

BIMSTEC Secretary General's Remarks at the Virtual Launch of CUTS "Innovative Route to Development: The Indo-Pacific Perspective" Compendium

Namaskar!

Good Evening distinguished participants,

I am delighted to join virtual launch of Compendium "Innovative Route to Development: The Indo-Pacific Perspective". I would like to congratulate CUTS International for bringing out this compendium. I commend its Authors and Editors for their contribution and I am confident that it will be found useful by various State and non-State actors in IP region and it will contribute, as intended, in shaping the IP narrative globally.

The concept of IP is not new. It has received renewed attention and focus as a geo-strategic approach during past two decades due to emergence of a multipolar world; IP region is home to a number of those poles. Since the shores of Asia are washed by waters of both Indian and Pacific Oceans, the IP approach is a recognition of this geographic reality. It also reflects the fact that the region between the two Oceans has shared security and developmental interests and challenges and the countries of the region believe that regional cooperation will serve their common interests.

Key regional and global players, including regional organisations, like the EU and ASEAN, have outlined their own Indo-Pacific Strategies. However, there are significant divergences in the approaches and priorities of various actors in Indo-Pacific region, though they have all underlined the salience of ASEAN centrality. Two key global players, China and Russia, have voiced their concerns due to their perception that IP approach is intended to target them.

IP region is of immense strategic significance to India, the primary arena of its action and influence. There has been a gradual evolution in India's IP approach. India's IP strategy is an extension of its longstanding Act East Policy. India has looked at ASEAN as a key strategic partner and has underlined centrality of ASEAN in its IP Strategy. In 2014, India launched Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, a tangible manifestation of its interest in Pacific Islands region. In 2015- policy of SAGAR was enunciated by PM Modi, sketching out key facets of India's IP strategy, which has recently been expanded to MAHASAGAR. Underlining its primary focus on forging developmental cooperation, India launched in 2019 its Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, based on building developmental partnerships with key regional players. India's Quad approach is aligned with its broad IP strategy of working together with like-minded countries to serve their shared interests in IP region and beyond.

Allow me to introduce briefly BIMSTEC. Since its establishment in 1997, 28 years ago, BIMSTEC with its 7 member States, has gradually evolved into a vibrant and preferred regional platform for forging technical and economic cooperation. It has well established core and sectoral mechanisms, including periodical Summits, Ministerial and SO Meetings. BIMSTEC has its Permanent Secretariat in Dhaka since September 2014. It has its own Charter and a vision document called Bangkok BIMSTEC Vision 2030. It has a vast Agenda, comprising 16 Sectors. 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 it is engaged in external partnerships with the relevant UN, International and Regional Organisations.

BIMSTEC is the only regional organization that brings together South Asia and Southeast Asia on a common platform. The core strength of BIMSTEC has been consistent political support of its member States and its non-political ethos. BIMSTEC has remained focused on technical and economic cooperation, while staying away from divisive political issues. With institutional reforms being undertaken, BIMSTEC is poised to emerge as a dynamic and capable regional organization. 6th BIMSTEC Summit held recently has given a new momentum to it.

The geo-strategic significance of Bay of Bengal in Indo-Pacific region cannot be overstressed. The Bay of Bengal plays a crucial role in security and development of India as also its eastern neighbours, including ASEAN countries. Therefore, India's commitment to forging regional cooperation, with its eastern neighbours, in and around Bay of Bengal region, through BIMSTEC, is fully aligned with its broad IP strategy as well as its "Act East Policy", "MAHASAGAR Policy" and "Neighbourhood First Policy". BIMSTEC's success in forging regional cooperation will contribute to the success of Indo-Pacific strategy of India.

To conclude, I again thank CUTS International for its invitation and wish it success in all its endeavors.
