

GREEN SHOOTS OF REVIVAL: ON BIMSTEC SUMMIT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: BIMSTEC

The road to the fourth summit of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in Kathmandu, Nepal, last week was marked by scepticism and hope. This was understandable, given the grouping's past performance — modest in the previous 19 years and promising in the past two years. The same blend characterises the summit's outcome. A dispassionate mindset is essential to assess its results accurately.

On the positive side, the fact that the summit could be held was a success in itself. It had been delayed. More importantly, BIMSTEC leaders listened to officials, experts and business chambers, and concluded that this grouping (composed of five South Asian and two Southeast Asian nations) needed to be given a firm institutional foundation. As a result, several important decisions have been taken. First, work begins now on drafting a charter for BIMSTEC, which has functioned so far on the basis of the Bangkok Declaration of 1997, and outcomes of the past three summits and the Leaders' Retreat in 2016. Second, a Permanent Working Committee will be set up to provide direction during the period between two summits and also to prepare the Rules of Procedure. Third, the Secretariat has been promised additional financial and human resources and enhancement of its role to coordinate, monitor and facilitate the grouping's activities.

Challenges at BIMSTEC

Fourth, as the institution has been handicapped due to lack of financial muscle, the leaders took the bold decision to establish the BIMSTEC Development Fund. This is not an easy task, but without strengthening itself financially, BIMSTEC cannot shed the unwanted tag of being a mere talk shop. Fifth, a push to increase its visibility and stature in the international fora will also be made. Finally, recognising that 16 areas of cooperation represent too wide a spectrum, the BIMSTEC governments will make a serious endeavour to review, restructure and rationalise various sectors, identifying a few core areas. In this exercise, Thailand has proposed a new strategy of five pillars (viz. connectivity, trade and investment, people-to-people contacts, security, and science and technology). This will be considered, although the difficulty in dropping specific sectors dear to individual member-states should not be minimised.

As to the debit side of the balance sheet, it should be noted that of at least six legal instruments awaiting finalisation, only one, the Memorandum of Understanding on Grid Interconnection, could be inked in Kathmandu. Fourteen years after signing the framework agreement on Free Trade Area (FTA), the leaders could only renew, rather lamely, their "commitment to an early conclusion" of FTA negotiations. The Thai Prime Minister bravely urged participants to accept making BIMSTEC a Free Trade Zone by 2021 as "our common goal", but this did not find a place in the summit declaration. The Myanmar President pointed out that the grouping had established its Energy Centre in 2009, but it was still struggling for the "early operationalisation" of the Centre.

Every participant dwelt on the advantages and potential of connectivity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi aptly emphasised that "**the biggest opportunity is connectivity** — trade connectivity, economic connectivity, transport connectivity, digital connectivity, and people-to-people connectivity." The Kathmandu Declaration has spelt out a number of measures, old and new, to secure this objective. However, it was noted that the Motor Vehicle Agreement and the Coastal Shipping Agreement would still need more time for finalisation.

Hopes were pinned on the leaders agreeing to make the BIMSTEC summit an annual affair. But they stopped short of it, choosing a "timely holding of Summit". Probably the timing of the next summit will be determined by the degree of progress ministers and officials achieve in the coming months. If the grouping succeeds in holding its next summit in 2019, it will be seen as a

healthy sign.

The annex to the summit's declaration presents an overview of the present state of play in various areas of activity. Plans to revitalise the Business Forum and the Economic Forum should be welcome if they help in fully engaging business and industry. Cooperation in the security domain has been progressing satisfactorily, with a new instrument added to the arsenal: a meeting of home ministers. This will be in addition to annual meetings of national security advisers and the first meeting of army chiefs, which is due to take place in Pune this month. Also envisaged is a sound plan to establish forums for parliamentarians, universities, cultural organisations and the media community.

Root out terror: BIMSTEC

The summit articulated a vision for the Bay of Bengal Region heading towards a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable future. The region is now widely viewed as a common space for security, connectivity and development.

Think tanks are fond of advising governments that they should walk the talk. But this time, that role was appropriated by the Nepalese Prime Minister and the summit chairman, who asserted: "Now is the time not just to deliberate, but also to deliver. Now is the time to translate promises into performance." If this prescription is followed by all, BIMSTEC can become a dynamic, effective and result-oriented organisation. The coming year will be crucial in its further development.

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