

BIMSTEC Secretary General's Remarks at the 2nd BIMSTEC Ports Conclave

Namaskar 🙏

Honourable Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways of India, Shri Sarbananda Sonowal; Secretary, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Shri T.K. Ramachandran; Chairman of Visakhapatnam Port Authority, Dr. Madhaiyaan Angamuthu; Distinguished Delegates from 7 BIMSTEC member States; other distinguished participants, Namaskar, A very good morning to you all.

I am delighted to join the 2nd Edition of BIMSTEC Ports Conclave and participate in its inaugural Session. I thank and commend Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways of India for its very timely and long overdue initiative of convening 2nd BIMSTEC Ports Conclave; I recall that the inaugural BIMSTEC Ports Conclave was held, here in Visakhapatnam, in 2019, six years ago. I am grateful to Honourable Minister for his esteemed presence at the Conclave and for the invitation extended to me and my colleague from the Secretariat to join it. The esteemed presence of Honourable Minister reflects the importance that India attaches to enhancing regional cooperation under BIMSTEC, including through promoting regional connectivity, particularly maritime connectivity in Bay of Bengal. I also thank other BIMSTEC member States for their participation at the Conclave and welcome their Delegations to the Conclave. It is an honour and privilege for me to share my thoughts with you about regional cooperation under BIMSTEC, across various sectors, and the importance of this Conclave in promoting maritime connectivity through enhancing cooperation amongst the ports of the member States located around the Bay of Bengal.

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates

Since its establishment in 1997, 28 years ago, BIMSTEC has gradually evolved into a vibrant platform for forging technical and economic cooperation among its seven member states. It has well established core and sectoral deliberative, policy-making and decision-making mechanisms, including periodical Summits, Ministerial and SO Meetings, Sectoral SO and Ministerial Meetings as well as sectoral Working Groups, Expert Groups and Centres of Excellence. BIMSTEC has its Permanent Secretariat in Dhaka since September 2014. It has its own Charter and a vision document called Bangkok BIMSTEC Vision 2030. BIMSTEC has concluded and is in the process of concluding a number of Conventions, Agreements, MoUs and MoAs. It has set up Centres of Excellence and engaged in external partnerships with the relevant UN, International and Regional Organisations, including ADB, WB, UNODC, IORA, IFPRI etc.

BIMSTEC's strategic significance is reflected in its share of global population, global GDP and global trade. Total population of seven BIMSTEC member states is estimated at 1.8 billion, representing 22% of global population. Combined GDP of BIMSTEC member States in 2023 was estimated at US\$ 4.9 trillion, accounting for 4.67% of Global GDP. Furthermore, combined external trade of BIMSTEC member States in 2023 was estimated at US\$ 1.88 trillion, approximately 3% of global trade. As the only regional organization bridging South and Southeast Asia, the core strength of BIMSTEC has been the impeccable and consistent political support of its member States and its non-political ethos, with focus on technical and economic cooperation, while staying away from divisive political issues. With reforms being undertaken, BIMSTEC is poised to emerge as a dynamic regional organization.

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As a founding member and a committed proponent of regional cooperation, India has been an abiding supporter of BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC represents a confluence of India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy', 'Act East Policy', 'Indo-Pacific Policy' and 'MAHASAGAR' paradigm, enunciated by Honourable Prime Minister of India. India has, therefore, been playing a leading role in forging regional cooperation under BIMSTEC.

India has, as the Lead Country for Security Sector, spearheaded endeavours to enhance regional cooperation to address both traditional and non-traditional regional security challenges, including maritime security challenges. India has also led regional cooperation in energy and disaster management, two other sectors that it leads. India is the largest contributor to the budget of BIMSTEC Secretariat.

India already hosts two BIMSTEC Centers (i) BIMSTEC Centre for Weather Climate (Noida); and (ii) BIMSTEC Energy Centre (Bengaluru). It has proposed to set up four other BIMSTEC Centres to strengthen regional cooperation in agriculture and food security, disaster management, maritime transport and traditional medicine. Last year, Honourable External Affairs Minister of India had hosted not only the 2nd Retreat of BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers in New Delhi but also the first Informal Meeting of BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers on the Sidelines of the UNGA in New York.

The Government of India, under exceptional leadership of Honourable PM Modi, has made immense contribution to revitalise BIMSTEC. In 2016, PM Modi hosted a retreat of BIMSTEC Leaders in Goa, which energised regional cooperation under BIMSTEC. At the 5th BIMSTEC Summit, held in Colombo in March 2022, Prime Minister Modi offered a financial grant of US\$ 1.0 million to the BIMSTEC Secretariat to enhance institutional capacity of BIMSTEC and its Secretariat. At the 6th BIMSTEC Summit held recently in Bangkok, Prime Minister Modi announced a number of significant initiatives to enhance regional cooperation under BIMSTEC across various sectors on its Agenda. India has also been playing a leading role in strengthening regional cooperation under BIMSTEC even in those sectors that are led by other member States.

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Given the significance of maritime cooperation in Bay of Bengal, for security and sustainable development of the BIMSTEC member States, allow me to highlight some notable recent developments in forging regional cooperation under BIMSTEC in maritime domain. BIMSTEC Expert Group on Maritime Cooperation has identified five key priority areas for regional collaboration: Maritime Domain Awareness, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Oil Pollution Response, Blue Economy and Maritime Security Cooperation.

In a significant step towards enhancing regional maritime connectivity, BIMSTEC member States signed, at the 6th BIMSTEC Summit held in Bangkok in April this year, BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation, aimed at boosting maritime connectivity in Bay of Bengal. It will come into force after it's ratified by at least 4 member States. I am grateful to the Government of India for ratifying it; India is the first BIMSTEC member State to do so. We're in the process of finalising SOP and instituting the Joint Shipping Committee for expeditious implementation of the Agreement. I appeal to other member States to ratify the AMTC at the earliest.

The Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation has several provisions aimed at enhancing cooperation amongst the ports of the BIMSTEC member States. It accords national treatment to each other's ships, crews and cargo, when they use ports, ensuring fair access, stays and use of facilities. Member States will also work to make sea transport faster by reducing delays and simplifying administrative, customs, immigration and health procedures in ports.

I am grateful to the Government of India for its significant initiative of setting up a Centre of Excellence for enhancing maritime transport cooperation. It's envisaged that the Centre will take initiatives to enable full and effective implementation of the Agreement. I am confident that the deliberations during the 2nd Ports Conclave will help in identifying concrete initiatives aimed at implementing AMTC and delineating the role of BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence in Maritime Transport in strengthening port to port cooperation.

Further, in domain of maritime cooperation, BIMSTEC has finalised guidelines for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief at sea. Moreover, the BIMSTEC member states are engaged in deliberations to develop guiding principles for maritime law enforcement agencies and a joint response plan for marine oil spills. We have also made progress in the deliberations, aimed at developing a BIMSTEC White Shipping Agreement, which will greatly enhance maritime domain awareness through information sharing.

With a view to further strengthening regional cooperation in maritime domain, BIMSTEC has forged partnerships with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). We have also made progress in forging cooperation in other sectors with maritime dimension, such as blue economy and disaster management.

The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity prioritizes development of deep-water ports, improved container handling, enhanced coastal and short-sea shipping, and expanded inland waterways to ensure better access for landlocked states. These efforts aim to build an integrated, efficient, and resilient maritime transport network across the Bay of Bengal. The BIMSTEC member States are committed to implement the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity.

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The importance of cooperation amongst the ports of the BIMSTEC member States cannot be overstated. Without cooperation amongst the ports of the member States, the goal of strengthening maritime connectivity cannot be realised.

The Secretariat is looking forward to focused, meaningful and result-oriented deliberations at the 2nd BIMSTEC Ports Conclave, which will contribute in building a seamless, efficient and sustainable maritime network across the Bay of Bengal. By enhancing maritime cooperation, including maritime connectivity and cooperation amongst the Ports of the BIMSTEC member States, we can unlock unprecedented opportunities for enhancing intra-BIMSTEC trade, travel, tourism and other people to people exchanges.

I, therefore, wish the Conclave every success in realising its goals. I request the Delegates to identify concrete steps to enhance maritime connectivity and security in Bay of Bengal. I again thank Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways of India for hosting the 2nd BIMSTEC Ports Conclave and for inviting me and the BIMSTEC Secretariat to participate. I am grateful for the warm hospitality extended by the Government of India to the Delegations from the Secretariat as well as the BIMSTEC member States. The Secretariat remains fully committed to support India and other member States, as per its mandate, in realising the goal of a secure, prosperous and developed BIMSTEC region. I thank you all again for your kind attention and wish you a fruitful Conclave. Have a great two days of deliberations. Namaskar!