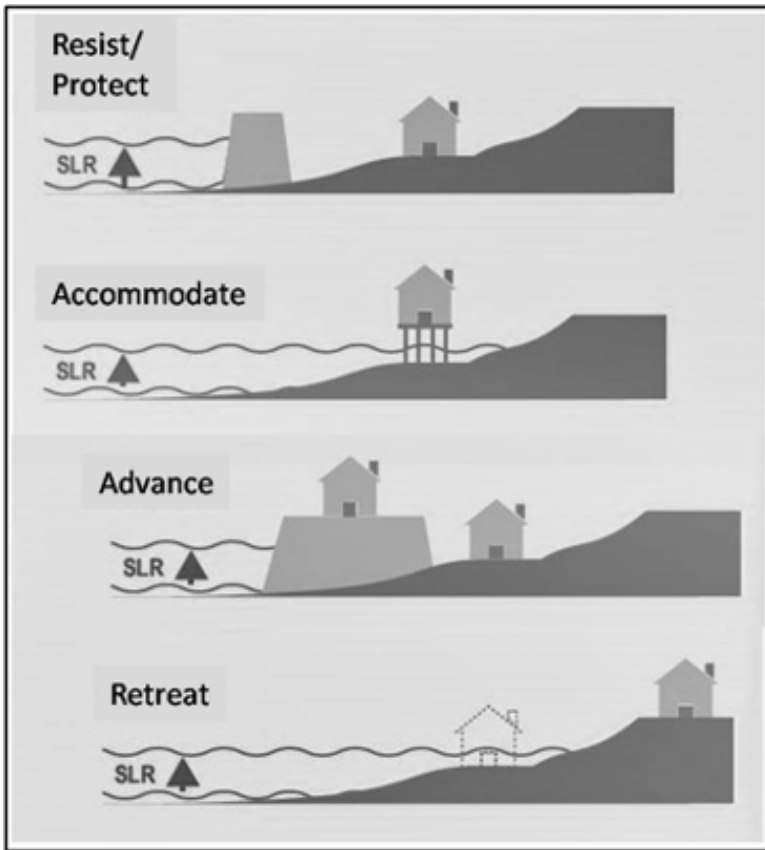
Potential coastal risks in the Bay of Bengal littoral states include loss of land due to increased erosion, damage to coastal projects and infrastructure, salinisation of freshwater supplies and a heightened vulnerability to flooding. Higher sea levels and receding coastlines escalate the destructive potential of storm surge associated with cyclonic storms. Such impacts of sea-level rise are further compounded by land subsidence. Kolkata, Dhaka, Yangon and Bangkok are subsiding at average rates between ~10 and 32 mm/year.^{15,16,17} The ground surface in some areas in Bangkok has sunk below the mean sea level, which makes flood drainage more difficult and expensive. The cost of pumping out storm and flood water over the floodgates to discharge into the Chao Phraya River and eventually the sea is increasing over time.¹⁸

The risks posed by climate change will be considerably magnified if a cascade of climate-related hazards overlap or follow one another. A rise in cyclone intensities will likely result in increasing inundation from the accompanying storm surges that turn nearby agricultural lands and lakes saline and imperil wildlife. Such a sequence of events will become increasingly frequent if anthropogenic climate change continues unimpeded.

Response Measures to Sea Level Rise

In trying to answer the questions on responding to rising sea levels, it is important to draw lessons from experiences post 2005 (after the Indian Ocean tsunami) from within the region and the immediate neighbourhood, including Vietnam and Indonesia.

In situ response measures to sea level rise take various forms and have different approaches. The measures could be in the form of legislations and regulations, hard infrastructure like dikes, sea walls and raised houses, early warning systems or climate risk insurance, all of which aim to reduce risk and build resilience for the continued habitability of coastal areas. The approaches taken to deal with sea level rises can be grouped as: (i) resist or protect, (ii) accommodate, and in certain cases (iii) build seaward (advance) to protect the hinterland (see Figure 3).¹⁹ Usually, a combination of approaches are implemented after a coastal disaster. In extreme cases, the approach is to retreat (move people and assets out of harm's way), as seen in Sri Lanka after the Indian Ocean tsunami where the government prohibited rebuilding in the coastal zone.²⁰ The retreat approach, however, is unfeasible for densely populated urban areas since “there are no technological limits to protect the coast during the 21st century even under high-end SLR [sea level rise] of 2 m.”²¹

Figure 3. Approaches to response measures to sea level rise

Source: Adapted from IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate, 2019²²

Of the 17 measures examined (see Table 2), one intervention in Vietnam (Can Tho City under the ‘accommodate’ approach) already shows extensive adaptation deficits,²³ while eight are unlikely to be able to ensure non-diminishing socioeconomic wellbeing over the course of the 21st century. The other eight measures seem capable of meeting their objectives over the remainder of the century.

While the measures have been examined in isolation, a combination of approaches and measures, if implemented and operated well, should be able to ensure the non-diminishing socioeconomic wellbeing for the majority of the nine million people living in extremely vulnerable low lying areas in the Bay of Bengal littoral countries. This does not consider potential storm damage due to intensifying tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal. Nevertheless, the BIMSTEC countries will do well to keep an eye on the top global reinsurance entities, such as Munich Reinsurance and Swiss Re, particularly their underwriting results, and rates for macro-level insurance for the Bay of Bengal region. A deterioration in the underwriting results of top global reinsurance companies over several years will not only jeopardise insurability in high-exposure areas, but will also indicate a rising frequency and severity of catastrophic events around the world, which has implications not only for the countries directly impacted but also the insured but yet unaffected ones. Should insurance rates across levels become unaffordable or nearly so, it will be time to opt for the retreat approach.

Table 2. In situ response measures to sea level rise

Approach	Response type	Country/ city/ region	Response measure	Status	Effectiveness	Study
Protect	Hard	Bangladesh	Polders*	Extant	Prevents tidal flooding, salinity intrusion and facilitates the outflow of water. Long-term maintenance of projects remains challenging.	Dewan et al., 2015 ²⁴
	Hard	Thanh Phu district, Vietnam	Engineered infrastructures (dykes, sluice gates, sea walls)*	Implemented and planned	Can limit salinity intrusion provided well operated and maintained but can eventually lead to very vulnerable production system.	Renaud et al., 2016 ²⁵
	Ecosystem-based adaptation	Thanh Phu district, Vietnam	Mangrove regeneration	Implemented	Protecting coastal fringes from erosion. Increased lifespan of engineered structures when placed behind mangroves.	Renaud et al., 2016 ²⁶

Approach	Response type	Country/ city/ region	Response measure	Status	Effectiveness	Study
Accommodate	Biophysical	Vietnam	Floating houses	Extant	Flexibility in structural solutions adapting to environmental and climate change.	Trang, 2016 ²⁷
	Biophysical	Semarang City, Indonesia	Houses elevated with the additional height, 50-400 cm*	Extant	Repeated individual and city council intervention required. Beyond 2030s, expensive proposition.	Buchori et al., 2018 ²⁸
	Biophysical	Bangkok	Allowing buildings to float when water level starts to rise (>0.6m)	Assessment of amphibious building technology	An alternative strategy to mitigate the impacts of flooding to individual buildings and to simultaneously deal with the challenges of restoring and preserving water storage capacity in cities.	Nilubon et al., 2016 ²⁹

Approach	Response type	Country/ city/ region	Response measure	Status	Effectiveness	Study
Accommodate	Biophysical	Can Tho City, Vietnam	Elevation of household assets & fortification of housing structure	Extant	Individual intervention; extensive adaptation deficits and high rates of flood affectedness.	Garschagen, 2015 ³⁰
	Biophysical	Bangladesh	Floating vegetable gardens	Extant	Improves nutritional security, household income, and land use capacity of the very poor and landless.	Irfanullah et al., 2011 ³¹
	Biophysical	Thanh Phu district, Vietnam	Sal-tolerant paddy varieties*	Developed	Short cycle varieties would allow for continued rice cultivation but salinity will eventually compromise rice production; salinity tolerance limits may be reached before new cultivars are developed.	Renaud et al., 2016
	Biophysical	Thanh Phu district, Vietnam	Modification of agro-ecosystems with emphasis on rice-shrimp systems	Extant	Can allow development of livelihoods adapted to both freshwater and brackish water systems, increased resilience.	Renaud et al., 2016 ³²
	Biophysical	Bangladesh	Conjunctive use of saline and freshwater for maize crop irrigation	Field study	Moderately saline canal water can be used as irrigation water for winter maize. Instead of reducing the number of irrigation events, conjunctive use of freshwater at early sensitive stage combined with saline canal water at a later stage(s) can minimize yield loss of maize.	Murad et al., 2018 ³³

Approach	Response type	Country/ city/ region	Response measure	Status	Effectiveness	Study
Accommodate	Institutional	Bangladesh	Floating vegetable gardens*	Extant	Included in National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) of Bangladesh but no pragmatic steps for implementation.	Irfanullah et al., 2011 ³⁴
	Institutional	Thanh Phu district, Vietnam	Regulating upstream river flow*	Planned	Can effectively limit salinity intrusion but the region will be dependent on water management decisions made upstream.	Renaud et al., 2016 ³⁵
	Institutional	Bangladesh	Early Warning System	Extant	Builds resilience against hydro-meteorological coastal hazards. Allows people to remain in hazard-prone areas but provide advance warning for evacuation in the face of imminent danger. However, the gap between the logistics and the monitoring of weather data for modelling and fitting of climate systems remains a constraint.	Leal Filho, et al., 2018 ³⁶

Approach	Response type	Country/ city/ region	Response measure	Status	Effectiveness	Study
Accommodate	Institutional	India	Early Warning System - INCOIS	Extant	Warning services for the coastal population on tsunamis, storm surges, high waves to Indian Ocean Rim countries. Performance of the warning centre was assessed against a set of indicators and found to be performing as per the design standards.	Srinivasa Kumar et al., 2010 ³⁷
	Institutional	Vietnam	Index-based climate risk insurance; payments disbursed if index crosses a predetermined strike value; a one percent payment for every centimetre at a hydrological station above a strike value*	Extant	Indexed insurance contributes to breaking the disaster-induced poverty cycle by enabling productive investment. However, the long-term viability of these programs in the face of large, covariant losses is still to be determined.	Skees et al., 2007 ³⁸
	Institutional	Bangladesh	Insurance bundled with savings*	Extant	Potential ex ante risk-management strategy. In case of damage due to flooding, clients receive indemnity payments twice the amount in their savings account thus breaking the “cycle of poverty.” Possibility of “moral hazard,” whereby individuals take fewer precautionary measures because they are insured.	Mechler et al. 2006 ³⁹

Conclusion

In coastal locations where the risk is extremely high and cannot be effectively reduced, retreat from the shoreline is the only option available. However, the economic, cultural and socio-political impacts of retreat and resettlement need to be carefully considered and addressed by at-risk communities and their governing authorities. Retreat is worth considering where the coastal population size and density is low. The need for retreat and other response measures can be reduced by avoiding new development commitments in extremely vulnerable low lying areas prone to severe sea level rise hazards. However, given the population dynamics of the Bay of Bengal littoral countries, except Sri Lanka where the rural and urban population in low lying areas is decreasing, avoiding new development commitments in low lying areas is going to be difficult. Countries, therefore, need to plan carefully and put in adequate protective measures to deal with coastal hazards. Alternatively, the Bangladesh model of dealing with migrants displaced due to degradation of natural habitats and heightened risks can be adopted.⁴⁴ An ongoing project in Bangladesh aims to build the human capital of migrants (skills, health and education), reduce costs of migration and remittance transfer, and make provisions for improved safety nets for migrants at their destinations. This approach accepts that without substantial transfer payments supporting poor areas, coastal flood risks will evolve unequally over this century. Richer and densely populated areas will be protected behind hard structures, but poorer, less densely populated areas will suffer losses and damages, eventually forcing these people to retreat from the coast. The Bangladeshi model aims to facilitate such movement while strengthening the receiving areas. This involves population withdrawal, but the population retains agency and the choice of timing and destination.

About the author

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Climate Change, Disaster Management and BIMSTEC

K.M. Parivelan

BIMSTEC states, home to 1.5 billion people or 21 percent of the world population, are facing challenges from climate change and natural disasters which cause massive damage to property and loss of human lives.¹ These countries have geographical and socio-economic vulnerabilities, to begin with, and in recent years, climate change has compounded the severity of hydro-meteorological disasters. Various hazards like cyclones, floods, droughts, storms and wildfires affect millions of people, underlining the importance of disaster risk management through coordination and cooperation among the BIMSTEC countries. *Climate change* (“attributed directly or indirectly to human activity;”) and disasters (“a situation or event that overwhelms local capacity...an unforeseen and often sudden event that causes great damage, destruction and human suffering”) are cross-cutting issues that need to be addressed holistically, integrating the Paris Climate Agreement and disaster risk reduction (DRR) measures. Climatological hazards are caused by long-lived meso- to macro-scale atmospheric processes, ranging from intra-seasonal to multi-decadal climate variability. In 2019, 396 natural disasters were recorded globally, with 11,755 deaths, 95 million people affected and US\$103 billion in economic losses. But the burden was not shared equally, with Asia suffering the worst impact and accounting for 40 percent of disaster events, 45 percent of deaths and 74 percent of the total affected.

The Anthropocene age has altered the climatic patterns as global warming and erratic climate patterns are changing and manipulating the earth system. Climate change refers to significant changes in global temperature, precipitation, wind patterns and other variables of climate that occur over several decades or more. Current atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are approximately 414 ppm due to continuous anthropogenic activities. The disturbance caused to the environment due to global warming has manifested in the form of glacial retreat, melting polar ice caps, depleted groundwater resources, desertification, and erratic climatic patterns (floods, drought, cyclones and altered precipitation patterns). The Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change predicted that the intensity and number of occurrences of disasters will increase exponentially by 2050. Mainly, maximum tropical cyclone wind intensities would increase by 5 percent to 10 percent. Nationally determined contributions (NDCs)—efforts by each country to reduce national emissions by pursuing domestic mitigation measures to adapt to the impacts of climate change—are at the heart of the Paris Agreement’s aim to keep global temperature rise to under 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The BIMSTEC grouping, which aims to serve as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia and reinforce sub-regional cooperation, explores areas of common interest in 14 sectors, including environment and disaster management, and climate change. Each member country is tasked with leading one or more sectors depending on their national expertise. India leads the ‘environment and disaster management’ sector and Bangladesh the ‘climate change’ one. The BIMSTEC region is dependent on livelihoods based on fisheries, agriculture, and natural resources; it is susceptible to various natural hazards like cyclones, droughts, floods and storm surges. Further, climate change causes extreme weather events, which may affect trade and connectivity in the region.

Disaster Profile of BIMSTEC Countries

A hazard is “a dangerous phenomenon, substance, human activity or condition that may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts, property damage, loss of livelihoods and services, social and economic disruption, or environmental damage.” It is the origin of a disaster. Multi-hazard and disaster risk maps are illustrated to depict the vulnerability of a country to natural hazards; the extent of risk involved with details of the impact on geography as well as on human settlements, resources and infrastructure. These details are essential to undertake preventive measures. Furthermore, the use of decile ranks, which arranges the risk data from lowest to highest, in such hazard mapping indicates the degree of hazard vulnerability in different parts of the country. These tools are thus useful in undertaking an assessment of the BIMSTEC’s countries exposure to disaster risk.

Bangladesh: Cyclones and floods pose the greatest risk to the country. Sub-nationally, the northern and eastern regions of Bangladesh are susceptible to earthquakes while the southeast is particularly vulnerable to all five hazards—cyclones, droughts, earthquakes, floods and volcanos.

Bhutan: Landslides, earthquakes and floods all show high mortality deciles (particularly for the southeast); however, their respective GDP weighted impacts are confined to the lower deciles, with the exception of floods in the southern edge of the country. This may suggest that the communities most vulnerable to these hazards tend to be poorer, thus affecting a smaller proportion of GDP when a disaster occurs.

India: Floods and droughts significantly impact the majority of India, although they are most prevalent in the northwestern and eastern regions, respectively. Geophysical hazards affect the Himalayan region in the north and northeastern portions of the country where they rank in high deciles for mortality and lower deciles for GDP impact. Cyclones influence a relatively small area of the country but have high-ranking mortality and GDP weighted impacts. Lastly, both the multi-hazard mortality and GDP maps demonstrate that almost the entire country is

significantly impacted by at least one hazard and mortality impacts are mainly concentrated in the north and northeastern regions.

Myanmar: The GDP and mortality weighted multi-hazard demonstrate that almost the entire country is affected by natural hazards. However, the decile rankings for individual hazards greatly vary throughout the country. Drought is the most persistent hazard throughout the country and ranks in the middle and lower deciles when weighted by GDP or mortality. Cyclones impact three small distinct regions of the country and range from mid to high decile categories in GDP and mortality. Earthquakes and floods significantly affect similar areas when weighted by mortality, however, floods generally rank in higher deciles when weighted by GDP.

Nepal: Nepal's fragile geology and steep topography have made it the 20th topmost disaster-prone country in the world. It ranks fourth, eleventh and thirtieth out of 200 countries on relative vulnerability to climate change, earthquake and flood hazards, respectively.

Sri Lanka: Floods are the primary hazard affecting Sri Lanka, ranking in high deciles when weighted by both mortality and GDP. Cyclones affect the northern region of the country but have a moderate to minor risk when weighted by mortality. Compared to the rest of the world, the mortality weighted multi-hazard map highlights those hazards that pose significant risks to the entire country and are especially severe in Sri Lanka's southwestern region.

Thailand: Droughts and floods pose the greatest threat to Thailand, influencing the entire country with varying degrees of risk. The country is severely impacted by floods when weighted by mortality and GDP, whereas droughts only rank in the moderate to lower deciles. Cyclones also pose a minor risk to the northern portions of the country. The multi-hazard disaster risk map indicates that Thailand is significantly affected by hydrological and drought events, particularly in the central, eastern and southern regions.

Scope of Cooperation

India's disaster management has evolved from its experiences over the last two decades, including incidents like the Odisha super cyclone (1999), Bhuj earthquake (2000), Indian Ocean tsunami (2004) and the Kashmir earthquake (2005). India established legal mechanisms such as the Disaster Management Act, 2005, and set up the National Disaster Management Authority and state disaster management authorities. The Disaster Management Act explores the potential for cooperation with neighbouring countries in disaster response, providing a framework for the BIMSTEC member states to cooperate in climate and disaster management coordination. India has often extended relief assistance on a bilateral basis to other BIMSTEC countries. In 2017, it sent emergency supplies to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar in response to Cyclone Mora. India also offered relief support to Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. India also hosted the first and second BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise in 2017 and 2020, respectively, to institutionalise regional cooperation in disaster response. BIMSTEC member countries have also requested India to train them in disaster management at the Nagpur training facility.

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According to the National Disaster Management Plan, 2019, “participating proactively to realize the global goals as per the agreements to which India is signatory- Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, Sustainable Development Goals, and Conference of Parties (COP21) Paris Agreement on Climate Change” is important.

The Sendai Declaration, adopted at the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015 for 15 years, consists of the following recommendatory frameworks: (i) understanding disaster risk; (ii) strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk; (iii) investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience; and (iv) enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response, and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction. All the BIMSTEC member countries are signatories to the Sendai Declaration and thus share the vision of

developing disaster risk resilience at the regional level. This, in part, explains BIMSTEC's spurt of initiatives to rejuvenate regional cooperation in disaster management since 2015. In 2014, India established the BIMSTEC Centre on Weather and Climate in Noida to:

1. Promote and encourage cooperation between BIMSTEC member countries in identified areas of fundamental and applied scientific research in weather prediction and climate modelling.
2. Facilitate scientific capacity building in weather and climate research
3. Encourage and assist the publication of important results of research obtained within the framework of the BIMSTEC cooperation on weather and climate

To effectively handle disaster response at the national and regional level within the BIMSTEC, the international disaster law (IDL) framework by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) can serve as a roadmap for climate and disaster coordination and cooperation. The IDL includes information on addressing regulatory barriers to emergency response.

In recent years, governments around the world have been updating and strengthening their disaster management legislations. Some countries still lack national disaster management laws, while others have not yet expanded and organised their legal frameworks to effectively address the full spectrum of disaster management. Experience shows that even the best-prepared countries may need international support when major disasters strike, such as the US received after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or in the aftermath of Japan's Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. Unfortunately, few governments have adequate systems in place to facilitate and regulate outside relief. After years of intensive research and consultations on problems and best practice in the regulation of international disaster relief, the IFRC spearheaded negotiations to develop a new set of international guidelines to help governments strengthen their domestic laws and

policies. The international disaster response law guidelines are meant to assist governments in becoming better prepared for the common legal problems in international response operations. Using the guidelines, governments can avoid needless delays in the dissemination of humanitarian relief while ensuring better coordination and quality of assistance provided. Incorporating the IDL framework for regional cooperation and coordination, along with the Sendai Declaration and Paris Agreement, can be useful. Disaster resilient communities and countries must be encouraged through a culture of preparedness and mitigation for better regional cooperation. How well the Sendai Declaration works towards concrete actions and achieving a substantial reduction of disaster risk and loss of lives, livelihoods and health is yet to be tested. Nevertheless, the BIMSTEC forum can adopt these practices on climate and DRR from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) regional mechanisms.

ASEAN and SAARC are committed to the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Declaration, and their member states also adhere to the IDL. Despite its difficulties, ASEAN has a functional and comprehensive structure of disaster management that is worthy of observation and emulating. BIMSTEC is already considering adopting a model similar to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management. SAARC also conducts periodic training programmes to develop disaster risk resilience and organises workshops to meet the Sendai targets. BIMSTEC can emulate these efforts.

Conclusion

The BIMSTEC forum provides an opportunity for member countries to cooperate in climate and disaster management. The challenge is to shift from managing disasters to managing disaster risk, where there is a need for a holistic and integrated approach as part of the institutional mechanisms and resilience-building processes. If the BIMSTEC countries explore such cooperation and resilience-building processes, it will be a win-win for all.

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SECTION 5

ANALYSING HUMAN CAPITAL

Reimagining BIMSTEC's Health Futures

Oommen C. Kurian

Established in 1997, BIMSTEC comprises of five nations from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two nations from Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand). It is often seen as a link between these two regions and their respective regional institutions: the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹ Fourteen sectors of cooperation have been identified by the member countries: trade, technology, energy, transport and communication, tourism, fisheries, agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counterterrorism, environment, culture, people-to-people contact, and climate change.²

In 2005, during the Eighth BIMSTEC ministerial meeting held in Dhaka, Thailand proposed that the sectoral theme of “traditional medicine” be expanded into a comprehensive area of cooperation on public health.³ In the 15th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting held in Kathmandu in 2017, a joint statement was issued recognising the importance of holistic public healthcare amongst the BIMSTEC member states and the need for establishing alliances. However, most intra-BIMSTEC collaborations so far have been centred on traditional medicine—which is the focus that had been set initially.⁴

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has brought the focus back on public health. In their messages commemorating the 23rd anniversary

of BIMSTEC's establishment in June 2020, top leaders of the member countries expressed their commitment to working together and building better health resilience across the region. Indian Prime Minister Modi declared that India stands ready to share the country's expertise, resources, capacities and knowledge with others in the region.⁵

The Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER) launched the JIPMER-BIMSTEC Telemedicine Network (JBTN) in 2017. It was designed to strengthen links amongst premier medical institutions in the BIMSTEC region and is considered one of the earliest initiatives to expand collaborations into modern medicine. It can potentially support the region's COVID-19 response efforts as well.

The world, and the BIMSTEC region, are now healthier and wealthier than ever. In 1980, only 84 of every 100 children globally reached their fifth birthday, compared to 94 of every 100 in 2018. In 1980, a child born in a low-income country had a life expectancy of 52 years, which improved to 65 years in 2018.⁶ Among the South Asian countries, life expectancy at birth was only 54 until 1980, improving to 69 in 2018. The corresponding improvement in life expectancy at birth within the East Asian Region was 75 in 2018, an increase of 10 years since 1980.⁷

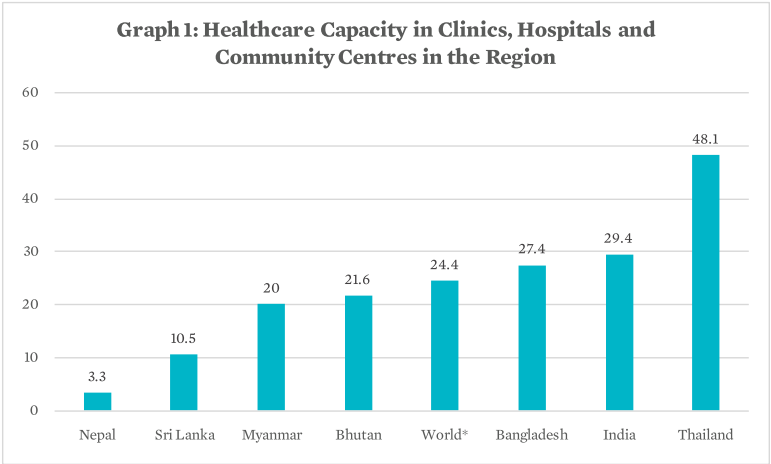
Improving skills, health, knowledge and resilience can help people become more productive, flexible and innovative, thereby able to access more opportunities for social mobility. For countries, therefore, investments in human capital are core-strategic decisions, not mere expenditure items within the social sector.⁸ Biological threats in any country can pose both short-term and long-term risks to global health, international security and, above all, the global economy. This has been underscored by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Since communicable diseases respect no borders, there is a need to prioritise and enhance system-level capabilities required to prevent, detect and rapidly respond to public health emergencies.⁹

Health remains as important in the second wave of the United Nations (UN) development goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as

it was during the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) era. It affects and gets affected by all the other 16 SDGs, six of which deal with direct risk factors, eight with indirect determinants, and two with equity and means of implementation. Since ill-health can undermine most, if not all, SDGs at the national and global level, SDG-3 on good health and well-being becomes one of the most important global goals. The BIMSTEC region's performance, in particular, will determine whether the world achieves these goals, since it houses more than one-fifth of the global population.¹⁰ This paper attempts a comparative analysis of the human capital situation of the BIMSTEC region, with specific attention to the health component.

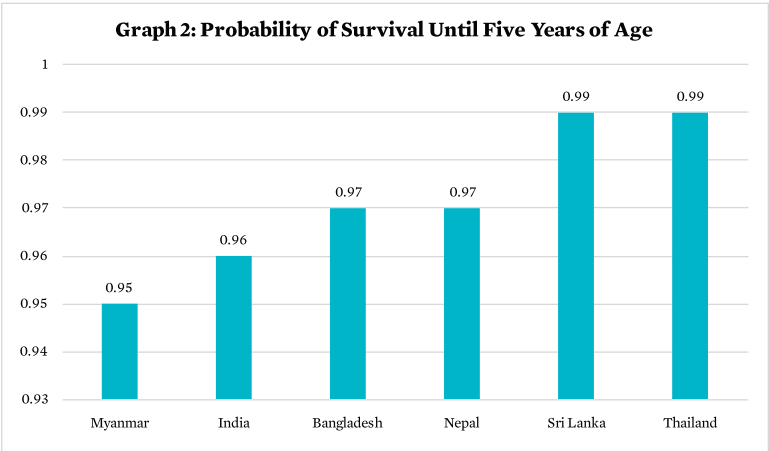
Comparative Analysis of Health Components in Human Capital across BIMSTEC

Health capacity in clinics, hospitals and community care centres is explored across BIMSTEC countries in Graph 1. Healthcare capacity is operationally defined here as a combination of available human resources (e.g. doctors, nurses, midwives) for the broader healthcare system and the capacity of health facilities (e.g. availability of hospital beds). Sri Lanka fares much lower than the global average on this aspect, despite its health system being perceived as one of the better ones in the region.¹¹



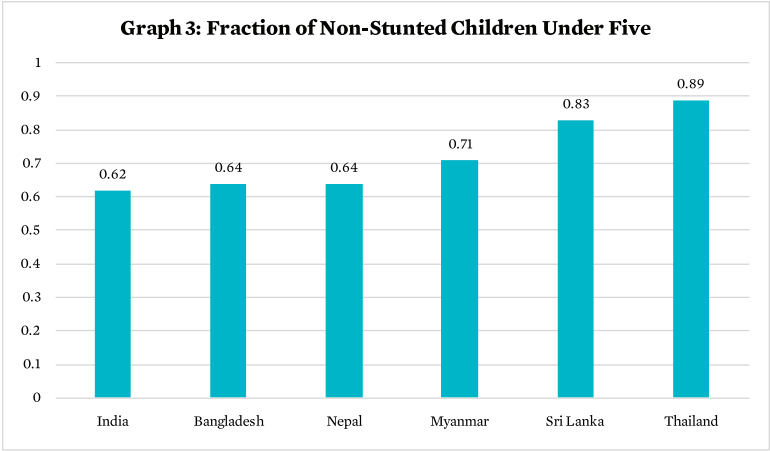
Source: Author's own, using data from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health 2019.¹²

The Global Human Capital Index (HCI) was initiated by the World Bank and its partners to create a simple cross-country metric for generating the political attention needed for catalytic worldwide action in social sectors such as health and education.¹³ There are three health-related components within the HCI. First, according to the World Bank, the *survival* component reflects the fact that children born today must survive until the process of human capital accumulation through formal education can begin.¹⁴ Survival is measured using the under-five mortality rate (See Graph 2). While almost all children survive from birth to school age in first-world countries, preventable child deaths are still a major challenge in South Asia.



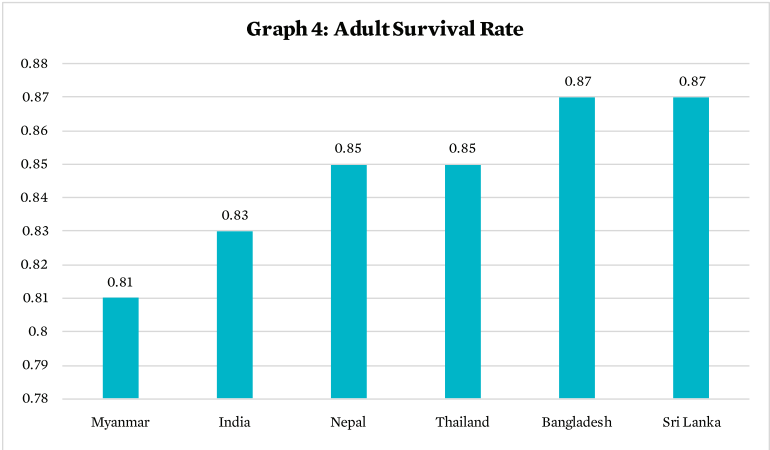
*Source: Author’s own, using data from The Human Capital Project.*¹⁵

The next health-related component of human capital is the rate of stunting of children below five years old (See **Graph 3**). Stunting reflects the health environment experienced during prenatal, infant, and early childhood development and is said to summarise “the risks to good health that children born today are likely to experience in their early years, with important consequences for health and well-being in adulthood.”¹⁶ Here, full health is defined as an absence of stunting. Compared with other BIMSTEC nations for which data is available, India fares the worst on this indicator.



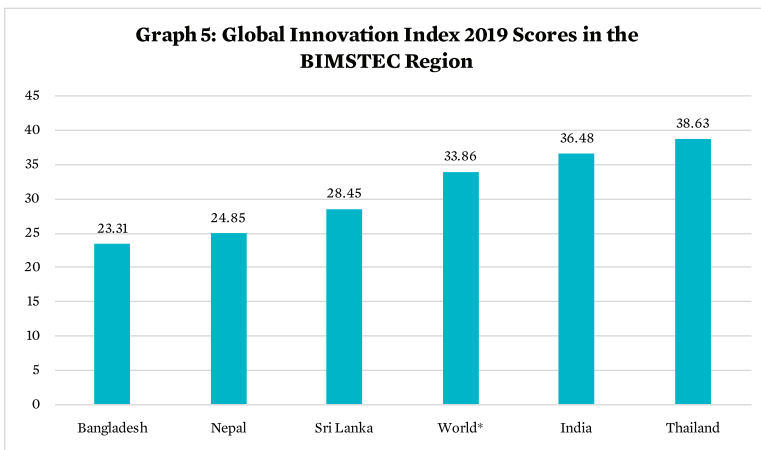
Source: Author’s own, using data from *The Human Capital Project*.¹⁷

The last health-related component of human capital is the “adult survival rate,” defined as the proportion of 15-year-olds who will survive until age 60 (See Graph 4). This component reflects the range of health outcomes that a child born today may experience as an adult. In this context, full health is defined as 100 percent adult survival.¹⁸ Here too, amongst the BIMSTEC countries where data is available, India fares the worst, along with Myanmar.



Source: Author’s own, using data from *The Human Capital Project*.¹⁹

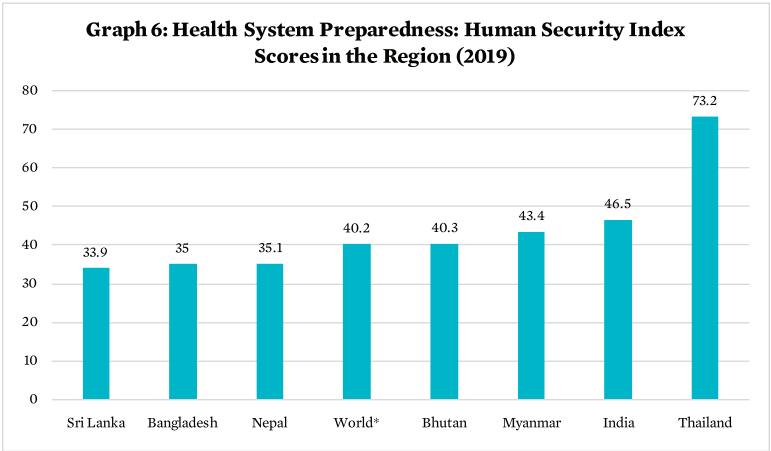
Overall, the health outcomes in the BIMSTEC region remain low, owing largely to bottlenecks within health systems. Moreover, the medical innovation landscape in the region leaves much to be desired. The Global Innovation Index 2019 focused on the future of global medical innovation and scored countries across a composite index, which pooled indicators across institutions, human capital and research, infrastructure, market sophistication, business sophistication, knowledge and technology outputs, and creative outputs. Only Thailand and India fared better than the global average (See Graph 5); both Bhutan and Myanmar remain absent from the global innovation landscape.²⁰



Source: Author's own, using data from Cornell University, INSEAD and WIPO (2019).²¹

In exploring comparable data across BIMSTEC countries on “country preparedness for infectious disease outbreaks and high-consequence biological events like COVID-19,” data was taken from the Global Health Security Index 2019. On average, countries in the BIMSTEC region are poorly prepared for a globally catastrophic biological event (See Graph 6), including those “that could be caused by the international spread of a new or emerging pathogen or by the deliberate or accidental release of a dangerous or engineered agent or organism.”²² The composite index of

34 indicators across six overarching categories scored each country on a scale of 0 to 100, wherein 100 represents the most favourable health-security conditions and 0 represents the least favourable conditions. It needs to be mentioned here that despite the gloomy scenario it presented for the region, BIMSTEC on average did much better than many other parts of the world in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, till now.



Source: Author's own, using data from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health 2019.²³

Recommendations

Considering the highly endemic nature of communicable diseases and the porous borders of BIMSTEC states, this essay suggests three specific recommendations. First, BIMSTEC must focus on collective action in the health arena and invest resources into developing public health as a regional public good. Under-investment in health is a problem across the region, and in addressing the issue, cross-border solidarity must be a key focus. This will contribute to regional as well as national resilience to adverse health events. Second, Thailand should take fresh initiatives as the BIMSTEC thematic lead to further public health as a sector of enhanced cooperation within the region. The country has made

remarkable achievements in health and has relatively better health status as indicated by data. Third, BIMSTEC should host policy workshops and exchange programmes in the region. These efforts can culminate in the constitution of a dedicated public-health cadre within member countries, consisting of personnel for public-health management to help countries overcome challenges such as COVID-19.

Conclusion

As discussed in the 2017 paper, “Health policies of BIMSTEC states: The scope for cross-learning,”²⁴ there are multiple areas within healthcare where BIMSTEC countries can learn from each other. These include telemedicine (Bhutan), monitoring of vital events through information technology (Bangladesh), the trial-and-error experimentation with the mother and child tracking system (India), the transformed district health information system (Bangladesh), often called a “silent revolution,” and the electronic medical records system (Sri Lanka).²⁵

The 2017 paper observed²⁶ that while there have been many in-depth studies focusing on the comparative analysis of the health systems in BRICS nations, offering valuable policy lessons, no such studies have been undertaken for the BIMSTEC members. This gives India an opportunity to conduct and support comparative health system studies within the region, with stronger economies providing valuable lessons for the future and the poorer members offering lessons for the present. Additionally, platforms for cross-learning can be immensely beneficial for culturally and socially similar neighbouring countries to learn from each other’s successes and failures in health policy.

About the Author

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Education as a Pivot in India's Cooperation with BIMSTEC Countries

Vivek Mishra and Suranjan Das

Introduction

Education and culture have historically provided essential links of connectivity between India and the member states of BIMSTEC. The Jataka tales, scriptures, inscriptions, palm-leaf records and accounts of foreign travellers testify to Takshashila, Nalanda and Vikramshila attracting scholars from the region in ancient times.¹

Following Independence, India became the world's second-largest provider of higher education and continued to attract students from the BIMSTEC countries: 26.88 percent of foreign students from Nepal, 4.38 percent from Bangladesh, and 3.82 percent from Bhutan (2018–19).² Various political leaders of some BIMSTEC countries, too, received their higher education in India, including Nepal's former Prime Ministers B.P. Koirala and Babu Ram Bhattarai; Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi; Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, and former Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay.³

This chapter outlines the different facets of educational cooperation between India and the BIMSTEC nations. The expansion of educational opportunities will enable India to use soft power diplomacy to strengthen its links with its BIMSTEC partners, four of whom are in South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two are in Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand).⁴

Bhutan

Approximately 4,000 Bhutanese students currently study in undergraduate courses in Indian universities. These students are either self-financed or dependent on Indian government scholarships. New Delhi offers 450 undergraduate slots annually to Bhutanese students and 90 fully funded scholarships for professional courses such as medicine, engineering, nursing and agriculture.⁵ The Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) earmarks 20 funded slots for Bhutanese students. Additionally, the India–Bhutan Foundation, established in August 2003, promotes educational cooperation between the two countries. In 2010, the prestigious Nehru-Wangchuk Scholarship was instituted, enabling talented Bhutanese nationals to study at selected premier Indian educational institutions. At the 2010 Calcutta University convocation, then crown prince of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck was awarded an honorary D. Litt degree. Following this, undergraduate seats were reserved for Bhutanese students at that university. During Prime Minister Modi's 2019 visit to Bhutan, he further emphasised the importance of education in Indo-Bhutan bilateralism.⁶

Bangladesh

“Education for All,” outlined in the Statement of Intent of 7 June 2015, made India and Bangladesh allies in education.⁷ A high-level India–Bangladesh Education Dialogue, with representatives from the government, academia and business, promotes strategic institutional partnerships in science, engineering, social sciences, humanities, and gender studies. There is also cooperation between India's National Assessment and Accreditation Council and Bangladesh's National Board of Accreditation. The joint declaration, issued following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh in June 2015, refers to “Notun Projonmo–Nayi Disha” and highlights education as critical to India–Bangladesh bilateral relations. India has announced a second Line of Credit (LoC) worth US\$2 billion for Bangladesh, to aid 15 development projects in different sectors, including education.⁸

India-Bangladesh education cooperation has been particularly strong in West Bengal, given its geographical proximity to Bangladesh and the cultural ties that bind the regions. Since 1971, leading higher education institutes of West Bengal and Bangladesh have organised student and teacher exchanges as well as collaborative research projects and seminars. In Visva-Bharati, Dhaka has established the “Bangladesh Bhavan,” which has become a centre for bilateral education and cultural activities. The Government of Bangladesh has now proposed to establish the “Bangabandhu Chair” in a leading West Bengal university, in memory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who studied at Maulana Azad College, Calcutta University.

Myanmar

Myanmar’s traditional education link with India has been through the people of Indian origin who inhabit its two main cities, Yangon and Mandalay. Yangon University has traditionally hosted leading Indian scholars: Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee spent several years in Myanmar. The Mekong Ganga Cooperation project included education as an area of collaboration.⁹

In 2012, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to Myanmar explored stronger educational cooperation between the two countries. India proposed a new LoC of US\$500 million to Myanmar for fostering bilateral linkages, partly to support educational links and assist Myanmar in capacity-building. On this occasion, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Calcutta University and the Dagon University of Yangon, making them the nodal centres for fostering Indo-Myanmar collaboration in higher education. However, Myanmar colleagues cited considerable difficulty in securing permission from their government to undertake visits to India. In 2013, the Calcutta University hosted the centenary session of the Indian Science Congress, and an invitation was extended to a Myanmar delegation; however, bureaucratic hurdles in Myanmar prevented their attendance. India must do more to help Myanmar improve school education and develop English-language teaching, about which interest was expressed during the visit.

In 2020, the president of Myanmar visited India, following which the Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education (ACARE) was established at Naypyidaw under a bilateral MoU.¹⁰

Nepal

India and Nepal share a strong cooperation in the field of education.¹¹ Narendra Modi's August 2014 visit to Nepal—the first in 17 years by an Indian premier—strengthened this link significantly. Following the visit, New Delhi rolled out funding for Indian universities to host Nepalese students to expose them to Indian culture and promote interaction with Indian experts in diverse fields of knowledge. In February 2016, a memorandum was signed on the utilisation of the grant of US\$250 million, allocating US\$50 million to education.¹²

Through the Indian embassy in Kathmandu, India provides around 3,000 scholarships/seats annually to Nepalese nationals, for studying at plus-2 level, as well as for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in engineering, medicine, agriculture, pharmacology, veterinary sciences, computer application, business administration, music and fine arts.¹³ In 1991, the bilateral B.P. Koirala India–Nepal Foundation was set up to further educational cooperation.¹⁴ In 2019, Nepal received INR 3 crores from India for building an educational institute in the Udayapur district.¹⁵

Sri Lanka

India and Sri Lanka have a history of cooperation in education. The Government of India offers 50 training opportunities Scheme in diverse fields under its Colombo Plan Technical Cooperation.¹⁶ The India–Sri Lanka Cultural Exchange Programme offers 60 annual scholarships to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses in India. Moreover, the ICCR's South Asian Regional Cooperation Scholarship Scheme annually awards one fellowship and two scholarships at the postgraduate level, in economics, education, environment, agriculture, mass communication, language, literature, sociology, transport engineering, applied economics, business administration, biochemistry,

social work, food technology and home science. Scholarships also exist for research and non-formal courses. India offers special training programmes for Sri Lankan Tamils. However, no scholarships are available for Sri Lankans in medicine. This gap is yet to be addressed.

An “India-Sri Lanka Knowledge Initiative”¹⁷ was launched following Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s visit to Delhi during 8–11 June 2010. Under this, the University of Colombo proposed a Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies with Indian support; the English and Foreign Language University (Hyderabad) was linked with the Sri Lanka–India Centre for English Language Training in Kandy; new Indian scholarships were introduced to address the “special needs of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka;” and Indian technical assistance was extended for agricultural research in the island. India offered Sri Lanka the use of its satellites for societal services.

Following the 2016 Sri Lanka visit of India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, India agreed to establish a Civil and Mechanical Engineering Complex and Skill Development Centre on the Kilinochchi Campus of the University of Jaffna; set up English Language Laboratories in all provinces of Sri Lanka; renovate 27 schools in Tamil-dominated Northern Province; and construct the Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Auditorium at the Ruhuna University and the Mahatma Gandhi International Centre in Matale.¹⁸ Annual Indian education fairs in Sri Lanka were also proposed.

Thailand

Indo-Thai education exchanges have long nurtured bilateral historical cultural ties, particularly after former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee’s visit in 2003. During this visit, Thai and Indian cultural centres were proposed to be established in both countries. An Indian Studies Centre at the Thammasat University and a Sanskrit Centre at the Silpakorn University were set up to disseminate knowledge of Indian culture.¹⁹ Following the Thai prime minister’s India visit in 2005, a joint working group was established to broaden bilateral education linkages in

Information Technology and Computer Science.

By 2017–18, the Government of India was offering 75 scholarships to Thai students under its various schemes (ITEC: 40, TCS of Colombo Plan: six, ICCR sponsored schemes: 20, and Hindi Scholarship: nine). Additionally, there are Thai students that fund their own study in India. India's Ministry of Education (earlier Ministry of Human Resource Development) sends eight professors every semester to the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok.²⁰ On 17 June 2016, India and Thailand signed an agreement to promote collaboration between Nagaland University and Thailand's Chiang Mai University.²¹ About 1,500 Thai scholars and monks have already completed their studies in science, engineering, philosophy, Buddhism and Sanskrit in institutions located at Pune, Darjeeling, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Delhi.²²

Conclusion

BIMSTEC was conceived as a regional grouping to “provide a fertile ground for cooperation” and be “a source of sharing and learning among members of the group,”²³ for which educational cooperation remains the sine qua non. Unfortunately, a viable and effective mechanism is yet to be developed for cooperation between the BIMSTEC nations within a regional framework. This chapter has relied on trends and mechanisms at the bilateral level to extrapolate potentialities and benefits for multilateral cooperation amongst BIMSTEC nations in the area of education. Following the experiment with BRICS regional cooperation, BIMSTEC should aim to become a viable regional forum for sharing knowledge, expertise and best practices in the education sector. As a “lead nation” of the grouping, India could start a new initiative for regional education cooperation within the region, drawing lessons from the bilateral education relationships that already exist within the group. Such educational links will not only contribute to sustainable development in the region but also aid cultural reconnection in the Bay of Bengal region. The former BIMSTEC Secretary General Sumith Nakandala stressed this when he remarked: “... we are not reinventing the wheel ... [but] just rediscovering the common heritage around the Bay of Bengal.”²⁴ Commemorating the 20th anniversary of the organisation in

June 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, too, underscored the cultural binding force of the organisation as well as its geostrategic importance for India:

BIMSTEC not only connects South and South-East Asia, but also the ecologies of the Great Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal. With shared values, histories, ways of life, and destinies that are interlinked, BIMSTEC represents a common space for peace and development. For India, it is a natural platform to fulfill our key foreign policy priorities of “Neighbourhood First” and “Act East”.²⁵

Fostering educational cooperation within the BIMSTEC can play a transformative role in enhancing people-to-people contact, creating closer and more constructive regional links. New Delhi must recognise this and take corrective measures, so that the current share of 47,427 foreign students among the 374 million enrolled students in the country’s higher education sector can be significantly increased, especially from the BIMSTEC countries.²⁶ The imperative is to make BIMSTEC a dynamic regional grouping whose successes can produce a multiplier impact on world politics.

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Gender Issues in BIMSTEC

Amena Mohsin

Introduction

In recent years, the world has seen a proliferation of regional organisations, with pronounced territoriality and defined regional markers, e.g. the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), African Union (AU), European Union (EU), and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Amongst these, BIMSTEC is an exception, since it moves beyond the traditional notion of “region,” referring to itself as “a regional organisation comprising seven member states lying in the littoral and adjacent areas of the Bay of Bengal constituting a contiguous regional unity.”¹

While the areas of cooperation between the BIMSTEC member states have expanded from six in 1997 to 15 in 2008, this multi-regional organisation is yet to address the gender issue.² In the key priority sectors such as trade and investment, transportation, energy, tourism, technological issues, and fisheries, no mention of gender-related issues can be found,³ even after the first addition of new areas.⁴ This is all the more problematic considering that that of the 1.5 billion people residing in BIMSTEC states, around 821 million are women.⁵

BIMSTEC’s failure to focus on gender issues stands in stark contrast to the evolving global practice of gender mainstreaming and the adoption of gender-sensitive policies by other major regional organisations.

Moreover, gender mainstreaming constitutes Goal 5 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This chapter reviews the state of gender equality (or lack of it) in each BIMSTEC member country. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has proposed a “Gender Gap Index,” which illuminates how the member states fare amongst global gender-based disparities. It broadly categorises gender-based inequalities into four aspects: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment.⁶ In the absence of an exclusive document on the gender gap and equality attainments of the BIMSTEC member states, the WEF Global Gender Gap Index provides a starting point for investigating gender-related issues in the countries.

An Overview of Gender Issues: Existing Challenges in BIMSTEC Countries

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According to a recent report published by the WEF, Bangladesh fares the best amongst the member countries of BIMSTEC in terms of bridging the gender gap. It is the best performer in South Asia and was ranked 50th amongst 153 countries in 2020. Bangladesh has shown an extraordinary effort in addressing gender inequality, by closing 72.6 percent of the prevailing gender gaps.⁷ The only other BIMSTEC member state to make it to the top 100 was Thailand, at the 75th position.⁸ In 2020, India has bridged two-thirds of its gender gap; however, there is substantial scope for improvement in the areas of societal and health issues.⁹ Myanmar, too, faces a number of issues in the political arena, economic sectors, and the educational sector.¹⁰ Sri Lanka, ranked 102, has been flagged specifically for issues of violence against women.¹¹ Similar conditions plague Nepal.¹² Bhutan, ranked at 131, has performed the worst of all the BIMSTEC in all aspects of gender issues, and requires particular focus on women’s health and survival, as well as the high rates of domestic violence in the country.¹³ To maintain its credibility as an organisation of cooperative behaviour, BIMSTEC must take these figures into consideration.

Table 1: The Rankings of BIMSTEC Countries in the WEF Index on Minimizing Global Gender Gap, 2020 [Overall Index]

Country Name	Ranks (Overall, amongst 153 Countries)
Bangladesh	50
Thailand	75
Nepal	101
Sri Lanka	102
India	112
Myanmar	114
Bhutan	131

Source: World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2020.¹⁴

Note: Lower Ranks Denote Lesser Gender Gap.

Challenges in Women’s Political, Economic and Social Empowerment

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, despite the political sphere being dominated by women at the topmost level, representation is inadequate in local governments as well as the parliament.¹⁵ From a socio-economic perspective, the majority of the Bangladeshi poor are women,¹⁶ and the country does not adequately address the fact that women are subject to blue-collar pay gaps (at least 50 percent).¹⁷ Nonetheless, Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in reducing maternal mortality by 5.5 percent per annum and achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education sectors.¹⁸ Moreover, it has made good progress towards fulfilling the requirements set by the SDGs. However, it still holds reservations against Articles 2 and 16 (1) (c) of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), due to the prevalence of personal law.

The predominant gender issue in Bangladesh is violence against women, i.e. domestic violence, workplace harassment, sexual assault, and rape.¹⁹ It is estimated that almost two out of every three women in Bangladesh have experienced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in their lifetimes.²⁰ The nation launched its first four-year National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security in 2019, in compliance with the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 2493.²¹

India

In India, female labour participation plummeted to 21 percent in 2018, from about 32 percent in 2005. Additionally, women's "domestication" rate expanded to the point that they were performing 9.6 times the unpaid care work that is done by male members of a household.²² The situation is similar in politics, with women holding only 14.39 percent of the seats in the parliament; governance at the village level (*Gram Panchayat*) also needs improvement.²³

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India holds reservations against Article 29 (1) of the CEDAW, while in reference to Articles 5 (a), 16 (1) and 16 (2), it has declared that states must not interfere in the community issues.²⁴ This stance must be examined in the backdrop of numerous layers of structural hierarchies. Violence, forced marriage and discrimination in healthcare access places India at a rank of 150 amongst 153 countries in the WEF sub-index on "Health and Survival." Moreover, Indian women are also prone to SGBV as well as suicides due to violence at almost double the rate as men.²⁵ These issues have prompted the United Nations (UN) Women India to prioritise six areas: ending violence against women, promoting leadership, national planning, economic empowerment, peace and security, and migration.²⁶

Myanmar

In Myanmar, the problems are aggravated because of the complex security situation in the country after almost 70 years of civil conflict. While few women participated in the formal peace processes, many of them took part in the informal ones.²⁷ The 21st Century Panglong Conference in

Naypyidaw had failed to deliver on its commitment of 30 percent quota for women's participation, and the female attendees comprised ethnic groups and academics only (with almost zero participation from women from the government or the military).²⁸ The government, too, discourages women's participation, citing their lack of experience. Even in areas of family planning, prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and motherhood, men are involved in larger numbers, resulting in the decline of women's knowledge of these issues, perpetuating a vicious cycle of ignorance and lack of access.²⁹

On the economic front, as Myanmar gradually opens up, improvements have been made in the female labour participation rate; however, data suggests that women face a 30 percent wage disparity and had low rates of participation, especially in top private sectors.³⁰ The mortality rate of mothers remains a major concern for the country. Women in Myanmar constitute 52 percent of the population and bear the brunt of militarism in an androcentric society.³¹

Officially, the country has promised to uphold the norms proposed by the international community, since it is a signatory of the ASEAN Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the SDGs and of the ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in the ASEAN Region, in addition to its commitment to the CEDAW.³² However, it has been accused of not incorporating women from ethnic minority groups. Moreover, in 2017, it had to report exceptionally to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, for the country's atrocities committed against Rohingya women in Northern Rakhine.³³

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, 64 percent of the workforce (of 8.6 million people) are men.³⁴ Only one every three Sri Lankan women take part in the country's labour force.³⁵ The female unemployment rate in Sri Lanka (11 percent) remains higher than that of their male counterparts (seven percent).³⁶ Political representation is another key concern, since women make up more than 50 percent overall population, but only 5.3 percent of the parliament.³⁷

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) found that 90 percent of females in Sri Lanka have experienced sexual harassment in public transportations at least once in life.³⁸ Given this context and the conflict-laden past, the government of Sri Lanka is currently working to draft a new constitution for including women's rights as part of the Fundamental Rights Chapter, while creating shelters for violence-surviving women in six places.³⁹

Thailand

Women in Thailand continue to lack access to the topmost levels of political decision-making.⁴⁰ Moreover, inequalities exist as gender-pay gap, sexual and gender-based violence, human trafficking, and forced labour;⁴¹ these issues remain unaddressed due to national security and religious factors.⁴² The labour force participation rate has fallen to 59.2 percent in 2019, compared to 66.4 percent in 1990.⁴³ In rural areas, in particular, women face discrimination due to ethnic identities.⁴⁴

Thailand, like Myanmar, is a signatory of the ASEAN Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the SDGs; the ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in the ASEAN Region; and is committed to CEDAW.⁴⁵ Despite this, violence against women remains a rampant issue in the country, with more than 20,000 annual cases of such incidents and a low rate of reporting due to lack of access to justice and fear of stigmatisation.⁴⁶

Bhutan

In Bhutan, workplace exploitation and unequal pay are significant issues, with women earning 77 cents for every dollar earned by a man for the same job.⁴⁷ Women's participation in electoral processes remains marginal, and the situation has worsened from the first to the second national elections of the country.⁴⁸ In the 2007–08 elections, women comprised 8.5 percent of the National Assembly, but the rate had dropped to 6.3 percent in the 2013 election.⁴⁹

Child marriage is another major concern in Bhutan. Between mid-2015 and mid-2016, Bhutan reported 1,557 cases of gender-based violence, with 44.6 percent of the Bhutanese women having experienced at least one form of partner violence during their lifetime.⁵⁰ Almost one in every 10 women is reported to have been sexually abused during childhood, and 12.5 percent of women experience physical violence from people other than an intimate partner.⁵¹

Despite the bleak data, Bhutan is one of the few BIMSTEC members that not only focus on attaining the SDGs with a specific focus on Gross National Happiness (GNH) and carbon neutrality, but has also adopted the CEDAW without any reservations against Article 10 of the country's Constitution.⁵² The country is also focused on the gendered aspects of climate change, as rural agriculture becomes heavily dependent on women during specific seasons.⁵³

Nepal

In Nepal 22 percent of women aged 15–49 have experienced gender-based violence since the age of 15, seven percent of whom have experienced sexual violence.⁵⁴ Around 66 percent of women do not seek assistance against their experienced violence, fear of stigma being the main deterrent.⁵⁵

While there has been considerable representation of women in the parliament, with an increase from 2.9 percent in 1991 to 29 percent in 2013,⁵⁶ the recent elections in the local level saw only 18 elected women mayors or chairs out of 753, and only three female ministers amongst a total of 22 at the federal level.⁵⁷ Despite the country's 79.4 percent female labour force participation (the highest in the South Asian region), gender pay gaps exist in the informal sector. Women's daily average time spent in unpaid care work is 268 minutes a day, compared to men's 56 minutes a day.⁵⁸

Conclusion

This review of the gender situation in the BIMSTEC countries indicates a major lacuna in the organisation's overall approach to cooperative behaviour and regionalism. Gender mainstreaming remains absent from its key areas of concern, despite the increased attention from other global and regional groupings. Both SAARC and ASEAN have paid adequate attention to gender issues, and it would do well for BIMSTEC to take lessons from them.

BIMSTEC's unsatisfactory performance as an effective cooperative body raises questions about its credibility and viability, and the absence of a gender focus only exacerbates this. As suggested earlier, feminist conceptions of cooperative behaviour and power bring in qualitative differences to the notion of connectivity. It is time for BIMSTEC to review its structure and agendas, and take into cognisance "gender" as an increasingly relevant topic in all areas of development.

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Trafficking of Women, Precarity, and BIMSTEC

Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury

Introduction

In the pre-COVID19 era, the increased incidence of trafficking and undocumented migration of people, and of women and children in particular, had become an urgent human rights concern for the countries of BIMSTEC. The routes, methods and activities of traffickers are organised, with greater penetration of crime syndicates into trafficking both within and outside the Bay of Bengal region. The alarming numbers of women and children being trafficked for forced labour or slavery-like practices (including commercial sexual exploitation) is a crucial concern for the Bay littorals. Since the statistics available are limited and contested in nature, it is difficult to create an exhaustive map of the current situation. Nonetheless, the available data has managed to draw BIMSTEC's attention to trafficking issues in the region.

This essay provides an overview of the trafficking of women in the Bay of Bengal region, particularly around India–Nepal–Bangladesh, a contiguous zone and a hub of this type of organised, trans-national crime. The author uses available data to analyse how trafficking is related to forced migration. What makes women and children fall prey to trafficking? What are the cross-border legal mechanisms between and amongst these countries within the Bay region? What is the response of BIMSTEC as a subregional organisation? The essay concludes with certain policy recommendations.

Setting the Tone

The Trafficking in Persons Protocol was adopted by the United Nations (UN) in November 2000 and came into force in December 2003. It defines trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, or deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.” Exploitation includes different forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.¹ According to the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) report, *Collateral Damage: The Impact of Anti-Trafficking Measures on Human Rights around the World*, trafficking in persons is not limited to criminal issues and is a multi-dimensional phenomenon including social, economic, and criminal: gender, health, migration and development. These are more pronounced in the informal sector.² According to a report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018*, in the last decade alone, there has been an upward trend in the number of victims identified, and traffickers convicted globally.³

Considering the dearth of data on the Bay of Bengal region, the 2018 UNODC report can be used to understand the situation in South Asia and East Asia-Pacific.¹ According to the report, of the total trafficked persons in South Asia,⁴ women account for 59 percent and men for 37 percent. Of all incidents, trafficking exclusively for sexual exploitation (50 percent) and trafficking for forced labour (49 percent) are nearly equal.⁵ In 2016, 67 percent of the total reported victims of trafficking in East Asia and the Pacific were women. About 60 percent of these detected victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation, and 38 percent for forced labour. In Myanmar, most of the detected victims were women. In Thailand, there was more trafficking of people for forced labour than for sexual exploitation, and men accounted for the majority of trafficked persons. Both these countries reported particularly high

numbers of women being prosecuted, and convicted of trafficking in persons. The vast majority of the convicted traffickers are citizens of the country of conviction.⁶

Based on this preliminary data, the next section discusses the severity of women trafficking in the India–Nepal–Bangladesh zone.

India–Nepal–Bangladesh: Hub of Women Trafficking

Based on the patterns of human trafficking in the region, analysts and authorities both have categorised some countries as “sending countries” or sites of origin, and others as “receiving countries” or sites of destination. Yet, the situation on the ground is not as simple. India, for instance, is not only a site of destination within the region, but a transit country as well. It works as an intermediary space, from where women and children are trafficked to sites within the region as well as to other parts of the world. Bangladesh and Nepal, on the other hand, can be characterised purely as sending countries.

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A 2008 report reveals that much of India’s trafficking issues originate in Bangladesh and Nepal, two of the biggest suppliers of the international traffic into India, accounting for 2.17 percent and 2.6 percent of trafficked persons, respectively.⁷ A report by Justice and Care, in association with the Border Security Force (BSF) found that more than 500,000 Bangladeshi women and children aged 12–30 have been illegally sent to India in the last decade.⁸ According to a report by the National Human Rights Commission, nearly 35,000 Nepali citizens (15,000 men; 15,000 women; and 5,000 children) were trafficked into India in 2018–19.⁹ Non-government organisations working to battle trafficking have estimated that about 50 women are being traded from Nepal to India every day.¹⁰ Nepali victims of labour trafficking are often transported through Sri Lanka and Myanmar, en route to their final destination.

According to the US State Department's 2018 report "Trafficking in Persons," about 728,000 Rohingyas have fled from Rakhine in Myanmar since August 2017 to neighbouring Bangladesh. Of these, a substantial number of women and girls have been subjected to sex trafficking in both Bangladesh and India. Traffickers are known to abduct Rohingya women and children who are in transit as well as those already in refugee camps in Bangladesh, and sell them into forced marriage in India, Indonesia and Malaysia. Some of them have reportedly been subjected to forced labour or sex trafficking.¹¹ Traffickers transport Rohingya girls both within Bangladesh, to Chittagong and Dhaka, and transnationally to Kathmandu and Kolkata for sex trafficking; some traffickers also trade these girls over the internet.¹²

Once these women are trafficked from one country to another, they lose their rights and become virtually stateless. Some start their journey as migrant workers but end up in brothels, primarily because there are no authorised safe channels for women migrant workers to guarantee their employment and remuneration. In most cases, the migrations occur without any legal or authorised documents. Unskilled female workers, between the ages of nine and 25 years, constitute the most vulnerable group in human trafficking.¹³ Radhika Coomaraswamy's report provides important indicators for the possible intersections between trafficking and migration.¹⁴ The growth in migration and trafficking flows has resulted from a combination of push, pull and facilitating factors. Illiteracy, poverty, class clashes, natural calamities, and political and ethnic unrest have all contributed to increasing the vulnerabilities of marginalised groups and made them susceptible to gross violations of human rights.¹⁵

Cross-border Legal Mechanisms in the Bay of Bengal Region

Until recently, the national governments of the BIMSTEC countries did not prioritise the issue of cross-border trafficking. However, most of the countries of the region have now made a commitment at the national level to combat the trafficking of women and children. India, Nepal and Bangladesh are perhaps the most proactive in attempting to combat the

problem through national legislations. However, the key impediment with the domestic laws are issues of implementation and enforcement; impunity still prevails despite the national legislations.

- **Bilateral Responses**

At the bilateral level, the India–Bangladesh MoU in 2015 was a significant move in the two countries' efforts at preventing human trafficking. The MoU has focused on three aspects: a) extension of the definition of people subjected to trafficking; b) repatriation; and c) the creation of a joint task force. India has been planning to sign similar MoUs with other neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Myanmar.¹⁶ On 27 November 2019, the Union Cabinet of India approved an MoU between India and Myanmar on bilateral cooperation for the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons, encompassing rescue, recovery, repatriation and reintegration of victims of trafficking.¹⁷ It was finally exchanged on 27 February 2020, during the state visit of the President of Myanmar. In Thailand, multiple agencies, including the MSDHS, the Royal Thai Police, the Immigration Bureau, the Office of the Attorney General, and the Office of the Judiciary, have cooperated with the Myanmar Police and other relevant agencies to provide assistance for and expedite the repatriation of Myanmar victims through the reception centre in Myawaddy, Myanmar.¹⁸

- **SAARC's Approach**

The signing of the SAARC Convention on Trafficking in 2002 was a landmark step towards recognising the importance of the issues relating to cross-border trafficking and undocumented migration. However, despite being touted as a milestone in coordinating interventions against trafficking at the regional level, the convention has its limitations. For one, it defines 'trafficking' within the limited scope of "prostitution." This definition does not address trafficking from a general perspective and needs to be broadened.¹⁹

- **BIMSTEC's Role**

Since its inception, BIMSTEC member states have advocated for peaceful and progressive development in the region. Subsequently,

the leaders have identified the fight against “terrorism and organised international crime” as one of the most important prerequisites for sustainable growth and for maintaining peace in the region. In the Eighth Ministerial Meeting held at Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 18–19 December 2005, Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) was added as one of the priority sectors of BIMSTEC, with India as the lead. Accordingly, a joint working group (JWG) was formed including four sub-groups, each with its own lead country: intelligence sharing (Sri Lanka), financing of terrorism (Thailand), legal and law enforcement issues (India), and prevention of trafficking in narcotics and psychotropic substances (Myanmar).

In 2009, the “BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking” was adopted. Comprising 15 articles, this convention can be considered as a confidence-building measure, and the member states, subject to their domestic laws and regulations, will cooperate in combating international terrorism; transnational organised crime; and illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, including their precursor chemicals. However, the convention does not mention human trafficking and undocumented migration. All the member states have ratified the Convention except Bhutan. In principle, Bhutan agrees with the agenda of cooperating with member states to combat human trafficking, but there is a lack of clarity about the nature of the extradition treaty at the BIMSTEC level since the country has already signed a bilateral extradition treaty with India.²⁰

While approving the final text of the “BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters,” the JWG recommended the inclusion of “Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration” and “Cooperation on Countering Radicalization and Terrorism” in the agenda of the 7th JWGCTTC meeting. Further, it proposed the creation of two new sub-groups under the leadership of Bangladesh and India, respectively. Finally, it approved the proposal to start drafting and negotiating on a “BIMSTEC Treaty on Extradition.”

Conclusion

BIMSTEC is still in its nascent stage and yet to finalise its rule of laws. Therefore, no fruitful steps have yet been taken at the BIMSTEC level for legal enforcement of laws and regulations to stop human trafficking. In relation to the countries' populations, the response level of criminal justice appears to be limited. For instance, in 2016, countries in South Asia reported lower conviction rates compared to those in more populated regions; the situation is similar in BIMSTEC.

While significant milestones have been achieved, trans-border organised crimes, particularly human trafficking, continues unchecked.²¹ Crossing the borders is a daily routine for many; thus, the role of security officials at the border checkpoints is crucial. Indeed, for the repatriation of trafficked women and children, government agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs) and civil society must facilitate the protection of these vulnerable groups. The risks of and possible responses to trafficking could be disseminated as practical information and should be provided to refugees, internally displaced people, and to communities that live along the migration routes.

This essay offers the following recommendations for battling the trafficking of women in the BIMSTEC region:

- Under the ambit of the CTTC sector of BIMSTEC, more focused and coordinated effort should be adopted to tackle all the interconnected segments of human trafficking.
- The definition of what constitutes 'human trafficking' must be considered in a more holistic and inclusive way, incorporating the dynamics of all facets of cross-border undocumented migration.
- For possible cross-border cooperation, member states must strengthen infrastructural as well as institutional connectivity, enhancing CTTC measures through the convergence of rules, regulations and policies.
- Exchange of information amongst the member states must be encouraged.

- Different stakeholders relevant in this field, including NGOs and civil society groups, should engage in constant dialogue, to better understand the ground realities.
- BIMSTEC should work towards linking gender, migration and labour laws.

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COVID -19 and the Changing Geopolitical Order: Challenges to BIMSTEC

Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic will no doubt have far-reaching, multifaceted impacts on the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape across the globe. As the pandemic recedes with time and is brought under control once an effective vaccine becomes available, the world must concentrate on economic reconstruction. Most countries are likely to turn inwards to revive national economies and concentrate on healthcare to keep the pandemic at bay. The first step is to address the issues of inadequate healthcare support and the public fear of the pandemic, since national economies are dependent on the quality of human capital. The post-COVID-19 era is also likely to witness a churning of the international order, as China's expansionist role and hegemonic aspirations lead to strategic realignments.

When a COVID-19 vaccine is ready, making it widely affordable will be a humanitarian imperative requiring international cooperation. India, with the capacity to produce the bulk of the world's supply of vaccines, will be at the forefront of this effort. It has already increased the supply of medicines and equipment to several countries and set up a SAARC fund to fight the pandemic.¹ Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced that India has already provided medical assistance to around 150 countries. Thus, India is gearing up for international cooperation to meet the humanitarian challenge of producing and supplying vaccines to the rest of the world.

For the economic revival of nations, the imperatives are food security, healthcare, re-skilling of the workforce, and generating employment. This will require cooperation at the national, regional and international levels. In the current international situation, however, it is uncertain whether the big powers will cooperate in the fight against the pandemic. With nations looking inwards and relying more on national resources instead of global cooperation, PM Modi announced his government's mission, "Atmanirbhar Bharat," along the same lines as "Make in India." The policy can be interpreted to have various elements: self-reliance, local manufacturing, and reducing imports.² At the same time, however, it runs the risk of being viewed as reflective of India's lack of trust in regional cooperation; this can have a dampening effect on regional organisations like BIMSTEC. To combat this notion, India has declared that it is not retreating into protectionism or autarky and will actively seek foreign investments and linkages with global value chains, which have become the backbone of global manufacturing.

The Impact of COVID-19

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Trans-border Connectivity and World Economy

The COVID-19 pandemic has struck at the core of globalisation, paralysing connectivity and causing massive disruption in the international order that is unprecedented since the Second World War. By disrupting connectivity and cooperation amongst nations, the pandemic has severely affected the world economy, especially the industries that depend critically on connectivity, including aviation, tourism, trade and investment. To be sure, the growth of digital innovation has offset this disruption to some extent, contributing to the development of new platforms to fill the gap in connectivity. The mushrooming of digital applications to facilitate virtual meetings and conferences have ensured people-to-people connectivity, even at a time of social distancing. As a subset of global connectivity, the role played by national and regional connectivity has been crucial, promoted and nurtured by both nations and regional organisations. However, the mobility of people and their human capital remains a fundamental factor in connectivity and technological innovation.

To be sure, the lockdown to combat COVID-19 has at least slowed down the spread of the virus; but it has also devastated economies. Most countries are attempting to gradually dilute the lockdown and initiate green shoots of economic recovery, despite the pandemic continuing to claim casualties across the world. In the absence of a vaccine, economic recovery is likely to be slow and unpredictable, leading to a deeper recession in 2020 and slower recovery in 2021. Indeed, the global economic recovery prospects are grim.³

For the first time in 18 years, India has recorded a trade surplus in June 2020, which is symptomatic of a contracting economy and declining demand. While discussing how reopening from lockdown can lead to uncertain recovery of the economy, the Chief Economist of the IMF said, “Over 75 percent of countries are now reopening at the same time as the pandemic is intensifying in many emerging market and developing economies. Several countries have started to recover. However, in the absence of a medical solution, the strength of the recovery is highly uncertain and the impact on sectors and countries uneven.”⁴

Moreover, there is apparent widespread dismay with global institutions, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and its parent organisation, the United Nations (UN), which should have been at the forefront of fighting the pandemic and stabilising the international order. Instead, WHO has been effectively hijacked by the geopolitical influence of China, which is attempting to expand its hegemony to international organisations. In response, the United States, the largest single financial contributor to WHO, has notified its intention to withdraw from the body. This will not only cripple the organisation but also leave the field open for further manipulation by China. It is already clear that the post-COVID-19 international order will not be the same as before. Multilateral organisations such as the UN have been found severely wanting and the trust deficit amongst nations has plummeted to an all-time low in the last 75 years.⁵

Human Capital and BIMSTEC

The nature of human capital will change in the post-COVID-19 world; this will be true for the BIMSTEC region. In its Human Capital Project (HCP), the World Bank defines the Human Capital Index (HCI) as a new definition of human capital: “[It] quantifies the contribution of health and education to the productivity of the next generation of workers. Countries can use it to assess how much income they are foregoing because of HC gaps, and how much faster they can turn these losses into gains if they act now...By improving their skills, health, knowledge, and resilience—their human capital—people can be more productive, flexible, and innovative. Human capital is a central driver of sustainable growth and poverty reduction. Investments in human capital have become more important as the nature of work has evolved. Yet despite substantial progress, significant gaps in human capital investments are leaving the world poorly prepared for what lies ahead.”⁶

Among the BIMSTEC countries, human capital development has been lagging, with India ranking last. Thailand and Sri Lanka occupy the top two positions (See Table 1).

Table 1: HCI in BIMSTEC COUNTRIES

Global Rank	Country	Index
65	Thailand	0.60
74	Sri Lanka	0.58
102	Nepal	0.49
106	Bangladesh	0.48
107	Myanmar	0.47
115	India	0.44

Note: No data for Bhutan.

In this context, it is worth noting the “Socio-Economic Response to COVID” proposed by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). The framework emphasises on three streams of work:

1. Protecting and investing in people and enhancing the resilience of societies and communities, especially women and vulnerable groups of the population, by strengthening social protection; improving access to health systems and basic services; and enhancing resilience, including emergency preparedness
2. Supporting sustainable and inclusive economic recovery through fiscal and monetary stimuli in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement
3. Restoring and building resilience in supply chains through regional and subregional coordination on trade, investment, transport and digital connectivity; and supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs).⁷

Further, UNESCAP has highlighted that the first track amongst several responses to COVID-19 must be the protection and building of human capital, particularly for vulnerable groups. BIMSTEC must therefore start planning programmes for human capital development in the sectors selected for cooperation.

As a sector-driven cooperation organisation, BIMSTEC has identified 14 sectors as its priority domains. Each sector is led by a member country, responsible for taking initiatives related to that sector. The sectors, included in various stages, are as follows:

1. Trade and Investment: Bangladesh
2. Transport and Communication: India
3. Energy: Myanmar
4. Tourism: India
5. Technology: Sri Lanka

6. Fisheries: Thailand
7. Agriculture: Myanmar
8. Public Health: Thailand
9. Poverty Alleviation: Nepal
10. Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime: India
11. Environment and Disaster Management: India
12. People-to-People Contact: Thailand
13. Cultural Cooperation: Bhutan
14. Climate Change: Bangladesh⁸

The Changing Geopolitical Milieu

BIMSTEC must recognise that the geopolitical situation has been affected adversely by China's actions in its geographical periphery, in the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and India. China's intrusive geopolitical and geoeconomic role in Nepal, and deepening economic and military engagement with other South Asian countries that are members of BIMSTEC, are likely to have an adverse impact on the organisation.

China has already played a significant role in undermining consensus in the ASEAN, Asia's leading regional organisation. With its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has now made substantial penetration into all BIMSTEC countries except India. The pandemic-driven economic downturn will create more opportunities for China to distribute largesse, as nations seek funding for economic revival. The New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIDB) will become vehicles for funding, since China has substantial influence in these multilateral lending agencies. China has recently offered Bangladesh tariff- and quota-free entry of goods, after decades of running a trade surplus. In return, it has sought sister-city linkages between several cities in Bangladesh and China. This will help China penetrate further into the hinterlands of Bangladesh, creating a strategic challenge for India. China's predatory mercantilism has already undercut and subverted the MSME sectors across several Asian countries.

In the context of the changing global order and the disruption caused by COVID-19, China will seek to undermine regional organisations, as it attempts to expand its hegemonic envelope and build a China-centric Asian order. Several nations and organisations have now started to push back. The World Health Assembly has voted unanimously to investigate the origin of the COVID-19 virus and China's role in the pandemic, much to China's chagrin. The recent Russia–India–China virtual meeting of foreign ministers ended without the customary joint statement. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS are likely to be the next casualties, since Brazil, India and Russia have been amongst the countries worst hit by COVID-19.⁹ BIMSTEC must consider the challenge posed by China and take steps to counterbalance its role in undermining regional cooperation through bilateral incentives to member countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Post-COVID Roadmap

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In light of the pandemic and the issues associated with it, BIMSTEC must review whether or not to continue cooperation in all 14 sectors. For now, the organisation could focus on sectors that contribute directly to economic revival in member countries. During the 16th meeting of BIMSTEC Ministers in August 2018, the foreign ministers of Bangladesh and Thailand had underlined the importance of prioritising some sectors, since progress across them has been uneven.

Thailand's Foreign Minister highlighted the following sectors: Connectivity, Trade and Investment, People-to-People Contact, Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime/Security, and Science and Technology. Additionally, Thailand submitted a concept paper to the BIMSTEC Secretariat on this issue.¹⁰ In response, BIMSTEC selected Public Health as one of the priority sectors to be led by Thailand, since the country has successfully managed the COVID-19 outbreak, with less than 3,300 cases and 58 deaths, and no recurrence of cases at the time of writing this essay. This, despite the first case of COVID-19 outside China being detected in Thailand, in a Chinese visitor from Wuhan. There have been low cases of COVID-19 in the countries sharing the Mekong River (except China). Vietnam, for instance, has not had a single death so far, and less than 350 cases. Cambodia and Laos have also had low incidences

of the virus. BIMSTEC must study this remarkable achievement and increase cooperation in the area of public health in the post-COVID era.¹¹ Moreover, the organisation should coordinate intensive training programmes to create a large and qualified pool of health workers trained in dealing with the pandemic on an emergency basis. For the next two years at least, the healthcare sector must be given the highest priority.

In the context of economic activity, security is paramount. With millions losing their employment, BIMSTEC countries will see a rise in transnational crimes such as piracy, drugs smuggling, human trafficking, and illegal fishing. Improving human capital in the area of Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime must be another one of BIMSTEC's priorities. Security in the Bay of Bengal region will be crucial to the Fisheries sector, which is a major employer. Here, too, upgrading of human capital will be essential to support modern fishing methods such as deep-sea fishing.

Finally, connectivity must be restored as soon as possible. The Transport and Communication sector must be prioritised, since it is vital for economic revival and restoration of employment.¹² Cyberspace cooperation and training in digital methods is crucial, considering that the expansion in digital workspaces during the pandemic is likely to continue in the post-COVID era. There is immense scope for upgrading human capital in digital operations, and to this end, BIMSTEC must adopt training programmes. Upgrading human capital in all sectors must become an integral aspect of all BIMSTEC programmes. Meetings at the official and technical levels can be accompanied by training modules in the digital mode, run by professionals from different countries. Such novel approaches are required to improve the HCI of BIMSTEC member countries.

About the Author

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SECTION 6

ENHANCING TRADE

Enhancing Trade in the BIMSTEC Region

Damaru Ballabha Paudel

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was established in June 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. Among the BIMSTEC's seven member states, Myanmar and Thailand are also members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka are also members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). BIMSTEC was established to create an enabling environment for rapid economic development. The aim is to establish a foundation for common action in trade, investment, technological exchange and other interrelated sectors through a spirit of equality and partnership, thereby contributing to peace, progress and prosperity in the region.¹ Of the 14 areas of cooperation, trade and investment promotion constitutes the core of BIMSTEC cooperation.

The Bay of Bengal is an especially important trading route for many countries. About 25 percent of the world's traded goods, 70 percent to 80 percent of China's energy imports, and over 90 percent of South Korea and Japan's energy imports flow through the Strait of Malacca, the southern end of the bay.² BIMSTEC covers 3.7 percent of global surface area and is a market of almost 1.7 billion people (or 22.2 percent of global population). In 2018, the combined BIMSTEC economy was worth US\$3.7 trillion, accounting for 4.3 percent of global gross

domestic production (GDP). The average per capita GDP was US\$2,191, with Thailand, Sri Lanka and Bhutan above the average. The BIMSTEC countries had an average of 6.6 percent GDP growth rate; among them, Bangladesh had the highest growth (7.9 percent) and Bhutan had the lowest growth (2.3 percent).³

Trade Engagement in BIMSTEC

In 2018, BIMSTEC accounted for 3.8 percent of global trade (US\$1.50 trillion out of US\$38.90 trillion), while intra-regional trade totaled US\$94.61 billion.⁴ Out of the total global trade, intra-regional trade within BIMSTEC was 6.30 percent (see Table 1). This shows that BIMSTEC is a less integrated region than ASEAN (intra-regional trade of 24 percent) and the European Union (intra-regional trade of 64 percent).⁵

In 2018, India had the highest trade share among all BIMSTEC members (40.26 percent), while Bhutan had the lowest (2.11 percent). India also had the highest trade share in BIMSTEC's global trade (55.42 percent) while Bhutan had the lowest (0.16 percent). At the same time, 85.71 percent of Bhutan's trade was with the BIMSTEC region (the highest), while only 4.30 percent of Thailand's trade was intra-regional (the lowest).⁶

Table 1: BIMSTEC Trade Engagement in 2018

Country	Intra-BIMSTEC trade		BIMSTEC global trade		Intra-regional trade share in global trade (percentage)
	Volume (in million USD)	Share of countries (percentage)	Volume (in million USD)	Share in BIMSTEC global trade (percentage)	
Bangladesh	10,957.98	11.58	89,094.36	5.93	12.30
Bhutan	1,997.90	2.11	2,331.07	0.16	85.71
India	38,087.67	40.26	832,257.25	55.42	4.58
Myanmar	7,369.83	7.79	36,209.81	2.41	20.35
Nepal	9,295.66	9.83	13,607.11	0.91	68.31
Sri Lanka	5,619.11	5.94	33,361.02	2.22	16.84
Thailand	21,279.09	22.49	494,984.73	32.96	4.30
BIMSTEC	94,607.23	100.00	1,501,845.34	100.00	6.30

Source: Author's own, based on IMF data⁷

In the same year, out of Bangladesh's total trade with the other BIMSTEC countries, 87 percent was with India and 10 percent with Thailand, with the remaining 3 percent with the others. Of Bhutan's total trade with the BIMSTEC region, 81 percent was with India, 15 percent with Bangladesh and the rest with the other member states. Of Myanmar's total trade with the BIMSTEC states, 77 percent was with Thailand, 21 percent with India, and rest with the others. For Nepal, 97 percent of intra-regional trade was with India. For Sri Lanka, 86 percent of BIMSTEC-wide

trade was with India, 10 percent with Thailand, and the remaining with the other countries. Out of Thailand's total trade with the BIMSTEC, 57 percent was with India, 34 percent with Myanmar, and the other countries making up the remaining 9 percent. Similarly, of India's total intra-regional trade, 32 percent was with Thailand, 26 percent with Bangladesh, 20 percent with Nepal, 16 percent with Sri Lanka, 4 percent with Myanmar and 2 percent with Bhutan.⁸

India is the top trading partner for five other BIMSTEC member states (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand), while Thailand is India and Myanmar's top trading partner. At the same time, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka have few trade engagements with each other.

In addition, the BIMSTEC region had a low foreign direct investment (FDI) inflow in 2015-2018. The average FDI inflow in the BIMSTEC member states was about 1 percent to 3 percent of GDP, although Myanmar fared better (FDI inflow of 4 percent to 6 percent of GDP).⁹

BIMSTEC Free Trade Area

The BIMSTEC members are bound by different trade agreements. The five member countries who are also part of SAARC are bound by the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). Similarly, as ASEAN members, Myanmar and Thailand are signatories of the ASEAN Free Trade Area. India, Myanmar and Thailand have the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement. India also has bilateral trade pacts with Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Sri Lanka and Thailand also have a bilateral trade deal.¹⁰

The BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA) framework agreement was signed in February 2004, and included six constituent agreements—Agreement on Trade in Goods, Agreement on Trade in Services, Agreement on Investment, Agreement on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters, Agreement on Rules of Origin and Operational Certification Procedures, and Agreement on Trade Facilitation.¹¹

The BIMSTEC FTA covers areas such as the progressive elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers; liberalisation of trade in services; establishing an open and competitive investment regime; establishing effective trade and investment facilitating measures; establishing appropriate mechanisms for the implementation and simplification of customs procedures; and developing mutual recognition arrangements.

BIMSTEC tariff reduction is divided into fast and normal tracks and two categories, developing countries (India, Sri Lanka and Thailand) and least developed countries (LDCs; Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal). It also recognises that LDCs in the region need to be accorded special and differential treatment given their development needs. Some products are listed in the negative list and will see no tariff reduction. The trade negotiating committee (TNC) held its first meeting in September 2004 and has several working groups to assist in the negotiations, including those on rules of origin, trade in services, investment, and Trade Facilitation.¹²

The TNC has held 21 rounds of negotiations to finalise constituent agreements under the BIMSTEC FTA but has been unable to conclude any deal due to a lack of consensus on important issues. At the 21st meeting in 2018, several core elements related to the Agreement on Trade in Goods, its rules of origin and product specific rules were agreed upon.¹³

Agreements on the trade in goods and customs cooperation are expected to be signed soon. Customs cooperation and trade facilitation agreements are being negotiated to remove non-tariff barriers. Although the BIMSTEC Economic Forum and BIMSTEC Business Forum were established to promote partnerships between governments and the private sector, the former has been passive since 2011 and the latter since 2016.¹⁴

BIMSTEC is not a substitute but an addition to the existing platforms. This is why the FTA must not duplicate or contradict existing or proposed bilateral, regional and multilateral agreements, and must incorporate the spirit of these trade agreements.

Limitations and Opportunities

In 2017, the average tariff rate in intra-regional trade in South Asia was 6.8 percent, which was higher than in ASEAN (2.7 percent), Latin America (1.1 percent), Sub-Saharan Africa (3.1 percent), transition economies (0.4 percent), and West Asia and North Africa (1.9 percent).¹⁵ Non-tariff barriers and issues such as a lack of connectivity and infrastructure, high transaction costs, complex customs procedures and huge informal cross-border trade are obstacles to smooth intra-regional trade. Various domestic compulsions have also prolonged the trade negotiations. The BIMSTEC tariff reduction list is wider than other agreements, and some member states appear to be apprehensive of losing customs revenue and significant harm to domestic industries if the FTA is implemented.¹⁶

There are many opportunities to prosper together in the BIMSTEC region. Deeper regional trade and connectivity will reduce the isolation of India's northeastern states and the two landlocked BIMSTEC countries (Bhutan and Nepal) since they will benefit from a reduction in transaction costs among the other countries. Businesses in the region can also benefit from better access to markets in South and Southeast Asia, and can create regional value chains through small and medium enterprises that integrate in the global value chains. In addition, free trade reduces monopoly, lowers prices, and increases economic efficiency. The informal trade can be diverted to official channels and bring revenue and other benefits with the barrier-free trade provisions.

Tariffs are no longer the major barrier to intra-regional trade, but the cost and time to trade remain relatively high.¹⁷ Tariffs have reduced as a result of global, regional and bilateral agreements, and no longer appear to be the major barrier to trade in BIMSTEC. Instead, it is the non-tariff barriers that are the main cause for dismal intra-regional trade in the region.¹⁸ The FTA will grant all BIMSTEC member states greater market access since it connects South Asia, one of the least economically integrated regions, and Southeast Asia, one of the most integrated regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the need to develop an uninterrupted supply chain for food, medicines and other basic essential commodities. With the global supply chain severely disrupted as a result of the pandemic, there is an opportunity for more intra-regional trade among the BIMSTEC countries. To seize this opportunity, member states should agree on some trade facilitation measures, including the simplification of customs procedures, the introduction of electronic tracking system for cross-border container movement, and the acceptance of electronic versions of export-import related documents. They should also conclude the pending BIMSTEC FTA and BIMSTEC Customs Cooperation Agreement to increase the volume of intra-regional trade. Trade facilitation measures need to be accompanied by efficient transport connectivity to ensure the easy movement of goods and people. Renewed emphasis will be needed to develop a resilient regional transport connectivity system capable of withstanding future disruptions. In this milieu, BIMSTEC member states should consider harnessing the unexploited potential of intra-regional trade to speed up their recovery from the pandemic.¹⁹

Conclusion

Trade engagement among the BIMSTEC member states remains low. The BIMSTEC FTA can serve to increase trade volumes. The BIMSTEC member states need to reduce non-tariff barriers through trade facilitation and custom cooperation agreements. Enhanced connectivity through the motor vehicles and coastal shipping agreements will reduce trade costs. In addition, the BIMSTEC member states can mobilise economic diplomacy to attract FDI and promote export trade. They can also explore new source of financing and promote small and medium enterprises. The countries must eliminate negative lists gradually, simplify trade procedures and reform the visa regimes to create a trade-friendly environment in the region.

At the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit in 2018, the countries called for the early conclusion of the FTA negotiations, and directed the BIMSTEC Trade and Economic Ministerial Meeting and its subsidiary bodies, including the TNC, to expedite the finalisation of the deal. The member states must now match their words with action.

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Rethinking Enhanced Trade Within BIMSTEC: An ASEAN Perspective

Suthiphand Chirathivat

The Mediterranean Sea and the Bay of Bengal are among the oldest waterways in the world, and are vital lanes for trade, tradition and the exchange of ideas and civilisation.¹ However, the Bay of Bengal is less known than the Mediterranean, despite having modern states in its littoral periphery such as India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia, and Indonesia's Sumatra.

To encourage successful regional cooperation through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a deep understanding of the region is needed, which was largely disconnected during the era of western colonialism. With a focus on preserving independence, spurring economic development and regional governance, India and many Southeast Asian states have cooperated with the West.²

Trade is an important parameter to showcase how the BIMSTEC countries are coming together for regional cooperation. It took Southeast Asia many years to develop intra-regional trade to the current levels through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). BIMSTEC has lessons to learn from the ASEAN experience.

Changing Landscape

The global economy was already experiencing a synchronised slowdown even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.³ Trade tensions, particularly between the US and China, had caused global manufacturing and investment activities to weaken substantially. The pandemic has compounded the far-reaching impacts and implications for economies and trade across the globe. While countries might continue to lockdown their borders, the pandemic is also presenting more challenges, such as anti-globalisation and anti-multilateralism, which could distort global supply chains or derail the technological emergence of new value chains. In such a scenario, it will not be easy for countries to collaborate and partner with each other to strengthen and protect multilateralism to ensure a more inclusive, responsive and participatory international governance architecture.

This provides a strong impetus to rethink BIMSTEC's trade and regional cooperation to move forward. BIMSTEC could take a new shape, going beyond past inertia and obstacles. Amid the changing global political economy and the lingering effects of COVID-19, an evolved BIMSTEC should go beyond the national interests of its member states to build a more meaningful regional cooperation. The BIMSTEC must find a way to fulfil its ambition to boost regional cooperation and integrate with the changing global order, for which a more constructive regionalised approach is needed.

Trade and Production at a New Crossroad

Weakened global economy and multilateralism offer a strong appetite and opportunities for BIMSTEC countries, which have a sizable population of almost 1.7 billion and combined gross domestic product of US\$3.8 trillion,⁴ to come closer together. But the member countries will have to recommit to long-term 'Bay of Bengal community building' based on the principle of 'geographic neighbourhood,' with openness, connectivity,

inclusivity and sustainability. BIMSTEC must integrate regionally and globally, based on each country's comparative advantages. But the reality of BIMSTEC cooperation is far from its potential.

India, the biggest economy in the grouping, is still trying to develop its manufacturing sector and to link it to global and regional value chains, with limited results. Without boosting its manufacturing sector, it will be difficult for India to develop into a service- or tech-based economy. Despite having a world-class garment manufacturing sector, Bangladesh seems to be caught with red-tapeism and enacting reforms to attract investment to diversify beyond apparels. And Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, despite a concerted, whole-of-government push to boost trade and investment levels, have not yet been able to create a suitable domestic environment for manufacturers. Myanmar, which joined ASEAN in the late 1990s, is still far behind other countries in the grouping in terms of attracting manufacturing investment and creating value chains, despite its geographical closeness to BIMSTEC countries. Only Thailand, the second largest ASEAN economy, has successfully embarked on a pathway to long-lasting broad-based prosperity by building on a manufacturing sector linked to global and regional value chains. However, the country is yet to develop on the technological and digital ladder. Nonetheless, it still has little linkages to the BIMSTEC region as far as its production base is concerned. Thailand's intra-regional trade within ASEAN is far greater than its intra-regional trade within BIMSTEC. Interestingly, Thailand's trade with China alone is equivalent to ASEAN-India trade in 2019.⁵ This showcases the importance of intra-regional trade and production linkages.

BIMSTEC countries must liberalise and facilitate trade and production, and enact institutional reforms and border controls. This year should mark a starting point for BIMSTEC. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increased focus by policymakers and businessmen on securing a 'one-main-source' supply scenario, amid rising tensions between China and many other countries, should lead to a rethinking on better connected and diversified local supply hubs. This represents a great opportunity for the BIMSTEC countries to capitalise on the changing

landscape, much like some ASEAN countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam) witnessed earlier with the relocation of supply chains from China amid US-China trade tensions before the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ The Bay of Bengal region should take steps to highlight and attract technology companies that lacked buffers to absorb disruption, moving supply chains away from China or elsewhere to the region.

Businesses could potentially move closer to customers by adding local and new regional supply chains, like BIMSTEC, into their calculation to create a less concentrated but better-balanced business model against future shocks and crises. The digital transformation of global supply chains has become far more complicated and sophisticated, such that the BIMSTEC grouping must figure out on how to reposition a tangle of manufacturers, subcontractors, distributors and logistics handling agents who are responsible for making the final production and transaction a reality.

Integrating Trade and Production Within BIMSTEC

With intra-BIMSTEC trade currently accounting for 5 percent of its global trade⁷ (amid the post-COVID-19 scenario), the grouping must consider settling for a limited free trade agreement (FTA), the first step to expand trade, rather than having no deal at all. The grouping could simplify the rules of origin and strengthen its implementation with time. It must also target non-tariff barriers consistently with trade facilitation on border controls, mutual recognition of national standards, harmonisation and development of common standards, and the identification and targeted exploration of existing value chains across the region.

Beyond the FTA, greater improvements and investment in infrastructure, both inland and maritime, to support regional trade will be necessary to overcome bottlenecks and limitations of size and geography.⁸ Engaging the private sector and other-related stakeholders is necessary for the creation of multipartite platforms, facilitating them to be real actors in the BIMSTEC region. A BIMSTEC Connectivity Master Plan should also be launched as soon as possible to support the free trade framework.

Trade frictions in a weakened global economy should lead to long-lasting changes that benefit the BIMSTEC economies. Unless the grouping acts, the region will squander another important opportunity to attract global and regional investment that is seeking an alternative to secure global value chains. India and Thailand, for instance, are well positioned to capitalise on current trade uncertainties by offering relocation incentives to lure global investment. These countries could take a leadership role to work with other BIMSTEC states to create a regional value chain hub.⁹ For inspiration, the BIMSTEC must look towards the ASEAN, which took many years to ink a trade deal, develop an economic community and deepen regional integration.

New Horizons and Way Forward

New trends exacerbated by COVID-19 shocks, such as rethinking supply chains security, policy shifts toward more economic nationalism and accelerated digitalisation in a wide range of sectors, will have far reaching consequences for international production over the next decade.¹⁰ There could be economic and social disruption, and risks, uncertainties and transformations amid the ‘new normal’, which the BIMSTEC should not take lightly. The grouping needs time to adjust to the new reality, and should use this time to revive the region’s historical linkages as a strategic ‘geographic neighbourhood’.

BIMSTEC is not alone in its soul searching for sub-regional building.¹¹ The failure of regional organisations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has meant India has made a consistent effort with ASEAN over the years, to strengthen its partnership with that grouping through efforts like Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and the recent turn towards the Indo-Pacific.

BIMSTEC must understand ASEAN’s past response to link India and other South Asian countries, which is also necessary to look beyond East Asia and at China’s rising influence, Japan’s former crucial role, or even the middle role played by South Korea in Southeast Asia. BIMSTEC offers Thailand and Myanmar, both ASEAN members, a perfect

opportunity to connect to the Bay of Bengal region. For Thailand and Myanmar, BIMSTEC is the crucial link to the east of South Asia through maritime and land connectivity and security. Additionally, there is the real possibility of multiregional cooperation with ASEAN and the Bay of Bengal, making BIMSTEC an attractive extending platform.

BIMSTEC must seize the moment and show tangible targets and results through an increased focus on crucial areas of cooperation—trade and investment, connectivity, energy, people-to-people exchanges, counterterrorism and the Blue Economy—alongside the enhanced institutional capacity of its secretariat. BIMSTEC must stamp out an FTA, even if it is limited in scope. The Thailand-proposed “Connecting the Connectivities” for ASEAN¹² could also serve well for BIMSTEC, much like the pending BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement, which aims to connect BIMSTEC members through a network of ports running in the Bay of Bengal, amid other attempts to connect the region.¹³

The region is also rich in maritime and territorial biodiversity. The whole BIMSTEC area offers a great chance to produce and trade products and services that cater to the wellness of the people. In addition, cross-border e-commerce and digital transformation can be carefully exploited in ways that are suitable, inclusive and sustainable for economies, people and societies. BIMSTEC trade and development should be linked to improving social justice and equality and environmental conditions in whichever way the grouping decides to move forward to boost regional cooperation and integration.

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Trade and Investment in BIMSTEC: Challenges and Opportunities

Nilanjan Ghosh

The last few years have seen a sudden spurt in mentions of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), an international organisation of seven South and Southeast Asian nations (Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand) in various policy discussions. This marks a clear departure from the nearly two-decade-long slumber since the formation of the institution in 1997. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, two major geopolitical forces were seen as the enabling factor for the sudden rise in BIMSTEC's importance—first, a need for an alternate institutional mechanism due to uncertainty in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation resulting from aggravation in India-Pakistan relations; and second, the ascendance of China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹ However, with COVID-19 and the consequent lockdowns crippling the global economy, BIMSTEC, as a regional grouping, must be evaluated from a different perspective in light of ways in which regionalism will be looked at.

BIMSTEC is rife with challenges and opportunities, none of which have featured in academic and policy debates.² These challenges can be placed under four heads:³ reactive regionalism as against proactive regionalism (when proactive regionalism would have entailed tapping untapped opportunities through cooperation or joint endeavours); ascendance of China and its “market imperialistic” designs of BRI that

loom large across the region in the context of India's souring relations with the former; bigger member-nations' lack of manoeuvrability with domestic policies for broader regional goals that become a stiff challenge in a federal democracy like India; and combatting the threats of global warming and climate change in the Bay.⁴ However, there is a fifth force of threat that has emerged recently—the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is a new challenge to regionalism, with borders getting sealed and economies getting insulated. Nevertheless, trade and investment within the BIMSTEC bloc is a critical force in enabling regionalism and regional development.

BIMSTEC FTA: Opportunities Galore

Since 2004, there have been discussions on a BIMSTEC free trade agreement (FTA). Talks essentially entailed domains of tariff concessions on goods trade, minimising non-tariff barriers through customs cooperation, trade in services, creating enabling investment conditions through cooperation, and establishing dispute resolution mechanisms. That there are great opportunities for the enhancement of intra-regional trade is evident from the fact that it is still low despite the region's increasing purchasing power, spurred by high gross domestic product growth rates and the high percentage of youth in the regional population. Yet, limited production capacities due to technology constraints, low labour productivity, and the dominance of low-technology tradable items, have restricted trade to a few product categories. However, there is a sizeable amount of informal trade that is not reflected in trade statistics.⁵

Table 1 is an exposition of the intra-regional trade intensity index among the BIMSTEC members. The trade intensity index is defined as

$$T_{ij} = X_{ij}/X_{it} \div X_{wj}/X_{wt}$$

where T_{ij} is the trade intensity index, X_{ij} and X_{wj} represent the values of country i 's exports and of world exports to country j , and where X_{it} and X_{wt} are country i 's total exports and total world exports, respectively. An index of more (or less) than one indicates a bilateral trade flow that is

larger (or smaller) than expected, given the partner country's importance in world trade. In other words, while measuring the ratio of a country or region's trade share to the share of world trade with a partner, the trade intensity index also indicates the potential for trade growth when the ratio is less than unity.

Table 1: Trade intensity index of member countries within the regional bloc

Year	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Myanmar	Nepal	Sri Lanka	Thailand
2004	4.97	35.68	1.67	15.32	26.50	6.70	1.07
2005	4.58	34.78	1.45	16.18	26.08	7.40	1.08
2006	3.96	30.02	1.30	17.40	25.34	6.99	1.12
2007	4.11	30.32	1.25	14.74	24.24	7.43	1.12
2008	4.13	29.60	1.00	14.47	21.63	5.98	1.11
2009	3.38	28.49	0.93	14.09	19.60	4.83	1.17
2010	3.41	23.99	0.89	11.87	19.44	5.05	1.01
2011	3.28	22.00	0.87	9.05	18.68	5.52	1.04
2012	3.01	23.80	0.88	10.03	18.47	4.95	0.98
2013	2.95	24.77	0.96	8.06	18.25	4.11	1.05
2014	3.00	25.04	1.11	6.83	18.40	4.86	1.12
2015	2.74	24.30	1.16	6.35	16.89	6.16	1.12
2016	2.74	25.56	1.20	6.35	18.18	4.77	1.06
2017	3.05	24.18	1.11	5.32	17.32	4.96	1.10

Source: Economic Research and Regional Cooperation Department (ERCD), Asian Development Bank (as cited in Basu and Ghosh 2020)

Table 2: Trade share of BIMSTEC with the world

BIMSTEC trade share with world	
Year	Trade Share
2004	4.91
2005	4.77
2006	4.74
2007	4.89
2008	4.66
2009	4.82
2010	4.74
2011	4.74
2012	4.78
2013	4.98
2014	5.56
2015	5.89
2016	6.00
2017	6.00

Source: Economic Research and Regional Cooperation Department (ERCD), Asian Development Bank

The smaller BIMSTEC partners (Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar) have a very high trade intensity index within the regional bloc, indicating their high levels of trade dependency within the region. The same is much lower for India and Thailand, as they have large trade exposures with countries outside the bloc. Further, as indicated by Table 2, BIMSTEC's trade share with the world is not substantial. In any case, a very high trade intensity index of the smaller nations and a greater than unity trade intensity index for most years for India and Thailand indicate that a BIMSTEC FTA can prove beneficial for the region.

This inference can be drawn even though the FTA will not be an unmixed blessing and will have variable results with disproportionate benefits for member countries. However, keeping with the axiom of monotonicity of

trade-welfare function, some estimates suggest that the BIMSTEC FTA will generate employment and help in poverty alleviation in the region.⁶

BIMSTEC FTA and RCEP

The BIMSTEC FTA is significant for India given that it has withdrawn from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations for many reasons. First is the presence of China, for which the RCEP fits well in its market imperialistic designs. The recent souring of ties between the two countries over the COVID-19 pandemic and tensions at the border have triggered protectionist responses from India through the creation of trade, investment and market barriers.

Second, India already has an FTA with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and bilateral FTAs with many of Southeast Asian nations. This has been associated with a rise in bilateral trade deficits for India. The bilateral trade deficits have also been rising even with countries like Australia and New Zealand, with whom India does not have FTAs. Both these points indicate that the RCEP will provide other countries with smoother access to the Indian markets rather than helping the Indian cause, despite claims that it would help Indian micro, small and medium enterprises fit into the ASEAN manufacturing value chain. But there are strong counterarguments against such claims.⁷

Third, most of the RCEP partners have a higher rank than India in terms of the ease-of-doing-business index, except for Cambodia, Laos and the Philippines. India has among the lowest manufacturing productivity and transaction costs of doing business are still high due to compliance costs of irrationalised GST and labour laws, both of which need further reform.⁸ In that sense, the RCEP partners are in better positions than India to attract investment.

However, these factors do not exist for BIMSTEC. There is enough reason for India to take a leadership role in the context of creating a BIMSTEC free trade area, where essentially even joint endeavours need to be taken to create a better investment climate. What seems to be pulling India back

is the belief that there may not be much for it to gain from a BIMSTEC FTA since it is already a major player in regional trade. India's response, therefore, has been a bit lukewarm and slow but not deterring.⁹

Priorities for BIMSTEC Amid COVID-19

BIMSTEC's priority should be to create a bloc with enabling conditions for investment and business. It should not be confined to trade promotion only. In India, the 'Make in India' initiative has been made to work through "competitive federalism" among the Indian states, with the apparent objective to improve the country's rank in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business ranking. However, there are several problems associated with the World Bank-Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade metric of Ease of Doing Business,¹⁰ including that most of the indicators considered in the ranking are related to broader reforms, without any semblance to ground realities. Recent research has suggested that the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are major enablers of business competitiveness.¹¹ While addressing the SDGs, critical input and output market conditions can be ameliorated. This is because four critical types of potentially available capital—physical, natural, social and human—that are critical inputs for businesses to thrive are embedded in the SDGs. SDGs 1-5 are factors of human capital (reflecting on poverty, hunger, health, education and gender equality), SDGs 8 and 9 are factors of physical capital, SDGs 14 and 15 (life below water and land, respectively) reflect on natural capital, while social capital in the forms of social and institutional variables are reflected by SDGs 10 and 16. The SDG index developed in the study is an enabling explanatory factor for the Ease-of-Doing-Business Index developed by the Asian Competitiveness Institute. The study also indicated that financial capital is drawn towards those destinations where enabling business conditions are already created through the prevalence of the four types of capital.

What are the implications of such results for BIMSTEC at a time when the world economy is reeling under the impacts of the pandemic? The short-run impacts on the global and regional economies will be as negative as expected. The global economy is witnessing rising

protectionism, and a more severe impact is already being seen on labour movements. With stricter immigration rules prevailing in many parts of the developed world, the BIMSTEC countries that have provided ‘skilled human capital’ to the developed world might seem to be at the losing end.

Growth drivers look set to change organically. While there remains a high possibility that growth may be spurred from the digital space, mostly from services, there may also be a simultaneous slump in traditional manufacturing. The service sector in the BIMSTEC area has grown organically, is slated to be the region’s growth-engine and is the cornerstone for a comparative advantage in trade with the external world. There remains a great opportunity to exploit the regional value-chain within BIMSTEC. A recent policy paper suggests that with the value added trade dynamics of Thailand and India, other BIMSTEC countries can be integrated not only through backward linkages, but can also participate in global commodity and service value chains.¹² However, the biggest challenge for BIMSTEC will be to place the major component of the services sector, which remains unorganised, informal and has a limited reach, in the digital space.

On the other hand, China is no longer a trusted destination for investment in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. Capital and investment have already begun exiting from China, creating a huge opportunity for BIMSTEC if it can present itself as an investment bloc. BIMSTEC countries like India and Thailand are already emerging as preferred destinations for investment. BIMSTEC has all four factors of business—human capital, social capital, natural capital and an improving physical capital—in abundance. The smaller nations in BIMSTEC have been relatively less explored for investment, although they have a massive natural capital base, such as water resources, forests and mines. The BIMSTEC region’s social capital (its rich culture and tradition) should be noted. More importantly, BIMSTEC has a huge human capital base, with around 50 percent of the population below the age of 25 and more than 60 percent of the population in the 15-65 years working age group. All these factors create the ground level conditions for an enabling business environment.

Conclusion

The potential to achieve better outcomes for regional development will increase manifold if the member countries collectively present BIMSTEC as a destination for trade and investment. But can such a commitment be taken up at the level of the BIMSTEC platform? A common platform helps in pooling resources, whether it is human or physical capital. This will also help in reducing the “transaction costs” of doing business.¹³ It is also important for the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative to be operational for BIMSTEC to be successful.¹⁴

A better investment climate and congenial business environment in the BIMSTEC region will only be possible when individual members agree to act collectively as a bloc towards achieving the SDGs. The current pandemic has created an opportunity to focus on equity, distribution and the welfare state, as suggested by Amartya Sen.¹⁵ This will help in promoting human capital and reduce the social transaction costs, thereby helping the cause of businesses. The International Monetary Fund, on the other hand, has been stressing on the need for uninterrupted trade mechanisms to promote global growth. Therefore, the BIMSTEC imperatives should lie on promoting the region as a preferred destination for investments by reducing the transaction costs for business and trade, and for smooth access to human, natural, social and physical capitals by working on the SDGs.

About the author

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SECTION 7

THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Bay of Bengal in the Emerging Indo-Pacific

C. Raja Mohan

Abstract

This essay looks beyond the institutional dimension of the BIMSTEC forum, which was set up in the late 1990s and is now the focus of renewed political attention, especially in India. It analyses the growing strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal region, the geographic focus of the BIMSTEC initiative, within the new and increasingly contested geography of the Indo-Pacific. Structured in three parts, this chapter examines the historic evolution of the littoral, its historic location at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, and the unfolding challenges to regionalism in the Bay of Bengal.

Historic Evolution

Geographically, the Bay of Bengal is a placid sea, but for the seasonal cyclones that disturb life in the littoral. It is almost a closed sea with just three countries bordering its northern reaches—Burma, Bangladesh and India. The northern waters of the Bay are also far from the main sea lines of communication. The region has not seen any serious great power rivalries or major conflicts in the recent past. However, it is poised to become, once again, a zone of geopolitical rivalry. But first to the past.

Throughout the ancient times, the Bay of Bengal was the natural connector between the subcontinent and the abutting regions to the east, right up to the southern coast of China. There was extensive movement of people, goods and ideas across the Bay of Bengal, which enriched the civilisations along this littoral, for instance, the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, followed later by Islam. The trading communities along the subcontinent's coast were instrumental in this movement. With the rise of European capitalism and the revolution in maritime capabilities, distant powers gained dominance in the littoral. Intense competition amongst the European powers—France, Britain, Russia, Austria, Hungary, Germany (then Prussia)—for the resources and markets of the region eventually led to the colonisation of the Bay of Bengal territories and beyond. The rivalries among the European great powers ended after the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century with the triumph of Great Britain. The Dutch and French rivals accepted the British primacy, and the geopolitical accommodations made amongst them endured until the middle of the 20th century. The rise of Japan in the early 20th century as a great power and the growth of Asian nationalism helped unravel the European imperial project in Asia. The 19th century, however, saw the political and administrative integration of the subcontinent into a coherent territorial entity under the British Raj. This, in turn, allowed the more purposeful political and strategic direction of the subcontinent's massive material and manpower resources.

The primacy of the Raj in the littoral was threatened briefly during the First World War, when the German cruiser *Emden* spread mayhem in the waters of the Bay of Bengal. That brief interlude presaged the kind of challenges that would eventually undo the Raj. During the Second World War, a rising Japan ousted Britain from Malaya and Burma—reaching the eastern land gates of the Raj, occupying the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and setting up a provisional Indian government in Port Blair. The Raj needed all the resources of the Subcontinent and assistance from afar to reverse the Japanese occupation of South-East Asia and its ingress towards India. If the Indian Army swelled to more

than two million soldiers in the Second World War, nearly 800,000 troops had to be deployed to the so-called Burma-China-India (BCI) theatre.

The Allied triumph in the Bay of Bengal at great cost and the enormous sacrifices of the people of the Subcontinent faded from the memory amidst the region's shifting power alignment, the wave of decolonisation, and major internal changes in some of the key littoral nations. The massive battles in the BCI theatre are now called the “forgotten war.” The Bay of Bengal did not return to its status as the British lake and simply disappeared from the geopolitical and geoeconomic view in the second half of the 20th century. It was only at the turn of the 21st century that the Bay regained some strategic salience.

The Indo-Pacific Junction

The decline in the importance of the Bay of Bengal was based largely on three factors rooted in the internal politics of the littoral.

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The partition of the subcontinent, resulting in the fragmentation of the region's energies. Undivided India had played a key role in shaping the politics of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific in the 19th century. Following Partition, the country became focused on coping with internal conflicts. If the military energies of the Raj were focused outward, the exertions of its successor states were directed at each other. This tragic turn was further complicated by the impact of the Cold War.

India's refusal to partner with Great Britain and the West in shaping the post-war regional order. India's determination to pursue a non-aligned foreign policy meant that Delhi would have nothing to do with the new security arrangements, e.g. the Cold War alliances such as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Without the “India Centre,” which provided the basis for regional security until the middle of the 20th century, these institutions could not survive the vicissitudes of post-Cold-War regional politics in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Moreover, since the

geopolitical contestation during the Cold War was focused on Central Europe and North-East Asia, the waters of the Indian Ocean became less critical for the Great Powers.

The choice most littoral nations made on economic orientation.

As the ideas of economic autarky gained ground in South and South-East Asia after the Second World War, the commercial significance of the Bay of Bengal began to diminish. Partition erected new borders within the subcontinent, and the emphasis on economic self-reliance set up high commercial fences along these borders. The fascination with “socialism in one country” within the subcontinent resulted in the disruption of multiple trade and financial links that were forged during the globalisation of the region under the Raj. However, the South-East Asian nations changed course in the 1970s by abandoning state socialism and reconnecting with the global markets. Nevertheless, with the subcontinent persisting in its isolationist ways, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) had no reason to look west to the Bay of Bengal.

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The situation began to change at the turn to the 21st century. India’s economic reforms launched in the 1990s began to produce substantive growth by the turn of the new millennium. Other countries in the region, too, have embarked on upward trajectories, especially Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, making South Asia the fastest-growing region in the 21st century. The opening up of Burma across the littoral and its integration into South-East Asian structures has provided the basis for overland and maritime links in the Bay of Bengal.

Meanwhile, major powers began to show interest in the Bay of Bengal littoral. China, for example, has long sought ocean access for its south-western provinces such as Tibet and Yunnan. The Bay of Bengal remains the closest sea to these two provinces. As part of its West Region Development Strategy announced in 2000, Beijing has promoted connectivity within and across China for these provinces. These projects include building new road and rail corridors and trans-border energy pipelines. China has also developed new institutional

mechanisms such as the “Kunming Initiative” to promote regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal littoral. Complementing the search for overland connectivity, has been the growing significance of the southern waters of the Bay of Bengal that host the growing maritime traffic from China to the Indian Ocean through the Malacca straits. Fears of vulnerability of its Sea Lines of Communication have seen Beijing put greater stress on naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

China is not the only country dependent on the Malacca Straits for energy and commerce. The other leading economies in the east, i.e. Korea and Japan, are deeply dependent on the few channels connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Japan, which had historic links to Burma and has invested in the modernisation of South-East Asian infrastructure, is now keen on promoting subregional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal. Meanwhile, India’s growing commercial engagement with East Asian countries has raised Delhi’s stakes in the partnership with the region. The oil-producing countries of the Gulf and the mineral-rich African states, which had traditionally looked to the West, are now looking east to India and China.

This general integration has helped break the traditional tendency to view the Indian and Pacific Oceans as different worlds. The United States that had long dominated both the oceans had surprisingly seen these spaces as unconnected in the past. Today, amidst the growing strategic integration of the two regions, Washington has seemingly accepted the new terminology “Indo-Pacific,” or the “Indo-Asia Pacific.” Like China, Japan and India, it is also putting emphasis on the idea of connectivity and corridors across the Indo-Pacific. China has talked about the Belt and Road initiative; Japan has promoted the idea of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” and offered its own “Partnership for Quality Infrastructure,” and the US has discussed an Indo-Pacific Corridor stretching from the east coast of Africa to the western Pacific. All three major powers have also acknowledged the importance of multilateral cooperation in the promotion of these corridors.

Regionalism and Rivalry

As the new spatial concept of the Indo-Pacific gains traction, the Bay of Bengal is emerging as geographically central. Coupled with the new outward orientation of the littoral and its rapid economic growth, the region is overcoming its fragmentation in the second half of the 20th century and finding ways to reconnect. Fortunately, the littoral has not had the kind of intense territorial disputes that have roiled the waters in the adjacent waters of the South China Sea. Moreover, Dhaka's initiative has addressed the maritime territorial disputes between India, Bangladesh and Burma through international arbitration, fostering a positive environment for building a regional community in the Bay of Bengal. This opportune moment, however, appears to be slipping away amidst the renewed rivalry among the major powers and the competing visions of regionalism.

There is great potential for linking the disconnected spaces of Western China, Eastern India, northern Burma, and the archipelagic territories in the Bay of Bengal and adjacent waters. However, this potential is matched by the possibility of growing political mistrust and strategic tensions in the region. The unprecedented opportunity for the economic transformation of the littoral is coming under the dark shadow of geopolitical rivalry—between the US and China and between Beijing and Delhi. As the rivalries acquire a naval dimension in the Bay of Bengal, mutual trust is beginning to grow.

Second, until a couple of years ago, it was possible to visualise the complementarity between multiple initiatives for regional infrastructural development from China, India and Japan. Today these are increasingly seen as competitive. Although the abundance of regional connectivity increases the options for the littoral, the political overload from major power rivalry is casting a dark shadow over the littoral.

Third, the prospects for regionalism in the last many decades were boosted by widespread international consensus on economic globalisation. As trade wars between major powers begin to take root, there is the growing danger of regional economic fragmentation. Finally, the geopolitical and geo-economic rivalries are putting many regional institutions, which have been around for long, under stress. This could make it even harder for weaker institutions like BIMSTEC. All efforts from New Delhi to promote regionalism in Bay of Bengal, therefore, must begin by making India an attractive economic and security partner for other littoral countries.

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BIMSTEC's Future within the Geostrategic Narrative of the 'Indo-Pacific'

Gareth Price

In recent years, the Bay of Bengal, in the eastern Indian Ocean, has become central to the emerging conception of the Indo-Pacific. This has urged a discussion on further expanding BIMSTEC. However, considering the disparities in size, threat perceptions, and economic heft between the member states, the grouping must first focus on more parochial, mutually beneficial “successes,” whether geographically or into a more politically minded bloc.

The most successful military alliance in the recent past has been the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), its members brought together by a shared belief in liberal democracy and, more importantly, a clear and present threat to those values in the form of the Soviet Union. BIMSTEC's members share similar political systems; do they have a shared threat? As recent clashes between Indian and Chinese troops in the Himalayas demonstrated, the tension between India and China is both real and current, and India shares with the US, and several countries in the South China Sea, similar concerns about China's intentions, both immediately and in the long term. However, other members have different approaches and several are willing to benefit from Chinese investment. Since smaller countries have been long used to navigating between great-power machinations, they view the seemingly inevitable rise of China not as a threat but as either a challenge to be surmounted or an opportunity to be taken.

Asia has many regional groupings, with most sharing common challenges. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is perhaps the most extreme example. While SAARC was established at a time of relative goodwill between India and Pakistan, the two countries had far from sorted their fundamental disagreements. Thus, this attempt to recreate the European Union (EU) in South Asia was doomed from the start. Consequently, since around 2016, SAARC has effectively been put in abeyance.

The history of the EU, however, holds lessons for other organisations, including BIMSTEC. Notably, the EU emerged from the European Coal and Steel Community. Its visionary founders saw coal and steel as areas where cooperation could prove its worth, in turn encouraging countries to invest their time and effort in developing further areas where cooperation could be mutually beneficial. The EU is exemplary of how proving the worth of international cooperation is a necessary precondition for strengthening political cooperation.

This reframes the challenge for BIMSTEC. If it is to evolve into a geostrategic reality, what would be its equivalent to the EU's coal and steel? It is worth adding a caveat here. At both regional and global levels, there are various challenges and opportunities. Even as the world is becoming increasingly fragmented, dealing with global challenges is best done at a global rather than regional level. The lack of a global response to the COVID-19 crisis is an obvious case in point. At the regional level, however, BIMSTEC must find a unique selling point with regard to the issues it chooses to address. This need is intensified by the fact that Myanmar and Thailand are members of ASEAN, which, while not without its critics, certainly offers a stronger regional sense of purpose. Thus, it is important to factor in the capacity constraints of the officials of BIMSTEC member states to understand whether their time would be best served by focusing on BIMSTEC, instead of other regional or global organisations.

A few years ago, when power cuts due to load-shedding was a frequent occurrence, the idea of a regional electricity grid would have seemed fanciful. However, such a grid is now slowly emerging amongst the BBIN countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal). Thus, mutual benefit (e.g. through trade in goods or power) should serve to build trust, and there are countless examples where it has done exactly that. In this context, India is by far the largest country in BIMSTEC. This is problematic, since smaller countries frequently do not see “mutual benefit” in engagements with larger neighbours. They see it instead as reliance and, therefore, vulnerability. The emergence of a (kind of) BBIN grid demonstrates how to gradually increase engagement and, with India as both an upstream and downstream neighbour, build trust. Extending energy connectivity across BIMSTEC would provide significant impetus to the organisation’s trajectory.

A further caveat for BIMSTEC would be to note that there are regional sensitivities between its member states. For instance, finding a solution for the Rohingya crisis—perhaps by providing a friendly forum for discussions between Bangladesh and Myanmar—would help the grouping’s case immensely. However, it seems unlikely that Myanmar would accede to such a proposal. Man-made disasters are frequently too sensitive for regional organisations, certainly those intent on exercising and demonstrating their “sovereignty.”

To some extent, BIMSTEC’s USP lies in its name: the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. The Indian Ocean is one of the world’s least governed spaces. As an integral part of that, could BIMSTEC members formulate a set of rules to govern maritime activities in the Bay of Bengal and manage the challenges emanating from its waters?

One such challenge is the occurrence of cyclones in the Bay of Bengal. While models vary on their likely frequency due to climate change, most projections expect an increase in both frequency and intensity. This presents a threat to each of the littoral states, as well as Nepal and Bhutan. Given the nations’ divergent levels of preparedness for cyclones

and other climate-change-related threats, this could well be the closest equivalent to coal and steel in Europe in the 1950s.

BIMSTEC's members are highly vulnerable to climate change in general. Climate change spurs different but simultaneous crises. For instance, COVID-19 can be linked to habitat destruction—not only fuelling climate change but also forcing animals to flee their natural environment. Prior to the pandemic hitting India, a plague of locusts appeared from West Asia. This, too, can be linked with climate change. Improving resilience to disasters such as cyclones, locusts, and pandemics would help BIMSTEC gain relevance amongst the member states.

Equally important are people-to-people exchanges. To take a contemporary example, the US' support for India in its dispute with China was undermined by the simultaneous decision to cut Indian workers' access to employment. Any successful strategic cooperation must be underpinned by genuine friendship. If BIMSTEC is to evolve into a meaningful organisation, it will require respect between its member states, since internal disputes or conflict can scupper aspirations for greater cooperation.

While climate change and related disasters present the most obvious shared challenge, BIMSTEC could also position itself as the bridge between the slowly converging BBIN countries and ASEAN, implementing India's longstanding Look/Act East Policies. The success is likely to be determined by (a) the extent to which China attempts to influence the opposition and (b) whether Chinese assertiveness drives South and South-East Asia closer.

Until a couple of years ago, continued co-existence—with India and Japan outliers—would have seemed the most likely outcome. However, since China stepped into the space ceded by the US, asserting itself more aggressively in its neighbourhood, the likelihood of a regional response has grown. Were BIMSTEC to provide the forum for a South–South-East Asia discussion on coping with China's rise, its initial success will demonstrate the organisation's long-term effectiveness.

In the Bay of Bengal, over-fishing is a serious challenge (as also elsewhere in the Indian Ocean). This creates challenges for the livelihood of fishers and, in the longer-term, threatens food security for those communities in which fish forms a significant part of the diet. Moreover, it will have dire consequences for the ocean ecosystems as well. At present, fishers from several BIMSTEC countries are imprisoned in other BIMSTEC member states. While Bangladesh, India and Myanmar have agreed on their Exclusive Economic Zones, fishers have repeatedly failed to abide by them, and clashes have become common. Moreover, conserving the stocks of migratory fish requires international cooperation, which has substantial scope for improvement. While Chinese targeting of Vietnamese fishing boats makes headlines, the sinking of smaller boats in the Indian Ocean receives less coverage.

Even as BIMSTEC members compete over fishing, these nations are also threatened by large trawlers from outside of the region, particularly from China. In the future, if BIMSTEC morphs into a platform for geostrategic discussion, forging a common position, or standard operating procedures, for their fishers would be a good place to start. This would strengthen the negotiating position of BIMSTEC nations in the event of a confrontation with China on overfishing. Successfully “resolving” the issue of fishers’ rights in the Bay of Bengal could become a template for BIMSTEC, to be up-scaled for the wider Indian Ocean Region.

Whether BIMSTEC follows the trajectory of ASEAN or SAARC is up to its member states. Several potential pathways are available, and BIMSTEC has the opportunity to collaborate or coordinate with other efforts seeking to deal with particular challenges, e.g. natural disasters, climate change or overfishing. If BIMSTEC can demonstrate its utility, in time, it could become the vehicle linking South and South-East Asia.

China is perhaps the country with the biggest potential impact on BIMSTEC's success. Its co-option of elites, the economic opportunities it provides, and its infrastructure investments have prevented any significant regional response in Asia. However, the same assertiveness could fuel BIMSTEC to unite as one forum for negotiating that response.

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BIMSTEC Plus: Towards a Bay of Bengal Community

Sohini Bose and Sohini Nayak

Introduction

Since its inception, BIMSTEC has carefully nurtured the shared past of the Bay of Bengal to consolidate its membership and validate its rationale by imbibing a sense of community within the organisation.¹ According to the constructivist school of thought, “regions” are constructed and reconstructed over time, based on ideational factors such as shared history and identities.² Indeed, the Bay had once been a “nation unto itself,”³ a fluid world linked through cultural and commercial ties and continuous migrations. This was one of the foundational pillars of BIMSTEC, as seen in the Bangkok Declaration.⁴ In recent years, the need to enhance this sense of community has gained additional impetus due to the strategic resurgence of the Bay of Bengal. This is reflected in the title of the conference that BIMSTEC held in 2018 to mark its 20th year: “BIMSTEC at 20: Towards a Bay of Bengal Community.”⁵

The conceptualisation of a “Bay of Bengal Community” has become an exercise in deepening inclusive cooperation amongst existing member countries.⁶ The imagined community is confined to the littorals framing the rim of the Bay, which (except for Sri Lanka) share land borders with each other. Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia—littorals of the Andaman Sea and Malacca Strait, which have an opening into the Bay—have not been taken into account, although they were an integral part of the

Bay's shared past and are an important feature of today's geopolitical interdependence. Arguing for the inclusion of these countries under the rubric of BIMSTEC for the creation of a holistic "Bay of Bengal Community," veteran Professor V. Suryanarayan has argued that the concept of the ocean as a "unifying force" and as a focus of regional cooperation is yet to be fully explored.⁷ Thus, a Bay of Bengal Community would not be complete without the inclusion of the littorals of the "extended Bay."⁸

This essay aims to explore the question of whether collaboration between BIMSTEC and these three countries would strengthen the grouping's foothold in the Bay. While a shared cultural heritage is significant, it is not reason enough for these countries to join BIMSTEC, and vice versa. More tangible areas of common interest must be identified, such that a partnership becomes mutually beneficial. The essay analyses the prospects of such collaborations in three important and shared domains. First, the possibility of strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific, since it is an overarching realm of opportunities and challenges for these countries. Second, the potential of increasing trade through coastal shipping, considering the almost-contiguous coastline shared by these countries. Third, the feasibility of developing a collective response mechanism against the transnational threat of natural disasters in the Bay.

Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is a zone of convergence⁹ for the mutual interests of the BIMSTEC countries as well as others such as Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia. As a regional organisation exclusive to the Bay, BIMSTEC has often been considered a subsection of the Indo-Pacific ambitions for relevant sea-based connectivity and security.¹⁰ Despite no official claims to this end, this narrative has gained credence because of the geographical contiguity. To the northeast of the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal hosts "sea lanes of communication," which are important for energy trade, making it a critical transit zone between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

One of the crucial harbingers of this idea has been the BIMSTEC Nations Military Field Training Exercise (MILEX) 2018, the first BIMSTEC military exercise wherein soldiers from six Indo-Pacific countries gathered at the AUNDH Military Station in Pune, India, to take part in counterterrorism drills.¹¹ By strengthening BIMSTEC's security aspect using interoperability and consensus-generation around counterterrorism,¹² this multilateral engagement is a welcome step towards making the organisation's presence felt in the Indo-Pacific.

The extended Bay littorals which are part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are equally interested in participating in this domain both as part of this grouping (ASEAN's "Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" or "ASEAN Centrality") and omnidirectionally.¹³ In fact, the ASEAN charter supports probabilities of seeking to develop appropriate cooperation with other regional and subregional groupings in the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions.¹⁴ Aiming to keep the SLOCs and the important chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca free and open, the countries are seeking increased engagements.¹⁵ For instance, the recent development in the 2,300-km submarine optical fibre from Chennai to Port Blair (2020) in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands promises opportunities for ASEAN countries, especially the Rando Island in Sumatra (Indonesia) and Thailand. Moreover, the ASEAN line of credit may be used to fund this opportunity, which can culminate into a deeper engagement between the two organisations in the wider Indo-Pacific paradigm.¹⁶

Extending Coastal Shipping

A quarter of all goods trading in the world takes place through the Bay of Bengal conduit, making BIMSTEC a vital organisation for enhanced future trade collaborations.¹⁷ However, trade volumes remain low amongst BIMSTEC nations, and the best capacities of each country continue to be underutilised. For instance, Kolkata, Chittagong and Yangon ports can handle limited container cargo due to inadequate investments. These river ports require the ships to travel up the river, often increasing the travel and turnaround time, and consequently, the

costs. Similarly, Visakhapatnam, Kattupalli and Mongla ports can take care of only limited volumes of container traffic.

Since port development is a subject of national jurisdiction, BIMSTEC has proposed “coastal shipping” to strengthen inter-regional commerce. The BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement has been pending formal implementation for a long time now, with increased convenience of cargo movement, i.e. less costly, environment-friendly, and using smaller vessels.¹⁸ The first working group meeting to deliberate upon the draft of the Coastal Shipping Agreement was held in 2017, but it did not yield constructive results.¹⁹

However, India is determined to realise this objective, since it is a part of the Sagarmala Project.²⁰ To this end, it sees BIMSTEC as a cornerstone of extending reach to Indonesia (Sabang Port) through the Bay of Bengal, underpinning enhanced cooperation with ASEAN.²¹ For example, several recommendations for the establishment of an India–Indonesia Shipping Chamber have been forwarded with small coastal vessels operating between Sabang and Port Blaire.²² The presence of Indian Coast Guard ship INS Vijit in Sabang further reinforces this idea.

Collaboration between BIMSTEC and ASEAN can also be seen as part of the wider Indo-Pacific aspirations of Bay littorals, counterbalancing China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the expanding access that it has to South East Asia.²³ Singapore, Port Kelang and Tanjung Pelepas have been identified as global standard trans-shipment hubs, with ships carrying anywhere between 6,500 Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit (TEU) to 12,000 TEU.²⁴ The Penang port of Malaysia is also well-equipped to handle larger volumes of cargo. Similarly, the evolving deep-sea ports at Haldia, Chittagong, Dawei, Kyaukpyu and Hambantota can benefit ASEAN countries in the Bay of Bengal through port-to-port connectivity.²⁵

Unfortunately, many ports along the Bay’s coast are exposed to cyclones, which damage infrastructure and hinder shipping.²⁶ Indeed, natural

disasters in this region affect much more than ports, with a large section of the 1.4 billion coastal population²⁷ being vulnerable to great risks of loss of life and property.

Collective Response to Natural Disasters

The Bay is prone to natural turbulence due to its triangular shape; low, flat coastal terrain; shallow depth;²⁸ and the presence of easterly waves.²⁹ Of the 36 most devastating cyclones recorded in history, 26 have happened in this maritime space, earning it the reputation of being the “deadliest” bay in the world.³⁰ Furthermore, to the southeast of the Bay of Bengal lies the seismically active Andaman–Sumatra Subduction Zone, which triggers violent tsunamis.³¹ Therefore, one of the cardinal concerns of the littorals is their vulnerability to natural disasters.

Out of the three countries in consideration, Indonesia is most frequently buffeted by cyclones and is also highly prone to tsunamis due to its proximity to the Subduction zone. Over the years, it has regularly sought humanitarian assistance and disaster relief from India—an internationally recognised provider of disaster aid. Disaster-management initiatives between the two countries indicate their interest in cultivating a joint disaster response in the region, e.g. the 2013 Memorandum of Understanding; the ‘Shared Vision on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’ of 2018; and their participation in the UNESCO-organised Indian Ocean-wide tsunami mock exercise.³²

Compared to Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are geographically sheltered and have more robust disaster management capacities. To strengthen strategic ties and to meet the demands for improved regional disaster management, India has undertaken several bilateral initiatives with Singapore and Malaysia. In 2015, armed forces from India and Singapore agreed to strengthen disaster relief partnerships. The latter accredited India as an International Liaison Officer to the Changi Regional HADR Coordination Centre. Two years later, a Joint Statement on India–Malaysia Diplomatic Relations declared the operationalisation of information-sharing in HADR, with both navies agreeing to engage

in a joint exercise to enhance disaster preparedness. Additionally, India collaborates in disaster management with these countries as a partner of ASEAN and in the East Asia Summit, the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the MILAN biennial exercises.³³

The BIMSTEC sector on “Environment and Disaster Management” led by India holds the promise of collectively improving the disaster risk resilience of the region while also promoting strategic partnerships. While much progress remains to be made, this is one of the few BIMSTEC sectors to have witnessed dynamic collaboration in the past years. For BIMSTEC, inculcating the expertise and technological know-how of these three countries will help develop its capabilities and be a pathway for greater collaboration with ASEAN in this domain.³⁴

Scope for BIMSTEC Plus

BIMSTEC’s associations with Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia hold significant potential, with the three nations standing to gain deeper strategic engagement with South Asia. With the increasing importance of the Indo-Pacific in the foreign-policy ambitions of these countries, they seek greater involvement in the security and economic paradigms of the Bay. Despite being a nascent organisation, BIMSTEC emerges as the only multilateral platform to address their converging interests and concerns. This “unique cross-regional grouping”³⁵ offers scope for joint action through a common institutional framework, interconnected with opportunities and challenges.³⁶

However, compared to this, BIMSTEC stands to benefit much more from such an engagement than do Malaysia, Singapore or Indonesia, since the former will gain access to their technical knowledge and superior resource pool. Moreover, such collaborations will also increase the likelihood of BIMSTEC–ASEAN cooperation, as these countries are members of the latter. While not at the peak of its productivity, ASEAN is the most functional regional organisation in BIMSTEC’s vicinity that shares its aspiration to act as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. However, BIMSTEC’s focus on vertical integration with existing

members and reluctance to extend its association with other states; its history of dormancy; and the nascence of its endeavours are deterrents to convincing these countries to become full-time BIMSTEC members. Therefore, a middle path must be forged to serve the interests of both BIMSTEC and the three nations.

One way to take this forward is for BIMSTEC to offer an “observer” status to these countries. As recorded in the Second Ministerial Meeting of the organisation, BIMSTEC has the provision of welcoming countries and international/regional organisations as ‘observers’ if they satisfy its principles and wish to participate in the realisation of its goals.³⁷ Currently, BIMSTEC has no dialogue partners, but the idea of providing an observer status to Indonesia has already been presented by Bangladesh, in the context of enhancing regional security.³⁸ The association of these three countries as BIMSTEC’s “observers,” especially in the above-mentioned purviews, will culminate into an arrangement of “BIMSTEC Plus.” This interim step is critical for BIMSTEC to emerge as a more holistic Bay of Bengal Community.

About the Authors

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BIMSTEC: Regionalism, Connectivity and Geopolitics

Christian Wagner

Introduction

Regionalism has long been seen as an important strategy for many countries in dealing with the challenges and prospects of globalisation. While a replication of the European Union (EU) in other parts of the world would not be possible because of its different political and legal foundations, the debate on “open/new regionalism” has paved the way for new forms of regional collaboration in Asia. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its achievements have been regarded as one of the most successful examples of this new approach towards regional cooperation.

However, the rise of China and the geopolitical ambitions that are connected with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the growing geopolitical compulsions between China and the United States, the rising trend of nationalism and protectionism, and the recent challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted the conversation. This raises a significant question: What role can BIMSTEC play in such a changing geopolitical landscape? This essay discusses the recent developments in regional cooperation in South Asia and outlines the prospects and challenges for BIMSTEC. Finally, it highlights some long-term perspectives.

The Rise and Decline of Regional Cooperation in South Asia

Regional cooperation arrived fairly late in South Asia. The first summit of the newly established South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was held only in 1985. However, the new organisation could not overcome the structural challenges of the region. India's difficult relationship with most of its neighbours and the lack of economic complementarity hindered a positive development. Eventually, SAARC became an example of an organisation that adopted "open-regionalism" but had weak institutional structures. The organisation became known notorious for producing "...reports, not results..." Intra-regional trade has grown from two to three percent in the mid-1980s, to five to six percent in recent times. The most visible sign of SAARC's poor performance was the low number of summits. Initially expected to be held annually, only 18 summits were held in 31 years.

One characteristic of the debate on regional cooperation, especially in South Asia, was the overestimation of its potential achievements and the simultaneous underestimation of its possibilities. Expectations that economic collaboration would be the main instrument for national development were often too high. Politically, regional cooperation was often seen as a key for conflict resolution, overlooking the fact that it could not replace structural domestic economic reforms. Such views seem to have been driven by a misperception of the European model and its achievements. The development of the EU was fostered by a system of legally binding treaties, which pooled the sovereignty of its member states in selected areas to supra-national institutions. This is in sharp contrast to the approach of "open regionalism," with its often non-binding commitments. Moreover, while the EU expanded its realm, it was not able to solve internal conflicts such as the one in Northern Ireland. For many South Asian countries, weak state capacity is a major issue and has often hampered joint projects. One oft-cited example is the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme of 1992, which was hardly implemented by the member states.

At the same time, much of the literature of SAARC reflects a certain underestimation of the new possibilities that such an institution could bring. Despite its failings, SAARC also had some intended and unintended positive achievements. One of its most-important yet least-known achievements is the SAARC Development Fund (SDF), which supports common projects when they are operating at least in three countries. The creation of the South Asia University (SAU) has also been a positive achievement, especially in times of growing nationalism. SAARC has paved the way for new forms of civil society networks, e.g. between chambers of commerce, parliamentarians, media and others. One of SAARC's most important unintended achievements has been its function as a mechanism for confidence-building measures. SAARC summits have been used regularly to discuss contentious bilateral issues at the highest political level on the side-lines of official meetings. Military confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan in the 1990s had their origins in the informal discussion between their prime ministers at SAARC summits. While bilateral issues were banned from the official agenda, SAARC's function as an informal platform gave the organisation an important political role.

The decline of SAARC after 2016 was accelerated by various factors. After the Uri attack in September 2016, the Indian government started scaling back relations with Pakistan, which continues to date. The Pulwama attack, the Balakot airstrike, and the revision of the status of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories in 2019 marked this process of a slow but steady decoupling between the two nations. Except for the opening of the Kartarpur corridor in 2019, there has been no noteworthy initiative between the two sides in recent years. Thus, India's announcement in June 2020 to halve its diplomatic missions in Pakistan was a consistent development.

Perhaps the most important external driver that contributed to the decline of SAARC was the massive Chinese investments in South Asia in the context of the BRI. The bulk of the investments has been in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the single-largest project

in the BRI. Additionally, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives have also received sizable Chinese infrastructure investments. The negative implications—rising debts and greater Chinese influence—have resulted in renegotiations in some cases. However, the continued investments will strengthen China’s economic relations with these countries, fostering Beijing’s claim for membership in SAARC. This would not be in India’s interests.

BIMSTEC: Prospects and Challenges

When BIMSTEC was created in 1997, the “Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation” grouping seemed to follow the path of SAARC.¹ Its development was initially sluggish, since its members gave little political importance to the new organisation, and its resource base and institutional structures remained weak. While the original agreement was to hold summits every two years, between 1996 and 2014, only three summits were held: Bangkok in 2004, New Delhi in 2008, Nay Pyi Taw in 2014. The creation of a secretariat was only agreed upon at the summit in 2014. So far, the member states have not been able to agree on a free trade agreement, and consequently, intraregional trade stands at just under five percent.

Against this backdrop, BIMSTEC’s recent revitalisation can be seen as a direct outcome of the process of the decoupling between India and Pakistan since 2016. After the Uri attack, India boycotted the forthcoming SAARC summit and was supported by many other SAARC countries. Moreover, the Indian government used the side-lines of the BRICS Summit in Goa in October 2016 for a BIMSTEC Outreach Summit, inviting SAARC members such as Afghanistan and the Maldives, which were not members of BIMSTEC.

After the summit in 2016, there was a rise in activities.² In August of that year, the BIMSTEC Transport and Connectivity Working Group (BTCWG) was launched. In 2017, the Thai government submitted a draft for the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Connectivity. Member states are currently negotiating agreements to promote coastal shipping and road transport. An agreement on improving customs clearance has already been signed, as well as a Memorandum of Understanding on expanding cross-border power grids. Finally, members have agreed to strengthen security cooperation by setting up regular meetings between interior ministers and security apparatus representatives. However, not all BIMSTEC members share India's interest in closer security cooperation. Nepal and Thailand, for example, only sent observers to India for BIMSTEC's first joint military manoeuvre in September 2018.

Compared to SAARC, BIMSTEC offers some important advantages, the most crucial being the absence of any major bilateral issues between member countries that may hamper the progress of the institution, e.g. the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan in SAARC. However, BIMSTEC does share some of SAARC's weaknesses, for instance, weak institutional structures as well as resource and capacity constraints. Given the economic downturn following the COVID-19 outbreak, it is unlikely that these structures will change in the foreseeable future. Another challenge, especially for India's new interest in the promotion of BIMSTEC, is the economic shadow of China. A closer look at trade figures (See Table 1) reveals that for most BIMSTEC members, China's importance as an economic partner outweighs India's.

Table 1: Trade Volume of India and China with BIMSTEC Members, 2019

	Imports from BIMSTEC Members		Exports to BIMSTEC Members	
	To China	To India	From China	From India
Bangladesh	1,036.44	1,229.86	17,335.12	8,134.06
Bhutan	0.05	248.96	10.80	694.35
Myanmar	6,381.77	505.25	12,331.17	961.02
Nepal	33.52	648.91	1,483.42	7,101.75
Sri Lanka	396.58	993.47	4,088.06	4,227.53
Thailand	46,134.73	7,041.25	45,619.58	4,332.84

Source: IWF Direction of Trade Statistics, <https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85>.

Note: All figures for 2019, in Mio. US Dollar

Especially striking is Thailand's¹ stronger trade relation with China than with India, which indicates that China and Thailand are connected through multiple production networks. Thus, the prospects for increasing intra-regional trade in BIMSTEC remain limited. Moreover, the new economic focus of the Indian government for greater economic self-reliance may act as yet another obstacle to enhancing India's trade with its neighbours.

Regionalism, Connectivity, Geopolitics

BIMSTEC makes for an interesting test case for regional cooperation amidst increasing (geopolitical) connectivity competition. Its success will depend on the extent to which member states are able and willing to create added value for the organisation, compared to their respective bilateral relationships. For regional organisations such as BIMSTEC, the main challenge is their loose institutional structure, as well as resource and capacity constraints. However, while this may restrict the creation of an ambitious agenda, it allows for increased focus on more specific areas of functional collaboration. With big infrastructure investments coming from outside investors, e.g. China, Japan or the Asia Development Bank (ADB), networks such as BIMSTEC can concentrate on expanding the benefits of connectivity projects to larger parts of their population. Additionally, BIMSTEC must seek closer cooperation with other actors, since soft connectivity will be more important for hard connectivity to work in the long term. To this end, the EU and its member states can share their expertise in making regional cooperation beneficial for their societies.

In the emerging subregional cooperation networks, India can use BIMSTEC. The grouping has always been seen as a bridge to Southeast Asia and ASEAN, but it may also serve an important function in strengthening other subregional networks such as the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) grouping. Moreover, BIMSTEC is also part of the larger Indo-Pacific theatre and can be a crucial link to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). After strengthening the maritime linkages between the different networks, “BIMSTEC Plus,” including countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, seems to be a logical next step.³

China’s political and economic shadow already looms large over most BIMSTEC members. To make the organisation a success, India must play its cards right.

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Endnotes

¹ After the entry of Bhutan and Nepal the organisation was renamed as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, thereby keeping its abbreviation BIMSTEC.

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SECTION 8

VOICES FROM MEDIA

BIMSTEC AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA

Bertil Lintner

The main challenge for journalists who intend to write about the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is to explain what kind of organisation it purports to be. Most of the public in Asia and elsewhere have never heard of it and what it stands for. But BIMSTEC nevertheless brings together seven countries in South and Southeast Asia—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand—with member states listed in alphabetical order to emphasise equality. It has also a permanent secretariat based in Dhaka.

If BIMSTEC wants more attention from the media, it will also have to undertake initiatives that journalists can report on, or, as Sri Lankan writer Priyanjini Charitha Fernando pointed out at a recent conference, “The media is not a PR agency, hence, it cannot serve as a tool for promoting BIMSTEC if the organisation remains static.”¹

However, if serious efforts are being undertaken by BIMSTEC, the media can serve as an advertiser to promote its activities. BIMSTEC also has the potential of becoming a collective platform where the media and policymakers can address, discuss and mitigate regional concerns.

ASEAN Myths and Facts

Comparisons can be made with another regional bloc that is as overrated as BIMSTEC is underestimated—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN has ten members (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam) and is often touted by the media as a success story. But the problem with ASEAN is that it is not a Southeast Asian equivalent to the European Union. The bloc has no common policies and there is minimal cooperation between its member states.

ASEAN has two guiding principles, non-interference and consensus, which make it totally ineffectual as a bloc. ASEAN never ‘interfered’ in the freedom struggle in East Timor because it was considered an internal affair for Indonesia. ASEAN also considered the Pattani Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand an internal Thai matter, so it never got involved. Only former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad did in a private initiative. And ASEAN never tried to solve the border disputes between Laos and Thailand, Malaysia and Cambodia, Cambodia and Vietnam, and the Philippines and Malaysia over the state of Sabah.

Furthermore, some ASEAN countries like Laos and Vietnam are one-party states, Cambodia is ruled by a strongman who has been in power for decades, Brunei is an absolute monarchy, Malaysia and Singapore are semi-democracies, and in Thailand and Myanmar, the military remains a powerful institution behind an elected government. This makes the Philippines and Indonesia the most ‘democratic’ countries in ASEAN. This divergence of political systems and views makes it impossible for ASEAN to agree on its most fundamental principle—consensus.

Nowhere is that lack of political cohesion more obvious than when it comes to relations with China. Cambodia and Laos are extremely close to China and never criticise its policies, while Vietnam has been involved in several serious conflicts with that country, including a border war in 1979 and clashes in the disputed South China Sea. The other ASEAN members have their own policies towards China, which overlap and

contradict each other. China, of course, is aware of this and deals with ASEAN members bilaterally, in what could be described as a divide-and-rule policy.

Despite these shortcomings, ASEAN has been successful in promoting an image of partnership and regional cooperation, and the secret is the media. ASEAN holds highly publicised meetings with invited partners, and although nothing might happen at the end of it, the fact that leaders from a variety of countries get together is enough to attract the attention of the regional and international media.

By sharp contrast, BIMSTEC meetings are usually held with no noteworthy press coverage. A lot more can be done to rectify this shortcoming. The BIMSTEC member states have vibrant media scenes and there is no shortage of good journalists who should be encouraged to attend major events. The emphasis should be in what is often described in denigrated terms as ‘the established’ or ‘mainstream’ media. But that is the professional press, and its reporting is often more accurate and better balanced than what appears in so-called ‘alternative media’.

Established Media vs Citizen Journalism

Only a few years ago, ‘citizen journalism’ was being hailed as a positive, ground-breaking development within the media scene in Asia and around the world. By the means of the Internet, the public was able to collect, disseminate and analyse news, and challenge the dominance of so-called ‘mainstream media’.

While good and admirable intentions may have been behind the concept, the outcome has been that social media is awash with rumours, doctored pictures and conspiracy theories that would never have appeared in professionally-run newspapers and magazines, where editors, fact checkers and lawyers scrutinise reports before they appear in print. But because social media and blogs are free, traditional media is facing an unprecedented crisis.

Another threat to the media and professional journalism comes from China. Already in 2009, Beijing decided to spend US\$6.6 billion on expanding its global media presence and to push the Chinese narrative.² This is especially evident in Myanmar, where the independent media is in serious trouble because of declining advertising revenue and poor distribution networks. Even leading newspapers in Myanmar are publishing advertorials promoting China's Belt and Road Initiative and Beijing's view of what is happening in Hong Kong.^{3,4} Chinese money is funnelled to struggling publications through local businessmen.

While it can be argued that the US National Endowment for Democracy and the British, French and German embassies in Asia also support publications in the region, they do not interfere with those in the same way as China does. There is no free lunch when it comes to Chinese support for the media, political organisations, or civil society groups.

Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean: Next Hotspots?

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The Bay of Bengal, after which BIMSTEC is named, and the Indian Ocean should provide the professional media with plenty to write about. About 80 percent of the container traffic between Asia and the rest of the world and 60 percent of the world's oil supplies pass through the Indian Ocean.^{5,6} For the first time in history, China is making inroads into the Indian Ocean region to protect its trade routes and supply of oil from West Asia, which may appear innocuous, but its newly established presence in a maritime area where it has never been before is a cause for concern among the region's traditional powers.

In Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, China has established its first military base abroad, ostensibly to fight piracy in the region. But the facility is also close to US bases in the region, including the facility on Diego Garcia and those in Gulf countries. The Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean and, in particular, the Bay of Bengal is also perceived as a threat to India's interests in the region. Thus, a new 'Cold War' is emerging in the Indian Ocean whose origins and development have not been scrutinised so far, nor have the long-term implications for China's newly established

presence in this maritime region received proper analysis. This may be beyond the scope of BIMSTEC as such, but issues that would be of great interest for the media.

Apart from having a military presence in Djibouti, China is also investing in several port projects in the region. These include Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan. The most important is Kyaukphyu at the end of the newly established China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which gives China direct access to the Indian Ocean. It is time to begin addressing the most important geopolitical issue in the region—China is in the Indian Ocean to stay, and there is a new security paradigm at play in the Bay of Bengal and beyond that could alter the balance of power in the entire region.

Myanmar: China's Gateway to South and Southeast Asia

China's plans to reach the Indian Ocean were first articulated in an article in the government operated weekly *Beijing Review* as early as 1985, when Pan Qi, the former vice-minister of communications, outlined the possibilities of finding an outlet for trade from China's landlocked provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou, through Myanmar, to the Indian Ocean.⁷

The article mentions the Myanmar railheads of Myitkyina and Lashio in the north and northeast and the Irrawaddy River as possible conduits for the export of goods from those provinces from Myanmar ports. Consequently, after 1988, when the Western world imposed sanctions on Myanmar's military regime for its gross human rights violations, China became Myanmar's closest trading partner and primary source of military hardware. Myanmar's membership in BIMSTEC should be seen as an attempt by the country's authorities to balance that dependence with closer relationships with other nations in the region.

India's Far Eastern Naval Command and the Geopolitics of BIMSTEC

For obvious reasons, India, China's main strategic rival in the region, has placed the Indian Ocean high on its security agenda. In 2001, India created a new Far Eastern Naval Command (FENC) to protect its interests in the region. The plan for its establishment was reportedly hatched in 1995 after a closed-door meeting in Washington between India's Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao and the US President Bill Clinton. The plan was finalised when Clinton visited India in 2000. As an Indian journalist reported at the time, "FENC will have state-of-the-art naval electronic warfare systems that can extend as far as Southeast Asia."⁸

FENC is based on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the local command of the three services of the Indian armed forces coordinates activities in the Indian Ocean. This is India's first such integrated command and, speaking at a roundtable conference held on 12 April 2010 organised by the New Delhi-based think tank the National Maritime Foundation, Chief Admiral Gary Roughead of the US Navy stated that American leaders at the highest level have declared that the US and India would be strategic partners for the 21st century: "I'm here to say that the United States navy in particular is a committed friend to India for the long term".⁹ The aim of this cooperation has never been stated officially, but is nevertheless clear—to counter the rise of China.

In August 2011, the Chinese received approval from the Jamaica-based International Seabed Authority, which organises and controls all mineral-related activities in the international seabed area beyond the limits of national jurisdiction, to explore a 10,000-square-kilometre area in the central Indian Ocean for "polymetallic sulphide ore." "The move is bound to draw close scrutiny from India, which is worried about China's military goals in the area," news reports stated at the time.¹⁰

Naval cooperation between India and the US, and other countries that share concerns about China's forays into the Indian Ocean, is likely to increase, especially since signals intelligence stations in the region have

noted an increased frequency of chatter by Chinese on their radars than in the past. The presence of Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean is also a worry for India as other countries in the region.

It may be argued that those geostrategic concerns are not part of the charter BIMSTEC is expected to adopt at the end of 2020. Stated common interests of concern for BIMSTEC member countries include illegal migration and armed piracy, freedom of navigation, controlling transnational threats, harnessing and sharing the natural wealth of the Bay of Bengal, promoting infrastructural, and people-to-people connectivity, but this would also mean a common policy to deal with China's presence in the Indian Ocean. No regional bloc can avoid addressing this issue, and BIMSTEC is in a better position than ASEAN to agree on a common policy aimed at securing peace and stability in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. And that is something the professional media will most certainly want to cover, to counter misinformation spread by hackers and internet trolls.

About the author

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Developing a Role for the Media in BIMSTEC

Haroon Habib

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was a dream of regional leaders who envisioned strengthened economic and physical connectivity among the South Asian and Southeast Asian nations through trade, investment, and tourism. BIMSTEC is a bridge between South Asian and Southeast Asian countries, and as a platform between the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for intra-regional cooperation. The region is home to about 1.5 billion people, or about 22 percent of the global population.

June 2020 marked 23 years of BIMSTEC, with leaders from the member countries reaffirming their commitment to building cooperation and increasing resilience under the inter-regional body.¹ The current chair, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, has declared that the grouping could play a more proactive role in boosting regional economy through trade, exchange of technological advancement and the development of human capital.² Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stressed the importance of BIMSTEC as a platform for nations to “collectively address the fallout and challenges stemming from the (Coronavirus) pandemic”. Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi noted the importance of BIMSTEC as a key platform for the achievement of peace, prosperity, sustainability and cooperation. Suu Kyi also expressed hope that the organisation will further leverage regional cooperation and respond to

new and emerging challenges. Bhutan Prime Minister Lotay Tshering lauded the countries for their handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Thailand's Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai, for his part, has expressed hope that the BIMSTEC free trade agreement (FTA) can be realised to reduce logistical costs and encourage more businesses and people-to-people connectivity.

First created in June 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration by Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, BIMSTEC drew wide media attention given its potential. Media outlets in the region saw more promise after Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar joined the grouping.

However, BIMSTEC's promise to harness accelerated and shared growth has remained largely on paper. Although BIMSTEC has held four summit-level meetings and some routine deliberations, most of its programmes have largely remained unimplemented. The initial euphoria surrounding the grouping has died down, prompting critics to dub it "a damp squib".³

Evaluating BIMSTEC

The media has identified some basic hurdles to the grouping's growth. These include having an expansive mandate,⁴ and failing to implement the FTA.⁵

The 4th BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2018⁶ was viewed in a generally positive light by the media. The Kathmandu Declaration stressed on the exchange of agricultural technology, the fight against terrorism, mitigating the impacts of climate change, increasing trade and investment, and easing visa rules among member states. The declaration also stressed on reducing poverty by 2030 in line with the UN's Sustainable Developmental Goals. Furthermore, it emphasised the importance of connectivity as an important driver for economic integration. However, most of these programmes are yet to see any meaningful progress, causing frustration in media circles.

The BIMSTEC's expected growth was obstructed, as many observers have pointed out, by 'lack of political will' in some member countries. Some countries were also accused of not supporting the BIMSTEC Secretariat with adequate financial and other resources.

The media saw the grouping getting a boost when political leaders met at the BRICS Summit in Goa in 2016.⁸ The media also had a positive view of the first meeting of the BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs in New Delhi in March 2017, which discussed various traditional and non-traditional security issues, including the holding of joint disaster management exercises.

In recent years, BIMSTEC has also started looking at the Bay as part of its larger maritime strategic space. The reasons are clear—the Indo-Pacific, a key transit route between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, is located at the intersection of Indian and Chinese strategic interests and is deeply impacting the other BIMSTEC nations. Moreover, the Bay of Bengal is facing a multitude of non-traditional security threats. Therefore, it is important to combat the transnational threats and ensure freedom of navigation so that the BIMSTEC countries can harness and share their natural wealth.

BIMSTEC is not an opportunity for any one country alone, but for the entire Bay of Bengal region. If the sub-regional collaboration succeeds, there will be a wider scope for direct connectivity with Southeast Asia via India's northeastern states and Myanmar. If the grouping emerges stronger, India's 'Act East' and Thailand's 'Look West' policies will complement each other, and the landlocked Nepal and Bhutan will also have the opportunity to enhance their connectivity with the rest of the region.

The media has always maintained that there is huge potential for enhanced intra-regional trade and investment in the BIMSEC region. Barring the Rohingya crisis between Myanmar and Bangladesh, the BIMSTEC countries have not had any significant bilateral problem. If such issues are resolved amicably, BIMSTEC will not be at risk of going the SAARC way.

Another issue that could have consequences of many countries in the region is the Nepal map fiasco. At the 2018 BIMSTEC Summit, countries pledged to help develop Nepal's energy, tourism, infrastructure and agriculture sectors. If the current issue persists, it could have consequences on the BIMSTEC grid inter-connection to Bangladesh through India from Nepal, and the Master Plan on Transport Connectivity. According to Bhekh Bahadur Thapa, coordinator of the Eminent Persons' Group on Nepal-India Relations, "This common effort to develop infrastructure to promote intra-regional connectivity will certainly benefit Nepal as well as other member nations while the proactive steps to collectively fight the challenges created by the climate change has made the summit unique."⁹

The Pandemic Challenge

The initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region was to restrict trade, travel and other forms of connectivity. Outgoing BIMSTEC Secretary General M Shahidul Islam has acknowledged that the crisis is not limited to the health sector alone but will also affect regional connectivity, which is at the heart of the BIMSTEC mandate.¹⁰

Analysts have stressed on the need for collective resilience to the COVID-19 crisis through joint action plans.¹¹ Regional leaders sought joint efforts to combat the crisis during the BIMSTEC anniversary meeting in June 2020.

While Hasina stressed the importance of BIMSTEC as a platform to combat the devastating impact of COVID-19, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the BIMSTEC's effectiveness in bridging South Asia and Southeast Asia and bringing the countries together to overcome the huge challenges of COVID-19. India also pledged to extend expertise, resources, capacities and know-how to help the region overcome the pandemic. Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli likewise called for a collective response to the crisis. Tshering lauded the countries for their handling of the public health crisis.

Yet no significant collaborative action is in sight, except for the scheduled 21st Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) comprising Foreign Secretaries (on 2 September in Colombo). The occasion will be used to deliberate BIMSTEC's role in post-COVID 19 recovery and rehabilitation, with emphasis on poverty alleviation, food security, and economic and physical connectivity in the region.

What Lies Ahead

BIMSTEC has failed to live up to its potential over the last two decades. India, the largest member of the grouping, has been criticised for not providing a strong leadership to it, while Thailand and Myanmar are viewed as having ignored BIMSTEC in favour of ASEAN. Additionally, the formation of another sub-regional group, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum, under Chinese initiative, has served as a counter to BIMSTEC.

The media can play a complementary role in increasing awareness on BIMSTEC. The real players, however, are the political leaders of the member countries. BIMSTEC must garner greater media attention to realise its goals. It is important to find a proper mechanism to regularly apprise the media across the region on the progress of the grouping's plans and projects.

Frequent cultural exchanges and media dialogues among the BIMSTEC nations must be conducted. The First BIMSTEC Conference on film, media and journalism was held in Dhaka in January 2020 to mark the birth centenary of Bangladesh's founding father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The BIMSTEC Secretariat can undertake similar initiatives in collaboration with the private sector. Such deliberations will help increase media awareness about the grouping's activities and potential, and in turn the media can help increase public trust in BIMSTEC.

About the author

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Encouraging Media Development and Cooperation in the BIMSTEC Region

Subir Bhaumik

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has gained greater importance in the post-COVID-19 world. Countries in Asia have realised they will need to address the question of China's rise as Beijing sheds its pretensions of peaceful emergence and flexes its military, political and economic muscle at the bilateral and multilateral level to push ambitious connectivity projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or water down global opinion through perception management and powerful backroom lobbying at the United Nations.

BIMSTEC is made up of seven countries that lie in the littoral and adjacent areas of the Bay of Bengal, and constitute a contiguous regional unity. This subregional organisation came into being in June 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration with four members (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand), and eventually expanded to include Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan.

India is a major power in BIMSTEC and this is the only regional grouping (other than the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative) where the country is the most important nation by size, resources and global influence. BIMSTEC is the only regional grouping that can help operationalise India's 'Act East' (formerly 'Look East') policy through its underdeveloped northeast region, a strategy that seeks to situate the

backward and conflict-scarred region at the heart of India's engagement with the tiger economies of Southeast Asia.¹

BIMSTEC has prioritised 14 areas of cooperation, including trade and investment and climate change, but media development and cooperation does not figure in the list. The grouping must consider including media development and cooperation as the 15th priority area cooperation, with India as the lead country. BIMSTEC should also focus on developing a grouping-level news pool, much like the Non-Aligned News Agencies news pool that failed to take off primarily because of the existence of several one-party states and dictatorial governments in the non-aligned countries, a problem that BIMSTEC does not face. Although all BIMSTEC countries face the issues of press freedom and media autonomy, none are one-party states or structurally support press censorship. While the BIMSTEC news pool could bring several official news agencies under one roof for the exchange of information, the regional grouping should also support free media platforms in the private sector, such as the Asia News Network, which has brought together dailies like *The Statesman* in Kolkata, *Daily Star* in Bangladesh and *Bangkok Post* in Thailand to share output. BIMSTEC should also organise an annual media conference to bring together leading media personalities and groups from the member countries to discuss issues like freedom of press, draconian laws restricting media freedom, impediments to the free flow of news, and other such issues that impact the operations of the free media. BIMSTEC should also support regional-level media projects on common issues like weapons and drugs trafficking and gender issues, bringing journalists together to research and create output that can be used across regional media platforms. BIMSTEC should also organise exchange programmes for journalists to learn from the experiences of other newsrooms, develop an understanding of other countries and ensure cross-regional news flows.

One of BIMSTEC's priority areas is to develop people-to-people contact within the member countries. Enhancing tourist circuits and easing travel rules is one way to achieve this. But even if tourism regains steam in the post-COVID-19 world, the fear of fresh virus-linked

destruction will hold the sector back. Therefore, the potential of tourism to generate people-to-people contact and cement the regional grouping will be limited in the foreseeable future. The only other way to boost people-to-people contact is the free flow of news between the member countries going beyond political or conflict news since the media has a much greater reach than tourism in impacting popular perceptions.^b

Indian Perspective on Media Development

Since several countries in the BIMSTEC region, such as Myanmar and Bhutan (formerly a kingdom), have recently become democracies with a free media, India can take the lead in creating a Media Training Fund and institute a training programme, much like the Satyajit Ray Film and TV Institute in Kolkata for students from the developing world. This will be a good venture because the media is hard and not soft power. Just consider the huge amounts of money spent by China on ‘influence operations’ to create its own global narrative. If India takes the lead in developing the media in the BIMSTEC region, it will have value-for-money spinoffs. Media training is a crucial area that must be addressed by India, a country with better resources and a stronger free media tradition, since better trained media professionals with a regional focus can bring to life a media of a trans-regional dimension. Media training that focuses on new media technology and a wider regional agenda rather than national agendas is the need of the hour.^b

While media training and new generation technology skilling (already part of the BIMSTEC agenda) can go a long way in creating a large pool of trained journalists who hold the key to the quality of media output, nothing will change until media owners and managers push a trans-regional agenda. BIMSTEC must organise a Media Stakeholder Dialogue to bring together owners, senior editors, media analysts and others to thrash out real issues and work on a future trans-regional media agenda. There is one incentive to push such a focus, especially for the digital media—a trans-regional audience is a guarantee against too much dependence on the national advertising market. Although the digital media in the BIMSTEC region has not grown as expected, primarily due to the limitations of internet penetration and the cost of data services,

the situation is changing. Digital media is the future. The BIMSTEC countries must invest in digital multimedia training and media outlets must focus on enhancing digital capabilities since it goes beyond time and distance limitations.

The BIMSTEC grouping is poised to assume significance once again in regional affairs. The renewed vigour has already resulted in a fresh agreement on tangible areas of cooperation and ways of resuscitating the organisation.⁴ It is high time media development and cooperation finds a place in the BIMSTEC list of priorities.

About the author

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Finding Solutions to BIMSTEC Region's Challenges: How the Media Can Help

Tshering Dorji

The Bay of Bengal, the largest basin in the world, historically holds great economic and ecological significance. Today, the Bay of Bengal is home to a cluster of developing countries that are grappling with poverty, economic susceptibility, the adverse impact of climate change and a host of other social issues, and together form the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The region has the advantage of demographic dividend, market forces, investment opportunities and natural resources, but the BIMSTEC countries are yet to realise their full potential. Reinforcing regional integration is the key to leverage collective efforts—not just government-to-government but business-to-business and people-to-people as well—towards this goal. The media can play a vital role in influencing governments, the public and other institutions by highlighting the outcome of a harmonious and prosperous BIMSTEC region.

This integration should be seen from a different perspective, one that is sustainable, inclusive and mutual. Prior to the pandemic, the International Monetary Fund had projected Bangladesh to be the fastest growing economy in Asia, followed by India and Bhutan, in 2020 and 2021.¹ How will the governments and leaders of these countries reap the impact of this growth for regional prosperity?

There are many challenges. The BIMSTEC region is not well integrated, in terms of both physical and virtual connectivity. There is a dearth of infrastructure and efficient logistics to facilitate the seamless movement of people and goods within the region. These factors have manifested into immigration, customs and standards compliance issues among different countries. Security concerns and transit norms also hinder trade. These problems have surfaced in almost all regional forums and progress to address these challenges has been slow.

An inevitable ingredient to steer towards the desired changes in the BIMSTEC region is political will, which has taken a backseat as words are yet to translate into action. Some progress is being made, and bricks are beginning to fall in place, but these efforts must be unrelenting. For instance, the inland water route between Bhutan and Bangladesh, which was in talks for decades, finally materialised in 2014 during the visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.² Likewise, the tripartite hydroelectric project between Bhutan, Bangladesh and India is also being considered, as is the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation Road Connectivity project.³

Bhutan is set to graduate from least developed country status in 2023,⁴ and the country is now 'moving from aid to trade'.⁵ The country is looking to boost regional trade through BIMSTEC, and use the forum as a gateway for goods to other parts of the world. In turn, Bhutan can offer its neighbours its hydroelectricity, which remains largely untapped. Headway has been made with the 1125MW Dorjilung project, a tripartite venture between Bhutan, Bangladesh and India. The country is also a top tourist destination, and is a unique destination for foreign direct investments due to its cheap electricity, educated workforce, political stability, and peace and security.

For landlocked countries like Bhutan and Nepal to leverage their potential, seamless regional connectivity is key to cushion economic vulnerability. Bhutan and Nepal have higher transportation costs, and require more time and paperwork for exports and imports. To reap the

benefits of cooperation under BIMSTEC, Bhutan and Nepal need to be well connected to the regional economies and gain access to the Bay of Bengal.

The timely implementation of projects to develop infrastructure, railways, roads and ports remain a challenge due to political complexity. At the policy level, there is lack of coordination among the different agencies both within and between different countries. This is a ripe avenue for cooperation among the BIMSTEC countries, with the potential for India and Bangladesh to leverage their technical capacities.

BIMSTEC must also enhance cooperation in healthcare and be aware of the rising risks of diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, COVID-19 and other communicable diseases. Epidemics will threaten the livelihood of the people living along the economic corridor and disrupt trade and supply linkages. An efficient health infrastructure and information sharing is necessary. For economies to prosper, BIMSTEC must also take a closer look at health and gender issues. A holistic approach is needed because regional integration must be seen as a tool to achieve sustainable and inclusive development through poverty alleviation and livelihood enhancement. Addressing the issues that concern the environment, women and children, and the poor and underprivileged can form the basis to pursue economic development in the BIMSTEC region. Solving the problems confronting people and the environment in the region, and addressing other issues affecting regional growth, will mean solving the problems of quarter of the world's population.

Media's role in BIMSTEC

In Bhutan, there is common understanding among media professionals that the role of the media in a democracy is to ensure good governance. To a large extent, the Bhutanese media has been successful in keeping the government and associated agencies on their toes, despite skill and capacity shortcomings. The Bhutanese media continues to adhere to the ethics of the profession and are driven by passion rather than money and muscle power. In times of calamities, the media aids the government in

disseminating information, educating the public and creating awareness. This should be the role of all media houses across the world. The media can play a powerful role in raising public awareness and inciting national debates to encourage changes in national policies.

A comprehensive media strategy with clearly defined goals and objectives is needed to encourage the media in the BIMSTEC region to focus on the forum and discuss issues pertaining to it. The media's role must go beyond just covering summits and conferences. Leaders from the region must also look at the media as much more than a platform for publicity. BIMSTEC must support the media and vice versa, and there must be a common understanding to address the issues not from a political perspective but from a people perspective.

This can be done by forming a network of media houses or professionals from the different BIMSTEC countries and the secretariat must provide the logistical arrangements. This network will facilitate information sharing, joint assignments, workshops and training on issues of interest, all to better partner with the national governments and the forum.

In the current digital era where numerous platforms cater to millions of viewers, is the BIMSTEC region getting its due coverage? Whether it is trade, culture or connectivity issues that is the focus of BIMSTEC, at the core, it is about the people and their wellbeing. This aspect is often missing in the media's coverage of BIMSTEC and must be rectified to ensure the region is on the path to inclusive development.

About the Author

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Resurrecting BIMSTEC Through the Media

Chandani Jayatilleke

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) area, which has over 1.6 billion people and a combined gross domestic product of over US\$3 trillion,¹ is one of the fastest growing regions in the world.

Of the BIMSTEC's total international trade, trade among the seven member states accounts for only six percent and the rest is made up by non-BIMSTEC countries, 24 percent of which is with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and 64 percent with the European Union (EU).² Despite the BIMSTEC trade negotiating committee holding 21 rounds of talks, the text of the Agreement on Trade in Goods is yet to be finalised.^{3,4} However, recent discussions have renewed hope of a deal as regional leaders have expressed a political commitment to move ahead with the BIMSTEC's key objective—securing the region's economic integration.^{5,6}

Lack of media focus

Although BIMSTEC has existed for over two decades, it is still an unknown concept for many in the news media in the member countries, while several of those who are aware of it view the grouping as being dead. There is scant awareness of BIMSTEC among journalists and the public alike since the media has not covered the grouping in the way it does the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

This is perhaps because BIMSTEC is not as newsworthy as SAARC, a politically important group in South Asia. But with India's renewed interest in its 'Act East' policy, BIMSTEC has the potential to grab media attention.

The news media—whether digital, electronic or print—is the principal channel of information for the masses and specific interest groups in society. At the global, regional, national and subnational levels, by constantly disseminating information, the news media offers society a choice of perspectives and possibilities to focus attention on, and direct human endeavours. The news media is constantly channeling social perceptions and guiding social endeavours in different fields and sectors of human activity, including political, diplomatic, economic, sociocultural and ecological.

Information provided through the news media includes actual data (raw data or analysis/interpretation) and human expressions, from expressions of interest (political, cultural, business) to messaging between individuals and groups in terms of aspirations, frustrations, appreciations and hostilities. Such media functioning enables negotiations, planning and decision-making. Therefore, the news media plays an important role in policymaking, programme implementation, and assessments and impact evaluation.

Significantly, the advent of the internet and cyber-communications has now eliminated several distinctions between news media and data and information sharing across all levels of demography and geography. At the same time, even as news outlets provides basic news (for specialised or general audiences), they also provide simultaneous access to data sources and feeds. The news media's 'directing' and 'focusing' functions are thus critical in shaping social groups and State and inter-state behaviour.

BIMSTEC as a geopolitical grouping

BIMSTEC, like many other geographical inter-state formations, is a grouping of nation-states that have some common geopolitical interests or some different individual state interests that intersect at certain points and levels in a manner that fulfils mutual interests. As the biggest regional power, India, for instance, is keen to ensure the prioritisation of its own specific interests in cross-regional trade in the Bay of Bengal through ocean dominance, business investments, and the smooth movement of its goods at sea and on land (through the land route and economic corridors).

Sri Lanka in turn can benefit from BIMSTEC in ways it cannot from SAARC, although the latter offers its own unique advantages. Sri Lanka's advantage is that all its neighbouring countries are SAARC members, and so it can easily reach out to SAARC members for support, including in security matters, both military and social (for instance, through disaster mitigation assistance and emergency food support). Close neighbour status enables necessary bilateral and intra-regional cooperation on crucial matters such as climate and ecology management, and close economic exchanges (trade, labour markets and investments). But SAARC is politically hampered by rivalries between the countries due to their close-neighbour proximity, including the regional conflict between India and Pakistan and other cross-border issues (land, water sharing, migration, disaster commonality, smuggling, transborder insurgency).

For Sri Lanka, BIMSTEC is thus very useful in off-setting some of the disadvantages of SAARC, especially in areas of economic cooperation, like investments, freight-forwarding, shipping, sea route security and inter-ports collaboration, and capitalising on opportunities in the richer ASEAN market.

Media's role

The media can play a key role in introducing the BIMSTEC states to each other's citizens. Informing the people on the grouping and its activities will help politically legitimise the BIMSTEC and its policies.

The media can also help specific interest groups within each country in understanding the usefulness of BIMSTEC in areas like business investments and trade, sociocultural aspects (tourism, pilgrimages, arts and entertainment), professional cooperation (associations of lawyers or doctors), and expert collaboration (especially in IT, sciences, mineral resources exploitation and ecology management). Specialised media/information groups can be set up to further link professional communities in the BIMSTEC countries on specific projects.

Ecology management in light of the climate crisis is an emerging area of cooperation, with ecology journalism set to replace development journalism especially in middle-income and developing countries. The common environmental challenges linked to energy and climate change in the BIMSTEC region are being written and rewritten, but relatively little space is allocated to raise awareness on solutions and on sustainable development in the region. The media, especially digital, can enable large-scale information sharing and advocacy among the seven member states to further these aims.

The BIMSTEC Secretariat should also facilitate a special project to build a series of online information sharing and advocacy hubs for the news media.

It is also important to conduct a study on the regional media's coverage of BIMSTEC, the findings of which will be useful to determine how the media can be engaged with and be more involved in BIMSTEC discussions and coverage. Such a study could be collaboratively conducted by multiple media departments at universities in association with local media professionals.

Potential for more

BIMSTEC's aim is to harness shared and accelerated growth through cooperation in different areas by mitigating the onslaught of globalisation, and by utilising regional resources and geographical advantages. According to BIMSTEC Secretary General M. Shahidul Islam, "Unlike

many other regional groupings, BIMSTEC is a sector-driven cooperative organization. Starting with six sectors—including trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism and fisheries—for sectoral cooperation in the late 1997, it expanded to embrace nine more sectors—including agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism, environment, culture, people to people contact and climate change—in 2008.”^{7,8}

However, BIMSTEC has yet to achieve the level of integration seen in the EU (economic and political) or in ASEAN (mainly economic). Nevertheless, the potential for such integration is huge, especially since the other main regional initiative, SAARC, has not been as successful as hoped. So far, media coverage on BIMSTEC has been focused on political and economic cooperation among the member states. There has not been much focus on the social and cultural integration among citizens. The media must promote such cooperation and regional integration, especially in areas that can prove beneficial to the common man. For instance, heritage tourism between Sri Lanka and India and Sri Lanka and Thailand is thriving. This can also be done in Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan, and can be promoted via the media.

The media should not wait for governments and political leaders to promote such integration as this could take a long time, as it did with the SAARC. Creating greater awareness on the benefits of BIMSTEC could in turn lead to increased public interest and pressure in support of regional integration efforts. It is important to remember that BIMSTEC is meant to benefit the people of the region, who have many things in common but have forgotten their shared history and geography.

A lack of awareness about the grouping, its initiatives and benefits could lead to negative consequences, as seen in Sri Lanka where certain professional and business lobbies have strongly opposed the country’s efforts to enter into trade deals with India.^{9,10,11}

It is time for the media fraternity in the region to foster closer ties to take BIMSTEC cooperation forward. Journalists must not shy away from BIMSTEC stories, even if they are of a political—and thus negative—nature, and instead see it as an opportunity. There is scope for stories on trade, travel and other sectors of BIMSTEC cooperation, as well as on how the opening of big markets like India and Thailand could be useful to the region's businesses. The role of the media in BIMSTEC can be strengthened by fostering a better understanding among media professionals that the news media can be an opinion shaper as well as an agenda setter.

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The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was established in 1997. Over the next 23 years, its membership has expanded, declarations have been made, and intentions expressed. Yet little has changed on the ground, even as the world has gone through changes, some of them perhaps irreversible—marked by a huge push towards globalisation, a global financial crisis, China’s departure from its “hide your strength, bide your time” strategy to the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

This compendium of essays calls for a reimagination of BIMSTEC. It collects a large number of essays whose purpose it is not to promote the ‘brand’ of BIMSTEC, but to generate a healthy deliberation on the future of the regional body.



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