

A 'SILVER' MOMENT TO PROPEL A BAY OF BENGAL DREAM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: International Treaties & Agreements, and other important organizations

'BIMSTEC needs to recreate the spirit of working in unison' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

June 6 marked the completion of 25 years since the 1997 Bangkok Declaration launched a modest grouping (of Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand), with the acronym, BIST-EC. Three countries (Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar) joined it later to make it the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). This unique set of five countries from South Asia and two from Southeast Asia are parents to an institution with an unwieldy name but lofty ambitions. It is the parents' responsibility that the 25-year-old offspring, now a full adult, begins taking strides to achieve the goals set before it.

At the grouping's birth, the world was different; it was stamped by America's 'unipolar moment'. India and Thailand joined hands to start an experiment of infusing a part of South Asia with the economic and institutional dynamism that defined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). But BIMSTEC found the burdens of South Asia too heavy to carry, and so it grew slowly.

Now in the third decade of the 21st century, the strategic contestation between the United States and China defines the region's geopolitics and geo-economics, creating new tensions and opportunities. The grouping has succeeded in rejuvenating itself. Since its Kathmandu summit in 2018, it is viewed as an instrument of regional cooperation and integration, not just of sub-regional cooperation. It is good going so far, but the challenging tasks begin now.

Experts maintain that if BIMSTEC is truly committed to its stated goals, it must recreate the spirit of working in unison, displayed at the historic Leaders' Retreat in October 2016 (and their interaction with the BRICS leadership on the same day). The far-reaching decisions taken, in Goa, paved the way for the institution's reform that took shape at the Kathmandu summit. The Colombo summit in March 2022 put its stamp of approval on it. A determined push at the highest political level made it happen. That is the key lesson from the past.

BIMSTEC has several achievements to its credit. It has crafted a new Charter for itself, spelling out the grouping's vision, functions of its constituent parts, and has secured a legal personality. It has prioritised the sectors of cooperation, reducing them from the unwieldy 14 to the more manageable seven, with each member-state serving as the lead country for the assigned sector. It has, finally, taken measures to strengthen the Secretariat, although some members are yet to extend adequate personnel support to it. Above all, its success lies in its survival through the turns and twists of internal tensions. The BIMSTEC region witnessed the influx of over a million Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh, the result of oppression by the Myanmar military; the coup in Myanmar that led to its virtual boycott by a large segment of the international community; and the grave political and economic crisis afflicting Sri Lanka.

Unlike the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, post-2014, BIMSTEC has continued to hold its summits and meetings of Foreign Ministers. Unlike the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) which held only one summit since its establishment in 1997, BIMSTEC has succeeded in holding five summits so far; it has now resolved to hold regular summits once in

two years.

The grouping has also registered progress in combating terrorism, forging security cooperation, and creating mechanisms and practices for the better management of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. A whole basket of memoranda of understanding, agreements and legal instruments provide the foundation for developing functional cooperation in select areas such as agriculture, trade, sustainable development and connectivity. Institutions such as an Energy Centre and the Centre on Weather and Climate are in place to push sectoral cooperation forward.

However, a fair balance sheet must factor in the shortfalls and the gaps between ambition and action. A major failure relates to the continuing inability to produce a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) 18 years after the signing of the Framework Agreement. Official sources concede that of the seven agreements needed to operationalise the FTA, only two are “ready” — a disappointing record. What is worse is that the highest political leaders, in their summit declarations, continue to “direct” ministers and officials to expedite action, but, alas, with little impact. Heads of state and government need to assert their authority or abandon the FTA as an unachievable goal.

The other disappointment is connectivity — in infrastructure (roads, railways, air, river, and coastal shipping links), energy, the digital and financial domain, and institutions that bring people closer together for trade, tourism and cultural exchanges. Only limited progress has been achieved so far, despite the adoption of the Master Plan for Connectivity supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Much of the connectivity established recently is the outcome of bilateral initiatives taken by India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan to strengthen transport links. Mega-projects aimed to improve connectivity between India and Myanmar (and Thailand) have been delayed inordinately.

For greater regional connectivity, more financial resources are needed. The movement towards establishing the BIMSTEC Development Fund is minimal. The grouping has talked about the Blue Economy but is yet to begin any work on it. Business chambers and corporate leaders are yet to be engaged fully with the activities of BIMSTEC. This leaves the grouping largely in the hands of officials and experts. The involvement of the ‘Third Space’ needs to be expanded significantly.

An objective evaluation may award an A- to BIMSTEC@25, with the remark that it must do better. An exciting destiny awaits it as it works to realise the vision of the Bay of Bengal Community (BOBC). In this Indo-Pacific century, the BOBC has the potential to play a pivotal role, deepening linkages between South Asia and Southeast Asia. It should accelerate the region’s economic development by collaborating with the newly minted Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). New synergy should be created between BIMSTEC and the IPEF.

Finally, while all member-states are equal, three have a special responsibility: Bangladesh as the host of the BIMSTEC Secretariat; Thailand as the representative of Southeast Asia; and India as the largest state in South Asia. This trio must be the engine to pull the BIMSTEC train with imagination and determination.

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