



BIMSTEC: AFTER THE FIFTH SUMMIT

On April 14, 2022, Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT) in cooperation with the Political Dialogue Asia Programme of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) organized a roundtable on 'BIMSTEC After the Fifth Summit' in Kathmandu. The hybrid event saw participants from Nepal, Thailand, Bangladesh, India and Singapore. As a follow-up to the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit held in Colombo on March 30, 2022 the event aimed at understanding the impact(s) of the Summit in South and Southeast Asia and ways to make regional cooperation endeavors through BIMSTEC effective and useful to all member states.

The BIMSTEC Summit adopted its Charter, formally stating objectives and principles, and thereby obtained an international status. The Charter emphasizes a strong commitment towards making BIMSTEC a dynamic, effective and result-oriented organization. BIMSTEC aims towards promoting peace and development sustainably through collective efforts, meaningful cooperation, and deeper regional integration.

Speaking at the opening session, Dr. Nishchal N. Pandey, Convener of the COSATT stated that through collective efforts, meaningful cooperation, and deeper integration, the recently adopted Charter emphasizes a strong commitment to making BIMSTEC a dynamic, effective, and result-

oriented organization for promoting peace and prosperity in the entire region. COSATT compliments all the priority areas of BIMSTEC. He stated that the presence of Thailand opens up a lot of possibilities and potential for the region because we would otherwise be in the same club as SAARC. Transport connectivity has long been recognized as a fundamental requirement of member states for regional cooperation and integration in order to accelerate economic growth and social development. A well-developed transportation network is required to reap the benefits of a free trade area, which include trade and investment promotion as well as progress in other areas such as tourism, people-to-people contacts, and cultural exchange. These kinds of track II events help BIMSTEC emerge as a dynamic and effective regional organization for promoting sustainable development in the Bay of Bengal region, he said.

Touching upon the ongoing discussion on the significance of the BIMSTEC, Mr. Christian Echle, Director, Political Dialogue Asia Programme, KAS, Singapore stated that the theme of this discussion is timely as the fifth BIMSTEC Summit was just held in Sri Lanka. He pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic and other related challenges, as well as the uncertainties that BIMSTEC member states face; make the goal of advancing BIMSTEC technical and



economic cooperation even more crucial. He also stated that the South Asian region as well as some Southeast Asian countries are held back because of poor connectivity and lack of integration, which has further worsened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

He also said that COSATT as a regional think tank forum has played a significant role in South Asia through track II diplomacy since its inception. Regional cooperation in South Asia is one of the key objectives of the COSATT network. The consortium has been continuously studying and researching South Asia in areas such as regional cooperation, peace-building, good governance, climate change, refugees, migration, and so on.

Dr. Vaishali Raghuvanshi, Assistant Professor of Banaras Hindu University, India framed her presentation around what BIMSTEC is all about along with the relevance for South Asia. She stated that the Bay of Bengal is one of the least integrated regions, with poor trade connectivity. Bay of Bengal is rich in untapped natural resources. Cooperation is even more important to reintegrate the region and maximize its potential. She also argued for joint action, which she believes is possible through common institutions that can provide more interconnected opportunities and serve as a better platform for dealing with future challenges.

She highlighted that BIMSTEC represents a common space for peace and development and as for India, it is a natural platform to fulfil key foreign policy priorities of "Neighborhood First" and "Act East." She stated that India's commitment to BIMSTEC is unwavering and second to none because there

is economic benefit from increased regional connectivity, and India's need to view the Bay of Bengal as a key theatre in which to contain an increasingly capable and assertive China. She explained that India's current interest in BIMSTEC as a means of achieving greater integration in the Bay of Bengal is being expressed via five strategic approaches;

First, domestically, India's focus on the region overlaps with its specific developmental goals for its eastern and north-eastern states.

Second, New Delhi's emphasis on the Bay of Bengal is also being pursued through reinvigorated bilateral relationships with the neighbors.

Third, India's reorientation toward the Bay of Bengal has also been pursued through regional organizations.

Fourth, India's path toward regional connectivity now also goes through sub regional and multi-lateral initiatives with other BIMSTEC members, including the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) formalized in 2013 as a quadrilateral joint working group.

Fifth, India's new impetus on the Bay of Bengal is channelled through a new posture toward external actors, seeking partnerships with countries and organizations from outside the region.

Dr. Raghuvanshi recommended that common legal instruments be developed, consultative platforms be offered, information sharing mechanisms be established, and operational coordination be fostered. She also suggested that BIMSTEC needs to evolve as a 'people-centric' organization and for this there is a need to reduce bureaucracy and optimize organizational functioning.

Ms. Harini Madhusudan, Doctoral Scholar at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru shed light on the importance of BIMSTEC particularly from the Indian security perspective. She said that in India's case, the pillar is security, which has three subcategories: counter-terrorism and transnational crime, disaster management, and energy. BIMSTEC should focus on intelligence

sharing, tracking terrorist finances, establishing legal systems to control them, and combating drug abuse and illicit trafficking. The primary focus area of security appropriately covers the pressing regional problem of terrorism, as well as the need for regional intelligence sharing among member countries. The security sector could be divided into four categories: physical security, cyber security, economic/trade security, and energy security, she added. She also said that the region has a common component of Buddhism and we need to showcase our Buddhist heritage sites.

Mr. Purushottam Ojha, Former Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Govt. of Nepal focused on trade and economy, recalling the BIMSTEC summit in Thailand, where a framework agreement on a free trade area was signed. However, the trade rules negotiations are still not finalized. He pointed out that the World Trade Organization is also in disarray, with negotiations moving at a snail's pace. In the current global context, the process of regionalism is more prominent and evident, with countries finding it easier to negotiate within their regions rather than taking a multilateral approach due to the slow negotiation process. Whereas it was felt that SAARC has a constant problem of Indo-Pak rivalry, the BIMSTEC too has the thorny bilateral issue of Rohingya refugees between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Mr. Ojha pointed out that BIMSTEC is less economically integrated than SAARC, as evidenced by the fact that intra-regional trade within SAARC countries was 5.8 %, while it was only 4.8 % among BIMSTEC countries. In this context, the BIMSTEC master plan was initiated, with more than 200 transportation projects identified, all of which require implementation and investment from member countries. He offered some suggestions for moving forward in areas of economic and trade integration;

First, BIMSTEC member countries should focus on contributing to the important economic integration agreements like the trading of goods agreements and trading services agreements.

Second, energy connectivity, physical connectivity, digital connectivity, and people to people connectivity must

be strengthened. Above all, physical connectivity should be a priority for landlocked countries like Nepal and Bhutan for whom transport connectivity is very important.

Third, the creation of regional values for the regional trade agreements. Countries should build on a regional trade agreement in such a way that there will be no hassle in moving the goods across the border along with the creation of a value chain.

Fourth, trade barriers between India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar should be removed for seamless connectivity.

And lastly, make the Dhaka based BIMSTEC secretariat functional, efficient, and workable with professionals to carry out monitoring and other tasks.

Mr. Mahbubur Rashid Bhuiyan, Research Fellow at the BISS, Dhaka stated that the most notable outcome of the Fifth Summit was the signing and adoption of the Charter. The Charter contains a number of noble ideas for deepening and broadening regional cooperation. According to him, the BIMSTEC Master plan for Transport Connectivity should be properly implemented in order to promote greater connectivity between and among members. He also stated that the convention on legal assistance is an important tool for combating crime as crime and the resulting problems in some of these countries are often similar. Similarly, nearly all BIMSTEC countries are vulnerable to natural disasters, energy resource



scarcity, health insecurity, and environmental pollution. As a result, if properly implemented, this can be a very useful platform for them to address all of these issues at once.

Whereas India and Thailand are known for medical tourism, Bangladesh is producing high-quality medicine. Sri Lanka is adopting organic farming. These positive attributes need to be highlighted in the context of finding common synergies in the region and only then the BIMSTEC can emerge as a vibrant economic group.

Dr. Khadga KC from the Department of International Relations, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu also said, member-states of BIMSTEC finally adopted a long-overdue Charter that formalizes its structure and functioning. In the 25 years of its existence, the Bay of Bengal grouping hasn't achieved much. That could be changing now with India's heightened interest in the grouping, as a vehicle for the achievement of its strategic interests. The failure of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is one of the reasons

for India's increased interest in BIMSTEC. The rivalry between India and Pakistan has disturbed SAARC's ability to function properly. Given India and Pakistan's strategic importance in the region, their rivalry has cast a long shadow over the region, with little cooperation taking place. But, he also stressed that BIMSTEC should not be regarded as a substitute for SAARC. For Nepal, SAARC is more important. He argued that Nepal does not benefit much from BIMSTEC until and unless it gets easy access to the sea through Phulbari route. 'How can we drive to Myanmar and then to Thailand when Nepalese cannot drive to Bangladesh?', he questioned. Nepal must play an important role and advocate for improving the functioning of SAARC. He suggested that Nepal's infrastructure capacity be developed first in order to develop connectivity with Southeast Asian countries of Myanmar,

Thailand, and even beyond.

Maj. Gen. (retd.) Binoj Basnyat from Nepal spoke about the geopolitical realities of the region, citing the United States' Indo Pacific strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative as examples. He claimed that the ASEAN region is a priority area for the US because the Indo Pacific region contains ten ASEAN states that account for 60% of global GDP. As a result, the BIMSTEC region serves as a land and sea gateway to both east and South Asia. He stated that South Asia serves as a link between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean for East Asian nations. China's influence in the Bay of Bengal region has been growing in terms of economic collaboration with some of the BIMSTEC member states.

Emphasizing the importance of SAARC, he said, BIMSTEC, even after capacity enhancement should not be a substitute for SAARC rather be complementary. He added, implementing policies and priorities of the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement (BBIN MVA), and South Asia Sub-Regional Economic (SASEC) and cross-border energy trade agreement



would alleviate export/import of natural gas, hydroelectricity to achieve regional stability and strengthen BIMSTEC. If BIMSTEC agrees to a protocol for coastal shipping and a dedicated supply line, it would provide sea access to two landlocked countries, Nepal and Bhutan, for security against supply chain disruption. To address common challenges, SAARC and BIMSTEC should hold defence and home ministers' conferences, and also meetings of chiefs of defence, civil police, paramilitary forces and intelligence services. Holding annual Summits of the organization without a fail is essential for substantive results.

Amb. (Retd.) Sundar Nath Bhattarai, Amb. (Retd.) Dr. Dinesh Bhattarai, Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Netra Thapa & Brig. (Retd.) Dharma Baniya also spoke during discussions.