

*National Statement by Prime Minister of Nepal Right Honourable
Mr. Sher Bahadur Deuba at the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit
Colombo, Sri Lanka, 30 March 2022
(Held in Hybrid Mode)*

Theme: BIMSTEC – Towards a Resilient Region, Prosperous Economies, Healthy Peoples

Your Excellency Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka,

Your Excellency Madam Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh,

Your Excellency Mr. Lotay Tshering, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Bhutan

Your Excellency Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of the Republic of India

Your Excellency Mr. Prayut Chan-o-cha, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand,

Honourable Ministers

Secretary General of BIMSTEC

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Namaskar and warm greetings to you all from Nepal.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Your Excellency Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the Government of Sri Lanka for the successful stewardship of BIMSTEC process over the last three and a half years. Holding of this Summit would not have been possible without your pro-active leadership, commitment, and dedication.

I would also like to commend Secretary-General Mr. Tenzin Lekphell and his team at the Secretariat for their tireless professional service to the Organization.

Thanks are also due to the Honourable Ministers and our Senior Officials for their diligent work in the lead-up to this Summit.

Excellencies,

The world today faces challenges that are both complex and unprecedented in their nature, gravity, and urgency. Inequalities both within and among nations are deepening and ideals of cooperation, collaboration and solidarity are wavering. These problems are further exacerbated by emerging threats, primarily climate change, digital divide, and crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like any other part of the world, our region has been fighting an epic battle against the pandemic over the last two years. Hundreds of thousands of people have died, many have relapsed into poverty, and structural vulnerabilities have deepened.

Even if the pandemic curve seems to be flattening gradually, the fight is far from over. Its economic and developmental consequences are sure to play out for quite some time.

Vaccine inequity has become yet another impediment to resilient recovery.

The pandemic has added further strain to the economies of the BIMSTEC countries which are already facing the endemics of poverty, unemployment, and low level of productivity and growth. In this context, our Summit today carries a higher significance. Given the unusual times we are meeting in, it is a true testament to the resilience of our regional spirit, a pledge of unity and solidarity, and a crucial step forward for our cooperation and collaboration.

It is a commitment to the shared goals of peace, progress and prosperity as enshrined in the 1997 Bangkok Declaration.

In fact, the theme of today's Summit – 'BIMSTEC – Towards a Resilient Region, Prosperous Economies, Healthy Peoples' resonates very well with the spirit of the Declaration and the challenges we are facing now.

True, our Organization has made some important achievements over the last 25 years—be it in terms of clarity of mandate, legal framework, formal institutional arrangements, or sector-specific cooperation.

The Fourth Summit held in Kathmandu was a significant marker of the renewed urgency recommitting to build a robust BIMSTEC, particularly through institutional reforms. It mandated the negotiation of the Charter, recommended the rationalization and restructuring of sectors and sub-sectors, and called for strengthening the Secretariat.

We are pleased that, today, we are going to sign the Charter, adopt the important instruments on Mutual Legal Assistance and Establishment of BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility, and endorse the rationalization of sectors and sub-sectors.

This will certainly be a key milestone in the history of our Organization, that may usher it into a new era.

But this is not sufficient. An organization of 1.7 billion people and a combined GDP of over 3 trillion US dollars must set higher ambitions for regional integration and cooperation.

We must muster the requisite political will to ensure that BIMSTEC process rekindles hope and reignites imagination.

We must breathe new life into the Organization by pooling the strengths of our natural resources, age-old civilizations, and diverse cultures and heritages.

We must better frame the future of cooperation to translate our ambition into action and leverage these potentials and resources— for our peoples, our countries, and our region.

This will require concrete action on several fronts.

First, our race to resilience must start with a green, flexible, and inclusive recovery plan.

This means action on vaccines, investment in health systems, and expansion of social protection schemes, together with structural reforms and quality investment in physical and human capital.

BIMSTEC must do its part to ensure that the region builds back better from the pandemic and is well-prepared for any future shocks and disasters.

It needs to chart out sustainable and resilient pathways to deal with the long term economic, social, and developmental consequences of COVID-19.

In this connection, I would like to share with you that the vaccination drive in Nepal has been gaining a strong momentum. We have so far received over 47 million vaccines and fully vaccinated close to 68 percent of our target population and about 92 percent of the eligible people have received at least one dose.

This has been possible due to the support and cooperation of our neighbors, development partners, COVAX Facility, and the entire international community. We remain grateful to them for their goodwill and valuable assistance.

Second, with less than a decade left, our region is not on track to achieve any of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The pandemic has further strained our development efforts.

So, we must reverse the regressing trends and accelerate the implementation of these global ambitions.

We must ensure an effective and timely implementation of the BIMSTEC Poverty Plan of Action and early operationalization of BIMSTEC Development Fund. The time-bound implementation of projects and programmes will be critical to uplift people's lives and livelihoods, create economic opportunities, and scale up growth.

It is more crucial for countries like Nepal, which are set to graduate from the LDC category. This is also because preparations for graduation will overlap with the

pandemic recovery and will entail upfront cost and loss of international support measures. This will require the development and implementation of sector-specific projects covering the needy countries, if not the entire membership.

Third, connectivity – both in physical and digital spheres – plays a catalytic role for enhancing an effective regional process. It also helps businesses – especially small and medium enterprises – to link up with global markets and value chains.

BIMSTEC cannot thrive in the absence of deeper integration of our countries, societies and markets through roads, railways, airways, waterways. This calls for investment in and promotion of transportation networks, energy and power grid interconnections, and information highways.

The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity we are going to endorse today is a big step forward. But an even bigger step will be the implementation of the projects as stipulated in the Plan.

Also, deeper connectivity and sharing of information and technologies will be vital to ensure regional security. It is only through an enhanced level of cooperation that we can combat terrorism, organized crimes, human and drugs trafficking, and money laundering facing the region.

Fourth, greater trade and investment linkages are a *sine qua non* for a robust regional cooperation.

However, the volume of intra-regional trade and investment within BIMSTEC is not that encouraging. The pandemic-induced disruptions have further dampened the trade and investment flows.

This needs to be reversed. BIMSTEC must focus on promoting economic ties, encouraging private sector participation, and facilitating trade and transit.

The success of our Organization will be contingent upon the innovation it inspires, the entrepreneurship it ignites, and the economic partnership it promotes.

An early conclusion of the ongoing negotiations on agreements on trade in goods, trade in services, investment, and mutual assistance in customs matters is a must for us to move ahead.

Fifth, our region is at the sharp end of climate change.

Climate crisis has upset the 'organic link' between mountains and oceans, and even endangered the Himalayan identity and civilization.

We need bold climate action before the crisis passes the point of no return.

We must take strong steps to help the vulnerable communities, make transformative efforts to halt warming at 1.5 degrees, and build climate-resilient development pathways in line with the global ambition of net zero scenario by 2050.

We must make the current crisis a gateway to a greener, safer, and more sustainable Bay of Bengal region.

Finally, our aspiration of a vibrant, forward-looking, and integrated BIMSTEC region will not be realized without the ownership of peoples and communities at the grassroots level.

This requires meaningful cooperation among governments and policy makers, parliamentarians, academics, private sectors, think tanks, civil societies and most importantly the people in a spirit of good neighbourliness. The signing of the MOU on Mutual Cooperation between Diplomatic Training Institutions is an important step.

Nepal welcomes the move to operationalize tourism circuits connecting our temples, archaeological sites, and eco-tourism and adventure sites. We must promote Buddhism as a strong connecting thread. In this regard, we call for an early establishment and operationalization of the Buddhist circuit with Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha.

In line with the rationalization of areas of cooperation, Nepal is pleased to lead the people-to-people contact sector. We remain committed to engaging with other member states and contributing towards building strong bonds at the level of the peoples.

To conclude, Excellencies, Ladies, and Gentlemen, regional cooperation is the only route to a more resilient, prosperous and sustainable Bay of Bengal region. In order to realize this regional aspiration, we must promote the BIMSTEC that is clear in both direction and destination. We must enhance its international visibility and build partnership with international organizations and other non-member states. Nepal remains committed, as ever, to contribute constructively to the BIMSTEC process.

I thank you all for your attention.
