

Webinar

25 Years of BIMSTEC: Opportunities and Challenges in the post-COVID 19 Era 18 July 2022

Dr. Deepak Mishra,

Director & Chief Executive of the Indian Council for Research - on International Economic Relations,

Mr. Adrian Haack

Director, India Office of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

Mr. Rudrendra Tandon

Additional Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs of India

Dr. Badri Narayanan

Head, OF Trade, Commerce and Strategic Economic Dialogue of NITI-Aayog

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure - to address this Webinar on the important theme – “25 Years of BIMSTEC: Opportunities and Challenges in the post-COVID 19 Era”.

I thank all the organisers for giving me this opportunity.

This year, BIMSTEC marks 25 years since its inception from the signing of the Bangkok Declaration on the 06th of June 1997

As you are all aware, at the time of its inception, BIMSTEC was a grouping of 04 countries – Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

With Myanmar joining later in 1997 and Nepal and Bhutan joining in 2004, membership in this grouping that bridges South and Southeast Asia expanded to seven, – five from South Asia and two from Southeast Asia.

Although the pace of cooperation over the last 25 years has been progressive, the pace of movement, has been somewhat uneven across the two decades.

The careful crafting of institution-building, especially, following the establishment of the Secretariat in Dhaka in 2014, the BIMSTEC Leaders’ Retreat in Goa in 2016, and the Kathmandu and Colombo Summits in 2018 and 2022, - inspire confidence that BIMSTEC is moving in the right direction even if the pace of progress may be somewhat measured.

During the recent 5th Summit held this year on the 30th of March, the Leaders adopted and signed the BIMSTEC Charter, securing its legal identity.

The Summit also saw:

- the rationalisation of the sectors and sub-sectors of cooperation,
- the adoption of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, and
- the approval of the basic architectural framework in the shape of Expert Groups and Joint Working Groups, that will form the vehicles for facilitating cooperation in the different sectors.

Additionally BIMSTEC has to its credit, a series of Agreements and MoUs that the Member States have entered into - in numerous fields, - the most recent being - the three legal instruments signed during the 5th Summit in Colombo –

- The BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters;
- The MoU on Mutual Cooperation between Diplomatic Academies; and
- The MoU on the Establishment of the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility in Colombo.

The focus of this Webinar - is Opportunities and Challenges in the Post-COVID 19 Era. From my perspective, every challenge provides an opportunity.

The fact that BIMSTEC is still at an early stage, in charting its way forward in terms of regional cooperation, provides an opportunity, to look for ways to create the mechanisms needed, to respond and progress collectively for the betterment of the people of our region.

The BIMSTEC region accounts for 22 percent of the world's population and 4 percent of the world's GDP, which indicates, that the BIMSTEC platform is one - that has considerable potential.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The worst of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of a health crisis, seems to have now passed for all the BIMSTEC countries.

Each of our countries responded to the pandemic largely on our own with the help of individual countries - both within and outside the region, and with the help of international organisations. **There was no unified response** to the pandemic because BIMSTEC does not as yet, have a mechanism to trigger such a response.

The pandemic therefore, to my mind, showed us - that there is an opportunity for the BIMSTEC Member Countries, to establish mechanisms and processes, to take collective action for pandemic preparedness and response in the future.

There are many lessons that could be drawn from the manner - in which our countries took action during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Learning from each other's experiences, the possibility of setting up protocols and mechanisms required to respond better in the future, is an opportunity that is worth seizing.

The fact that BIMSTEC has a new sub-sector - devoted to Public Health, is an enabler in this regard.

On the heels of the pandemic, came the developments related to Ukraine, which aggravated - the economic problems that countries in our region are already grappling with, - resulting in slower growth, limited market opportunities, rising inflation, and increased poverty.

I would like to share some thoughts, on how BIMSTEC could progress forward, with the challenges that the region is faced with:

- i) As I mentioned a while back, the area of **Public Health** is definitely one that provides opportunities for greater collaboration and collective action. This includes - exploring possibilities for a unified response in situations of future pandemics, -including, better vaccine manufacture & distribution preparedness, public health management, research and training, and may be - even setting up a regional fund for health-related activities.

- ii) The BIMSTEC **Free Trade Area** has been under negotiation for 18 years since 2004. At a time, when the region is faced with food security and supply chain issues, picking up this unfinished agenda item, -to prioritise concluding a BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, can help reduce barriers to trade and investment, - and assist businesses in the region to join global supply chains. This would certainly be of benefit - to the people in the BIMSTEC countries.
- iii) The 5th Summit adopted the BIMSTEC **Master Plan for Transport Connectivity**. The Master Plan is a 10-year strategy for enhancing transport and trade linkage through the development of physical infrastructure -including roads, railways, ports, inland waterways, and airports - with soft components such as capacity building, access agreements and harmonization of rules, regulations, policies, and measures related to transport between and among BIMSTEC Member Countries. [The Master Plan](#) identifies 267 projects worth 124 billion US dollars. **It is important that BIMSTEC focuses on successful implementation of the Master Plan**, which, combined with the implementation of the FTA, will directly benefit the people of our region.
- iv) Improving **Trade Facilitation** is another area that deserves prioritisation in the Post COVID-19 era. [Moving to a regional](#) single window in customs and a paperless trade regime, will help to reduce trade costs and enhance cross-border business.
- v) BIMSTEC countries are currently negotiating on a BIMSTEC **Coastal Shipping Agreement**, a BIMSTEC **Motor Vehicle Agreement**, and a BIMSTEC **Grid Interconnection Master Plan**. [Expediting](#) the conclusion of the Agreements that are under negotiation, and moving forward on securing energy security, are certainly opportunities that must be seized.
- vi) Experts have pointed out the need for BIMSTEC Member States, to prepare to embrace the potential of the fast-moving **digital economy**. [This requires](#), investment in digital technologies and related infrastructure, a business-friendly regulatory approach to e-commerce, and investing in digital skills.

vii) Resource constraints for region-wide and cross regional projects are a challenge. [Fast-tracking the setting](#) up of the **BIMSTEC Development Fund**, coupled with sound partnership building for this purpose - with partner nations and international organisations, may prove to be a useful area to explore in moving forward.

Distinguished Delegates,

This year is a landmark in the history of BIMSTEC. Not only is it celebrating 25 years since the signing of the Bangkok Declaration and the founding of the Organisation, but it is also the year of the adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter.

Therefore, the Secretariat, considering this as an invaluable opportunity to reflect on the 25 years of BIMSTEC and carry out a brainstorming exercise that will dissect its bottlenecks and challenges, including its working methods - to identify opportunities and accelerate regional cooperation as envisaged in the Bangkok Declaration, Summit Declarations and the BIMSTEC Charter, - has already sought the views of Member States on a Concept Note, - on setting up a Group of Eminent Persons to undertake such an exercise.

We hope this would be a constructive and meaningful exercise for BIMSTEC, in moving forward efficiently and effectively - to reap the possible benefits of regional cooperation and integration - for the peoples of our region.

I thank you all once again, for providing me this opportunity to share some of my thoughts.

Thank you.