



Sri Lanka's Participation in BRICS and BIMSTEC Outreach Summit 2016

*Dr. M. Samatha**

The first BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (comprising Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Thailand), Outreach Summit was held in Goa on 16th October. Focus areas of the Summit included institution building, trade engagement, counter terrorism, climate change and economic cooperation. The Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena attended the Summit since Sri Lanka is a Member State of BIMSTEC. For Sri Lanka the platform provided an opportunity to interact with the member states of BIMSTEC and BRICS. The bilateral meetings that were held between Sri Lankan President and the leaders of Member States highlighted the issues the countries will have to address individually and collectively. Sri Lankan President said the countries' should 'derive benefits from globalisation through partnering with regional blocs and achieving convergence of priorities is important in the regional development discourse'.ⁱ Sri Lanka's participation in the Summit was also used to indicate that it is time to reorient the BIMSTEC to meet its original expectations that is to enhance inter-regional trade, investment and tourism. In this regard Sri Lanka at the Summit announced its support to establish a BIMSTEC Centre for Technology Transfer Facility in Sri Lanka which will contribute for collective economic development. This initiative as the Outcome Document mentioned 'will help in access and availability of technology, including for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) for promoting sustainable development across sectors'.ⁱⁱ

The BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat 2016 Outcome Document touched upon the issues of mutual interest and concern among the member countries and proposed various mechanisms to address the same. The issues mentioned in the document were terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, disaster management, multimodal physical connectivity, food security, renewable ocean energy, Free Trade, social issues, people to people contacts and cultural cooperation. And some of the proposed mechanisms were BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement, BIMSTEC Memorandum of

Understanding on Grid Interconnection, BIMSTEC Free Trade Area and BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission.

Issue of Terrorism

In this context the issue of terrorism figured prominently during the Summit meeting. The Sri Lankan President endorsed the view expressed by the Indian Prime Minister for countering terrorism and deepening security cooperation among Member States. The Indian Prime Minister in his statement at the Summit said that, “terrorism casts a long shadow on our development and economic prosperity. Therefore, terrorist funding, their weapons supply, training and political support must be systematically cut off”.ⁱⁱⁱ He also said that the early adoption of the draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism will help to fight the menace of terrorism. As a country that experienced terrorism in all its manifestations, the platform in Goa was used by Sri Lanka to reiterate its commitment towards eliminating terrorism. The BIMSTEC leaders Retreat 2016 Outcome Document after the Summit, ‘recognised terrorism as the most significant threat to peace and stability in the region’.^{iv}

Strengthening of Democracy

The bilateral meetings that were held between Sri Lanka and BIMSTEC member states such as Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan highlighted the need for strengthening democracy and enhancing economic cooperation among Member States. The bilateral discussions held among these countries also focused on strengthening cultural and religious linkages. The convergence on above mentioned areas was reflected when the Foreign Minister of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi commended ‘the democratic transformation being occurred in Sri Lanka’. And Sri Lankan President also ‘commended the service rendered by Aung San Suu Kyi who led a long term struggle for democracy’.^v The Sri Lankan President invited Ms. Suu Kyi for an official visit to Sri Lanka’. Buddhism has been a link between the two countries for long. At the same time, both the countries are facing the challenge of accommodating the minority interests without disturbing the ethnic relations between majority population who practice Buddhism and minority ethnic communities (in case of Sri Lanka it is mainly the Tamils and Muslims and in case of Myanmar it is Kachin, Karen, Mon and Rohingya ethnic groups). Therefore, strengthening democracy that can guarantee equal and just rights to the ethnic communities or addressing minority concerns through policy measures are pressing issues to deal with in both the countries.

Sri Lankan President also held bilateral discussions with the Prime Minister of Nepal Pushpa Kamal Dahal and with the Premier of Bhutan Tshering Tobgay at the Summit. During the meeting the Nepalese Prime Minister recalled the Sri Lankan assistance provided for the development of Buddhist places of worship in Nepal. He appreciated the support extended by Sri Lanka for the development activities in Lumbini. The Bhutan Premier also said that “the friendship between Sri Lanka and Bhutan is based on the Buddhist philosophy. He said Bhutan further expects the Sri Lankan assistance for the development of Buddhist education in Bhutan. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay invited President Sirisena to participate in the ceremony to plant the Bo sapling offered by Sri Lanka”.^{vi}

One of the bilateral issue that were discussed between Sri Lanka and Nepal were about the capital punishment handed down by Sri Lanka on a Nepali citizen, Chet Bahadur Thapa (Lalitpur) over a case of drugs smuggling. The Prime Minister of Nepal Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘urged President Maithiripala Sirisena to reconsider the capital punishment’.^{vii} The Sri Lankan government is yet to decide on the request to reconsider capital punishment. Another bilateral issue discussed was operation of direct flights between Sri Lanka and Nepal and disaster management cooperation.

Strengthening of SAARC

The need for strengthening the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) through unity among member states and hosting of stalled 19th SAARC Summit figured prominently in discussions between Nepal and Sri Lanka. These countries backed India’s decision to suspend the 19th SAARC Summit that was to be held in Islamabad Pakistan, after the terrorists attack on the Indian military base in Uri on 18th September. In this context, the view expressed by these countries during the BIMSTEC outreach meeting is important as it had reiterated the need for strengthening SAARC despite political differences. The statement by the Sri Lankan President while addressing the BIMSTEC Summit on 16th October also promoted the idea of ‘strengthening SAARC through nexus between SAARC and ASEAN states’.^{viii} Because according to the President, the Sri Lankan government “approach to regional collaboration is based upon friendship with all and enmity towards none”.^{ix} Sri Lanka’s cautious approach in dealing with SAARC was also evident in its statement given after it pulled out of the SAARC Summit in support of India. For example, the statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sri Lanka, on 30th September 2016, stated that, Sri Lanka is “committed to regional cooperation, and hopes that the steps required to ensuring region’s peace and security will be taken to create an environment that is conducive for the pursuit of regional cooperation”.^x

Sri Lanka and India

Discussions between Indian Prime Minister and Sri Lankan President focussed on strengthening the long friendship between Sri Lanka and India and a deep relationship beyond the agreements and regulations.^{xi} India’s assistance to Sri Lanka ‘whenever the country has been in difficult situations was highlighted during the meet’.^{xii} Given the fact that India’s development assistance to Sri Lanka after the war since 2009 has been significant in terms of resettling the displaced and improving connectivity from North to the South within the country, the statement reflects the current stable bilateral relations between the two countries. Currently India’s investments in Sri Lanka are more than \$ 1 billion. Sri Lanka’s engagement with India through BIMSTEC may provide more avenues for cooperation in the future.

Discussions held with Russia and China

The Sri Lankan President also met leaders of Russia and China at the Summit. The Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his appreciation over the transformation in Sri Lanka and assured that he will provide every required support to Sri Lanka’. Russia has been an important source of support for Sri Lanka in the UN forums in the past particularly at the United Nations

Human Rights Council. In 2014 Russia voted against the UNHRC resolution on “Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka”.^{xiii} In October 2015, it supported the UN resolution co-sponsored by Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, the President also met with the Chinese President Xi Jinping at the summit. The focus of the discussion was on bilateral issues such as the preparatory work of the ceremony to be held in Sri Lanka to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Sri Lanka- China friendship and the assistance given by the Government of China in preventing kidney disease in Sri Lanka. The Government of China agreed to ‘provide funding to Sri Lanka to build a hospital with all the modern facilities to cater to patients with kidney diseases’.^{xiv} The Chronic Kidney Disease of unknown origin (CKDu) has affected ‘over 40,000 individuals in main agricultural districts of Sri Lanka, especially in the North Central Province’.^{xv}

The Outreach Summit was also used to appreciate the assistance given by China to Sri Lanka for the Moragahakanda Development Project for irrigation and power generation purposes in central region of Sri Lanka. The project is supported ‘by China Development Bank with the cost of \$ 558 million’.^{xvi} The Sri Lankan President said that the development projects being implemented in Sri Lanka by China are a great support for the strategic development of Sri Lanka’.^{xvii} Sri Lanka is one of the BIMSTEC member countries that extended support to China’s One Belt One Road initiative other than Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand. Nepal recently expressed its ‘interests in joining the initiative with an expectation that it would help the land locked country’.^{xviii}

Conclusion

Sri Lanka participated in BRICS -BIMSTEC Outreach Summit, with an expectation that ‘increasing economic influence of the BRICS countries will open up possibilities for BIMSTEC countries in terms of trade, investment as well as knowledge and technology transfers’.^{xix} Another expectation by Sri Lanka was to realise the long awaited Free Trade Agreement within BIMSTEC. Whether the next 4th BIMSTEC Summit that is going to be held next year in Nepal will meet the expectation remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the bilateral discussions that took place among BIMSTEC member states in Outreach Summit and the outcome document were in line with the BIMSTEC objective of promoting peace and stability and economic cooperation for mutual benefit.

* Dr. M. Samatha is a Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.

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

Endnotes

ⁱ “We Must Derive Benefits From Globalisation through Partnering With Regional Blocks- President”, 16 October 2016, www.President.gov.lk/ We -Must -Derive- Benefits -From- Globalisation -through- Partnering- With -Regional -Blocks- President/

- ii “BIMSTEC Leaders’ Retreat 2016 Outcome Document”, 17th October 2016, <http://pib.nic.in/newssite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=151717>.
- iii “Welcome Remarks by PM at BRICS Leaders’ Plenary Session”, 16 October 2016, http://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/welcome-remarks-by-prime-minister-at-brics-leaders-plenary-session/?comment=disable
- iv “BIMSTEC Leaders’ Retreat 2016 Outcome Document”, 17th October 2016, <http://pib.nic.in/newssite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=151717>.
- v “Aung San Suu Kyi praises Sri Lanka’s democratic transformation”, 16 October 2016, <http://www.president.gov.lk/aung-san-suu-kyi-praises-sri-lankas-democratic-transformation/>
- vi “President Sirisena is an exemplary leader – Nepalese Premier”, 16 October 2016, <http://www.president.gov.lk/president-sirisena-is-an-exemplary-leader-nepalese-premier/>
- vii “Nepal requests Sri Lanka to reconsider death penalty”, 16 October 2016, <http://colombogazette.com/2016/10/16/nepal-requests-sri-lanka-to-reconsider-death-penalty/>
- viii “Sri Lanka Committed to Set Up BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Center-President”, 16 Oct 2016, www.president.gov.lk/Sri-Lanka-Committed-to-Set-Up-BIMSTEC-Technology-Transfer-Center-President/
- ix *ibid*
- x “Sri Lanka’s participation in the 19th SAARC Summit scheduled for November 2016 in Islamabad”, 30th September 2016, <http://www.mfa.gov.lk/index.php/en/media/media-releases/6614-19saarc>
- xi “President holds bilateral discussions with Indian Premier”, 16 October 2016, <http://www.president.gov.lk/president-holds-bilateral-discussions-with-indian-premier/>
- xii *ibid*
- xiii “Action on Resolution on Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability, and Human Rights in Sri Lanka”, 27 March 2014, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14447&>
- xiv “China Agrees Funds to Build a Hospital for Kidney Patients”, <http://www.president.gov.lk/china-agrees-to-aid-to-build-a-hospital-for-kidney-patients/>
- xv “Comprehensive report on preventing kidney disease in Sri Lanka submitted to President” 15th March 2016, http://www.colombopage.com/archive_16A/Mar15_1458061444CH.php.
- xvi “Mahaweli Water Security Investment Program (RRP SRI 47381)”, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/47381-001-dc.pdf>
- xvii “Putin assures fullest support to Sri Lanka, 18th October 2016”, <http://news.lk/news/sri-lanka/item/14716-putin-assures-fullest-support-to-sri-lanka>
- xviii “Nepal keen to join China’s ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative”, 21 October 2016, http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/nepal-keen-to-join-china-s-one-belt-one-road-initiative-116102101067_1.html
- xix “We Must Derive Benefits From Globalisation through Partnering With Regional Blocks- President”, 16 October 2016, www.president.gov.lk/We-Must-Derive-Benefits-From-Globalisation-through-Partnering-With-Regional-Blocks-President/.