

Namaskar,  
Excellencies, Honourable Ministers  
Distinguished audience,  
Good Afternoon!

Thank you chair for inviting me to share my thoughts. It's a great privilege and honour to address this Conference. Before I do so, I want to thank India Foundation as well as the Government of Mauritius and the Government of India for inviting BIMSTEC to participate at the 9<sup>th</sup> IOC and the warm hospitality extended to us.

As pointed out by various speakers before me, 9th IOC provides a timely and vital platform for engaging in deliberations on critical challenges to Maritime Governance in IOR and delineating pathways for its collective stewardship. The welfare of entire humanity depends on it.

As Chairman India Foundation, Shri Ram Madhav Ji, pointed out yesterday in his inaugural address, in future, all Geopolitics will be regional. He had noted that the purpose of the IOC is to catalyze regional cooperation in IOR. A number of other Speakers spoke about decline in multilateralism and growing salience of regionalism.

The salience of regional organisations like BIMSTEC has grown due to financial and other challenges being faced by global multilateral institutions, such as UN and International Organizations. BIMSTEC has emerged as a vibrant and dynamic regional organization in IOR.

BIMSTEC shares the vision of a free, peaceful, stable and prosperous IOR. BIMSTEC Charter and Bangkok BIMSTEC Vision 2030 commit the member States to pursue the goal of a prosperous, resilient and open Bay of Bengal Region, a vital sub-region of IOR.

As you have heard from the speakers before me, the need to act together, both regionally and globally, to preserve the freedom of navigation and to deal with other challenges to maritime security, is more acute today than ever. Our Conference provides us a precious opportunity to define future pathways for forging regional maritime cooperation in IOR. The global peace and prosperity depends on inclusive collective stewardship of Indian Ocean.

Bay of Bengal is a critically important Sub-region of IOR. It connects South Asia to South East Asia and a large part of global energy and trade flows through the waters of Bay of Bengal.

BIMSTEC acts as a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia, as it has five members from South Asia - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka - and two members from South East Asia - Myanmar and Thailand. BIMSTEC has its own Charter. Regional cooperation

under BIMSTEC is also guided by its vision document, BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030. BIMSTEC has the requisite core and sectoral mechanisms to forge cooperation. It has a vast agenda comprising 18 sectors. In almost all Sectors, there are joint working groups or expert groups. Member States have concluded Action Plans, which are under implementation. All our member States act as Lead member States for leading cooperation in various sectors, BIMSTEC has already concluded a number of conventions, agreements and MoUs in different areas; many conventions, agreements and MoUs are under negotiation. We have already established 3 Centers of Excellence, and more Centers of Excellence are being established.

Given the centrality of Bay of Bengal, BIMSTEC has naturally attached a high priority to Maritime Cooperation. BIMSTEC has taken initiatives to strengthen maritime connectivity. The BIMSTEC agreement on maritime transport cooperation was signed at the 6th BIMSTEC Summit held in Bangkok in April 2025. Three member States have already ratified it. A Joint Shipping Committee is being set up to implement it. Further, India has hosted two Editions of BIMSTEC Ports Conclave, which brings together various port authorities of the member States and contributes to strengthening maritime connectivity. Moreover, India has proposed establishment of a Centre of Excellence on Maritime Transport, which will play the role of anchor in strengthening maritime transport cooperation.

Maritime Security Cooperation under BIMSTEC has focused on Maritime Domain Awareness, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Oil Pollution Response etc. The BIMSTEC Expert Group on Maritime Security Cooperation has finalized guidelines for maritime law enforcement agencies to ensure effective coordination during their interactions at sea. India has proposed to host the BIMSTEC Multilateral Maritime Security Exercise in the last quarter of 2026. BIMSTEC Member States will be considering, in future, initiatives aimed at framing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for cooperation among BIMSTEC maritime security agencies, enabling real-time intelligence sharing to counter cross-border maritime crimes.

In maritime domain awareness, there's a proposal to conclude BIMSTEC white shipping agreement. India will soon be presenting a draft for consideration of the member States.

BIMSTEC has established an Expert Group on Blue Economy to promote sustainable use of marine resources in Bay of Bengal. The Group will be meeting soon.

Recognizing the severe economic and environmental consequences of marine oil spills, BIMSTEC has finalized guidelines for coordinated regional oil spill response. Proposed initiatives include development of a regional contingency plan, standardized emergency procedures, joint pollution response exercises and capacity-building programs to enhance preparedness.

As regards HADR in maritime domain, the Expert Group on Maritime Security Cooperation has finalized BIMSTEC guidelines on maritime component of HADR.

Bay of Bengal is highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Under BIMSTEC, a Plan of Action on Comprehensive Disaster Management has been finalized. Four editions of BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise have been held to strengthen joint operational capabilities. Additionally, India has proposed establishment of a BIMSTEC Disaster Management Centre to serve as a focal point for coordinating regional HADR operations. BIMSTEC has also been pursuing collaboration with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) to enhance disaster response and resilience in Bay of Bengal region.

BIMSTEC has thus taken a number of initiatives to enhance maritime cooperation including maritime security cooperation and it is committed to deepen its growing maritime cooperation in future.

I would like to conclude by making a few practical recommendations:

Firstly, in view of various existing and emerging traditional and non-traditional maritime challenges, it is imperative to reinforce regional and sub-regional maritime cooperation under the existing regional platforms in IOR. Their existing cooperation in areas of maritime safety and security, maritime connectivity, management of maritime resources and protection of maritime ecosystem should be expanded and deepened.

Secondly, the regional platforms should also endeavor to forge cooperation in critical areas of energy security, food security, enhancing intra-regional trade and regionalization of supply chains in order to deal with the current and future disruptions in global flows of energy and trade.

Thirdly, various regional platforms in IOR, which have maritime cooperation on their agenda, like ASEAN, BIMSTEC, CSC, GCC, IFC-IOR, IOC IONS, IORA, should engage in consultation, coordination and cooperation among themselves in order to share their knowledge and best practices and benefit from one another's initiatives and programs.

Fourthly, since the existing regional organizations don't have all the IOR littoral countries as their members and they are not mandated to deal with the danger of disruption in maritime connectivity in IOR, should we create a new pan IOR platform, which will enable the countries in IOR, to work together, to ensure that there's no disruption in flow of energy and trade in Indian Ocean Region due to closure of Straits in future.

As an influential player in IOR, India has taken initiatives to enhance maritime cooperation in IOR, including establishing IFC-IOR, IONS, IORA, BIMSTEC, CSC, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative etc. It's, therefore, heartening to know that India will be hosting the 10th IOC. India is well positioned to take lead in creating a pan-IOR regional arrangement to ensure freedom of navigation and maritime security in IOR.

I thank India Foundation and co-hosts for giving BIMSTEC an opportunity to participate in this Conference. I wish 9<sup>th</sup> IOC success in its deliberations. I thank you for your kind attention. Have a joyful evening. Namaskar

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