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BIMSTEC at 20: Prospects For Maritime Security Governance

By Rajni Gamage

Synopsis

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) celebrates its 20th anniversary in June. BIMSTEC needs to engage in maritime security cooperation to meet the challenges of a changing strategic landscape.

Commentary

BIMSTEC, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, celebrates its 20th anniversary in June this year. It is well-positioned to engage in maritime security cooperation to face the challenges of a changing strategic and economic landscape.

Although BIMSTEC was initially established to tackle sub-regional economic and social development issues, its potential for sub-regional security cooperation has come to the fore in the past decade. While BIMSTEC started with six economic-related priority areas in 1998, security issues were included since the 8th Ministerial Meeting in 2005, including counter-terrorism, transnational crime, and disaster management.

Increased Profile of BIMSTEC

In October 2016, India hosted a joint BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit for the first time, effectively increasing BIMSTEC's profile as a sub-regional economic and security organisation. A number of factors facilitate this increased profile and potential of BIMSTEC.

Firstly, the Bay of Bengal is increasing in economic and strategic significance. The sub-region is marked as a cockpit for economic growth, driven by the growing economies of India and Myanmar. It also lays claim to critical sea lines of communication for the transit of trade and energy supplies from the Middle East, Europe, and Africa to the economic powerhouses of East Asia.

Secondly, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been moribund as a regional organisation. India has for some time been looking to engage more deeply with sub-regional initiatives that exclude Pakistan, its deadlock with the latter being a major impediment to the progress of SAARC. While a number of sub-regional groupings have emerged, such as SASEC (South Asia Sub regional Economic Cooperation), BIMSTEC stands out in being more comprehensive in its membership and comprising a good mix of coastal South Asian and Southeast Asian states.

Thirdly, the intensification of the India-China great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean Region provides greater impetus for India to engage more deeply with the Bay states so as to not lose out to China. The more recent issues of contention include border stand-offs and the strategic inroads made by China into India's neighbouring states through defence ties and port development.

Foremost among these is the operationalisation of Pakistan's Gwadar port (financed by interest-free Chinese loans) in November 2016, as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the associated maritime security cooperation between the two navies.

BIMSTEC & Maritime Security Governance

The importance of maritime security governance is increasingly recognised by coastal and island states in the Bay of Bengal, which deal with similar threats, both traditional and non-traditional in nature. There is every likelihood of BIMSTEC becoming an instrument for sub-regional maritime security governance.

Recent economic and political developments within the member states augur well for the prospects of maritime security cooperation. These include India's maritime-related domestic and foreign initiatives since 2014 (e.g., 'Sagar Mala', 'Project Mausam'); and Myanmar's 'strategic realignment' following internal political reforms since 2011.

Sri Lanka's strategic 'rebalance' since 2015 (evident in its increased participation in regional maritime-related initiatives) and Bangladesh's strong advocacy of the 'blue economy' in the recent past, alongside efforts towards naval modernisation within most of the Bay states, have also helped. Meanwhile, Thailand and India have held bilateral discussions on maritime security, trade, and connectivity in January 2017, while the former signed an MOU with Myanmar on the joint development of marine tourism in January this year.

Maritime Security Issues

There are a number of serious maritime security issues in the Bay of Bengal which require timely and coordinated responses. These include firstly, the 2015 Rohingya refugee crisis which saw thousands of 'boat people' being stranded on the Andaman Sea, and made vulnerable to recruitment by criminal networks, sea pirates, and Islamist militants. The Bay is also prone to some of the most severe natural disasters, incidents of sea piracy, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

At present, maritime security cooperation initiatives within the sub-region do not include all the coastal Bay states while including states from outside the sub-region – for instance, CORPAT exercises, Milan exercises, and the 'IO 5' grouping. It is the Bay states that have the largest stakes in their surrounding waters, and a sub-regional maritime security governance mechanism within BIMSTEC is essential.

Maritime security cooperation also provides BIMSTEC members an avenue for making inroads into Southeast Asia (or other sections of the Indian Ocean Region for Thailand and Myanmar). Recent statements made by leaders and officials from India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka all reflect the awareness that there is a need to break out of the confines of South Asia and to engage more deeply with the more prosperous countries to the East.

BIMSTEC's key challenges in the past have been the lukewarm attitude of India, and the internal preoccupations and limited capabilities of member states towards regional instruments. With a changing strategic and economic landscape, coupled with increasing maritime security threats, BIMSTEC may be well-placed to become involved in and engaged with broader security cooperation among its member states.

Rajni Gamage is a Senior Analyst in the Maritime Security Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg