

Remarks by H.E. Tenzin Lekphell, Secretary General of BIMSTEC

**Rejuvenating Growth Through Partnership
Role of BIMSTEC**

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Professor Sachin Chaturvedi,
Director General of the RIS (Research and Information System)

Mr. Rudendra Tandon
Additional Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs of India

Excellencies, Heads of Missions of BIMSTEC Member States,

Dignitaries,

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Good Afternoon!

First of all, I would like to thank RIS for inviting me to this event organized during my official visit to India as the Secretary General of BIMSTEC.

I assumed office as the Secretary General in November 2020, and this visit would have taken place much earlier, had it not been for the COVID-19 pandemic that hampered regular travel and interactions. Anyway, I am glad that I am here today - and I would like to sincerely thank the Ministry of External Affairs of India – in particular the SAARC and BIMSTEC Division for the warm hospitality, support and cooperation.

BIMSTEC came into being on the 06th of June 1997 with the signing of the “Bangkok Declaration”. At that time, it was a grouping of four countries known as BIST-EC- Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand - Economic Cooperation. There was no emphasis at that time on the Bay of Bengal.

Later, with the joining of new members – Myanmar in 1997 and Bhutan and Nepal in 2004, the grouping redefined its identity as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.

And since then, BIMSTEC has been moving forward making progress in several fields. The organisation today - has a Secretariat which was established in Dhaka in 2014; a Charter that was adopted this year on the 30th of March at the 5th Summit which provides its legal personality on the international stage; and several other legal instruments that facilitate cooperation between the Member States.

Moreover, at the recently concluded 5th Summit, one significant development that took place to reshape BIMSTEC was that it rationalised and trimmed 14 areas of cooperation into 7 sectors to give focus - with each sector led by a member state.

Accordingly,

- Bangladesh** leads in Trade & Investment;
- Bhutan** in Climate Change and Environment;
- India** in Security, that includes Counter Terrorism & Transnational Crime, Disaster Management, and Energy;
- Myanmar** in Agriculture and Food Security;
- Nepal** in People-to-People Contact, Culture & Tourism,
- Sri Lanka** in Science, Technology & Innovation including Public Health and Human Resources Development; and

-Thailand in Connectivity.

The Summit has also directed the Member States to draw a Plan of Action of their respective sectors and also submit progress reports during the Senior Officials Meetings in order to build ownership and responsibility.

Excellencies

BIMSTEC's framework for cooperation evolves, and continues to gradually take shape.

Today's topic – *Rejuvenating Growth through Partnership & the Role of BIMSTEC*– compels us to take an honest look at the world around us, including our immediate neighbourhood.

BIMSTEC is often talked of, as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. At the time of BIMSTEC's birth in 1997, I believe, the initiative of bridging South Asia with Southeast Asia, was aimed at achieving growth and prosperity for the people of these two regions.

I would like to quote from the remarks made by the Honourable Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi at the 5th BIMSTEC Summit in March this year. The Honourable Prime Minister said –

Quote

“Today, when our region is facing the challenges of health and economic security, -Solidarity and cooperation between us is the need of the hour. Today is the time to make Bay of Bengal, a bridge of connectivity, a bridge of prosperity, a bridge of security.”

Unquote

As expressed by the Honourable Prime Minister, the BIMSTEC Member States are faced with many challenges today. The economic problems that our countries were grappling with, such as slower growth, loss of jobs, rising inflation and increased poverty – largely triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, have been aggravated by the developments in Europe.

When looking at the potential benefits that would accrue to all our people from working together, as the Honourable Prime Minister so clearly expressed, **today**, is really the opportune time to make the Bay of Bengal - a bridge of connectivity, a bridge of prosperity, and a bridge of security for the common good of all the peoples of this region.

However, despite the strategic location and the fact that our Member States are bound by geography; and linked by history with shared values and traditions, the spirit and passion to build a sustainable and resilient “Bay of Bengal Community” still needs to be bolstered.

Excellencies,

At the time of BIMSTEC's birth in 1997, two regional organisations – SAARC and ASEAN – were already in existence. It is no secret that ASEAN has made tremendous strides in regional cooperation and evolved into a true ASEAN Community. ASEAN today resonates well beyond the Southeast Asian region, as they have established linkages with all the important countries and international organisations - and has emerged on the international stage, as a regional organisation to be reckoned with.

BIMSTEC which is the youngest of the three regional organisations is still in a nascent stage, but has the advantage of many examples at its disposal, to learn from, in terms of what has worked and what has not. In that sense, BIMSTEC is fortunate, and we hope our Member States will not let go of the valuable opportunity that is available - to learn from the stories of our immediate Asian region as well as other regions.

Excellencies,

Since today's topic focuses on growth, it must be mentioned that a key element in pursuing growth in BIMSTEC is financing. During the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2018, the BIMSTEC Leaders directed the relevant Ministries and national agencies to explore the possibility of establishing a BIMSTEC Development Fund (BDF). Fast tracking the setting up of BIMSTEC Development Fund, coupled with sound partnerships with partner nations and international organizations, may prove to be a useful area to explore in moving forward.

Excellencies,

BIMSTEC Summit, Ministerial Meeting, Senior Officials Meeting and BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee Meeting are key institutional coordinating mechanisms. It may therefore be useful to regularise these annual meetings by fixing a date or even increase the frequency of Ministerial Meetings - in order to boost BIMSTEC mechanism. I am sure Excellencies are aware that ASEAN Ministers meet regularly – four times in a year.

Linkages, partnerships and external relationships are another area that BIMSTEC may like to reflect to pursue growth in the organization. It may be important to consider whether the BIMSTEC countries are willing to consider facilitating a new era of partnership - not only amongst each other as BIMSTEC countries, but between BIMSTEC and other regional and international organisations as well as individual countries.

To make BIMSTEC more relevant to the people of the region, it would be of merit to prioritize activities under each sector - and set timeframes.

The BIMSTEC Free Trade Area has been under negotiation for many years. The Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC) for the Trade in Goods Agreement has met 21 times and it is still under negotiation. BIMSTEC countries are continuing to negotiate on an Agreement on BIMSTEC Maritime Transport Cooperation, a Motor Vehicle Agreement, BIMSTEC Inter - Grid connection and complete its Rules of Procedure. Prioritizing some of these items, introducing project based cooperation, and expediting the MoUs that have been signed are certainly opportunities that can be seized

Excellencies,

To conclude, the 20th BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting considered establishing an ad-hoc BIMSTEC Eminent Persons Group. As I mentioned earlier, this year, 2022, is an important year for BIMSTEC as it marks its 25th anniversary - and also the year of the adoption of BIMSTEC Charter. Therefore, the Secretariat, considering this as an opportunity to reflect on the 25 years of BIMSTEC, proposed to carry out a brainstorming exercise that will dissect BIMSTEC's challenges and explore opportunities. To take this forward, we have sought the views of Member States on a Concept Note on setting up a Group of Eminent Persons to undertake such an exercise. We are confident that this would be a constructive and meaningful exercise and will provide direction and a road map for BIMSTEC in moving forward - and reap benefits of regional cooperation for the peoples of our region, and pursue the Rejuvenation of Growth through Partnership.

With this, I thank the organizers once again - for providing me this opportunity to share some of my thoughts.

Thank you.