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A Report
on
Kolkata Colloquium 2019
Reimagining BIMSTEC



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Agenda

In June 1997, four countries from the Bay of Bengal region, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand constructed a sub-regional economic cooperation through the Bangkok Declaration, ‘to promote sub-regional cooperation in the areas of trade, investment, technological exchange’ and contribute to peace and prosperity in the region. Soon Myanmar joined the organization followed by Nepal and Bhutan in 2004. With seven countries as members, the organization adopted a new name—Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). In order to serve as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia and to reinforce sub-regional cooperation BIMSTEC explores areas of common interest and at present cooperates in 14 such sectors comprising Trade and Investment; Transport and Communication; Energy; Tourism; Technology; Fisheries; Agriculture; Public Health; Poverty Alleviation; Counter-terrorism and Transnational Crime; Environment and Disaster Management; People-to-People Contact; Cultural Cooperation; and Climate Change. Each member country is tasked to lead one or more sectors depending on its national expertise.

However, much of BIMSTEC’s promise to ‘harness shared and accelerated growth through mutual co-operation ... by utilizing regional resources and geographical advantages’ has remained confined to paper. Recently, with the resurgence of strategic and economic interests in the Bay as part of a larger maritime strategic space, namely, the Indo-Pacific, BIMSTEC as a promising sub-regional grouping is gaining traction. 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 impacting deeply all other BIMSTEC member-countries. Moreover, the Bay is plagued by a variety of non-traditional security threats such as illegal migration and armed piracy. Freedom of navigation in these waters, controlling transnational threats, harnessing and sharing the Bay’s natural wealth, promoting infrastructural and people-to-people connectivity thus become common issues for BIMSTEC member countries. India, in particular, with its Look/Act East Policy has a major stake in bringing together South and Southeast Asian countries in such a common endeavour with long-standing consequences for the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, it is possible that the membership of BIMSTEC may be expanded to BIMSTEC Plus in view of the growing shared interests of the countries in this region. Therefore, a lot more effort and commitment is required than exhibited so far as to reinvigorate the organization into a robust multilateral forum. When the whole world is at a critical strategic crossroads the BIMSTEC in its own way has an opportunity to set an example.

Against this backdrop, The Kolkata Colloquium was organized in which academics, thinkers, policy makers, journalists and other important stakeholders of the BIMSTEC countries as well as potential partners were assembled to analyse the brand value of BIMSTEC, its opportunities for wider collaboration and understanding of the prevalent narratives within BIMSTEC. Accordingly, the discussions in the conference were set out to generate larger perspectives for harnessing the maximum opportunities and benefits of the organisation.

Session I - Connecting Nations within BIMSTEC (rail, road and air)

Connectivity is one of the most significant issues that engage both strategic and economic aspects of policymaking in the BIMSTEC region. It is widely believed that greater connectivity in terms of infrastructure would facilitate greater economic benefits to follow. For India, developments in connectivity promise to be the harbingers of striking changes in her eastern and northeastern states including the city of Kolkata. India's Northeast could play a significant role in not only further consolidating India–Bangladesh bilateral cooperation, but also offer an opportunity to facilitate BIMSTEC's sub-regional cooperation. While there are several infrastructure connectivity projects across the region such as the Trilateral Highway Project, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and so on, many of the projects have witnessed challenges such as unforeseen delays or impediments such as regime changes. According to this session will comprise discussions on the necessity of connectivity to better link the region. What are the main impediments that have affected the development of rail, road and water connectivity? What are the suggestions for rapid progress to remove the constraints that might come up at the workshop? How do we see structural changes in bridging the gap in the near future? These were few of the questions that this session addressed.

Session II: Maritime Connectivity and Significance of the Bay of Bengal

In present times, the Bay of Bengal has gained salience as part of a strategic maritime space. Located at the intersection of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, the Bay is also home to important Sea Lanes of Communication which are used for trade through the Strait of Malacca. The assertive rise of China has created apprehensions about the freedom of navigation in these waters. Efforts are thus being undertaken by the powers that operate in these waters to rekindle connectivity across the Bay and partake of its benefits. This session thus looked into how the Bay littorals as well as other stakeholders are undertaking bilateral and multilateral initiatives to reinvigorate connectivity in the Bay. What are the impediments that hinder trade and connectivity across the Bay and how can these be overcome? How can cooperation in maritime safety and security be strengthened in the Bay in the light of both traditional and non-traditional security concerns? As the only sub-regional organization operating in the Bay, how can BIMSTEC help strengthen and institutionalize multilateral maritime connectivity in these waters? These were the few key questions that the session intended to raise.

Session III: Climate Change, Disaster Management and BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal region is witness to frequent and disruptive natural disasters which have called for the establishment of robust disaster management networks and apparatuses in countries like India and Indonesia. In addition, the region is also being affected by climate change and its attendant impacts. This session highlighted the need for a coordinated approach towards mitigation of climate change and effective management of disasters under the intuitional framework of the BIMSTEC.

The key questions addressed in this session were: Does climate change as an exogenous force feature in the equations of connectivity initiatives between the nations of the regions? How are nations preparing to combat such a force? There are circumstances where mitigation might not

remain an option, instead, adaptation measures need to be pursued. What are the possible in situ adaptation measures? Can the withdrawal of population, if executed strategically and managed efficiently, be a way to adapt to forces of climate change in regions where neither mitigation nor in situ adaptation can work? Is transboundary cooperation between nations feasible?

Session IV: Enhancing Trade: Engaging Members in BIMSTEC

One of the key drivers of strengthening regional cohesion is trade. However, despite the historical connect which characterizes BIMSTEC countries, commercial interactions are yet to be utilized optimally. Therefore, numerous avenues remain open to facilitate and boost trade in the region. The key questions that needed to be answered were: what inhibits trade linkages to develop despite the availability of abundant opportunities? Can the movements of investments across economies be accentuated through structural economic measures? Or are the political, strategic and security concerns so overbearing that they erode the growth of trade and investment linkages across the region?

Session V: Historical and Cultural Linkages within BIMSTEC

Cultural connections between India and BIMSTEC countries (and more generally the countries of Southeast Asia) have aroused comments in official statements and the media frequently. Such a comment looks back not only to ancient history but other recent networks associated with migration, tourism and commerce. With the exception of inputs from Buddhist pilgrimages and the Archaeological Survey of India in Myanmar and Cambodia, and some growth of nostalgia tourism between India and Bangladesh, little has been done towards building awareness of such connections. The narrative of the 'connect' is stuck in time and framework of reference, despite the excitement generated by the writing of Amitava Ghosh and Sunil Amrit. Additionally, cooperation in education as important segments of cultural interaction may pave the way to strengthen people-to-people connectivity. Against this backdrop, this session raised questions regarding what connect had been established between India and the other littorals, why it attracted limited awareness and what could be done about the state of affairs, and most importantly, how tourism can play an important role in strengthening inter littoral relations.

Special Panel Discussion 1: RCEP and BIMSTEC: Can the Two Tango?

India's participation in the mega-trade agreement, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), has long been debated and sentiments around the subject are quite divided and divergent. The RCEP initiative will be the largest trade bloc in Asia and the biggest Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in which India has ever participated. One of the most debatable issues in the ongoing RCEP negotiations is India's overall trade deficits which are increasing over the years (to begin with, India has huge trade deficits with most of the RCEP members). While the negotiating partners in RCEP have been insisting India to open up its goods market, there is reluctance in acceding to India's demand for liberalization in services. The domestic industry in India is also wary about China's participation in the RCEP that might weaken the competitiveness of Indian products in the trade bloc while providing easier access of Chinese

goods to the Indian markets. In these circumstances, the growing importance of the BIMSTEC cannot be undermined as well because of India's interest to participate along with a few countries which are mutually present in both the groups. In fact, the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement and its relevance have an important role to play in this entire idea as well.

Therefore, it was important to deliberate on the following issues: How will it enhance the export competitiveness of domestic firms and boost the Make in India' campaign? Are the two frameworks—RCEP and BIMSTEC—counteractive or complementary to each other in its functions? How can the two frameworks become successful with the above-stated circumstances?

Special Panel Discussion 2: Future of BIMSTEC within the Geostrategic Narrative of the 'Indo-Pacific'

Rather than an ideational construct the Indo-Pacific must be understood as a collective of multiple sub-regions. Hence, to understand its dynamics, it is important to delve into the developments that are occurring in these geo-political spaces. One such sub-region is the maritime space of the Bay of Bengal, strategically located between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The Bay once a livelihood of trade and connectivity is fast regaining its economic and strategic significance as it becomes critically important to protect the many Sea Lanes of Communication that traverse through its waters. In a future that is riddled with competition for energy and many other resources, the Bay with its wealth of hydrocarbons and sea routes vital for energy trade has become an arena of both cooperation and competition amongst its many stakeholders. In such a scenario, the BIMSTEC, with its members encompassing the Bay littorals, has a major role in shaping the Bay's future dynamics as also in contributing to their multidimensional development. In the broader perspective, it is thus possible that BIMSTEC will play a more expansive role within the Indo-Pacific. Under such circumstances, the following issues were deliberated upon. As the only sub-regional organization exclusive to the Bay, in what ways can BIMSTEC enter into collaborative ventures with other regional/sub-regional organizations to further integrate the Indo-Pacific? What are the multiple avenues in which BIMSTEC members can increase or begin cooperation to have an impact beyond the Bay? In a situation where many non-littoral powers are now major stakeholders in the Bay, what is the possibility of a BIMSTEC Plus in the broader context of the Indo-Pacific?

Media Workshops

In the special panel discussions, media approaches of respective member countries of the BIMSTEC towards the organization as a whole will be discussed. The deliberations of the panelists would cover issues such as the degree of importance that the media accords to BIMSTEC, the impact of regional and global political dynamics on the organization and how the media perceives the renewed interest in BIMSTEC by the member countries.

Two sessions were created to discuss the role of the media. While the first session has been entitled, 'BIMSTEC: Media's Assessment', the second session is called 'Assessing the Media:

BIMSTEC in Perspective'. The first session would address two important questions: How is BIMSTEC being perceived by the media as a new strategic framework in the region? What role can the media play in bringing BIMSTEC closer to the people? The second session would address: Which sector/sectors of the BIMSTEC has/have drawn media's maximum assessment? Are we satisfied with the role that the media has played with regard to the BIMSTEC?

Deliberations

A two-day Kolkata Colloquium 2019 on Reimagining BIMSTEC was organised by Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in Kolkata on 28 and 29 November 2019 at The LaLiT Great Eastern Hotel, Kolkata, India in collaboration with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, New Delhi, Centre for New Economic Diplomacy and Department for International Development, U.K. As the first of ORF Kolkata's flagship annual event, it hosted fifty one participants from BIMSTEC member countries engaging academics, thinkers, policy makers, journalists and other important stakeholders.

Established 22 years ago in 1997 and lying mostly idle, the resurgence of strategic and economic interests in the Bay as a part of the Indo-Pacific has caused the BIMSTEC, a sub-regional grouping of the Bay littorals, to gain traction. Gauging the significance of this opportune moment the Colloquium sought to explore the brand value of BIMSTEC, its opportunities for wider collaboration through BIMSTEC Plus and the prevalent narratives within the organization. The Colloquium started with the inaugural session followed by four business sessions and four special panel discussions. It also hosted three interactive sessions, one media workshop and concluded with a valedictory session.

Inaugural Session

Chair: Sunjoy Joshi, Chairman, Observer Research Foundation

Welcome Address: Nilanjan Ghosh, Director, Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata

Inaugural Keynote: M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Special Address: Peter Rimmele, Resident Representative India, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung



Panellists at the Inaugural Session

From left: Nilanjan Ghosh, M. Shahidul Islam, Sunjoy Joshi and Peter Rimmele



Sunjoy Joshi chairing the Inaugural Session

Chairing the inaugural session of the Kolkata Colloquium, Sunjoy Joshi drew the attention of the audience to the Bay of Bengal as an example of the power of cartography. The Bay had once been a livelihood of trade and connectivity that reached its zenith in the colonial era. It represented a microcosm of globalization much before the actual phenomenon began to set in. However, several factors that brought about the downfall of the colonial era ushered in an era of nationalism in which the littoral countries sought to prioritize self-

sufficiency rather than cultivate their trade dependencies. With a subsequent redrawing of mental maps the Bay got bifurcated into South and Southeast Asia and over time receded into isolation as a backwater of the Indian Ocean, only to be remembered when struck by natural calamities for which the Bay is infamous. Artificial or constructed barriers thus obstructed the natural confluence of commerce and culture that had once characterized the Bay.

The platform of BIMSTEC, however, by seeking to promote multilateral collaboration and integration in the Bay challenged this cartographical divide. It has the potential to be the political, cultural and economic bridge between South and Southeast Asia. The shared past of the Bay littorals and the present lack of any major disputes amongst them provides BIMSTEC with the necessary impetus to foster regional trade, security and development against the backdrop of a world which is steadily receding into bilateralism.

In his Welcome Address Nilanjan Ghosh noted that BIMSTEC can emerge as an organic response to meet the collective socio-economic and political needs of the region especially in the light of untapped potential and significant political threats that it faces. Questions were raised about the BIMSTEC FTA and the possible future of economic cooperation in the region. It was argued that proper commercial integration within BIMSTEC could transform it into a strong economic bloc and even pave the way towards having a common currency in the region. A strong and well-conceived BIMSTEC may also have the potential to balance the power dynamic in the Indo-Pacific.



Nilanjan Ghosh delivering the Welcome Address at the Inaugural Session

On that note, Shahidul Islam in his 'Inaugural Keynote' explained how BIMSTEC had been formed in 1997 for rapid economic development in the region in its various identified sectors of cooperation. Presently, the organization cooperates in 14 such sectors. It must be noted that the region is one of the fastest growing regions of the world in terms of economy but till date inter country trade amongst the littorals of the Bay amounts to only 6 per cent. However, after years of dormancy, it is only in recent years that the Bay littorals have realized the need for renewed regional commitment which coincides with the resurgence of interest in the Bay of Bengal that has attracted numerous stakeholders into its waters.



M. Shahidul Islam delivering the Inaugural Keynote at the Inaugural Session

Accordingly, a number of initiatives have been undertaken post the Goa Retreat of 2016. Since then, the member states have engaged in the Coastal Shipping Agreement and the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement. The member countries have also participated in a ports conclave to enhance port connectivity in the region. Efforts are also underway to facilitate a more conducive visa regime to promote the BIMSTEC sector of tourism. The strength of BIMSTEC lies in utilizing the cultural synergy amongst its members to promote

connectivity, economic cooperation and people-to-people connections. Media can also play a deterministic role in aiding BIMSTEC to regain its vigour.

However, the growth story of BIMSTEC is fraught with many challenges. The level of communication and connectivity remains low among the member states. This was proved when the first cultural festival had to be postponed due to lack of response to the initiative by member countries. Another problem area is that the Bay of Bengal region is one of the most disaster prone regions and frequently experiences several kinds of natural disasters like cyclones and tsunamis which cause disruption in trade across the Bay. As climate change is on the rise, natural calamities are likely to increase in future. Therefore, to create disaster preparedness in the region, it is necessary that BIMSTEC invokes local actors to undertake preparatory measures. However, despite such difficulties, BIMSTEC remains a platform for discussing ways of combating environmental degradation, drugs and human trafficking across borders.

Adding to the list of hindrances that BIMSTEC continues to face, Peter Rimmele in his Special Address identified that the organizations lack resources and opportunities which can only be overcome if the member countries fully commit to the idea of multilateralism. In the context of



Peter Rimmele delivering the Special Address at the Inaugural Session

India, BIMSTEC has acquired renewed significance in recent years as a part of India's Act East Policy as it can serve as a necessary platform for regional cooperation. Regional organizations, as Rimmel observed, are not the end but a process. In this regard, the European Union could serve as a suitable model of reference for BIMSTEC, keeping in mind the specific requirements of the region. The session concluded on the note that in a world in which the Trans-Atlantic consensus is faltering, it is important to reverse from regressing into bilateralism and use BIMSTEC to enhance multilateral collaborations. However, the organization lacks both resources and capacity and this can only be overcome when the members freely commit to the idea of multilateralism. BIMSTEC is yet to be prioritized by its members but a polycentric government approach, clear identification of agendas and economic commitment can bring the organization into limelight within the Indo-Pacific.

Opening Panel: *Connecting Nations within BIMSTEC*

Chair: Sunjoy Joshi, Chairman, Observer Research Foundation

Panellists: Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, Visiting Fellow, ORF, New Delhi, India; Nisha Taneja, Professor, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), New Delhi, India; Daw Than Than Htay, Member, Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS), Yangon, Myanmar; C. Raja Mohan, Director, Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore (NUS)



Opening Panel on 'Connecting nations within BIMSTEC'

From left: Than Than Htay, Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, Sunjoy Joshi, Nisha Taneja and C. Raja Mohan

Progressing with the Colloquium, the first panel discussion, chaired once again by Sunjoy Joshi, sought to explore the connectivity linkages amongst the member countries of BIMSTEC and discuss the importance of hard and soft forms of connectivity in rejuvenating the organization. Taking a cue from the deliberations of the Inaugural Session, conversations began on how despite being home to numerous trade routes and being a large depository of resources, the arena of the Bay of Bengal still remains as one of the least connected regions in the world. Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty put forward that BIMSTEC has remained mostly

dormant since its inception for various bureaucratic, economic and political reasons. The colonial legacy particularly has been the reason for an atmosphere of apprehension and mistrust amongst the members. There is also power asymmetry in the region and India is often perceived by small littorals as an overwhelming power. As a result, little work has been done to boost intercountry connectivity. Lack of intercountry banking mechanisms and increasing financial problems has also affected multilateral integration. For example, there is only one Indian bank in Bangkok, Thailand. If linkages are to be indeed revived, the BIMSTEC sector of tourism, which has substantial growth potential, needs to be developed. The prevalence of Buddhist culture and tourist attractions in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand provide the opportunity for the creation of a regional Buddhist circuit, which would appeal not only to domestic but also to foreign tourists. Coupled with a more liberal visa system, tourism may contribute substantially towards regional integration.

Nisha Taneja pointed out that in 2008 the Asian Development Bank had prepared a consultant's report that had been designed to help promote interregional integration by increasing trade and travel among the BIMSTEC countries. The expected outcomes in this report would assist in the overall enhancement of intraregional transport infrastructure, improve logistics and reduce transport time and costs. However, the blueprint had never been implemented. Ten years later, in 2018, the renewed interest within BIMSTEC has paved the way for a revised framework and its implementation with the assistance of advanced technology which has been developed in the interim period. Connectivity, however, cannot be sustained in the absence of robust trade amongst the BIMSTEC members. The BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement is, therefore, pertinent for the region's development. Moreover, if only cargo traffic increases will the private sector be more interested in investing in regional integration projects. Taneja also outlined how seamless transportation is important for connectivity and in this respect she highlighted that the Convention on International Transport of Goods Under Cover of TIR Carnets must be adopted by the BIMSTEC countries. Also, for multi-modal connectivity to succeed there is need for better coordination amongst the different ministries and agencies.

On that note Than Than Htay offering a Myanmar perspective to the unfolding discussions noted that in the Kathmandu Declaration, BIMSTEC leaders reiterated their resolve to establish seamless multi-modal transportation links and synchronized transit facilities through the development of highways, railways, waterways, sea routes and airways in the region by promoting regional connectivity and free trade. Presently, as BIMSTEC finds itself at the centre of several trans-regional connectivity plans and projects, Myanmar is in a strategic position to connect BIMSTEC with other corridors, such as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM), Mekong-Lancang Economic Development Belt, Asian Highway Network, ASEAN Connectivity 2025, Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) and Mekong-Japan Cooperation. However, there are challenges such as armed conflicts and insurgencies which Myanmar has to overcome to successfully implement connectivity with BIMSTEC.

While concluding the panel C. Raja Mohan talked of partitions limiting the BIMSTEC. The first is the political partition that divided Punjab and Bengal, the two frontier regions which connected India to many neighbouring regions. This led to the creation of new boundaries which has led to several unresolved conflicts which the member states continue to bear as colonial legacy. The choice of economic partition that was consciously adopted by the Bay littoral countries followed soon after and has only been reaffirmed with an inward looking mindset that continues to characterize the region. Several partitions also exist within India itself as free movement of goods within the country continues to be inhibited; there are areas which are termed as protected regions where one cannot buy property. The internal barriers make it difficult for India's neighbours to access its markets. Hence, structural changes are necessary within India as also within BIMSTEC to promote trade and connectivity in the region.

Business Session I on *Maritime Connectivity and Significance of the Bay of Bengal*

Chair: Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Senior Fellow, ORF, Kolkata

Speakers: Rohan Masakorala, CEO, Shipper's Academy, Colombo, Sri Lanka; Kept Wan Baderul Hisan bin Wan Muda, Director, Contemporary Security, Malaysian Institute of Defence and Security (MiDAS), Malaysia; Nazneen Ahmad, Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, Bangladesh; and Sanjay Chaturvedi, Professor and Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of International Relations, South Asian University, New Delhi, India



**Business Session I on 'Maritime Connectivity and Significance of the Bay of Bengal'
From left: Kept Wan Baderul Hisan bin Wan Muda, Rohan Masakorala, Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Nazneen Ahmad and Sanjay Chaturvedi**

Delving deeper into the issues of connectivity, the first business session of the day was devoted to understanding maritime connectivity within BIMSTEC that is inextricably intertwined with the dynamics of the Bay of Bengal. As the chair of the session, Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury commenced the deliberations with an introduction on how the Bay, situated at the intersection of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, was gaining strategic salience for India and other

BIMSTEC members, especially with China's emergence as an assertive maritime power in these waters. The Bay hosts some of the most vital Sea Lanes of Communication and is in close proximity to the East–West shipping route. India, however, has lost multiple chances to utilize the unfolding opportunities in this region such as the Hambantota port of Sri Lanka that was subsequently taken by China. As India seeks to strengthen its engagement with its eastern neighbours and gain prominence in the region, it has become necessary for the country to engage in collaboration with other BIMSTEC members who are also the littorals of the Bay.

Rohan Masakorala, speaking from the shipowners' perspective, noted that shipping lines would only call on those ports which have economic efficiency and which can offer sufficient cargo and this must be kept in mind by the other BIMSTEC countries in trying to promote maritime connectivity. Only Sri Lanka of all Bay littorals has been able to effectively tap into the traffic of the East–West shipping route owing to its efficiency of ports. Also because of this issue of port efficiency, most container ships from the region move to Singapore for trans-shipment and only around one-third of it moves to Colombo. Most of the region is only linked through feeder shipping routes and passenger traffic in the region continues to be hindered by the dearth of a flexible visa regime. Reasonable bunker cost at ports is also an important factor in making the ports more appealing to shipowners. In comparison to Singapore, in Sri Lanka the cost of bunker is around 35 dollars more. Therefore, to increase the shipping traffic in the region such economic efficiency must be developed by the ports of member countries.

One of the most important factors which provide the Bay its strategic significance is the proximity of this maritime space to the Strait of Malacca, a narrow stretch of water which is crucial for trade between the countries of East and West Asia. As the Bay merges into the Strait of Malacca via the Andaman Sea, any security concern challenging the freedom of navigation in this Strait is likely to have a negative impact on the maritime connectivity in the Bay itself. Kept Wan Baderul Hisan bin Wan Muda, therefore, explaining the significance of the Strait for BIMSTEC countries delved into the non-traditional security threats prevailing in its waters. These range from piracy and robberies at sea to terrorism, refugee crisis, illegal immigration and disaster emergencies. Such challenges has made it necessary to have a collaborative security arrangement and accordingly, the Malacca Straits Patrols undertaken by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand in order to ensure the safe passage of ships in these waters.

Apart from security challenges, there are other more technical hindrances which continue to obstruct maritime connectivity amongst the Bay littoral countries. Nazneen Ahmed identified three such restraints. The first is the dearth and consequent need for infrastructural development and a holistic view of financial provisions. The second is the need for skill development and capacity building in the region wherein the BIMSTEC members can be mutually beneficial. The third is concern about the Rohingya issue. If not resolved in time it can hinder connectivity initiatives between BIMSTEC members, particularly Bangladesh.

Finally, Sanjay Chaturvedi stated that in trying to re-imagine BIMSTEC in the 21st century, it becomes necessary to examine the issue of connectivity, keeping in mind the overarching frame of climate change, economic development and the prospects of blue economy. He opined that in present times because of technological advancements, connectivity has come to replace

division as the new paradigm of global organization in many cases. However, spread of such technological know-how and the rise of traffic have also increased the eminence of threats as well. On that note he stressed on the need for a strong grouping around the Indian Ocean. Finally, the session concluded on the note that before reimagining BIMSTEC it was important to re-imagine the Bay itself as a ‘Bay of Hope’ rather than a ‘Bay of Fear’.

In-Conversation: Bertil Lintner, Correspondent, *Asia Times*, Hong Kong

Chair: Suhasini Haidar, Diplomatic Editor, *The Hindu*, New Delhi, India



‘In Conversation: Bertil Lintner with Suhasini Haidar’ (from left)

As one of its highlights, the Colloquium featured a conversation with Bertil Lintner, moderated by Suhasini Haidar to understand the role of media in BIMSTEC. In the context that South Asia ranks low in the media freedom index in comparison to the rest of the world, Haidar raised the issue that present-day governments ‘want to be the narrative’ rather than only seeking its control; in this context she wanted to know about Lintner’s perspective on the censorship of media in the region. She also posed questions to Lintner about the problem of fake news that is increasingly grappling the region.

In his response, Lintner explains how problems of anonymity of social media posts and censorship of journalism have undermined media connectivity in the region. In an age where social media platforms are readily available for ‘citizen journalism’ wherein people are free to post any scoops without judging its authenticity, news must be sought from credible journalists to evade fake reports. However, the convenience of attaining news at zero cost from social media has diverted people from purchasing newspapers or magazines for their daily updates. There is also the problem of fake publication wherein publishing houses often

print divergent narratives of the original stories for monetary gains. Haidar adds that websites popularly known as ‘IT cells’ are often commissioned by other agencies to disseminate doctored speeches and spread fake news.

Moving to questions on the challenges facing the region in terms of low levels of readership, Lintner explains that within this region, the number of readers is relatively higher in India than other member countries owing to the country’s higher literacy rate. Hence, he deems it necessary to promote free education policies and concepts such as 24-hour bookstores to improve literacy in the region. Speaking particularly on Myanmar, Lintner highlights that media freedom is gradually growing in the country since its press censorship was lifted in 2012.

Media Workshop on *BIMSTEC: Media’s Assessment*

Chair: Bertil Lintner, Correspondent, Asia Times, Hong Kong

Speakers: Reaz Ahmad, Executive Editor, *Dhaka Tribune*, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Priyanjini Charitha Fernando, Senior journalist, Colombo, Sri Lanka; Haroon Habib, Senior journalist, Dhaka, Bangladesh and Tshering Dorji, Journalist, Kuensel, Bhutan.



Media Workshop on ‘BIMSTEC: Media’s Assessment’
From left: Reaz Ahmad, Priyanjini Charitha Fernando, Bertil Lintner, Haroon Habib, and Tshering Dorji

While analysing the role of media in BIMSTEC, Bertil Lintner as the chair of the media workshop initiated the discussions by stating that BIMSTEC needs publicity but it is up to the organization to undertake initiatives that the media can report. Agreeing to his statement, Priyanjini Charitha Fernando put forth that ‘media is not a PR agency’, hence, it cannot serve as a tool for promoting BIMSTEC if the organization remains static. However, in the wake of serious efforts, the media can serve as an advertiser to promote the undertakings. Due to its dormancy there is a general lack of awareness about BIMSTEC in the region and beyond in

comparison to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which people know is in a deadlock condition. Accordingly, the people are unaware of the opportunities that BIMSTEC presents and its exact role as a regional organization. Deliberating from a Sri Lankan perspective, Fernando eulogized that the political leadership too is not overtly invested into the workings of the BIMSTEC and the organization appears low on the list of the country's foreign policy priorities. Accordingly the workings of the organization do not feature much in the national media. The occasional reports are mostly event-based, focused on the decisions announced and those who attended it. Detailed accounts or analysis are rare and follow ups are scarcely made by the media. Therefore to procure more in-depth analysis of the interactions within the BIMSTEC, journalists may get in touch with necessary think tanks or diplomats.

Haroon Habib noted that the media had not always been wary of BIMSTEC. At the time of its inception, the media nurtured a positive outlook towards the organization which started dwindling with the passage of time. Even in rare occasions media reports on BIMSTEC focus almost exclusively on transportation and connectivity issues rather than on all the sectors of cooperation. However, as SAARC recedes into the background, BIMSTEC can gain prominence in the region as a collective platform to address, discuss and mitigate regional concerns. The media can play a role in promoting such collaborations as developments in the face of challenges that the region confronts. If there is a strong political will amongst the BIMSTEC member countries to integrate the region it is likely that media houses in each of these countries would also prioritize stories on BIMSTEC thereby creating awareness about the organization.

Speaking of regional challenges, Reaz Ahmad raised an interesting point in saying that in South and Southeast Asia, journalists' presence is often discouraged on sensitive topics such as Rohingyas or Kashmir. Nonetheless, the media can still explore a number of concerns within the BIMSTEC such as the usage of funds that are available to BIMSTEC or the fact that BIMSTEC member countries trade more with the West than with each other, which might propel deliberations towards increasing trade in the region. Ahmad also critiqued the way the media has reported on the BIMSTEC in the past, covering only high-profile events such as summits or international meets, and losing steam in the interim between events. The media must, therefore, engage in investigative journalism and instil an approach to follow-up events.

In the context of the media's engagement with BIMSTEC Tshering Dorji held that media has the power to build the momentum which can persuade the governments of member countries to revive the organization. For members like Bhutan which has just made it out of the list of Least Developed Countries, BIMSTEC presents an important opportunity for free trade, connectivity and multilateral engagement. The Bhutanese government also has the political will to nurture ties within BIMSTEC to develop the country's logistical facilities. Hence, the media of the country would be eager to report on BIMSTEC developments. In dealing with sensitive issues within the region, the media also has the role to seek the truth and aid in bridging trust deficits that may arise between member countries due to their different agendas and policies.

Special Panel Discussion on *RCEP and BIMSTEC: Can the Two Tango?*

Chair: Nick Low, British Deputy High Commissioner, Kolkata

Panellists: Heribert Dieter, Senior Associate, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, Germany; Nilanjan Ghosh, Director, ORF, Kolkata, India; Nahim Razzaq, Member, Bangladeshi Jatiya Sangsad, Bangladesh; and Prabir De, Professor, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi, India



Special Panel discussion on ‘RCEP and BIMSTEC: Can the two tango?’

From left: Prabir De, Heribert Dieter, Nick Low, Nilanjan Ghosh and Nahim Razzaq

Chairing the session, Nick Low raised pertinent questions for the speakers to address, such as whether the absence of China in the South Asian region would have made trade easier. He considers climate change to be a priority for the region. Narrowing down to the theme of the discussion, Low floated the broad question of whether BIMSTEC can substitute Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or how it can help develop India's relationship with the RCEP countries.

Heribert Dieter argues that there is a large disconnect between the Indian masses and the Indian politicians with respect to the benefits of globalization. Majority of the population have a favourable attitude towards globalization; the Indian government, however, is reluctant to engage in this and questions the compatibility of free trade. In his perspective, he saw better prospects for BIMSTEC. He said that various options are available to combat complications in trade, security, and climate change. One such option is the creation of custom unions between trading countries like European Union (EU). BIMSTEC can take a positive lesson from the EU. Comparing the position of India among BIMSTEC member countries to that of Germany in the EU, Dieter warns that not every country would be willing to accept India's position in matters of cooperation. India needs to strengthen the bond with her South Asian neighbours by finding workable solutions through grounds of common interests.

Commenting on whether BIMSTEC can help develop India's position in the RCEP, Nilanjan Ghosh explains that although axiomatically more trade is always better, empirically it is challenged from India's perspective. Providing further evidence, he explains that most trade

agreements, such as the India-Malaysia Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA), have benefited the trading partner more than India. Moreover, edible oil imports from Malaysia have negatively affected the domestic oil producing sector in India although consumers have benefited largely from it. Therefore, for India to benefit from any trade agreement improving the competitiveness of its export sector is an imperative. Secondly, he highlights the lack of any empirical study on the impacts of trade agreements on the value chains in India. Nilanjan Ghosh lays emphasis on the fact that consumer surplus may not be sufficient to outweigh the loss in producer surplus due to these trade agreements. Ghosh, focusing on potential of trade among BIMSTEC countries, argues that the absence of China and a trade surplus with the South-East Asian countries, except Thailand, is a positive indication. BIMSTEC member countries can integrate further by creating a financial block and developing a regional stock or commodity exchange in future, as envisaged by Nilanjan Ghosh.

Nahim Razzaq suggests that the RCEP is a win-win situation for many countries including Bangladesh. It provides an opportunity for countries to get access to cheaper and better quality products. Limited success of multilateral agreements has increased the proclivity towards bilateral connectivity. Razzaq believes that in order to create a competitive market and boosting the standards of production, India should ideally participate in the RCEP. However, Nahim Razzaq warns that one has to acknowledge that although trade and commerce is of priority, it cannot come at the cost of peace and security. He further points out that there is low level of human development in the region, and this has been a hindrance to the economic growth of the region. Besides this, the threat of climate change cannot be ignored as the agrarian economy forms the backbone of most of the countries in the region. Finally, Razzaq suggests that the road ahead requires the implementation of a successful model with leaders as stakeholders, taking into consideration the regional aspects that would be mutually beneficial to all parties involved.

Prabir De argued that the decision to opt out of the RCEP can lead to isolation of India, even if the risks outweigh the returns. Citing trade data, De states that BIMSTEC trade is abysmally low and India should be worried about two implications. Firstly, the BIMSTEC has completed its 21st round of talks and although there has been ample discussion on the exchange of goods, there has been very little discussion in terms of exchange of services. Secondly, even though India for now has rejected the RCEP, in future the country may also reconsider its decision, but Myanmar and Thailand have to be incorporated to control the Free Trade Agreement. This will help to revitalize the region.

Special Panel Discussion on *Future of BIMSTEC within the Geostrategic Narrative of the Indo-Pacific*

Chair: Krishnan Srinivasan, Former Indian Foreign Secretary and Deputy Secretary General of the Commonwealth of Nations

Panellists: Smruti S. Pattanaik, Research Fellow, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, India; Robin Ramcharan, Executive Director, Asia Centre, Thailand; Gareth Price, Senior Research Fellow, Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House, London, United Kingdom; and Christian Wagner, Senior Fellow, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, Germany.



Special Panel Discussion on ‘Future of BIMSTEC within the geostrategic narrative of the ‘Indo-Pacific’

From left: Robin Ramcharan, Smruti S. Pattanaik, Krishnan Srinivasan, Christian Wagner and Gareth Price

Chairing the last panel discussion of the first day of the Colloquium, Krishnan Srinivasan steered the discussion on how BIMSTEC could feature within the narrative of the Indo-Pacific—a geo-strategic construct spread over the combined maritime space of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Smruti Pattanaik analysed that transnational threats in the Bay of Bengal region can only be addressed by BIMSTEC members in collaboration with each other. Certain progress has been made in the arena of security cooperation as is evinced by the joint military exercises that was held in Pune last year. Efforts must be made to build mutual trust in the region and obstacles in the path of intelligence sharing must be overcome. It is presently necessary to make existing connectivity projects such as 'Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative functional and extend these to other BIMSTEC countries. To sustain, BIMSTEC needs to reinvent itself in a way which will transform it from bureaucratic government-oriented initiative to a more people-centric organization.

While stressing on the phrase ‘Reimagining BIMSTEC’, Robin Ramcharan stated that the organization must lay out its fundamental values and highlight its functions to usher clarity in its operations. BIMSTEC’s key instruments and summits have seldom articulated a shared vision around core sets of 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. It cannot escape the ideological battles that will shape the 21st century—a battle over values. Greater people to people connectivity will be achieved through better framing of common values binding the regions. In this regard, India’s leadership and democratic model can be a positive asset as it ‘Acts East’ towards ASEAN.

Gareth Price, in his turn, argued that there are two different logics necessary for regional cooperation—shared security concern and need for functional engagement. However, as all countries within BIMSTEC vary in their interpretation of security concerns not all issues are perceived as common threats. On the other hand, in the sphere of functional engagement BIMSTEC lacks a clear agenda and seeks to cooperate in too many sectors despite its small institutional capacity. Under such circumstances, if only BIMSTEC manages to re-establish itself as a functional and fruitful organization would countries such as Malaysia or Singapore seek to join BIMSTEC and partake of its advantages.

The final speaker of the session Christian Wagner pointed out that as many BIMSTEC members have a prominent relationship with China ranging from security to trade, China's actions in the region will characterize developments within BIMSTEC. Shifting the discussion from BIMSTEC to regional organizations in general, Wagner drew a closure to the first day of the Colloquium with his deliberation on what is or should be the measure of success for regional organizations such as BIMSTEC. In his opinion there have been both, an over and an underestimation of the ability of regional organizations. The overestimation lies in the overarching emphasis on increased international trade as the necessary path to the development of regional economic goals. This emphasis has caused trade to become a replacement for dynamic economic reforms of any other kind. The underestimation, on the other hand, lies in the lack of emphasis on regional cooperation as a necessary step towards regional confidence building, which can express the confidence of a region at global levels. Thus ended the first of Kolkata Colloquium 2019.

Interactive session on *Climate Change, Disaster Management and Global Warming* with Jayanta Bandopadhyay, Visiting Distinguished Fellow, ORF, Kolkata, India and Sugata Hazra, Director, School of Oceanographic Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India



Interactive session with Sugata Hazra and Jayanta Bandopadhyay (from left)

After a day of exploring the geo-political and geo-economic dimensions of BIMSTEC, the second day of the Kolkata Colloquium began with an interactive session between Sugata Hazra

and Jayanta Bandopadhyay, exploring the impact of geo-physical factors on such dynamics. As most of the BIMSTEC members share a common geographical space, situated around the rim of the Bay, these countries share the risk of exposure to rise of sea level that occurs as a result of thermal expansion of the oceans owing to climate change. Furthermore, the continued Green House Gas (GHG) emissions particularly by the ‘developed’ Global North contribute to global warming, causing glaciers and ice capes to melt. This aggravates the risk of sea level rise which is most manifest in areas such as the Bay of Bengal region, where large sections of the population reside in coastal areas and are dependent on its resources for their livelihood.

Climate change also heightens the risk of natural calamities such as cyclones and floods which are already frequent in the Bay. Increased frequency of disasters has the potential to disrupt life and livelihood in the affected areas. The hinterlands of the Bay of Bengal are also fertile for farming; especially the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin. However, climate change-induced variations in rainfall pattern are expected to have a significant impact on agriculture which is one of the primary means of livelihood practised in this region. Concerns thus arises about environmental migration and refugees as a possible future security concern within BIMSTEC.

In view of such common geographic vulnerabilities and transnational ecological concerns, the BIMSTEC members must use the organization as a platform to work towards collective mitigation. There is need for more efforts such as the BIMSTEC Centre on Weather and Climate, that India had set up in New Delhi to provide leadership in weather and climate-related issues through improved specialized forecasts in the region and bolster multilateral cooperation. For so long attention has generally been on the impact on climate change on glaciers. Working as a community, BIMSTEC can draw the attention towards its impact on the ocean, its resources and ways of collective mitigation.

Business Session II on *Climate Change, Disaster Management and BIMSTEC*

Chair: Anamitra Anurag Danda, Visiting Senior Fellow, ORF, Kolkata

Speakers: K. M. Parivelan, Associate Professor, TISS Mumbai, India; Cleo Paskal, Associate Fellow, Energy, Environment and Resources Department and Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House, London, United Kingdom; and Runa Sarkar, Professor, Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Calcutta, Kolkata, India



Business Session II on ‘Climate change, Disaster Management and BIMSTEC’
From left: Runa Sarkar, Cleo Paskal, Anamitra Anurag Danda and K.M. Parivelan

In this session, Anamitra Anurag Danda, as the chair, set the tone of the discussion by pointing out how the member countries of BIMSTEC continue to be reactive rather than proactive in their efforts towards mitigating natural disasters. The focus in the region, he explained, has been particularly on disaster response. K.M. Parivelan in his presentation expanded on this concern by highlighting how disaster management initiatives have been undertaken in the region significantly as a reaction to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. Accordingly, India passed its Disaster Management Act in 2005 and since then, the country has undertaken disaster management policies and plans, established the National Disaster Management Authority and formed the National Disaster Response Force, which have been critical in mitigating crisis situation in India and in the neighbourhood. However, disaster preparedness is yet to be uniformly developed in all parts of the country. In the larger perspective of the Global South there remains a sizeable vacuum in terms of necessary research and coordination for immediate disaster response. He also emphasized on the importance of community-based disaster management and the need to explore indigenous methods of disaster mitigation.

The three pillars of disaster management—Mitigation, Adaptation and Protection must be better integrated in the region. In terms of mitigation it is important for the region to adopt the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework and the International Disaster Law to produce better disaster response. Adaptation, on the other hand, implies disaster resilience and will have to be integrated in several sectors across the region such as agriculture and fisheries. Lastly, protection is necessary keeping in mind the geographic vulnerability of the region and the population living therein. However, strategic atmosphere conducive to the region is the key to enhancing such collaborations, as pointed out by Cleo Paskal. China has in the recent past emerged as an assertive and prominent power in this maritime space. In the South Pacific Islands, China has already made investments and built installations to prevent detrimental impacts of climate change such as land inundation. Using such diplomacy China is gaining traction in these countries which in turn reinforces their civilian as well as military presence in these regions. It is therefore necessary for BIMSTEC countries to mutually re-engage and create a collective way of disaster management and means to reduce the impact of climate change.

An obstacle in this path is that the BIMSTEC countries follow a ‘disaster by disaster’ approach as a result of which there is significant lack of disaster preparedness in the region. For this institution to truly make progress it is important that the countries understand the intertwined nature of geo-political, geo-economic and geo-physical factors and act accordingly. Speaking in this regard Runa Sarkar noted that while the low availability of funds is a restraining factor in regional development, the process of fund utilization also requires considerable deliberation. Therefore, BIMSTEC as a collective organization must not only manage funds but must also engage in collective resource management strategies amongst the member states to create optimal disaster resilience. Sarkar also highlighted that adaptation to climate change must not be understood as a linear process. The adaptation is highly conditioned by social, economic and political factors and although often considered a public good the means to it may often worsen the problem. For example only a more economically prosperous section of society can use air

conditioners to adapt with the effects of climate change. Moreover, large-scale use of air conditioners further harms the environment. Therefore, sustainable means of adaptation must be explored by BIMSTEC through means such as region-wide policies of crop and livestock insurance. Such problems in the region can only be effectively tackled once the environment has been made central to the political and economic discourse of all member countries of BIMSTEC.

Business Session III on *Enhancing Trade: Engaging Members in BIMSTEC*

Chair: Nilanjan Ghosh, Director, ORF, Kolkata, India

Speakers: Damaru Ballabha Paudel, Director, BIMSTEC Secretariat, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Sujeev Shakya, CEO, BEED Management, Nepal; Suparna Karmakar, Independent researcher, Kolkata; Khondaker Golam Moazzem, Research Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka Bangladesh; and Suthiphand Chirathivat, Professor Emeritus, Chulalongkorn University Bangkok, Thailand.



Business Session III on ‘Enhancing Trade: Engaging Members in BIMSTEC’
From left: Suthiphand Chirathivat, Damaru Ballabha Paudel, Sujeev Shakya, Nilanjan Ghosh, Suparna Karmakar and Khondaker Golam Moazzem

Moving from ecology to economics, the third Business Session of the Colloquium focused on trade within BIMSTEC. Chairing the session, Nilanjan Ghosh began the discussion with questions on whether economic liberalization was truly beneficial for the region. In this regard, he raised the issue of the utility of a BIMSTEC FTA and commenced deliberations on what factors in the region could create a congenial environment for trade and investment.

Damaru Ballabha Paudel put forth that at its inception the objective of BIMSTEC had been to create an enabling environment for rapid economic development by collective actions to promote peace, progress and prosperity in the region. Presently, out of the 14 areas, trade and investment promotion constitute the core of BIMSTEC cooperation. Regional trade statistics reveals that within BIMSTEC, while India and Thailand account for substantial portion of the regional trade, the other member countries need to substantially increase their commercial

engagement. Thus, there is a need to increase bilateral trade volume amongst member states. The success of BIMSTEC FTA which covers progressive elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers, liberalization of trade and services, simplification of customs procedures can enhance trade engagements. However, it still lacks consensus and as BIMSTEC is not a substitute but an addition to existing economic platforms it must be ensured that BIMSTEC FTA does not duplicate existing bilateral regional and multilateral agreements. Rigorous negotiations, are therefore, necessary before implementation. Presently, the obstacles hindering intraregional trade are high tariff rates, lack of connectivity infrastructure, high transaction costs and prolonged process of decision making and delayed notification of such decisions amongst member countries.



Damaru Ballabha Paudel speaking at Business Session III on Enhancing Trade: Engaging Members in BIMSTEC

Sujeev Shakya, projecting a dynamic growth of India’s GDP in the near future, observed that India would be at the centre of BIMSTEC’s rejuvenation. Furthermore, considering the presence of substantial young population in the member countries, it is hoped that technological innovations such as online shopping and payment will characterize the trade in the region. Efforts to re-imagine BIMSTEC must also take into account special border economic zones in the region which facilitate the movement of people, money and goods, reducing transaction costs in the business. Differences in trade in goods and services and investments must also be carefully calibrated. The idea of a common BIMSTEC currency, however, is contemporarily too ambitious but the possibility of relaxing visa regimes for investors may be explored.

In his turn, Khondaker Golam Moazzem outlined three different patterns of bilateral trade existing within the region—trade with larger economies (India and Thailand) both of which offer different export commodities; trade with land-locked countries (Nepal and Bhutan), which have highest volume of trade with the country sharing their border i.e., India; and trade between neighbouring member countries under different trade agreements. However the larger economies trade very little with other BIMSTEC countries compared to their trade outside the region. For example, India has a high demand for import of natural rubber but it imports little over 10 per cent from Thailand although it is the largest exporter of natural rubber in the world. Hence, there is need for harmonization of tariff rates and substantial incremental trade potential to develop regional value chains. Attention must also be specifically paid to increase the limited trade amongst the smaller member countries. Absence of cross-border connectivity agreements has led major portion of trade of BIMSTEC member to be conducted through sea routes. Robust cross border is a pre-requisite for a successful FTA.

Suparna Karmakar, on the other hand, states that rather than re-endorsing globalization through BIMSTEC trade initiatives, the model of ‘Globalization’, which is an amalgamation of ‘global’ and ‘local’ would work better for the region. Creation of Special Economic Zones close to the borders with cross border BIMSTEC trade centres operating in these zones would develop ‘glocal value chains’ and subsequently increase trade across the BIMSTEC countries. Such systems would also attract more sustainable and viable investment opportunities from the local business actors and larger agencies. Such a system may be created along India, Bhutan and Nepal border through Sikkim, thereby creating a sort of an economic hub wherein the trade within that hub would be considered as a part of the BIMSTEC trade. Such an arrangement would be beyond bilateralism and also generate interest amongst the local people in constituting regional value chains. However, to effectively cultivate such a system, India must appear as a compatriot rather than an overwhelming power to the smaller member countries. Trade across border regions in local sectors would gradually snowball into region-wide trade.

Suthiphand Chirathivat, as the last speaker of the session, commented that BIMSTEC is at the crossroads with the ongoing global economic outlook marred by synchronization of global economic slowdown, erosion of multilateral trading system and, more recently, US–China trade disputes and the emergence of British exit (BREXIT) away from the EU. Against this background, BIMSTEC countries have to adjust more with the new ground realities which would affect their economies, production, trade, value chains, investment and employment. Moreover, to truly integrate regional trade it is important to focus on regional value chains and reduce the tariff costs in cross-border trade.

Business Session IV on *Historical and Cultural Linkages within BIMSTEC*

Chair: Hari Vasudevan, Visiting Distinguished Fellow, ORF, Kolkata and President, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK).

Speakers: Joshua Thomas, Deputy Director, Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Shillong, India; Ronojoy Sen, Senior Research Fellow, ISAS, NUS, Singapore; and Lipi Ghosh, Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, India



Session IV on ‘Historical and Cultural Linkages within BIMSTEC’
From left: Lipi Ghosh, Hari Vasudevan, Ronojoy Sen and Joshua Thomas

While contemplating future possibilities, the Colloquium paying due attention to the past explored the ancient linkages that had once made the Bay the livelihood of trade and connectivity in its last Business Session. Chairing the session, Hari Vasudevan commenced on the note that people play an active role in the successful implementation of any policy. Therefore, initiatives to reinvigorate BIMSTEC rather than being confined to government undertakings must also encompass the people. Hence, there is need to rejuvenate people-to-people linkages across the Bay and the cultural past of the region provides a conducive opportunity for doing so.

Speaking in this context, the first speaker of the session, Joshua Thomas pointed out that cultural connectivity has potential for growth in the region. It can be promoted through educational diplomacy wherein universities in the various BIMSTEC member countries can offer exchange programmes and scholarships within the region. Exchange of faculty amongst the members might also contribute in further dissemination of awareness about the region. Joint research projects must also be encouraged. Furthermore, as teaching continues to be primarily through European languages, there is need to encourage learning languages of neighbouring countries to overcome language barriers. Journals and other forms of publications focusing on the developments in the region can also play an effective role in disseminating information about developments in the neighbourhood and thereby contribute to increasing public awareness about the region and regional organizations like BIMSTEC. Tourism diplomacy between member countries also has the potential to contribute significantly in improving cultural connectivity. Given the shared cultural past, food and cultural festivals as well as religious sites can be developed as major tourist attractions.

Ronojoy Sen in his presentation delved into the cultural past of the Bay and its littorals, highlighting the way in which the Bay had once been the hub of an important trading network between India and the countries of Southeast Asia. At the height of the Chola Empire (who ruled a part of southern India) trade between India and Southeast Asia was frequent and as the natural conduit for the ferry of goods and passengers the Bay was referred to as the 'Chola Lake'. Commodities like spice and textile goods formed the backbone of commerce and the transfer of goods eventually led to the exchange of ideas. Naturally, religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam along with cultural practices spread from India to these countries. As time moved to the colonial era, the Bay also became an arena of contestation with the emergence of European powers like the British, French and Dutch in its waters. Migration of soldiers from one colony to another across the Bay added to the interconnectedness of the region. However, the end of the colonial era and the onset of nationalism in the newly independent littoral countries shifted attention from trade to self-sufficiency and, as a result, the Bay receded into isolation. In the latter half of the 19th century however efforts were made by notable figures such as Rabindranath Tagore and Periyar E. V. Ramasamy to re-inspire this cultural connectivity through their writings and visits. In modern times, BIMSTEC presents an unique opportunity to revive these lost linkages between civilizations.

Zooming in from the Bay to the more specific case of India–Myanmar historical ties and cultural connectivity, Lipi Ghosh described the ancient trade routes that existed between India's northeast and Burma or present-day Myanmar primarily along the Southern Silk Route.

Migration from Burma to India was particularly prevalent among the tribes of Ahom and Khamtis. As a result, a similarity in architecture and culture can be noted between north-eastern Indian states like Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and the states of Yangon and Moulmein in Myanmar. Against such a backdrop, Ghosh raised specific questions on how tourism can be improved between the two countries with help from academia and the private sector and also questioned the role of BIMSTEC in this regard.

Panel Discussion on Media, *Assessing the Media: BIMSTEC in Perspective*

Panellists: Saumya Bandopadhyay, Consulting Editor, *Prothom Alo* (a newspaper of Bangladesh), New Delhi, India; Anchalee Kongrut, Assistant News Editor, *Bangkok Post*, Bangkok, Thailand; and Joydeep Gupta, Executive Director, *The Third Pole*, India.

Chair: Sajjadur Rahman, Business Editor, *Daily Star*, Bangladesh



**Panel Discussion on Media, ‘Assessing the Media: BIMSTEC in Perspective’
From left: Saumya Bandopadhyay, Anchalee Kongrut, Sajjadur Rahman and Joydeep Gupta**

After the Business Sessions, the second day of the Colloquium featured a panel discussion on media’s role in BIMSTEC, chaired by Sajjadur Rahman. Drawing attention to the variety of cross-regional problems such as poverty, inter country trust deficit and lack of events at a multilateral level, Rahman questioned the role of the media in awakening these countries to their regional realities and possibilities of BIMSTEC.

Saumya Bandyopadhyaya, one of the panellists, identified in this regard certain issues that are responsible for the lack of media’s attention in BIMSTEC. Foremost amongst these is that regeneration of interest about the organization is a recent phenomenon and may be attributed to India’s present focus on developing ties with its eastern neighbourhood and the failure of SAARC. While this has generated some attention within the media, there had been a significant lack of content since the inception of the organization. Also, while the media has focused on several issues like public health, poverty and education, BIMSTEC has not featured in their coverage for lack of initiatives, although these are its priority areas of concern. Recent efforts

of BIMSTEC in disaster management have however been duly showcased by the media. On the other hand, the organization can also engage in initiatives such as BIMSTEC games or festivals which will help it capture the media's attention. In a sea of groupings like Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN) and SAARC, BIMSTEC must gain momentum in its undertakings to garner media's interest.

Anchalee Kongrut, speaking from the viewpoint of Thai media, also noted that BIMSTEC does not feature in its coverage even though the media reports on its priority areas of concern. Lack of awareness about the organization has pushed BIMSTEC into the sidelines. Inadequate of funds and initiatives has only worsened the situation. Under such circumstances, utilizing the recent resurgence of interest, BIMSTEC must try to play a more active role in the dynamics unfolding in the region. It can strive to facilitate negotiations between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the Rohingya issue and engage in creating collaborations for maritime security in the face of China's assertive rise. It can also make efforts to foster cultural bonhomie between member countries through festivals and agreements. Such efforts can return media's attention to BIMSTEC.

Joydeep Gupta further pointed out that it is not the job of the media to promote any grouping but to report news. However, it is also not the job of the media to only report developments, as investigative journalism also makes it necessary to bring to light the challenges that are affecting the region into which BIMSTEC should take a look. Issues such as climate change-induced migration, desertification of the coastal areas due to over-intensive aquaculture and displacement of people from coastal areas due to sea level rise are all issues which require transnational collaboration for mitigation, wherein BIMSTEC can contribute significantly. Hence, it is also the job of the media to bring such issues to the surface so that they become a part of the political agendas of member states. Media, rather than being only reactive, can also have a proactive role in the region.

Interactive Session on Media

Chair: Subir Bhaumik, Veteran British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Correspondent, Kolkata, India

Speakers: Soe Myint, Editor-in-Chief and Managing Director, Mizzima Media Company, Myanmar and Chandni Jayatilleke, Group Editor Business, Lake House, Colombo, Sri Lanka



Interactive Session on Media

From left: Chandni Jayatilleke, Subir Bhaumik and Soe Myint

In the subsequent Interactive Session on media between Soe Myint and Chandni Jayatilleke, Subir Bhaumik as the chair started the session by posing questions on how media is supposed to promote BIMSTEC and the potential for such coverage in the member countries. In this regard, Jayatilleke speaking from the perspective of Sri Lankan media, noted that news in Sri Lanka primarily concentrates on domestic affairs and does not devote much attention to socio-cultural aspects. However journalists across the BIMSTEC region can strive to corroborate on such regional issues to raise public awareness, increase media coverage, and in doing so contribute towards increasing cooperation and integration in the region. Very often it so happens that owing to domestic turmoil and concerns in many of the countries of this region, their respective media does not get the scope to focus on regional developments. Media representatives from the BIMSTEC nations could therefore try to create open and informal platforms of friendly exchanges through texts and messages to keep each other updated about important developments in their countries.

Moving on with the session, Bhaumik engaged Soe Myint with the question: ‘Is BIMSTEC appealing to journalists or the media of Myanmar?’ To this Myint expressed that the answer is both a ‘yes’ and a ‘no’. This is because although the journalists of Myanmar lack the content to write on BIMSTEC, as the media of a country which is trying to reconnect with its neighbours after an era of isolation under military rule, developments in BIMSTEC are important. For example, Mizzima Media Group has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Prasar Bharati, India’s Public Service Broadcaster. The upcoming agreement will facilitate cooperation and collaboration in broadcasting and also envision content-sharing over a wide range of genres, including culture, entertainment, education, science, news and sports along with other areas of mutual interest. The partnership is expected to enhance quality content as well as bilateral ties. At this juncture, Bhaumik makes an intervention by questioning whether in a world where the importance of news is determined by its respective media house, can the media houses in India have a dedicated regional section. Bhaumik concluded the session on the note that there exists disparity in interest between the media of member states to cover each others’ developments which can create an impasse in BIMSTEC’s media integration. It is, therefore, important that BIMSTEC member countries encourage the creation of a regional page in their respective dailies devoted to understanding the developments happening in the neighbourhood.

Valedictory and Summing up session by C. Raja Mohan, Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

Chair: Rakhahari Chatterji, Advisor, ORF, Kolkata

As the second day of the Kolkata Colloquium drew to a close, in the valedictory session Rakhahari Chatterji briefly summarized the main ideas that have surfaced through the two-day long deliberations. After a dormant existence since its inception 20 years ago, it is only in recent years that BIMSTEC has catapulted to ‘visible determination’ with a need for re-integration, as felt by its member countries. Amongst economic agreements the FTA seems particularly



Rakhahari Chatterji summing up the deliberations of the two-day Kolkata Colloquium in the Valedictory Session

necessary for all BIMSTEC members. However, despite several rounds of talk, the FTA is still short of achieving a framework although renewed attempts are now being made to accomplish the same. Focus in the region also remains specifically on enhancing bilateral ties and multilateralism is yet to gain ground although the countries share common ecological concerns and a shared past. There is also need and scope to improve people-to-people connectivity in the region to facilitate which tourism diplomacy, student exchange programmes and cross border public health initiatives are necessary. As regards the role of the media, it must be noted that BIMSTEC must be a more active organization and feature in regional concerns to attract media attention. In this regard, it can tap into the rich repository of culture and heritage that the countries share. Moving on to India’s role in the region it was argued that the country must refrain from assuming a ‘Big brother’ posture in this region and instead project itself as a compatriot and an equal partner to other BIMSTEC member countries to reduce trust deficit and work towards better integration in the region. To truly integrate the region, rigorous and tenacious initiatives by the organization must be complimented by legal sanctions from member countries aided by the civil society in case political will is lacking.

In his Valedictory Address, C. Raja Mohan stated that renewed interest in BIMSTEC is only the beginning of the change that is unfolding in the region. More initiatives such as the Kolkata Colloquium are necessary as it is a break from much of India’s Delhi-centric foreign policy discourse. Re-imagining BIMSTEC is only a part of re-imagining the Bay of Bengal since the former is only one reflection of what is happening in the region. It is interesting to note in



C. Raja Mohan delivering the Valedictory Address chaired by Rakhahari Chatterji

this regard that although the media does not cover the BIMSTEC on a daily basis,

the Bay of Bengal regularly features in media coverage. The Rohingya issue as well as Bangladesh's economic rise are both global stories. However how the region changes not only depends on what is happening in the region but also how the region responds to larger global trends that are emerging. It is not realistic to hope that the member countries of BIMSTEC will undertake national policies for the benefit of BIMSTEC. These would rather be determined by the aspirations, compulsions and circumstances that these countries face in the larger global order and the economic, political and strategic choices these countries make which will determine the success or failure of BIMSTEC as a whole.

In the colonial era, contestation between the imperial powers as well as the search for spice took place in the Bay of Bengal and after British occupation the Bay became the maritime theatre through which the Empire was administered. This period thus experienced an expansion of the subcontinent's connectivity with Southeast Asia and Africa amongst other places all under the rubric of resources of undivided India driven by the might of Britain. At the end of the colonial era, Japan shattered the British dominance in the region. But in the Second World War, 1 million Indian troops succeeded in driving the Japanese out of the Bay. Subsequently, the construction of modern east Asia was founded on the efforts of the Indian soldiers and the resources that India offered to restore the British Empire and reverse the Japanese.

After the war there was a dramatic decline of the region as with the economic choices that the Bay littorals made, there was a retreat from globalization. The economic salience of the Bay for the rest of the world thus declined. However, factors like economic reforms in 1991 by India, the opening up of China before that and that of Myanmar later in the 21st century, the rise of China and growth of ASEAN, began stimulating changes in the region. This economic change is leading to the recreation of mental maps that once divided the Bay into South and Southeast Asia after the Second World War. Chinese economic influence is seeping down amongst the littorals of this region. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a framework within which China is using its resources to build its connectivity with the region. India might oppose the BRI but the Indian digital sector is completely exposed to Chinese investments. Japan is also involved in infrastructure development in the region. Integration is thus in progress. Also, Bangladesh is emerging as one of the fastest growing economies of the world which will alter the economic geographies of the region. In such a context, the kind of choices that the BIMSTEC leaders make will determine the future of the organization.

In the spectrum of security, structural changes are taking place in the region. Stakes in the Indian Ocean are growing and therefore Chinese presence is also going to grow in these waters. 'Confluence of the Two Seas' (Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean) is going to take place because of China's rise as a maritime power which will in effect determine how the geopolitics of the region is going to change. China's economic modernization has also been accompanied by China's military modernization which has the capacity to influence military development of states and strategic developments in the region. Consequences of these are just beginning to be felt in the Bay of Bengal. Future deployment of Chinese ships in the Bay is also not a far-fetched possibility which would result in dramatic structural change in the Bay of Bengal. In the next five-year projection, Chinese naval power is most likely to make its presence felt in the Bay of Bengal and that will affect all littorals and other stakeholders present in the Bay. China supplies arms to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, therefore there is expansion of Chinese

arsenals. India can object to it but it has no alternate to offer. China's military and economic presence in the region is going to grow. Japan is also involved in the region economically and is giving military support to Sri Lanka and is also involved in several undertakings with India. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have become important again and Japan might help India develop them. Therefore, forgotten geographic and strategic features of the Bay of Bengal are making a comeback. There are also doubts about American presence in this region and US withdrawal or reduction in their military presence will fundamentally alter the security and economic architecture of the region.

The global trading order is fundamentally changing and every country is making its own choices. The options range from moving in favour of more regionalism to engaging in more domestic reforms or bringing in more foreign investments. These choices will be made to deal with the breakdown of the World Trade Organization liberal trading system. Therefore, although BIMSTEC may not make collective decisions but the choices of the individual member countries will determine how the region will grow.

In the purview of connectivity, China, Japan, America and India are all engaging in ways to expand connectivity which although creates competition but in effect actually increases the choices for the region. But it must be contemplated how far the region is prepared to make these choices. Connectivity is a work in progress so there are going to be even more choices and BIMSTEC will have a lot of possibilities of engagement.

Thus, before the Bay is securitized, it must be deliberated if the littorals will work together to prevent this securitization. Some of the disputes regarding maritime delimitation of borders has already been resolved but there is scope to do more in terms of naval cooperation, confidence-building measures which would limit a potential return of the great power rivalry in the region. It must be remembered that institutions can only do as much as its members allow it to undertake. However, a lot is also possible in the region even without the success of negotiated agreements within the institution. At this pivotal moment, there is thus room for broader thinking and more collaborative initiatives which are not tied by narrow decision making.

At the end of the Valedictory Address, Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury delivered the 'Vote of Thanks', thanking the programme collaborators, the speakers and chairs for their participation which is indeed a step towards creation of a 'Bay of Hope'. Thus ended Kolkata Colloquium 2019 on *Re-imagining* BIMSTEC.



Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, the coordinator of the Kolkata Colloquium giving the Vote of Thanks at the close of the programme



Speakers and participants at the Kolkata Colloquium

Media Montage



ORF **ORF Events** ✓ @orfevents • 29 Nov 19 ▾
A lack of initiatives and programs on **#BIMSTEC** fails to generate interest among **#media**. A BIMSTEC website for instance, can be maintained in regional languages in order to strengthen the sector.

Saumya Bandyopadhyay, Consulting Editor, Prothom Alo

#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



ORF logo, comment icon, retweet icon, heart icon, share icon

Mizzima News ✓ @Mizzima... • 28 Nov 19 ▾
#BIMSTEC chief prioritises disaster management bit.ly/34Dwiap




ORF logo, comment icon, retweet icon, heart icon (1), share icon


ORF **ORF Events** ✓ @orfevents • 30 Nov 19 ▾
.@MohanCRaja Whether **#BIMSTEC** can cohere into a community will depend on whether there is synergy among the national policies of individual member countries.

#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



ORF logo, comment icon, retweet icon, heart icon (1), share icon

 Chandjay @Chandjay3 · 01 Dec 19
#BIMSTEC generates new hope with renewed political commitment
sundayobserver.lk/2019/12/01/bim...
#bimstec #secretariat #dhaka #Kolkatacolloqium



BIMSTEC generates new hope with renewed political commitment | Sunday
sundayobserver.lk

 Chandjay @Chandjay3 · 29 Nov 19
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC #Kolkatacolloqium @orfevents

 Chandjay @Chandjay3 · 27 Nov 19
#BIMSTEC #Kolkatacolloqium #Kolkata
dailynews.lk/2019/11/27/fin...

 Mizzima News @Mizzima... · 28 Nov 19
 Journalist warns **#socialmedia** hampers good journalism in **#Myanmar**, region at **#BIMSTEC** meet bit.ly/20Vsiem



 **Sujeev Shakya** ✓ @sujeevs... · 29 Nov 19 ✓
 It was a fresh experience at a conference on regional issues where the discussions don't get dominated by focus on #India. Diverse panels, diverse perspectives. Congrats #Kolkata team @orfevents #ReimaginingBIMSTEC

🗨️ ↻ ❤️ 7 🔄

 **UKinKolkata** 🇬🇧🇮🇳 @UKinKolkata · Nov 29, 2019 ✓
 British Deputy High Commissioner, **Kolkata**, @NickDLow (centre) chairing the session on 'RCEP and BIMSTEC: Can the two tango?' at the **Kolkata Colloquium** on 28 November 2019.
 @DFID_UK @UKinBangladesh



ORF and 6 others

🗨️ ↻ ❤️ 8 🔄

 **ORF Events** ✓ @orfevents · 29 Nov 19 ✓
 Realizing climate adaptation strategies will always be a problem as long as people keep electing governments that do not realise that climate change is an emergency.
 -Rakhahari Chatterjee, Advisor, ORF Kolkata
 #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



🗨️ ↻ 1 ❤️ 1 🔄

 **ORF Events** ✓ @orfevents · 29 Nov 19 ✓
 The Bay has unfortunately remained largely neglected in strategic and political discourse. #BIMSTEC countries should draw inspiration from the ideas of #Tagore of a greater India.
 - Ronojoy Sen, NUS, Singapore
 #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



🗨️ ↻ 1 ❤️ 1 🔄

ORF Events @orfevents · 28 Nov 19

There is a lack of collective opinion in the #BIMSTEC region. For instance, how many countries are willing to take up the Rohingya issue?

- Bertil Lintner, Asia Times, Hong Kong


#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Interaction icons: comment, retweet, like, share

Chandjay @Chandjay3 · 15 Dec 19

A Bay of Hope with BIMSTEC
sundayobserver.lk/2019/12/15/bus...
 @orfevents #BIMSTEC #Kolkatacolloq
 #trade #investment



A Bay of Hope with BIMSTEC | Sunday Observer
sundayobserver.lk

Interaction icons: comment, retweet (2), like (3)

ORF Events @orfevents · 29 Nov 19

If peace in future is to be maintained, we have to give due attention to #GlobalWarming and #ClimateChange

- Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, Visiting Distinguished Fellow, ORF

#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Interaction icons: comment, retweet, like, share

Asia Centre @asiacentre_org · Nov 29, 2019

Asia Centre's, Executive Director Dr. Robin Ramcharan attended Reimagining BIMSTEC **Colloquium** in **Kolkata**. Dr. Ramcharan met with BIMSTEC Secretary General, Mr Shahidul Islam, who intends to pursue Asia Centre's proposal to develop a rights approach, structured around the SDGs.

ORF Events @orfevents · 30 Nov 19

At the close of an enriching two day Colloquium with intense deliberations and lots of new takeaways.

#ReimaginingBIMSTEC

Suhasini Haidar @suhasinih · Nov 28, 2019

The best way to discuss the neighbourhood's future is with the neighbours! Discussing BIMSTEC at the **Kolkata Colloquium** @orfonline, great to see delegates from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand and journalist & expert Bertil Lintner





@sunjspots : With the Atlantic Consensus becoming increasingly frail, there is a growing need for dialogue to face the as yet unresolved issues of our times. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Nisha Taneja: Many countries have a single transport ministry. This helps to avoid the challenges of coordination among several departments of transport across several interfaces. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



C. Raja Mohan: How do you make the movement of people across boundaries acceptable and move beyond the legacies and baggages of the past? This is where technological solutions will come into play. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Sanjay Chaturvedi: Before Reimagining BIMSTEC, it is important to reimagine the Bay of Bengal - a semi enclosed sea.
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



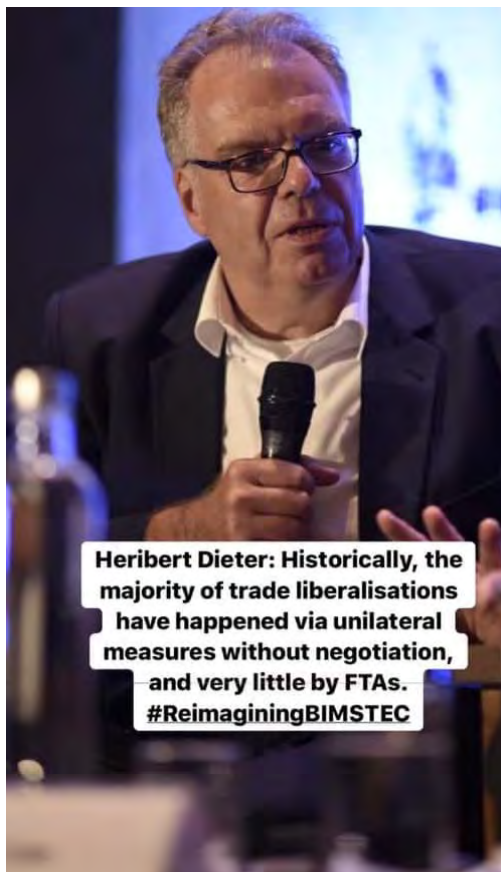
@nilanjangh2000 : #BIMSTEC is a region rife with opportunities and now is the time to delve into them and seek solutions.
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



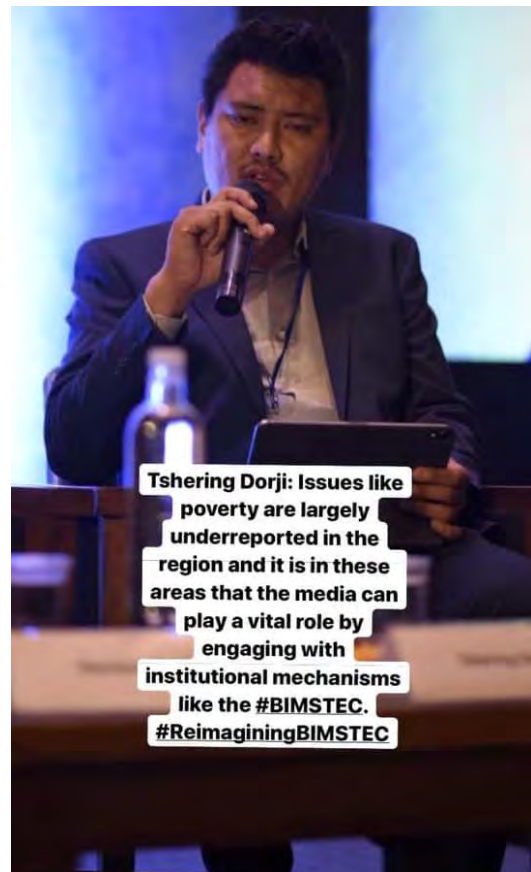
Rohan Masakorala: Shipping lines would call on only those ports which have sufficient economic efficiency. As most existing port infrastructure functions at below 50% capacity, what do we mean by maritime connectivity?
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Suthipand Chirathivat: In the global context of development, responses to uncertainties need to be factored in when deliberating issues such as the enhancement of trade. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



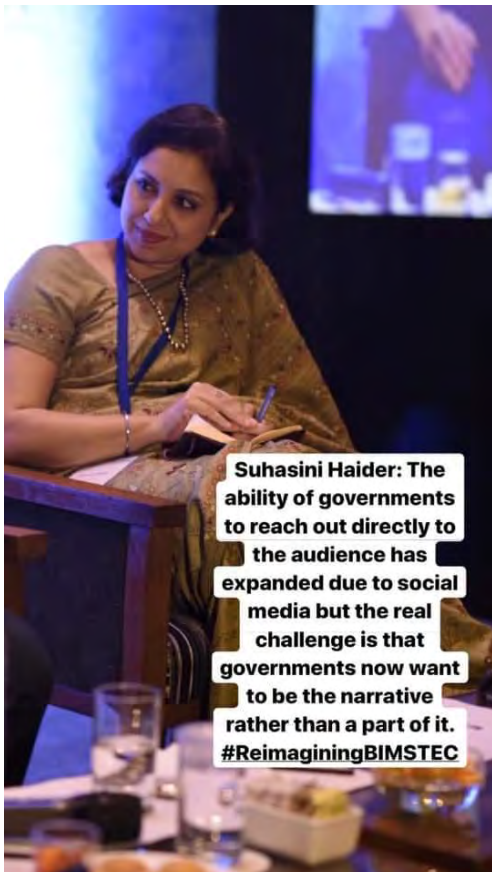
Heribert Dieter: Historically, the majority of trade liberalisations have happened via unilateral measures without negotiation, and very little by FTAs. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Tshering Dorji: Issues like poverty are largely underreported in the region and it is in these areas that the media can play a vital role by engaging with institutional mechanisms like the #BIMSTEC. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



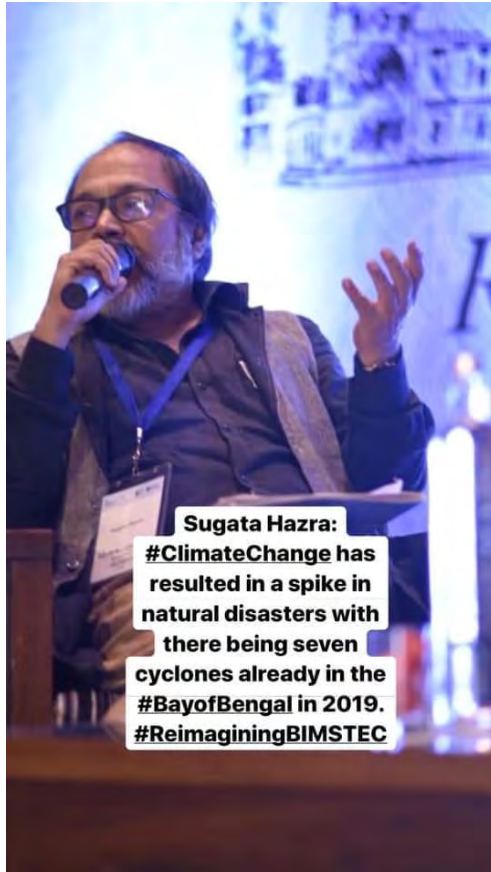
Charitha Fernando: Media should be more aware to not only promote, but also boost the small economies in the BIMSTEC. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Suhasini Haider: The ability of governments to reach out directly to the audience has expanded due to social media but the real challenge is that governments now want to be the narrative rather than a part of it. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Runa Sarkar: It is critical that countries move beyond national interests and cooperate in the sharing of information related to #ClimateChange and #DisasterManagement. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Sugata Hazra:
#ClimateChange has resulted in a spike in natural disasters with there being seven cyclones already in the #BayofBengal in 2019.
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Jayanta Bandyopadhyay: If peace in future is to be maintained, we have to give due attention to #GlobalWarming and #ClimateChange.
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Birtil Lintner: There is a lack of collective opinion in the #BIMSTEC region. For instance, how many countries are willing to take up the Rohingya issue?
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Saumya Bandyopadhyay: A lack of initiatives and programs on #BIMSTEC fails to generate interest among #media. A BIMSTEC website for instance, can be maintained in regional languages in order to strengthen the sector. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Anamitra Anurag Danda: Transboundary cooperation is imperative for #ClimateChange adaptation strategies. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Cleo Paskal: Real solutions need to assess the confluence of #geopolitics, #geoeconomics and #geophysical changes - including but not limited to #ClimateChange. #ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Suparna Karmakar:
Maybe it's time we
looked at value chain
trade instead of nation
trade and the creation
of cross border
production centres.
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Sujeev Shakya: **#BIMSTEC** is a place
where the majority of the population
is under the age of 35 and we need to
ask ourselves whether we are
involving this demography in the
reimagining process.
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC



Nahim Razzaq: The future
of **#BIMSTEC** needs to be a
win-win situation for all
member countries.
#ReimaginingBIMSTEC

Media Coverage of Kolkata Colloquium



Don't expect much from BIMSTEC, says Southeast Asia expert Bertil Lintner

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

KOLKATA, DECEMBER 01, 2019 11:38 IST

'I don't think any country will accept any kind of regional superstructure,' he says

One 'should not expect much' from the regional group of south and south east Asian countries, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). BIMSTEC may still continue to operate as the countries 'always need to talk', but after 22 years of its inception, there is not much left in this regional group of seven countries to look forward to, said foremost Southeast and East Asia expert, Bertil Lintner.

'I am sceptical. People sit in meetings (but) do not draw any grand plan to drive the organization forward,' said Mr Lintner, on the sidelines of a two-day Observer Research Foundation (ORF) conference on BIMSTEC. Mr Lintner, who has authored over half a dozen books on Myanmar, China, North Korea and 'Methamphetamine explosion in the Golden Triangle', said that the argument that 'BIMSTEC took trade negotiations forward' has little merit.

'Trade has its own dynamics. Of course, they (BIMSTEC members) can relax customs regime or facilitate ports but trade has its own momentum and importantly official trade is also informal, which does not reflect anywhere,' said Mr Lintner, while adding that he was equally sceptical about dialogue on security within the BIMSTEC.

'I don't think any country will accept any kind of regional superstructure; they have memories of fighting against the colonial rule and thus they would not like to surrender their sovereignty to a superstructure. However, I do not mean that it [BIMSTEC] is nothing; people always need to talk but one should not expect much from it,' he said.

Thus, the BIMSTEC cannot play a role to address the Rohingya, crisis which is affecting three of its member countries, Myanmar, India and Bangladesh. Mr Lintner also does not

feel that the BIMSTEC as a regional grouping may make any difference to influence China in the region.

‘This is something BIMSTEC members do not talk about openly but there was a suspicion. However, I don’t think as a group they can do that [though] people from various countries under BIMSTEC umbrella may talk about the issue. But that talk is informal, behind the closed doors. It is not structured, formal,’ Mr Lintner noted.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/dont-expect-much-from-bimstec-says-southeast-asia-expert-bertil-lintner/article30128911.ece>

TRUE AND IMPARTIAL daily sun

BIMSTEC and the Media – A Brief Assessment

Haroon Habib



Haroon Habib

BIMSTEC—the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, was formed with lots of hopes and expectations. When the four countries from the South and Southeast Asian region first mooted the sub-regional grouping through the Bangkok Declaration in 1997, it was widely hailed by the media. The media found the

initiative with more positive note after the joining of Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan in the grouping.

The Bay of Bengal group raised enormous expectations because the region housed 1.5 billion people, having combined GDP of \$ 3.5 trillion, and such regional and sub-regional partnerships have driven growth all over the world.

After the initial euphoria, and when BIMSTEC had only four Summit-level meetings in last two decades, and also when many of its programmes lacked actual implementation, media interests started to be partly diminished. Some critics say, BIMSTEC has so far remained a mere talking shop; a perception many others wouldn't subscribe, even though it is yet to succeed like those of other such groupings including the ASEAN.

Media, whose role is to inform, watch, motivate or educate the people, have identified some basic snags for the group's sluggish growth; one of them is the identification of too many areas to address, not going for selective viable priority fields. Failing to conclude BIMSTEC FTA, pending for long, is an issue being highlighted by the Media. However, FTA is not the lone hurdle for BIMSTEC. Its Chamber of Commerce, formed in 2011 in Sri Lanka to promote trade, has also failed to make meaningful headway.

Achieving common goal and aspirations never go without difficulties. Therefore, it is important to review the programmes time to time, so that they gather practical perspectives for harnessing the maximum opportunities and benefits for the common good.

The 4th BIMSTEC Summit was held in Kathmandu in 2018. Media, in general, including those from Bangladesh, as I recall, saw the Summit as a positive step. The declaration adopted in Kathmandu stressed on the exchange of agricultural technology, fight against terrorism, reducing impact of climate change, increase trade and investment and ease of visa for member states. It also stressed on the reduction of poverty by 2030 in line with the sustainable developmental goal. Furthermore, the declaration emphasized the importance of connectivity as an important driver for economic integration, among others.

But much of the goals are yet to get meaningful progression. The hurdles may be quite a few, but the lack of political commitment required from among the member states, can be identified as the major one.

Precisely, the expected growth of BIMSTEC was obstructed mainly due to lack of political will. Some members, media have rightly pointed out; have not shown the needed political

commitment to help the group grow. Some were also accused of not supporting its Secretariat with adequate financial and manpower resources.

However, the media saw the organization getting a major boost as the political leaders met in the BRICS Summit in Goa in 2016. When India hosted the first meeting of the BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs in New Delhi in March 2017, the media, excepting a few, saw it positively, as Summit discussed some traditional and non-traditional security issues, including the joint disaster management exercises.

BIMSTEC has started looking at the Bay as part of its larger maritime strategic space. The reasons are clear—plagued by varying security threats, the Bay of Bengal has turned a key transit route between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, impacting all its member-states.

It is viewed that creating regional value chains, that could feed into global value chains, can help BIMSTEC member states take advantage. Integration of women entrepreneurs and building innovative business models were suggested, among others. Multimodal connectivity and a speedy conclusion of the BIMSTEC FTA along with an effective energy sharing mechanism may also have a multiplier effect on trade and investment, some experts say.

It was stated that besides ASEAN, BIMSTEC is yet another opportunity for India. But, practically, it's not for India alone, but for the whole region. If the regional collaboration succeeds, removing the shortcomings, there will be wider scopes for direct connectivity in the region, with Southeast Asia via Northeast India and Myanmar, from which Bangladesh may be benefited. Besides, the member countries will be able to pursue the major issues of counter-terrorism and tap untapped resources, which appear to be the major concern today. If the grouping emerge stronger, India's 'Look East' and Thailand's 'Look West' policy will complement each other, and the land-locked Nepal and Bhutan can also hold the prospect of enhancing their connectivity with the rest of the region.

Media does not plan or execute programmes but collaborate. To the best of our understanding, media have always projected that the scopes for developing the region by enhancing intra-regional trade and investment, and tapping its potential resources, is huge. Except for the crisis caused by Myanmar's decision to ruthlessly drive out a million minority Rohingya people from Rakhine state to Bangladesh, BIMSTEC is not having any major bilateral problem. The organization is not like the SAARC which is suffering from perennial tensions and mistrusts, thus BIMSTEC has the potential to become a productive body.

But, unfortunately, in the last two decades, BIMSTEC could not proceed as desired. India, the largest member of the group, has been criticized for not providing a strong leadership to it. Thailand and Myanmar are criticized for having ignored BIMSTEC in favour of ASEAN. The absence of a permanent secretariat and lack of required level of commitment are some of the key factors holding the body back. The effect of the formation of another sub-regional group, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum, under the leadership of China, has created more doubts about the exclusive potential of BIMSTEC.

Some officials connected with the BIMSTEC operation in the past have identified the lack of media support and public awareness as one of the major shortcomings. Well, media obviously can play a complementary role, but they are not the players. The actual players are the Seven nations who wanted to promote the idea.

In the eyes of the Media observers, BIMSTEC has a huge potential to promote intraregional trade, investment and counter the security threats involved. They also noticed that despite sluggish advancement so far, the hope for a stronger tie is amply visible.

Needless to say, BIMSTEC needs to engage greater Media attention to support the dream that the regional leaders have rightly promoted. And, therefore, setting up of a permanent Secretariat with necessary tools to feed the media outlets all over the region, and on a regular basis, is important. However, Media's support will be greater only when the BIMSTEC leaders will carry forward the initiative braving the challenges, putting up a stronger political will.

Abstracts from the paper, presented by Haroon Habib, a senior journalist and writer, at the 'Kolkata Colloquium—Re-imaging BIMSTEC', organized by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India

<https://www.daily-sun.com/amp/post/442532><https://www.daily-sun.com/amp/post/442532>



MIZZIMA MYANMAR NEWS AND INSIGHT

02 December 2019

By [Mizzima](#)

28 November 2019

BIMSTEC chief prioritises disaster management



BIMSTEC secretary general M. Shahidul Islam says the Bay of Bengal regional grouping should focus on disaster management on a priority basis.

‘Our member nations face challenges from regular cyclones, earthquakes and floods. India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, we all face cyclones in the Bay of Bengal, ... so it would be great to have a transregional disaster management structure ,’ Mr Islam said at the inaugural ceremony of the Kolkata Colloquium of the Observer Research Foundation entitled ‘Re-imagining BIMSTEC’ .

‘Cyclones don't recognize national boundaries, neither do floods, so such problems are better tackled on a regional basis,’ he said.

Chief editor of Mizzima, Soe Myint, speaking on a colloquium event, said BIMSTEC should focus on issues like physical connectivity and on developing people-to-people contacts.

‘It is no good opening new roads, ports, or airports if visa regimes are not eased if tourists are not encouraged because they are viewed with suspicion,’ said Soe Myint.

He said if Myanmar was giving visas on arrival to Indians, India should reciprocate.

‘That will help our people living in states closer to the Indian border to come to India for medical treatment or Buddhist pilgrimage,’ said Soe Myint.

Leading author Bertil Lintner said regional groupings like BIMSTEC don't get to do much because post-colonial leadership and bureaucracies are very conscious of sovereignty. ‘This is a reality in Asia but much can still be done if governments had the intent,’ he said.

Participants said India as the biggest country and economy in BIMSTEC had to take the lead and do more than other countries.

<http://www.mizzima.com/article/bimstec-chief-prioritises-disaster-management>

Daily News

Academics, policy makers to drive ‘Re-imagining BIMSTEC’ concept

Wednesday, 27 November 2019 - 01:00

Finance

Chandani Jayatilleke



Academics, policy makers, journalists and other stakeholders involved in cross-national issues related to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) will gather in Kolkata, India this week.

The forum from November 28 to 29 will discuss and analyse the brand value of BIMSTEC and its opportunities for wider collaborations and focus on understanding the prevalent narratives within BIMSTEC. The event named ‘Kolkata Colloquium-Re-imagining BIMSTEC’ has been organized by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), an independent think tank in India in collaboration with Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Foundation, New Delhi.

‘Strong BIMSTEC can be a good stepping stone for cooperation in broader Indo-Pacific construction,’ says Dr Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Senior Fellow and Programme Coordinator, ORF, Kolkata.

She adds, ‘When the whole world is at critical strategic crossroads, the BIMSTEC in its own way has an opportunity to show some direction.’

The forum is divided into three main business sessions—Connecting Nations within BIMSTEC; Climate Change, Disaster Management and BIMSTEC; and Enhancing Trade and Cultural Interactions: Engaging Members in BIMSTEC.

Meanwhile the second meeting of the BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was held in Colombo in October. Sri Lanka is the current chair of BIMSTEC. The deliberations were attended by all BIMSTEC member states namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the BIMSTEC Secretariat. The meeting was chaired by P. M. Amza Additional Secretary, Economic Affairs Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Foreign Secretary Ravinatha Aryasinha noted with concern that BIMSTEC, which entered its third decade, is yet to reap benefits of the full socio-economic potential of the region—with intraregional trade at only 3.7% and investment approximately 5%. He urged delegations to actively seek to understand what holds the organization back—imagination, resources or political will. As current BIMSTEC Chair, Sri Lanka saw as crucial re-energizing the organization, the early finalization of the BIMSTEC Charter and the rationalization of the sectors in order to maximize utilization of resources and to make BIMSTEC a result-oriented organization delivering tangible benefits to all its people. Sri Lanka will forge closer cooperation, especially in the areas of counter terrorism and transnational crimes. He also emphasized the importance of BIMSTEC working closely with various international organizations such as the IORA, ASEAN and the ADB.

<https://www.dailynews.lk/2019/11/27/finance/203978/academics-policy-makers-drive-%E2%80%98re-imagining-bimstec%E2%80%99-concept>



Has “journalism” become a luxury?

Sheith Khidhir

1 December 2019



This file photo shows journalist Rowena Paraan (L) and a police officer speaking during a lecture about fake news in Philippine Army Camp Jaime Bitong in Baler, Aurora, north of Manila. (AFP Photo)

Recently, on 28 November, Swedish veteran journalist and author Bertil Lintner warned a forum in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), India, that the rampant misinformation being spread on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter was having a negative effect on journalism in Myanmar, India and the region.

Lintner was speaking about the media at the two-day Kolkata Colloquium 2019 organized by Observer Research Foundation (ORF) under the title ‘Re-imagining BIMSTEC’.

The veteran journalist spoke on issues regarding objectivity, balance and the challenge of ‘Fake News’ in his presentation and follow-up question time. His main focus, however, was on Myanmar.

He pointed at the earlier challenge of so-called ‘citizen journalism’, saying that it had made way for the serious threat posed by misinformation spread quickly through social media.

He was quoted by local Myanmar media as saying, ‘I was actually in Kolkata a few years ago at a conference about the media and made myself extremely unpopular at that conference because I criticized something that was very much *al a mode* at that time: citizen journalists, citizen journalism.’

‘Everyone has the right to be a journalist and could be a journalist. But what I argued was being a journalist is a profession. It’s a job. It’s a trade like any other profession. Like being an electrician, a carpenter or an architect. It is nothing that anyone just can do. It needs training. It needs experience. I said that I wouldn’t want to be in an aeroplane flown by a citizen pilot nor would I like to have my teeth fixed by a citizen dentist. This is how serious it is,’ Lintner observed.

He stressed that while people had the right to write and say what they want; it should not be mixed up with journalism.

‘This was a couple of years ago. Today I actually believe that the tide has changed. There is much more criticism coming up about and against the main platform for so-called citizen journalism, social media, especially Facebook. And it is a threat here to the independent media from social media,’ he said.



Source: Reporters Without Borders

If not social media, then where?

During the Colloquium, one speaker had pointed out that there had been concerns expressed about media freedom in the region and in India, with the latter ranking poorly in the media freedom index. In fact, India had ranked 140 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders’ 2019 World Press Freedom Index. Myanmar ranked just two spots better at 138.

While fake news is certainly a matter of serious concern, and this is especially true nowadays where information or misinformation can be spread with the click of a button, the question of an oppressed media in the Southeast Asian region complicates matters further.

On the topic of Myanmar, it is noteworthy to mention the case involving two Reuters journalists—Wa Lone and KyawSoeOo.

The case has already become infamous, both in the region and across most of the world. The journalists were arrested in December 2017 for allegedly accepting secret documents from the

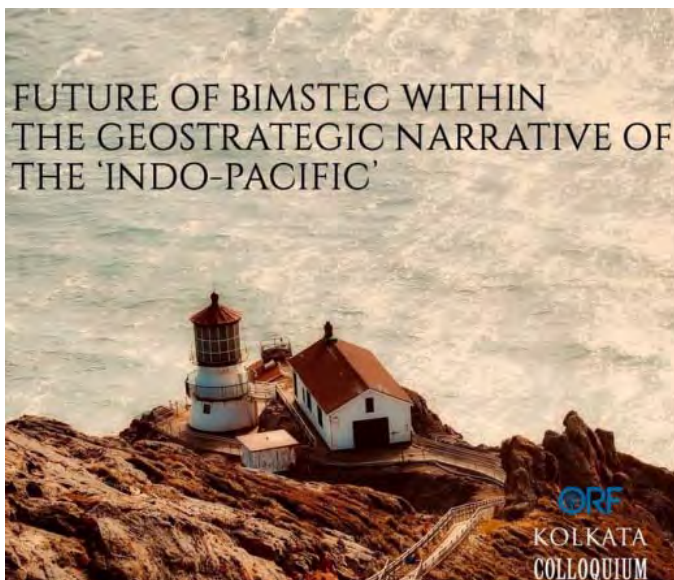
police in connection to a story they were working on. Had they been convicted under the Official Secrets Act—a colonial law implemented during the British occupation of Myanmar—the two journalists could have faced up to 14 years in jail.

While the case shows a clampdown on transparent journalism, it is also worth mentioning that even clampdowns on the internet can happen from time to time.

On 21 June, the government of Myanmar ordered mobile phone operators in the country to shut down all internet data across at least eight townships in Rakhine and one in neighbouring Chin state. United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur to Myanmar, Yanghee Lee expressed serious concerns regarding the blackout, saying that it could be cover for ‘gross human rights violations’ in an area where a brutal army crackdown had already forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee.

Fake news is a dangerous thing. In India, the spread of fake news has led to numerous lynching incidents. Nevertheless, in a region where true journalism is either largely controlled or completely shut down, social media provides an avenue for people to tell their family and friends about - “what is happening”- and often times, that’s all many here have to go on.

<https://theasianpost.com/article/has-journalism-become-luxury>



Global Watch

BIMSTEC NATIONS IDENTIFY SPHERES OF CO-OPERATION

29 November 2019 Partha Roy

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi -SECTORAL Technical & Economic Cooperation is dedicated to create an enabling environment for rapid economic development through

identification and implementation of specific cooperation in various sectors. These are trade, investment, industry, technology, human resource development, tourism, agriculture, energy, infrastructure and transportation, transport and communication, agriculture, fisheries, counter terrorism and transnational crime, environment and disaster management, climate change, public health, poverty alleviation, culture and people-to-people contact. The main objective of the BIMSTEC was detailed by M. Shadul Islam, Secretary General of the Dhaka headquartered organization at Kolkata Colloquium held on 28 and 29 November. BIMSTEC comprises Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan. Fourteen priority sectors of cooperation have been identified and several BIMSTEC centres have been established to focus on those sectors. The initial emphasis on project-based cooperation has been shifted to a rule- and institution-based cooperation format. A number of agreements and MOUs were initiated to provide legal framework for cooperation, the most notable one being the Framework Agreement on BIMSTEC Free Trade Area in 2004 providing negotiating specific agreements to eliminate tariffs and non-tariff barriers, liberalize trade in services, establish an open and competitive investment regime, and establish effective trade and investment facilitating measures, including simplification of customs procedures, facilitation of visa for businessmen and development of mutual recognition arrangements. In 2014, BIMSTEC established its permanent secretariat in Dhaka which gave a formal structure to this regional forum, he said. BIMSTEC received new impetus when BIMSTEC Leaders were invited to a Leaders' Retreat organized alongside BRICS Summit held in Goa in October 2016. At the Goa Retreat, the Leaders reiterated their strong political commitment to make the organization stronger, more effective and result-oriented, and recommended a 17-point Agenda of Action. Since then, BIMSTEC began to hold meetings more regularly and resumed negotiations to conclude pending agreements including BIMSTEC FTA. Riding on the new momentum, the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2018 took a number of important decisions to rationalize and consolidate BIMSTEC's operational modalities and institutional structure. The Summit decided to draft BIMSTEC Charter, establish a BIMSTEC Development Fund, and review and rationalize the 14 sectors of cooperation to bring focus in BIMSTEC's work. The topics selected for the Colloquium—connectivity, trade, climate change and disaster management, cultural linkages— were some of the most relevant areas of BIMSTEC cooperation. Two sessions had been devoted to media, because the role of media will be crucial in both re-imagining and re-imaging BIMSTEC. The first area to receive renewed attention of member states is the economic dimension of cooperation, which is the *raison d'être* of BIMSTEC. The success of other regional organizations like EU and ASEAN are often measured by the role they have played in promoting intra-regional trade and investment. BIMSTEC with more than 1.6 billion people and a combined GDP of over 3 trillion US dollars is one of the fastest growing regions in the world. But these countries do 94% of their international trade with non-members of BIMSTEC, and the remaining 6% trade take place within themselves, compared to 24% for ASEAN and 64% for EU. The BIMSTEC Trade Negotiating Committee has held 21 rounds of negotiations to finalize the text of the Agreement on Trade in Goods but to no avail. BIMSTEC needs to conclude the long-awaited BIMSTEC Free Trade Area without further delay because that will constitute the crucial first step towards economic integration of the region. In addition, trade facilitation measures such as simplification of customs procedures, business visa facilitation and mutual recognition arrangements should be put in place. BIMSTEC region is one of the least connected regions in the world. The importance of connectivity was aptly captured by the prime minister of India in his speech at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit, and I quote, 'I believe that the biggest opportunity is connectivity—trade connectivity, economic connectivity, transport connectivity, digital connectivity, [and] people-to-people connectivity.' Unquote. BIMSTEC must leverage on its unique geographical location to act as the bridge between South and Southeast Asia by

strengthening physical, economic and people-to-people connectivity. The hon'ble prime minister of Thailand in the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit stated that BIMSTEC should aim for a road network to transport people, goods and services as well as harmonization of rules and regulations to accommodate seamless movement from India to the east coast of Vietnam in the shortest possible time. The ADB-assisted study titled 'BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan' and the proposed BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement[1] will greatly help in realizing this vision.

<http://www.ebangla.in/bimstec-nations-identify-spheres-of-co-operation/>

প্রথম আলো

বাংলাদেশ

রোহিঙ্গা সমস্যা দ্রুত সমাধানের তাগিদ বাংলাদেশের

প্রতিনিধি, কলকাতা

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সম্মেলনে ভাষণ দেন বিমস্টেকের সেক্রেটারি জেনারেল শহীদুল ইসলাম। কলকাতা, ২৮ নভেম্বর। ছবি: ভাস্কর মুখার্জি বিমস্টেক সম্মেলনে বাংলাদেশের পক্ষ থেকে বলা হয়েছে, দ্রুত রোহিঙ্গা সমস্যার সমাধান করতে না পারলে বঙ্গোপসাগরীয় অঞ্চলে আশার বদলে আশঙ্কা মাথা চাড়া দিতে বাধ্য হবে। আজ বৃহস্পতিবার সকালে ভারতের কলকাতায় দুদিন ব্যাপী এ সম্মেলন শুরু হয়েছে। সম্মেলনে বাংলাদেশের পক্ষে রোহিঙ্গা ইস্যুতে একথা বলেন বাংলাদেশ ইনস্টিটিউট অব ডেভেলপমেন্ট স্টাডিজের (বি আই ডি এস) সিনিয়র ফেলো নাজনীন আহমেদ।

নাজনীন আহমেদ বলেন, বিমস্টেক ভুক্ত দেশ গুলো কে পরস্পরের সমস্যা ও স্পর্শকাতরতা কে গুরুত্ব দিতে হবে। না হলে সহযোগিতার বাতাবরণ নষ্ট হয়ে নিরাপত্তার বিষয়টি ঝুঁকির কারণ হয়ে দাঁড়াবে। তিনি সরাসরি রোহিঙ্গা সমস্যার অবতারণা করে বলেন, গোষ্ঠী ভুক্ত দেশের এই বিষয়টি দ্রুত অনুধাবন করে রোহিঙ্গা সমস্যার সমাধান করতে হবে। না হলে বঙ্গোপসাগরীয় অঞ্চলে আশার বদলে আশঙ্কা মাথা চাড়া দিতে বাধ্য হবে।

কলকাতার একটি অভিজাত হোটেলে বিমস্টেক তথা বে অববেঙ্গল ইনিশিয়েটিভ ফর মাল্টিসেক্টরাল, টেকনিক্যাল অ্যান্ড ইকোনমিককো-অপারেশনের এই সম্মেলন হচ্ছে। এতে এই জোট ভুক্ত সাত দেশ বাংলাদেশ, ভারত, মিয়ানমার, শ্রীলঙ্কা, থাইল্যান্ড, ভুটান ও নেপালের প্রতিনিধিরা অংশ নিয়েছেন। এতে স্বাগত ভাষণ দেন অবজারভারিসার্চ ফাউন্ডেশন, কলকাতার পরিচালক নীলাঞ্জন ঘোষ।

আলোচনা সভায় বিমস্টেকের সেক্রেটারি জেনারেল (বাংলাদেশি) শহীদুল ইসলাম বলেন, বঙ্গোপসাগরীয় অঞ্চলে প্রাকৃতিক বিপর্যয় ব্যবস্থাপনার সমষ্টি গত সহযোগিতার প্রয়োজনা বিমস্টেক ভুক্ত দেশ গুলোর বিষয়টি ভেবে দেখতে হবে। এই জোটের সহযোগিতা ও অগ্রগতির বিষয়গুলোর দ্রুত সমাধান করা প্রয়োজনা কিন্তু দুঃখের বিষয়, নানা কারণে তা সম্ভব হচ্ছে না; যদি ও সাম্প্রতিক কালে সহযোগিতার ক্ষেত্রে কিছুটা গতি সঞ্চারিত হয়েছে।

বিমস্টেকের এই সম্মেলনে যোগ দিয়েছেন ভারতের সাবেক কূটনীতিক পিনাক রঞ্জন চক্রবর্তী, ইনস্টিটিউট অব সাউথ এশিয়ান স্টাডিজের পরিচালক সিরাজা মোহন, অবজারভার রিসার্চ ফাউন্ডেশনের চেয়ার ম্যান সঞ্জয় যোশী, মিয়ান মারের স্ট্র্যাটেজিক অ্যান্ড ইন্টারন্যাশনাল স্টাডিজের সদ স্যথান হাতের, জার্মানি ইনস্টিটিউট ফর ইন্টারন্যাশনাল অ্যান্ড সিকিউরিটি অ্যাফেয়ার্সের গবেষক ক্রিশ্চিয়ান ওয়াননার, এই সংস্থার শীর্ষক মর্কতা হারিবাটডিটার, থাইল্যান্ডের এশিয়া সেন্টারের নির্বাহী পরিচালক রবিন রাম চরণ, যুক্ত রাজ্যের এশিয়া প্যাসিফিক প্রোগ্রামের ফেলো গারেট প্রাই, বাংলাদেশের সাংসদ নাহিম রাজ্জাক, বাংলা দেশের সেন্টার ফর পলিসিডায়াল গেররি সার্চ ডিরেক্টর খন্দকার গোলাম মোয়াজ্জেম প্রমুখ।

<https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1626720/%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%B9%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%99%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%B8%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%A4-%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A7%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%A6-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%82%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B6%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0>

আনন্দবাজার পত্রিকা

রোহিঙ্গা: সক্রিয় হতে পারে বিমস্টেক
নিজস্ব সংবাদদাতা

২৯ নভেম্বর, ২০১৯, ০৩:৫৭:১০

শেষ আপডেট: ২৯নভেম্বর, ২০১৯, ০৪:০৮:৩৬



—ফাইল চিত্র

বাংলা দেশ আর্জি জানালে রোহিঙ্গা শরণার্থীদের দেশে ফেরানোর বিষয়ে মায়ান মারের সঙ্গে কূটনৈতিক দৌত্য শুরু করতে পারে বঙ্গোপসাগর সংলগ্ন ৭টি দেশের সংগঠন বিমস্টেক। সংগঠনের মহাসচিব এম শহিদুল ইসলাম বৃহস্পতিবার কলকাতায় বলেন, “বাংলাদেশ ও মায়ানমার, দুই দেশই বিমস্টেকের সদস্য। বাংলা দেশ আনুষ্ঠানিক ভাবে প্রস্তাব দিলে বিমস্টেক এগোনের কথা ভাববে।”

বাংলা দেশের প্রধানমন্ত্রী শেখ হাসিনা সম্প্রতি বলেছেন—শুধু বাংলা দেশ নয়, গোটা দক্ষিণ এশিয়া অঞ্চলের নিরাপত্তার পক্ষে মস্ত ঝুঁকি রোহিঙ্গা শরণার্থীরা। প্রতিবেশী দেশ গুলির পাশাপাশি আসিয়ান, বিমস্টেকের মতো আঞ্চলিক সংগঠন গুলিকে ও মায়ানমারের ও পর চাপসৃষ্টিকরতে আর্জি জানিয়েছেন বাংলা দেশের বিদেশমন্ত্রী একে আব্দুল মোমেনা দিল্লিতে বহু দিন ধরেই নিরাপত্তার পক্ষে ঝুঁকি বলে মনে করে রোহিঙ্গাদের। মায়ানমার ছেড়ে আসা প্রায় ১০ লক্ষ রোহিঙ্গা শরণার্থী এখন বাংলাদেশের বিভিন্ন শিবিরে রয়েছেন। ভারতে ও এসেছেন কয়েক হাজার রোহিঙ্গা। ঢাকার অভিযোগ, দু’বছরে এঁদের ফেরত নেওয়ার কোন ও সদিচ্ছা মায়ানমার প্রশাসন দেখায়নি। বিমস্টেকের মহা সচিব শহিদুল ইসলাম নিজেও বাংলাদেশের কূটনীতিক। তিনি বলেন, “ঢেলে সাজানোর পরে বিমস্টেক এখন অনেকগতিশীল। অর্থনৈতিক সহযোগিতা, যোগাযোগ বৃদ্ধি থেকে নিরাপত্তা—নানা ক্ষেত্রে সক্রিয় হয়েছে বিমস্টেক। ঢাকা চাইলে রোহিঙ্গা নিয়ে ও তৎপর হতে পারে।”

ভারত ও পাকিস্তানের মনো মালিন্যে সার্ক সংগঠনটি কার্যত বন্ধ হয়ে যাওয়ার পরে বিমস্টেক (বেঅববেঙ্গল ইনিসিয়েটিভ ফর মাল্টি-সেক্টরাল টেকনিক্যাল অ্যান্ড ইকোনমিক কো অপারেশন)- এর কাজের পরিধি বাড়িয়ে তাকে কর্ম ক্ষম করে তোলার চেষ্টা হচ্ছে। সদস্য দেশ ভারত,

বাংলাদেশ, নেপাল, ভুটান, শ্রীলঙ্কা, তাইল্যান্ড ও মায়ানমারা ‘নবরুপেবিমস্টেক’ নামে দু’দিনের একটি আলোচনা সভায় অংশনিত্তে কলকাতায় এ সেশন সদস্যদেশ গুলির কূটনীতিক ও সাংবাদিকেরা। উদ্যোক্তা অবজার্ভার রিসার্চ ফাউন্ডেশনের ডিরেক্টর নীলাঞ্জনঘোষবলেন, “‘চিন-মার্কিনবাণিজ্য-যুদ্ধের পরিস্থিতিতে অভিন্ন অর্থনৈতিক ব্লক হিসেবে সাফল্য পেতে পারে বিমস্টেক। মুক্ত বাণিজ্যচুক্তিতে হিমশৈলের চূড়ামাত্রা’”বক্তারা জানান, অভিন্ন সড়ক ও রেল যোগা যোগ নিয়ে বেশ কিছু গুরুত্ব পূর্ণ প্রস্তাব রয়েছে বিমস্টেকের। তারপরে ও সংগঠনটি এতদিন কেন সেভাবে পাখা মেলেনি, তা বিস্ময়ের। প্রাক্তন কূটনৈতিক পিনাক রঞ্জন চক্রবর্তীবলেন— বড় শক্তি হিসেবে ভারত বেশি লাভবান হবে, ছোট সদস্য দেশ গুলির এমন আশঙ্কাই হয়তো এজন্য দায়ী। তবে এই ভয় দূর করতে বিমস্টেকের খোল-নলচেষ্টা দলে ফেলা হয়েছে। চলার গতি এবার বাড়বেই।

<https://www.anandabazar.com/international/bimstec-may-start-discussion-with-myanmar-on-rohingya-issuse-1.1076470>

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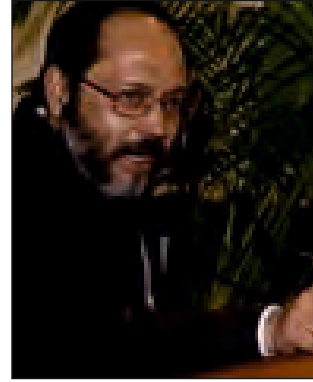
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