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## The Re-Emergence of the Bay of Bengal

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# The Re-Emergence of the Bay of Bengal

*Nitin Agarwala*

## Structured Abstract

*Article Type:* Research Paper

*Purpose*—The Bay of Bengal has been a fractured region since the weakening of imperialism due to fear of re-colonization, lack of trust, historical baggage and inward orientation. Due to the rise of China and India, the Bay has once again become an arena of activities forcing littoral states to engage in a number of sub-regional groupings with BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) as the only intra-regional grouping between South Asia and Southeast Asia. The paper explores if BIMSTEC can actually help the Bay to re-emerge as the “center of activities” and the possible “route to course” for such a re-emergence.

*Design, Methodology, Approach*—Using a comparative approach, the author looks at various groupings in this region in general, and BIMSTEC in particular, as a medium to help the Bay to achieve its lost unity and identity.

*Findings*—BIMSTEC can become a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia if member states allow bilateralism to develop into multilateralism and focus more on trade, investment, connectivity and energy. Since BIMSTEC is more than a grouping, by being a defined region of the Bay of Bengal, its success means the re-emergence of the Bay of Bengal.

*Practical Implications*—This contribution explains how the nations of South Asia and Southeast Asia, by their concerted efforts of working together, can re-integrate the region to its earlier glory.

*Originality, Value*—This contribution examines the growth of sub-regional

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partnerships and how the success of an intra-regional partnership can help the entire region prosper.

Keywords: Bay of Bengal, BIMSTEC, re-emergence,  
sub-regional partnership

### Table of Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AMRO	ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
BCE	Before the Common Era or Before the Current Era
BIMP-EAGA	Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area
BIMST-EC or BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BISNC	BISNC
BIST-EC	Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation
BNPTT	BIMSTEC Networks of Policy Think Tank
BOBP-IGO	Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organisation
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
CE	Common Era or Current Era
CGIF	Credit Guarantee and Investment Facility
CTI	Coral Triangle Initiative
EAS	East Asia Summit
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization
EMEAP	Executives' Meeting of East Asia Pacific Central Banks
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
EurAsEC	Eurasian Economic Community
FEALAC	Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation
FFA	Forum Fisheries Agency
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program
IFAS	International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea
IMT-GT	Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle
IOR-ARC	Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation
IT	Information Technology
IUU	Illegal, unreported and unregulated (fishing)
MRC	Mekong River Commission
NARBO	Network of Asian River Basin Organizations
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
RCI	Regional Cooperation and Integration
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SACEP	South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme
SASEC	South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SEANZA	Central Banks of Southeast Asia, New Zealand, and Australia
SEAWUN	Southeast Asian Water Utilities Network
SOPAC	Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission
SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
SPECA	UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia

## I. Introduction

The Bay of Bengal since times immemorial has encouraged trade and cultural connectivity between its littorals, namely India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. With colonialism, the region became economically stronger and allowed seamless movement of military troops and agricultural products. However, in the latter half of the 19th century with the weakening of colonialism and newfound independence, the littorals developed a mind of their own and their cohesiveness and unity weakened, causing the Bay to lose its identity.

Inward-looking economic policies and mistrust between these littorals created a sharp line of distinction that forced the region to be recognized as two separate entities—the eastern half as “Southeast Asia” and the western half, which included India, as “South Asia.” Of these, the Southeast Asian nations, which were more cohesive and like-minded, decided to restore their lost identity and unity by creating a “successful” sub-regional grouping of ASEAN in 1965. Seeing the success of ASEAN, despite differences, the South Asian nations came together under SAARC in 1985. However, there was no real effort to revitalize the entire region as one and to its ancient glory until the 1990s, when India launched its “Look East” Policy, and then through BIMST-EC in 1997.

Today, an increasing population in this region has resulted in an increased demand for energy and resources by the two rising powers of Asia, viz. India and China, thereby forcing the Bay of Bengal, that controls the transit of nearly 90 percent of world trade on it, to once again re-emerge at the heart of international politics by becoming an arena of connectivity and strategic competition for control over energy resources, shipping lanes, and cultural influence. To add to this, the silent challenge of climate change is having a severe effect on the densely populated littorals of the Bay.<sup>1</sup>

To ensure the well-being of their people, a must for any nation, a multitude of bilateral and multilateral sub-regional partnerships, programs and initiatives for improving trade, transportation, tourism, energy, security and social and cultural exchange have become the norm for the littorals of this region. Though there is no doubt that the Bay of Bengal is regaining its importance,<sup>2</sup> this paper aims to look at the partnerships, programs and initiatives in this region that are propelling the Bay to re-emerge and achieve its lost glory and importance. In doing so, the paper will focus primarily on BIMSTEC since it is the only initiative that tries to connect South Asia to Southeast Asia and can possibly help the Bay of Bengal to achieve its lost unity, glory and identity. The question this study aims to answer is whether BIMSTEC can help the Bay of Bengal to re-emerge as the “center of activities” and the possible “route to course” to achieve this goal.

This article has been arranged in six sections. The second section provides a historical background of the Bay of Bengal to show how for many years it has been the center of activities. The third section presents an insight into the need for cooperation, the patterns of cooperation used and the partnerships that exist in the Asia-Pacific region. The fourth and the fifth sections focus on BIMSTEC and the possible route it needs to chart to help the Bay of Bengal to re-emerge and regain its lost glory. The sixth and final section concludes the paper.

## II. Background

The Bay of Bengal, the largest bay of the world, named after the region of Bengal, covers an area of about 2,172,000 square kilometers (839,000 square miles), is fed by a number of large rivers and boasts of numerous ports, both big and small. Numerous islands, though small, including chains of occasionally active mud volcanoes, both habited and uninhabited, dot the Bay. The Bay has been recognized as one of the world's largest marine ecosystem due to the presence of biological diversities such as coral reefs, estuaries, fish spawning, nursery areas, and mangroves. It is rich in natural resources such as oil, natural gas, methane hydrates and strategic minerals that can be harvested from the available polymetallic nodules. The Bay hosts vital maritime trade routes for Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and for the landlocked states of Bhutan, China, India and Nepal while economically supporting countries like the Maldives (for fishing), Malaysia (for fishing and trade), and Singapore (for container traffic from the littoral states of the region).<sup>3</sup>

This region, in its first reference worldwide given by Ptolemy (150 CE), was addressed as the *Gangeticus Sinus* meaning "Gulf of the Ganges" on the world map.<sup>4</sup> Later, for many centuries, and in many languages, it was known as the "Chola Sea," the "Chola Lake"<sup>5</sup> and Kalingorda or "Kalinga Sagar."<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, the Portuguese gave it the name "Golfo de Bengala."<sup>7</sup> Whatever the name, the Bay has been instrumental in the spread of trade, religion, culture, and migrants over the years. It has been a maritime thoroughfare for trade between India and China<sup>8</sup>; a conduit for the spread of Buddhism and Indian art, culture and civilization to Cambodia (as ReamKer),<sup>9</sup> Malaysia (as Hikayat Seri Rama), Thailand (Buddhism in 3 BCE, and as Ramakien), Myanmar (as Rama Vatthu) and Indonesia (as Ramayana Kakawin)<sup>10</sup>; with people moving freely between the littorals of the Bay of Bengal until the early 20th century, thereby giving the region a feeling of "a neighborhood."

The historical use of the Bay dates back to Prince Vijaya (543–505 BCE) who traveled from Bengal through the Bay to colonize Sri Lanka.<sup>11</sup> Under the Pallav dynasty (the middle of the 6th to the middle of the 8th century), trade between India and Southeast Asia flourished and the Bay's littorals came closer. With the Cholas (between the 9th and 13th centuries), commerce in the region saw a new high with the Indian merchants leaving their imprints as far as Java, Indonesia. By the early 11th century, the Cholas had become a regional maritime power and their empire

extended to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and the Laccadives. This led to imperial and commercial rivalry by the empires of Srivijaya (a Hindu Malay kingdom around the Straits of Melaka and the Javanese kingdom of Mataram), the Cambodian kingdom of Angkor (in competition with the Dai Viet and Champa), the Burmese kingdom of Pegu (by developing Buddhist connections with Ceylon while linking the Bay's northern commerce overland with Yunnan) and the new Song dynasty in China (960 CE).<sup>12</sup> These commercial rivalries eventually led to the military expedition of King Rajendra, a Chola ruler, in 1025 CE, across the Bay of Bengal to raid the lands of Srivijaya. This attempt was the first such attempt to assert naval supremacy over the Bay with many others, such as those of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, and the Japanese, to follow.<sup>13</sup>

Around 1240 CE, invasions by semi-nomadic armed groups from Inner Asia profoundly disrupted regional politics, thereby re-orienting seaborne commerce to overland trade to result in a decline of integration around the Bay, which eventually was corrected after European traders arrived in Asia in the 15th century. These invasions brought about a change in the commercial and cultural life of the Bay of Bengal as Islam began to grow in South and Southeast Asia between the 13th and 14th centuries, giving new prominence to Muslim trading communities from South India. With Muslim rule expanding into South India, the dispersed Muslim communities connected South and Southeast Asia to the Arab world, making the Buddhist and Muslim cultural traffic as the common bond.<sup>14</sup>

The 14th and the 15th centuries saw explorers like Ibn Battuta (1304–1369) of Morocco, Niccolo De Conti (1395–1469) of the Venetian Republic and Admiral Zheng He (1371–1435) of Imperial China venturing through the Bay of Bengal.<sup>15</sup> The 16th century saw the Portuguese empire, the Second Burmese Empire (Taungoo dynasty, 1486–1752) and the Kingdom of Mrauk U (1429–1785) as the major powers in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>16</sup> Such was the interest in the region that navigational charts for the Bay were first prepared by the Portuguese in the 16th century and later refined by the English and the Dutch with the dedicated efforts of theoretical mathematicians and the practical experience of seamen in the 17th century. By the 18th century, numerous European trading companies had established settlements across the region, which culminated into Crown rule in the subcontinent in the 19th century and eventual disruption of the region's traditional maritime networks. What emerged was the British policy of protecting trade routes to China and the Pacific while displaying their complete strategic dominance over the Bay of Bengal in military, economic, demographic and political terms.<sup>17</sup>

To control territories around the Bay, the British needed laborers whom they brought with them from India. It is estimated that nearly 30 million Indians worked overseas between 1834 and 1937<sup>18</sup> and were responsible for change to the demographic and economic landscape of the area by creating tea industry in Ceylon, rice industry in Burma and rubber industry in Malaya. These linkages were supported by infrastructure such as the regular ship connection between Calcutta and Rangoon and dozens of ports on the eastern and western coasts of the Bay of Bengal by the British India Steam Navigation Company (BISNC).<sup>19</sup> The early 20th century saw a rapid

increase in trade and migration from India between British India and British Burma allowing fostering of free trade, market economy and strong economic and commercial linkages between the two nations that ultimately saw a decline with their independence in 1947 and 1948, respectively, so as to protect local industries, to restrict labor immigration, for security and threats from neighbors.

The decolonization of the countries of this region and India's leaning away from the Western nations divided the region into South Asia (pro-communism) and Southeast Asia (anti-communism), which was made *de jure*<sup>20</sup> by the formation of the ASEAN in 1967 by the Southeast Asian nations. The demarcating border of Southeast Asia, so created, was limited to Myanmar, with its admission to ASEAN in 1997 while Sri Lanka was denied membership for geographical reasons.<sup>21</sup>

For times immemorial, every aspect of human society, culture and sustenance of life in the Bay has been dictated by the Asian monsoon that animates the Bay by providing fresh water to lower the salinity and allow greater biodiversity to thrive. While the resulting aquatic life provides a crucial source of energy to the population residing along the coasts, the monsoon provides the necessary water resource for daily livelihood and agriculture for the hinterland. With time, as the Bay lost its importance as a lifeline of commerce and to pollution due to numerous human activities as a result of population growth, urbanization close to the shores, industries and building of dams on the rivers that feed the Bay, the very nature of the Bay and the biodiversity that makes it so unique got altered. The oxygen content of these waters has reduced to such an extent that there is a "dead zone" of the size of 600,000 square kilometers, which has been found to be growing steadily.<sup>22</sup> With continued neglect and global warming, the coastal regions of the Bay have become the most vulnerable to climate change in the world, especially since more than half a billion people live directly on the coastal rim that surrounds it, which means that one-fourth of the world's population lives in a country that borders the Bay of Bengal.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the geographical location of the Bay provides with a unique strategic position as it connects the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean via the Malacca Strait, through which transits nearly one-third of global trade. It is no wonder that the two rising powers of the world, India and China, are trying to be assertive and dominative in the Bay.

From the preceding discussion, one realizes that the Bay of Bengal was once the heart of global history, linked by kinship, commerce, and cultural circulation; however, due to the lack of a political structure to knit the region together, the Bay was forgotten in the second half of the 20th century and was divided for control over trade and migration. Over the years, in order to knit back the region and ensure their own growth and development, nations here have engaged in many sub-regional agreements. All these years, these efforts have mostly been limited to countries within the constructs of South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is only now that through an initiative named BIMSTEC, an effort to integrate nations across these constructs has taken shape and the world watches to see if the re-emergence of the Bay of Bengal as the "center of activity" can become a reality or not. The success of BIMSTEC is

hence considered critical to integrate the two sub-regional constructs and bring back glory to the Bay.

### III. The Need for Cooperation

Decades of suspicion, mistrust and fear among the countries of the Bay of Bengal<sup>24</sup> have caused various trans-boundary issues to take root.<sup>25</sup> Some of these issues include fishing, oil-spill, pollution control, piracy, human trafficking, illegal human migration, and trade. Even with the issues known, very little has been done by countries here as these issues are trans-boundary in nature and cannot be handled unilaterally. Furthermore, the lack of trust, suspicion and fear has disallowed these issues to be handled without involving the concerned nation(s), thereby allowing the issues to persist and grow. This has necessitated the need to implement sub-regional partnerships, programs, initiatives and agreements and build trust to create areas of cooperation. Independently, both Southeast Asia and South Asia have their own cooperation mechanisms in place but those between these two blocs have been missing. India's "Look East" policy of 1991 that was upgraded to the "Act East" policy in 2014 and the BIMSTEC of 1997 are the only cooperation mechanism between the two blocs.

To date, a multitude of international, regional and sub-regional partnerships operate in the Bay of Bengal, many of which have similar roles and mandates, resulting in limited effectiveness. Due to their overlap and duplication, they have been given the proverbial name "noodle bowl" of treaties (see Figure 1 as a simplistic representation of these groupings). It is imperative to mention that irrespective of their names and the member countries, all these sub-regional partnerships aim at addressing all or some of the four basic areas of cooperation—economic, trade and investment, monetary and financial, and regional public goods.<sup>26</sup>

Before delving into the details and nuances of these sub-regional partnerships in Asia we need to understand the multitude of terms used for these partnerships and the areas which they focus on. Having understood these basics, we will discuss the sub-regional partnerships in Asia, in brief, to better understand how these partnerships have supported the re-emergence of the Bay of Bengal in the last few decades.

#### *Patterns of Cooperation Structures*

In order to allow trade and investment to help development through cooperation, developing countries are fostering sub-regionalism through various sub-regional agreements. We need to understand that the concept of region is a very loose notion as regions can be constructed and re-constructed based on the common interests, threats or vision and this concept can create "outsiders" and "insiders." For the purpose of this study, we define "region" as Asia and the Pacific. The various patterns of cooperation structures that evolve, in general, include:

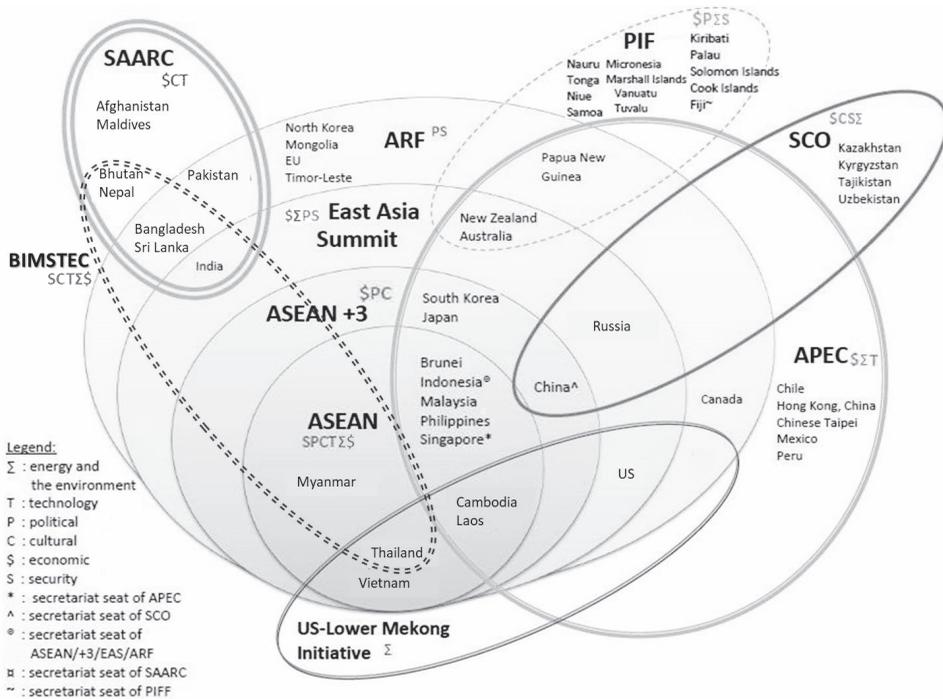


Fig. 1. Sub-regional cooperation structures in Asia. Source: modified from Bower.<sup>27</sup>

(a) A regional agreement, wherein regional countries voluntarily enter into an agreement in order to upgrade cooperation through common institutions and rules.<sup>28</sup> The primary objective of such an agreement can be economic, political or environmental. Usually, for governments, it tends to become a political initiative with commercial interests. Agreements allow an increase in international trade and investment and in the formation of regional trading blocs.

(b) Regional agreements allow regional integration that is progressed through international institutions, intergovernmental decision-making, or a combination of both. They are aimed to achieve rapid economic development, decrease conflict, build mutual trust and overcome barriers that impede the flow of goods, services, capital, people and ideas. Accordingly, the Regional Cooperation and Integration (RCI) Strategy<sup>29</sup> recommends four pillars for cooperation and integration as seen in Figure 2. These include:

- (i) Economic cooperation (infrastructure development such as transport, ICT, technology and energy)
- (ii) Trade and investment (trade, investment, domestic regulation, and macroeconomic and financial policy)
- (iii) Monetary and financial integration (a single currency and a close to uniform interest rate for the region)
- (iv) Regional public goods—environmental protection (shared natural resources) and security (both traditional and non-traditional threats)

[IUU fishing, piracy, illegal migration, slave trade] and climate change)

(v) Culture and education

(c) *Regional partnerships* are partnerships formed when two or more countries or organizations of a region either reach a formal or an informal agreement to work together to achieve a common goal. Partnerships are created to achieve greater value, leverage resources, address common issues, provide a communication forum and achieve bold goals.<sup>30</sup>

(e) *Regional programs* are planned activities of particular interest to people living in the area for which the service is provided. These programs should deal with a subject matter of specific interest to the region and with people who are residents or have close connections with the region.<sup>31</sup> They aim to support the region in the efforts of domestic priorities, policy reforms and regional integration.

(f) *Regional initiatives* are initiatives<sup>32</sup> committed to a specific region. These initiatives generally have a broad scope and include several topics of common interest.<sup>33</sup> They may aim at innovative and sustainable practices, building a knowledge base and formulation and implementation of strategies at the country level. The initiative provides an integrated approach to addressing priority issues, and to guide the implementation of country programs.

While the regional cooperation models are effective and are the way ahead, there are risks to regional integration that need to be identified and managed. These include<sup>34</sup>:

(a) Different priorities of countries depending on their connectivity gaps, economic geography, or preferences for sovereignty in specific areas.

(b) Difficulty in assessment of the impact on trade and investment flows, allocation of economic activity, growth, and income distribution.

(c) Inefficient outcomes due to lack of adequate complementary policies and institutions.

(d) Need of policies and institutions to ensure that eventually there are no winners and losers and social, environmental, and governance risks are managed correctly.

Such resulting institutes of regional integration may be either trans-regional (with countries outside Asia), intra-regional (with countries within the region but of different sub-regions), or sub-regional (with countries of the same sub-region). To better understand the architecture of these institutions that have developed in Asia, these institutions are divided into three categories, viz. overarching, functional and facilitating.<sup>35</sup> An overarching institution is an umbrella arrangement that convenes summits and meetings for governments and provides normative and declaratory frameworks to legitimise and support regional cooperation and integration initiatives. The functional institutions are more specialized with a narrow technical agenda that focuses on a specific area (or range of areas) of cooperation while the facilitating institutions provide advisory, administrative, technical, and financial support.

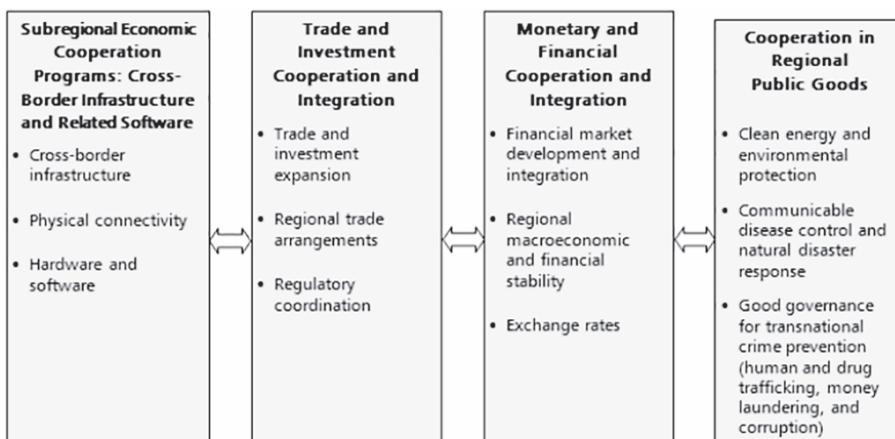


Fig. 2. The four pillars of regional cooperation and integration. Source: ADB, 2008.<sup>36</sup>

### *Partnerships in the Region*

Asia, as a region, is home to 48 developing nations (Central Asia [8], East Asia [6], South Asia [8], Southeast Asia [10], Oceania [2] and the Pacific [14]), and has witnessed a steady increase in institutions of regional integrity. These institutions are aimed to be comprehensive, open, and multi-dimensional and help nations to develop through cooperation.

The existing institutions of regional integration in this region are as seen in Table 1.<sup>37</sup> These institutions and their members (as seen in Fig. 3) indicate that these institutions are haphazard and overlapping. Such overlapping institutions lead to higher transaction cost due to duplication, are difficult and problematic for government agencies to manage due to scarce technical resources and eventually yield lower welfare gains. However, they continue to flourish due to foreign-policies and politics of participating nations. When analyzing the existing institutions in Asia based on the four pillars of RCI strategy (see Fig. 2), what stands out is that regional integration is much higher in East Asia and Southeast Asia while Pacific, South Asia, and Central Asia are the least integrated sub-regions in the world.<sup>38</sup> The main driver of these integrations has been “trade and investment” while “monetary and financial integration” has lagged and both “economic cooperation programs” and “cooperation in regional public goods” have been wanting. This said, it is evident that there is substantial untapped potential for regional integration in South Asia.<sup>39</sup>

It is essential to understand that regional economic cooperation and integration is essential to bring about socio-economic development of the region and also for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda of achieving Sustainable Development Goals by generating large opportunities for enhancing employment and incomes across the region.<sup>40</sup> In return, a lower integration has a direct bearing on connectivity leading to poor infrastructure, which in return affects the development of seaports, ports and harbors, and air services. These in return have a direct bearing on tourism, business and migration.

**Table 1. Institutions of Regional Integration  
in Asia (ADB, 2010)**

*Trans-regional*

Overarching	Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM); Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC); Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC); East Asia Summit (EAS)
Functional	ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC); Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

*Intra-regional*

Overarching	ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN+3);
Functional	ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office (AMRO); Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC); Central Banks of Southeast Asia, New Zealand, and Australia (SEANZA); Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI); Credit Guarantee and Investment Facility (CGIF); Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO); Executives' Meeting of East Asia Pacific Central Banks (EMEAP); Network of Asian River Basin Organizations (NARBO)

*Sub-regional*

*Central Asia*

Overarching	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC); International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS); UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA)
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*South Asia*

Overarching	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)
Functional	Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organisation (BOBP-IGO); South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP); South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC)

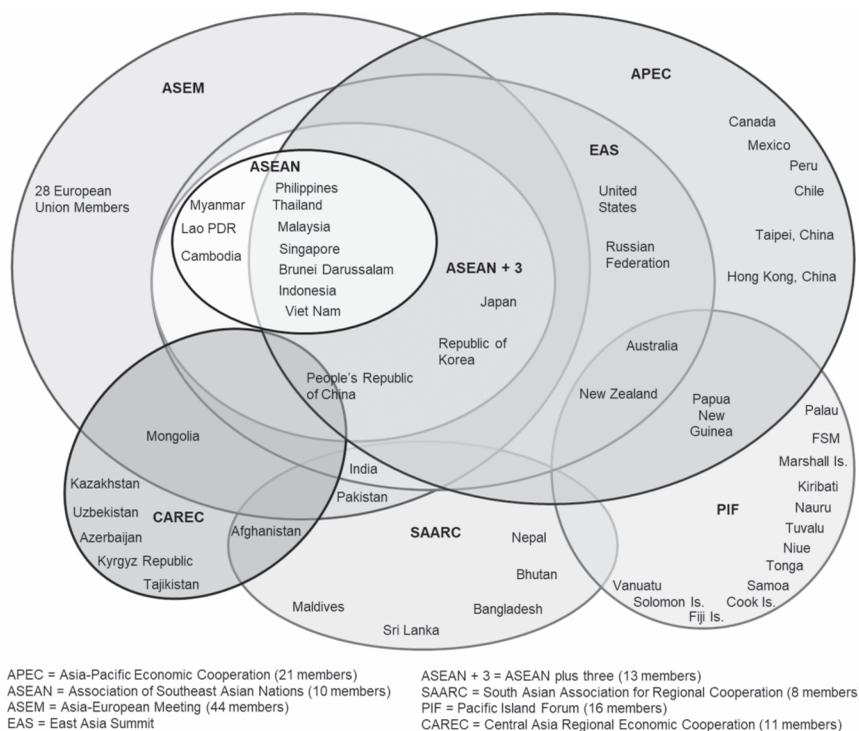
*Southeast Asia*

Overarching	Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)
Functional	Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA); Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program (GMS); Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT); Mekong River Commission (MRC); Southeast Asian Water Utilities Network (SEAWUN)

*Pacific*

Overarching	Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)
Functional	Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA); Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC); Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC); Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP); South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO)

This all notwithstanding, in the last 70 years, the littoral countries of the Bay



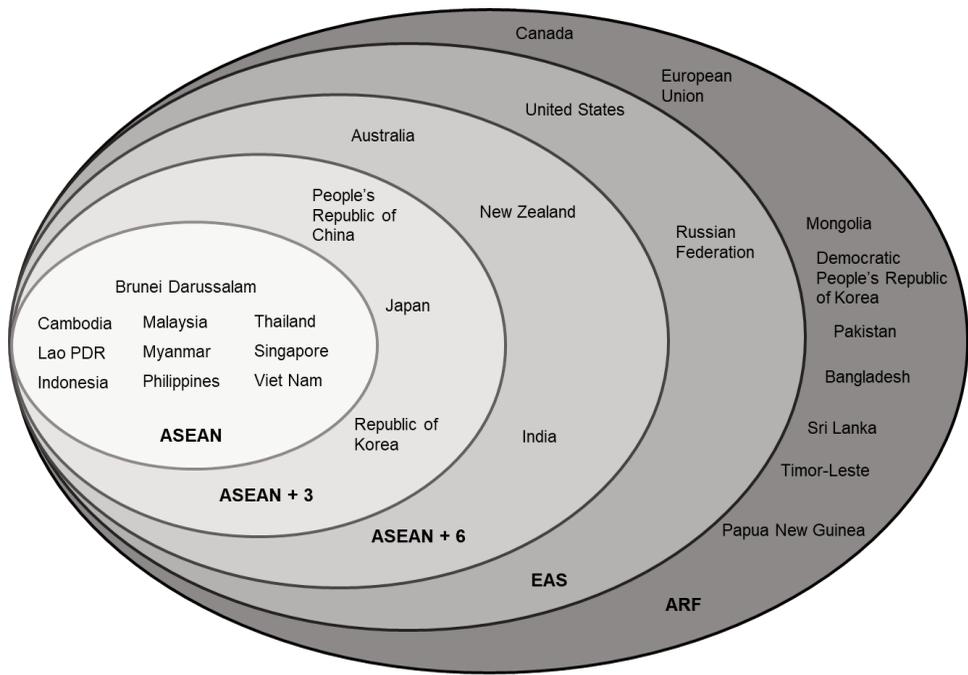
**Fig. 3. Main regional and trans-regional economic integration initiatives in Asia. Source: ADB, 2010.<sup>41</sup>**

of Bengal, despite the challenges faced, have seen substantial economic and social achievements much beyond the expectations of most people. This is largely attributable to ASEAN which has helped establish a high degree of political unity through regional cooperation. This in return has allowed trade and investment to flourish in the region and provide leverage for trade negotiations at the international level. Over the years, ASEAN has become a successful model for the developing world through openness and gradualism. On the other hand, since the motivation for the creation of SAARC was a common fear of domination of smaller countries by India, the grouping has not been able to show comparable results.<sup>42</sup>

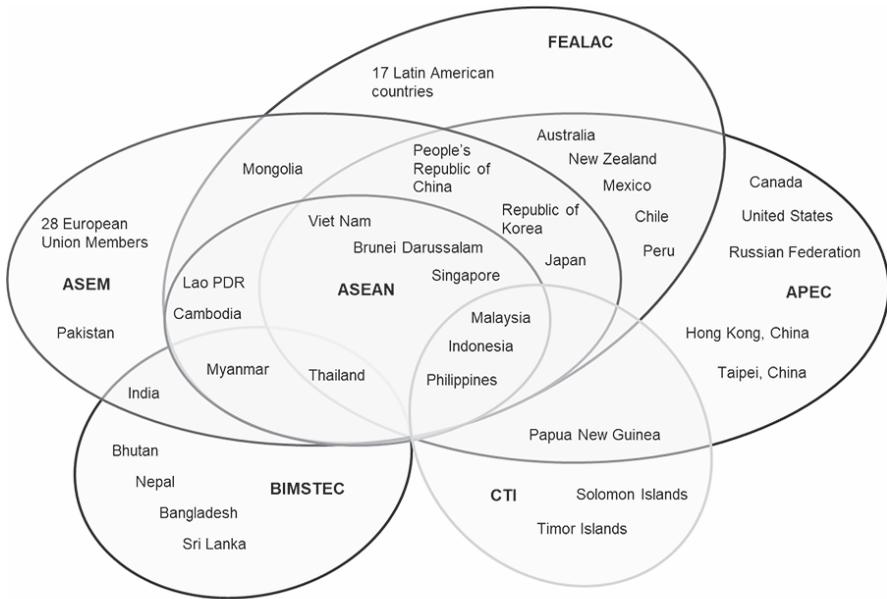
Though there has been skepticism about the region achieving regional integration with a “noodle bowl” arrangement of institutions,<sup>43</sup> it is ASEAN that stands out to provide the required hope and direction. It is because of this that one notices that ASEAN maintains centrality to both trans-regional and inter-regional groupings (see Fig. 4). It must be noted that the ASEAN’s centrality is not a result of a preconceived plan but due to its increasingly central role in Asia-wide cooperation.

In spite of the downside of the “noodle bowl” arrangement, several countries

**Opposite: Fig. 4. Centrality of ASEAN in groupings. Source: ADB, 2015.<sup>44</sup> Top: Inter-regional grouping. Bottom: Trans-regional grouping.**



ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations  
 ASEAN + 3 = ASEAN plus three nations  
 ASEAN + 6 = ASEAN plus six nations  
 ARF = ASEAN Regional Forum  
 EAS = East Asia Summit



APEC = Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (21 members)  
 ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations (10 members)  
 ASEM = Asia-European Meeting (44 members)  
 BIMSTEC = Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (7 members)  
 CTI = Coral Triangle Initiative (6 members)  
 FEALAC = Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (36 members)

have stayed on with these agreements for reasons of simplification of trade negotiations or simply “peer pressure.” It is with this understanding that it is opined that BIMSTEC can play a crucial role to ensure socio-economic development of the littorals of the Bay of Bengal as it connects nations of South Asia and Southeast Asia to remove the existing divide between these two sub-regions while maintaining the centrality of ASEAN, a near necessity for the stability and prosperity of this region as seen in Fig. 4. Such an effort would eventually help in the possible re-emergence of the Bay of Bengal as the “center of activities” in this region once again.

### *Influence of Partnerships on the Bay of Bengal*

It is clear by now that the intention of regional partnership is to bring business, government, education and community leadership together in order to strengthen the economy of the region by retaining, expanding and diversifying existing business and industry while attracting new businesses to the region.<sup>45</sup> This has resulted in fast-paced development and growth of Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular.

With development, has come unprecedented pollution of the land, air and the sea. This has resulted in 99 of the 100 most polluted cities of the world in 2018 to be in Asia<sup>46</sup> thereby exposing 92 percent of the population of this region to significant health risks.<sup>47</sup> According to the 2017 Ocean Conservancy report,<sup>48</sup> China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam are dumping more plastic in the oceans than the rest of the world combined. This is resulting in the blatant pollution of the oceans and is directly responsible for climate change and loss of habitat for the fishes. It is essential to mention that the fishing industry plays a vital role in the lives of millions of people in this region, with ASEAN being a major producer of fish and other fisheries products. As the effects of climate change increase, natural disasters and sea rise have become frequent and common events for the region. This has also had an effect on the monsoon pattern on which the region depends largely for its agriculture, and which was once a determining factor for movement of trading ships in this region. Today, no part of the world is likely to be affected more by climate change than the littorals of South Asia due to low lying and crowded cities close to the coast.<sup>49</sup>

As for the unity of the region, while Southeast Asia has displayed a close-knit integration South Asia has not. Furthermore, with no effort made to integrate South Asia and Southeast Asia, the integration of the Bay of Bengal has remained a distinct dream for the last 70 years. However, with the magnitude of world trade moving through the Malacca Strait that accounts for nearly half of the global trade<sup>50</sup> and one-third of the total global petroleum and other liquids production,<sup>51</sup> the Bay of Bengal has started to attract extra-regional powers. With political conflict and piracy being rife in this region, extra-regional powers such as the U.S., China, Japan, South Korea, India, Vietnam, Australia and many more have been forced to involve themselves in issues of trade, defense and diplomacy, sale of military equipment, and military exercises with the littorals of this region. This in return has affected the security

of the littorals of the Bay of Bengal forcing them to expend their limited finances in developing a military of their own.

#### IV. Understanding BIMSTEC

If we observe closely the sub-regional partnerships mentioned above, we realize that most of them maintain the broad division of inward-oriented South Asia and outward-oriented Southeast Asia and there is very little participation of nations on an intra-regional basis, barring BIMSTEC. Loosely, BIMSTEC can be called an initiative to bring together the two sub-regions so that the Bay of Bengal and Asia as a whole regains its long-lost glory. It is with this understanding that we will look at BIMSTEC in detail and see what efforts it is making to bring the two sub-regions together and whether it has/is succeeding in its efforts.

The Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) was formed in 1997 as BIST-EC and was renamed as BIMST-EC after Myanmar joined this intra-regional grouping. With Nepal and Bhutan joining it in 2004, it was renamed as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). Unlike other sub-regional groupings, BIMSTEC is a sector-driven cooperation organization. Though it began with six economic-related priority objectives, over the years more were added to eventually address 14 sectors. Each of these sectors has a member nation as a lead country to coordinate the activities in that sector. These sectors include those of Trade and Investment (Bangladesh), Technology (Sri Lanka), Energy (Myanmar), Transport and Communication (India), Tourism (India), Fisheries (Thailand), Agriculture (Myanmar), Cultural Cooperation (Bhutan), Environment and Disaster Management (India), Public Health (Thailand), Poverty Alleviation (Nepal), Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (Sri Lanka) and Climate Change (Bangladesh). Additionally, two specialized centers, the Energy Centre and the Centre on Weather and Climate have been created to support sectoral cooperation and for a concerted energy policy. Today, 23 years later, BIMSTEC has created its own identity as an intra-regional organization, rather than being just a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. However, with achievements, new challenges have surfaced that need to be continually resolved.

##### *Progress Made*

BIMSTEC as a sub-regional organization maintained a low profile till the 2016 BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Submit. Since then, progress in various areas has been made with various agreements being inked by the member states. To improve working a secretariat has been established in Bangladesh. The progress made in the various priority sectors is varied with the major focus being on Trade and Investment, Connectivity and Energy with some basic effort focused toward other priority areas.

Intra-regional trade and investment have been one of the key priority sectors

to achieve socio-economic development for BIMSTEC. Accordingly, the Trade Negotiating Committee has established the Agreements/Protocols on Trade in Goods, Trade in Services, on Investment, on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters, Rules of Origin and Operational Certification Procedures, Trade Facilitation, and Protocol to amend the Framework Agreement to conduct negotiations. In addition, the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement (BFTAFA) to stimulate trade and investment among member states and to attract trade in goods, trade in services, and investment with outsiders has been inked.

To achieve better transport connectivity, BIMSTEC member states have prepared a BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan with Asian Development Bank and identified 167 projects (35 roads, 12 railways, 9 airports and 109 ports) at an estimated cost of US\$45–50 billion. Some of these include rail and road corridors such as the SAARC Corridor 4,<sup>52</sup> the SAARC Corridor 8,<sup>53</sup> the Asian Highway 2,<sup>54</sup> the linking up of existing national highways at Dalu (Meghalaya, India)–Nakugaon (Mymensingh, Bangladesh), to create a North-South corridor for Bhutan, Meghalaya and Assam,<sup>55</sup> a 4,430-kilometer long Kolkata–Ho Chi Minh City railway corridor that remains mainly on the drawing board at present, the Kaladan multi-modal transit transport project that aims to reduce the travel distance between Kolkata to Sittwe by approximately 1,328 kilometers and avoid the Chicken’s neck in Siliguri by connecting the port of Kolkata with Sittwe (Myanmar) by sea route (539 kilometers), Sittwe to Paletwa (western Myanmar) by Kaladan riverboat route (158 kilometers), and Paletwa to Mizoram (India) by road (62 kilometers). The Kaladan project is supported by several associated projects such as the Bairabi–Sairang–Hmawngbuchhuah railway, Sittwe Special Economic Zone, Sittwe–Gaya gas pipeline, Tha Htay Chaung Hydropower project, India–Myanmar–Thailand highway, Agartala–Feni–Chittagong highway, India–Myanmar Zokhawthar–Rihkwadar–Kalemyo highway, Paletwa–Chika–India highway project and the four-laning of Aizawl–Tuipang national highway.<sup>56</sup>

The Motor Vehicles Agreement for road traffic and Agreement on Coastal Shipping between BIMSTEC member countries has been inked. Under this the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement (draft discussed on December 1, 2017) aims to facilitate coastal shipping within 20 nautical miles of the coastline in the region to boost trade between the member countries while the Unified Motor Vehicle Act (MVA) aims to provide easier and smoother movement of goods and vehicles between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, was inked in 2015. The work on establishing mechanisms and procedures for acceptance of custom transit documents, coordination between border authorities and physical clearance of goods remains to be addressed and is being developed while the BIMSTEC Agreement on Mutual Assistance on Customs Matters has been signed.

In order for one member nation to use surplus from by another member, due to different time zones, and hence enhance energy cooperation, a memorandum of understanding to develop a Master Plan for the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection<sup>57</sup> was signed during the 4th BIMSTEC Summit.<sup>58</sup> The project aims to create a sub-regional power grid by connecting the Northeast to Muzaffarnagar via Bangladesh.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, petroleum product pipeline from Numaligarh refinery (Assam, India)

to Parbatipur (Bangladesh),<sup>60</sup> and a three-nation gas pipeline project between Myanmar, Bangladesh and India, that was aborted in the mid-'90s, are being studied for revival.<sup>61</sup>

To ensure availability of technology and safe transfer of technology for development, the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility (TTF) is being established and is in the final stages. Furthermore, an IT corridor to share the excess internet bandwidth available with Bangladesh has been created. In doing so, Tripura in India is connected to Cox's Bazaar through Akhaura, both in Bangladesh, for the internet.<sup>62</sup>

Tourism that has a huge potential in this region and can attract tourists from both within and beyond the region has also been given priority. With this in mind, a BIMSTEC Tourism Information Centre has been established in New Delhi, India. Furthermore, the Network of Tour Operators and a common marketing strategy to promote tourism are being developed.<sup>63</sup>

To focus on sharing of cultures, various events such as film festivals and a festival of Buddhist Heritage have been organized.

To advance cooperation in the Fisheries sector, a draft concept paper on cooperation in combating IUU fishing, joint activities in fisheries, combating climate change effects to fisheries, research in inland/coastal aquaculture and capacity building is under consideration. Additionally, many collaborative activities have also been conducted.

Intensified cooperative efforts to increase agricultural productivity and to encourage sustainable agriculture and food security have been conducted, along with workshops.

To fight the effects of climate change and to enhance cooperation in the field of Environment and Natural Disaster Management, the BIMSTEC Centre on Weather and Climate has been established in India. In addition, a Concept Paper has been drafted to establish a framework of cooperation on climate change at a sub-regional level.

To ensure public health through traditional medicine, the BIMSTEC Task Force on Traditional Medicine has been set up. Priority Areas for Technical and Research Collaboration in Traditional Medicine are under consideration by the Member States. Similarly, the Protection of Genetic Resources and Intellectual Property Rights are under consideration.

In order to combat terrorism and transnational crimes, concrete measures have been undertaken to step up cooperation and coordination among law enforcement, intelligence and security organizations against non-traditional threats. In addition, BIMSTEC security agencies have begun to cooperate and combat transnational security threats. To create a more conducive atmosphere of trust, the land boundary issues between India and Bangladesh and the maritime boundary issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar have been resolved.

To encourage people-to-people contact, a Networks of Policy Think Tank (BNPTT) has been established as a Track-II BIMSTEC initiative with RIS so as to foster and enhance cooperation and interactions among the Member States.<sup>64</sup>

## V. BIMSTEC as a Bridge

In a world that is developing fast, no one nation can have all the resources, both natural and man-made, at its disposal for the well-being of its people. This has caused the world to realize the importance of regional and sub-regional groupings for developing synergy, stability, growth and socio-economic development of the nations. It is with this realization that Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand joined hands to form BIST-EC. With another three more geographically collocated countries joining the grouping, BIMSTEC, as we know it today was formed. Now that the grouping has been formalized, it is essential that this grouping is nurtured enough to keep it alive and kicking, or it would experience a death due to dysfunction. In order to evaluate if BIMSTEC can be the required bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia let us look at the grouping more closely.

### *An Analysis*

The greatest advantage of this grouping is “geographical contiguity” and “economic complementarities” of the member states that have similar problems and people who think and work alike making understanding better and making the grouping a union of like-minded people with the same set of issues. However, this grouping has remained a mere “talk shop” in the 23 years of its existence with very little to showcase as its achievements. Though the lack of achievement can be attributed to lack of political will, one needs to realize that BIMSTEC is not just another sub-regional grouping but represents an already existing and a much larger recognized identity—the Bay of Bengal—that has existed even before humanity set foot on Earth.

Due to the commonality of issues, the grouping has identified 14 sectors and has assigned each sector to a member state as the “lead country.” Since some countries are handling multiple sectors, it is felt that the focus for spearheading multiple sectors is disallowing the adequate addressing of a single sector itself. Though all the sectors identified are critical for the region, it is essential that BIMSTEC identifies some core sectors as priority areas to be addressed first and allow the remaining to be addressed over the years. Some core sectors that need to be addressed before others are *trade, investment, connectivity* and *energy*. However, care needs to be taken that the focus from the other sectors is not diluted. Sectors such as education and tourism, that are essential but not critical, to begin with, can continue to progress in tandem but not at the expense of the core sectors. It is hence essential that BIMSTEC finalize and implement socio-economic development projects that are more critical to member states and implement them. Since funding will remain an issue, a separate bank or a PPP model to address such a development may be considered as an option.

Another area of concern in this region is security against both traditional and non-traditional threats including terrorism and climate change.

Individually, all member states have been handling the threat of terrorism

through their domestic laws. To address cross border terrorists, several bilateral treaties have been put into place and joint military exercises by the Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard between countries such as Surya Kiran (between India and Nepal), Mitra Shakti (between India and Sri Lanka) and many more are conducted regularly. The need of the hour is to move from bilateral to joint exercises involving all the members of BIMSTEC and share real-time intelligence of all the three domains to ensure a safe Bay of Bengal. In this regard, the creation of the International Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC–IOR) at Gurugram, India, is considered a positive step to address maritime issues.

On the threat of climate change, it is a well-known fact that this region is possibly the worst-hit region due to drought, floods, sea-level rise, and increasing temperature leading to ice melts, forest fires, hurricanes, storms and climate shift, thereby affecting human health, biodiversity, water, food, economy, infrastructure and holistic and maritime security of the countries of the region. It is essential that BIMSTEC as an organization create joint studies and implement them to create adaptive and resilience mechanisms for the people of this region for disaster preparedness due to climate change. In this regard, a think-tank under the aegis of BIMSTEC itself should be established which could provide scholarly research writings on adaptive and resilience mechanisms against climate change relevant to this region and for other programs of BIMSTEC.

While in some priority sectors work needs to be done from scratch, there are many sectors wherein the cobwebs of time need to be removed to establish the once prevailing systems. Sectors such as information technology, customs, and renewable energy may need to be established from scratch, while others such as road and rail links need to be revitalized to their earlier glory with repairs at some places and reconstruction at others. It is pertinent to mention that each member nation has a center of excellence in one or more fields. Some of these are: India in renewable energy, Bangladesh in cyclone preparedness, Thailand in IUU fishing, the last mile connectivity of tsunami early warning system of Thailand for improved preparedness in coastal areas, to name a few. By tapping into this expertise, the entire region can benefit substantially.

In doing all this, it is essential to keep BIMSTEC outside the political arena. The basic thrust of BIMSTEC should be the development of the region with ample opportunity for discussion to avoid mistrust and differences. Political concerns of nations with other nations must be kept out of the gambit of BIMSTEC as is done by ASEAN to keep it apolitical.

In trying to achieve these goals, BIMSTEC should strive to become a thriving partnership among governments, business and industry, civil society, other stakeholders and people working together for ensuring security, preserving peace and expanding the reach and impact of development. Furthermore, there is a need to look not only at the development of hard connectivity (transportation and industrial corridors) but also soft connectivity such as skill development, person-to-person connections and building technological capacity.

## *Route to Chart*

BIMSTEC as a sub-regional grouping has been a slow starter. After inception it was planned that summits would be held every alternate year, ministerial meetings every year and senior officials' meetings biannually. However, in the last two decades, only four summits have happened with no ministerial meetings and the senior officials' meeting postponed seven times.

With changing geopolitics in the Bay of Bengal resulting in increasing traditional and non-traditional threats including those due to climate change, nations here find themselves creating bilateral and multilateral groupings thereby garnering greater world attention for the Bay of Bengal. With an Indian foreign policy focusing on "Look East" (1991), modified as "Act East" (November 2014); that of Bangladesh focusing on "Look East" (2002); that of Myanmar focusing on "Look West" (1996); a failing SAARC due to strained relations between India and Pakistan; and with BIMSTEC having a mix of nations of both South Asia and Southeast Asia, BIMSTEC has started to emerge as a possible solution for the countries of the Bay of Bengal. Such a sub-regional grouping can eventually help bridge these two long-lost blocs that would provide the necessary security and socio-economic growth and allow the realization of the re-emergence of the Bay of Bengal to its original glory. However, in order to achieve this, the following are considered essential:

(a) *Creating greater trust.* There is an increasing necessity to create trust among the member nations. Mistrust restricts trade and connectivity, both of which are essential for greater socio-economic development. A visa on arrival for citizens of BIMSTEC could be an option, to begin with, before a more open visa such as a Schengen visa is evolved.

(b) *Creating greater connectivity.* There is an increasing requirement of air, land, sea and telecommunication connectivity between the nations of this region to ensure the creation of trust and to encourage the seamless spread of trade and religion.

(c) *Creating a better environment for Free Trade Agreements.* FTAs, if used irresponsibly, can create a negative economy and decimate the economy and industries of a host nation. It is essential that, to ensure better trade and socio-economic development of the countries of the region, the right environment for FTA through transparency, intra-regional investments, addressing tariff and non-tariff barriers, transportation, supply capabilities and information gaps as a minimum to encourage FTA and allow free trade are developed.

(d) *Big brother approach.* Though India is a big brother in the region and most of the initiatives of BIMSTEC can be manipulated to be India-centric, India as a member nation of BIMSTEC needs to be wary that such an approach may create mistrust and may be counter-productive. It is essential that India adopts an approach of "growth for all." Such an approach would allow BIMSTEC to realize its goal of socio-economic development and act as a bridge for the region.

(e) *Developing infrastructure.* Nations of this region require funds for developing their infrastructure. For this, they should try and tap the resources of the

ADB, the development partner of BIMSTEC, rather than on a bilateral basis. Such an approach will permit the nation to avoid a condition like debt diplomacy while ensuring that their requirement of infrastructure development goals are achieved.

(f) *Need for coordination.* In order to ensure that different groupings, but with common member states work on the same goals, coordination between these groupings is essential. A strong secretariat of BIMSTEC may help provide this coordination. This can be achieved by providing the secretariat with the requisite manpower and autonomy needed to function.

(g) *Need for guidance.* There is an urgent need for guidance in BIMSTEC. With a strong secretariat, this guidance can be ensured to speak to each other and drive the grouping to its desired goals.

(h) *Minimize the involvement of China in the region.* Though such minimization may not be feasible, nations of the region need to see beyond their own interest and try and create options for cooperation within themselves and allow extra-regional powers to get a foothold only when essential.

(j) *Competition between India and China.* Competition between the two major powers is natural. However, in order to shape the future of the Bay of Bengal, it is essential that India revisits the terms of engagement to pursue cooperation where it can and competition where it must.

(k) *Creating a common interest.* Since no two countries may have a common agenda for growth it is essential to evolve common interest areas that will help regional development.

(l) *Create a greater image.* Currently, BIMSTEC lacks a media image. For an organization to gain greater traction through public awareness in society, it needs to be a household name. Such an image needs to be created for BIMSTEC.

(m) *Lack of closure of projects.* Though BIMSTEC has done some good work over the years, the projects that have not been closed in full give the organization a negative image of sorts. It is essential that the projects once completed are closed, allowing the grouping to focus on more economically feasible and result-driven projects.

(n) *Working as one.* Currently, BIMSTEC is working with national goals in mind with each nation looking to achieve their own goals rather than the overall prosperity of the region. It is necessary to remember that if the region prospers, the nations in the region would prosper automatically. It is hence essential that the member nations build synergies so as to utilize available resources in an optimal manner and allow the achieving of the greater goal for the region.

(p) *Key checkpoints.* While progressing with development, security and political stability; the impact of development on macroeconomic policies; increasing market access and capacity building; supporting governance to maintain financial stability; and improving aid effectiveness need to be monitored as key checkpoints.

(q) *Funding.* In order to ensure smooth and regular functioning of the secretariat, member nations need to boost funding for the secretariat's budget. This funding is considered essential in order to invest in outreach and agenda-setting initiatives.<sup>65</sup>

(r) *Sustainability*. Development and pollution have become synonymous in recent years. If BIMSTEC is to help the Bay of Bengal re-emerge, it needs to set standards in achieving growth and development sustainably to ensure that the environment is protected and the negative impacts of climate change do not end up destroying the region.

(s) *Making the grouping stronger*. Indonesia is geographically at the fringes of the Bay of Bengal and enjoys a strong position in ASEAN. Inviting Indonesia to join BIMSTEC would make the grouping stronger.

## VI. Conclusion

The Bay of Bengal has remained fractured due to fear of re-colonization, lack of trust, historical baggage or simply inward-orientation. It is time that these fractured elements are put together and allowed to heal as a single entity, as it was a decade ago. One such effort is the realization of the Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as an engine for socio-economic development in this region. Though BIMSTEC has maintained a low profile for the last 23 years, it is time that this organization becomes a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia and helps the Bay of Bengal to re-emerge to its original glory of yesteryears.

In order to allow this to happen, the member states have to allow bilateralism to develop into multilateralism. Currently, while there are 14 priority sectors for BIMSTEC, each led by a member nation, it is essential that to give impetus to the socio-development of this region, the focus should be more on trade, investment, connectivity and energy as the main sectors while progress on the other sectors continue at a lower priority. When all this is achieved, and since BIMSTEC is not a grouping but a defined region of the Bay of Bengal, success of BIMSTEC would directly mean the re-emergence of the Bay of Bengal. With the strong political will being displayed by the member states toward the success of BIMSTEC, it is only a matter of time that the re-emergence of the Bay of Bengal will become a reality.

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## Biographical Statement

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