

India-BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional organization comprising seven Member States around the Bay of Bengal region. BIMSTEC constitutes a unique link between South and South-East Asia with five Members from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two from South-East Asia (Myanmar and Thailand). The BIMSTEC region brings together 1.67 billion people and a combined GDP of around US \$ 2.88 trillion.

The organisation came into being on 6 June 1997 through the 'Bangkok Declaration'. Initially, the economic bloc was formed with four Member States with the acronym 'BIST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation). Following inclusion of Myanmar on 22 December 1997 during a special Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok, the Group was renamed 'BIMST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation). With the admission of Nepal and Bhutan at the 6th Ministerial Meeting (February 2004, Thailand), the name of the grouping was changed to 'Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation' (BIMSTEC).

Permanent Secretariat of BIMSTEC is operational since September 2014 in Dhaka.

Sri Lanka is the Current chair of BIMSTEC.

For India, BIMSTEC is a natural choice to fulfill key foreign policy priorities of 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East'. BIMSTEC enjoys the unique strength of connecting South and South-East Asia.

The presence of BIMSTEC leaders at the government's swearing-in ceremony in May 2019 reinforced the growing stature of BIMSTEC in the region.

Four Summits have been held so far – 2004 [Bangkok], 2008 [New Delhi], 2014 [Nay Pyi Taw] and 2018 [Kathmandu].

BIMSTEC Leader's Retreat

The BIMSTEC Leader's Retreat hosted by India in Goa in October 2016 served as an important impetus to BIMSTEC. The "Agenda of Action" - A robust policy agenda agreed during the Retreat was meant to translate the shared commitment into delivery of specific, people oriented initiatives to achieve greater connectivity, trade, people-to-people contacts, and sustainable use of resources which is being steadily

implemented.

20th Anniversary of BIMSTEC:

A series of events were organised by India to mark the 20th anniversary of BIMSTEC in 2017-18. These include: a BIMSTEC business conference by Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) at Agartala on March 23, 2017; participation of BIMSTEC Countries in Textiles India - 2017 in July, 2017 in Gandhinagar; BIMSTEC Tele-Medicine Network by JIPMER on 13 July 2017 in Puducherry; BIMSTEC Trade and Tourism Expo on 15 September 2017 in Kolkata; Bodhi Parva: BIMSTEC Festival of Buddhist Heritage on 8-10 December 2017 in New Delhi; Integrating BIMSTEC – 2018 Conference in Sikkim in April, 2018 organised by ICC; Roundtable conferences on “Advancing the BIMSTEC Regional Cooperation” organised by DPG in New Delhi, Yangon and Colombo in April, June and August 2018 respectively; and conference on ‘Reinvigorating BIMSTEC: An Industry Vision for the Next Decade’ organised by FICCI in New Delhi in April, 2018.

4th BIMSTEC Summit:

The Theme of the Summit was “Towards a Peaceful, Prosperous and Sustainable Bay of Bengal region”. The Kathmandu Declaration adopted at the Summit provides vision and Leaders' directions for intensifying regional cooperation in key sectors of security and counter terrorism, disaster management, connectivity and trade, agriculture and poverty alleviation, S&T, culture, tourism, and people-to-people contacts, among others. The focus continued on the streamlining and creating necessary institutional infrastructure and rationalizing areas of cooperation for implementing various projects and schemes of regional cooperation in a time bound manner. An MoU on BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection was signed at the Summit.

At the Summit, the Prime Minister announced a number of initiatives by Government of India to further strengthen BIMSTEC cooperation and capacity-building in diverse areas. Major initiatives that India has since implemented include: BIMSTEC Military Exercise (MILEX) and Army Chief's Conclave 2018 (September 2018, Pune) at Pune; BIMSTEC Ministerial Conclave at India Mobile Congress 2018 (held on 25-27 October 2018 in New Delhi); 2nd BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise (held on 11-13 February 2020 in Puri) and capacity building of officials in this area held on 17-20 December 2019 in Ahmedabad; the first ever BIMSTEC Conference on Combating Drug Trafficking. This two-day Conference (New Delhi; 13-14 February 2020) was inaugurated by Home Minister on 13th February. MoS (External Affairs) addressed the conference at the inauguration; BIMSTEC Seminar on Climate Smart Farming Systems (held on 11-13 December 2019 in New Delhi) ;

Training of BIMSTEC Diplomats at FSI (New Delhi, 3-15 February 2020.); Projects in our North-Eastern region in areas of S&T-course at NESAC (North Eastern Space Application Centre), Shillong in the area of space and remote sensing support programme (6-17 January 2020.); and Capacity building (scholarships at Nalanda University, (with effect academic session 2019).

AREAS OF COOPERATION

There are 14 priority areas viz. 1) Counter terrorism and transnational crime, 2) Transport & Communication, 3) Tourism, 4) Environment and Disaster Management, 5) Trade and Investment, 6) Cultural Cooperation, 7) Energy, 8) Agriculture, 9) Poverty Alleviation, 10) Technology, 11) Fisheries, 12) Public Health, 13) People-to-People contact 14) Climate Change. Each country takes lead in specific areas.

India is the Lead Country in four areas, viz Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime, Transport & Communication, Tourism, and Environment and Disaster Management.

Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime

Terrorism remains the single largest significant threat to peace and stability in the region. BIMSTEC, through its various sub-groups under Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime has been working towards strengthening cooperation against terrorism.

Three Meetings of the BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs (NSCs) have so far been held viz. in March 2017 in New Delhi; in March 2018 in Dhaka; and in March 2019 in Bangkok. The Meeting of NSAs have underscored the importance of recognizing the Bay of Bengal as common security space and agreed to work out collective strategies for common response. The following action points emerging from the meetings of the National Security Chiefs have been implemented:

- Sardar Vallabhai Patel National Police Academy, Hyderabad, trained 36 National Security Officers of BIMSTEC Countries on Cyber terrorism, Counter Terrorism, Cyber Security and Counter - transnational crimes.
- First Sub Group meeting on Countering Radicalization and terrorism was held in June 2019 in New Delhi.
- Second Meeting of Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Security Dialogue Forum was held in July 2019 in Dhaka.
- The first BIMSTEC Conclave of Ports was held in Visakhapatnam (in November 2019. The inaugural session was attended by the Minister of State for Shipping (Independent Charge) Chemicals and Fertilisers. On the sidelines, the Rangong Port (Port Authority of

Thailand) signed three separate MOUs with the Port Trusts of Chennai, Vishakhapatnam and Kolkata.

- The Coastal Security Workshop for BIMSTEC Countries was held in November 2019 by Indian Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) Gurugram, India.
- The Second BIMSTEC Think Tanks Dialogue on Regional Security was held at VIF, New Delhi in November 2019.
- The First workshop of Himalayan Science Council was held at National Centre for Polar and Oceanic Research, Goa from 5-6 December 2019

Transport and Communication

Enhanced connectivity through the region is vital to achieving our common goals of growth, employment & prosperity. At the Leaders Retreat, BIMSTEC Leaders stressed on multi-modal physical connectivity and agreed to explore the possibility for a Motor Vehicles Agreement. The action agenda agreed at the Retreat also called for developing a Master Plan on BIMSTEC Connectivity.

The Inception Meeting of the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group (BTCWG) held in August 2016 in Bangkok finalized the draft Terms of Reference for the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group. A draft BIMSTEC Master Plan on Connectivity is currently under active consideration among Member States. The 3rd Meeting of the BTCWG is scheduled to be held in India in 2020 to discuss and finalise the text.

India has also circulated a draft text for the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement. The first Meeting of the corresponding Working Group was held in November 2017. Subsequently, draft SOPs developed by India related to this agreement have been circulated. The agreement is expected to be finalised soon.

India hosted a BIMSTEC Ministerial Conclave on the theme of “New Digital Horizons: Connect, Create, Innovate” on the sidelines of India Mobile Congress which was held in New Delhi in October 2018 with a focus on new and future communications technologies.

Tourism

Tourism has rich potential in the BIMSTEC region, as this region is home to ancient civilizations with deep civilization and cultural linkages, several historic monuments, and natural splendour. BIMSTEC Tourism Information Centre was established in July 2007 in Delhi to create a Network of Tour Operators among the BIMSTEC Member States to promote tourism in the region including the Buddhist Tourist Circuit and

luxury cruise. India hosted the First Meeting of this Network on 7 July 2017 in New Delhi where it was decided to work on common marketing strategies, creation of the brand BIMSTEC for tourism; creation of BIMSTEC specific products; promoting Public Private Partnerships; developing and sharing of common safety protocols and development of common circuits and cruise tourism.

Environment and Disaster Management

BIMSTEC region is vulnerable to a variety of natural disasters. Building regional capacities for coordinated disaster response, risk reduction and rehabilitation is accordingly important to the region. The BIMSTEC Summit in 2014 resolved to enhance cooperation in environmental protection and sustainable development and promote capacity building in the area of disaster management. India has hosted workshops on geoinformatics application in disaster management in November 2007 and on seasonal prediction and application to society in June 2011.

The first BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise hosted by India in October 2017 saw participation of over 135 professionals from all Member States as a step towards this direction. The 2nd BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise was held in February 2020 in Puri, followed by a capacity building workshop of officials in Ahmedabad.

India has also taken the initiative for addressing regional susceptibilities in this regard by setting up a BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC), a state-of-the-art facility in NOIDA, in 2014. India has also set up a link between BIMSTEC countries through Tsunami Early Warning Centre and has been sharing data from the Tsunami Early Warning Centre since 2006.

Latest event in the formal framework of BIMSTEC

At the 20th Senior Official Meeting (SOM) session in March 2020, considerable progress was made in terms of consolidating institutional procedures and mechanisms by way of advancing the draft texts of BIMSTEC Charter, Template Memorandum of Association (MoA) between BIMSTEC Secretariat and BIMSTEC Entities, Rationalization of Sectors of Cooperation; and MOU on cooperation between Diplomatic Academies / Training Institutes of BIMSTEC countries.

19 June 2020