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Niloy Ranjan Biswas



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Article

Bangladesh beyond Borders: Its Trans-Regional Experience in BIMSTEC

Niloy Ranjan Biswas

Abstract

Bangladesh has been a pioneer in promoting regional cooperation in South Asia. It has been an active partner of various regional, sub-regional and inter/trans-regional initiatives. During the Cold War period, these regional initiatives started as an alternative to power politics and regional tensions. However, in the twenty-first century, it is not yet clear whether regional cooperation can accelerate growth for all member states in an even manner. This article examines Bangladesh's perspective and participation in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation (BIMSTEC) in order to understand the progress of a trans-regional approach in promoting peace, prosperity and security. It argues that Bangladesh's participation in BIMSTEC is a conscious choice to accelerate its growth and development through a comprehensive approach of connectivity.

Introduction

I reiterate our government's total commitment to the BIMSTEC. It has the potential to move us all to our common goals.

[Bangladesh] will work closely in furthering relevant regional/sub-regional cooperation processes; empowering BIMSTEC would appear to be a step in this direction.

-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina¹

Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has on multiple occasions reiterated her commitment to promote trans-regional cooperation beyond traditional patterns of regional integration. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic

Niloy Ranjan Biswas, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

Co-operation (BIMSTEC), a unique trans-regional platform that links South and Southeast Asia, is currently the cornerstone of Bangladesh's regional diplomacy with a broader scope and a transformed vision of integration. Since the late 1990s, Bangladesh has widened its participation in various regional initiatives. India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan have moved beyond state-led regional institutions and accommodated new approaches to regionalism, such as sub-regionalism, inter-regionalism and so forth. Bangladesh has been an active and constructive player in these initiatives. BIMSTEC is an evolving platform for regional integration, which aims to capture both conventional (state-led) and pragmatic (inclusive of non-state stakeholder) approaches. Bangladesh is a founding member and a pro-active contributor to this process. With this backdrop, it is vital to examine whether and how Bangladesh has been able to facilitate cooperation among countries of South and Southeast Asia through BIMSTEC.

This article discusses both physical as well as people-to-people (beyond-the-state) contacts within BIMSTEC in order to understand how Bangladesh has contributed to the progress of regionalism, but also examine BIMSTEC's effect in reshaping Bangladesh's view of regional cooperation. It explores two conceptual thoughts: borderlands and connectivity—to examine how Bangladesh has been steering its relations within and beyond the region, with a specific focus on BIMSTEC. The research undertakes a qualitative approach by synthesizing both primary and secondary documents—arguments and deliberations of policymakers and scholars on the subject matter. It argues that BIMSTEC has progressed towards a non-traditional regional approach to generate greater opportunities for its member countries. It has further been able to gradually institutionalize itself in the past two decades. Bangladesh has played a constructive role in building BIMSTEC-centered cooperation. Nevertheless, collective success of the institution depends on how connectivity is translated and implemented so that no one is left behind from the networks of cooperation. Bangladesh, given its potential and location, is perhaps well-placed to stimulate processes of trans-regionalism linking South and Southeast Asia. However, one always needs to keep a careful gaze on political and other developments occurring in the region and beyond.

States, Borders and Regions—Unpacking a Critical Relationship

The relationship between states and a region is much more than just an effort to build a platform. A commentator has rightly pointed that “one [idea] cannot be attained without the other [effort]” to understand how and whether or not states reflect features of a region—political or geographical.² It is often assumed that regional integration projects evenly demonstrate a collective feature of states. States, however, join regional

organizations for various reasons. Membership of regional organizations demonstrate states' diplomatic orientation, and how they would like to manage their natural resources, foster trade relations, promote democracy and good governance, and maintain peace beyond the state.³ Regional organizations are based on geography-- more precisely, border-based formation of states. Two flagship regional organizations—South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—represent South and Southeast Asia respectively with a fixed number of states and defined borders. Such regional integration initiatives aim to promote the welfare of citizens of the member states, accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region, and promote collaboration and mutual assistance in economic, social, cultural and technological domains. State-based regional organizations are confined by conventional ideas of borders. Such state-centric approaches of integration are often considered responsible for creating more roadblocks and resistance to cooperation.

Borders demarcate geographical scope of a state, and hence, it defines and delimits state power and sovereignty.⁴ Borders and boundaries are often holding a constructed image of hard and enclosing frontiers, and thus, borders become a “bastion of orthodox military thinking”.⁵ Nevertheless, borders are not always linear and sacrosanct lines of demarcation -- some of them are porous.⁶ On the other hand scholars define borderlands as geographical places along with the lines of demarcation or borders. Social, economic and political governance in borderlands are often quite different as they are closer to the neighbouring country than from the central power structure of its own country.⁷ The idea of borderland offers a ‘spatial variance’ in International Relations; it may also in a different way explain regional integration. How does it do so?

Regional integration, which is often based on ideas of conventional border, may be confined by a conservative explanation of formal processes of cooperation—such as government-led and state-promoted areas of cooperation. This may ignore dynamics of borderlands—cross-border interactions and other human aspects of cross-border : integration. Mahendra P. Lama has discussed border-led regional integration in the context of South Asia and observed: “This gradually injected the framework of competitive rivalry in any regional activity in South Asia and took away the time tasted cooperative–integrative practices. This very treatment of border actually remains at the heart of poor trust and confidence in South Asia region.”⁸ Regions and sub-regions in Asia are full of asymmetries. Therefore, complex border management practices often do not limit themselves to state-led practices. The idea of borderland invokes cooperation beyond statist framework and covers both state and non-state actors. Asymmetries are well-addressed in borderland governance and cooperation led by both statist and non-statist features.⁹ Borderland

governance, in recent times, has covered wide spectrum of connectivity —economic, social and political. It further promotes local integration within broader inter-national integration in the context of regional integration. Therefore, in borderland-based regional integration physical borders become secondary. Lama, furthermore, suggests that borderland ideas may transform various asymmetries into opportunities which may lead to resolutions of political and economic crisis among countries and communities.¹⁰ It is important to note that conventional regional cooperation in Asia has largely been dominated by ideas of borders and states. It not only shapes features of regionalism but also limits the scope of alternative practices and hinders progress led by borderland dynamics. SAARC and ASEAN are examples of border-based regional cooperation in Asia. Can Asian practices of regional cooperation demonstrate borderland-based alternative approaches?

Sub-regionalism can be discussed in this regard. In December 1996, Nepal pitched an idea to form a South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India in the Ganga–Brahmaputra–Meghna (GBM) sub-region. The idea was to facilitate cooperation in GBM borderlands along with the coastlines of Bay of Bengal to promote connectivity among socio-economically volatile and vulnerable communities of these countries. Four countries endorsed the idea as it aimed to overcome challenges of asymmetry in state-based regionalism. It was not appreciated by Pakistan which saw it as Indian 'proxy' to dysfunction SAARC.¹¹ Furthermore, these four states started a new sub-regional initiative—Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA). The MVA aims to regulate passengers, personnel and cargo vehicular traffic to accelerate economic and social developments.¹² Similarly, India initiated talks with Myanmar and Thailand to develop a framework for motor vehicle agreement. The idea was to promote connectivity across South and Southeast Asia.¹³ Simultaneously, non-state think-tanks, such as Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD, Bangladesh) and Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (Kunming, China) proposed the idea of a Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM) and the concerned states have acknowledged the significance of such a sub-regional integration model.¹⁴ Major objectives of the BCIM are to strengthen physical connectivity within the states which will have trickle down impact on the societies of borderland communities.

Where does BIMSTEC position itself in this complex relationship of state, border and regionalism? One may argue that BIMSTEC is another state-led initiative across the sub-regions of South and Southeast Asia. Myanmar, by joining ASEAN in 1997, has constructed a common border between ASEAN and SAARC countries. Furthermore, countries, such as India and Bangladesh accelerated their east-ward diplomacy—"Look East Policy". Myanmar and India received observer status in SAARC and ASEAN respectively.

BIMSTEC is often identified as a sub-regional cooperation.¹⁵ Others have classified this as a trans-regional organization, because it involves selected members from both ASEAN and SAARC.¹⁶ One study calls BIMSTEC a trans-South Asian regional organization.¹⁷ BIMSTEC dates back to 1997 and it has facilitated cooperation among borderlands of the Bay of Bengal. This region possessed maritime ties that thrived in the period 900-1500 CE and experienced trade and cultural exchanges among the coastal countries.¹⁸ The Bay of Bengal has a historical legacy in connecting communities, spreading cultures, civilizations, and faiths in countries along its shores and the neighbouring areas.¹⁹ Therefore, BIMSTEC member countries share history and values which cannot only be measured by state-centric means of integration. It may quite significantly be understood through its people-to-people connections. Bangladesh, as a member country of BIMSTEC, has been a part of transformation from border-centric understanding of regional connectivity to an emphasis on borderlands in reconnecting its socio-economic and cultural heritage. The following sections unfold a brief history of BIMSTEC and discuss Bangladesh's partnership in the growth of trans-regional connectivity through BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC: Evolution of Trans-regional Integration in Asia

In Bangladesh, BIMSTEC is often perceived as an alternative way-out from South Asian statist paradigms of regionalism. On the other hand, this may also be a reflection of Bangladesh's 'look east' policy, which emphasises regional connectivity beyond South Asian borders. Reaching out to the economic, geographic and socio-cultural alliance among the South Asian and Southeast Asian neighbors, BIMSTEC subsequently favoured the furtherance of newer networks -- somewhat parallel as well as contrasting to the SAARC centric idea of South Asian regional multilateralism.²⁰

The idea of BIMSTEC came in 1994 from Thailand which was interested in the establishment of an Economic Cooperation Group incorporating the countries on the rimland of Bay of Bengal. The primary sub-regional structure of the organization was formulated on June 6, 1997 and included Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. They formed the loose commercial coalition BIST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation). Myanmar's inclusion on December 22, 1997 led to a change in the name to BIMST-EC followed by the acronym BIMSTEC at the first summit of the organization on July 31, 2004. BIMSTEC focused on trade and investment, technology, transport and communication, energy, tourism, and fisheries. BIMSTEC accounts for US\$4 trillion of global economy and intra-regional trade among its members rose to "USD 83.9 billion in 2017 up from USD 72 billion in 2016, the trade figure within the region is still low, only around 5% compared to other regional organizations".²¹ Member states also signed a Free

Trade Area Framework Agreement (BFTAFA) in 2004.²² The FTA is not yet functional and till today BIMSTEC does not have free mobility of resources, such as capital, technology and man power.

In 2004, Nepal and Bhutan were incorporated into BIMSTEC and the first summit of BIMSTEC took place on July 31 of the same year. The primary goal of the organization has been defined as the advancement of technological and economic cooperation among the member states. The transformation of Indian 'Look East' policy to a more robust 'Act East' policy added a sheer momentum for the association to continue its trajectory.²³ In other words, the absence of Pakistan has created a conducive environment for executing smooth and less competitive latitude for the bigger brother of the region adhering to its material superiority, political anecdotes as well as intra and inter-regional influence.²⁴ In its first summit, six pivotal areas of interaction were selected for the organization: trade and investment, transport and communication, energy, tourism, technology and fisheries. In 2005, seven more sectors were added: agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counterterrorism and transnational crime, environment and disaster management, people-to-people contact as well as cultural cooperation. This was followed by the inclusion of climate change in 2008.

At the 2nd BIMSTEC summit meeting on November 13, 2008 in New Delhi, proper utilization of natural and human resources for economic development was the focus. The summit acknowledged the abundance of resources in the region and committed to expand active collaboration in socio-economic, scientific and technical fields.²⁵ Impacts of climate change, trans-boundary terrorism and the jeopardies affecting the price of food and fuel were also considered. Establishment of BIMSTEC Weather and Climate Centre in India; BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission and BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory in Bhutan; proclamation for BIMSTEC Convention on Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking as well as negotiations on general and specific rules for the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area marked some positive annotation for the summit.

The 3rd summit took place in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, on March 4, 2014. Along with trade and connectivity, the congregational dialogue gave eminence to climate change, terrorism, food and energy security as well. The summit also gave birth to a permanent secretariat for the organization in Dhaka, Bangladesh. On the other hand, Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) were initiated for the installation of the previously mentioned cultural centre and the Centre for Weather and Climate Change. On the other hand, it adopted resolutions on the enhancement of cooperation in agriculture, promotion of

regional economy, negotiating the foundation of the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility, and protecting environment while promoting sustainable development in the region. Special consideration for the least development member states was something that was agreed to temper the challenges they face in the global economy.

The 4th and the very recent summit in Kathmandu, Nepal was held on August 30-31, 2018. While general issues were still on the table, poverty alleviation, tourism and different security challenges were also being discussed.²⁶ In view of the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations (UN), alleviation of poverty became a key objective to be achieved by 2030. Reiterating the key theme *Towards a Peaceful, Prosperous and Sustainable Bay of Bengal Region*, the intergovernmental assembly endorsed the expansion of technological and economic activities in the region. The parties also agreed to establish a better and stronger platform for regional capacity building by strengthening the secretariat. Moreover, another MoU was signed for the foundation of BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection. The 5th summit of the organization will be held in Sri Lanka in 2022.

Starting from a very specific geo-economic dimension, BIMSTEC has gradually developed its agenda, resolutions, operating mechanism, scope and institutional framework. It demonstrates an institutional shape that is not entirely dominated by a statist framework of integration. One would rather suggest that BIMSTEC demonstrates civilizational chronicles, geostrategic value of the region, the flexibility in the mandates and a probability of greater future cooperation. These have contributed to the tenacious mileage of the organization and is promising from myriad of perspectives.

Bangladesh in BIMSTEC: A Sector-wide Analysis

We are committed to pursuing all means of domestic, bilateral, regional and international cooperation in transforming Bangladesh to a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed one by 2041.

- Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina²⁷

Bangladesh, the eighth most populous country in the world, has been unfettered from a 'small state' image. It progressed from being a Least Developed Country (LDC) to a lower middle-income country in 2015. The country has made considerable progress in various economic indicators, such as: per capita income, education, neo-natal health, infant mortality, healthcare, and women empowerment. Moreover, poverty declined from 44.2 percent in 1991 to 13.8 percent in 2017 in Bangladesh.²⁸ The leading financial institutions of the world highlighted its future economic growth potential. For example, Goldman Sachs included Bangladesh in the next 11 emerging countries and JP Morgan features

Bangladesh among its 'Frontier Five' emerging economies.²⁹ Textile and apparel exports are thriving as it accounts for 12 per cent of GDP and around 83 per cent of total exports from Bangladesh.³⁰ There is an upsurge of private sector and the government encourages small and big investments from within and abroad in economic zones. Bangladesh, in its seventh Five Year Plan (FYP, 2016-2020), presented detailed strategies that require more investments in business and entrepreneurial abilities of youth. In order to achieve the targets of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and FYP, Bangladesh has accelerated its trans-boundary cooperation with neighboring states and other significant trading partners. Regional cooperation has always been an important sector for Bangladesh. Bangladesh has promoted SAARC, BIMSTEC and other sub-regional initiatives since their inception. How has Bangladesh-BIMSTEC partnership evolved so far as of now? A sector-wide analysis will aid to unearth Bangladesh's role in BIMSTEC.

Trade and Investment

Bangladesh and other BIMSTEC member countries have been struggling to improve their intra-region trade relations. As of now, India and Thailand contribute almost 12 per cent to Bangladesh's foreign trade.³¹ India accounts for 10 percent, the largest share of all among BIMSTEC members. This is above the average intra-BIMSTEC trade which is nearly six percent.³² Some of the important products exchanged between India and Bangladesh are jute, edible fruits and nuts, yarn, woven fabrics, cotton, cereals, coffee, tea and other agro commodities. Bangladesh runs a trade deficit with India and Thailand. With only six percent intra-BIMSTEC trade the region is not at par with intra-ASEAN or intra-EU trade volume. Even increment of the products for exports by all member countries may not be able to cure the situation. BIMSTEC has also not yet been able to create concrete opportunities for trade deficit countries to improve their situation.

Poverty mitigation is an area in which Bangladesh has recorded significant success in recent decades. Its success is acknowledged in the Kathmandu Declaration and BIMSTEC Poverty Plan of Action (PPA).³³ However, BIMSTEC has not yet invested enough in carrying out research to provide useful guidance and inputs to policymakers and practitioners on joint effort to alleviate poverty in member states. Trade cooperation must address poverty alleviation as one of the major objectives. Bangladesh has promoted trade cooperation targeting poverty alleviation and a platform to graduate from LDC to a developing country. Bangladesh has also advocated for restructuring barriers to trade and structural differences of the economies. It has made attempts to reduce trade cost through better connectivity mechanism. It has also expedited trade facilitation measures through diversifying the investment sectors from heavy to soft and service industries.³⁴ Bangladesh promotes

strengthening of regional value chain as per its Sixth Five-Year Plan. BIMSTEC, however, has not yet been successful in its attempt to reduce trade costs among its member countries.

Bangladesh has been attracting foreign direct investments (FDIs) in order to facilitate growth and economic development. This is also in compliance with BIMSTEC cooperation framework on trade and investment. A Gateway House data shows that in South Asia, China invested the second highest amount in Bangladesh, preceded only by its investments in Pakistan. It has promised to invest US\$ 31 billion on various infrastructure projects, such as roads, railways, and thermal power plants in Bangladesh.³⁵ It is currently developing a power plant and port in Payra. In addition, Japan's International Cooperation Agency has offered a loan of 200 million yen to Dhaka to fund mega infrastructural projects. Matarbari deep sea port and Dhaka urban transport facilities are among many of these projects.³⁶ Bangladesh needs FDI flows for its economic growth and offers investment opportunities for other BIMSTEC countries. As an emerging economy, Bangladesh has relaxed its foreign investment norms in various sectors. It would like to boost intra-regional trade in non-conventional sectors—such as banking and financial institutions to facilitate innovative trade credit arrangements-- with their counterparts in other BIMSTEC countries. It is unfortunate, from Dhaka's perspective, that the BIMSTEC has not been able reach a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) so far. Negotiations for a BIMSTEC FTA have been dragging on for the last 15 years.³⁷ Nevertheless, countries in BIMSTEC have continued their trade cooperation bypassing the FTA impasse. Bangladesh advocates a comprehensive and coordinated regional integration process built on comparative advantage in trade and investment. BIMSTEC nations need to explore business opportunities in many new areas such as entertainment and cultural services, education and healthcare services, among others.

Connectivity Programmes

Connectivity in the twenty-first century has a wider meaning and it is not just confined to physical connectivity. BIMSTEC promotes both conventional (state-to-state) and non-conventional (people-to-people and cultural) connectivity, though its primary focus is on infrastructural connectivity. Experts have argued that the BIMSTEC regional integration process is deeply affected by lack of proper inter-connectivity, which is inadequate to serve the purpose of growth, trade and development. Bangladesh is one of the fast-growing economies and it requires state-of-the art connectivity to foster greater growth and enabling conditions for people to overcome poverty. The BIMSTEC has set up a working group on connectivity—BIMSTEC Transport and Connectivity Working Group (BTCWG)—to promote multi-modal physical connectivity, such as roads, rail, air, and

waterways within the region.³⁸ This working group has put its efforts behind finalizing a Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA), Coastal Shipping Agreement and a BIMSTEC Master Plan for Connectivity. The master plan considers “14 road corridors, 4 rail corridors, 2 inland waterway corridors, 11 maritime gateways and 15 aviation gateways”.³⁹ Some of these routes may overlap with the Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) routes. This also underlines the need for coordination between some parallel connectivity programmes.

Bangladesh has been pursuing regional connectivity through more than one initiatives. For example, Bangladesh has been actively participating in: (a) The Asian Highway project with the UN-ESCAPE (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Far East), (b) the think-tank-led Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM)-Economic Corridor proposal, and (c) Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicle Agreement. Bangladesh, under these initiatives, has committed to promote a seamless land-based connectivity with emerging economies of Asia. This is to integrate global production network so that it accelerates and sustains Bangladesh’s prosperity and economic growth. Bangladesh’s policy to enhance cooperation with East Asian countries is also a critical objective in this regard. Bangladesh understands the need to enhance its connectivity with Myanmar and Thailand so that these two countries help in opening the gateways to the ASEAN market.

Bangladesh-India transport connectivity is crucial in this context. Tripura, like other north-eastern states of India, has strong trade connectivity with Bangladesh. Inland border ports are critical for exchange of goods and services from and to Bangladesh. Rebuilding inland ports, such as: Akhaura in Tripura-Bangladesh border is a dire need.⁴⁰ Connectivity needs to focus on sophisticated facilities in trade hotspots, inland ports, and quarantine and testing facilities for food items, etc. These issues have somehow been overlooked by BIMSTEC. They need to be pondered on as part of a comprehensive connectivity project under both bilateral and BIMSTEC programmes. ‘Connectography’ is the buzzword now. It goes beyond the idea of geographical connectivity to promote regional integration.⁴¹ It is not limited to water and land-based transport. Aviation connectivity and virtual (internet) connectivity both play important roles. Bangladesh suffers from a shortfall in infrastructure in aviation industry. It requires larger international airports with more carrying capacity for goods and passengers. Regional assistance through BIMSTEC is not quite adequate in this sector.

Energy

Rapid growth in power generation and consumption is critical for Bangladesh to achieve its target GDP growth 7.4 percent per year between 2016 and 2020, as mentioned

in its 7th Five-Year Plan.⁴² The Power System Master Plan (PSMP 2016) highlights that Bangladesh requires the development of new export-oriented industries and a significant increase in power generation capacity. It must aim to produce potentially 52 GW electricity by 2041, and the consumption of power needs to be quadrupled.⁴³ This is in compliance with BIMSTEC's plan to facilitate energy access, increasing per capita consumption, increasing renewable energy share, energy efficiency initiatives and more interconnected systems across the region.⁴⁴

The total primary energy consumption in the BIMSTEC region is likely to increase from 706 Mtoe in 2014 to 1,210 Mtoe by 2030. The peak electricity demand in the BIMSTEC region is expected to grow from 175 GW in 2014 to 482 GW in 2030.⁴⁵ Bangladesh can benefit by extending cross-border power trade with neighbouring countries. Dhaka, as of now, imports surplus off-peak power from eastern India. It has helped reduce Bangladesh's reliance on oil-based power generation in the peak summer period, and also decreased Bangladesh's dependence on its limited reserves of natural gas. Bangladesh has been able to produce more and diversified its sources of energy by replacing gas/oil-based domestic generation with renewable generation during off-peak and shoulder periods. Furthermore, Bangladesh has been actively pursuing energy trade with Nepal and Bhutan in hydroelectricity which will be mutually beneficial within a broader purview of BIMSTEC.

Energy experts argue that BIMSTEC requires a strong and robust regional power transmission grid to act as energy-bridge for trans-regional integration of South East Asia/ ASEAN Power Grid with South-Asia Power Grid for power trade.⁴⁶ International agencies, such as the World Bank, also advocate a similar arrangement in the context of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has already stepped out of government to government (G2G) arrangements for power trade. More initiatives are needed and a regional power exchange would be a key element of this. A comprehensive plan is needed to ensure that the design of the exchange aligns with the rules of the market in Bangladesh and its trading partners, and product definitions (energy as well as ancillary services), market clearing mechanisms, prices and congestion management rules are compatible across markets of the region.

Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC)

BIMSTEC has evolved as an integrated platform beyond economic cooperation. It has also extended the purview of technical cooperation to include counterterrorism as a critical subject matter of regional integration. Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) was adopted as an area of cooperation in 2004 during the 1st BIMSTEC summit and since then it has made some progress. BIMSTEC has further taken some technical initiatives in this regard. A Joint Working Group (JWG) involving four sub-groups each led

by a member country -- intelligence sharing by Sri Lanka, combating financing of Terrorism by Thailand, prevention of illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and precursor chemicals by Myanmar, and legal and law enforcement issues by India. Overall, India is entrusted with the sector of counter terrorism and transnational crime. Second, a convention titled "BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking" has been adopted in 2009 which has been ratified so far by India and Bangladesh.⁴⁷

As of now, the JWG has held eight meetings. In the sixth meeting, which was held in Sri Lanka on May 7-8, 2013, member countries approved the final text of the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters. They also placed Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration on the Agenda of the 7th JWG-CTTC meeting and constituted a new Sub Group on the subject. Furthermore, the member states took initiatives to draft and negotiate a BIMSTEC Treaty on Extradition.⁴⁸

Bangladesh has been proactive in taking measures regarding CTTC and has also made tremendous progress in countering violent extremism since the 2016 Holy Artisan Bakery attack in Dhaka. It has accepted bilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation in this regard, to strengthen Bangladesh's capacity to counter terrorism and prevention of violent extremism. The Government has declared a 'zero-tolerance' policy towards terrorism. It has formed a 17-member National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention. Bangladesh's counter-terrorism laws are quite robust, such as: the Anti-Terrorism Act 2009 (2012), the Money Laundering Prevention Act 2012 and the Children Act 2013.⁴⁹ It has complied with more than fourteen UN Anti-Terrorism Conventions and Protocols, such as: the UN Convention against Transnational Crime, and the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. It has been actively pursuing counter-terrorism cooperation with international development partners.⁵⁰ Bangladesh has taken significant initiatives to strengthen its counterterrorism infrastructure and forge stronger partnerships with the BIMSTEC states.

Bangladesh hosted the Second Meeting of BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs in Dhaka on 28 March 2018 and a Joint Working Group meeting on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (JWG-CTTC) and its Sub-Groups.⁵¹ In the meeting, participants agreed to invest their collective resources to improve capacities in training, equipment, research & development, and sharing of experiences to better deal with emerging threats. In September 2018, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar in the BIMSTEC regional group participated in the first-ever joint military drills at the Aundh Military Station near Pune in Maharashtra, India.⁵² MILEX-18, the field training exercises, was aimed to enhance planning

and conduct of counter terrorist operations in semi-urban areas. The participating troops undertook serious trainings on search-and-cordon operations along with handling and neutralizing improvised explosive devices during counter-terror operations.

Climate Change

Bangladesh, like other BIMSTEC countries, is vulnerable to climate change. Extreme climate conditions, such as drought, cyclone and flood, cause regular damages to various sectors of the country. On the other hand, Bangladesh's carbon emissions are also increasing—from 68.59 megatons in 2013 to 84.55 megatons in 2017.⁵³ It recorded an increase of 23% of carbon emission within five years.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Bangladesh's low-lying topography makes it vulnerable to severe floods and cyclones. A World Bank report says, "80 percent of the population is potentially exposed to floods, earthquakes and droughts, and more than 70 percent to cyclones".⁵⁵

Bangladesh aims to cut down greenhouse gas emissions by 5 percent by 2030.⁵⁶ It has accessed advanced satellite and imaging technologies for disaster risk reduction. Bangladesh has also undertaken several adaptation and mitigation programmes, and it has created a Climate Change Trust Fund of \$400 million in line with its Comprehensive Climate Change Strategy.⁵⁷ The Trust Fund has sponsored over two hundred projects in climate-change affected areas of Bangladesh. It has adopted policies in compliance with global standards. BIMSTEC countries should create their own support mechanism to address damages caused by global warming. Bangladesh can share its disaster management experience and expects better cooperation from other technologically advanced countries within and beyond the region.

Other Sectors of Cooperation

In addition to abovementioned sectors, BIMSTEC has also extended its cooperation in various other areas, such as agriculture, public health, culture, and blue economy. Bangladesh has actively been engaged in all these sectors to promote regional integration beyond statist connectivity models.

Bangladesh's economy significantly depends on agriculture and its associated sectors. Although the share of this sector has fallen as a percentage of total GDP of the state from approximately 17.81 percent in 2007 to 13.4 percent in 2017;⁵⁸ this is still quite a significant share of Bangladesh's economy. Seven expert group meetings have taken place in BIMSTEC as of now; and in the 7th Dhaka meeting in 2019, participants observed that there exists "a lack of dedicated funds to implement the common projects and encouraged BIMSTEC Member States to consider contributing to a corpus fund that would be created

for funding common identified projects and for deepening agricultural cooperation.”⁵⁹ BIMSTEC expert groups has come up with nine (later, amended to seven) projects for agricultural cooperation. Among these, some projects focus on collaboration in research and development in rural power generation, private sector participation, collaboration between agricultural universities and research institutions.

Public health has been mentioned as one of the fourteen areas of regional cooperation among BIMSTEC members and is linked to sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the UN. Furthermore, cooperation in health also opens up opportunities for trade, investment and cooperation among member countries. India and Thailand in BIMSTEC are the hubs for medical tourism. They also set a standard in medical science for other countries. Among many, BIMSTEC promotes cooperation in telemedicine in order to provide medical care to patients in remote areas in BIMSTEC countries. Bangladesh has taken some initiatives to strengthen medical services for those who usually do not have access to health services. Bangladesh has established community clinics in rural areas to accommodate all citizens and leave nobody without health care. Nevertheless, it is not yet self-sufficient in offering state-of-the-art treatment for challenging diseases. BIMSTEC must advocate more cooperation to address weaknesses in the health sectors in relatively less equipped member states.

Cultural cooperation, after the 2014 Goa BIMSTEC outreach summit, has received greater attention as a critical component of connectivity. The Indian Premier has particularly emphasized how cultural connectivity is important between the member states in saying, “I believe that the biggest opportunity is connectivity—trade connectivity, economic connectivity, transport connectivity, digital connectivity, and people-to-people connectivity.”⁶⁰ In this regard, the memorandum of understanding for founding the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission (BCIC) and the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO) are two significant initiatives.⁶¹ Bangladesh also advocates greater cultural cooperation. Bangladesh and India bilaterally cooperate on various sectors of cultural production. Joint production of movies is one of such avenues of cooperation. Nevertheless, Bangladesh is also concerned about non-tariff barriers (NTBs), which is still an obstacle to foster cultural connectivity.

Blue economy is a vital area of cooperation for BIMSTEC states. Bangladesh, after a peaceful arbitrational resolution of its maritime boundaries with two states—India and Myanmar, has become more proactive to ensure sustainable use of its maritime resources. It is imperative for Bangladesh to use her marine resources actively to be a middle-income country. Despite the government’s commitment to invest more in this sector,

it is assumed that Bangladesh lacks capacity and resources to invest in research to exploit its marine resources. Resourceful member states of BIMSTEC may need to come forward to extend their cooperation in this regard. Moreover, foreign direct investment in marine resource industries needs to be attracted. The Government of Bangladesh may also plan to initiate public-private partnerships in enacting exhaustive rules and regulations to ensure proper use of marine resources in its blue economic zone.⁶²

The above discussion highlights some key areas of integration in the context of BIMSTEC and Bangladesh's perspective in promoting trans-regional cooperation. It is evident that BIMSTEC took some years to take an institutional shape. Moreover, BIMSTEC member countries have struggled to reach consensus on many issues over the last two decades. In parallel, it must also be noted that the seven countries of BIMSTEC have experienced a resurgence in multiple country-led and non-state initiatives and have recalibrated their approaches to facilitate regional integration. Bangladesh has established itself as a leading flag-bearer of the BIMSTEC integration process. The significance of Bangladesh's engagement reflects flexibility of the process, inclusivity of actors and a sign of borderland cooperation. There is also an interesting mixture of vertical expansion—bilateral and sub-regional cooperation-- and horizontal expansion in issues of cooperation in BIMSTEC. It is apparent that Bangladesh's regional diplomacy is highly informed by these patterns of transformation, which has inspired it to play a proactive role in BIMSTEC.

Challenges in Trans-regional Cooperation

BIMSTEC faces some institutional challenges that are generated from the formation of the organization itself. The primary challenge for BIMSTEC has been to define its preferences, position and relationship with the two other regional organizations—SAARC and ASEAN. It is important to understand that the South Asian notion of connectivity may differ from that of the regions in Southeast Asia. Most of the South Asian nations thrive in a common yet differentiated identity. Common interests are being explored, but that does not wither away the diverse interests of the countries in this trans-regional platform. This has affected institution building.

Is the India-centric nature of the organization a problem for Bangladesh and/or other members of BIMSTEC? There is some concern among a few about 'Indo-centric' institutionalization of BIMSTEC, coupled with India's disenchantment with SAARC.⁶³ India's endeavor to enhance its connections with the Southeast Asian nations is also seen as a plan to develop its less developed areas in the northeastern region.⁶⁴ The Indian approach clearly gains from the 'cordial' relationships within the BIMSTEC as against the 'strained' relations

in SAARC, mainly because of hurdles posed by Pakistan.⁶⁵ In addition, China's presence in this region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in particular, its use of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and eventually a chance of larger Chinese strategic presence in the Bay of Bengal littoral area are seen as sensitive factors by India. India's plan to expand and grow its economy depends on greater connectivity and market access. It is not different from what Bangladesh wants to achieve. One would not argue that BIMSTEC's progress may be influenced by macro issues, such as India-China relations, and Bangladesh would not be immune from that. However, for Bangladesh, it is more significant as to how it can conduct pragmatic balancing act between the powerful states to extract maximum benefits for itself.

India and Thailand as the two largest economies in BIMSTEC can do much to facilitate regional integration. On par with the expansion of BIMSTEC's domain of engagement, the question comes – *how successfully had they been carrying those wheels for the organization?* Even though the ceremonial mechanism for the establishment of a Free Trade Area was done in 2004, it hasn't yet seen the light. The BIMSTEC Trade Negotiating Committee's (TNC)'s effort to revive the negotiation for a full-fledged outcome in 2015 also failed due to the contention between India and Thailand on the question of tariff cuts.⁶⁶

Though expansion of physical and operational landscape is beneficial for all the member states, proper implementation is always a must for the organization to bear the tasks envisaged. In an official meeting at New Delhi on August 2006, member states identified specific area to be led by each of the countries: Bangladesh for trade and commerce; Nepal leading the mitigation of poverty; India's role in tourism, counterterrorism, transport and environment; technology by Sri Lanka; cultural cooperation to be led by Bhutan and so on.⁶⁷ However, this division of responsibilities seem more on the basis of intuition than strategic. On the other hand, further areas of exploration have been ignored. For example, Thailand's enormous potential in the agricultural sector and its role in public health could have facilitated robust and practical cooperation in these sectors. ⁶⁸ Some scholars have also mentioned the necessity to expand the scope for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in Bangladesh and creating opportunities for extra regional actors like Japan and China.⁶⁹ While such an argument clearly mixes up the bilateral initiatives with the regional arrangements being worked out, it draws attention to the need to discuss ways to facilitate smoother capital movements within BIMSTEC. Bangladesh is, in fact, already working hard to accelerate the role of FDI in its economy, while a regional plan to facilitate intra-region FDI flows have not yet been fully exploited in BIMSTEC. Hence, while it is important to demarcate the probable aptitude that the countries can offer, it is also necessary to come up with priority upon specific areas first. The question remains whose priority will be

considered in preparing regional economic and development plans.

Envisaging BIMSTEC as an alternative to another form of regional institutionalism may not be useful for Bangladesh. The Nepalese ambassador to India Nilambar Acharya in an interview has opined that BIMSTEC should never be counted as a substitution to SAARC. He emphasises the latter's legacy of uplifting the South Asian cultural identity, diversity and historical legacy as important and BIMSTEC cannot replace SAARC as an institution.⁷⁰ Bangladeshi High Commissioner to India Syed Muazzem Ali also opined the need for BIMSTEC's to initialize its own version of stratified objectives: particularly, to develop BIMSTEC Development Goals (BDG),⁷¹ and the importance of strengthening the secretariat with a defined visions of trans-regional cooperation.⁷²

In summary, BIMSTEC's primary challenges emerge from its inadequacy in developing operational and legal codes and priorities in its multifarious realms of engagement. It has so far worked more on committees and conventions, and not sufficiently on monitoring and evaluating action plans. Addressing the primary objectives of BIMSTEC while associating them with common and contemporary realities of the diversified member states can ensure a perceptive outcome—as an institution and also as a promising blueprint for a new age regional integration.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion in this paper highlights four areas why and how BIMSTEC as an avenue for trans-regional cooperation has become imperative for Bangladesh's foreign policy and regional diplomacy. These are: diversification of regional integration, Bay of Bengal cooperation, a gateway to ASEAN countries, and balancing between major powers within and beyond region. The discussion has focused on Bangladesh's commitment and contributions in some selected and significant sectors of development. Bangladesh has demonstrated a transformation in its experience of regional integration from a border-led or state-centric formation to more complex and diverse borderlands or beyond-the-state formation. BIMSTEC provides opportunities for diversification in areas of cooperation based on the needs of each member state. For example, the 2018 BIMSTEC Summit ushered in counter-terrorism, a development fund, connectivity, mountain economy and blue economy as key areas of cooperation.⁷³ It also incorporates private and non-state actors in cross-border cooperation to facilitate trans-regional cooperation.

BIMSTEC has received strong political support from one or more of the key players among the member states. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation for BIMSTEC

leaders in his swearing-in ceremony is a prominent example. Furthermore, the 2016 Goa Summit also demonstrated how India had prioritized BIMSTEC led cooperation as a central actor in this process. This is important as other state-led regional institutions have been facing constraints to be fully functional. For Bangladesh BIMSTEC and SAARC are not alternatives to each other. It is evident that BIMSTEC is considered by Dhaka as an important avenue for trans-regional cooperation as a matter of choice and not because of any imposition by others. Bangladesh's own discourse on diverse forms of regional cooperation is an evidence to that. Gradually, Bangladesh has come to believe that connectivity is at the core of its regional cooperation. It has been part of several parallel integration processes, such as BBIN, and lately, it has committed to be part of both the China mooted and funded Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiatives of the US and Japan. It has thus diversified its options for regional cooperation.

One major focus of this cooperation for Bangladesh in the region highlights its interest to develop its capacity in exploring blue economy by developing infrastructures along the coastal belts of Bay of Bengal. This also demonstrates a shift in focus of cross-border integration beyond conventional border-centric cooperation among states. Connectivity is at the core of this thought and is considered to be the game-changer for Bangladesh's growth and economic development. Connectivity in the Bay of Bengal covers both South Asia and South East Asia, and furthermore, it involves business groups, NGOs, health specialists, producers of cultural products, and the like. Such geographical coverage and inclusivity of actors can facilitate much bigger and stronger trans-regional holistic integration. Proposals have been on the table indicating the interest of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to be part of BIMSTEC.⁷⁴ Bangladesh should be pragmatic in supporting this proposal in order to gain from the opportunities opened up through such beyond-the-border larger connectivity. As it gains from connectivity within the Bay of Bengal, Dhaka must be willing to support a non-parochial pattern of regional integration. Keeping this in mind, the GoB has been offering commendable support to the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka.

Bangladesh, as a founding member, is deeply committed to BIMSTEC and this was further emphasized when the members decided the Secretariat would be established in Dhaka. With the BIMSTEC Secretariat in place, the organization will receive added momentum in monitoring important decisions, which was lacking for a long time. Bangladesh has significant trading partners within and beyond the region. Both China and the United States are critical development partners for Bangladesh. Balancing between partners has been an important tool of diplomacy for Bangladesh. However, there are some regional developments which might affect Bangladesh's commitment to regional integration and

these are crucial for further attention to maintain regional peace and security.

The 2017 influx of Rohingya population into Bangladesh due to state-led persecution by Myanmar has turned the relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar into a complex one. Even though more than seven hundred thousand Rohingya people have been forcibly displaced from Myanmar and are currently camped in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, this issue does not even make the agenda of BIMSTEC deliberations under the existing framework of the organisation. Such issues remind us the failures of SAARC which too suffered from restrictions of not being able to discuss and resolve pressing regional security issues. The Rohingya issue is not merely a bilateral one. It has trans-regional humanitarian and security implications. It deserves a space in BIMSTEC's deliberations at some level.

BIMSTEC has been unable to enact a free trade agreement (FTA) even though about two dozen meetings have been held in this regard.⁷⁵ In a media interview, BIMSTEC's current Secretary General Shahidul Islam said: "It is no secret that we have not been able to achieve what we wanted to, and there are various reasons behind the situation. However, I feel the BIMSTEC member states have started to realize the potential of the organization now, and things will get better in the coming days."⁷⁶ In light of this thought, there exists an expectation that BIMSTEC will overcome its hurdles, which often originate from border-centric statist integration approaches. It is expected that BIMSTEC, with a more proactive role of Bangladesh and other members, will advance an inclusive regional integration beyond state-led cooperation. This will help in achieving equitable growth for all without leaving no one behind.

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