

## BIMSTEC and Disaster Management: Future Prospects for Regional Cooperation

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**ABSTRACT** The Bay of Bengal is highly prone to extreme weather events, many of which result in massive disaster. The sub-regional grouping, BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral and Technical Cooperation), took a long time to begin nurturing their collective capabilities in disaster mitigation. It was only after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, which caused overwhelming devastation in the region, that BIMSTEC identified the area of 'Environment and Disaster Management' among its priorities for cooperation. Since then, however, the Bay littorals have achieved little progress in cooperating towards disaster management. This brief analyses the reasons for such inertia, and explores future prospects.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bay of Bengal used to be known as 'Kalapani' or 'dark waters', alluding to its characteristic storminess.<sup>1</sup> Such tempestuous nature of the Bay causes frequent natural hazards such as cyclones, which wreak havoc in the littoral countries. From 1996 to 2015 alone, some 317,000 people were killed in disasters that struck the region; 16 million people lost their homes in the same period, and massive economic losses were recorded.<sup>2</sup> In February 2020, the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)—the only sub-regional/regional organisation<sup>a,3</sup> exclusive to the Bay region—conducted its Second Disaster Management Exercise, 23 long years after it was established in 1997.<sup>4</sup>

Today the area of disaster management has emerged not only as a means for harnessing collective strategies for disaster mitigation, but also as a pathway for promoting strategic equations. Accordingly, a plethora of initiatives are being undertaken to revitalise and strengthen the BIMSTEC sector on 'Environment and Disaster Management'.

This brief analyses how BIMSTEC has approached disaster management since its inception and explores its future prospects. It has four objectives: to understand the geographic vulnerability of the Bay of Bengal region to natural hazards; to estimate the disastrous impact of these hazards on Bay

littoral countries; to comprehend the BIMSTEC experience of developing collaborative disaster management in the region; and to enquire into the challenges and opportunities that are expected to affect the prospects of the BIMSTEC sector on environment and disaster management.

## DISASTER VULNERABILITY IN THE BAY OF BENGAL REGION

The Bay of Bengal with its triangular shape, the low flat coastal terrain, shallow depth,<sup>5</sup> and the 'easterly waves'<sup>ib,6</sup> is one of the epicentres of the 'World's Hazard Belt'.<sup>c,7</sup> Apart from the cyclones that originate in the Bay, cyclonic winds from the Pacific Ocean are also drawn to it in the absence of any large landmass at the intersection of these two seas. Tsunamis also occur, as southeast of the Bay lies the Andaman-Sumatra Subduction Zone, where seismic activity is intense along the mutually jostling European and Indo-Australian tectonic plates. The recurrent earthquakes trigger tsunamis, the worst of which was witnessed in 2004.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the entire shoreline of the Bay, with a high population count of 1.4 billion people<sup>9</sup> is exposed to frequent disaster risk of significant magnitude. Among the BIMSTEC member countries, Sri Lanka, which is situated south-west of the Bay of Bengal, experiences intermittent cyclones and consequent floods. Tsunamis are infrequent but cause substantial

a BIMSTEC has seven member countries: Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand. Upon inception, BIMSTEC proclaimed itself to be sub-regional in character. Today, however, BIMSTEC refers to itself as a regional organisation, as can be seen in its literature, including its website.

b Easterly waves are small travelling circulations which have the potential to develop into larger tropical cyclones.

c The Indian Ocean is often referred to as the 'World's Hazard Belt'.

damage given the country's proximity to the Andaman-Sumatra Subduction Zone.<sup>10</sup> The Indian east coast forming the Bay's western shores, witnesses an average of three cyclones every year. The northern and southern parts of the east coast are vulnerable to tsunamis.<sup>11</sup> Located at the peak of the Bay, Bangladesh is frequently affected by severe tropical cyclones, floods and earthquakes.<sup>12</sup> Myanmar is also susceptible to destructive cyclones and floods.<sup>13</sup> The west coast of Thailand frames the Bay as it merges into the Andaman Sea. It is relatively less vulnerable to disasters because the Andaman and Nicobar Islands lying parallel to the Thai states of Ranong,

PhangNga, and Phuket, act as a buffer. At the same time, however, Thailand was also significantly affected by the tsunami of 2004 because of its geographic proximity to the epicentre. Given the high population density along the coastlines, the natural hazards frequently translate into disasters<sup>d</sup> that cause massive devastation to lives and livelihoods.<sup>14</sup> Table 1 provides an overview of the impact that cyclones and tsunamis have had on the coastal countries of BIMSTEC in the past five years. No discussion on disasters in the Bay of Bengal may be conducted without a reference to the tsunami of 2004—the deadliest ever to have been recorded in history.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1: Impact of cyclones and tsunamis on coastal countries of BIMSTEC<sup>e</sup>**

| Year | Disasters            | Impact                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2004 | Indian Ocean Tsunami | Sri Lanka suffered 30,000 fatalities and economic losses of US\$1.5 billion. <sup>16</sup> In India 10,273 people died, 5823 were missing and 22750 hectares of agricultural land were damaged. <sup>17</sup> Myanmar's official figures pegged the death toll at 86. <sup>18,f</sup> Thailand witnessed thousands of deaths and economic losses valued at US\$508 million. <sup>19</sup> Bangladesh recorded two deaths. <sup>20</sup> |
| 2015 | Cyclone Komen        | In India, 83 people died and 107,808 houses were damaged. <sup>21</sup> Another 1.5 million people were affected in Bangladesh. <sup>22</sup> Myanmar witnessed severe flooding. <sup>23</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2016 | Cyclone Roanu        | 30 people died <sup>24</sup> and almost half a million people were displaced in Bangladesh. <sup>25</sup> Sri Lanka suffered 104 deaths and losses of US\$2 billion. <sup>26</sup> In Myanmar, 27,757 people were affected. <sup>27</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|      | Cyclone Vardah       | In India 9,000 people had to be evacuated to relief camps. <sup>28</sup> Tamil Nadu suffered economic losses of US\$1 billion. <sup>29</sup> In southern Thailand, 14 people were killed. <sup>30</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 2017 | Cyclone Ockhi        | In India, 350 people died <sup>31</sup> and the coastal fisheries sector suffered a loss of INR 821 crores. <sup>32</sup> In Sri Lanka, 414 were killed and 32,000 houses were damaged. <sup>33</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|      | Cyclone Mora         | Some 200,000 people were displaced in Bangladesh, and six were killed. <sup>34</sup> In Sri Lanka, 150 people died. <sup>35</sup> Damage was inflicted on Rakhine, Myanmar <sup>36</sup> and flood warnings were issued in Thailand. <sup>37</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                      |

d When natural hazards harm life and livelihood they are recognised as disasters.

e The death tolls and other figures mentioned in this table have been obtained mostly from news reports as official figures were often unavailable in the public domain.

f In Myanmar the unofficial death toll was deemed to be closer to 400-600.

|      |                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2018 | Cyclone Titli  | Eight lives were lost in India. <sup>38</sup> In Odisha alone, almost 300,000 people had to be evacuated to cyclone shelters. <sup>39</sup>                                                                                                                                                  |
|      | Cyclone Gaja   | In India, 45 died and 250,000 were evacuated. <sup>40</sup> Damage to houses was estimated at INR 3.4 lakh. <sup>41</sup> Some 1,000 homes were damaged in Sri Lanka and 100 people were displaced. <sup>42</sup>                                                                            |
| 2019 | Cyclone Fani   | In Odisha, India, 64 people died <sup>43</sup> and over 10 million people were affected. <sup>44</sup> In Bangladesh, 12 people were killed. <sup>45</sup>                                                                                                                                   |
|      | Cyclone Bulbul | 12 people were killed in India and another 12 in Bangladesh. The latter evacuated 2.1 million people to cyclone shelters. <sup>46</sup>                                                                                                                                                      |
| 2020 | Cyclone Amphan | In India, 98 people were killed in West Bengal alone. <sup>47</sup> Thousands of 'kutchas' houses on the coastal parts of West Bengal were destroyed <sup>48</sup> and economic damage stood at almost US\$13 billion. Bangladesh suffered economic losses of US\$130 million. <sup>49</sup> |

Source: Author's own, using various sources.

## THE BIMSTEC RESPONSE

### Passive Phase (1997-2004)

Initially an organisation devoted to economic and technical cooperation, BIMSTEC at its inception did not focus on disasters or their management despite the almost regular occurrence of cyclones in the Bay. The first mention of the need to incorporate disaster management under the work programme of the grouping was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting of 2000, or three years after its formation.<sup>50</sup>

No further mention of disaster management is made in the 4<sup>th</sup>,<sup>51</sup> 5<sup>th</sup><sup>52</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup><sup>53</sup> Ministerial Meetings that were held in 2001, 2002 and 2004, respectively. In July 2004, only five months before the tsunami would hit the Bay of Bengal region, the 1<sup>st</sup> BIMSTEC Summit declaration identified “natural

disaster mitigation and management” as an area in which the member countries would explore cooperation.<sup>54</sup>

### Provisionally Responsive Phase (2005-2006)

The Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 served as a wakeup call to the urgency of cooperating in disaster management. Among the Bay littoral countries, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand suffered the worst impact from the tsunami.<sup>55</sup>

In the Eighth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC, it was decided to include ‘Environment and Disaster Management’ as one of the organisation’s priority area of concerns.<sup>56</sup> India offered to lead in 2006; the proposal was readily accepted by the organisation. After all, India had been active in extending relief and humanitarian assistance to its neighbours (including BIMSTEC member countries) despite being heavily affected itself in the aftermath of the tsunami.<sup>57</sup> India also

g India deployed several Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations to assist other disaster-affected littorals at the behest of the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force. Three simultaneous disaster relief operations had been launched: Operation Castor to Maldives, Operation Rainbow to Sri Lanka, and Operation Gambhir to Indonesia. Naval ships and aircraft deposited about 550 tonnes of relief supplies, including 200 tonnes of provisions and medicines. The Indian government also committed US \$500,000 to Thailand as relief aid.

proposed the creation of the Weather and Climate Centre, which would collaborate with other relevant regional institutions such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Metrological Research Centre (SMRC) and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC).<sup>58</sup> The ministerial meeting also welcomed India's offer to organise a workshop on cooperation in the area of remote sensing for environment and disaster management applications.<sup>59</sup>

In October 2006, the Indian National Institute of Disaster Management in collaboration with the Ministry of External Affairs hosted the 'Workshop on Regional Cooperation among BIMSTEC Countries for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management'. Recognising the need for a holistic approach to disaster management transcending geopolitical considerations, the workshop reiterated the need for proactive regional cooperation in all aspects of disaster management: mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery and rehabilitation. Taking inspiration from the principles articulated in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, 2005 and the SAARC Framework on Disaster Management, 2006, it sought to integrate mutual cooperation in disaster risk reduction and management. Presentations were made by the member countries on various aspects of disaster management like early warning, emergency response, knowledge sharing, reconstruction and rehabilitation.<sup>60</sup> The Workshop also prepared an Agenda for Action for effective regional cooperation among BIMSTEC countries.<sup>61</sup>

These two years demonstrated a new vibrancy within BIMSTEC. A sector on 'Environment and Disaster Management' was created, discussions began on the creation of a Centre on Weather and Climate for improving disaster prediction techniques, and various workshops and training programmes were conducted. The Eighth and Ninth Ministerial Meetings of BIMSTEC devoted substantial discussions to this sector of cooperation. However, it was provisional in nature, and this vibrancy did not last long.

### **Phase of dormancy (2007-2014)**

In the absence of any strong financial commitment from the member states, BIMSTEC's activities related to disaster management tapered and no new ventures were undertaken. Thus began a phase of dormancy which was to characterise BIMSTEC's approach towards disaster management for the next eight years, from 2007-2014. Throughout this period BIMSTEC was limited to the creation of the Weather and Climate Centre in India.

In the Tenth Ministerial Meeting of August, 2008 the Heads of Delegation approved the Memorandum of Association (MoA) of the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate in India,<sup>62</sup> which was finalised two months later in the 11<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting of November, 2008.<sup>63</sup> No further progress was recorded in 2009<sup>64</sup> and two years later in 2011, the countries agreed to expedite the signing of the MoA.<sup>65</sup>

This is not surprising. After all, in those years, BIMSTEC was more concerned with the impending change in its chairmanship which

was subsequently undertaken by Nepal, and the establishment of the Permanent Secretariat at Dhaka.<sup>66</sup> Another two years later, the MoA was finally signed in 2014 at the 3rd BIMSTEC Summit of 2014 and the Centre was established at the National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting in Noida, India.<sup>67</sup> The Centre promotes cooperation between BIMSTEC member states in identified areas of fundamental and applied scientific research in weather prediction and climate modelling. It also works on capacity-building in weather and climate research.<sup>68</sup>

Until 2014, therefore, BIMSTEC's progress in terms developing collective disaster management remained restricted to the domain of early warning. Progress within BIMSTEC soon gained momentum owing to rapid changes within India and in the wider Bay.

### **Proactive phase (2015-present)**

A series of developments in India's domestic scenario as well as in its collaborations with other states, and a transition in the strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal caused the BIMSTEC sector on 'Environment and Disaster Management' to regain vigour beginning in 2015.

#### ***Changes at the domestic front:***

In 2014 a new government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected to power in India<sup>69</sup> that prioritised India's foreign policy endeavours. Under the rubric of expanding connectivity with its neighbouring states, India stressed on collaboration in the domain

of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) as a means of expanding India's outreach in the region. Consequently, the "five-fold framework for India's maritime engagement," that was outlined by Modi in 2015 established India's focus to deepen cooperation with its regional partners to cope with matters of maritime security like natural disasters through multilateral collaboration.<sup>70</sup>

India's maritime military strategy, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* that outlined India's role as a "net security provider" in the region was also released in the same year.<sup>71</sup> HADR has since then emerged as one of the key components of the Indian navy's peace-time strategy. Subsequently, India's first National Disaster Management Plan was released in 2016, articulating India's enthusiasm to build disaster resilience in the region through sustained regional partnerships.<sup>72</sup>

#### ***New collaborations***

The Modi government reaffirmed the country's 'Look East' policy and renamed it 'Act East'. It emphasised on the security domain unlike the earlier policy which was commerce-oriented.<sup>73</sup> This prompted the government to undertake cooperation in mitigation of shared non-traditional security threats with its eastern neighbours. HADR then emerged as a cardinal area of cooperation to manage the turbulence in the common maritime space of the Bay of Bengal. The Vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All) in the Indian Ocean region was launched in 2016, providing additional impetus for collaboration.<sup>74</sup>

In 2015, India along with other BIMSTEC member countries signed the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 that prioritised strengthening disaster risk governance. Towards this goal, at the regional level it envisioned the formulation of regional strategies and mechanisms to promote efficient planning, creation of common information systems, and exchange of good practices in capacity building.<sup>75</sup> The signatories then began working on developing a collective disaster management system at the regional level which further encouraged the BIMSTEC members to revitalise this sector of cooperation on ‘Environment and Disaster Management’.

India further sought to enhance the BIMSTEC platform after the SAARC Summit was stalled in Islamabad in November 2016 owing to tensions in India-Pakistan relations.<sup>76</sup> At the BIMSTEC Goa Retreat in 2016, India initiated discussions on closer cooperation in disaster management through joint exercises, sharing of information, capacity building, early warning system, adoption of preventive measures, and joint action on relief and rehabilitation.<sup>77</sup> This marked a transition from the earlier focus on collaboration in early warning systems. For the first time, all aspects of disaster management—rescue, relief and recovery—were taken into consideration.

India’s gradual prioritisation of BIMSTEC has been more clearly manifested in recent years. While Prime Minister Modi invited all SAARC members to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014, he extended the gesture to the BIMSTEC leaders when re-elected in 2019. Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam

Jaishankar has stated that India sees BIMSTEC as having new energy and possibilities, unlike SAARC that has its own problems.<sup>78</sup> Avoiding India’s difficult western borders, BIMSTEC “is the only forum that brings together India’s strategic peripheries (South, East and North) under one single grouping.”<sup>79</sup>

### ***Demand for greater engagement in the Bay of Bengal***

Situated at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Bay of Bengal is rich in hydrocarbon reserves and a number of Sea Lanes of Communication important for trade in energy and other goods, traverse through its waters before merging into the Strait of Malacca. China’s rise in the Indian Ocean region has raised apprehensions about the continued freedom of navigation in these waters. The need to ensure un-interrupted trade flow, coupled with the desire to partake of the Bay’s wealth of resources, has attracted many stakeholders to this region. Indeed, the Bay has attained geo-political centrality in the Indo-Pacific realm. Such a situation has convinced the Bay littorals that their economic and security interests would be protected through regional cooperation.<sup>80</sup>

For the smaller member countries, while dependency on China can act as a restraining force in regional integration, their apprehensions are propelling them to forge deeper engagements. Several of the smaller member states are welcoming India’s initiatives (in this case promoting regional integration through BIMSTEC) across the region if only to “tactically increase their own bargaining power with Beijing”.<sup>81</sup> Moreover,

**Table 2: Recent developments in Disaster Management under BIMSTEC**

| Year | Event                                                                                                   | Agenda                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2017 | First Annual Disaster Management Exercise                                                               | Table Top Exercise, Field Training Exercises on Earthquake and Flood and an After Action Review <sup>82</sup> was conducted.                                                                       |
|      | 15 <sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting                                                                    | Recorded the need for closer cooperation in disaster management and agreed to establish an Expert Group on Disaster Management within BIMSTEC. <sup>83</sup>                                       |
| 2018 | Inaugural Governing Board and Scientific Advisory Council Meeting of the Centre for Weather and Climate | Held four years after the establishment of the Centre in 2014. A Workshop entitled 'Severe Weather/Climate Disaster warning for BIMSTEC Region' was held in New Delhi. <sup>84</sup>               |
|      | 16 <sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting                                                                    | Decided to establish an Inter-governmental Expert Group to develop a plan of action on improving preparedness and coordination for responding to natural disasters. <sup>85</sup>                  |
|      | Fourth Summit Declaration                                                                               | Noted specific areas requiring development within disaster management such as adoption of preventive measures, rehabilitation and capacity building. <sup>86</sup>                                 |
|      | BIMSTEC think tank dialogue on regional security                                                        | Deliberated on activation of inter-governmental mechanisms to utilise regional resources, and institutionalise cooperation in disaster management. <sup>87</sup>                                   |
| 2020 | Second Disaster Management Exercise                                                                     | Evaluated existing capabilities, strengthened regional response mechanism and conducted risk assessment of cultural heritage sites in the context of flood disaster due to cyclones. <sup>88</sup> |

Source: Author's own.

in the purview of collaboration in disaster management, the China factor is unlikely to have much impact as it is a humanitarian concern and therefore unlikely to invite political consequences. Furthermore, the issue of climate change which threatens to increase the intensity of natural hazards has

provided an additional impetus to revive the sector on 'Environment and Disaster Management.' Due to all these reasons, several developments have been undertaken to develop collaborative disaster management under BIMSTEC in recent years (see Table 2).



## CONTINUING CHALLENGES

There are various factors that continue to impede the growth of cooperation among the BIMSTEC states in the area of disaster management.

**1. Lack of maturity:** Although established 23 years ago, BIMSTEC is still at a nascent stage as sincere efforts for its growth have only been made in the past few years. Concrete discussions to enhance cooperation in disaster management is a recent phenomenon and therefore it is not surprising that there have been inconsistencies in executing the plans. For example, although the BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise has been designed to be held annually, it has only been conducted once in 2017 and again in 2020. The term ‘Annual’ has since been removed from its name. The plans to enhance capacity building and to create an Inter-Governmental Expert Group on Disaster Management have yet to materialise.

**2. Narrow collaboration on disaster management:** The focus within BIMSTEC so far has been on early warning systems and disaster management exercises. It is unlikely that BIMSTEC will venture into those aspects of disaster management that encroach into areas of national jurisdiction such as reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes—which involve shifting populations from vulnerable areas to more sheltered spaces and developing socio-economic programmes to enhance people’s resilience. Engagement in these aspects requires providing BIMSTEC with much more autonomy than it presently has. Nonetheless, there are other aspects of disaster

management in which BIMSTEC can broaden cooperation: capacity building through sharing of knowledge and technical know-how, framing standard operating procedures, and creating a disaster response fund and force.<sup>89</sup>

**3. Lack of long-term plans for disaster management:** BIMSTEC lacks a constructive plan for long-term collaboration, in general, as well as for disaster management in particular. In the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Meeting in 2018, the Secretariat was tasked to prepare a preliminary draft Charter for the organisation outlining its long-term vision and priorities for cooperation.<sup>90</sup> The Third BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee Meeting and Senior Officials Meeting held in March 2020 confirms the finalisation of this draft Charter which will be deliberated upon again in the upcoming Ministerial Meeting before being adopted in the Fifth Summit Meeting scheduled to be held in late 2020.<sup>91</sup>

**4. Absence of a consolidated fund:** As of 2018, BIMSTEC had a lean budget of US\$ 200,000, primarily used for operational duties and leaving little for funding cooperative efforts.<sup>92</sup> To overcome this issue the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit, directed its member states to explore the possibility of establishing a BIMSTEC Developmental Fund (BDF) at an “appropriate time” and with voluntary contributions from member states for planning and financing of BIMSTEC projects.<sup>93</sup> The BDF is likely to allow member countries “to focus and invest in their specific ‘pet projects’, in effect overriding the consensus clause and allowing for a multi-speed organisation.”<sup>94</sup> Once formulated, the

BFD will enable India to better mobilise resources for the strengthening collaboration in disaster management. However, no further steps have yet been taken towards the creation of this Fund and there is no clear timeframe for its establishment.

**5. Institutional weaknesses:** The BIMSTEC Secretariat continues to be understaffed, with less than 10 people. It therefore needs to be strengthened through increased financial and human resources.<sup>95</sup> It also needs to be granted more autonomy by the member countries to enable bold decision-making. The Fourth BIMSTEC Summit for the first time included a series of commitments to strengthen the organisation's institutional capacity. Apart from the Charter and BFD, it envisioned the creation of a Permanent Working Committee (PWC) and expansion of the number of directors from three to seven.<sup>96</sup> Although the PWC has now been created, more vigour is required to actualise the other reforms. Without a strong institutional base, BIMSTEC member-states will not be encouraged to provide adequate financial resources for crafting the kind of disaster management cooperation that is required.

At the same time, BISMTEC is faced with a number of opportunities which if utilised can pave the way for effective collective disaster management.

## EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES

**1. Learning from each other:** The 17<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC Senior Officials Meeting of 2017 advocated for the BIMSTEC countries to learn from each other through the sharing of best practices. In this regard, it must be noted that

Bangladesh's 'cyclone preparedness programme' has been recognised as a global best practise and Thailand's last-mile connectivity of tsunami early warning system is also appreciated.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, in the outcome document that was produced after the first meeting of BIMSTEC think tank dialogue on regional security in November 2018, the member countries called on India to provide training to member states at its disaster management training centre in Nagpur.<sup>98</sup> The document further recommended that the BIMSTEC Weather and Climate Centre be renamed as BIMSTEC Disaster Management and Climate Change Centre to convert it into a development institution on disaster management.<sup>99</sup> The moment is therefore opportune for the BIMSTEC member countries to put forth their expertise and create a collective knowledge pool to enhance the disaster management capacity of the region.

**2. Promoting HADR:** Keeping in mind the geographic proximity of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) to Myanmar and Thailand (both BIMSTEC members), India must consider developing the Islands as a point of first response to provide HADR to these countries. The geographic proximity will aid in providing faster HADR in emergency crisis situations. In the future, a BIMSTEC HADR brigade in the form of a disaster response team with contributions from member countries may also be stationed in the ANI.<sup>100</sup> Developing the Islands in this capacity will not only promote India's strategic aspirations of strengthening ties with its eastern neighbours but will also fuel collaborations in disaster management within BISMTEC.

**3. Collaborating with ASEAN:** India as a partner of the ASEAN may also work with Thailand and Myanmar (members of both ASEAN and BIMSTEC) to facilitate collaboration between the two organisations. Although it has often been argued that ASEAN's agility and response to natural disasters remains inadequate<sup>101</sup> and members rely more on bilateral aid, it has been functional in coordinating relief assistance to member countries such as during Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar<sup>102</sup> and more recently during the tsunami which hit the Palu coast of Indonesia in 2018.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, among the other regional arrangements of disaster management that prevail in the Indian Ocean Region such as under the Indian Ocean Rim Association or the SAARC Disaster Management Centre, ASEAN has a more comprehensive structure of disaster management.<sup>h,104</sup> Closer cooperation between ASEAN and BIMSTEC will therefore provide the latter with a guiding template for development in this domain. Indeed, BIMSTEC is already looking at adopting the model of the AHA Centre on disaster management.<sup>105</sup>

**4. Creating a 'BIMSTEC Plus':** Improved engagements between BIMSTEC and the countries of Southeast Asia through ASEAN might in time lead to the creation of 'BIMSTEC Plus' in the region. In this arrangement, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore as countries of the 'extended' Bay may be inducted within BIMSTEC to build a more collective system of disaster management in

the region.<sup>106</sup> Indonesia is vulnerable to natural disasters and in recent years has engaged in promising collaborations in disaster management with India. Malaysia and Singapore, on the other hand, are both active providers of HADR in crisis situations<sup>107</sup> and inculcating their expertise and technological know-how within the ambit of BIMSTEC might prove beneficial for the organisation.

At the 16<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, Thailand's Minister of Foreign Affairs shared his vision of streamlining BIMSTEC's structure of cooperation to make it more efficient and responsive through a concept paper on 'Reprioritisation of BIMSTEC Pillars of Cooperation'. The paper proposed the reduction of BIMSTEC's 14 pillars of cooperation to just five: 'Connectivity', 'Trade and Investment', 'People-to-People Contact', 'Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime/Security', and 'Science and Technology'.<sup>108</sup> This was welcomed by other member countries at the 4<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC Summit.<sup>109</sup> While the sector on 'Environment and Disaster Management' does not feature as one of the five areas, it may now be understood as having been included under the domain of 'Transnational Security'.

## CONCLUSION

BIMSTEC appears poised to give greater attention to disaster management. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a challenge. Although India had in recent years

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h Regional mechanisms for disaster management for ASEAN include and extend beyond an ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management, the ASEAN Joint Disaster Response Plan, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre) which provides early warning as well as coordinates between member countries during disasters and the ASEAN Emergency Response and Assessment Team that is deployed during disasters.

shifted its attention from SAARC<sup>i,110</sup> to BIMSTEC, faced with the pandemic, Prime Minister Modi convened a SAARC Video Summit to provide a region-wide response to the crisis. However, rather than interpreting India's move as an act of prioritising SAARC over BIMSTEC, it may be understood to be a diplomatic strategy to re-engage with the former which had remained dormant since the failed Summit of 2016. It has been argued that Modi, realising the need for a comprehensive policy of best practices and having been critiqued by other SAARC members for not letting the organisation function normally, utilised this crisis to revitalise the organisation.<sup>111</sup> The choice therefore does not necessarily challenge India's commitment to BIMSTEC.

Another development which may challenge the prospects of BIMSTEC is the emergence of 'Quad Plus' - a grouping of the Quad countries-India, Australia, Japan and USA<sup>j,112</sup> plus 3; New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam. The Quad had its roots in the Tsunami Core Group (2004-2005) through which the officials of the four countries had coordinated relief assistance in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami.<sup>113</sup> Now once again faced with a humanitarian crisis, the Quad seems to have awakened to possibilities of revival especially through collaboration with other regional countries of the Indo-Pacific. A teleconference was held on the COVID crisis by

the Quad, inclusive of three other Indo-Pacific powers, and since then it has held subsequent meetings on other issues such as technology sharing and reviving the global economy.<sup>114</sup> The question which therefore arises is that with the emergence of such a grouping in which major powers are members, would the Bay littorals continue to be interested in rejuvenating BIMSTEC or would they be more inclined to be a part of the 'Quad Plus'?

It may be argued that the Quad has so far been largely subjected to major power dynamics which had once led to its collapse.<sup>115</sup> BIMSTEC, on the other hand, is based on a shared past; the absence of major disputes in the Bay lends stability to the platform. Also in the BIMSTEC, the smaller littorals would have more say than in the Quad where they are likely to be overshadowed by the interests of the major powers. Most importantly, BIMSTEC is exclusive to the Bay of Bengal region while the Quad has a much wider purview covering the entire Indo-Pacific. BIMSTEC is therefore much more intrinsic to the immediate policy goals of the Bay littorals.

Over the years, BIMSTEC's approach towards disaster management has been conditioned by the way in which its members have responded to changes in both the strategic as well as natural environments. For the smaller member countries, any

i In the Summit India proposed a SAARC COVID Fund pledging a contribution of 10 million USD and further referred to the role that could be played by the SAARC Disaster Management Centre in enabling a coordinated response towards combating this disease.

j The Quad or Quadrilateral Initiative-an informal strategic dialogue between India, USA, Japan and Australia had been dissolved in 2008 in apprehension of earning Chinese displeasure until it resurfaced again in 2017 as Quad 2.0 to maintain status quo in the Indo-Pacific. Purely strategic objectives has however neither lent stability nor strength to the grouping.

collaborative mechanism of disaster management under BIMSTEC will ease their concerns about the impact of disasters to a large extent. Of course, India also stands to learn from the best practices of other members, but cultivating the domain under

BIMSTEC is more of a strategic move for India given its heightened clout. For all BIMSTEC members, it is beneficial to utilise this strategic moment of re-engagement in the Bay and proactively develop the institution for a strong regional system of disaster management. [ORF](#)

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