



Myanmar, Thailand and the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Meeting

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The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) member countries joined the BRICS leaders in the BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach Summit held in Goa, India on October 15- 16, 2016. The BIMSTEC member countries include India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

Myanmar

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor and Minister for Foreign Affairs, participated in the BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach meeting held on October 15-16, 2016. She arrived in India on October 16, 2016. Suu Kyi was also on a state visit to India, which officially started from October 17, 2016.

Lauding Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to invite the member countries of BIMSTEC to participate in the BRICS outreach meeting, she opined that the initiative would facilitate greater cooperation between BRICS and BIMSTEC countries.

It may be noted that it has become a practice in BRICS that the members can invite neighbouring countries to join in for an outreach Summit. As stated in the Ministry of External Affairs briefing, "during the last two Summits we have had a BRICS Outreach...Because of our Look East policy we decided that the group that we will invite is BIMSTEC and we have confirmations from all the BIMSTEC partners. We have confirmations from Prime Minister of Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan. We have President of Sri Lanka who will participate and from Myanmar we will have State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi participating."ⁱⁱ

During the BIMSTEC meeting, the member countries identified 14 sectors in which to deepen their cooperation, including in areas of blue economy and counter-terrorism.

Sectors	Lead Countries
1. Trade & Investment/Sub-sector	Bangladesh
2. Technology/Sub-sector	Sri Lanka
3. Energy/Sub-sector	Myanmar
4. Transportation & Communication/Sub-sector	India
5. Tourism/Sub-sector	India
6. Fisheries/Sub-sector	Thailand
7. Agriculture/Sub-sector	Myanmar
8. Cultural Cooperation/Sub-sector	Bhutan
9. Environment and Disaster Management/Sub-sector	India
10. Public Health/Sub-sector	Thailand
11. People-to-People Contact/Sub-sector	Thailand
12. Poverty Alleviation/Sub-sector	Nepal
13. Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime/Sub-sector	India
14. Climate Change	Bangladesh

Source: <http://www.bimstec.org/index.php?page=sectors>

In her speech, Myanmar State Counsellor said BIMSTEC was the “least integrated, least connected” region in the world. During the meeting, the member states agreed to explore the possibility of a BIMSTEC Motor Vehicles Agreement. They also decided to cooperate on disaster management issues and in the agriculture sector.

For Myanmar, BIMSTEC is a critically important tool to connect with the South Asian countries. More importance given to the BIMSTEC will naturally bring about the ‘Westward orientation’ in Myanmar’s foreign policy. India is a critically important neighbour for Myanmar. Security concerns emanating from Bangladesh, particularly in the form of illegal migration make the South Asian region in general, and Bangladesh in particular, very important for Myanmar.

Thailand

Thailand vice-minister of foreign affairs Virasakdi Futrakul participated in the BRICS-BIMSTEC Meeting. Due to the death of Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha cancelled his trip to India. The kingdom was represented by the vice foreign minister. Nevertheless, the Thai foreign ministry welcomed the initiative and actively participated in the same.

Thailand has been involved in the BIMSTEC process from the beginning. As a matter of fact the origins of BIMSTEC lie in Thailand’s ‘Look West’ policy. The increased attention given during the BRICS Summit to the BIMSTEC has made the sub-regional grouping more relevant in the new diplomatic dynamics, thereby drawing more attention of Thailand also.

During the meeting, the BIMSTEC members expressed their condolences for the late King. They stated, “We express our deep sorrow at the passing of His Majesty Bhumibol Adulyadej whose contributions to global development have been recognised by the United Nations in its First Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award. We convey our heartfelt condolences to the Royal Family, the people and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand.”ⁱⁱⁱ

During the meeting they also committed themselves to “expedite the signing of the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters, and to early ratification of the BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Being convinced that the development of connectivity in various forms and manifestations is the key to promote regional integration, they express satisfaction at the continuing efforts and initiatives to advance multi-modal physical connectivity (air, rail, roads and waterways) in the BIMSTEC region. During the meeting, the implementation of the recommendations of the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study was also appreciated and the members agreed to explore the possibility of having a BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement.^{iv}

Conclusion

The decision of the Government of India to invite members of BIMSTEC turned out to be a great initiative. In terms of South Asian participation, the outreach meeting was a realistic plan as except Pakistan, Afghanistan and Maldives, all other members of SAARC are also members of the BIMSTEC. The added advantage of inviting BIMSTEC leaders was that it gave India an opportunity to interact with its two of the most important neighbours on the eastern sea board i.e., Myanmar and Thailand. The outreach meet also gave an opportunity to Myanmar and Thailand to believe that they are also part of India's neighbourhood diplomacy. Finally, it provided the BRICS countries, especially Brazil, Russia and South Africa, with a rare opportunity to interact with the BIMSTEC countries. This has opened new vistas of cooperation between the two groupings and its member countries.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

End Notes

ⁱ <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/27476/Transcript+of+Curtain+Raiser+Briefing+on+BRICS+and+BIMSTEC+Summits+October+07+2016>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.narendramodi.in/bimstec-leaders-retreat-2016-outcome-document-532768>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl%2F27501%2FBIMSTEC_Leaders_Retreat_2016_Outcome_Document

^{iv} http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl%2F27501%2FBIMSTEC_Leaders_Retreat_2016_Outcome_Document