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The 5th Summit of BIMSTEC and Bangladesh: Promoting Regional Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal Region

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About the Contributor

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In the era of globalization, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has entered in the domain of regional cooperation to accelerate the shared growth and cooperation between the littoral and adjacent countries in the Bay of Bengal region on 6 June 1997. Actually, a new sub-regional grouping was formed in Bangkok under the name of BIST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation). The group was later renamed BIMSTEC after the inclusion of Myanmar on 22 December 1997. BIMSTEC region comprises almost 22% of world's population or 1.68 billion people, and these member states have a combined GDP of \$3.69 trillion per year. BIMSTEC works as a bridge between East Asia and South Asia. For pragmatic policy, Bangladesh has achieved its remarkable successful economic and social transformation and is successfully maintaining the economic stability after the COVID-19 pandemic. Bangladesh is significant for BIMSTEC because of the dynamic geopolitical implications of Bangladesh's economic development, which is causing a shift in South Asia's center of economic gravity.

The 5th Summit: An Overview

The first-ever summit of the BIMSTEC was held in July 2004. After that, its summits were not conducted regularly. Sri Lanka hosted the fifth summit of the 25 years old BIMSTEC that was held in a hybrid fashion on 28-29 March 2022. The

theme of the 5th summit was "Towards a Resilient Region, Prosperous Economies, Healthy People". The 5th summit of BIMSTEC was quite remarkable because the charter of BIMSTEC was adopted in it. The BIMSTEC now has an international personality with its emblem and flag.

- The BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters;
- The Memorandum of Understanding on Mutual Cooperation between Diplomatic Academies or Training Institutions of BIMSTEC Member States;
- The Memorandum of Association on the Establishment of the BIMSTEC Technology or Transfer Facility in Colombo

While one of the important provisions in the charter is to keep regular meetings on track and provide enough scope to the BIMSTEC permanent working Committee to keep the process energizing. Now the members have to meet once every two years, and the ministerial meet will be held annually.

The fifth summit was also important because it had some other major achievements as well. Other than the adaptation of a charter, the leadership at BIMSTEC vowed to a proper secretariat of BIMSTEC. Above all, it was also decided to conduct regular sessions of BIMSTEC to make it more effective and efficient. To make it more organized, the leaders of the member countries have now agreed to divide the working of BIMSTEC into seven segments, one for each country. Earlier, there were 14 leading sectors of BIMSTEC along with technological and economic cooperation among South Asian and Southeast Asian countries along the coast of the Bay of Bengal. One of the major decisions taken in the fifth summit was to re-constitute and reduce the number of cooperation sectors from unwisely 14 to a more manageable seven. Now, each member state will serve as a lead for a sector. As a result, trade, investment, and development will be led by Bangladesh.

Address of Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina

Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has repeatedly stated her commitment to promoting trans-regional cooperation beyond established patterns of regional integration. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attended the summit and shared her remarks

and plans regarding the achievements made by BIMSTEC and its future projects.

She stated, "We need to find common strategies to rebuild a sustainable and resilient Bay of Bengal region by tapping the full potentials of the region". She has strongly highlighted three points;

- To put into action and operationalize all agreed-upon decisions
- Focusing on the complication of all those legal instruments and policy documents that are already in the works
- Expand the organization's relationship and outreach with relevant entities beyond BIMSTEC to create more engagements and innovative processes.

The PM highlighted the fastest economic growth of Bangladesh. Also focused on gradual development by stating the poverty rate dropped from 41.5 percent to 20.5 percent, and extreme poverty dropped from 25.1 percent to 10.5 percent. In her speech, she showed her great concern about the global pandemic of COVID-19 and the current Russia-Ukraine war and urged the BIMSTEC to play a vital role in resolving the political crisis in the west. PM also included the agenda of multimodal transport connectivity, the expansion of trade, energy cooperation, and security among the member countries in her address. The summit opens a host of opportunities for Bangladesh as a founding member.

Boosting Regional cooperation

The BIMSTEC has built the institutions and fostered regional collaboration gradually and cautiously. BIMSTEC is frequently seen as an alternative to South Asian statist regionalist ideologies in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's emphasizes regional connectivity beyond South Asia.

"We are committed to pursuing all means of domestic, bilateral, regional and international cooperation in transforming Bangladesh to a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed one by 2041."

– The Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina

Bangladesh's membership in BIMSTEC demonstrates governments' diplomatic orientation and how they want to manage their natural resources, create trade links, promote democracy and good governance, and

maintain peace outside of their borders. Bangladesh is working to fulfil Bangladesh's SDGs and 'Vision-41' strategy.

Expanding Trade and Economic Development

Bangladesh and other BIMSTEC members have worked hard to develop intra-regional commercial ties. According to the media reports, Bangladesh exports to India, Nepal, Thailand, and Myanmar are increasing. In the first four months of the fiscal year 2021-22, Bangladesh's exports to India surged by 65 percent to \$700 million. In the fiscal year 2020-21, bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Nepal was roughly US\$ 73.47 million, and Bangladesh hopes to export electricity to Nepal in winter and import it in summer from Nepal. Bangladesh exported \$50.6 million to Thailand in 2020, up from \$25.5 million in 1995. Importantly, the export of Bangladesh to Myanmar has increased from BDT 2,122.031Mn, 2020 to BDT 2,355.494 Mn in 2021. During the 5th summit of BIMSTEC, Sheikh Hasina also emphasized utilizing the untapped potential. She especially focused on the expansion of trade among the member countries. BIMSTEC might be a platform for Bangladesh to strengthen its much-needed economic development. The summit participants also adopted the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity applicable for 2018-2028. It was devised and backed by the Asian Developmental Bank (ADB). It lists 264 projects entailing a total investment of \$ 126 billion.

Multi Modal Transport Connectivity

BIMSTEC highlights connectivity because transportation or connectivity is a crucial prerequisite for regional cooperation and integration to accelerate economic growth and social development. The connectivity is linked with trade facilitation and human resource development. Geo-strategically, Bangladesh holds a prominent position in BIMSTEC for its direct borders with India and Myanmar and its proximity to Bhutan and Nepal to the north. If the connectivity and transportation become smooth, the economic flow of the region will be positively affected. By creating connectivity, Bangladesh can easily provide access for land-locked member states (Bhutan and Nepal) and India's northeastern states with access to the seaports of Mongla and Chattogram. BIMSTEC focuses on linking port and border transportation; for example, develop-

ing four-lane of the Dhaka–Chattogram highway (191 km, \$414 million, 2009–2017) will link Chattogram Port and Dhaka. BIMSTEC is working to improve road connectivity to Myanmar in order to promote future transit between and among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Thailand.

Planned Flagship Projects to Enhance Arterial Links to Ports and Borders

Project Description	Approximate cost (2018) in \$million	Time scale
Improvement of the Jatrabari intersection (Mawa) on the Dhaka–Khulna Highway and the Pantchchar–Bhanga road section to four lanes	1,295	2016–2020
Construction of the Padma Multipurpose Bridge at Mawa	3,70	2009–2019
Road Connectivity Project Joydevpur–Chandra–Tangail– Elenga to four-lane highway	682	2013–2018
Road Connectivity Project II (fourlaning Elenga–HatikamrulRangpur, 190.4 km)	1,494	2016–2020
Construction of the second Katchpur, Meghna, and Gomti Bridges and rehabilitation of existing bridges (total bridge length of 2,736 m)	1,035	2013–2021
Construction of the Dhaka–Chattogram Expressway (217km)	3,701	2019–2023
Four-laning of the Dhaka (Katchpur)–Sylhet Highway (226 km, NH 2)	1,800	2019–2023

Energy Security and cooperation

As for maritime trade and tourism, the Bay of Bengal has 15,792 square kilometers of coral reefs of around 8471 square kilometers and is an important source of natural resources for a coastal population of approximately 185 million people. The fisherman population in the Bay alone is estimated to be around 3.7 million, with the annual fish catch of around 6 million tones, constituting 7% of the world's catch and valued at US \$4 billion. BIMSTEC focuses on maritime security. Bangladesh underscored regional cooperation in the power and energy sector. In this regard, Bangladesh emphasized regional cooperation in the power and energy sectors. The State Minister for power, Energy and Mineral Resources, Nasrul Hamid further said, "BIMSTEC has created a link between South Asia and southeast Asia. We can establish a peaceful and prosperous Bay of Bengal through development and proper use of natural resources." BIMSTEC region's need for energy is quite high, but the intra-region energy export-import is very low for many factors.

On April 22, 2015, the Numaligarh Refinery Ltd (NRL) and the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation signed an agreement in Dhaka for the export of petroleum products to Bangladesh via the proposed 130-kilometer-long Indo-Bangla Friendship Pipeline (IBFPL) from the Numaligarh oil refinery's Siliguri depot in India to Parbitipur in Bangladesh. The Dorjilung Hydropower

Project (1125 MW)—jointly proposed in 2017 by the Bhutan Electricity Authority, Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and the Indian Ministry of Power and Nepal and Bangladesh initiated talks on electricity trade in 2018 are two major projects (still require India's participation) related to ensuring regional energy security through cooperation. In the 5th summit, the prime minister emphasized implementing these taken projects by gaining member state's cooperation.

The Singing MOUs and Bangladesh

By placing a charter in force, the leaders have pledged to promote the BIMSTEC cooperation while adhering to the core principles, shared values, and norms that have governed the relationship since 1997. By signing the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters as a legal instrument, BIMSTEC ensures more security in the region. Bangladesh agreed upon BIMSTEC's Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Mutual Cooperation in Diplomatic Training. It reveals the spirit of cooperation among the respective BIMSTEC countries. Bangladesh is focusing more on its IT sectors. According to the 2021 report, Bangladesh has targeted to export \$5 billion in the ICT sector and during the pandemic, Bangladesh has exported \$382 million by selling engendering products during July-March period of 2020-21. On the other hand, India has ranked 46th on the global innovation index, and Thailand focuses on manufacturing high-value advanced technological and scientific innovations. India and Thailand both are the highest shareholdings in the BIMSTEC, and the technology transfer will bring socio-economic and environmental changes to the region. BIMSTEC is also signing cooperation with ADB. By working with other organizations and institutions, the region will be more connected with the globe.

With the conclusion of the fifth summit, BIMSTEC has entered in a new era. It is the time for its implementation of programs and decisions undertaken on various occasions. One-fifth of the world's humanity has become a part of this regional organization. This vast population is not only a challenge but also an opportunity. In this regard, the BIMSTEC forum is an appropriate tool that can provide leverage for mutual benefit.

The 5th BIMSTEC summit has successfully adopted its charter within 25 years. Many analysts are skeptical to this organization. The fact of the matter is that the BIMSTEC has been demonstrating new dynamism in multilateral cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region. India's positive role in the bloc is crucial. Indian analysts underscore India's opportunity to rejuvenate India's presence in the region for the betterment of the region. The global economy's recovery prospects have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was followed by the Russia-Ukraine war. The global economy is entering a new, more unstable time characterized by rising geopolitical, economic, and pandemic risks. But, the recent summit of BIMSTEC is placing hope for the region during this world's polarization regarding the Ukraine-Russia war. Undoubtedly, the BIMSTEC forum is an appropriate platform that may create mutual benefit among the member states to address post-COVID-19 challenges as well as the impact of the political crisis in the West.



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