

# BIMSTEC AFTER THE COLOMBO SUMMIT

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Many unfinished tasks | Photo Credit: AP

The fifth summit of the regional grouping, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), held virtually in Colombo on March 30, has undoubtedly advanced the cause of regional cooperation and integration. But a dispassionate look at the grouping, composed of five South Asian countries and two Southeast Asian countries, is needed, especially as it celebrates its 25th anniversary in June this year. The member-states are: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar and Thailand.

BIMSTEC is no longer a mere initiative or programme. The question to address is whether it is now capable of tackling the challenges facing the region. Representing a fifth of the world's population that contributes only 4% of the global GDP, can this multilateral grouping trigger accelerated economic development?

It was clear that BIMSTEC first needed to strengthen itself — by re-defining its purpose and rejuvenating its organs and institutions. The much-needed process was launched at the Leaders' Retreat convened by India in 2016. It gathered momentum, thanks to the outcome of a forward-looking summit held in Kathmandu in 2018. The eventual result is now seen in the package of decisions and agreements announced at the latest summit.

The package comprises, first of all, the grouping's charter. Adopted formally, it presents BIMSTEC as "an inter-governmental organization" with "legal personality." Defining BIMSTEC's purposes, it lists 11 items in the first article. Among them is acceleration of "the economic growth and social progress in the Bay of Bengal region", and promotion of "multidimensional connectivity". The grouping now views itself not as a sub-regional organisation but as a regional organisation whose destiny is linked with the area around the Bay of Bengal.

The second element is the decision to re-constitute and reduce the number of sectors of cooperation from the unwieldy 14 to a more manageable seven. Each member-state will serve as a lead for a sector: trade, investment and development (Bangladesh); environment and climate change (Bhutan); security, including energy (India); agriculture and food security (Myanmar); people-to-people contacts (Nepal); science, technology and innovation (Sri Lanka), and connectivity (Thailand).

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Third, the summit participants adopted the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity applicable for 2018-2028. This approval was delayed, but its importance lies in the highest-level political support accorded to this ambitious plan. It was devised and backed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It lists 264 projects entailing a total investment of \$126 billion. Projects worth \$55 billion are under implementation. BIMSTEC needs to generate additional funding and push for timely implementation of the projects. Finally, the package also includes three new agreements signed by member states, relating to mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, cooperation between diplomatic academies, and the establishment of a technology transfer facility in Colombo.

Post Colombo, a quick look at the unfinished tasks and new challenges gives an idea of the

burden of responsibilities on the grouping. The pillar of trade, economic and investment cooperation needs greater strengthening and at a faster pace.

Despite signing a framework agreement for a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2004, BIMSTEC stands far away from this goal. Of the seven constituent agreements needed for the FTA, only two are in place as of now. The general formulations of the Colombo Declaration instil little confidence about prospects of early progress. The need for expansion of connectivity was stressed by one and all, but when it comes to finalising legal instruments for coastal shipping, road transport and intra-regional energy grid connection, much work remains unfinished. On the positive side, however, there needs to be mention of the speedy success achieved in deepening cooperation in security matters and management of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). As security and economic development are interrelated, it is essential to ensure an equitable balance between the two pillars.

Statements by leaders at the summit gave important clues about the thinking on how to tackle the challenges. The Nepalese Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, in a most candid speech emphasised the point that “with less than a decade left, our region is not on track to achieve any of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030”. He added that the COVID-19 pandemic “has further strained our development effort”. The Thailand Prime Minister (and Defence Minister) Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha, as the new Chair, expressed his resolve to work for ‘a Prosperous, Resilient and Robust, and Open (PRO) BIMSTEC’ during his tenure. As a co-founder and key driver, Thailand can contribute much, provided it marshals sufficient institutional and political resources.

It was left to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to offer an array of practical suggestions to strengthen the grouping. India was the only country to offer additional funding to the Secretariat and also to support the Secretary General’s proposal to establish an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) for producing a vision document. Other countries need to emulate this sincere matching of words with action.

Governments showed considerable creativity by agreeing to restrict Myanmar’s participation in the summit to the Foreign Minister’s level. This obviated diplomatic controversy. Thailand and India will need to be astute in managing Myanmar’s engagement until the political situation there becomes normal. BIMSTEC should focus more in the future on new areas such as the blue economy, the digital economy, and promotion of exchanges and links among start-ups and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Besides, three more suggestions deserve consideration.

First, the personal engagement of the political leadership should be stepped up. The decision taken in Colombo to host a summit every two years is welcome if implemented. But in the medium term, an annual summit should be the goal, with an informal retreat built into its programme.

Second, BIMSTEC needs greater visibility. India’s turn to host the G20 leaders’ summit in 2023 presents a golden opportunity, which can be leveraged optimally. Perhaps all its members should be invited to the G20 summit as the chair’s special guests.

Finally, the suggestion to simplify the grouping’s name needs urgent attention. The present name running into 12 words should be changed to four words only — the Bay of Bengal Community (BOBC). It will help the institution immensely. Brevity reflects gravitas.

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