



BIMSTEC

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation

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Editorial



Welcome to 3rd Edition (March 2025) of our Monthly BIMSTEC E-Newsletter.

At the outset, the BIMSTEC Secretariat extends its deepest condolences to the people of Myanmar and Thailand, our Two member States, for the loss of thousands of lives, injuries to thousands other and devastating devastation due to the earthquake of 7.7 magnitude which struck them on 28th March 2025. The Secretariat highly appreciates the prompt earthquake relief assistance provided by other 5 BIMSTEC member States Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka in solidarity with the Governments and Peoples of the two affected member States. This national tragedy has underlined the need to enhance cooperation in disaster management.

The month of March was marked by intense preparations for the 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok- the first in-person gathering of BIMSTEC Leaders since the Kathmandu Summit in 2018, including its key outcomes such as the Summit Declaration, reflecting the Leaders' shared vision, decisions and directives for future cooperation.

While the special BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee Meeting finalized the draft Summit Declaration, the 13th Meeting of the BIMSTEC Sub-Group on Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism finalized a paper on Illicit Flow of Funds (IFF) and an Action Plan to curb IFF among member states. The 2nd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission, held in Thimphu, finalized the basic documentations for the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory.

The 3rd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Working Group on Tourism explored the ways to operationalize BIMSTEC Tourism Circuits. Similarly, the 3rd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Working Group on Trade Facilitation advanced discussions on the draft Agreement on Trade Facilitation, while the 22nd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Working Group on Rules of Origin revised the draft Rules for Determination of Origin of Goods. Progress was also made in regional cooperation in agriculture and allied sectors with the 11th Meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Agriculture, which adopted the Implementation Plan for Strengthening BIMSTEC Agricultural Cooperation.

The Secretariat organized a Workshop on the Midterm Review of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, in partnership with the Asian Development Bank, to assess its implementation, identify key challenges, and provide recommendations for accelerating progress in regional connectivity. It also, in collaboration with the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling, organized a Policy Dialogue titled "BIMSTEC Policy Dialogue on Regional Cooperation and Development: Curtain Raiser to the 6th BIMSTEC Summit.

I had the privilege during the month of sharing insights with the participants at a trade facilitation capacity-building Program, held in New Delhi, participating in webinars and engaging the media in the lead-up to the Summit.

As we move forward, BIMSTEC remains dedicated to fostering inclusive and sustainable development and security of its member States. We deeply value your readership and welcome your suggestions to strengthen regional cooperation under BIMSTEC and to improve our E-Newsletter.

IN THIS ISSUE

- Core and Sectoral Meetings;
- Secretary General's Engagements; and
- BIMSTEC Policy Dialogue.

(Indra Mani Pandey)
Secretary General

Special BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee Meeting



A Special Meeting of the BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee was held virtually on 25 March 2025, hosted by Thailand to finalise the draft of 6th BIMSTEC Summit Declaration and other related documents.

13th Meeting of BIMSTEC Sub-Group on Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Financing of Terrorism



13th Meeting of the BIMSTEC Sub-Group on Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism was held on 01 March 2025 in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

It finalized a Paper on Illicit Flow of Funds (IFF) and an Action Plan to prevent illicit flow of funds among the BIMSTEC member States. It considered conclusion of a draft MoU on capacity building to combat money laundering and financing of terrorism among BIMSTEC Member States. It also emphasised the importance of BIMSTEC becoming an observer at Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering.

2nd Meeting of BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission



The 2nd of the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission was held on 10 March 2025 in Thimphu, Bhutan.

It finalized the draft Organogram for the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO) and the Terms of References for the appointment of Director, Professional and General Service Staff as well as their emoluments and other administrative and financial matters. It also deliberated on the potential areas of cooperation under the BCIO.

3rd Meeting of BIMSTEC Working Group on Tourism



3rd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Working Group on Tourism was held on 18 March 2025 in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

It discussed drafting BIMSTEC Tourism Policy Guidelines, operationalizing BIMSTEC Tourism Circuits, organizing annual tourism events, facilitating visas for tourists, enhancing banking facilities for tourists and operationalising BIMSTEC Tourism Development Fund. It also emphasized the importance of collaboration in developing BIMSTEC tourism packages & digital platforms and strengthening regional connectivity to unlock the full potential of BIMSTEC's diverse and vibrant tourism sector.

3rd Meeting of BIMSTEC Working Group on Trade Facilitation



3rd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Working Group on Trade Facilitation was held virtually on 19 March 2025, organised by Bangladesh. It discussed the draft Agreement on Trade Facilitation for the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area.

22nd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Working Group on Rules of Origin



22nd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Working Group on Rules of Origin (WG-ROO) was held virtually on 25 March 2025, organised by Bangladesh. It discussed and updated the Draft text of the Rules for Determination of Origin of Goods for Agreement on Trade in Goods for BIMSTEC Free Trade Area and its Annexes.

Midterm Review of BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity



A two-day Workshop on the Midterm Review of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity was held in Bangkok, Thailand, from 5–6 March 2025. It was organized by the BIMSTEC Secretariat in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank.

It assessed the implementation status of projects under the Master Plan, identified challenges hindering progress and proposed measures to address them. It also provided recommendations to expedite project completion and preparation for the Midterm Review Report.

11th Meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Agricultural Cooperation



The 11th Meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Agricultural Cooperation was held in hybrid format in Phuket, Thailand from 28-30 March, 2025.

It updated the Implementation Plan for Strengthening BIMSTEC Agricultural Cooperation (2023–2027) and discussed key initiatives, including the feasibility of establishing a BIMSTEC Food Reserve, a BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence in Agriculture proposed by India and BIMSTEC Scholarships in Agriculture, among other areas of cooperation. It also prepared for the 3rd Meeting of BIMSTEC Agriculture Ministers scheduled to be held on 09 April 2025 in Kathmandu.

Secretary General addresses the Valedictory Session of capacity-building programme on trade facilitation



Secretary General addressed the concluding session of a two-week capacity-building programme on trade facilitation in New Delhi on 28 March 2025. He emphasized the importance of enhancing trade facilitation among the BIMSTEC member States to strengthen intra-regional trade and investment.

Secretary General participates in online webinar “Bolstering BIMSTEC: Mapping the Next Steps”



Secretary General participated in an online webinar, “Bolstering BIMSTEC: Mapping the Next Steps”, which was held on March 28, 2025, organized by the Centre for Global India Insights.

In his remarks, SG highlighted the key deliverables expected at the 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok on April 4, 2025, and emphasised the need for full and timely implementation of the decisions taken at the Summits and Ministerial Meetings and partnerships with external partners to advance BIMSTEC’s agenda.

Secretary General (SG) in conversation with Journalist Masud Karim (MK) of The Daily Jugantor & ANI on 6th Summit and Regional Cooperation under BIMSTEC



SG: First let me thank you for this interview. I am delighted to have this conversation with you and with your audience. The Summit, which is just 10 days away, will be an important Summit as it will be the first in-person Summit after the Kathmandu Summit in 2018; the 5th Summit, held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, was held in virtual mode. Apart from adopting the Declaration of the Summit, the leaders are also going to adopt the vision for BIMSTEC called “BIMSTEC Vision 2030, that will pave the road for future cooperation among the BIMSTEC member States. We had our Charter coming into force last year in May and now our Leaders are going to adopt the Rules of Procedures for our Organization. So, that will also be a very important decision by our Leaders.

Similarly, we had an Eminent Persons Group working last year and they have already submitted their report to the Foreign Ministers. Now our Leaders are going to adopt the Report of the Eminent Persons Group. Here I would like to mention that we have already started implementing the Report even before it has been adopted by our Leaders. There will be a signing ceremony for some MoUs between BIMSTEC and its partners. Also, we are expecting that there will be a special ceremony for signing the Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation. There is also a plan for virtual inauguration of BIMSTEC Energy Centre, which has already been set up and is going to be operational soon.

MK: How does BIMSTEC plan to strengthen regional cooperation in the face of global economic challenges?

SG: The global economic challenges do impact on all our member States and our member States take steps to deal with those challenges. However, they believe that regional cooperation can help them in dealing with those challenges in its own way. BIMSTEC has a very comprehensive Agenda. We have 15 sectors and sub-sectors of cooperation on our agenda and they cover most of the sustainable development goals. So, if we are able to expand cooperation under our various agenda items, it will help our member States realize their sustainable development goals and directly and indirectly, it will also enable them to deal with the challenges that they face whether they are economic or social challenges.

MK: With PM Modi expected to attend the summit, what role do you see India playing in shaping BIMSTEC's future direction?

SG: India, together with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Thailand, was a founding member of BIMSTEC and it has continued to play an important role in shaping the Agenda and nature of cooperation within the BIMSTEC, working together with other member States. The way we have structured our cooperation, each member State has been given responsibility to lead cooperation in one or more sectors. For example, Bangladesh has been given the responsibility to lead regional cooperation in Trade, Investment, Development and Blue Economy, whereas India has the responsibility to lead cooperation in sectors like Security, Disaster Management and Energy. So, in both disaster management and energy, India has taken the initiative, for example, of setting-up centers of excellence. There is a BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate, set up by India which assists our member States in climate and weather forecasting. As I mentioned earlier, the BIMSTEC Energy Centre is being set up by India for promoting collaboration in energy sector. We are also working towards interconnection of electricity grids, which will contribute to energy security and green transition of our member States. So, India is working together with other member States and has been very supportive of BIMSTEC. I would like to mention two more initiatives of India. In 2016, when India had hosted the BRICS Summit, it had invited BIMSTEC Leaders for a Retreat, which gave a new momentum to regional cooperation. In 2022 Prime Minister Modi had announced a grant of 1 million dollar for BIMSTEC and it has helped us in strengthening the institutional framework of BIMSTEC. So, India, as I said, together with other members, has been trying to strengthen BIMSTEC, because it believes that regional cooperation through BIMSTEC will be helpful for all our member States.

MK: Bangladesh has reportedly approached India for a bilateral meeting between PM Modi and Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus. How significant is this meeting for regional diplomacy?

SG: The secretariat is not directly or indirectly involved in the meetings which our Leaders will have on bilateral basis. So, we are not aware of what our Leaders are planning to do on a bilateral basis with other Leaders. However, the Summit gives an opportunity to our Leaders to have conversations and express their collective commitment to BIMSTEC. So, we are hoping that all our Leaders will reiterate their political commitment to strengthening BIMSTEC at the Summit and that's what we are looking forward to.

MK: Could BIMSTEC facilitate enhanced cooperation between India and Bangladesh on trade, security, and connectivity?

SG: I am glad you asked this question because strengthening intra-regional trade, security cooperation and connectivity has been on BIMSTECs agenda from the very beginning and we have been able to progress in all three sectors. In Connectivity Sector, we have adopted a Master Plan for Connectivity. There is Agreement among the member States to take initiatives to complete the projects within their own territories in order to

connectivity with other member States. In trade, we have already signed a Framework Agreement on FTA and we are also going to focus on promoting other areas of interactions like business-to-business interaction, more meetings between our business leaders. We are looking at completion of negotiations for free trade, trade in services, investments. All these measures will help all the countries to enhance intra-regional trade. Naturally, the trade between Bangladesh and India will also get a positive momentum by all these measures and our effort has been to encourage all our member States to trade more with each other. So, directly or indirectly, what we are trying to do in BIMSTEC will help our member States to enhance intra-regional trade.

MK: How does BIMSTEC plan to improve its institutional framework to make regional cooperation more effective?

SG: I just mentioned to you that we had, last year, an Eminent Persons Group working to prepare a Report on the state of cooperation within BIMSTEC, including the institutional framework that we have, and the cooperation that we have in different sectors. It consulted a number of stakeholders and then it prepared its comprehensive report, which contains a number of key recommendations to reform and revitalize BIMSTEC. As I mentioned to you, our member States are very keen to reform and revitalize BIMSTEC, so that it can play the role that it has been expected to and, in this regard, they have already started taking steps to implement the recommendations contained in the Report even before the report is adopted by our Leaders at the Summit. So, member States are very keen to undertake some of the essential institutional reforms to strengthen regional cooperation through BIMSTEC. And, I am very hopeful that once we go through these reform steps, BIMSTEC will be in a better position to meet the expectations of our member States.

MK: Thank you so much! **SG:** It is my pleasure speaking to you and to your audience, Thank you, Sir!

BIMSTEC Policy Dialogue on Regional Cooperation and Development: Curtain Raiser to the Sixth BIMSTEC Summit



The BIMSTEC Secretariat, in collaboration with the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM), organized a BIMSTEC Policy Dialogue titled “Regional Cooperation and Development: Curtain Raiser to the Sixth BIMSTEC Summit” on March 12, 2025, at the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka.

The Dialogue brought together a diverse group of experts, diplomats, scholars, practitioners and key stakeholders to deliberate on pressing regional issues and opportunities as well as expected deliverables at the 6th BIMSTEC Summit.

The Dialogue focused on critical areas such as economic integration, the early finalization of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement, trade facilitation, enhanced connectivity, digital transformation, and sustainable development. Participants engaged in in-depth discussions to identify actionable strategies and policy recommendations to strengthen regional cooperation under the BIMSTEC framework. The outcomes of the Dialogue are expected to contribute significantly to advancing regional cooperation.