

**Statement by Secretary General of BIMSTEC during Panel Discussion on
Strengthening ties in the Indian Ocean: How can we better facilitate cooperation,
including through regional architecture, between Indian Ocean countries
(7th Indian Ocean Conference 2024|09-10 February 2024, Perth, Australia)**

Distinguished fellow Panelists and distinguished audience, Namaskar, Good Afternoon.

While I have had the opportunity to meet with some of you, let me introduce myself. My name is Indra Mani Pandey and I am the new Secretary General of BIMSTEC. I joined just five weeks ago. I am privileged to represent BIMSTEC at the Indian Ocean Conference. I am grateful for this opportunity to speak before you and thankful to the organisers for the invitation and their hospitality extended to me!

The critical importance of Indian Ocean for global security and development has long been recognised. It's embodied in Indian PM Modi's call for strengthening cooperation in IOR to realise the goal of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). Both the EAM of India and Foreign Minister of Australia, in their keynote addresses, at the dinner on 9th February 2024 highlighted the global challenges that the world faces today. They outlined their Vision for the IOR and underlined the importance of collaboration amongst the countries of the IOR.

The imperative of cooperation amongst the countries of IOR in dealing with both the threats to the security as also other challenges such as climate change, sustainable development etc. has been self-evident and can't be overemphasised. How do we realise the goal of forging and expanding regional cooperation in IOR is the obvious question before us for which we're seeking answers. Do regional and sub-regional organisations provide a better framework to achieve the goal cooperation in IOR?

The short answer is yes: they do provide a viable framework for forging multifaceted cooperation in IOR. In my view, Regional Organisations like BIMSTEC, which I represent, IORA, ASEAN and PIF provide a conducive framework for forging cooperation amongst the countries of IOR:

Firstly, they embody the commitment of their member States to cooperate and collaborate in order to address the shared security and developmental challenges.

Secondly, due to the ease of finding convergences and building consensus, because of the small membership of these regional and subregional organisations, it's easier for them to deal with the regional challenges by devising region-specific strategies and plans.

Thirdly, IOR is a huge and diverse geographical space and it comprises very different regions and subregions with very unique geo-strategic and geo-economic dynamics. Therefore, it's not easy to devise mechanisms and institutions for forging cooperation in the entire IOR and one size fit all solutions may not work for all the sub-regions.

Fourthly, the regional and sub-regional organisations belonging to IOR, which I mentioned earlier, including BIMSTEC, have well established institutional set-ups and a long-standing tradition of working with their member States to deal together with both the security and developmental challenges.

Thus, there should be no doubt that regional and subregional organisations belonging to IOR provide useful platforms for forging cooperation in IOR. Allow me to briefly talk about BIMSTEC:

BIMSTEC comprises 7 countries, geographically located in the Bay of Bengal geographical space, which is an important sub-region of IOR. They are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

What is unique about BIMSTEC is that it straddles two significant regions of Asia – South and Southeast Asia - located almost in the centre of the IOR- and it has members from both the subregions.

Though BIMSTEC has a relatively small membership, the combined population of 7 member States of BIMSTEC is estimated at approx. 1.8 billion (22% of global population), which is larger than the population of ASEAN (approx. 679.69 million) and EU (448.4 million) countries combined together. Also, the combined GDP of BIMSTEC member States amounts to USD 4.5 trillion in 2022 (approx. 4.5% of global GDP). India, with its population of around 1.4 billion and GDP of around \$4.0 trillion, remains central to the success of regional cooperation within BIMSTEC.

Even though BIMSTEC is not very well known, it has been in existence for 27 years, as long as IORA. It has its own charter and well established mechanisms for forging regional cooperation, including regular Summits, Ministerial Meetings of Foreign Ministers and Sectoral Ministers, Meetings of Senior Officials of Foreign and other Ministries as well as numerous working groups, expert groups, Regional Centres etc.

BIMSTEC has embarked on a vast Agenda of regional cooperation, which is currently centred around 07 Sectors, with each member State playing lead role for one sector: Bangladesh leads the sector of Trade, Investment and Development including Blue Economy; Bhutan leads the sector of Environment and Climate Change including Mountain Economy; India leads the Security sector, including maritime, space, cyber and energy security as well as CTTC and Disaster Management; Myanmar leads the sector of Agriculture and Food Security, including fisheries and livestock; Nepal leads People-to-People Contact sector, including culture and tourism; Sri Lanka leads the Science, Technology and Innovation sector including Health; and Thailand leads the important sector of Connectivity.

Another unique feature of BIMSTEC is its focus on technical and economic cooperation, keeping away from often divisive political issues. Given the commitment of BIMSTEC member States, it is poised to play a leading role in the security and sustainable development of the Bay of Bengal region. It has a huge untapped potential and it can contribute to the security and growth in the entire IOR. Strengthening cooperation in Bay of Bengal region through the framework of BIMSTEC should be an integral part of any strategy or mechanism to promote security and development in IOR.

BIMSTEC is keen on building cooperative relationships and working together with other like minded States, regional organisations, located in IOR and beyond, as well as the UN and International Organisations.

The BIMSTEC Charter signed and adopted in March 2022 allows BIMSTEC Secretariat to engage in external relations with non-member States, developmental partners and regional as well as the UN and International Organisations. The Charter allows BIMSTEC to accept requests from States or organisations to become Observers or even members.

Before I conclude I want to again thank, on behalf of the member States of BIMSTEC, the Foreign Minister of Australia and External Affairs Minister of India as well as India Foundation for inviting me to attend the IOC 2024 and extending hospitality.