

BIMSTEC into the Mainstream: The Role of the Media

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ABSTRACT This brief is an experienced journalist’s view of how the media should regard the relevance of BIMSTEC, or the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation; and, in turn, how BIMSTEC can utilise the media in making its issues known to the public and the policymakers, in its immediate region and beyond. The brief argues that if BIMSTEC is to become an effective forum for regional cooperation, it should be more open and transparent, and work to stimulate interest in its initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is an entity on which little is written by journalists, whether in its immediate geography in Asia, or beyond. This is especially noticeable when comparing the media coverage of BIMSTEC to that of, for instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The ASEAN is widely known, having successfully promoted an image of itself as a forum for partnership and cooperation. Over the years, it has used the media well to attract attention to its activities which, this brief argues, are often overrated.

Further, the emergence of so-called “citizen journalism” – reports published in niche internet forums by citizens who are not professional journalists – and the popularity of various internet-based social-networking platforms are new challenges for BIMSTEC as it seeks better media exposure. Both citizen journalism and social-media platforms are not bound by ethical norms that require them to ensure that their facts are right. Traditional media forums serve better at providing professional coverage of sensitive issues crucial to BIMSTEC, such as the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean region.

The first key challenge for journalists who write about BIMSTEC is to explain what kind of organisation it is, to begin with. Indeed, many in Asia and beyond have never heard of the grouping (nor know even what the acronym stands for). BIMSTEC brings together seven countries in South Asia and

Southeast Asia — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand,^a and has a permanent secretariat based in Dhaka.

If BIMSTEC wants more attention from the media, it will have to undertake initiatives that are newsworthy. As Sri Lankan writer Priyanjini Charitha Fernando pointed out at a recent ORF conference: “The media is not a PR agency, hence, it cannot serve as a tool for promoting BIMSTEC if the organisation remains static.”¹ At the same time, however, if serious initiatives are being taken by BIMSTEC, the media can write about them. BIMSTEC also has the potential of becoming a collective platform where the media, as well as policymakers, can address, discuss and mitigate regional concerns.

ASEAN MYTHS AND FACTS

Reasonable comparisons can be made with another regional bloc that is as overrated as BIMSTEC is underestimated: the ASEAN. ASEAN has 10 members (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) and is often touted by the media as a “success story”. However, ASEAN is hardly a Southeast Asian equivalent of the European Union (EU). The bloc has no common policies and there is minimal cooperation between its member states.

ASEAN’s two guiding principles—non-interference and consensus—are what make it highly ineffectual as a bloc. For instance, ASEAN never made its position clear on the

a BIMSTEC’s member states are listed in alphabetical order to emphasise equality.

freedom struggle in East Timor in the late 1990s because it was considered an internal affair of Indonesia.² ASEAN also considered the Pattani Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand an internal matter, and thus did not involve itself as a bloc.³ Only former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad did so in a private initiative. Nor has ASEAN attempted to solve the border disputes between its members—Laos and Thailand, Malaysia and Cambodia, Cambodia and Vietnam—or the one between the Philippines and Malaysia over the state of Sabah.⁴

As mentioned earlier, one of ASEAN's declared fundamental principles is *consensus*. This has been difficult to achieve for various reasons. To begin with, the ASEAN countries diverge in their political systems. 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 the elected government. That makes the Philippines and Indonesia the most “democratic” countries in ASEAN.

Nowhere is such lack of political cohesion more obvious than in these countries' relations with China. Cambodia and Laos, for example, have close relations with China and avoid criticising Beijing's policies. Meanwhile, Vietnam has been involved in several serious conflicts with China, 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 one another. China, of course, is aware of this and deals with ASEAN

members bilaterally in what could perhaps be described as a divide-and-rule policy.

In spite of all these shortcomings, however, ASEAN has met with success in promoting an image of partnership and regional cooperation; one of the factors is its use of the media. For one, ASEAN holds highly publicised meetings, either of its own or with invited partners. Even as these meetings may yield little tangible results for the bloc and its member states, the very fact that state leaders from various countries get together is enough to attract the attention of regional and international media.

By sharp contrast, BIMSTEC meetings are usually held with hardly any noteworthy press coverage. A lot more can be done to rectify this shortcoming. The member states of BIMSTEC all have vibrant media, with no shortage of serious journalists who could be encouraged to attend significant events. The emphasis should be on getting coverage in what is today often referred to pejoratively as “the established” or “mainstream” media. However, that is the professional press and its reporting is often more accurate and balanced than what appears in the so-called “alternative media”.

ESTABLISHED MEDIA VERSUS CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Only a few years ago, the practice of “citizen journalism” was being hailed as a positive, even ground-breaking, development on the media scene not only in Asia but in many other parts of the world. It was believed that the internet would enable the general public to collect, disseminate and analyse news, and

thereby challenge the monopoly of the mainstream media on the telling of truth.

While there may have been admirable intentions behind the concept, it has also brought about an information landscape that is awash with rumours, digitally manipulated images, and conspiracy theories that would less likely appear in professionally-run newspapers and magazines, where editors, fact-checkers—and even lawyers, in the most controversial cases—scrutinise reports before they are published. But because social media and blogs are under no such control, traditional media is facing an unprecedented crisis. False, often misleading, news spreads faster than ever before via Twitter, Facebook and other consumer-generated media. No doubt some social network platforms have introduced better quality control to check this trend. Facebook has banned several users seen to promote hate speech— among them Myanmar’s military chief General Min Aung Hlaing — and even US president Donald Trump has had several of his tweets taken down because they were deemed to violate Twitter’s rules on misinformation.⁵

By putting out incorrect information, citizen journalists have in some cases harmed the very causes they are seeking to support. For example, the plight of the hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas who crossed the border into Bangladesh from Myanmar during the refugee crisis in 2017 was obscured by Islamic activists posting pictures of victims of the 2008 cyclone in Myanmar, claiming they were Rohingyas who had been killed by Myanmar’s security forces and “Buddhist mobs”.⁶ Similarly, pictures of Tibetan monks assisting earthquake victims and removing

corpses from under the rubble in Sichuan, China, in August 2017 — the same month as the refugees began arriving in Bangladesh — were said to be of “Muslims killed by Buddhist monks”.⁷ A picture of rows of dead children in a school yard, supposedly of Rohingyas who had been butchered by the Myanmar military, turned out to be from a school in Nigeria, where children had been killed by Boko Haram, a jihadist outfit known for its brutality.⁸ Such online propaganda only served to discredit other, more objective reporting of the crisis and of the atrocities that have been committed by the Myanmar military.

Another threat to the media and professional journalism comes from China. By 2009, Beijing was spending US\$6.6 billion⁹ to expand its global media presence and push the Chinese narrative. 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 (BRI) and Beijing’s view of what is happening in Hong Kong.¹⁰ Such PR drive is especially important to China as Myanmar is the only country that can provide it direct access to the Indian Ocean, and is therefore a key link in the entire BRI project.

While it can be argued that organisations such as 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 their editorial stance like China does. Indeed, the truism, “There is no such

thing as free lunch” rings true when it comes to Chinese support for the media, political organisations, or civil society groups.

Beijing has also invited Myanmar journalists on all-paid-for trips to China, where they are treated to lavish dinners and taken sightseeing to the Great Wall.¹¹ No doubt, proving to be more professional than their Chinese hosts had expected, many Myanmar journalists later complained that they had not been allowed to interview any Chinese officials or engage in any other journalistic activities.¹² This seems to have left China largely dependent on its own writers in getting its views across to the Myanmar public.

India, Myanmar’s other big neighbour, in contrast, has done little to interact with the Myanmar media. But if it does, its emphasis should be on offering opportunities for professional reporting. Peace efforts in India’s northeast, where there are ethnic insurgencies not unlike those in Myanmar, would surely pique the interest of Myanmar journalists. They could be encouraged to cover India’s approach to the problem.

THE BAY OF BENGAL AND THE INDIAN OCEAN: THE NEXT HOTSPOTS?

The Bay of Bengal, after which BIMSTEC is named, and the Indian Ocean, should provide the professional media plenty to write about. Around 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.¹³ 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. While this may appear innocuous, 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. However, the facility is also close to US bases in the region, including the one 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 of China’s newly established presence in this maritime region been made the subject of proper analysis. This may be beyond the scope of BIMSTEC, but they are issues of great interest for the media.

Apart from building a military presence in Djibouti, China is also investing in several port projects in the South Asian region. These include Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Gwadar in Pakistan. The most important perhaps 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 – that China is in the Indian Ocean region to stay, and there is a new security paradigm at play in the Bay of Bengal and beyond that could alter its balance of power.

MYANMAR: CHINA'S GATEWAY TO SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

China's plans to reach the Indian Ocean region 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.¹⁴

The article mentioned 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 to 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 of 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 planning behind the step reportedly began in 1995, after a closed-door meeting in Washington between India's then

Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao and then US President Bill Clinton. It 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."¹⁵

FENC is based in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the local command of the three services of the Indian armed forces coordinates its activities in the Indian Ocean. This is India's first such integrated command. Speaking at a roundtable conference on 12 April 2010, organised by the New Delhi-based think tank National Maritime Foundation, Chief Admiral Gary Roughead of the US Navy stated that America's 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".¹⁶ The aim of this cooperation has never been stated officially, but is nevertheless clear – to counter the rise of China.

In August 2011, China 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 *Times of India* reported at the time: "The move is bound to draw close scrutiny from India, which is worried about China's military goals in the area."¹⁷ Increased 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 a higher frequency of Chinese chatter on their radars. The presence of Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean is also a worry for India as it is for other Indian Ocean littorals.

It may be argued that these geostrategic concerns—and media coverage of such issues—are not part of the charter that 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, as well as freedom of navigation, controlling transnational threats, harnessing and sharing the natural wealth of the Bay of Bengal, and promoting infrastructural and people-to-people connectivity.¹⁸ Surely, that also means having 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 its Bay of Bengal. It is something the professional media would most certainly want to cover, while also countering misinformation spread by hackers and internet trolls.

CONCLUSION

If BIMSTEC is to be taken more seriously, it

needs more publicity; this, however, can be achieved only if, and when, the bloc proves that it is in fact doing something of impact on the economic and/or political power balance in the Indo-Pacific region. While promoting its efforts, BIMSTEC should interact more with professional journalists, including those who work for established newspapers and magazines, as well as websites with competent editors and fact-checkers. It is especially important to track and counter China-based internet trolls, who are masters at disseminating fake news. BIMSTEC could rebut them with professionally designed internet platforms, regular press conferences, and dissemination of press releases.

The best way forward would be for BIMSTEC to be open and transparent, and to invite professional journalists to places of interest in the region. These would include Indian naval installations in the Bay of Bengal, and especially the Andaman Islands, as well as industrial sites in Bangladesh and eastern India. Other ways to stimulate interest in BIMSTEC would be by providing better information about upcoming BIMSTEC summits; and, between those events, issuing regular press releases about BIMSTEC activities. The internet could of course be used as well, but websites should be designed and maintained by professionals, so that they are informative and objective. That is the only way BIMSTEC can get the media attention it desires and deserves. ©RF

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ENDNOTES

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