

**Excellencies, Distinguished members of the Eminent Persons' Group,
My dear Directors and members of the Secretariat,**

A very Good Morning and a warm welcome to you all. It was a pleasure hosting you at dinner yesterday evening which gave us an opportunity to become familiar with one another and engage in informal conversations. As you know, I took over as the Secretary-General of BIMSTEC only 3 weeks ago. It's an opportune coincidence that the First Meeting of the Eminent Persons' Group on the Future Directions of BIMSTEC is also the first meeting which BIMSTEC Secretariat is hosting after I assumed the charge.

02. As you are aware, the decision to set up EPG was taken during our Leaders' informal consultation at Goa Retreat in 2016. After over 7 years the EPG has been constituted and is holding today its first meeting. It took 7 years to implement a key decision of our leaders which would have far-reaching consequences. This delay is not only unfortunate but also symptomatic of the challenges that BIMSTEC has been facing in forging regional cooperation. There has been either complete lack of progress or slow progress as well as inordinate and avoidable delays in translating the will of our Leaders into reality.

03. There is no denying that, over the years, BIMSTEC has made some progress in fostering regional cooperation. However, the progress has been tardy and patchy and BIMSTEC has failed to deliver tangible progress on the ground. BIMSTEC has not lived upto our expectations and has failed in fulfilling the promise it has held for the people of the region. It took us over 15 years to consider creating a Secretariat. It took us 25 years to delineate BIMSTEC's Charter. During 26 years of BIMSTEC's existence, there have been only 5 Summits and 19 Ministerial Meetings. Some sectoral Ministerial Meetings have not been held for almost two decades. Fortunately, we have been able to at least delineate seven pillars of cooperation within BIMSTEC with each member State acting as a Lead for one sector.

04. In view of the present unsatisfactory situation, the EPG's Meeting today assumes a high importance. EPG embodies the desire of our leaders to reinvigorate and re-imagine BIMSTEC to foster regional cooperation in Bay of Bengal region, aimed at addressing the shared security and developmental challenges that our region faces.

05. Given your vast knowledge and experience, there will be no gain outlining to you the importance of BIMSTEC for regional cooperation in Bay of Bengal region. At a time when global multilateral organisations, like UN and other IOs, are facing existential crises and challenges, regional cooperation has been seen as a viable alternative to address challenges which are common to various regions. With BIMSTEC member States facing common security and developmental challenges, there is immense untapped potential for regional cooperation.

06. The EPG, has been tasked with the critical responsibility of charting the future course of BIMSTEC, a BIMSTEC which is fit for the purpose of fostering cooperation in line with the vision of our Leaders. EPG has the crucial task to thoroughly analyze the challenges that BIMSTEC faces and make recommendations to address them so as to ensure that we avoid repeating the same mistakes that we made in the past, resulting in loss of valuable opportunities to forge deeper regional cooperation and integration, and we are able to make swift progress and deliver tangible benefits for our people.

07. As you may have noted, there are numerous organizational and structural problems, which have affected progress in forging cooperation in all the sectors. I request you to focus on analyzing the limitations of the existing structure, role and resources of the Secretariat; the role and responsibilities of the Lead States as well as the non-lead States; the efficiency and efficacy of various institutional mechanisms; and the constraints imposed by multi-layered and sequential decision making processes and reporting requirements etc. I request you to be critical and candid in your analysis of the present situation and to be bold, ambitious and futuristic in your recommendations, so that we can embark on a new path in forging regional cooperation. As the saying goes: there is always a room for improvement and we can always improve and do better. This opportunity that you have to reform and reinvigorate BIMSTEC will not be available again for decades.

08. The Secretariat is keen to facilitate the EPG's work. We have shared with you relevant briefs. We will make detailed presentations today. We will assist you in your work in any manner you desire, including making available briefs and notes. We are looking forward to working together with you to enable you to accomplish your noble task.
