Second Roundtable of BIMSTEC Network of Think-Tanks (BNTT)

BIMSTEC Integration: Challenges and Tasks Ahead

Venue: University of Calcutta, Alipore Campus, Kolkata

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The Centre for Studies in International Relations and Development (CSIRD) organised a Roundtable of BIMSTEC Network of Think-Tanks - “BIMSTEC Integration: Challenges and Tasks Ahead” in collaboration with the Institute of Foreign Policy Studies (IFPS), University of Calcutta and CUTS International Public Policy Centre (CIPPolC). CSIRD being the sole institution involved in sustained research on BIMSTEC and managing an independent BIMSTEC Network of Think Tanks (BNTT), is committed towards providing research based policy inputs to the BIMSTEC integration process. This second Roundtable was attended by prominent Think-Tanks from the BIMSTEC region and diplomatic representatives of the BIMSTEC Countries based in Kolkata. The Roundtable was conceptualised and organised at a very short notice and this would not have been possible without the support of various organisations and individuals. At the outset, we wish to thank the Secretary General of BIMSTEC, Amb. Sumith Nakandala for his appreciation of our efforts and encouraging us to deepen our involvement in BIMSTEC. We extend our deepest gratitude to Professor Suranjan Das, the Hon’ble Vice Chancellor of University of Calcutta and the Director of Institute of Foreign Policy Studies (IFPS) for agreeing to support us in this effort and extending major financial support. Our gratitude is also due to Shri Pradeep Mehta, Secretary General of CUTS International for bringing CUTS International Public Policy Centre (CIPPolC) into the BNTT fold and lending us a helping hand for the Roundtable. His promise of continuous support in future is highly appreciated and encouraging.

We are thankful to Ambassador Rajeet Mitter for his enriching Keynote Address that provided us with a clear idea about the status of BIMSTEC, the potential of the arrangement and the areas that need greater effort for the success of the BIMSTEC process. We are thankful to the BIMSTEC Secretariat and to Md. Safiqur Rahman, Director of BIMSTEC Secretariat for attending the Roundtable and contributing to the discussion with his valuable inputs. We thank all the Think Tanks and research bodies from BIMSTEC countries namely, Institute of Foreign Policy Studies (IFPS), CUTS International Public Policy Centre (CIPPolC), Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of Sri Lanka, University of Dhaka, India Studies Centre (ISC)- Chulalongkorn University, Dagon University- Myanmar and South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE) for joining the network (BNTT) and pledging their continued effort towards promoting the agenda of BIMSTEC. The presence of eminent persons - Ambassador Krishnan Srinivasan, former Foreign Secretary of India, Lt. Gen. (Retd.) John Mukherjee, Professor Hari Vasudevan (Professor-University of Calcutta), Amb Dago Tshering (Former Ambassador of Bhutan to India) - added great value to the discussion and helped us preparing an useful road map for BNTT.

The diplomatic presence of the BIMSTEC countries reassured the commitment of the BIMSTEC members. We are thankful to Mr. Kyaw Thu (Vice Consul of Myanmar in Kolkata), Ms. Sita Basnet (Consul of Nepal in Kolkata), Md. Saiful Islam (First Secretary-Commercial- Dy. High Commission for Bangladesh in Kolkata), and Dr. Abhijit Sen (Consul of Sri Lanka in Kolkata) for their active participation in preparing the future road map for BNTT. Last but not the least, we express our heartfelt thanks to all the chairpersons, speakers, panelist, participants and volunteers who contributed immensely to the success of the Roundtable.
The Centre for Studies in International Relations and Development (CSIRD), in collaboration with the Institute of Foreign policy Studies (IFPS) and CUTS International Public Policy Centre (CIPPolC) organised the second Roundtable of BIMSTEC Network of Think Tanks (BNTT) on 28th March 2015 in Kolkata involving some prominent Think Tanks from all BIMSTEC countries. The Roundtable was also attended by the Director of BIMSTEC Secretariat, Mr. Shafiqur Rahman, Ambassador Krishnan Srinivasan, former Foreign Secretary of India, Ambassador Rajeet Mitter, Former High Commissioner to Bangladesh and Ambassador to the Philippines, Ambassador Dago Tshering, former Ambassador of Bhutan to India, Consuls and Deputy High Commissioners of BIMSTEC countries in Kolkata, prominent media houses and academics from various other academic institutes. Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Dr. B.S. Malik, the President of CSIRD delivered the welcome address and chaired the inaugural session. Amb Rajeet Mitter delivered the Keynote Address in the inaugural session, while Mr. Pradeep Mehta, Secretary General of CUTS, delivered the Special Address. The First Secretary General of BIMSTEC, Ambassador Sumith Nakandala sent his message to the Roundtable, which was readout by the Director of BIMSTEC Mr. Shafiqur Rahman during his Secretarial Address. The Roundtable had a twofold objective. First, it aimed at discussing the issues that are pertinent to the evolution of BIMSTEC; and second, it aimed at preparing a roadmap for the Think Tanks within the region to take the BIMSTEC agenda forward. Divided into six broad thematic sessions, the Roundtable delved deep into questions that challenge the development of BIMSTEC into an effective regional arrangement. The following were the major discussions.

**Trade, Investment and Development**

The Bay of Bengal region is a dynamic and eventful region and the BIMSTEC is an addition to this. Though the achievements of this regional arrangement may have been not optimal, but one cannot deny the importance of BIMSTEC as it is at the centre of a very large...
volume of global trade. As a region BIMSTEC has the advantage having 22% of world’s population and a combined GDP of US$ 2.7 trillion. It is also unique evincing both micro-level approach and sectoral approach that aims at ensuring cooperation on specific sectors and facilitating spill over into other sectors that can then lead to macro level cooperation among the BIMSTEC countries. One way to achieve this is to create several Common Economic Zones (CEZs) involving BIMSTEC countries that may be conceptualised on the now operating border haat, but at bigger level. There are such haats at the borders between India and Bangladesh, India and Myanmar but trading items in these haats are limited. The concept can be widened to create special economic zones based on resources available on both sides of the border between two countries. This could be successful given the fact that BIMSTEC as a region has higher trade potential for intra-regional trade in comparison to SAARC. There are more trade complementarities among the BIMSTEC countries than among the SAARC countries. This is primarily due to the presence of Thailand and Myanmar who have a product basket substantially different from the product basket of the South Asian countries. Moreover, there should be trade facilitation projects for greater economic gains for the BIMSTEC member countries. The trade facilitation projects in BIMSTEC shall aim to simplify trade processes and procedures, establish Single Window, facilitate setting up regional standard organisation, etc. Besides, Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) ought to be removed or rationalised.

BIMSTEC can also look forward towards the intra-industry trade (as it happens in the European Union), but for that level of trade, industrialisation of the region is a prerequisite. Individual countries of BIMSTEC may fall short of viable industrial areas but as a collective BIMSTEC can use itself as a big market for value added products. BIMSTEC has to ensure competitive advantage in some sectors in order to grow at a faster rate. Innovation is very important for gaining competitive advantage in some sectors. Thus, countries within the region must focus on skill development and encourage innovation in the member countries to enable our youth to cause and sustain high growth in the region. There is yet another need for integration of market, growth, and investment in the region. FDI can cause faster economic growth within the BIMSTEC region. Regional FDI in BIMSTEC is very low. There should be more intra-regional FDI to build BIMSTEC as the conduit to join the South Asian value chain with the ASEAN or East Asian value chain. Integration in financial sector will act as a boost to regional trade and investment in key sectors of each country to attain competitive advantages. One may look towards the activities and experiences of SAFTA however limited they may be and use them rationally in operationalizing BIMSTEC FTA.
Promotion and Development of Tourism to Initiate Sectoral Cooperation

Unfortunately, BIMSTEC countries are competing with each other in many sectors rather than cooperating with each other and this is true in the tourism sector. Cooperation in the tourism sector can be initiated immediately to improve people to people contact and boost economy. There remains huge potential in tourism if member countries cooperate and invest strategically to improve the tourism infrastructure and market tourism potential collectively. The Buddhist circuit tourism alone has a potential of over US$ 5 billion per year for the region. Tourism infrastructure, manpower and regional connectivity need to be improved to realise the full potential of tourism in the region. BIMSTEC needs to learn lessons from ASEAN and adopt methods like smart visa facility to boost tourism within the BIMSTEC region. It would also not be a wishful thinking to design and implement a Schengen type visa facility within BIMSTEC that ease movement of people within the region not only for travel but also for work. The details have to be worked out in accordance with the needs of the BIMSTE countries. However, this should not be difficult to achieve as all most all the BIMSTEC countries have visa on arrival facilities bilaterally. Increasing air connectivity is the beginning point to improve intra-regional tourism. In fact BIMSTEC countries have to look at the possibilities of promoting physical connectivity in order to boost tourism.

Connectivity among the BIMSTEC Countries

One cannot imagine the growth of a region like the BIMSTEC without establishing connectivity. BIMSTEC has better prospects in comparison to other regional arrangements in the proximity as it has both land and sea connectivity among the majority of its members. This also promises better development prospects for the land-locked areas such as Nepal, Bhutan and Northeast India. In the case of Northeast India, one of the issues that prevented the Look East Policy of India to help the Northeast is the lack of sea outlet for the Northeast. With inclusion of both Myanmar and Bangladesh in the BIMSTEC arrangement, Northeast India can avail greater access to regional economy and market not only through land but also through the seas of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Already more than 100 connectivity projects have been identified within the region under a study “BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS)” commissioned by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). A huge list of connectivity projects among the BIMSTEC countries had been identified and some are being implemented but they are not attached to the BIMSTEC framework. As a result, most of these proposals have been carried out either at a bilateral level or by other organisations while BIMSTEC remained inactive. Now there is a need to supplement the existing and on-going projects so as to consolidate these connectivity projects into a larger
connectivity project under BIMSTEC. Railway connection is one such area where BIMSTEC needs to focus in order to give the connectivity projects a holistic fillip. Emphasis needs to be put on softer aspects of connectivity like border management, motor vehicles agreement, transit facilities and trade facilitation (as mentioned before) and BIMSTEC has the scope of doing some pioneering work in these areas.

Rationalisation of digital connectivity would help facilitate regional integration. Digital connectivity is a great facilitator of trade. There is a need to streamline digital connectivity among the BIMSTEC countries so that businessmen and other stakeholders can interact among themselves at a moderate and uniform rate to carry forward trade and other communication. A lot of activities are also happening within the countries of BIMSTEC in establishing and connecting energy grids and energy pipelines. This is one area where the BIMSTEC countries could do pioneering work in tapping energy resources within the region and facilitate transmissions and transportation through a well-designed and connected network of energy grids and pipelines. Rejuvenating the old Mekong-India Corridor as a viable way of connecting the countries of Thailand and CLMV countries as much as establishing links with South India and Sri Lanka is a suggestion that BIMSTEC could take seriously. In order to do this the ADB is the most reliable development partner. BIMSTEC countries have to take advantage of it and engage ADB in the region.

Creating and Strengthening the BIMSTEC Identity

One needs to draw lessons from ASEAN also. There has been a huge campaign to popularise the concept of ASEAN by their members. BIMSTEC countries have to invest in building the BIMSTEC identity through a sustained campaign. Campaign would serve the purpose of spreading awareness about BIMSTEC and at the same time would lead to the building of a BIMSTEC identity as it has happened in the case of ASEAN. A suggestion has been made to encourage academic exchanges among BIMSTEC countries that should be encouraged to promote people to people contact and sustained articulation of the BIMSTEC identity. Certainly, the BIMSTEC Secretariat must be strengthened both with resources and manpower to effectively coordinate the growth of the BIMSTEC idea. The bigger economies of BIMSTEC need to take ownership of the BIMSTEC process and provide leadership to the process. India and Thailand must invest in promoting the idea of BIMSTEC. Thailand has started the process, while India is yet to become more pro-active. For India, BIMSTEC can provide the much needed boost to India’s Look East Policy and can help India materialise its newly launched “Act East Policy”. In addition, BIMSTEC provides the best opportunity to end the economic isolation of the Northeast region of India.
Thus on a priority basis, the Government of India should create a separate division for BIMSTEC in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and empower it with enough resources to lead the BIMSTEC arrangement. Important to note that BIMSTEC has the advantage of not being hijacked by the India-Pakistan bilateral dynamics, has Myanmar as a member and more importantly Thailand, a relatively improved economy, in BIMSTEC, and thus there exists a favourable political environment for causing faster development in the region.

**Security Concerns**

All are aware that the definition of security has undergone profound change. Concepts that were not considered strategic enough now form a very important part of the security discourse. New institutions and practices are being invented to deal with the expanding number of items in the security agenda. Regional organisations are playing increasingly important role in shaping the security agenda and BIMSTEC should not be an exception to this trend. The region faces a number of conventional and non-conventional security challenges. There is a huge (over 600 million) circulation of small arms in the BIMSTEC region majority of which are in the hands of non-state actors operating transcending borders. Terrorism is becoming trans-national day by day and BIMSTEC is also increasingly getting affected by terrorist onslaughts. Ethnic unrest in one country is developing into major insurgency that sooner or later find ways of establishing links with transnational outfits. This is apprehended to affect economic development apart from basic security issues. For instance, investors are not interested in India’s North Eastern Region (NER) because of the insecurity situation arising from insurgency and terror threats. Subsequently, NER seems to be one of the less developed parts of India. Parallel illegal economy and presence of underground forces on the borders of BIMSTEC countries make regulating transnational crime difficult. Again a suitable example is India’s NER. In addition, the use of sophisticated technology and of the cyber space to commit terror and transnational crimes calls for multilateral arrangements to curb this menace. Thus, all the countries of BIMSTEC, especially India need to pro-actively cultivate her neighbours to keep the level of transnational crime within check and prevent terror networks from growing in the region. Joint training, monitoring and joint operations among of the BIMSTEC countries to curb cybercrime and other forms of transnational crimes is the need of the hour. BIMSTEC should start thinking and acting along these lines.
Thank you very much Gen. Malik, Prof. Mehta, Prof. Mehta, Prof. Shafiqur Rahman, Mr. Shantanu Chakrabarti and distinguished guests here. We are very happy to have with us Mr. Krishnan Srinivasan, former Foreign Secretary of India, who has also much to contribute to our discussions today. Let me thank CSIRD, IFPS and CUTS for inviting me to this very important Roundtable discussion on BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC is something very close to my heart because there was a period when I worked in the commerce ministry, where I used to frequently meet Mr. Mehta, where I was very directly involved in the FTA negotiations, which of course did not see the immediate light of the day but I believe now some new life has been breathed into it.

This is a timely Roundtable because there is new energy in BIMSTEC. The third summit in Nay Pyi Taw last year was extremely useful and set up a powerful new agenda, and of course the establishment of the secretariat gives it some permanence and direction and we look forward to working closely with the Secretariat in pushing BIMSTEC forward. I think the intrinsic advantages of BIMSTEC have already been referred to by previous speakers, that it is the only real bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. It is a unique opportunity for the LDC countries in this region to draw some benefits from association with the larger economies of India and Thailand and certainly BIMSTEC should look at non-reciprocal benefits to the LDC countries. It of course fully compliments India’s LEP and now Act East Policy and is a vital part in this journey that has been going on since 1991.

I think the most important point here is that it brings the relatively underdeveloped and landlocked North East of India into the heart of LEP. This is an extremely important point because I have travelled a lot in the North East and the first question that comes is that “India has been doing LEP, we are the eastern most provinces of India, where do we fit into this?” I think that is a central theme from an Indian perspective, not from our friends’ from other BIMSTEC countries. Having said that since we are in a closed group and we are brainstorming I think we should acknowledge that BIMSTEC has not lived up to its high expectations.
When it was first started in 1997, progress has been there in various committees but in terms of visible beneficial outcomes the record is less, but modest. The second point is much of the BIMSTEC agenda has been, if I may have to use the word hijacked, by bilateral, sub regional and regional initiatives outside BIMSTEC. This is a fact that has to be faced head on and to be seen what can BIMSTEC do in this. So against this background, I will just bring up some ideas which we can deliberate on further in the course of the day. The first point is has BIMSTEC spread itself too thin? Now if you remember when BIMSTEC started in early years there were I think 6 areas of cooperation today that has grown to 14 areas of cooperation. Some of these areas have moved well, from what I understand, some have not, that much. So should we now look at prioritization and a more focused agenda? In this context I will recall the speech made by the then India’s External Affairs Minister Mr. Salman Khurshid at the last summit in Myanmar, where he said that BIMSTEC should look at 5 priority areas namely- connectivity, economic cooperation, energy, security and people to people contact. I think it’s probably a coincidence that your Roundtable today is also looking at these areas in particular, so this is something for the secretariat to think about and to see whether we should go in for some prioritization and sequencing of the activities of BIMSTEC. We know that the important issue is that, much of BIMSTEC agenda is being handled by other organizations such as SAARC, ASEAN, BCIM etc. So BIMSTEC must now find out where it can supplement and compliment the initiatives that are already under way and also to carve out niche area for itself where it can lead in regional cooperation.

Let me illustrate this with few examples, we again will be discussing these in details later, if you take the issue of connectivity, BIMSTEC was a pioneer in connectivity. The study done by ADB as a partner of BIMSTEC, called BTILS, which was commissioned in 2005 and then finished in 2009, gave a huge menu of connectivity projects; I think some 100 projects in all. This was the first solid professional study of the issue of connectivity and yet we find that lots of connectivity projects today are being pushed by other organizations. Let me just mention a few, though it is all known to you. At bilateral level, India and Bangladesh are doing the Howrah – Agartala rail link, the Sabroom to Ramgarh road link across the Feni river, which will open a route to Chittagong port. With India and Myanmar there is this Kaladan multi model project. There is also road from Aizawl to Kale opening up the route through Mizoram. Then we have at sub regional level the trilateral highway, India, Myanmar, Thailand and of course same new initiative there is this BCIM economic corridor proposal. Then we have the new Chinese proposal in the form of southern silk route and maritime silk route. So, where would BIMSTEC fit into this pattern of connectivity projects.
that are going on? One way of looking at it, as I said, you supplement the efforts that are already going on. BIMSTEC could look at rail connectivity, which has not had much focus. There are missing links between India and Myanmar, and Myanmar and Thailand, which can be looked at. But I think one emphasis could also be on what is termed as soft aspect of connectivity. It’s not just physical connectivity that is important but there are many other areas such as trade facilitation, border management, motor vehicles agreement and things like that. Transit is another important issue that will have to be addressed sooner or later, and I feel BIMSTEC could do pioneering work in this. There is another little grouping I don’t know if you all are aware of, it’s called BBIN and there are so many of these. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India, they have I believe, Pradeep will tell us more about it later, done some agreement on motor vehicles, how motor vehicles can cross borders, that could be expanded to BIMSTEC context as a supplement to the existing connectivity.

Similarly if you look at trade and investment, there has been so many FTAs now in this region, SAFTA not only came into force but has been deepened in December 2011, where India gave non reciprocal benefits to LDC countries, virtually opening Indian market to the LDCs. There is the India-Sri Lanka FTA, India ASEAN and yet the BIMSTEC FTA for various reasons got stuck. Now again I am told that it is very close to completion and I saw a quote by Bangladesh minister saying that in course of 2015, the FTA should be signed and I hope that is so. But we should look at how this FTA will add value to the other FTAs that are already there, and here again I would stress that we need to have special facilities for LDCs, which India has given under SAFTA and Thailand can extend that to other LDCs to make it FTA plus, FTA that are already existing to add some value to that. Similarly we move into services and investment, which is extremely important because we are looking not at free flow of trade but also eventually of co-production networks, established services, trade moving, this is particularly relevant from Indian perspective for the North East where already there are medical services being extended form Manipur to Myanmar.

The last area, I will just mention briefly, is energy, where again a lot has happened in last few years between India and Bangladesh. There is a new study to bring transmission line from Assam across northern Bangladesh to evacuate some 5000 MW from the North East into India and Bhutan. Between India-Bhutan and India-Nepal there are grids already linked and there is substantial energy trade going on already. There is huge energy potential in North East of India and in Northern Myanmar, so we should look at not just connecting the grids and here again I believe there has been a very good progress, because the energy group I met two weeks ago, I am told that blue print connecting the grids has been finalised.
Besides electricity, we can look at gas and petroleum products. Myanmar is supposed to have the 10th largest gas reserves in the world. There is already a pipeline carrying Myanmar gas to China. But we could look at reviving the old ideas of the India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh gas pipeline. With the resolution of maritime boundary dispute between India and Bangladesh, and Bangladesh and Myanmar a lot of exploration activity in Bay of Bengal has now picked up and lot of Indian companies are involved in this. One expects lot of hydrocarbons will be found in this region, so this, I would suggest should be the focus for BIMSTEC; i.e. to see how this can be best harnessed for the benefit of all BIMSTEC countries.

So this is the issue of supplementing and carving out new areas for BIMSTEC to do. Let me just touch briefly, we are running out of time, so, I will just throw this up for may be further discussion. Should BIMSTEC look at bringing others in? I don’t believe in unnecessarily expanding membership, I think BIMSTEC could get other countries involved or other institutions involved in specific projects. What comes to mind immediately is the old idea of Mekong India Economic Corridor, which never took off but with the development of the Dawei port in Myanmar linking up with Thailand and CLMV countries and that opens up the route not just to southern India but also to Sri Lanka, other member of BIMSTEC, progress can be expected. So this is a project which has not moved at all and perhaps BIMSTEC could look at this similarly to bring in funding from ADB, from Japan, From China because funding is a major issue that we all have to face.

Final thought is, I have already touched on this point, the focus on North East. I think from Indian perspective, we must always look at how it is going to benefit, how it is going to be a challenge for the North East to open up to countries that are the immediate east neighbours. Our own economic corridor shows North East has much to gain if it is properly calibrated and properly executed. So I leave it at that and I look forward to some concrete discussions.

Thank you very much.
At the outset let me extend very warm greetings from the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka. It is rather unfortunate that I am not in a position to be here with you today and to participate in the Second Roundtable of BIMSTEC Network of Think-Tanks (BNTT) on ‘BIMSTEC Integration: Challenges and Tasks Ahead.’

Professor Binoda would recall that my first contact with him as the Director of CSIRD was even before my assuming the post of Secretary General of BIMSTEC in August 2014. He would also recall the first meeting we had in Kolkata.

On behalf of the Secretariat, I express my gratitude to the organisers of this event especially CSIRD for giving me this opportunity to share the BIMSTEC Secretariat’s perspective and initiatives on the topic.

BIMSTEC Secretariat, came into being after almost 2 decades of the start of the process. The idea of the permanent Secretariat emanated from the need to have a mechanism or institution to expedite cooperation in priority areas through effective coordination and facilitation of its BIMSTEC activities and programs. The Secretariat is now located in Dhaka. However, with its six months’ existence, with only two officers; Secretary General and the Director, the institution is at its nascent stage and in the making. We certainly feel challenged to take it to an institutional shape—a nerve centre for coordination and facilitation of the BIMSTEC-led projects, programmes and activities.

Ladies and Gentleman, BIMSTEC is considered a unique regional grouping. First it is seen to be a natural link or bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia; two vibrant growth poles in Asia. BIMSTEC as a region is seen as a high potential growth zone in Asia. The uniqueness lies in its geographical contiguity and access to the Bay of Bengal and Eastern coast of the Indian Ocean. The uniqueness of BIMSTEC is in multi-sectoral approach compared to other Asian blocs. Another uniqueness lies in the structural process of the organization. BIMSTEC cooperation is focused on the micro issues like sectoral cooperation and gradually moving towards the macro issues like forging agreements such as a trade agreement. This gives a considered and sustained layer of cooperation to ensure quicker integration.
The share of Intra-regional trade in BIMSTEC currently starts at 75 billion US$ which accounts for about 7 per cent of the global trade. The region is set to establish a Free trade Area, the BIMSTEC-FTA. The Framework Agreement on BIMSTEC-FTA signed in 2004 covers trade in goods, services and investment but with minimal progress. With Sri Lanka’s submission of the commitments of Tariff Schedule last November, the process is on the move again.

Let me share the Secretariat’s perspective on the organization of the event. Think Tank engagement is an initiative under the priority area of cooperation called the People-to-People Contact. There are two processes under the BIMSTEC Network of Think-Tanks (BNTT) which is a Track-II initiative and the official one is the BIMSTEC Networks of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT).

The Secretariat has noted with interest the seminal research works undertaken by the Centre for Studies for International Relations and Development (CSIRD) on the BIMSTEC for the last nine years. Some of the works deserve special mention like the special Report on BIMSTEC Conference and Curtain Raiser, May 2013, Asian Integration Process and BIMSTEC, Trade Performance and Integration Experience of BIMSTEC: A Review of Issue etc. The 16th SOM held in Nay Pyi Taw conveyed its deep appreciation to the CSIRD for convening a seminar of Curtain Raiser on BIMSTEC in May 2013 in Yangon, Myanmar.

We hope that CSIRD will continue to provide leadership with ideas and insights with its research and publication on BIMSTEC issues. We feel the gap of research works on BIMSTEC as we proceed with works. As a region, BIMSTEC is the least-researched and least focused area. The Secretariat would appreciate area-based study and re-evaluation of the areas of cooperation.

From our part, we assure you that we in BIMSTEC could take up the challenges. We hope that our collective efforts will bring benefits to the people of our region for a better future. That would be the promise of BIMSTEC.

Thank you very much.
1. Centre for Studies in International Relations and Development (CSIRD) organised the second Roundtable of the BIMSTEC Network of Think-Tank (BNTT) on 28 March 2015 at Kolkata in collaboration with the Institute of Foreign Policy Studies (IFPS) of University of Calcutta and CUTS International Public Policy Centre (CIPPolC). CSIRD realised the importance of a Network of Think-Tanks in promoting the BIMSTEC agenda and thus initiated BIMSTEC Network of Think-Tanks (BNTT) way back in 2005. CSIRD has been operating the BNTT and contributed to the BIMSTEC process through continuous research and periodic publications to spread awareness about BIMSTEC. This Roundtable of policy think-tanks was organised as a follow-up to the declaration of 3rd BIMSTEC Summit which was held in Myanmar in April 2014.

2. Although BIMSTEC made its humble beginning in the year 1997, till recently, it remained as a low profile regional bloc and there are many reasons for this underachievement. Nevertheless, one can see a rejuvenated momentum to the BIMSTEC process at present. Participation of prominent Think-Tanks from all BIMSTEC countries within a short notice of less than two weeks makes one believe in a strong potential of BIMSTEC. Most importantly, BIMSTEC now has a permanent secretariat at Dhaka with Ambassador Sumith Nakandala as its first Secretary General; and the interest of the secretariat and particularly of Amb. Nakandala in promoting this Network of Think-Tanks has made this Roundtable special and meaningful as we have gathered to prepare a roadmap for the regional bloc. Bay of Bengal has been playing a key role in the regional maritime architecture. The resurgence of BIMSTEC, centering around the Bay of Bengal, is critical to the Asian integration process in the backdrop of India’s Act East Policy. BIMSTEC has high economic potential, given the region’s economic dynamism, huge markets and rich natural resources. The growing economic dynamism in the region makes it clear that there should be greater regional collaboration among the stakeholders to effectively address and confront non-traditional security issues such as cyber security, maritime security, energy security and food security.

3. BIMSTEC is a unique experiment that sets itself apart from all other regional arrangements that have broad mandates and some element of strategic interest embedded in it. This is the only arrangement that promises to “improve the quality of life and well-being of the people” through deeper economic and social cooperation. To achieve this objective,
the members have identified 14 specific sectors for mutual and multilateral cooperation. BIMSTEC’s origin belongs to UNESCAP study in 1990s, a proposal later pursued by Thailand. In view of the forthcoming BIMSTEC Summit in Nepal, it has been recommended that consolidation of regional cooperation sectors at BIMSTEC is essential as there are overlaps between the regional blocs in terms of projects and programmes. At the same time, countries should also focus on non-traditional issues such as maritime security, counter-terrorism measures, post-2015 development agenda, connectivity, border area development, cultural and media cooperation, etc. and not just trade and investment issues.

4. The 2nd Roundtable of think-tanks deliberated intensively on all these sectors and all the participants are convinced that there lies a great potential in tapping resources in common for the benefit of all in the region. It is also clear that there remain certain impediments that need to be removed in order to achieve the full development potential of this region. This Roundtable, with the participation of prominent think-tanks from all BIMSTEC countries and the diplomatic representatives, draw the following line of activities.

BNNT remains committed to furthering the agenda of BIMSTEC through persistent research and regular publication of research based policy briefs for the policy makers of the BIMSTEC countries. A comprehensive study on sectoral value chains among the BIMSTEC countries and a study on trade in services for sectors such as information technology, education, tourism, etc. among BIMSTEC countries are identified as immediate priorities.

- BNNT will work as a Track II forum facilitating negotiations among BIMSTEC countries in order to remove the barriers to trade, investment and energy cooperation. BNNT proposes that there should be BIMSTEC Economic Summit every second year to begin with and welcomes the proposal of CUTS International Public Policy Centre to hold the first Summit in the year 2016.

- Connectivity and backend infrastructure needs to be improved in all BIMSTEC countries. BNNT member organisations will engage themselves in developing feasible proposals for regional cooperation in collaboration with each other and in coordination with the BIMSTEC Secretariat.

- Connectivity is key to the regional integration in BIMSTEC. Participants appreciated the Asian Development Bank’s BTILS study. To implement the recommendations of BTILS, BIMSTEC countries should undertake transport connectivity projects across the region. Trade facilitation projects, border connectivity projects, etc., and visa facilitation in the form of a regional arrangement should be promoted.

- BIMSTEC region suffers from various forms of NTMs. Rationalisation of NTMs would facilitate the regional trade. The region needs an FTA. Regional FTA coupled with trade facilitation would generate more value addition to the economies. BNNT urges the BIMSTEC member countries to work towards an early operationalization of BIMSTEC FTA.
• Access to Bay of Bengal is the greatest advantage of BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC countries shall promote coastal shipping in the region in a cooperative manner. More shipping links, particularly between Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar would pave the way for faster trade in the region. Besides, BIMSTEC countries shall exchange regular information on the use of fishing trawlers, early weather warning system, coastal protection projects, etc.

• BNTT shares the global concern that terrorism, trans-border crime and cyber-crimes are critical to regional cooperation, not only in BIMSTEC but also in any part of the world. BNTT shall focus on devising cooperative mechanisms in BIMSTEC to tackle these commonly shared concerns of the region.

• There is a shared conviction that without the development of the least developed members of the BIMSTEC grouping, overall growth in BIMSTEC region is not possible. Thus, BNTT would advocate and work towards capacity building in the least developed countries.

• BNTT pledges to promote the idea of sustainable development and as part of this would promote sustainable exploitation and conservation of the eco-system including the fragile ecosystem of Bay of Bengal.

• People to people interaction and mutual cultural understanding are the keys to cementing regional bond and BNTT urges both government and private institutions of the BIMSTEC countries to promote tourism and cultural exchanges.

• CSIRD being the nodal organisation of BNTT shall work closely with BIMSTEC Secretariat on BIMSTEC integration process and will host events such as seminars, Roundtables and workshops in collaboration with IFPS, CUTS and other interested members of the network. It should also promote cooperation with ADB and the World Bank.

• It is recommended that the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in the Government of India shall set-up an exclusive wing on BIMSTEC, which may emerge as a new division as the work load goes up.

• BNTT will organise a curtain raiser before the 4th BIMSTEC Summit in Kathmandu.

5. The third Roundtable of BNTT will be held in early 2016. The participants of the Roundtable of BIMSTEC Network of Think-Tanks (BNTT) appreciated the efforts of the CSIRD in taking the initiative to rejuvenate the BIMSTEC Track II process and the generous support of Institute of Foreign Policy Studies (IFPS) and CUTS International Public Policy Centre (CIPPolC).
Second Roundtable of BIMSTEC Network of Think-Tanks (BNTT)

*BIMSTEC Integration: Challenges and Tasks Ahead*

Venue: University of Calcutta, Alipore Campus, Kolkata
28 March 2015

**Agenda**

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<td>09:00 – 09:30 Hrs.</td>
<td>Registration, Tea &amp; Coffee</td>
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<td>09:30 – 10:30Hrs.</td>
<td>Inaugural Session</td>
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<td>• Welcome Address by Lt. Gen. Dr. B.S. Malik, PVSM, AVSM, President, CSIRD</td>
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<td>• Special Address by Mr. Pradeep Mehta, Secretary General, CUTS International</td>
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<td>• Secretarial Address by Md. Shafiqur Rahman, Director, BIMSTEC Secretariat, Dhaka</td>
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<td>• Inaugural Address by Prof. Suranjan Das, Vice-Chancellor, University of Calcutta</td>
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<td>• Keynote Address by Amb Rajeet Mitter, Former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh and Ambassador to the Philippines</td>
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<td>10:30 – 12:00 Hrs.</td>
<td>Session 1: Energy and Natural Resources and Regional Cooperation (Special Session on Myanmar)</td>
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<td>Chair: Prof. Hari Shankar Vasudevan, Calcutta University</td>
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<td>• Presentation by Prof. Hla Htay, Rector, Dagon University, Yangon [10 minutes]</td>
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<td>• Presentation by Prof. Min Thaung, Head of Dept. of International Relations, Dagon University, Yangon [10 minutes]</td>
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<td><em>Panellists:</em></td>
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<td>• H.E. Kyaw Thu, Vice Consul General of Myanmar in Kolkata [7 minutes]</td>
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<td>• Prof. Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborty), Dept. of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Calcutta [7 minutes]</td>
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<td><em>Q&amp;A</em></td>
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**12.00 – 13.00 Hrs.** Session II: Transport, Communication and Border Connectivity

Chair: H.E. Krishnan Srinivasan, Former Foreign Secretary of India
• Presentation by Mr. Prithviraj Nath, Policy Analyst & Head, CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre [10 minutes]

Panellists:
• Prof. Prabir De, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi [7 minutes]
• Ms. Sita Basnet, Consul, Consulate of Nepal in Kolkata [7 minutes]
• Dr. Mrinal Kanti Chakma, Fellow, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS) [7 minutes]

Q&A

13:00 – 14:00 Hrs.  Lunch Break

14:00 – 15:30 Hrs.  Session III: Tourism, Trade, Investment and Technology

Chair: Prof. Ajitava Raychaudhuri, Dept. of Economics, Jadavpur University

• Presentation by Dr. Selim Raihan, Professor, University of Dhaka and Executive Director, South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM), Dhaka [10 minutes]
• Presentation by Ms. Dharshani Premaratne, Research Officer, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of Sri Lanka, Colombo [10 minutes]

Panellists
• Md. Saiful Islam, First Secretary (Commercial), Deputy High Commission for Bangladesh in Kolkata. [7 minutes]
• Prof. Partha Pratim Pal, Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Kolkata [7 minutes]
• Dr. Mohor Chakraborty, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, South Calcutta Girls College [7 minutes]

Q&A

15.30 – 16.30 Hrs.  Session IV: People-to-People Contact and Media

Chair: Dr. Nilanjan Ghosh, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Kolkata

• Presentation by Dr. Surat Horachaikul, Director, India Studies Centre, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok [10 minutes]
• Presentation by Amb Dago Tshering, Former Ambassador of Bhutan to India [10 minutes]

Panellists
• **H.E. Dr. Abhijit Sen**, Consul General (Hon.) of Sri Lanka in Kolkata [7 minutes]
• **Mr. Jaydeep Dasgupta**, Senior Journalist, Filmmaker, Communication and Media Consultant [7 minutes]
• **Mr. Suvojit Bagchi**, Senior Correspondent, The Hindu [7 minutes]

**Q&A**

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<td>16.30 – 17.30 Hrs.</td>
<td>Chair: Lt Gen. (Retd.) Dr. B.S. Malik, President, CSIRD</td>
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<td>• Presentation by <strong>Dr. Shantanu Chakraborty</strong>, IFPS, University of Calcutta [10 minutes]</td>
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<td>• Presentation by <strong>Mr. Anindya Battabyal</strong>, Faculty of Political Science, University of Kalyani [10 minutes]</td>
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**Panellists**
• **Lt. Gen. (Retd.) John Mukherjee**, Indian Army [7 minutes]
• **Dr. Ishani Naskar**, Associate Professor, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata [7 minutes]

**Q&A**

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<th>Session VI: Valedictory Session – Panel Discussion on BIMSTEC Rising: From Cooperation to Integration</th>
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<td>17:30 – 18:30 Hrs.</td>
<td>Chair: <strong>Amb Dago Tshering</strong>, Former Ambassador of Bhutan to India</td>
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**Panellists**
• **Prof. Posh Raj Pandey**, President, South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE) [10 minutes]
• **Dr. Surat Horachaikul**, Chulalongkorn University [10 minutes]
• **Prof. Ratan Khasnobis**, University of Calcutta [10 minutes]
• **Prof. Selim Raihan**, Dhaka University and SANEM [10 minutes]
• **Prof. Prabir De**, RIS [10 minutes]

**Q&A**

Presentation of Summary and Vote of Thanks by **Dr. Binoda Mishra**, Director, CSIRD

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<th>Time</th>
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<td>19.30 Hrs.</td>
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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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MOMENTS OF THE ROUNDTABLE