

BIMSTEC NEEDS TO REINVENT ITSELF

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: BIMSTEC and India

The foreign ministers of BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) met virtually on April 1. That they made time to hold their 17th meeting is good news. They advanced the agenda, which had been arrested by the pandemic, since the last ministerial meeting held in August 2018. Their major task was to pave the way for the next summit, the grouping's fifth, due to be held in Sri Lanka in the "next few months".

While most multilateral groupings from G20 to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) held their deliberations at the highest political level in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, BIMSTEC leaders failed to do so. In contrast to a meeting of even SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) leaders held at India's initiative a year ago, BIMSTEC could not arrange its ministerial meeting until April 2021. This is due as much to contextual factors as the diplomatic environment prevailing today.

Established as a grouping of four nations — India, Thailand, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka — through the Bangkok Declaration of 1997 to promote rapid economic development, BIMSTEC was expanded later to include three more countries — Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan. It moved at a leisurely pace during its first 20 years with only three summits held and a record of modest achievements. But it suddenly received special attention as New Delhi chose to treat it as a more practical instrument for regional cooperation over a faltering SAARC. The BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat, followed by their Outreach Summit with the BRICS leaders in Goa in October 2016, drew considerable international limelight to the low-profile regional grouping. This also opened up the path for its rejuvenation.

The fourth leaders' summit, held in Kathmandu in August 2018, devised an ambitious plan for institutional reform and renewal that would encompass economic and security cooperation. It took the important decision to craft a charter to provide BIMSTEC with a more formal and stronger foundation. The shared goal now is to head towards "a Peaceful, Prosperous and Sustainable Bay of Bengal Region". At the second swearing-in of the Modi government in May 2019, the leaders of BIMSTEC, not SAARC, were invited as honoured guests. Soon thereafter, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar observed that India saw a mix of "energy, mindset and possibility" in BIMSTEC.

Two and a half years after the Kathmandu Summit, the grouping stands ready to move forward. The foreign ministers cleared the draft for the BIMSTEC charter, recommending its early adoption. They endorsed the rationalisation of sectors and sub-sectors of activity, with each member-state serving as a lead for the assigned areas of special interest. The ministers also conveyed their support for the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, which will be adopted at the next summit. Preparations have been completed for the signing of three agreements relating to mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, cooperation between diplomatic academies, and the establishment of a technology transfer facility in Colombo.

What has been missing from recent deliberations is a reference to the lack of progress on the trade and economic dossier. A January 2018 study by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry had suggested that BIMSTEC urgently needed a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement to be a real game changer. Ideally it should cover trade in goods, services and investment; promote regulatory harmonisation; adopt policies that develop regional value chains; and eliminate non-tariff barriers. Also lacking was an effort to enthuse and engage the vibrant

business communities of these seven countries, and expand their dialogue, interactions and transactions. On this score, BIMSTEC remains a work in progress. Over 20 rounds of negotiations to operationalise the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement, signed in 2004, are yet to bear fruit.

In contrast, much has been achieved in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief and security, including counterterrorism, cyber security, and coastal security cooperation. India has led through constant focus and follow-up — to the extent that some member-states have complained about the ‘over-securitisation’ of BIMSTEC. The trick to ensure balance is not to go slow on security but to accelerate the pace of forging solid arrangements for economic cooperation. Similarly, while national business chambers are yet to be optimally engaged with the BIMSTEC project, the academic and strategic community has shown ample enthusiasm through the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks and other fora.

The goal now should be to overcome the obstacles leading to BIMSTEC’s success. First, a strong BIMSTEC presupposes cordial and tension-free bilateral relations among all its member-states. This has not been the case, given the trajectory of India-Nepal, India-Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh-Myanmar ties in recent years. Second, uncertainties over SAARC hovers, complicating matters. Both Kathmandu and Colombo want the SAARC summit revived, even as they cooperate within BIMSTEC, with diluted zeal. Third, China’s decisive intrusion in the South-Southeast Asian space has cast dark shadows. A renowned Bangladeshi scholar argued at a recent conference that BIMSTEC would make progress if China is accepted as its principal interlocutor and partner. This perspective has hardly any takers in India and its friendly partners in the grouping. Finally, the military coup in Myanmar, brutal crackdown of protesters and continuation of popular resistance resulting in a protracted impasse have produced a new set of challenges. Despite them, the BIMSTEC foreign ministers could meet virtually — but will it be as easy for the summit to be held, with the much-maligned Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing in attendance at Colombo?

As BIMSTEC readies itself to celebrate the silver jubilee of its formation next year, it faces a serious challenge: to effect “a paradigm-shift in raising the level of our cooperation and regional integration”, as Mr. Jaishankar said on April 1. The grouping needs to reinvent itself, possibly even rename itself as ‘The Bay of Bengal Community’. It should consider holding regular annual summits. Only then will its leaders convince the region about their strong commitment to the new vision they have for this unique platform linking South Asia and Southeast Asia.

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To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

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