

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

BIMSTEC: Why It Matters

By Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy

Synopsis

The recently concluded BIMSTEC Summit in Nepal presents signs of optimism and the comeback of the Bay of Bengal as a new strategic space. What is its significance?

Commentary

THE ECONOMIC and strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal is growing rapidly with the re-emergence of the idea of the 'Indo-Pacific' region. This notion assumes that the growing economic, geopolitical and security connections between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions are creating a shared strategic space.

The Bay is evolving as the centre of the Indo-Pacific region again. The renewed focus has given a new lease of life to the developmental efforts in the region, in particular the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation or BIMSTEC.

Outlining Changes

To revive the region as a distinct community and to promote regional cooperation among the Bay of Bengal's littoral states, BIMSTEC was established on 6 June 1997 as a regional organisation comprising seven states (five from South Asia: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka; and two from Southeast Asia: Myanmar and Thailand).

As the BIMSTEC process enters the third decade of its existence, it has yet to make visible progress in advancing concrete cooperation among the member states. In the last two years, however, member states have invested some fresh energy to make BIMSTEC a valuable institution for regional integration and collaboration.

BIMSTEC has a huge potential as a natural platform for development cooperation in a rapidly changing Indo-Pacific region, and the Bay of Bengal region can leverage its unique position as a bridge linking South and Southeast Asia.

BIMSTEC had been mostly overlooked until a renewed push came from India in October 2016, when it hosted an outreach summit with leaders of BIMSTEC countries alongside the BRICS summit in Goa. Since then, there have been some progress, in BIMSTEC cooperation in several areas including security, counter-terrorism, transport connectivity and tourism, among others.

Some timely developments, for example, the BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs meeting, disaster management exercise, launching of a hospital and Tele-medicine network, founding of a centre for weather and climate, meetings of business chambers and industry associations, helped maintain the momentum. Ministerial and senior officials' meetings motivated member countries for strengthening cooperation in key sectors.

Building Bay of Bengal Region

Reflecting the growing geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of the Bay of Bengal region, the 4th BIMSTEC Summit was held in Kathmandu on 30-31 August and has generated optimism in the region. The growing value of BIMSTEC and its attempt to generate synergy through collective efforts by member states, can be understood, for three key reasons.

First, there is a greater appreciation of BIMSTEC's potential due to the geographical contiguity, abundant natural and human resources, rich historical linkages and cultural heritage for promoting deeper cooperation in the region. Indeed, with a changed narrative and approach the Bay of Bengal has potential to become the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific idea – a place where the strategic interests of the major powers of East and South Asia intersect.

Political support and strong commitment from all member countries is crucial for making BIMSTEC a dynamic and, effective regional organisation.

Second, BIMSTEC serves as a bridge between two major high-growth centres of Asia – South and Southeast Asia. Connectivity is essential to develop a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable Bay of Bengal region. Therefore, BIMSTEC needs to address two dimensions of connectivity – one, upgrading and dovetailing of national connectivity into a regional roadmap; and two, development of both hard and soft infrastructures.

BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Emerging?

The discussions on BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement are in an advanced stage and are likely to be finalised soon. Similarly, leaders are committed to an early conclusion of BIMSTEC Free Trade Area negotiations.

Involvement of industries and business chambers through BIMSTEC Business Forum and BIMSTEC Economic Forum; BIMSTEC startup conclave, BIMSTEC Ministerial conclave at the India Mobile Congress to enhance cooperation in the areas of information technology and communication, are some examples of various steps taken during the summit.

While, the summit has addressed all BIMSTEC priority areas, namely, poverty alleviation, connectivity, trade and investment, counter terrorism and transnational crime, environment and disaster management, climate change, energy, technology, agriculture, fisheries, public health, people-to-people contacts, cultural cooperation, tourism, mountain economy and blue economy, there are no lofty promises in the declaration. There is an attempt to follow up on earlier announcements and to focus on a concrete action plan.

Third, the leaders agreed to enhance the institutional capacity of the BIMSTEC Secretariat in order to enable the Secretariat to coordinate, monitor and facilitate implementation of BIMSTEC activities and programmes. Similarly, preparation of a draft charter for the BIMSTEC, enhancing its visibility and stature in international fora, is an important step forward. Likewise, India has committed to set up a Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies at the Nalanda University for research on art, culture and other subjects in the Bay of Bengal.

BIMSTEC: Alternative to SAARC?

India's Ministry of External Affairs remarked in a press briefing before the Summit that BIMSTEC links the unique ecology of the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal, reflecting the growing political support and commitment from India.

Some experts also envisage BIMSTEC as an alternative to the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) process. Indeed, BIMSTEC holds a special significance for India in a changing mental map of the region.

Certainly, making the Bay of Bengal integral to India's 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies could accelerate the process of regional integration. Therefore, BIMSTEC matters for India and for the region.

Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy is a Visiting Fellow in the Office of Executive Deputy Chairman at the 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