Editorial

The BIMSTEC Secretariat is pleased to re-launch its newsletter coinciding with the 19th Anniversary of the establishment of BIMSTEC. As far as the BIMSTEC is concerned, in the recent past two significant milestones were achieved by the organization; firstly, the establishment of Permanent Secretariat in Dhaka, Bangladesh and secondly, the conclusion of the Headquarters agreement between the Secretariat and the Government of Bangladesh.

The operationalization of the Secretariat and the support extended by the Government of Bangladesh is a vivid testimony of Bangladesh’s commitment to regional cooperation and integration in the Bay of Bengal Region. Since the establishment of the Secretariat, we have been able to service a total number of 27 Meetings virtually in each Member State as well as at the Secretariat. At the second Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT), it was decided that the BIMSTEC newsletter would be re-launched with inputs from the Members of BNPTT. We are pleased to publish in this issue two articles from the BNPTT Members.

The newsletter will be, henceforth, published as a quarterly edition as part of the Secretariat’s effort to strengthen People-to-People Contact. With a view to enhance People-to-People Contact, the Secretariat has taken couple of initiatives which includes the regular holding of the BIMSTEC Foundation Lectures and the BIMSTEC Roundtable Meetings.

IN THIS ISSUE

Strengthening BIMSTEC Integration: The New Agenda

Regional cooperation has been in the forefront of India’s foreign policy. The signing and negotiating of FTAs with Southeast and East Asian countries indicate India’s firm commitment to its Look East - Act East Policy and further deepening and widening of the partnership. BIMSTEC is a unique regional cooperation initiative. In terms of geographical contiguity and access to ocean, BIMSTEC outperforms many successful regional integration initiatives. However, countries in BIMSTEC are yet to benefit out of its resources. Lack of connectivity has been identified as one of the deficits that make the BIMSTEC as one of the least integrated regions in the world.

Countries in BIMSTEC have diverse preconditions for promoting economic development through cross-border trade and investment. In the absence of an effective multilateral cooperation, bilateral and regional economic treaties and agreements have proliferated, with India being the focal point of the economic activity in the region. However, regional integration that is more than the sum of all bilateral relations remains to be strengthened for the benefit of all partners. A range of different reasons exist for the current low levels of regional economic integration in BIMSTEC:

- The remoteness and landlocked character of the mountainous Nepal and Bhutan make it difficult for these countries to link up to international markets.
- The difficult economic and financial situation particularly in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal has been the reason that capital account restrictions remain in place prohibiting, among other transactions, outward foreign direct investment.
- Excessive red tape characterizes trade- and investment-related rules and regulations in the region.

Associate Editors:

S. M. Nazmul Hassan
Director (Bangladesh)

Kunzang N. Tshering
Director (Bhutan)

While efforts at the government levels, along with political will, have been playing a pivotal role in strengthening relations, enhanced connectivity, physical or otherwise, is needed to contribute to the deeper cooperation which would positively influence the future course of BIMSTEC.

The New Beginning:

Although BIMSTEC made its humble beginning in the year 1997, till recently, it remained as a low profile regional bloc and there are many reasons for this underachievement. Intra-regional trade has grown slightly to 5 percent in the last one decade and a half. Growth of intra-regional investment is negligible. The region is yet to witness any regional connectivity project on ground. Nevertheless, one can see a rejuvenated momentum to the BIMSTEC process at present due mainly to India’s economic growth and political leadership. If India takes interests while in the driving seat, BIMSTEC process will make a turn towards deeper integration. Three supporting developments add tremendous value to the integration process, compared to a decade earlier:

First, BIMSTEC now has a Permanent Secretariat in Dhaka and a Secretary General has been appointed.

Second, with land boundary deal between India and Bangladesh in place, member countries are encouraged to support India in promoting the BIMSTEC integration.

Third, conflicts with Pakistan will continue to prevail, putting SAARC in slow motion with perpetuity.

Notwithstanding its cross-regional structure, BIMSTEC has high economic potential, given the region’s economic dynamism, huge markets and rich natural resources. BIMSTEC is a natural choice for strengthening India’s footprints in the neighbourhood under the Act East Policy (AEP). Experiences in SAARC would be added advantage in driving the BIMSTEC process by its member countries.

BIMSTEC FTA: The Enabler

First and foremost would be to encourage trade in the region by signing BIMSTEC FTA. Given the existing trade preferences among the BIMSTEC countries under SAFTA or ASEAN-India FTA or bilateral FTAs, implementation of BIMSTEC FTA may not necessarily increase the intra-BIMSTEC trade in the short run. But, it may certainly activate the production links between the countries, which would ultimately generate regional value chains, thereby regional trade in circle.
In other words, the BIMSTEC region needs an FTA. Regional FTA coupled with trade facilitation would generate higher value addition to the economies at a time when most of BIMSTEC countries have ratified the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement. With leadership of India and Thailand, BIMSTEC Secretariat should be asked to complete the FTA negotiation.

Another compelling reason for signing the BIMSTEC FTA would be to rationalise NTMs in the region. BIMSTEC region, alike other regions, suffers from various forms of NTMs. Rationalisation of NTMs would facilitate the regional trade, much faster than mere tariff cuts. India has rich experiences in product standard historically. Therefore, India should work closely with BIMSTEC member countries to conclude the trade negotiation and attempt to early operationalise the FTA. India in consultation with BIMSTEC Secretariat may undertake a study on rationalising BIMSTEC NTMs, or may request international organization to conduct the study on-behalf of the member countries.

Recent Developments in Regional Connectivity

Despite the existing difficulties, recent years have shown increasing awareness of the opportunities offered through stronger regional cooperation in BIMSTEC. The followings are some of the recent developments:

• There is increasing awareness that regional economic integration offers unique opportunities to address some of the key economic challenges. For example, all countries in the region suffer from unstable and insufficient power supply. Hydropower potential of the mountainous Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan, and India’s Northeastern region offers opportunities to overcome these shortages in a sustainable manner if investments in hydropower can be realized and the necessary regional cooperation is in place.

• Significant efforts are underway to address infrastructure or connectivity constraints in the region. Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and other development organisations plan to support infrastructure financing in the region either through SAARC or GMS or ASEAN. In another example, the Indian government earmarks 10 percent of its annual budget for developing its Northeastern region, mostly through investments in infrastructure such as roads and railways.

• Some of the BIMSTEC countries like India and Thailand have taken steps to build cross-border infrastructure unilaterally in the region. For example, India has decided to extend the Trilateral Highway to Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam, and a new highway project connecting India, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Viet Nam and Cambodia as well as developing the Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) connecting Southeast Asia to South Asia on the eastern part of India in order to add greater momentum to the growing trade and investment linkages between ASEAN and India.

• Myanmar is setting-up quite a few port-based SEZs at Dawei, Kyaukphyu, Thilawa and Dawei, which upon completion would not only strengthen BIMSTEC connectivity but also generate employment and reduce poverty.

• India is also setting-up Kaladan project at Sittwe in Myanmar. Sittwe port is ready to be inaugurated. What we need to set-up an SEZ at the backyard of Sittwe port to facilitate investments. This Sittwe SEZ project should be taken up immediately.

• We need to build coastal transportation along the BIMSTEC coast with the help of multimodal transport operators. If promoted properly, it would be the most cost effective corridor for trade and transportation in the region. The Bangladesh – India Coastal Agreement, signed in 2015, may be a template which can be regionalized.

Myanmar – The Pivot of BIMSTEC

Restoration of democracy in Myanmar is one of the most important developments witnessed by Asia in the contemporary period. After a prolonged isolation, Myanmar has embarked on a path of political and economic reforms since 2011, paving the way for unlocking the country’s large potential. Owing to its strategic location, Myanmar is connecting Asia’s three big markets—ASEAN, China, and India. Myanmar is very much like India – diverse, and heterogeneous. Myanmar has the potential to become another dynamic growth centre of Asia if it strengthens its own economy and develop a stronger and improved connectivity with the neighbouring countries. Opening-up and strengthening the connectivity with neighbouring countries such as China, India, and Thailand would also speed up its development process. The changing situation in Myanmar creates new opportunities for strengthening BIMSTEC cooperation. BIMSTEC initiative shall therefore give more priority in connectivity development in Myanmar.

Trilateral Highway: Priority Project

India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (TH), which links Moreh (in India) with MaeSot (in Thailand), is the land-bridge connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia. The alignment of this trilateral highway falls within the Asian Highways 1 and 2. The agreed route of the TH (1,360 km) is tentatively identified as follows: Moreh (India)-Tamu-Kalwa-Chaungma-Yinma-bin-Pale-Kyadat-Lingaow-akokku-Bagan-Kyauk-padaung-Meiktila-Bypass-Taungoo-Oktwin-Pay-agyil-Theinzayat-Thaton-Hpaan-Kawkareik-Myawaddy-Mae Sot (Thailand). However, an alternate route from Kalewa to Mandalay via Monywa has been proposed and a part of which (Kalewa to Yargyi) is being developed by India. The TH includes building new roads, upgradation of existing roads, construction of all-weather approach lanes, rehabilitation/reconstruction of weak or distressed bridges, etc. The Government of India is responsible for upkeep of the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo (TKK) part of the TH (160 km).

In the Joint Task Force Meeting on TH, held on September 10–11, 2012 at New Delhi, India has agreed to finance the Kalewa to Yargyi portion, whereas the redevelopment of Yargyi to Monywa portion will be managed by the Myanmar government. Another difficult portion of the TH is the Hpaan to Mae Sot (Thailand), a part of which (Myawaddy to Kawkareik) is being constructed by the Thailand government. Myanmar government has sought a loan from ADB for the improvement of Thaton–Mawlamyine–Kawkareik section. Thus, the only missing link of the TH is Kawkareik to Phaen, for which we need development assistance. Three major tasks ahead for completion of the TH. First, we need to complete the construction and improvement of two sections of TH: (i) Kalewa to Monywa via Yargyi, and (ii) Hpaan to Mae Sot, along with replacement of all vintage bridges falling on the highway. Second, we should negotiate and finalise a regional transit transport agreement in BIMSTEC, which is now known as Trilateral Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA). This agreement has to be ready well before the completion of the Trilateral Highway. Among others, this proposed agreement will allow vehicles to move seamlessly for regional and international trade transportation purposes.
This is the “software” that is needed in order to operate the “hardware” - TH. Through this agreement, we could identify modalities of transportation, introduce operating procedures (OP) for vehicles to ply on the highway, and set-up the rule book for public utilities. India may take the lead role in convening a workshop on the transit transport agreement with help of BIMSTEC Secretariat and international organisations such as ADB, UNESCAP and WCO.

Third, building a common template for running and maintaining the corridor and signing of mutual recognition agreement (MRA) on logistics and other transportation services between the member countries would be essential for not only removing the barriers to trade but also sharing the benefits and risks.

Finally, connectivity is the enabler. However, its success will depend how quickly it brings peace and prosperity, particularly to the relatively laggard parts of the region it passes through. Once a highway project starts attracting investment, engages into the development of the region and improves the quality of life of the local people through generation of employment and reduction of poverty, it becomes a truly public good and then turns to be a development corridor. With projects being implemented in Myanmar in anticipating the TH, time is ripe for a big push for India-Myanmar Development Corridor. A coordinated strategy involving the government and private sector is essential, with a clear set of priorities and a willingness to follow through on decisions made. Therefore, a stronger connectivity will eventually convert TH into a “Development Corridor” or “Economic Corridor”. Undoubtedly, deeper regional cooperation in BIMSTEC would speed up this transformation.

Tasks Ahead

While the developments in BIMSTEC connectivity are very limited in numbers, challenges in BIMSTEC are looming large. Three major strategies would be good for the region to support its connectivity—(i) enhanced physical infrastructure development, (ii) effective institutions, mechanisms and processes (institutional connectivity), and (iii) empowered people (people to people connectivity) supported by required financial resources. To complement the connectivity, we should implement followings:

• First, completion of BIMSTEC FTA, which covers trade in goods and services plus investment;

• Second, implement the BTILS recommendations. To start with, India and Bhutan may opt for their border posts for OSBP (one stop border post) project. Depending on its success, this can be extended to other borders in the region

• Third, with completion of the Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) for either BBIN or Trilateral Highway, a BIMSTEC MVA is virtually within our reach. This should be formalized. This BIMSTEC MVA should be BBIN+, and it may help harmonize technical standards such as truck size and weight regulations, transport rules & regulations, etc., less and less border inspection except strategic areas, and simplification of documentation and clearance procedures, and e-submission of trade documents.

• Fourth, visa facilitation in the form of a regional arrangement should be promoted. India’s e-Visa project along with Thailand’s visa on-arrival experiences may be shared with the region. BIMSTEC countries may consider Schengen type visa for certain group of travellers, particularly tourists, business people and patients in the region. This is very much possible since most of the countries in BIMSTEC offer on-arrival visa. BIMSTEC Travellers Card (BTC) may also be introduced.

• Airlines can connect the inland parts of BIMSTEC. India may allow smaller flight (ATR type) to operate between Guwahati, Dhaka and Yangon; Imphal, Mandalay and Yangon; Delhi, Yangon and Bangkok; Mumbai, Colombo and Yangon; etc.

Strengthening trade in BIMSTEC requires stronger transport links, interconnecting telecommunications, increasing the use of information and communications technology, and liberalizing investment in these sectors. The agenda should cover (i) simplification of trade procedures and complete electronic submission of documents, (ii) transit of goods, (iii) completion of TH by 2018, (iv) improvements of border infrastructure, (v) coastal and short sea shipping in Bay of Bengal, etc., which will pave the way towards faster and deeper integration of the region. There should be regular dialogues among BIMSTEC transport officials for setting up BIMSTEC Airlines Group, BIMSTEC Federation of Forwards Associations, BIMSTEC Ports Association, Federation of BIMSTEC Shipowners’ Associations, the Federation of BIMSTEC Shippers’ Councils, etc. Regular exchange of each other’s experiences in achieving the aforesaid targets will strengthen BIMSTEC connectivity.

Finally, to attain the objectives discussed above, it is suggested that BIMSTEC countries should take immediate initiatives to formulate a comprehensive transport policy on the basis of transportation network. BIMSTEC shall also update its own connectivity plan in view of the recent developments in connectivity in ASEAN, India, China and Indian Ocean Rim (IOR). A new study may be undertaken to draw a master plan of BIMSTEC connectivity.

*Professor, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi, and Coordinator, ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), New Delhi, e-mail: prabirde@hotmail.com Author has been benefitted from discussions with conference participants at Kolkata on 3 December 2014, 28 March 2015 and 28-29 March 2016. In particular, author is grateful to Dr Binoda Mishra, Director, CSIRD for inviting him to attend the series of conferences, which he has organized on BIMSTEC in the past. Views expressed by the author are his own. Usual disclaimers apply.
BIMSTEC: Regional Economic Integration in the Bay of Bengal

Dr. Saman Kelegama

The Bay of Bengal is rich in natural resources and embraces both South and East Asia. Although a number of regional groupings like BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) and BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) partially cover the region, it is BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) that covers the entire region and provides a framework for regional economic integration.

BIMSTEC accounts for US$ 2.7 trillion GDP, 21% of global population (1.3 bn population) and 7% of intra-regional trade. BIMSTEC provides South Asian countries a conduit for economic cooperation with East Asian countries and a link to East Asian production networks and value chains. It can become a building block of a future Asian Community, however, the progress so far has been exceedingly slow.

Launched in 1997, BIMSTEC began as a sectoral cooperation grouping partly to better utilize the natural resources in the region and partly to quicken integration of the region. Sectoral cooperation was broadened by extending it to many selected areas normally referred to as Multi-Sectoral Cooperation. Such cooperation is government-driven in contrast to mostly market driven integration through an FTA (Free Trade Area). BIMSTEC has identified a number of areas for sectoral cooperation such as tourism, fisheries, transport, etc.

BIMSTEC also envisaged a market driven integration process when it first mooted an FTA in 2004. It was supposed to be in full operation by 2011 but did not become a reality by then. This is most probably because some member countries of BIMSTEC were questioning the need for another FTA when the tariff levels in the region are already low as well known, via unilateral liberalization as well as through bilateral and regional liberalization via the existing FTAs and RTAs (regional trading arrangements) in the region the tariff levels have come down. Despite delays, a BIMSTEC FTA still remains in its agenda. It is argued here that the two key functional aspects of BIMSTEC, which are market-driven integration and government-driven integration, should be utilized selectively to seek quick gains to the region.

As for market integration, BIMSTEC should not have high hopes on an FTA coming into operation. Indications are that it will drag-on for a long time. In this situation more emphasis should be given on Trade Facilitation via liberal transit, business-friendly customs, transport corridors, etc. Such a process will partly address some of the non-tariff barriers in the region and catalyze trade. According to the ESCAP, Trade Facilitation is a more powerful driver of trade than tariff reductions when tariff levels are already low and this argument is aptly applicable to BIMSTEC.

As for government-driven integration, it is prudent to focus on a few sectoral cooperation projects related to connectivity and people-to-people contact rather than spreading too thin by focusing on a large number of sectoral cooperation projects. Road, rail and sea transport facilitation through road and rail links, transport corridors, multi-modal systems, transit arrangements, etc., which have been highlighted by the 2009 ADB Study on BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistic Study (BTILS) needs to be worked on to improve connectivity. Perhaps digital connectivity may also be considered to strengthen physical connectivity. People-to-people contacts can be improved by improving air connectivity and tourism promotion via inter-governmental cooperation in the region. Buddhist circuit is one such example for BIMSTEC tourism promotion.

For Sectoral cooperation to be effective there needs to be strong institutions and information. Four areas need particular focus, viz., (1) BIMSTEC Secretariat; (2) BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce and Industry; (3) External Partners, viz., ADB and ESCAP; and (4) interaction of the BIMSTEC Network of Think Tanks with BIMSTEC Officials, and BIMSTEC Chamber.

A strong Secretariat is required to push the activities of the regional grouping in-between Summits. The SAARC Secretariat has proved to be an ineffective body whereas the ASEAN Secretariat has been able to drive the ASEAN agenda of the organization more effectively. The BIMSTEC Secretariat needs to be similarly empowered like the ASEAN Secretariat and delegated by member states to play a more proactive role in driving the BIMSTEC agenda. This becomes all the more important in the absence of a Charter for BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC working mechanism has six layers, viz., (1) Leaders’ Summit; (2) Ministerial Meetings; (3) Senior Officials’ Meeting; (4) Expert Group Meetings; (5) Business and Economic Forums; and (6) BIMSTEC Working Group (BWG). Basically, (1) to (4) are at the inter-governmental level and the new BIMSTEC Secretariat has absorbed all the work of the BWG. The Business and Economic Forums should basically be absorbed by the BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce and Industry located in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The Chamber should closely coordinate with the BIMSTEC Secretariat and drive the BIMSTEC economic integration agenda. The CUTS (India) proposal to have an annual BIMSTEC Economic Summit should be welcomed and should be closely co-ordinated with the BIMSTEC Chamber.

The external funder to facilitate BIMSTEC regional integration could be the ADB. The role ADB played in sub-regional cooperation in the Greater Mekong Sub-region is well known. With the concurrence of the BIMSTEC member countries, the BTILS project can be initiated by the ADB. Thereafter, attracting additional funds to complete the project will not be a problem. However, duplication with the initiatives of BCIM and BBIN needs to be avoided. The Asian Highway that ESCAP suggested sometime back can also be part of the BIMSTEC connectivity and ESCAP can provide technical assistance to drive the project. Japan played a key role with FDI in ASEAN economic integration, likewise ADB and other external funding led connectivity improvement can catalyze BIMSTEC economic integration.
Finally, the role of think tanks cannot be overlooked in regional economic integration. They can play a crucial role as knowledge-partners of BIMSTEC. It is understood that there is both a Track 1 and Track 2 Think Tank networks for BIMSTEC. Both these Tracks can interact with each other and network with the BIMSTEC Senior Officials and private sector to bring about necessary policy changes to activate sectoral cooperation.

When BIMSTEC started, India’s "Look East" policy coincided with Thailand’s "Look West" policy and there was much enthusiasm to drive the organization by these two member countries to integrate a part of South Asia to the growing economies of East Asia. But since then, India and Thailand had embarked on an FTA and India and ASEAN had worked out an FTA.

Thus both these member countries do not have the same enthusiasm to push the organization for deeper integration as before. The other member countries are less powerful and passive partners of BIMSTEC.

Chinese interest in the region could also bring benefits, he added. He stressed on the need for proper planning and agreement to reinforce among the BIMSTEC Member Countries to utilize the assets of the region and turn it into a fruitful regional bloc. In his lecture, Prof Hall also suggested to come up with a plan to deal with the infrastructure problems. Professor mentioned that the historical similarities in language, culture and lifestyle amongst the nations in the Bay of Bengal region were neglected and the people of BIMSTEC Countries could not fully realize the importance of the body.

According to Professor Hall, by classifying difficulties, considering the multi-cultural and ethnic identities of the people in the region, and taking steps to overcome the difficulties can make the cooperation more active and vibrant among the Member States.

The BIMSTEC Secretariat undertook the initiative of organizing the First BIMSTEC Foundation Lecture on 31 January 2016. The programme was chaired by Ambassador Sumith Nakandala, Secretary General of BIMSTEC while the chief guest was His Excellency Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser for International Affairs to the Honourable Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Dr. Kenneth R. Hall, Professor of History, Ball State University, USA delivered the First Foundation Lecture titled "The Importance of Documenting Pre-1500 Bay of Bengal Regional Interactions and Contested Agencies Relative to the Present." Professor said that the maritime age prior to 1500 AD was an age of relatively open challenging and multiple dispersion that shared ports and trading routes in this region. Kenneth Hall referred the then Bay of Bengal as a ‘Borderless Society’ where people used to communicate and work together. There were cultural transitions, historical, political, and religious connections between the communities of Bay of Bengal, he added.

He also spoke about the Maritime Silk Route of Indian Ocean, diversity of resources, overland trade to South China, overland trade via Cambodia to Vietnam and South China Sea Coastline, upstream-downstream networking of Bay of Bengal Trade and also about the marketplace transactions of this region at the age of 15th century. Dueling on Southeast Asian early maritime trade and societal growth, he stressed on more connections among people across the Bay of Bengal.

Professor Hall spoke of the time between 1000 and 1500 AD when three major civilizations- Arabic, Indian and Chinese- interacted in this region. Professor discussed about horizontally linked communities with a hierarchical relationship. He said this region could be advanced from its glorious history of political networks, diverse colonial inheritances and ports of trade.
Bangladesh and Sri Lanka attends G7 Outreach Summit

The two-day Summit began on 26 May at Ise-Shima in Nagoya, the capital of Japan’s Aichi Prefecture, a modern manufacturing and shipping hub in central Honshu. The G7 members meet annually to discuss such issues as global economic governance, international security, and energy policy. Besides, the G7 Outreach Meeting is held between the G7 Leaders with the Leaders of other countries outside the group.

The leaders of Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Chad as well as the African Union chairperson were also invited to the Outreach Meeting. Besides, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría, World Bank President Jim Yong Kim, Asian Development Bank (ADB) President Takehiko Nakao and International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Christine Lagarde also attended the Meeting.

High Commissioner and Ambassador of the BIMSTEC Member States present their credentials to the President of Bangladesh

His Excellency Mr. Harsh Vardhan Shringla has joined as the new High Commissioner of India to the People’s Republic of Bangladesh on 14 January 2016 and presented his credentials to the President of Bangladesh on 19 January 2016. Prior to his arrival in Bangladesh, he was the Ambassador of India to the Kingdom of Thailand.

Her Excellency Ms. Panpimon Suwannapongse has been appointed as the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Thailand to the People’s Republic of Bangladesh and has presented her credentials to the President of Bangladesh on 03 May 2016. Ambassador Panpimon is concurrently accredited as Thai Ambassador to Bhutan and visited Thimphu to present her letter of credence to the King of Bhutan on 18 March 2016.

Bangladesh Foreign Minister visits Bhutan-

His Excellency Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, MP, Hon’ble Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh paid a 4-day bilateral visit to the Kingdom of Bhutan from 12-15 March 2016. During the visit he stressed on the importance of the BBIN for BIMSTEC connectivity and requested Bhutan to ratify the document at the earliest. The Minister also discussed on the Tri-lateral Energy Cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan and India with the relevant authorities in Bhutan to take the cooperation in energy sector further among the BIMSTEC Member States.
Enhancing the connectivity across the Bay of Bengal, the Bay of Bengal Gateway (BBG) has been established by the Consortium of telecommunication providers recently. The BBG has 3 fiber pair cable with a length of 8100 kilometer and is based on 100G-Plus Dense Wavelength Division Multiplexing (DWDM) technology with an overall design capacity of 100 Tbit per second. The BBG will connect Barka (Oman) and Fujaira (UAE) and Penang (Malaysia) with landing points in Mumbai (India), Colombo (Sri Lanka) and Chennai (India).

The BBG Consortium includes Vodafone, Omantel, Etisalat, Reliance Jio Infocomm, Dialog Axiata and Telekom Malaysia. BBG is expected to provide low cost high value connectivity to people in the Bay of Bengal. Such facilities will enhance People-To-People contact across the Bay of Bengal. The President of Sri Lanka, Maithripala Sirisena, on 30 May 2016 commissioned the Sri Lankan landing point of BBG and Optical Add-Drop Multiplexer (OADM) in Colombo.

The BBG is an addition to the existing SEA-ME-WE submarine fibre optics cable network connecting South and Southeast Asia with Europe through the Middle East. UNESCAP has commenced discussions on a possible Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway based on the Trans Asian Railway Network and Asian Highway Network.

Transport and Communications is one of the priority areas identified for cooperation in BIMSTEC. The enhanced physical and digital connectivity will facilitate trade, trade facilitation and People-to-People Contact among the BIMSTEC Member States.

Map Courtesy: Malaysian Wireless

Photograph Courtesy: The Island, Sri Lanka
RECENT EVENTS

International Workshop on Art and Cinema Industries in India, 06 May 2016, Kiran Nagar Museum of Art, New Delhi

The Workshop was attended by the Art and Film Producers, Directors, Artists and Workers from the Indian and French Cinema Industries, Scholars and Research Interns from the French Institute in India, Officials from the French Embassy, UNESCO, BIMSTEC, Bollywood Film City and the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, (FICCI). The BIMSTEC Secretariat was represented by Mr. Kunzang N. Tshering, Director (Bhutan) as one of the panelist for the session on the norms, standards and harmonization. Mr. Tshering spoke on the BIMSTEC Cultural Cooperation: Paro Initiative on the establishment of the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission (BCIC) and the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO) with theme “Culture Express Identity, Unity and Happiness” leading to closer People-to-People Contact.

The outcome of the Workshop was that the French Institute in India and the Bollywood Film City/workers to further collaborate on the issue of “The Other Thought, French - Indian Encounters on Creativity and Innovation” to harmonize the norms, standards, workers and territories in the field of Arts and Cinema Industries in India.

BIMSTEC Workshop on Developing Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)-Phase II “GAP for International Trade”, 26-28 April 2016, Chonburi, Thailand

Delegations from the BIMSTEC Member States i.e., Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand had attended the Workshop, except Nepal. Mr. Kunzang N. Tshering, Director (Bhutan), represented the BIMSTEC Secretariat.

Fifth BIMSTEC Roundtable Meeting, 04 April 2016, BIMSTEC Secretariat, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Mr. Bipul Chhaterjee, Executive Director of CUTS International, Jaipur, India, talked about “Look East, Act East” policy of the Government of India which is a part of its Foreign Policy, and how it progressed over the years since its existence in 1992. He also talked about the Development Co-operation of India in the global perspective, which could bring positive developments in the BIMSTEC Region.

Fourth BIMSTEC Roundtable Meeting, 03 April 2016, BIMSTEC Secretariat, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Mr. Kanak Mani Dixit, Editor-in-Chief of the Himal South Asian, Nepal while Chairing the Fourth BIMSTEC Roundtable Meeting spoke about the Regional Cooperation and Integration in the BIMSTEC Region and suggested that the vision of the BIMSTEC’s Regional Cooperation and Integration initiative should be based on economic and social justice.

Third BIMSTEC Roundtable Meeting, 21 March 2016, BIMSTEC Secretariat, Dhaka, Bangladesh

The Third BIMSTEC Roundtable Meeting was held as a part of the Secretariat’s effort to promote People-to-People Contact. It was chaired by Dr. Guanghua Wan, Director, Research, Asian Development Bank Institute, Tokyo. Dr. Wan talked about the “One Belt One Road” Initiative of China and how it could bring positive impact on the regional integration and economic cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region.
RECENT EVENTS

The BIMSTEC Workshop on Trade and Sustainable Development Goals: Achieving Win-Wins, 22-23 March 2016, BIMSTEC Secretariat, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Delegations from the Government of Bangladesh, Asian Development Bank Institute, the BIMSTEC Secretariat and Economists and Experts from the renowned organizations attended the workshop. They discussed on the subjects relating to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its impacts on the regional integration and economic cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region and beyond.

Eighth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Sub-Group on Combating the Financing of Terrorism, 16-17 March 2016, Colombo, Sri Lanka

The Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, His Excellency Arjuna Mahendran inaugurated the Meeting. Delegations from all BIMSTEC Member States attended the Meeting. Ambassador Sumith Nakandala, Secretary General of BIMSTEC and Mr. Nazmul Hasan, Director (Bangladesh) of the BIMSTEC Secretariat also attended the Meeting. The Meeting reviewed, inter alia, the status of bilateral Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) between the BIMSTEC Member States on Combating the Financing of Terrorism, discussed the identification of needs for Human Resources Development and Capacity Building.

Sixth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Sub-Group on Legal and Law Enforcement Issues, 17-18 December 2015, New Delhi, India

The Meeting commenced the negotiations on the Draft Text of the BIMSTEC Convention on Transfer of Sentenced Persons. Delegations from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri-Lanka and Thailand attended the Meeting. Ambassador Sumith Nakandala, Secretary General and Mr. Nazmul Hasan, Director (Bangladesh) represented the BIMSTEC Secretariat.

Second Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks, 08-09 October 2015, Bangkok, Thailand

Thai Member of Parliament, His Excellency Kobsak Chutikul graced the Meeting with his kind presence and keynote address. Ambassador Sumith Nakandala, Secretary General of BIMSTEC, delivered special remarks at the Meeting. The Meeting discussed ways and means of revitalizing cooperation among the Member States to further enhance People-to-People contact in the Bay of Bengal region and to make BIMSTEC more visible.
A Permanent Secretariat for the BIMSTEC in Dhaka, Bangladesh

After a span of 17 years of the founding of BIMSTEC as a regional organization, its long cherished Permanent Secretariat was established in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 13th September 2014 to serve the BIMSTEC Member States. While inaugurating the Secretariat, Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Hon’ble Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh called it ‘historic’. She further remarked, “Let BIMSTEC Secretariat become a hallmark of proud partnership of the Seven-Member States across the Bay of Bengal”.

Publications on the Bay of Bengal


“Admirably ambitious yet eminently readable, Crossing the Bay of Bengal is one of the most engaging works of history to come my way in a long time”
-Amitav Ghosh, writing at amitavghosh.com/blog

“Amrith uncovers new horizons in oceanic history as he sets sail with Tamil migrants across the turbulent water of the Bay of Bengal. This exquisitely crafted book deftly traces the migratory patterns and cultural flow that connect South and Southeast Asian while demonstrating the power and limits of human agency in shaping the environmental destiny of the sea”
-Sugata Bose, author of His Majesty’s Opponents

“Exquisitely crafted and exhaustively researched, this book will be come a classic in global and oceanic history. Few studies of world history can rival the breathtaking interdisciplinary reach and sheer narrative splendor of this book”
-Isabel Hofmeyr, author of Gandhi’s Printing Press

“Reading this book is pure joy. Beautifully written, with lyrical tenderness and subtle concern for the voices of migrants. Crossing the Bay of Bengal portrays the history of the Bay transformed over epochs, from medieval times to the present, in all its environmental, economic, social, and political complexity.”
--David Ludden, author of India and South Asia: A Short History

Sunil S. Amrith is Mehra Family Professor of South Asian Studies and Professor of History
Harvard University
Connecting Asia:

BIMSTEC is an intergovernmental regional organization comprising seven Member States lying in the littoral and adjacent areas of the Bay of Bengal constituting a contiguous regional unity. This organization came into being on 6 June 1997 in Bangkok, Thailand. Its membership includes five from South Asia, i.e., Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka and two from Southeast Asia, including Myanmar and Thailand. The Secretariat is located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. © BIMSTEC Secretariat. 2016