

Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Linking South and Southeast Asia

25 September 2018, Singapore – Underpinning the importance of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as a key regional grouping around the rim of the Bay of Bengal, experts called for greater focus on the grouping, including institutional efforts on BIMSTEC studies.

Delivering the special address at the international workshop on ‘BIMSTEC at 20: Priorities and Prospects’, Ambassador-at-Large Ong Keng Yong recalled the ASEAN experience and emphasised on the centrality of issues for any grouping to move forward. The former secretary-general of ASEAN said that the current will to strengthen the BIMSTEC mechanism provides an opportunity not to be missed. Ambassador Ong said that it is, therefore, imperative for BIMSTEC to act quickly to produce tangible results.

Ambassador Ong, who is also the executive deputy chairman of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang University of Singapore, urged BIMSTEC to target “low hanging fruits” such as business and market developments. He said that these areas will create goodwill and trust in the organisation’s potential, which will have a virtuous spill-over effect and will open ways for other modes of cooperation. Ambassador Ong added that enhancing infrastructure and standardising regulations to allow cross-border movement of people and goods are of fundamental importance, and that necessary steps must be taken to focus on the digitalisation of the local economies and engagement of its population.

The BIMSTEC workshop was organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore, in collaboration with the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), Singapore, on 24 September 2018.

Ambassador M Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC, was optimistic about the future prospects of the grouping. He highlighted the reorganisation within BIMSTEC to enhance cooperation within the grouping. While Ambassador Islam felt that grouping has not received as much visibility in regional circles as it should have, he pointed out important areas of cooperation, such as energy, terrorism, cross-border crime, movement of vehicles and coastal shipping that are being worked upon with urgency by the BIMSTEC members. He said that the grouping’s process has gathered momentum after its recent Summit in Kathmandu, Nepal, last month. Ambassador Islam cited the developments on the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area and expressed hope of significant outcomes in the near future.

Speakers at the workshop emphasised the importance of BIMSTEC as a significant grouping between South and Southeast Asia. Dr Amitendu Palit, Senior Research Fellow, ISAS, highlighted the importance of tracking the grouping’s evolution. Dr Nishchal Pandey, Convenor, COSATT, and Mr Christian Echle, Director, KAS, Singapore, highlighted the salience of cooperation and connectivity in shaping the future regional agenda.

The workshop also focused on the member countries' perspectives on BIMSTEC. The presenters included Mr Kamal Thapa, former Deputy Prime Minister and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nepal; Mr Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, Director General, Institute of National Security Studies of Sri Lanka; Mr Faiz Sobhan, Senior Research Director, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Bangladesh, Ambassador Biren Nanda, Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group, India; Major General (Retd.) Professor Nu Nu Lwin, Yangon University of Economics, Myanmar and Dr Sathaporn Opananon, Thammasat University, Thailand.

The one-day workshop witnessed active participation from scholars, practitioners and policy study experts.

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand are members of BIMSTEC.

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