

## Bay of Bengal diplomacy

India will seek to reaffirm its regional leadership in environmental and climate diplomacy as it hosts the first Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation Disaster Management Exercise (BIMSTEC DMEEx 2017) starting October 10. Despite a decade of meaningful efforts in the sector, political and security tensions between members have hindered progress on regional cooperation and action. The renewed focus and enthusiasm of the regional leaders to rejuvenate BIMSTEC, after two decades of its existence, is therefore a welcome opportunity to boost effective cooperation in the sub-region.

The BIMSTEC region, comprising 22% of the global population, is exposed to an ever-increasing threat from natural disasters. Whether it is the recurrent floods affecting Assam, West Bengal and downstream in Bangladesh or Himalayan landslides in India and Nepal, regular disasters in the sub-region continue to cause transboundary impacts, damaging lives, livelihoods and assets, often leading to mass displacement and migration across borders. In the absence of a joint integrated mechanism to address the spurt in the scale, frequency and impacts of disasters, the response has largely been reactive and limited to post-incident crisis management. BIMSTEC, therefore, has the opportunity to enable a paradigm policy shift from a traditional relief centric, reactive approach towards a joint, proactive, holistic one that encompasses disaster preparedness, prevention, mitigation and risk reduction among member states. In order to strengthen inter-governmental coordination, among BIMSTEC members, the first step would be to devise a comprehensive Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) regional action plan. The road map should reflect a clear strategy to integrate DRR in all development programmes of member nations, adopt a multi-hazard and multi-sectoral approach to DRR and work towards common outcomes through institutionalising partnerships across all levels of governance.

### Building capacity

Given the regional nature of the threats, there is an urgent need for setting up of regional institutional capacity for threat assessment and designing response strategies. An important challenge for disaster preparedness is addressing the knowledge gaps among the member countries. Setting up of research taskforces on various climate change and environment risks in the BIMSTEC sub-region can develop a common understanding of the threats, create standards for emergency management and come up with cost-effective solutions.

India has volunteered to lead the Environment and Natural Disaster Agenda under BIMSTEC, and must make the best of this opportunity by translating the learnings from the disaster management experiences of SAARC and ASEAN. This is also an opportunity for India to take a measured approach and add value to its own regional agenda.

Like other regional blocs, this initiative is set to take place amidst a long-standing climate of political discord amongst some of the member nations — Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. India's tensions over transboundary Teesta river water sharing with Bangladesh, and the Rohingya refugee crisis between Myanmar and Bangladesh are cases in point. However, member nations must recognise that considering their regional setting and geographical proximity, the security of states in the sub-region is contingent upon each other and therefore, 'Environment and Natural Disaster' management would need to be prioritised as their common security agenda.

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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