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Vijay Sakhuja and Somen Banerjee, *Sea of Collective Destiny: Bay of Bengal and BIMSTEC*, (New Delhi, Pentagon Press, 2020), Pages: 192, Price: 795.00, (HB) Rs. 596.00 (SC)

From time immemorial, the Bay of Bengal [BoB] has been a maritime domain for Asian countries for trade and cultural exchanges. Before the Christian era [BCE], ancient Kalinga pioneered maritime exchanges across the BoB to lands east of India. Ports along India's Coromandel Coast and the coast of Odisha and Bengal, were trading across the BoB, with East and South East Asian ports in Malaya, Sumatra, Java, Borneo, the Moluccas (Maluku), and China. During the 8th-10th centuries CE, Arab traders were prominent players in sea-borne trade in the Arabian Sea and the BoB. The rise of the Chola Empire in southern India in the 11th and 12th centuries inherited this strong maritime tradition and legacy. The advent of European colonial powers subverted these ancient ties as they established their political and economic hegemony over Asian countries.

This book is a timely contribution to the literature on regionalism at a time when strategic restructuring is underway in the global order. It covers a wide range of issues, under the broad themes of Security, Economy, Geopolitics, Connectivity, and Regionalism. It examines the potential for knitting together a BoB oriented community of nations, with BIMSTEC as the pivot. Both the authors are former naval officers whose knowledge of strategic maritime affairs is evident in the narrative of the book. Published in the pre-COVID era, the book lacks inputs on the geopolitical and geo-economic impact of COVID. A unique feature of the book is that each chapter can be read as an issue brief. This is helpful for lay readers and scholars. On the negative side are occasional repetitions. End notes are comprehensive, and will be useful for readers who wish to delve further into the subject.

There is a useful discussion on "the dialectic of regionalism and regionalization" which sets the context. The evolution of regionalism through various stages, and why some geographic spaces manage to succeed in regional integration and some fail, are part of this context. By identifying the main criteria for regionalism – security, economy, culture – and how regionalism connects with its periphery as well as globalisation, the narrative focuses on the paradigms of regionalism in IR theory as well as its relationship with globalisation and its role in constraining an emerging hegemon via regional

structures. By adopting regionalism to develop powerful economic blocs, developing countries can create heft in the global economic order, and cope with unilateralism and hegemony.

The overview of the BoB as the highway for regional and international commerce and civilisational discourse during the past millennia is pithy. It links the current geopolitics of the BoB with reference to China's Maritime Silk Road [MSR], India's "Mausam" and Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum [GMF], and notes that there are no major boundary disputes within BIMSTEC, except for Myanmar and Thailand over three small islets. Apart from BIMSTEC, the BoB littorals are members of several regional organisations that promote economic cooperation and connectivity. Such cooperation has moved into the security domain with MILAN, a joint and coordinated naval patrol, information and intelligence sharing, humanitarian aid and disaster management [HADR] as well as Search and Rescue [SAR].

A large part of the book [6 Chapters] has been devoted to Traditional and Non-traditional Security issues, ranging from transnational organised crimes [TOCs], environment, migration, and climate change. It defines the nature of transnational organised crimes, and identifies trafficking in drugs/psychotropic substances as well as humans/wildlife as the main areas of transnational crimes. It recommends mitigation efforts via regional cooperation on the SAARC and BIMSTEC platforms, utilising the Colombo-based South Asian Regional Intelligence and Coordination Centre [SARICC] as the vehicle for cooperation. The remaining 5 Chapters deal with economic integration and connectivity as well as current geopolitical and geo-economic trends and challenges.

On Terrorism and Piracy, the book discusses various initiatives and institutional frameworks for cooperation. It suggests that India as the lead country for Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crimes [CTCC] – one of the 14 sectors for BIMSTEC cooperation – can develop greater synergy with other institutions like the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia [ReCAPP], the Indian Ocean Rim Association [IORA], and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium [IONS]. Noting that the BIMSTEC CTCC Convention is yet to be ratified and the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters [MLACM] is yet to be signed, the lack of urgency in formalising these institutional frameworks remains a serious deficiency in charting BIMSTEC's future trajectory.

Not surprisingly, Climate Change is highlighted as the most pressing issue/concern among non-traditional security challenges. Regional cooperation on issues like the rise in greenhouse gases and its impact on the

BoB and littoral countries, Sea Level Rise [SLR], the impact on crop yields, Ocean Acidification and Oxygen depletion is essential, although Climate Change mitigation demands a global response. It notes that the BoB already has developed “dead zones” that are bereft of marine life, endangering the livelihoods of millions dependent on fisheries. The BoB is already threatened by marine pollution [plastics, litter, industrial and agricultural waste], exacerbated by melting glaciers and drying rivers. Policy measures and cooperation among BIMSTEC members to move to non-renewable energy sources cannot be postponed.

Cyber-attacks and illegal migration are other non-traditional security threats that have grown with increasing incidents of piracy, disrupting commercial shipping and cargo handling at ports. Illegal migration, though not a new phenomenon, has increased in the BoB region. It has been caused by social and physical insecurity, local conflicts, religious persecution, and climate change factors. All these issues demand cooperation among BIMSTEC members and the BoB littoral countries.

Connectivity is an important pillar of building a community and the feeling of togetherness which the authors call “we-ness”. It identifies a successful connectivity ecosystem as having people-to-people contact and the ability to intermingle reasonably freely, transportation links with smooth movement of goods and services, and investment and digital connectivity for facilitating interactions at all levels. It notes that ports in BoB are not very profitable since container ships have to deviate from SLOCs and travel north to ports on India’s eastern seaboard – Chittagong in Bangladesh and Yangon in Myanmar. Smaller container ships have to enter a river to dock. These constraints inhibit large container ships. Port cities connectivity via coastal shipping arrangements will facilitate tourism and cultural contact at the people-to-people level, and lower costs for shipping companies.

India’s “Sagarmala” project seeks to remedy this as well as inland connectivity issues. The Bangladesh-India Coastal Shipping Agreement is a landmark agreement for local shipping in the BoB. Ro-Ro ships are now able to ship vehicles from Chennai to Mongla at a much lower cost. The harmonisation of Cabotage laws in the BoB will add to the greater movement of shipping among BIMSTEC and other BoB littoral countries. The “Sethusamudram” Canal Project [SCP] has the potential to reduce costs for shipping when it is completed, though the impact on fragile marine ecosystems remains a constant red flag for such projects. The Kra Canal, a potential connector between the BoB/Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, has a

similar potential, but has also aroused considerable environmental and political concerns.

Digital and Energy connectivity, tourism, and associated leisure activities have a huge potential for community building. Energy connectivity is in place for the BBIN countries and can be expanded into Myanmar and Thailand. The Tri-lateral highway project, when completed, can also facilitate Energy and Railway connectivity from India's north east to Myanmar, Thailand, and beyond.

The weakness of regionalism among BoB countries lies in its low 4 percent share of global GDP, despite having 23 percent of global population. While success in regionalism has transformed certain South East Asian countries into dynamic economies, India and Bangladesh too have logged impressive rates of growth. In this context, the advantages and challenges to regionalism and the structures of BoB countries individually have been examined.

The lack of economic corridors is a major constraint in growth and integration. An Economic Corridor demands the harmonisation of regulations as per international conventions, connectivity, standardisation, investment in cross-border infrastructure projects, and security coordination. Another factor is gender sensitivity, particularly at Land Customs Stations and Border Haats. Governments should deploy female customs and police officials at these cross-border nodes for encouraging female participation in cross-border trade.

The Blue Economy is a natural domain for BIMSTEC countries, except the two landlocked ones – Bhutan and Nepal. The development of the Blue Economy is closely connected with the 14 sectors identified for cooperation in BIMSTEC. The Blue Economy is also intimately linked with Maritime Security. The National Security Advisers [NSAs] of the BIMSTEC countries met for the first time in 2017, and then again in 2018. There is no agreed framework for cooperation yet. The UN-promoted Sustainable Development Goals [SDG] 2030 are also connected with several sectors of BIMSTEC cooperation; yet there is no progress on Joint Managements Plans - not even on the crucial issue of the protection of the Sunderbans, a unique ecosystem that protects the hinterland against annual cyclones in the BoB. While national measures by individual countries to fulfil SDGs 2030 are being implemented, collective strategies are absent as individual countries pursue national strategies in silos.

The geopolitical underpinnings in the BoB, in the absence of a community displaying “we-ness” despite the long civilisational maritime discourse, have been marked by political identities, nationalism, and identity politics fostered

by the nation state system. Yet, there is an underlying spirit of co-existence. The BIMSTEC countries and other littoral countries of the BoB are being buffeted by pulls and pressures generated by China's BRI and MSR. China's investments have, no doubt, built infrastructure that has added to nation building; yet the pitfalls of "debt trap diplomacy" have become quite apparent. The geopolitics of playing the "China card" by smaller countries and reducing India's influence is a natural magnet for India's neighbours and China. The latter is eager to increase its sphere of influence in pursuit of its ambition to be the regional/global hegemon. Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand are already dependent on Chinese military hardware, and are susceptible to Chinese politico-military pressure.

China has used economic reprisals to warn countries against taking anti-China positions on issues like COVID, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Australia and India are facing China's assault – the former via economic reprisals, and the latter via military intrusions along the LAC. China's COVID-related behaviour may ultimately lead to countervailing balancing, by bolstering the Quad, and should motivate BIMSTEC and the BoB littoral countries to strengthen their bonds, and expedite building a community. The recommendations proposed for a future road map, are worth pursuing.

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Lakhan Mehrotra. *The Odyssey of a Diplomat: Through the Corridors of Time*, (New Delhi, Heritage Publishers, 2020), Price: Rs. 595.00 (PB) ¹ 695.00 (HB), Pages: 356 (PB) 356 (HB)

Veteran diplomat Shri Lakhan Mehrotra's autobiographical book *The Odyssey of a Diplomat: Through the Corridors of Time* is both a narrative of the rich experience of the author and a reflection on the history and cultures of the various countries where he served. During his illustrious career spanning almost five decades, the author witnessed as well as participated in historic events in places as diverse as Tibet, East Timor, Argentina and the erstwhile Soviet Union.