

Twenty years of BIMSTEC: promoting regional cooperation and integration in the Bay of Bengal region

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BOOK REVIEW

Twenty years of BIMSTEC: promoting regional cooperation and integration in the Bay of Bengal region, edited by Prabir De, New Delhi, Knowledge World, 2018, pp. 292. Rs. 900, ISBN 978-93-87324-34-3 (hardback), ISBN 978-93-87324-35-0 (ebook)

The year 2017 marked the completion of two decades of existence of the subregional organization BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). A periodic assessment of any organization to review progress is not only desirable, but also necessary as it helps draw up a roadmap for the future. Brought out by BIMSTEC Secretariat to commemorate the grouping's 20th anniversary, the volume under review is an exercise to 'take stock of BIMSTEC's achievements and chart future direction of the organization.' The key objective of the book is to provide policy measures with the hope that the 'Next 20 years would be BIMSTEC's decades,' asserts Prabir De, the editor of the book. BIMSTEC has come a long way since it came into existence in 1997, but there is still a long way to go for the grouping to emerge as a key player in promoting integration and strengthening inclusive development in the Bay of Bengal subregion as well as the wider Indo-Pacific region. The introductory chapter observes that BIMSTEC is 'yet to make visible progress in advancing concrete cooperation among the member states.' Comprising five nations from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two nations from Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand), BIMSTEC is viewed as the link between the two regions and their regional institutions – South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

As a grouping based on deepening sector-specific cooperation among the member states, BIMSTEC has established several mechanisms in specific sectors identified for cooperation since its inception. Initially, six priority sectors of cooperation were identified that included trade & investment, transport & communication, energy, tourism, technology and fisheries. In 2005, BIMSTEC member states increased the number of priority sectors of cooperation by adding new areas that comprised of agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism & transnational crime, environment & disaster management, people-to-people contact and cultural cooperation. In 2008, climate change was added to the existing priority sectors making it the 14th priority area of cooperation. It is evident that BIMSTEC has expanded and diversified the areas of cooperation over the years. Notable among these sectors are the inclusion of security issues such as combating terrorism and ecological issues in managing climate change. This reflects the organization's flexibility in terms of both responding to emerging regional issues and the willingness to work together in tackling transnational issues. What is perhaps the most important development in the evolution of BIMSTEC as an organization is the establishment of a permanent secretariat in Dhaka in 2014, tasked with coordination of activities and programs of the grouping. This has demonstrated the political commitment of member states to the goals of BIMSTEC and their faith in the potential of the subregion.

The book is in four parts with each addressing the major themes of cultural and civilizational linkages; trade and investment; connectivity; and emerging challenges. The first three chapters under the cultural and civilizational theme discuss the 'connected history' and 'inclusive borderless' nature within the Bay of Bengal subregion as well as with the wider Indian Ocean region for over thousands of years. The underlying idea that runs throughout these chapters is the notion that the Bay of Bengal was a 'key connector' for South Asia, Southeast Asia and

China. Going several centuries back, the authors argue that the Bay of Bengal had always served as an important maritime trade and cultural routes for the region.

Using regional chronicles, Chinese court records and Western travelers' accounts, Kenneth R. Hall discusses in detail the rich cultural and trade interactions and engagements in the eastern Indian Ocean from 900–1500 CE. Documenting the civilizational linkages in the Bay of Bengal subregion until 1800 CE, Rila Mukherjee argues that the Bay of Bengal played a key role as a 'cultural mediator' from the ninth to the eleventh centuries that gave way to new exchanges from the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries as European powers replace traditional Southeast and South Asian maritime powers. In the eighteenth century, the British Empire consolidated its control over the littorals of the Bay which marked the beginning of yet another phase of building new routes and networks in the Bay of Bengal. Himansu Prabha Ray stresses the point that 'history of the seas that unite the BIMSTEC region should be discussed' and argues for the need of collaborative research on the rich transitional maritime heritages among the BIMSTEC member states as they provide a strong basis for building 'connectedness' among the Bay of Bengal nations. Ray argues that '[p]olitical boundaries demarcated on geopolitical considerations often spilt a continuous cultural region ...' (p. 62). The fourth chapter by Lungtaen Gyatso under this theme explores the deeper meaning of culture by looking it not merely as 'a maker of identity' but as an expression of 'the core values' of an individual. Taking Bhutan's concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as case to explain, Lungtaen argues that 'human beings not only want to be happy but [they] also want to have a good society, a good world' (p. 77). Applying such an idea as a guiding principle in community building for subregional groupings such as BIMSTEC may be useful.

The second and third parts of the book examine major economic themes in the BIMSTEC subregion and highlight key issues including trade, investment, connectivity and communication as well as specific issues such as 'blue economy,' trade logistics and transportation hub and 'gateway'. Most of the chapters highlight the close relationship between low intra-regional trade and investment among BIMSTEC countries and the weak transport connectivity infrastructure in the subregion. While recognizing the ongoing negotiations to establish the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA), the BIMSTEC customs union and the BIMSTEC trade facilitation agreement to boost trade and investment in the subregion, without cross-border seamless connectivity, these agreements may not sufficiently benefit trade and investment. Already there are several existing bilateral/regional trade agreements among the BIMSTEC member states and hence, Khondaker Golam Moazzem and Marzuka Ahmad Radia argue that the negotiation for BIMSTEC-FTA needs to focus on 'incremental trade' and 'put emphasis on various conditionality' on issues such as 'sensitive list, rules of origin and provision for services and investment under those agreements, etc.' (p. 102). To encourage trade and investment in BIMSTEC countries, Sanjay Kumar Mangla and Prithviraj Nath observe that there are several challenges both at the infrastructural and policy levels concerning tariff and non-tariff barriers, trade and investment facilitation, ease of doing business, high tax rates, etc. that need urgent measures to overcome. On the connectivity side, there is a strong consensus that the state of connectivity in the BIMSTEC subregion is one of the weakest links in achieving the objectives of BIMSTEC. A few recent positive developments in BIMSTEC include the efforts to conclude the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement, the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement, preparation of BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity as well as the acceptance of the Update BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study by the Asian Development Bank. Rohan Samarajiva discusses the current state of different mode of connectivity including digital, air, sea and land and suggests that 'geopolitical considerations' among major Asian powers – China, India and Japan might 'drive greater investment' in connectivity infrastructure in the BIMSTEC subregion (p. 164). Kavita Iyengar discusses not only air, land and maritime

connectivity but also emphasizes the need for development of national single windows to increase efficiency and enhance trade facilitation, upgradation of border infrastructure, land ports and logistics services.

The other four chapters under the economic theme deals with the opportunities and challenges of two specific countries Nepal and Myanmar, a landlocked region (India's Northeast) and the concept of 'blue economy' in the context of BIMSTEC. The significance of Myanmar's geostrategic location has long been recognized as the land-bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia and as a key littoral nation of the Bay of Bengal. Ko Ko Hlaing highlights the role of Myanmar as a 'golden gateway' between the Bay of Bengal and the 'heartland of Asia' and argues that the port-led development model initiated by Myanmar provides a 'win-win solution for mutual benefits, which can be a game changer in the regional cooperation and development' (p. 148). As US-China strategic rivalry intensifies in the region, Myanmar may find itself 'sandwiched' in great power politics. Ko Ko observes that whether Myanmar plays the role of a gateway would not only 'depend upon the capacity and wisdom of the country's leadership' but also the 'unity of regional players in Bay of Bengal' (p. 150). Viewing Nepal not as a landlocked but as a bridge between India and China, Pushpa Raj Rajkarnikar examines the status and prospects of Nepal's trade logistics and its implications on BIMSTEC countries. Nepal's trade logistics remains 'inadequate and inefficient,' but recent developments such as upgradation of road and rail corridors and transit facilities with neighboring countries, particularly, China and India would allow Nepal to play an important role in enhancing regional trade. C. Joshua Thomas and Deigracia Nongkynrih examine the role of India's Northeast region in economic integration of the BIMSTEC subregion by viewing the Northeast as a 'regional gateway,' owing to its geographical location as a land-bridge. The chapter identifies a number of potential areas of cooperation and stresses the need to prioritize people-to-people contacts. Exploring the potentials of harnessing 'blue economy' in the BIMSTEC, Kapil Narula outlines a comprehensive list of policy recommendations for the Indian government in managing maritime issues. With the longest coastline among the BIMSTEC countries, what India does would have a huge impact on the Bay of Bengal subregion and hence the ideas proposed for India fit in well with the wider subregional framework. In fact, India could take the lead in creating a blue economy for the subregion.

The fourth theme deals with emerging challenges and way forward for BIMSTEC. There is a growing recognition of the strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal in recent years. David Brewster focuses on the re-emergence of Bay of Bengal in the center-stage of global strategic dynamics as the connector of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, viewed increasingly from within the new Indo-Pacific concept. The chapter argues that BIMSTEC can play an important role in creating a 'new region in Asia' around the Bay of Bengal. Within the wider context of the Indian Ocean that is increasingly witnessing growing strategic competition among major powers, Zhu Cuiping explores the prospect of China-India cooperation and/or competition in the Bay of Bengal region or what Zhu calls the 'Sino-Indian cooperation dilemma.' The chapter suggests that it is the 'responsibility of Asian countries to avoid the strategic competition from rising to strategic confrontation' (p. 257). From a comparative perspective, De looks at BIMSTEC and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) with the aim of establishing common grounds for deepening cooperation between the two organizations and provides ways to strengthen inter-regional cooperation. Similarly, the concluding chapter by De and Suthiphand Chirathivat provides a set of policy recommendations with the aim to strengthen cooperation and economic integration in BIMSTEC as way forward.


This book has covered a wide range of issues concerning BIMSTEC with particular focus on cultural and economic issues. However, it may not be wrong to say that for a more balanced account of BIMSTEC, the political and security dimensions could have received the attention

they deserve in the book. The significance of the political and security aspects of BIMSTEC cannot be underestimated. Arguably, political drivers have played as much an important role, if not more, as economic and cultural factors in the revival of BIMSTEC. The growing convergence of politico-strategic interests among the BIMSTEC member states has provided the 'political push' for the emergence of the 'new region'. Within this context, a detailed examination on the political factors that have allowed for the revival of BIMSTEC would have been nice. An understanding of this issue will provide a clue on the kind of political environment that is likely to effect the progress of BIMSTEC. Similarly, there have been major developments on the security side in BIMSTEC including the establishment of meetings among national security chiefs of BIMSTEC nations as well as the holding of the first ever BIMSTEC's joint military exercise. A chapter exploring the prospects and challenges of security cooperation in BIMSTEC would have rounded-off all the key emerging issues. Moreover, an understanding of the politico-strategic environment is important because deepening economic cooperation requires political harmony among the member nations.

An issue that has come up from time to time is the question of expansion of membership of BIMSTEC. There have been voices in the region for the inclusion of countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia owing to their geographical proximity as littorals of the Bay of Bengal. A discussion exploring the pros and cons on expansion of membership would have contributed to the ongoing debate on the issue. Lastly, a new area that has been recognized as a potential area of cooperation in BIMSTEC is the mountain economy and some discussion on the potential for cooperation and challenges on the issue would have been apt. Moreover, in recent years, there have also been questions around the issue of the need to minimize the priority areas of cooperation with the hope to provide greater focus on the priority list of sectors. Spelling out this issue by examining the merits and demerits of such an approach as part of the way forward would have been appropriate. Having said that, this is a comprehensive account on BIMSTEC. One of the strengths of the book is that it has a good representation of scholars, mostly economists, from the BIMSTEC nations. The inclusion of two outsider's perspectives – Chinese and Australian – also add value to the book as they allow for understanding of how people outside BIMSTEC view the organization. This volume is a timely contribution to the growing literature on BIMSTEC in recent years and should be of interest to policy-makers and scholars both within and outside the BIMSTEC subregion.

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