

**ADDRESS BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF BIMSTEC AT
THE INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY BANGLADESH (IUB)**

Plot #16, Block #B, Bashundhara, Dhaka-1212
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[Slide 1 on the screen]

Vice Chancellor, Independent University, Bangladesh
Members of the Board of Trustee
Lt General Mohd. Aminul Karim, PhD, Professor and Dean, School of Businesses,
Dr. Imtiaz A. Hussain, Head, Global Studies & Governance Program,
Dr. Borhan Uddin Khan, Head, Department of Law,
Distinguished faculty, Students and guests

Good afternoon.

01. It is indeed a great privilege for me to join you this afternoon to exchange views on a rather less known inter-governmental organization named Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation - popularly known by the acronym as BIMSTEC. The people of our part of the world are more aware of SAARC and ASEAN. As opposed to that BIMSTEC is less visible; people are vaguely aware of its existence, and largely unaware of its objectives and purposes. As the Secretary General of BIMSTEC, it is often a challenge for me to make people understand what we are doing. So, I welcomed the generous offer from my elder student of the JCC Mr. Rahsed Chowdhury, Member of the Board of Trustee to speak today at IUB, an institution of high standing and repute.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Origin of BIMSTEC

02. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (or BIMSTEC) is an inter-governmental regional organization which came into being on 6 June 1997 through the adoption of Bangkok Declaration. The Bangkok Declaration was signed by four Member States – Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The initials of four Member States' names were used to name the new organization – **B**angladesh-**I**ndia-**S**ri Lanka-**T**hailand-**E**conomic Cooperation (BIST-EC). Myanmar joined the Organization on 22 December of the same year, and the organization was renamed as **B**angladesh-**I**ndia-**M**yanmar-**S**ri Lanka-**T**hailand-**E**conomic Cooperation (BIMST-EC). Bhutan and Nepal acquired full membership in 2004 during the 6th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting held on 8 Feb 2004 in Thailand, raising the number of Members of the grouping to seven. The acronym BIMSTEC remained the same as before, now to represent the full name: **B**ay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral **T**echnical and **E**conomic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).
03. An important feature of BIMSTEC is that this organization brings together five countries from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two countries from South East Asia (Myanmar and Thailand). Thus, the group constitutes a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia; or let's say, between SAARC and ASEAN. BIMSTEC membership has a strong geographical reference point – All Member countries either have direct access to the Bay of Bengal or are heavily dependent on the Bay of Bengal for trade and transportation. The membership criteria established by the BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting clearly states this geographical reference:

'Countries seeking membership should satisfy the conditions of territorial contiguity to, or direct opening into, or primary dependence on the Bay of Bengal for trade and transportation purposes.'

[Slide -3 (Map)]

[Slide -4 BIMSTEC Profile]

04. The BIMSTEC region is home to around 1.7 billion people which constitute around 22% the global population with a combined GDP of about US\$ 3 trillion. In the recent years, BIMSTEC Member States have been able to sustain an average 6.5% economic growth trajectory, much higher than the global average. In view of the geopolitical shifts taking place in the region, [in particular with the rising tensions around the South China Sea which may potentially affect maritime trade through the *Malacca Strait*], the Bay of Bengal region is gaining importance in the context of freedom of navigation.

[Slide 5 and 6]

1.2. Purposes and principles of BIMSTEC

05. BIMSTEC was established at a time when all of its seven Member States were already members of either ASEAN or SAARC, and both the regional organization were showing bright prospects as vehicles of regional cooperation. So, one would wonder why it was felt necessary to establish another regional organization overlapping the existing two regional organizations. The answer may be found in the founding purposes and principles of BIMSTEC.

06. The initial purpose of BIMSTEC as provided in the Bangkok Declaration was to “create an enabling environment for rapid economic development through identification and implementation of specific cooperation projects in the sectors of trade, investment and industry, technology, human resource development, tourism, agriculture, energy, and infrastructure and transportation”. Then again, one of the founding principles of BIMSTEC was to “constitute additionality to and not be a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation involving the Member States.” So, the objective was to bring some additional economic benefit without compromising their memberships to SAARC or ASEAN.

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1.3. Structure of BIMSTEC

07. Since the new organization was meant to be a development-project based cooperation platform, the institutional structure was kept to the minimum. The BIMSTEC mechanism was very simple – annual ministerial meetings will be hosted by Member States on the basis of alphabetical rotation; Senior Officials Committee will meet as and when necessary; and a Working Group, under the Chairmanship of Thailand comprising Ambassadors of Member States accredited to Thailand will meet regularly to carry out day to day activities in between Ministerial Meetings. Provision was kept for establishing specialized task forces to deal with specific subject.
08. Subsequently, BIMSTEC Summit comprising the Heads of State or Government was added to the institutional mechanism in 2004. Recently, the Bangkok-based BIMSTEC Working Group has been replaced by the BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) comprising Joint Secretaries of Member States to deal with administrative and budgetary issues of the organization.
09. With the identification of various sectors of cooperation, sectoral Ministerial Meetings, Working Group Meetings and Expert Group Meetings were also introduced to deal with sectoral activities.
10. BIMSTEC did not have a Secretariat until 2014. With the increasing volume of activities, the Member States felt the need of a permanent Secretariat to coordinate, follow up and monitor BIMSTEC activities. A Memorandum of Association (MoA) on the Establishment of BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat was signed at the 3rd Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar in March 2014 to establish a BIMSTEC permanent Secretariat in Dhaka. BIMSTEC Secretariat was inaugurated by Bangladesh Prime Minister H E Sheikh Hasina on 13 September 2014. Bangladesh can take a modicum of pride to host BIMSTEC secretariat as it is the only headquarters of an intergovernmental organization located in Dhaka.

[Slide 9 on sectors]

1.4. BIMSTEC Sectors of Cooperation

11. As the name suggests, BIMSTCE is a multi-sectoral cooperation platform that promotes sector-driven cooperation. At the beginning, it identified six sectors of cooperation, namely, trade and investment, technology, energy, transport and communications, tourism and fisheries in the late 1997. Subsequently, it expanded to embrace eight more sectors: agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism and transnational crime, environment, culture, people to people contact and climate change. Each sector is led by one Member State acting as the Lead Country, whose role is to initiate, organize and coordinate activities of a specific sector.
12. Of late, Blue Economy and Mountain Economy have been identified as two more important areas of cooperation. As opposed to this, Member States are now engaged in a debate to review and rationalize the existing high number of sectors with the objective of reducing the number of areas of cooperation to bring focus to the organization.

2.0. BIMSTEC'S ACHIEVEMENTS DURING PAST 20 YEARS

[Slide – 10, 11]

2.1. BIMSTEC'S evolution

13. BIMSTEC cooperation has undergone many changes and adjustments to find its rightful place in a competitive atmosphere where a number of other regional organizations like ASEAN, SAARC, SASEC etc. have been active. Beginning as an informal grouping of seven countries belonging to other major regional grouping, BIMSTEC has been able to carve out its own distinct identity - so much so that some people even suggest BIMSTEC as an

alternative to SAARC. Although BIMSTEC was meant to pursue project-based development cooperation, it has expanded its role to lay down legal framework and build permanent institutions.

2.2. BIMSTEC is turning into a platform to facilitate exchange

14. In spite of its relative low visibility, BIMSTEC has developed into a useful platform to facilitate regular exchanges among the Governments of Member States, thereby narrowing down differences and creating common grounds for cooperation. During the last 20 years, our Heads of States and Governments met five times, our foreign ministers met 17 times, our Foreign Secretaries met 20 times, and our national security chiefs met twice. This indicates that BIMSTEC core meetings have attained a high degree of regularity.

2.3. BIMSTEC is building permanent institutions

15. The organization is increasingly consolidating itself with necessary institutional structures. In 2014, BIMSTEC established its permanent secretariat in Dhaka to improve coordination and monitoring of its activities. Four specialized centers namely, BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC) in India; BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO) in Bhutan; BIMSTEC Energy Centre in India; and BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility(TTF) in Sri Lanka are at various stages of operationalization.

2.4. BIMSTEC is setting norms and standards for regional cooperation

16. In the area of norm-setting, BIMSTEC has concluded some major agreements including the Framework Agreement on BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (2004), BIMSTEC Convention on International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking (2009), and an MOU to establish BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection to facilitate electricity trade in the region. Agreement on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters, Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement and BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement are currently being negotiated. These agreements will lay down necessary legal framework for cooperation in the areas of trade, transport connectivity, energy cooperation, and counter-terrorism cooperation. Also, BIMSTEC is working towards facilitating travel of its citizens within the region to promote trade, investment, tourism and people-to-people contact. The next meeting of the Working Group on Visa Matters will be held in April 2019.

2.5. Project-based development cooperation

17. BIMSTEC has also remained committed to its original focus on promoting development project-based cooperation, in particular in the area of enhancing transport connectivity. Historically, the Bay of Bengal region was a well connected area permitting unhindered trade, travel and exchange of ideas. BIMSTEC wants to revive that old connectivity in a comprehensive manner. BIMSTEC with ADB assistance undertook BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS) in order to identify and address the missing links to establish greater physical and economic connectivity between South and South East Asia. The study identified 167 projects to enhance the connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region at an estimated cost of USD 45-50 billion. Most Member States have taken initiatives towards

implementation of projects identified by that study, either with its own funds or with external funding.

18. Encouraged by the progress made on the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS), BIMSTEC is currently developing the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan with a vision to promote seamless connectivity between and across BIMSTEC countries, through the use of different transport modes, to achieve enhanced transport and trade linkages for faster and more inclusive growth. The scope of the Master Plan includes both hard and soft infrastructure - including physical roads, railways, ports, inland waterways, and airports; and soft infrastructure including capacity building, transport access agreements, harmonization of rules, regulations, policies, and measures related to transport between and among BIMSTEC countries with a view to facilitating the cross-border movement of BIMSTEC trade in support of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area. After making reasonable progress in transportation part of connectivity, BIMSTEC is poised to take up broadband and internet connectivity. The Fourth BIMSTEC Summit decided to establish a Working Group to deal with information technology and communications related matters with a view to provide greater access, more affordable and high-speed internet and mobile communications to the peoples of the region.

2.6. Progress in social and cultural fronts

19. We have also made reasonable progress in the social and cultural front. Member States adopted the BIMSTEC Poverty Plan of Action (PPA) at the Second BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting on Poverty Alleviation held in Nepal in

January 2012. The overall objective of the Poverty Plan of Action is to identify and implement collective actions for poverty alleviation in the BIMSTEC Member States. The Poverty Plan of Action has been again modified in the Third BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting on Poverty Alleviation held in Colombo in December 2017 to reflect the progress achieved since its initial adoption. The 4th BIMSTEC Summit agreed to make poverty alleviation as the overarching goal of the Organization wherein all other sectors like trade, connectivity, energy cooperation, agriculture should make contribution. The First Roundtable and Workshop of Tourism Ministers held in Kolkata, India in February 2005 adopted the **Plan of Action for Tourism Development and Promotion for the BIMSTEC Region**. The Plan of Action included setting up of BIMSTEC Tourism Information Center, BIMSTEC Tourism Fund, conduct of tour packages etc. First BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting on Culture held at Thimpu, Bhutan on 22-25 May 2006 adopted the Paro Initiative on Culture which lays down the Plan of Action and cooperation including the institutional arrangements.

2.7. People to People Contact

20. BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT) has been established to enhance cooperation among policy think tanks of the BIMSTEC region. The fourth BIMSTEC Summit has decided to establish Parliamentarians' Forum, network of Universities, and journalists' forum to further expand the scope of people-to-people contact.

3.0. WAY FORWARD

3.1. Bringing focus in BIMSTEC activities

[Slide 12 future prospects]

21. In recent years, BIMSTEC has been receiving renewed interest from within the region and beyond. The process started with the holding of the BRICS-BIMSTEC Retreat held in Goa in 2016, wherein the Leaders renewed their commitment to make the organization stronger, more effective and result-oriented. From outside the region, the growing importance of the Bay of Bengal as a major sea route for conducting international trade is a factor that has enhanced the relevance of BIMSTEC. There are indications that BIMSTEC is being seen as an important building block of the emerging Indo-Pacific community.

22. Until recently, BIMSTEC process was marked by a high degree of informality where past practices and norms were relied upon in conducting business. The recently held 4th BIMSTEC Summit (Kathmandu, 30-31 Aug 2018) has made some important decisions to strengthen BIMSTEC's institutional structure and rationalize its areas and method of cooperation. As a follow up to the Summit decisions, the BIMSTEC Charter and Rules of Procedures have been drafted to replace informality by clear rules and procedures. The Member States have agreed to establish BIMSTEC Development Fund to finance projects and programmes. Many scholars have suggested that one of the reasons for which BIMSTEC could not achieve its full potential is that the organization has chosen to deal with too many issues with limited resources. The process has started to review and rationalize the existing

sectors of cooperation to make the organization result oriented. While it will still take time to complete the process, trade and investment, transport connectivity, energy cooperation and security are expected remain at the heart of BIMSTEC activities towards building a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable Bay of Bengal region.

23. The Leaders also decided to enhance the institutional capacity of the BIMSTEC Secretariat, including through financial and human resources, in order to enable it to coordinate, monitor and facilitate implementation of BIMSTEC activities. As a first step, the number of Directors at the Secretariat has been raised from three to seven, to be filled by one Director from each Member State.

3.2. Openness and security

24. The norm-setting role will continue to dominate the activities of BIMSTEC for some time. While cooperation in combating terrorism and transnational crimes including drug trafficking and human trafficking will need utmost attention of the Member States, it will also be important to ensure seamless movement of goods, services, capital and human persons including businessmen, investors, scholars and tourists across the region. The operationalization of BIMSTEC FTA and ratification of counter terrorism and transnational crime related Conventions will therefore be a priority in the coming days. While it is only natural that BIMSTEC will increasingly consolidate its identity as a community of Bay of Bengal nations, it will also continue to leverage on its unique position of bridging South and South

East Asia and remain open to enter into meaningful collaboration with entities having similar aims and objectives. As per mandate given by the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit, the Secretariat is exploring possibilities of establishing collaboration with ADB and UN-ESCAP to advance project-based development cooperation.

3.3. Role of Bangladesh as host country

25. Bangladesh as the host country of the BIMSTEC Secretariat has an important role to play in reinvigorating BIMSTEC process. The visibility of BIMSTEC will enhance Bangladesh's visibility within the region as a diplomatic hub. Bangladesh as the Lead Country for Trade and Investment sector needs to hold the meetings of Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC) regularly to conclude all Agreements related to the BIMSTEC FTA as early as possible. It is also expected to host two important trade related events namely, BIMSTEC Business Forum and BIMSTEC Economic Forum to further strengthen Government-Private sector cooperation for the promotion of trade and investment.

3.4. The time for BIMSTEC has come

26. Ladies and gentlemen: BIMSTEC has come of age and is poised to play a greater and more visible role in promoting peace, prosperity and sustainable development in the Bay of Bengal region. Major foundations have already been laid over last twenty years to make BIMSTEC viable as a regional organization. With renewed political commitment of Member States and necessary institutional structure in place, the time for BIMSTEC has come. Thank you.

Table -1: Aims and Purposes of BIMSTEC

1. To create an enabling environment for rapid economic development through identification and implementation of specific cooperation projects in the sectors of trade, investment and industry, technology, human resource development, tourism, agriculture, energy, and infrastructure and transportation.
2. To accelerate the economic growth and social progress in the sub-region through joint endeavours in a spirit of equality and partnership.
3. To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, technical and scientific fields.
4. To provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the educational, professional and technical spheres.
5. To cooperate more effectively in joint efforts that are supportive of and complementary to national development plans of Member States which result in tangible benefits to the people in raising their living standards, including through generating employment and improving transportation and communication infrastructure.
6. To maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.
7. To cooperate in projects that can be dealt with most productively on a sub-regional basis among the BIST-EC countries and that make best use of available synergies.

Table -2: Founding Principles of BIMSTEC

The BIST-EC will observe the following principles in all its activities:

- (a) Cooperation within the BIST-EC will be based on respect for the principle of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs,

peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit.

(b) Cooperation within the BIST-EC will constitute an additionality to and not be a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation involving the Member States.

Table -3: Initial Structure of BIMSTEC

To carry out the aims and purposes of the BIST-EC, the following institutional mechanisms shall be established:

(a) Annual Ministerial Meetings, which shall be hosted by the Member States on the basis of alphabetical rotation.

(b) Senior Officials Committee, which shall meet on a regular basis as and when required.

(c) A Working Group, under the chairmanship of Thailand and having as its members the accredited Ambassadors to Thailand, or their representatives, of the other Member States, to carry on the work in between Annual Ministerial Meetings.

(d) Specialized task forces and other mechanisms as may be deemed necessary by the senior Officials to be coordinated by Member States as appropriate.

Table- 4: Sectors and Lead Countries

#	Sector of cooperation	Lead Country
1.	Trade and Investment	Bangladesh
2.	Technology	Sri Lanka
3.	Energy	Myanmar
4.	Transport and Communications	India
5.	Tourism	India
6.	Fisheries	Thailand
7.	Agriculture	Myanmar
8.	Public Health	Thailand
9.	Poverty Alleviation	Nepal
10.	Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime	India
11.	Environment & Disaster Management	India

12.	Culture	Bhutan
13.	People-to-People Contact	Thailand
14.	Climate Change	Bangladesh

Table- 5: Sectoral Meetings in 2018

#	Sector	Lead Country	Meetings held in 2018
1.	Trade and Investment	Bangladesh	2
2.	Technology	Sri Lanka	0
3.	Transport & Communication	India	2
4.	Energy	Myanmar	0
5.	Counter-Terrorism & Transnational Crime	India	8(9)
6.	People-to-People Contact	Thailand	1
7.	Cultural cooperation	Bhutan	0
8.	Tourism	India	0
9.	Agriculture	Myanmar	2
10.	Public Health	Thailand	2
11.	Fisheries	Thailand	1
12.	Poverty Alleviation	Nepal	0
13.	Environment & Disaster Management	India	1
14.	Climate Change	Bangladesh	0