



## BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit and Bangladesh

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Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina participated in the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS)- Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Outreach Summit which was held in Goa on 16-17 October 2016. The seven-countries grouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, was founded in June 1997 as BIST-EC, and then renamed as the Bay of Bengal initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic cooperation (BIMSTEC) in December 1997. It has not 'taken off' since then due to lack of funding. It didn't even have an office, and meetings were held at the Thai foreign ministry in Bangkok until it was given headquarters in Dhaka in 2011 and a secretary general, Sri Lankan diplomat Sumith Nakandala, in 2014.<sup>i</sup> At present, the BIMSTEC region houses around 1.5 billion people with a combined gross domestic product of \$2.7 US dollar trillion, most of which is accounted by India.<sup>ii</sup>

Intra-BIMSTEC trade is around 6 per cent. The major intra-bloc importers are India, Thailand and Bangladesh and exporters are India, Thailand and Myanmar, respectively. Poverty is a big problem for member states. Unlike SAARC, India-Pakistan rivalry is not an issue in BIMSTEC.<sup>iii</sup> Yet the organization has not moved up. For example, Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism (CTTC) was adopted as an area of cooperation in 2004 following the 1<sup>st</sup> BIMSTEC summit, but has made limited progress.<sup>iv</sup> There also remain threats of transnational organised crimes like illegal trade, trafficking of goods, drugs, narcotic, arms, smuggling of currencies and counterfeiting, etc. In addition, the BIMSTEC region fosters illegal migration and the Golden Triangle of poppy production causes massive movements of narcotic and narcotic drugs. The initiatives undertaken in the related sector so far includes: first, a Joint Working Group (JWG) involving four sub-groups each led by a member country with 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.<sup>v</sup> India is entrusted with the sector of counter terrorism and transnational crime. Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking" has been adopted in 2009 which has been ratified only by India and Bangladesh.<sup>vi</sup> This issue also finds

mention in the BIMSTEC leaders Retreat 2016 document. The document says “We (the leaders of member countries) commit 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”<sup>vii</sup>.

In the welcome speech, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said “We look forward to a rich exchange of ideas for common benefit and convergent action. BRICS and BIMSTEC have been shaped by different contexts. They are located in different geographies. Together, we represent two thirds of humanity. But, we are joined by a common vision and commitment to peace, stability and development. We are also united by similar challenges and concerns that shape our domestic choices and international partnerships. India is privileged to belong to both these groups.”<sup>viii</sup> The Prime Minister added “With 1.5 billion people and a combined GDP of \$ 2.7 trillion US Dollars, the countries of BIMSTEC have shared aspirations for growth, development, commerce, and technology. Their quest for economic prosperity can shape the agenda for building economic partnerships with BRICS. Similarly, BRICS represents large emerging economies, G-20 member-states and 2 permanent members of the Security Council. Its linkages with BIMSTEC economies will enlarge the regional and global sphere of dynamic growth and prosperity.”<sup>ix</sup> Highlighting convergence between BRICS and BIMSTEC, the Indian Prime said “The convergence of purpose and priorities between BRICS and BIMSTEC provides a perfect opportunity to:”<sup>x</sup>

- Frame economic and development partnership;
- Shape ties in the fields of energy, agriculture, technology, fisheries, and culture;
- Structure trade, investment and commercial partnerships; and
- Pool resources to fight terrorism and transnational crime.

### **Sheikh Hasina at BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit**

Welcoming Sheikh Hasina, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted “Honoured to host you PM Hasina for BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit. We cherish the strong ties between India and Bangladesh and applaud your role.”<sup>xi</sup> Speaking at the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit, Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Hasina said a large part of BIMSTEC needs to develop quality and resilient infrastructure. She called for ‘special’ attention from the BRICS banks to the opportunities in the low-income countries.<sup>xii</sup> About the proposal to focus on development of science, technology and innovation capabilities, she said, “The world is now focused on ‘learning’. Sizable part of our population needs access to technologies in farming, water, sanitation and basic health. We also need to develop and adopt technologies to address the challenges arising out of climate change.”<sup>xiii</sup> On this issue she urged the BRICS leaders for cooperation in sharing of technology.

Sheikh Hasina emphasised collaboration between the higher education and research institutions in the lower-income countries and the BRICS institutions.<sup>xiv</sup> Speaking about sustainable economic development, Hasina said both BRICS and BIMSTEC can engage in a

‘conversation’ for this."We need to look at sustainability issues with purpose. It could be an opportunity for us to link our value chains and markets aligning with the norms and trends of global supply chains," she said.<sup>xv</sup> "In BIMSTEC, we are working on our own regional value chains. While our countries are at different levels of development, our two groupings can surely join hands on developing value chains for products and services," she added.<sup>xvi</sup>

On the issue of terrorism, she said Bangladesh maintains "zero tolerance" to any act of terrorism or violent extremism as a "responsible member of the global community".<sup>xvii</sup> "We must join hands to deal with terrorism and violent extremism as well," she added.<sup>xviii</sup>

During the bilateral meeting with the Indian Prime Minister, terrorism and Teesta river water-sharing issues came up for discussion. On the Teesta issue the two Prime Ministers agreed that more discussions are needed to arrive at an acceptable solution. On the issue of terrorism Hasina told the Indian Prime Minister about the steps her government has taken to combat terror including a crackdown on radical elements and creating and spreading social awareness against radicalisation of youths.<sup>xix</sup> Other bilateral issues as well as the South Asian security situation were also discussed by the two leaders. On postponement of 19<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit the two prime ministers agreed that given the current situation in South Asia, it was not conducive to holding of the SAARC Summit in Pakistan in November 2016, and postponing it was a "right decision". The two leaders also agreed that answers to the questions raised about the future of SAARC could be found only by the top leaderships of the member countries of the organization.<sup>xx</sup>

During the Summit Sheikh Hasina held bilateral talks with Russian President Valdimir Putin, and her Thai and Bhutanese counterparts. She also held a meeting with her Nepalese counterpart Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'.

## Conclusion

In Retreat 2016 outcome document the leaders of member countries of the BIMSTEC pledged to work collectively towards making the organization stronger, more effective, and result oriented. On terrorism the document says "Recognizing that terrorism continues to remain the single most significant threat to peace and stability in our region, we reiterate our strong commitment to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and stress that there can be no justification for acts of terror on any grounds whatsoever."<sup>xxi</sup> The document adds "We condemn in the strongest terms the recent barbaric terror attacks in the region. We strongly believe that our fight against terrorism should not only seek to disrupt and eliminate terrorists, terror organisations and networks, but also identify, sanction and hold to account States who encourage, support and finance terrorism, provide sanctuary to terrorists and terror groups, and falsely extol their virtues."<sup>xxii</sup> In addition to it the leaders also agreed to cooperate on the issue of climate change, physical connectivity, cooperation in agriculture sector, development of blue economy, accelerate efforts to develop a comprehensive plan for energy cooperation with a view to augment interconnectivity and promoting regional energy trade, to expand linkages among our educational and research institutions etc. This is an impressive agenda which will require concerted and long term effort to be successfully implemented.

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

## **End Notes**

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/bimstec-outreach-likely-to-pep-up-rocky-brics-summit-at-goia/article9224549.ece>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://indianexpress.com/article/business/business-others/india-pushing-for-consensus-on-bimstec-free-trade-pact-nirmala-3083355/>

<sup>iii</sup> Bangladesh and BIMSTEC: Way Forward “ Seminar on 13 January 2015 at BIIS Dhaka

<sup>iv</sup> ibid

<sup>v</sup> ibid

<sup>vi</sup> ibid

<sup>vii</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.mofa.gov.np/bimstec-leaders-retreat-2016-outcome-document-16-october-2016-goia-india/>

<sup>viii</sup> Retrieved from [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27492/Welcome\\_Remarks\\_by\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_at\\_Plenary\\_Session\\_of\\_BRICS\\_BIMSTEC\\_Outreach\\_Summit](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27492/Welcome_Remarks_by_Prime_Minister_at_Plenary_Session_of_BRICS_BIMSTEC_Outreach_Summit)

<sup>ix</sup> ibid

<sup>x</sup> ibid

<sup>xi</sup> <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/bangladesh-pm-sheikh-hasina-in-goia-for-bilateral-talks-bimstec-3085609/>

<sup>xii</sup> <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/10/16/bangladesh-pm-places-three-point-proposal-to-link-brics-with-bimstec>

<sup>xiii</sup> ibid

<sup>xiv</sup> ibid

<sup>xv</sup> ibid

<sup>xvi</sup> ibid

<sup>xvii</sup> ibid

<sup>xviii</sup> ibid

<sup>xix</sup> <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/hasina-modi-talk-teesta-terrorism-1299886>

<sup>xx</sup> ibid

<sup>xxi</sup> <https://www.mofa.gov.np/bimstec-leaders-retreat-2016-outcome-document-16-october-2016-goia-india/>

<sup>xxii</sup> ibid