

Remarks by the Secretary General of BIMSTEC at the Symposium on
BIMSTEC: A Vehicle for Growth and Development
organized by
the Institute for Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS) and Ministry of External
Affairs, Government of India

25th October 2021 at 11.30 AM

- His Excellency Mr. Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Foreign Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India
- Professor Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General, RIS, India
- Mr. Arindam Mukherjee, Director, Institute for Social and Cultural Studies
- Scholars from BIMSTEC Member States;
- Ladies and gentleman:

I am honored to have the opportunity to participate in this important symposium on, BIMSTEC: A Vehicle for Growth and Development. I and my colleagues at the Secretariat would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies and the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India for taking the initiative to organize this important symposium. Forums like this, devoted to discuss the growth and development of BIMSTEC, indicates the commitment and concern India has as one of the founding members of BIMSTEC.

While I am happy to share the Secretariat's perspective on BIMSTEC as a vehicle for growth and development, I also look forward to the opportunity of learning from the eminent panel of speakers and academicians, their thoughts and views, on developing it into a vibrant regional organization.

Excellency and Distinguished Delegates,

Before reporting on the recent developments, let me give a brief historical background on BIMSTEC.

The idea of creating a multilateral cooperation forum and the need to connect South and South East Asia started in the late 1990s. **In June 1997**, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand took the first step to establish what was known as BIST-EC through the adoption of the Bangkok Declaration. **Later** in the same year Myanmar joined the group.

In 2004, Nepal and Bhutan joined the bloc during which the first BIMSTEC Summit took place and it was only during this Summit that BIMSTEC was formally endorsed as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.

Although a BIMSTEC framework was established and a declaration signed in 1997, there however, did not exist a formal working structure.

BIMSTEC Ambassadors to Thailand or their representatives with a small working group attended meetings that were mostly hosted by Thailand.

Documentation and follow up of decisions taken during the meetings were not very well established as BIMSTEC at that time, was primarily formed to pursue project-based cooperation between the countries and operated more as a regional forum than organization.

It was only much later and gradually, that BIMSTEC transformed into a regional organization and began to lay down its legal framework for cooperation and build institutions.

The leaders, subsequently in the second BIMSTEC Summit held in new Delhi in November 2008, agreed to establish a permanent secretariat for BIMSTEC, and accordingly in September 2014—(that is 7 years ago) - the organization was endowed with a Permanent Secretariat, located in Dhaka.

The BIMSTEC Secretariat which started with the first Secretary General in 2014 with a handful of staff, has now graduated to a secretariat with 7 directors representing all 7 Member States.

BIMSTEC in the recent past, has been taking bigger strides in regional cooperation and enjoying greater visibility. **Substantial progress** has been made after the BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat held in Goa in 2016 and the 4th Summit held in Kathmandu in 2018.

The Members States have completed the negotiation of the BIMSTEC Charter and it is expected to be signed in the coming 5th Summit.

In addition to the BIMSTEC Charter, 03 other legal instruments will also be signed: the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, **Memorandum of Understanding** on Mutual Cooperation between Diplomatic Academies&Training Institutions of BIMSTEC Members States, and, the **Memorandum of Association** on the establishment of BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility in Colombo. **The Summit will also** adopt the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity which has 267 projects with a worth of USD 124 billion.

Another significant progress that BIMSTEC made recently and worthy of being highlighted is, that Member States have ratified the BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International terrorism, Transnational Organized crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking, which has entered into force on 16 March 2021.

We are also happy to inform you that the Agreement on Trade in Goods of BIMSTEC FTA, has reached at a very advanced stage and we are hopeful that it will be signed in another year or two.

Likewise, BIMSTEC countries are also negotiating and making progress on the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement, BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement and BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Master Plan Study, and, also setting up of BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory in Bhutan and BIMSTEC Energy Centre in India.

Excellency, Distinguished Delegates

It may be difficult to measure, but another vital role being played by BIMSTEC is, that the organization is a platform to facilitate regular exchanges among the various officials of the Governments of Member States, which has helped in narrowing down differences and created common grounds for cooperation.

Our Foreign Secretaries have met 21 times, Foreign Ministers met 17 times and our Heads of States and Governments met 4 times.

During the last 2 years of the pandemic when the world went through very difficult times of life and death, the governments of BIMSTEC Member States, cooperated, responded and supported each other at the national level including supply of vaccines.

Excellency, Distinguished Delegates,

Our Heads of States will be meeting again for the 5th time in Colombo very soon. As I said earlier, during this Summit, the BIMSTEC Charter will be signed with three other important documents and adopt the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity.

The Summit is also expected to reconstitute and rationalize 14 areas of cooperation into 7 sectors, where each sector will be led by a Member State. This rationalization will therefore build ownership, responsibility and accountability amongst the member states and thereby enhance progress.

I believe laying these legal frameworks and having long term Master Plans, are key instruments and vehicles of growth and development for any organization.

BIMSTEC has come of age, and is beginning to play a greater role - its sectoral plans are strategic and institutional agreements and MoUs are founded on strong convictions by the Member States.

With renewed political commitment from the 5th Summit in Colombo, BIMSTEC hopes to play a more visible and strengthened role in promoting peace, prosperity and sustainable development in the Bay of Bengal region.

To conclude, I would like to once again express my appreciation to the Institute for Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS) and Ministry of External Affairs of Government of India for organizing this important symposium.

Looking at the participants who will be attending this symposium, I have no doubt that the deliberations and discussions are going to be very enriching and meaningful. We at the Secretariat, despite other meetings that are going on and preparations that we have for the upcoming summit, will still take the opportunity to log in and learn from the renowned participants.

With this, I wish this symposium - BIMSTEC: A Vehicle for Growth and Development a great success.

Thank you.
