

81st Session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

High-Level Dialogue with Sub-Regional Organisations 23 April 2025, Bangkok, Thailand

Thank you Chair for giving me the floor.

- Honourable Chairperson
- Excellency Executive Secretary, UNESCAP
- Excellencies, Fellow Panelists
- Distinguished Delegates to 81st Annual Session of UNESCAP

I joined the BIMSTEC member States in strongly condemning the terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory of India, which is a founding member of BIMSTEC, which killed 26 innocent lives and injured many others.

I am delighted to represent BIMSTEC at the 81st session of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). I want to thank Executive Secretary of UNESCAP for her invitation.

It's a great privilege to participate in High-level Dialogue with sub-regional organisations under Agenda item 2(b) on the topic, "inclusive and sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific: the current and emerging challenges". I warmly greet representatives of other regional and sub-regional organisations from the Asia and Pacific, who are participating in this Dialogue.

I would like to commend UNESCAP for convening this High-Level Dialogue on a very pertinent topic: the challenges that our region faces in realising the goals of inclusive and sustainable development. There is absolutely no doubt that the developing countries of our region are lagging behind in achieving the SDG Agenda 2030.

While it was never going to be an easy target, the countries in our region, including BIMSTEC member States, suffered huge setbacks due to COVID-19 pandemic. They incurred huge economic losses and missed opportunities to realise their SDGs. Their debt situation worsened due to Covid while their access to finances dwindled.

The realisation of SDGs has also been impacted negatively by the challenges posed by climate change due to global warming. Our region has witnessed more frequent, unusual and devastating natural disasters due to changes in weather and climate patterns caused by global warming. Climate Change has particularly hit hard agriculture and allied sectors, which provide employment and livelihoods to a large segment of our populations.

We're living in a digital age. It's essential and a prerequisite that we leverage digital technologies for inclusive and sustainable development. However, there is a growing digital divide and a large number of developing countries have not been able to harness digital technologies due to lack of DPis, lack of local contents, digital illiteracy and uneven access to data. This growing digital divide, including within the countries, has also hindered the ability of these countries to harness other Gen.4 technologies such as AI, data analytics, machine learning and blockchain technologies to address their developmental and good governance challenges.

The recent massive unprecedented and unpredictable disruptions in global trade will certainly cause a huge setback to external trade of the countries from our region, including BIMSTEC member States, which will have adverse impact on their realisation of SDGs. It's difficult to foresee how severe the impact will be.

We have also been witnessing recently decline in the role and contribution of the multilateral developmental institutions, particularly the UN and International Organisations, which have been engaged in assisting the developing countries in realization of their SDGs. Their developmental programmes have been disrupted due to lack of resources, which will cause setbacks to realisation of SDGs by developing countries.

North-South cooperation in realising SDGs has largely been absent and there has been a significant decline in the ODA and other developmental assistance from the North. As a result SDG Agenda 2030 is unlikely to be realised by most of the countries in our region.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

In the context of the persistent and new and emerging challenges, some of which I have outlined, enhancing South-South cooperation has been seen as the way forward. Developmental partnerships amongst the countries of the global South has the potential to help them realise their SDGs.

The role and contribution of regional organisations becomes relevant in the context of the imperative of enhancing South-South cooperation. There's no pan global organisation which can lead the efforts towards enhancing South-South cooperation. The salience of regional cooperation through regional organisations in forging South-South cooperation has been growing.

Regional Organizations bring together a small group of closely-related countries, with shared historical and cultural linkages. Located in same geographical space, members of a regional organisation usually face similar developmental and security challenges. As they cannot deal with these challenges alone, they prioritise regional cooperation to deal with the shared challenges. The small membership of the Regional Organisation makes it easy to build convergences and find regionally acceptable solutions. Regional Organizations are also less vulnerable to the upheavals in the global politics, which we are witnessing now. In this context, our dialogue today assumes a high importance.

In this context, I would like to underline the importance of BIMSTEC in forging regional cooperation in Bay of Bengal. BIMSTEC stands for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Founded in June 1997, it has been in existence for almost 28 years. Its Permanent Secretariat is located in Dhaka since 2014. It's an Inter-Governmental Organisation, led by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs with participation of other Ministries and Organs of the Government. It brings together 7 countries located in Bay of Bengal, an important sub-region of Indian Ocean Region: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In March 2022, BIMSTEC Charter was signed and, in May 2024, it entered into force.

The global significance of BIMSTEC is evident in its share of global population, GDP and trade. The total population of 7 BIMSTEC member States is estimated at 1.8 Billion (22% of the global population) (Larger than the combined population of ASEAN and EU). The Combined GDP of BIMSTEC member States in 2023 amounted US\$ 4.9 Trillion (4.67% of Global GDP) and their combined External Trade in 2023 was estimated at US\$ 1.88 Trillion, around 3% of Global Trade.

The Agenda of BIMSTEC is vast and we have adopted the unique concept of designating lead member States to lead cooperation in Specific sectors, ensuring that all the member States are equal stakeholders in success of regional cooperation under BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC has well established core mechanisms and sectoral mechanisms. Framework for sectoral cooperation comprises sectoral Action Plans/ Master Plans; Conventions; Agreements/MoUs; Centres of Excellence; External Partnerships. Outcomes of 6th BIMSTEC Summit

- Summit Declaration;
- Adoption of BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030; Signing and Adoption of BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation;
- Signing of MoUs with the external partners [IORA and UNODC];
- Initiation of Meetings of BIMSTEC Health Ministers and Home (Interior) Ministers Mechanisms.
- Reform and revitalization of BIMSTEC: Implementation of the EPG Report.

BIMSTEC has sought and engaged in External developmental partnerships with the UN, International and Regional Organizations:

-MoUs already signed with: ADB; IFPRI; IORA; UNODC.

-MOUs under consideration with a number of other UN and International Organisations

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates

Let me reiterate the Core/fundamental strengths of BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC is the only regional organization, which brings together 5 countries from South Asia and 2 countries from Southeast Asia. BIMSTEC has its own Charter and well-established decision-making mechanisms. BIMSTEC has clearly identified areas of cooperation, organized in seven groups, with each member States taking lead in one or more Sectors. BIMSTEC enjoys the requisite political support of its members, and it focuses on technical and economic cooperation and stays away from divisive political issues.

Let me conclude by reiterating that BIMSTEC provides a conducive and effective framework for promoting cooperation amongst the countries of Bay of Bengal region. With the expected reforms and revitalisation, the BIMSTEC is poised to emerge as a vibrant and effective regional organisation in Asia and Pacific.

I would like to conclude by commending again Executive Secretary of UNESCAP for organizing this Dialogue with regional and sub-regional organizations of the Asia and Pacific on a very pertinent topic of the challenges we face in realizing inclusive and sustainable development. I again thank her for inviting me to participate in this Dialogue. I thank you all for your kind attention. I wish this Dialogue success in attaining its goals and wish you all a pleasant and meaningful day.
