Report

VIF-BIMSTEC Security Dialogue

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The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the sub-regional organization straddling states of South Asia and Southeast Asia, is as important for India as for the region. Given the increasing salience of the geographical expanse, India has been attempting to make it an effective and robust organization. The invitation to leaders of BIMSTEC for the second oath-taking ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019 sent out a clear message that India wants to invest in strengthening its ties with its neighbouring states and also build a regional network of connectivity, trade, and institutions.

In the larger context of global developments in the Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific, a regional organization that connects South and Southeast Asia can be very valuable for all member states. In the backdrop of the terror attacks in Sri Lanka, the threat of terrorism in the region can be better handled through a regional security cooperative framework under the BIMSTEC umbrella. This is an aim that Colombo has voiced by stressing the need for regional countries to come together on an anti-terror platform. Terror attacks that have international and regional linkages have deeply affected many of the member countries. Finding convergence on how to deal with the challenges and evolve cooperative mechanisms will certainly benefit all of them.

In the words of Prime Minister Modi, there is much scope in 'realising the vast potential' of this region, through physical and digital connectivity, cultural contacts and sustainable use of resources. While BIMSTEC lacks high visibility in the public domain, there has been a variety of dialogues at the official level. India has in the past suggested developing the Bay of Bengal region as 'common security space' and sharing of best practices on this forthcoming counter- terrorism platform would not only be an important initiative but

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also a move to evolve coordinated responses to common security challenges. Towards this end, there has been a number of meetings, discussions, interactions, and the think tanks' dialogue have added momentum to the official deliberations. Security cooperation has been strengthened with the periodic meetings of the national security chiefs.

The first meeting of the National Security Chiefs was held on 21 March 2017 in New Delhi considered the specter of terrorism, especially cross-border terrorism that continues to challenge peace and prosperity in the region. This meeting recognised the Outcome Document of the First National Security Chiefs Meeting as the guiding norms for security cooperation. The Meeting agreed that BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat in 2016 has given a new thrust to BIMSTEC, including security cooperation. Their subsequent meetings in Dhaka 2018 and Bangkok in 2019 underscored the importance of recognizing the Bay of Bengal as a common security space and agreed to collectively work to deal with the evolving challenges.

Think Tanks' Security Dialogue

The periodic meeting of all the national security chiefs has led to greater focus on discussing various aspects of security cooperation. The Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi, was tasked to host the BIMSTEC Think Tanks' Security Dialogue, annually. This annual security dialogue has led to two rounds (2018 and 2019) of discussions and deliberations to evolve a regional security cooperative framework. It is through continued dialogue and discussion on actionable steps that enhance their individual and collective security that this sub-regional organisation could become a more effective forum.

In the two rounds of security dialogues in November 2018 and November 2019, it was noted that security collaboration in the region is characterized by several features. First, it is more bilateral (between India and its neighbours) rather than regional or multilateral. Second, security cooperation is still dependent on the overall context of bilateral relations and therefore prone to setbacks. The forms of collaboration range from confidence building measures, such as capacity-building and training programmes to military operations in some instances. Finally, security cooperation is not exclusive, which means that the states also have military relations with other great powers such as China and the United States. Some of the core findings from the two dialogues are identified below.

First Security Dialogue –November 2018

The First think tank dialogue considered the threat of terrorism, radicalisation and response by BIMSTEC Countries. The dialogue emphasised the importance of recognising the Bay of Bengal as a common security space, which was initially voiced by the Security

Chiefs during their first meeting. The delegates shared their perceptions about security challenges in the region and pointed out that new collaborative approaches will be required to meet the growing challenges of terrorism and radicalisation. It was agreed that BIMSTEC members need to show political will and determination, and pool their resources to meet these challenges. It was further emphasised that terrorism must not be used as a tool of State policy. It is important that States that help and provide safe haven to terrorists are held accountable for their deeds.

Promoting Maritime security in the Bay of Bengal also found focus in the first Dialogue. It was agreed that a rule based maritime order must be established in the Bay of Bengal and there should be a common maritime security architecture. There is a need to find regional solutions to regional problems. The concept of SAGAR- "Security and Growth for All in the Region" promoted by India may be considered for implementation by all the BIMSTEC Member States.

The Dialogue also covered the issue of transnational crime given the common concern on proliferation of crimes such as human trafficking, drugs abuse, cyber threats, climate change, arms smuggling, terror financing and money laundering in the Bay of Bengal region. It was reiterated that while there is reasonably good cooperation at the bilateral level, there was an urgent need to build mechanisms amongst BIMSTEC Member States to deal with such crimes. Cyber security is also becoming a key area that requires cooperation amongst technical and law enforcement agencies of BIMSTEC Member States and there is need for coordination of their positions on norms in cyberspace. Given the different levels of capabilities within each state, there is an urgent need to build capabilities in all the BIMSTEC Member States.

In the session on Disaster Management, the member states agreed that BIMSTEC countries are among the most vulnerable to climate change. Thus, member states should pool in their resources and capabilities to deal with natural disasters. The participants recommended that the BIMSTEC Weather & Climate Centre (BCWC) at Noida, India, should be renamed as BIMSTEC Disaster Management & Climate Change Centre. It should be converted into a research & development Centre on Disaster Management.

Second Dialogue –November 2019

The broad themes that found focus in the Dialogue in November 2019, were in complement with the previous round of Dialogue. The first session of the Dialogue deliberated on the role of the State and civil society in addressing the spread of radicalization and finding means to check radicalization through the internet and social media. The

dialogue explored the avenues for cooperation in addressing de-radicalization in social media. In view of the increasing number of internet users in BIMSTEC states in the coming years, countering radicalization using social media has become very important.

The member states would need to finalise the pending BIMSTEC Conventions and ratify them at the earliest to provide the legal framework for cooperation in counter terrorism issues. Further, there is a need to harmonize the legal provisions of the Member States to deal with use of internet, social media and for countering radicalization. That apart, best practices of the BIMSTEC member states on countering radicalization may be compiled and circulated among the member states. This process would benefit from a transparent IT enabled system for information sharing on radicalization.

Delegates noted that the operationalisation of the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) has been a slow process. Maritime security is critical for promoting overall security in the Bay of Bengal region. As is well documented, the Maritime security challenges in the Bay of Bengal are varied. They include illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing, armed robbery at sea, piracy, human trafficking, arms smuggling, drug trafficking and terrorism. BIMSTEC Convention on Blue Economy may be drafted taking into account the specific considerations of each of the Member States. It was suggested that a 1.5 Track meeting may be convened with specific agenda for developing the Convention. Promoting and operationalization of region-wide White Shipping Agreements was also suggested. An early conclusion of BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement is necessary to promote security cooperation. It was further noted that the BIMSTEC Member States need to promote a sustainable blue economy.

This Dialogue also deliberated on the possibility of BIMSTEC Member States formulating a roadmap to address the challenges of climate change in the region, by preserving Mountains and Oceans Ecosystems. The growing vulnerability of the BIMSTEC region because of climate change is evident in the melting of Himalayan glaciers, increasing occurrence of floods and landslides in the hills and plains and the rise in sea level. Clearly, climate change has the potential to hamper progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as poverty eradication, zero hunger, health, water, clean energy, infrastructure, economic growth, sustainable cities and the overall well-being of human society. Only through the formulation of far-reaching and action-oriented policies that these issues can be addressed. Holding of an annual BIMSTEC Conference on climate change will not only highlight the issues but also provide a platform for strengthening collaboration among the BIMSTEC Member States, especially on research, data management, information sharing, sharing best practices in the domain of climate change with due focus

on mountain regions. Transboundary mechanisms are necessary to deal with transboundary nature of diseases, pest control and hazard control. This is only possible through building and creating Institutional capacities in all the member states. The fourth BIMSTEC summit meeting has also provided a framework for enhancing cooperation on climate change. This includes establishing a BIMSTEC funding mechanism for tackling climate change issues. Developing Green bonds and encouraging public private partnerships in climate financing were suggested as options.

The session on Cyber Security, deliberated on action being taken by the BIMSTEC member states in strengthening cyber security measures, practical measures that can be taken to build BIMSTEC cooperation in cyber security, and the role Think Tanks can play in promoting cyber security cooperation in BIMSTEC. The delegates noted the importance of information and communication technologies as an instrument of social and economic development and as a key enabler for sustainable development. The delegates expressed concern over rising cyber threats, including threats to critical information infrastructure as well as malicious use of ICTs. The delegates also highlighted the initiatives taken to enhance cyber security in their respective countries. Developing a BIMSTEC Wide Cyber Security Forum of experts and policy makers would be a way forward to exchange views and seeking ways for greater cooperation. Mechanisms for sharing of information on cyber threats, malware and cyber incidents are also needed. This would include strengthening law enforcement cooperation to address cybercrime, cyber terrorism and cyber security. Specific points of contact in the law enforcement agencies for sharing of information during emergency or crisis situation need to be put in place. A group of technical experts from the BIMSTEC member states may be constituted to develop tools to address cyber security issues of BIMSTEC.

Session on Restructuring Institutions: Cooperation and Capacity Building (of think tanks) within BIMSTEC States was vital to enhancing the role that think tanks can play in strengthening BIMSTEC. Think tanks have a crucial role to play in deliberating on a variety of complex issues and offering independent advice to governments. Thus, synergies must be developed between the BIMSTEC Think Tanks Dialogue on Regional Security and BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks. It was suggested that 'Leave no one behind' could be considered as a slogan of BIMSTEC and thinks tanks may deliberate on this. The Think Tanks may provide inputs to appropriate BIMSTEC Forums so that recommendations are considered by the authorities while making policy decisions. For institutional memory, a database of delegates participating in various Dialogue/meetings may also be created. Creating and encouraging BIMSTEC wide sectoral social media networks such BIMSTEC Youth Network would play a positive role.

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More importantly, this BIMSTEC Security Dialogue emphasized that for stability, prosperity and growth in the Bay of Bengal region, common security challenges must be addressed cohesively and hence the need for continuous dialogue among the security agencies as well as the Think Tanks in the region. Certainly, to enhance regional cooperation in the field of security, BIMSTEC Member States needs to engage with each other in more meaningful and innovative ways. The destiny of the people of the region is closely linked with the well-being of the Bay of Bengal.

The first two security dialogues at VIF underscored the importance of the annual BIMSTEC Think Tanks' Dialogue on Regional Security, enhancing the capacity of BIMSTEC Secretariat and giving it more autonomy to enable BIMSTEC to perform its tasks more effectively.

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