

Report on

Fifth Meeting of BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT)

21-22 December 2020



RIS

Research and Information System
for Developing Countries

विकासशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली

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KEY SPEAKERS



Riva Ganguly Das



Tenzin Lekphell



Sachin Chaturvedi



Chewang Rinzin



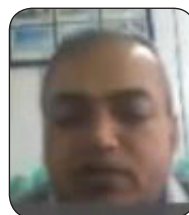
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Dushni Weerakoon



Lahpai Zau Goone



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S. K. Mohanty



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Prabir De



Pradeep Singh Rajpurohit



Chhimmy Pem



Han Thein Kyaw



K. G. Moazzem



Priyadarshi Dash



Sabyasachi Saha



Ravi Srinivas

Professor Sachin Chaturvedi

Director General, RIS & Chair, Fifth BNPTT Meeting



- RIS has been involved and engaged in the very establishment of the BNPTT network, and organised the first BNPTT meeting in 2010.
- Sustaining economic growth is a major challenge during and after COVID-19 as health sector issues are going to be extremely challenging as we all are awaiting the vaccine and the essential plans for distribution and absorption.
- Shrinkage in the global economy, estimated to be 4.4 per cent is going to have a spill over effects on several dependent economies, particularly in South Asia.
- Developing economies also face major challenge because of contraction in trade. In this difficult time it is important that we explore possibilities for value chains, explore inter-linkages and ensure collective and inclusive growth in the BIMSTEC region.
- It is also very important see that these inter-linkages are explored to the best of our advantage, as both imports and exports are falling. Regional cooperation in this context is extremely important.
- BIMSTEC regional connectivity especially in the coastal areas in all various forms such as railways, digital connectivity, inland water transit, etc are important. Motor Vehicle Agreement needs to be finalized.
- Recently, Bangladesh and India have demonstrated the importance of connectivity that would facilitate trade between Bhutan and Bangladesh, Nepal and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar are part of this narrative.
- Several of the regional linkages through technology, seamless flow of trade and investment, and cooperation and partnership could come up in this 'Decade for Development'.
- Maritime connectivity for Bay of Bengal is extremely important. So are environmental cooperation, cooperation for a greener recovery for the Paris commitments, and of course, for exploring the dimensions of cooperation across the spectrum.

H.E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell

Secretary General, BIMSTEC Secretariat



- People-to-people contact is one of the main areas of cooperation within the 14 priority areas of the BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC leaders at every summit have stressed upon people to people contact to achieve the shared vision of securing a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable Bay of Bengal.
- Right from the first summit in Bangkok in 2004, people to people contact has been included as a priority area of cooperation in BIMSTEC. To further promote people to people contact among the member states, the second summit held in New Delhi in 2008 established the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT).
- The fourth summit held in Kathmandu in 2018 further agreed to expand the scope of people to people contact by including academia, media, parliamentarians, and cultural organizations.
- Efforts are underway to realize some other people to people platforms such as BIMSTEC Business Forum, Forum for media and parliamentarians, and few others.
- Some major recommendations emerging from the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks meetings have been implemented, the foremost being the establishment of the Secretariat in 2014. The Secretariat has greatly helped BIMSTEC in achieving some of its objectives.
- For the BNPTT the Terms of Reference (ToR) has been finalized with all the member states giving their concurrences. And with the adoption of ToR by the ministerial meeting, there is optimism that this forum will meet regularly and pick-up momentum through a robust action plan.
- The rationalization of the sectors into seven core areas with sub sectors has been endorsed by the Senior Officials Meeting and we are waiting for it to be approved in the next ministerial meeting and the summit.

Professor Chewang Rinzin

Director, Royal Institute for Governance
and Strategic Studies, Bhutan



BHUTAN

Presentation of Fourth BNPTT Meeting Report

- The fourth meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think tanks was organized by the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies, which is the focal think tank in Bhutan for BNPTT, on 27th and 28th of December 2018.
- Dasho karma Ura who was the chief guest at the event highlighted the important role of think tanks. And he also shared ideas from Bhutan's development philosophy of gross national happiness, and how that could inspire some of the work that our think tanks do in the region.
- He also emphasized on the importance of funding and related issues of funding of think tanks. In particular, he expressed concerns around cross-border or trans-border issues such as illegal trade and drugs, other illicit trans-boundary and climate change issues.
- On funding, three key decisions were taken. First, member organizations to continue to work at their own and explore possible support with BIMSTEC Secretariat. Second, funding from ADB and other multilateral organizations can be explored. And, third, setting up of a trust fund which can support the activities of the think tanks in the region.
- On follow up of the Fourth Summit Declaration on institutional reforms, the meeting underscored the need to enhance the institutional capacity of BIMSTEC Secretariat, including financial and human resources; finding innovative ideas and pragmatic recommendations to facilitate early realization of the summit declarations; and the need to be specific and focused without regrouping all the existing areas of cooperation under the five pillars.
- On the new BNPTT initiatives, a number of decisions were taken. First, the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit could be the guiding document to further cooperation among the member states.
- Secondly, some useful study proposals by RIS (India) such as digital and financial sector cooperation, usage of local currencies in light of worldwide efforts for de-dollarization, health sector financing, and cooperation in the areas of cross border connectivity, SDGs with focus on environment and climate change including blue and mountain economy.
- Delegations emphasized on producing policy briefs focusing on respective lead areas of the member states during the fifth BNPTT meeting.
- Funding from member states can be mobilized to conduct studies on the earlier three proposals, namely Economic Corridor, Value chain and Short Courses.

Keynote Address

Ms. Riva Ganguly Das

Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, India



INDIA



सत्यमेव जयते
Government of India

- BIMSTEC enjoys the unique strength of connecting South and Southeast Asia. It links the ecologies of Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal. With shared histories, values and ways of life, it is a natural platform to build our common future.
- BIMSTEC represents a common desire for peace and development. India considers BIMSTEC as a natural strategic choice to fulfil the objectives of our Neighbourhood First and Act East Policy.
- India being the largest country in the region has a non-reciprocal commitment to BIMSTEC. Presence of BIMSTEC leaders at our government's swearing-in in May 2019 is a reflection of the commonality of interests and recognition of mutual gains from our extended neighbourhood from South and Southeast Asia.
- India is the lead country in four out of 14 sectors identified by BIMSTEC for cooperation, namely counterterrorism and transnational crime, transport and communication, tourism, and environmental and disaster management. Satisfactory progress is being made in all the four areas.
- At the fourth BIMSTEC summit in Kathmandu, India announced a number of initiatives to further strengthen BIMSTEC cooperation and capacity building in diverse areas. Out of these the BIMSTEC military exercise, the BIMSTEC ministerial conclave at India Mobile Congress 2018, second BIMSTEC disaster management exercise, BIMSTEC seminar on climate smart farming systems, training of BIMSTEC diplomats at the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Services have already been implemented. India is hosting BIMSTEC start-up conclave in virtual format next month.
- BIMSTEC is an economy of US\$3.8 trillion and is emerging as a promising sub-regional economic community in Asia. Over the period 2010-2019, the region has witnessed a compound annual growth of 6.1 per cent. It is heartening to see BIMSTEC making rapid strides in institution building and further deepening cooperation among the member states.
- After two decades of existence, BIMSTEC officials have finalized the Charter, which is expected to be adopted at the next BIMSTEC summit. Subject to the completion of internal procedures by respective countries, there are three other important agreements expected to be signed at the next BIMSTEC summit. These are BIMSTEC convention on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, Memorandum of Association on the establishment of BIMSTEC technology transfer facility in Colombo, and MoU on mutual cooperation between diplomatic academies and training institutions of the BIMSTEC member states.
- There is also a proposal for rationalization of sectors and sub-sectors of regional cooperation for consideration at the next summit.

- On connectivity, the BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity was finalized by the BIMSTEC transport connectivity Working Group at its third meeting chaired by India earlier this month. It would be an important milestone in enhancing regional connectivity, and thus fulfilling aspirations of the people of our region.
- We are simultaneously working on establishing legal framework to fully utilize the potential of the connectivity infrastructure. These include the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicles Agreement. The two agreements will facilitate seamless transport of goods across our borders.
- The BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think tanks has over the years played an important role in shaping the BIMSTEC cooperation agenda and has provided a rich menu of issues for consideration of our leaders. India has been at the forefront of taking forward the agenda of interaction between the think tank community of our region with the objective of strengthening People-to-People ties in the region.
- It has organized the first meeting of BNPTT in New Delhi in February 2010. Our leaders from time to time have acknowledged and appreciated the role of BNPTT in bringing people of our region closer.
- At the fourth BIMSTEC summit in Kathmandu, the leaders had resolved to build a deeper understanding and trust among the member states and promote People-to-People contacts at various levels. They noted with satisfaction the activities of BNPTT in enhancing public awareness about BIMSTEC.
- As we pass through the difficult phase of COVID pandemic, transport, trade, tourism, hospitality and many other sectors have been drastically impacted. Poverty and unemployment are going to emerge as major issues for the region. Remittance flows to the region would also be impacted substantially. Social Security and public health issues have also come to the forefront.
- There has been renewed attention on skilled manpower in the public health sector and strong value chains in pharmaceuticals.
- Tangible cooperation for developing and supplying COVID-19 vaccine in the region and regular exchanges between health professionals at regional level would be critical for the people in the BIMSTEC region.
- Food security, reducing vulnerability and achieving sustainable development goals would be major policy challenges for the BIMSTEC region in the post-pandemic period.
- There is need to focus on people-centric needs and facilitating movement of essential products like food and medical supplies in the region. Prime Minister of India has underscored the need to put people at the centre of our vision of global prosperity and cooperation, freely and openly share the benefits of medical research and development, develop adaptive, responsive and human healthcare systems, promote new crisis management protocols and procedures for an interconnected world and work together to reduce economic hardships resulting from COVID-19 particularly for the economically weaker sections of the society.
- This fifth BNPTT meeting is going to discuss the prospects of regional cooperation to achieve smooth recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, measures to facilitate and further expand intra-BIMSTEC trade, cooperation in health and financial sectors, collaboration in the field of science, technology and innovation at the regional level, among others.

Dr. K. G. Moazzem

Research Director, CPD, Dhaka



BANGLADESH

- Since the last BNPTT meeting in Bhutan, the region has taken various kinds of initiatives both at the regional context as well as at bilateral level. After the COVID-19, these initiatives are more focused on the national contexts.
- As decided in the last BNPTT meeting CPD has developed a format for preparing the policy briefs and shared it with the Secretariat.
- CPD has contributed one chapter to the edited volume 'BIMSTEC at 20'. The major focus of the chapter was on connectivity instead of only focusing on the preferential tariff related issues. There is huge potential for enhancing regional connectivity cooperation.
- CPD colleagues have also contributed papers on country-specific issues within the BIMSTEC region.

For example, the LDC graduation is an issue for Bangladesh and Myanmar. The paper covers the challenges and the common initiatives these countries could undertake through regional and sub-regional cooperation to ensure smooth graduation to developing countries.

- SDG is another important area of focus where CPD along with RIS has participated in a number of events organized by RIS and UNESCAP where the focus was on the kind of regional cooperation/collaboration that could be undertaken for implementation of SDGs.
- On COVID-19 related issues CPD was involved and contributed by participating in initiatives taken by UNESCAP's South and South-West Asia office.

Professor Chewang Rinzin

Director, RIGSS, Thimpu



BHUTAN

- As a young think tank RIGSS is catching up to cover BIMSTEC in its activities.
- RIGSS participated in the initiative on regional security cooperation which was organized by the Vivekananda Foundation in New Delhi.
- RIGSS in Bhutan has been identified as the COVID-19 control centre in the south and in the last nine months, in fact the whole year, we have been busy as the COVID Centre.
- RIGSS works closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other important institutions in Bhutan including some institutions which are working closely on regional initiatives as well.

Review of Past BNPTT Meetings

Dr. Priyadarshi Dash

Assistant Professor, RIS, New Delhi



INDIA

- RIS is actively engaged in research on BIMSTEC. Several publications are available in the public domain on RIS website.
- In the last two years, RIS has consolidated its BIMSTEC work programme and a dedicated webpage on BIMSTEC activity and resources has been created. This website is not meant for disseminating research by RIS faculty only but also to highlight various types of activity happening in the BIMSTEC domain and to serve as a repository of knowledge creation and dissemination.
- The dedicated website also provides essential information in terms of data and statistics being updated from time to time.
- RIS is coming up with a comprehensive report on various pillars of BIMSTEC cooperation covering a wide range of areas like trade, industry, finance and social sector issues. The Report will capture developments in the BIMSTEC region in the recent years and provide perspectives on the future roadmap for cooperation.
- RIS also continues to have in-house research on FinTech and financial cooperation. A policy brief is being prepared on Financial Cooperation, which is emerging as a separate pillar of BIMSTEC cooperation.
- After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a need for assessing the magnitude of economic loss to the region, and the nature of coordinated policy response needed for the region to guide the national economies and the region as a whole to have a smooth recovery. In this respect, RIS organized a webinar on June 30, 2020 on exit strategies and policy responses by the BIMSTEC countries.
- RIS offers a course called Summer School on International Trade Theory and Practice that is open to Indian research scholars and research scholars from the BIMSTEC countries. In fact, the colleagues from BIMSTEC Secretariat have also participated in the course.

Mr. Lahpai Zau Goone

Member, MISIS



MYANMAR

- This is the time for us to reimagine our aid organization and set up a new international set-up, especially because the under-contention election of the United States will have some global impact.
- In the light of this new regional setting, economic as well as political, it would be wise for BIMSTEC to take a look at the background and to look forward to what the future heralds for us.
- Progress in Master Plan on Transport Connectivity is a welcome step towards regional economic cooperation.
- India would be a big support to Myanmar in addressing food shortages resulting from the pandemic.

Review of Past BNPTT Meetings

Dr. Dushni Weerakoon

Executive Director, IPS, Colombo



SRI LANKA

- In 2019, IPS prepared paper on climate change challenges for food security with regard to the BIMSTEC area for the conference that MISIS organized in June 2020.
- From a policy point of view, IPS was engaged with the Government of Sri Lanka in 2019 for working on a roadmap for trade integration through two committees, one is the Advisory Committee on free trade agreements and the other was the Trade and Productivity Commission.
- As part of this engagement, IPS helped mapping of BIMSTEC FTA for regional trade integration in BIMSTEC region and assessed the potential of bilateral FTA with Thailand and Bangladesh.
- As COVID-19 has made us rethink and reprioritize our areas of cooperation, IPS considers some issues like food security, restoring supply chains, reviving trade & investment and ensuring FDI flows within the BIMSTEC region as important facets of domestic policy reforms.

Dr. Surat Horachaikul

Director, India Studies Centre



THAILAND

- India Study Centre (ISC) has released a poster that depicts Bay of Bengal as the core of the BIMSTEC cooperation.
- For easy understanding by ordinary people, ISC organized a film screening about Bangladesh, India and so on to let students and others outside universities participate and understand more about how different cultures and identities come together in the fraternity of BIMSTEC.
- For wider dissemination and awareness of opportunities in BIMSTEC ISC has conducted training with eight institutes. The participants included civil servants, private sector, NGOs, etc with understanding on benefits in different sectors by BIMSTEC.
- Instead of any single subject e.g. economics, political science, international relations, we believe that multidisciplinary approach is better to make things simpler and easy to follow.
- ISC has also been assigned to undertake a study on Indo-Pacific funded by National Research Council of Thailand which includes BIMSTEC as a major region.
- ISC is working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to plan activities on BIMSTEC as Thailand is taking over as Chair of BIMSTEC after Sri Lanka.
- In 2020, ISC had altogether 16 radio shows on BIMSTEC through our Chulalongkorn University, FM 101.5 which broadcasts on every Saturday. In addition, there were 18 television programs and FB live, Facebook Live on BIMSTEC alone. At the same time, we have also introduced BIMSTEC to a number of institutes to include them in their curricula.

Professor Arun Kumar Thakur

Executive Director, CEDA



NEPAL

- In terms of priority sectors, two areas such as mountain economy and blue economy are important for Nepal, Bhutan and India. It is important to recognise the type of actions that can be taken to exploit our natural resources and that can be shared among the BIMSTEC countries.
- It is also important to explore the nature of cooperation among the BIMSTEC countries for conservation and exploitation of these natural resources.
- Mountain economy is most important for tourism and to conserve the mountainous resources such as herbs, timber and recharging.
- Ice can be also preserved, for which tree plantation is important.
- Water resources can be efficiently used for the betterment of Nepal and the low-land area. India, Bangladesh and other countries can use those water resources for irrigation as well.
- Regional initiatives are needed so that the mountainous countries like Nepal do well economically. Similar approach can be considered for promoting blue economy in the region as well.

Review of Past BNPTT Meetings



H.E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell

Secretary General, BIMSTEC Secretariat

- It is important to reach out effectively to the people and make BIMSTEC visible.
- Food security is an important issue that was taken up in past BNPTT meetings. Follow up may be taken by BNPTT to study this issue in-depth.
- Connectivity is critical for the growth and prosperity of the region.

Dr. Pradeep Singh Rajpurohit

Director (SAARC & BIMSTEC),
Ministry of External Affairs



INDIA



- BIMSTEC is India's key foreign policy priority and the Government of India is working towards promoting greater cooperation among the member states.
- Recently, the transport connectivity working group meeting chaired by India was held. The master plan for the transport connectivity has been finalized.
- Preparation for the BIMSTEC start-up conclave which is going to take place on 15-16 January is underway.
- India also hosted a meeting on the BIMSTEC poverty alleviation expert group with very fruitful outcome.
- Moreover, MEA is gearing up for many other initiatives for ministerial and the summit level deliberations in the coming months.

Professor Sachin Chaturvedi

Director General, RIS



Closing Remarks by Session Chair

- Initiative on Start-ups is important for the economies in the region. Science & technology especially FinTech solutions are crucial areas for the BIMSTEC to consider. MSMEs can benefit from the innovative FinTech solutions.
- Prime Minister of India has emphasized on the role of agriculture for development of the BIMSTEC region. With respect to linkage of agriculture with market, besides India Sri Lanka and Bhutan have made significant progress.
- Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have done remarkably well in Bangladesh. BIMSTEC region can learn from the success of SHGs in development of rural areas and rural enterprises.
- It is important to bring in resilience of value chains, work on the food security and supply of medical and food items, share gains from medical research and gains particularly for economically marginalized communities within the region.

Review of Past BIMSTEC Summit Commitments and Future Priorities for BNPTT

Ms Chhimmy Pem

Director (Culture), BIMSTEC Secretariat



Presentation by BIMSTEC Secretariat

- There have been a number of recommendations made in past BNPTT meetings. While some of those have been implemented some others are being tracked, whereas certain recommendations have not been discussed in the subsequent meetings.
- A note by BIMSTEC Secretariat (ref: BIMSTEC/BNPTT/05/2020/02) provides details of the implementation status of various recommendations of BNPTT.
- The Secretariat is planning to table two specific recommendations of the fourth BNPTT Meeting held in Thimpu in 2018 to the next Senior Officials Meeting. The first one is with regard to the presentation of the report by the Chair of the BNPTT and the other being the funding for the three studies and the short course that has been recommended by the fourth BNPTT meeting.
- For easy follow-up and smooth implementation, the Secretariat is of the view that recommendations of the BNPTT meeting should be prioritized accompanied by an action plan with clear timelines against each recommendation.

Dr. Prabir De

Professor, RIS



Presentation by RIS (Host Institution) on Scope and Diversification of BIMSTEC Cooperation Agenda

- Interestingly, most of the BIMSTEC countries have done well economically in the past decade. In particular, Bangladesh has experienced remarkable GDP growth in recent years. The focus should be on expanding regional prosperity in the region and in neighbourhood, as all the countries would get some or other benefits out of this expanded pie.
- While catching up by the regional economies is good for the region, the mechanism of regional cooperation should be such that the aspirations of all the member states including the least developed countries, the smaller economies, Island economies, mountain economies, etc are properly addressed. It may require larger economies like India and Thailand to contribute relatively more to the process of regional cooperation.
- Intra-regional trade in BIMSTEC has gone up over the years. In several sectors such as textile and clothing the regional value chains have been developed or picking up the momentum.
- Moreover, the growth in intra-regional trade has happened without any regional FTA. Besides overall growth in intra-regional trade, the dependence of the member countries on the BIMSTEC region has grown phenomenally.

- It is clear that land-locked and least developed countries in the region depend more on BIMSTEC than their larger peers. For instance, 98 per cent of Bhutan's global trade is with the Bay of Bengal, which used to be 85 per cent in 2000 whereas it is 69 per cent for Nepal when it used to be 43 per cent in 2000.
- Given this inter-dependence among the member countries, BIMSTEC should introduce further momentum in terms of new projects and new ideas.
- Along with trade, FDI flow to BIMSTEC countries has also increased in the recent years. National and regional initiatives can further boost regional economic integration in the region.
- BIMSTEC as an organisation has achieved several milestones marked over the long period of 23 years; from Bangkok Suvarnabhumi project in 1996 to Goa Leaders' Retreat in 2016.
- People-to-People contact pillar had assumed thrust in 2004 with initiatives like Business Visa Travel Card, Civil Exchange etc.
- RIS Publication titled 'Future Directions of BIMSTEC: Towards a Bay of Bengal Community' in 2004 has captured the various dimensions of evolution of BIMSTEC over time.
- Second BIMSTEC summit in 2008 focused on institution building with proposal for setting up of centres on technology transfer, poverty alleviation, etc. including setting up the BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat. Some of those are already created while others are at different stages of development.
- Third BIMSTEC Summit held in 2014 at Nay Pyi Taw focused on trade and sectoral cooperation. Finalization of BIMSTEC FTA was given specific thrust along with several sectors such as crops, livestock, horticulture, agriculture, and so on.
- In the Leaders' Retreat held in Goa in 2016 focus was more on setting a political vision with thrust on connectivity master plan, etc. Some of those are being pursued at different levels.
- With respect to future roadmap and priorities, BIMSTEC countries should coordinate their policies to bring the economic loss during 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic. The economic loss is measured at 8 per cent of BIMSTEC GDP in PPP terms.
- Future roadmap should also focus on completing BIMSTEC Master Plan on connectivity, BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement, and other pending matters.
- Post-pandemic economic recovery programs may include people-centric development partnerships, strengthening value chains, comprehensive economic partnerships be it India- Bangladesh or for the entire region, areas of cooperation like health, renewable energy, e-commerce, digital economy, and science and technology cooperation. New initiatives like Indo-Pacific in which BIMSTEC could have a stake.
- The future role of the BNPTT could cover some of the priority action points:-
 - » Recommendations of BNPTT meetings on promoting joint research, databases and networking, dialogue, exchange of scholars, etc are to be expeditiously followed up. Like Summer School and forthcoming report on BIMSTEC by RIS, other BNPTT member institutions can undertake similar initiatives.
 - » BNPTT engagements can be scaled up beyond the closed-door meetings. Some session may be open to public with participation of larger audiences.
 - » Hosting a dedicated website on BIMSTEC (RIS has developed one) for exchange and sharing research and connecting with the community.
 - » Additional sources of funding to support the activities of the BNPTT institutions with technical support from ESCAP, ADB and respective national governments.



Review of Past BIMSTEC Summit Commitments and Future Priorities for BNPTT

Remarks by BNPTT Members on Future Priorities

Dr. K. G.Moazzem

Research Director, CPD, Dhaka



BANGLADESH

- Specific policy briefs can be prepared by the think tanks in the region capturing the new ideas, new thoughts and the new kinds of policy interventions required for promoting regional cooperation.
- The policy briefs can cover six sections including (1) Relevance in the regional context, (2) Domestic and cross-border activities on that particular issue, (3) Legislative and regulatory issues; implementation of different initiatives at regional and sub-regional level, (4) Future of the idea in regional context; strength and weaknesses, (5) Further research and potential areas of future cooperation, and (6) References.
- The policy briefs prepared on the new issues covering digital economy, new technology, food security, etc may be presented to the BIMSTEC Secretariat for further action.

Professor Chewang Rinzin

Director, RIGSS, Thimpu



BHUTAN

- Each think tank in the region can prepare a policy brief on the focus of the country it represents. For example, RIGSS can prepare a policy on environment and climate change as this is the priority sector that Bhutan leads.
- For promoting people-to-people contact education is an important area that BIMSTEC can focus on. Exchange program and scholarships at BIMSTEC level will be useful for us to carry forward our agenda of people to people contact.

Review of Past BIMSTEC Summit Commitments and Future Priorities for BNPTT

Dr. Surat Horachaikul

Director, India Studies Centre



THAILAND

- On the idea of preparing policy briefs on country focus areas may not be a consensus document to present to the BIMSTEC Secretariat for any meaningful action and impact.
- Common issues can be identified and policy briefs may be based on those issues for substantial outcome involving experts from member countries.
- Each think tank in the region should proactively promote the visibility of BIMSTEC among the common people.

Dr. Dushni Weerakoon

Executive Director, IPS, Colombo



SRI LANKA

- As a think tank network, BNPTT should come up with joint positions that will convince the political leadership to move on certain things that are recommended.
- To be specific, a joint position paper on COVID-19 covering economic fall-out of the pandemic, immediate policy responses and the key priority areas that BIMSTEC should focus on would be useful.
- Other priority areas that could possibly be considered are digitalization, health care, environment, social sectors, funding, social protection, and so on.



Review of Past BIMSTEC Summit Commitments and Future Priorities for BNPTT

Mr. Lahpai Zau Goone

Member, MISIS



MYANMAR

- Emphasize on the most tangible outcome of the BIMSTEC cooperation i.e. transport connectivity. Transport connectivity is not only important for Myanmar but also for other countries in the region.
- Connectivity would promote agriculture trade between Myanmar and India. Agricultural products especially plenty of tea plantations in Assam can help promote trade in tea and other products through better connectivity.
- Myanmar has very rich mountain economy which needs to be promoted from the business for peace perspective.

Professor Fahmida Khatun

Executive Director, CPD, Dhaka



BANGLADESH

- Since COVID-19 has impacted all the countries in the region, the ways of sharing country experiences and ensuring coordination of policies in dealing with the economic impact would be important. BNPTT can develop frameworks for this coordinated response.
- Climate change is a serious issue for the region which apparently has accentuated the impact of COVID-19 and increased our vulnerability. BNPTT can pick up climate change as a future policy domain.

Professor S. K. Mohanty

Professor, RIS



INDIA

- Diversity of ideas is good for preparing policy briefs, as it would foster scholarship.
- In the past, different institutions in the region have brought out different reports on diversified areas e.g. trade, investment, technology. But, for impact and policy action, leading think tanks can prepare the consensus document in collaboration with all the think tanks in the region.



Review of Past BIMSTEC Summit Commitments and Future Priorities for BNPTT

H.E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell

Secretary General, BIMSTEC Secretariat

- On matter of presentation of BNPTT recommendations, the Secretariat encourage all the respective think tanks of the countries to be in close contact with the National focal points.
- As far as the chair of BNPTT presenting the report to the Senior Officials Meeting, the Secretariat will adjust the agenda of the next meeting as it would bring think tanks closer to the leaders and will have impact in the decision-making process.
- On the idea of trust fund, the Secretariat will extend support to all the member states and the different working groups. The think tanks should provide the secretariat the background, purpose, terms of reference and other details to take it forward.
- With respect to exploring funds from various organizations like ADB, UNESCAP the Secretariat would like to request for a concept paper and roughly some kind of a detailed plan of the study by the think tanks. Then the Secretariat would communicate with the member states for their consideration.
- The Secretariat feels that it is good for the BNPTT institutions to keep in touch with the National focal points. That will help sort out most of the issues relating to funding, studies, and so on.
- It is better that the study proposals considered are based on the consensus of all the member states for generating any impact. The Secretariat again, can facilitate the member states to support funding, but then it is very important, than there is consensus on the ideas.
- With respect to connectivity the master plan for transport and connectivity has been endorsed by the working group and it is going to be tabled in the next Senior Officials Meeting.
- Another key development on connectivity is the transport connectivity and infrastructure financing by ADB for the BIMSTEC region. This is in progress now.

Mr. Han Thein Kyaw

Director (Development Division),
BIMSTEC Secretariat

- On the idea of BIMSTEC scholarship, Myanmar hosted the very first BIMSTEC Agriculture meeting in Nay Pyi Taw in 2019. At that time, with support from the Government of India, the BIMSTEC Agricultural scholarship was launched. Now this is a full-fledged Scholarship Program with Government of India funding for one master and one PhD scholarship in agriculture every year.
- BNPTT members can also explore the idea of any other particular area, if they wish to create scholarship. The Secretariat may propose and streamline scholarship in those relevant sectors as well.
- With the new Secretary General at the Secretariat, we are brainstorming on how best to serve the grassroot level of the BIMSTEC and Bay of Bengal region. BNPTT members may also take that forward and suggest better engagement with the grassroot level.

Dr. Dushni Weerakoon

Executive Director, IPS, Colombo



SRI LANKA

- Economic activities must resume because the costs of lockdown on the vulnerable sections of the population is quite heavy. Like most other BIMSTEC member countries, Sri Lanka has large share of its workers in the informal sector surviving on daily wages. So extension of lockdowns means greater sufferings by these sections of the population.
- On exit plan and recovery on the economic front, Sri Lanka has done reasonably well. Sri Lanka did not have much fiscal policy space to provide a large stimulus package but relied on monetary policy interventions, huge amounts of liquidity injections, debt moratoriums, direct financing of fiscal deficits and low interest rates.
- With respect to exit strategy, improving fiscal situation assumes topmost priority as high fiscal deficit (7 per cent of GDP), high public debt (85 to 90 per cent of GDP) and high exposure to international capital market have weakened the resource position of the country.
- And because of the fiscal situation the sovereign ratings for Sri Lanka has been downgraded over the last couple of months, and the government has asked for bilateral debt relief from countries like China, India, etc and has applied to IMF for rapid financing facility.
- With respect to domestic policy reforms, Sri Lanka at the moment is relying more on import controls, controls on capital outflows, etc, to manage the foreign exchange pressure.
- In the context of trade and investment, a slight change in position with regard to broader trade policy and trade integration measures is observed. The government policy statements contained in the budget says that Sri Lanka will not be opening up trade, including banking, finance and professional sectors through any FTAs. Within this overall context, any free trade agreements will be accommodated only if they helped to bridge the trade gaps that the country has bilaterally or in any regional setting.
- Investment policy is open and encourages more FDI inflows with an aim to bridge foreign exchange gaps. For instance, Colombo port city is now ready for foreign investors.
- In terms of sectoral cooperation food security could be the immediate challenges as COVID-19 pandemic caused sudden disruptions to food production and supply chains.
- Given the important socio-economic impacts of unequal access to public health, addressing health sector challenges would be key priority in the coming years. Thankfully Sri Lanka has universal free health care for all.
- Another area of sectoral cooperation is opportunities to discuss innovation and the application of technology across various industries and in sectors like agriculture, business, healthcare, education, etc. because the pandemic has created or generated disruptions in the field of technology.
- There has been huge uptake of digitalization, e-banking, e-marketing, digital value chains, etc involving activities like online education, e-channeling for health, drones and other kinds of technology even to monitor quarantines facilities.

Mr. Lahpai Zau Goone

Member, MISIS



MYANMAR

- COVID-19 exit plan for Myanmar has not really come to be visible as the country is primarily engaged in containing the spread of the disease. Cooperation of neighbours especially from the BIMSTEC countries would be helpful.
- Health facilities in the country are adequate for the time being. By using lockdown and monitoring the Health Ministry and COVID Control Committee are handling the pandemic in the country.
- For vaccines, Myanmar is mostly dependent on the technically advanced countries. Pfizer and Moderna vaccines would be coming to Myanmar in a few days.
- With respect to the economic plan for the country, Myanmar is very much in cooperation with all the neighbours, despite the fact that our border trade has been stalled for some time now.

Agenda for Fifth BIMSTEC Summit

Professor S. K. Mohanty

Professor, RIS



INDIA

- There are several countries in the BIMSTEC region which are quite resilient, but faced unprecedented difficulties in their growth performance; possibly, it was the lowest since the global economic recession in 2008.
- The experience of the regional economies is really devastating. India after adjustment is expected to register (-)8.3 per cent though IMF predicted (-)10.4 per cent and Thailand (-)7 per cent. Only a couple of countries which are showing positive growth include Bangladesh (4 per cent) and Myanmar (2 per cent).
- Export of India is expected to decline by 16 per cent in 2020. Bhutan is the only economy in the region which is going to maintain very robust growth in exports whereas Sri Lanka and Thailand would register 20 per cent and 8 per cent growth respectively. So, overall the region can see a strong decline in the trade performance.
- Only solace one can have is the inflationary trends in the BIMSTEC region, which is likely to be moderate, except a few countries like Myanmar and Nepal, which would be above, and also Bangladesh, above 5 per cent. Otherwise, it would be quite within the limit. Even in Thailand, the inflationary rate would be negative, (-) 0.4 per cent.



Agenda for Fifth BIMSTEC Summit

- In nutshell, the region has been adversely affected by the macroeconomic shock. The stimulus packages had been very low as compared to the requirement of the region to make any significant impact in different economies. Further, it has arisen to the creation of 'new poor' those people who were on the border just before the pandemic
- There is large scale disruption of the GVC sector globally and that has led to the decline in global trade and also global production to a very large extent.
- Production disruptions are faced in upstream GVCs, particularly those who are producing mostly raw material level of GVC components, and that disturbance has created difficulties in the downstream GVCs particularly those who are dealing with higher end intermediates.
- Many emerging countries within BIMSTEC are dependent on GVC products for their domestic final goods production. They are also severely affected because of the breaking in the value chain segment.
- Because of the decline of multilateralism, there is a need for having BIMSTEC FTA which is very much due. BIMSTEC has already worked very significantly in the past and can take it further.
- International trade within the region is very poor. There are many forthcoming RTAs where international trade is very high particularly ASEAN. But one thing is very important that the international trade within BIMSTEC is growing step by step and it is already seven plus, a percentage of the total trade of the region.
- Within BIMSTEC, there are certain sub-sectors where international trade is much higher than the overall international trade of the region. In that sense, it is better to give a boost to overall international trade of the region; with sectors having higher sectoral international trade ratios.
- Some of those sub-sectors include agriculture, fisheries, garments, chemicals, machinery which have experienced growth in intra-regional trade.
- The GVC sector is growing in the BIMSTEC countries. GVC component is very large and expanding both in exports and imports. The GVC total trade in 2018 was around \$128 billion in terms of exports and in terms of imports, it was around \$101 billion.
- Another important aspect of the region is that the technology-intensive trade is growing particularly the final consumer goods sector. It is growing very fast with the rest of the world.
- Therefore, there is a need for developing a kind of institutional mechanism within the region to ensure that the regional trade is growing.

Professor T. C. James

Visiting Fellow, RIS



- BIMSTEC countries are at different stages of health care facilities but they share a broad similarity in the matter of disease burden.
- The countries do have still to tackle the communicable diseases fully, and the rising pace of communicable diseases raise new challenges. These commonalities in health challenges, particularly highlighted during the current COVID-19 pandemic, point to the advantages of coordination and knowledge sharing in the health care sector among the BIMSTEC countries.
- New R&D and drug & vaccine development programs are going on in most of the BIMSTEC countries, including clinical trials. Harmony in R&D programs, clinical trials, regulatory steps will naturally help the BIMSTEC countries to have more cooperation and less the cost of R&D and clinical trials.
- When patients from one BIMSTEC country go to the other country for speciality treatments, they face many problems in payment, hence are allowed to carry hard cash. With the kind of technological advancements now available particularly in digital technology, some harmony in payment settlements may be considered.
- In view of these factors, we would like to propose two recommendations as way forward. The first one is convergence of regulations or approval process of the clinical trials and reducing the cost and save the time. The saving time is very important because much duplication can be avoided.
- The second one is that facilitation of digital payment of medical bills can enable easy access to specialty health care in other BIMSTEC countries.

Agenda for Fifth BIMSTEC Summit

Dr. Sabyasachi Saha

Assistant Professor, RIS



- As part of the COVID-19 exit plans, we may think of two clear areas. One, of course is about giving some boost to a few sectors that are dynamic and to create the enabling conditions for that. And second, thinking about greening economic recovery.
- Cross-border on-site consumption of services like health, education and tourism is on the rise and are key pillars of BIMSTEC cooperation and people-to-people connect. BIMSTEC countries are important destinations for such services that hold tremendous potential for contributing to sustainable economic growth and employment for economic recovery post-pandemic.
- In order to facilitate instant settling of accounts and payments for B2D, B2C and C2B in BIMSTEC, mutually ratified digital payment platforms is an urgent need of the hour. From that perspective, some members have advanced indigenous FinTech capabilities, which can boost the prospects of regional payment systems.
- Cooperation in renewable energy is part of the green recovery process. Honourable Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi in his Independence Day speech in 2020 outlined India's vision of one world, one sun and one grid. India's leadership in creation of the International Solar Alliance is meant to benefit the developing world as well as the neighbourhood. It must be ensured that all BIMSTEC members are part of this initiative.



- Following the signing of BIMSTEC MoU for grid connectivity in 2018, BIMSTEC members should further strengthen cooperation in this area to bring grid connectivity to countries that are not presently connected and step up cooperation in renewable energy. Previously BIMSTEC Energy Centre was proposed and it may be operationalized soon.
- Disaster resilience is an important emerging area of cooperation in the BIMSTEC region. Prime minister of India Shri Narendra Modi announced a Global Coalition for disaster resilient infrastructure at the Climate Action summit in 2019. Developed through consultations with more than 35 countries, CDRI envisions enabling measurable reduction in infrastructure losses from disasters, including extreme climate events.
- BIMSTEC region is very prone to climate related disasters. CDRI aims to enable achievement of objectives of expanding universal access to basic services and enabling prosperity as enshrined in the SDGs while also working at the intersection of the Sendai framework for disaster risk reduction and Paris Climate Agreement. It must be ensured that all BIMSTEC members are part of this initiative. Further activities of BIMSTEC Centre on weather and climate based in India and the annual BIMSTEC disaster management exercise needs to be further promoted.

Agenda for Fifth BIMSTEC Summit

Dr. Ravi Srinivas

Consultant, RIS



- Responding to the pandemic has been a challenge for the individual states in the region which has highlighted the need for cooperation in harnessing science and technology for collective action and benefits.
- Preparedness is essential in terms of vaccines, diagnostics, and associated health infrastructure and logistics including supply and cold chains. BIMSTEC countries should plan for joint incentives for effectively using science and technology cooperation.
- Preparedness for pandemics in future is equally important even as countries grapple with post-pandemic developments in health, economy and society.
- Strengthening BIMSTEC technology transfer facility is important as there is wide variance among the countries in level of science & technology. An Expert Group constituted on the establishment of BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility is considering a memorandum of association drafted by Sri Lanka in this regard.
- A Technology Transfer Facility has got two objectives. One, enhancing intra-BIMSTEC cooperation in science and technology and to develop linkages with other countries. But the current focus of this initiative is to enhance the transfer of technology, knowledge and skills among micro, small and medium sized enterprises, that is MSMEs in the BIMSTEC region.
- Still, the TTF has got a limited role now and it is not matched by other initiatives on cooperation in science technology. So strengthening of TTF and formalization of the process should be high on the agenda.
- Digital payments and using ICTs in different sectors provides new avenues for all the countries in the BIMSTEC region. In that sense, it is high time for countries in the region to plan for responding to the fourth industrial revolution and emerging technologies. In this regard a regional project in research in science, which can be a mini Big science project may be facilitated.

Professor Chewang Rinzin

Director, RIGSS, Thimpu



BHUTAN

- Being a land-locked mountain economy, it has been tough for Bhutan to cope with the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic.
- Besides being the leading trade partner of Bhutan, India's support has been crucial for the Bhutanese economy more prominently during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Like other countries in the region, Bhutan has implemented several policy measures to help people in the country. Those covered deferment of loan repayments by the banks and free quarantine, testing and medicine by the government.
- Thousands of Bhutanese working abroad have been repatriated during the pandemic and taken care of by the government.
- The two sectors such as construction and infrastructure those are important for the Bhutanese economy has been badly affected during the pandemic affecting income and employment in the country.
- The main concern is unemployment and food security, as Bhutan is an import dependent economy.
- Moving forward, the government has already started the economic contingency plan. Three sectors have been identified for this contingency plan.
- Build Bhutan Project focusing largely on the construction sector would probably create employment for the unemployed youth in the country.
- There is focus on tourism amidst uncertainty around reviving tourism in the coming months.
- Fortunately, hydro sector, the backbone of our economy, has been saved even though other sectors virtually collapsed. Bhutan could able to maintain the hydropower exports during the pandemic.
- Technology is another critical area of cooperation in BIMSTEC. The fields of cooperation could include sectors like FinTech, education, health, start-ups, and entrepreneurship.
- With support of technology firms from Singapore and Estonia, Bhutan has started providing digital IDs to its citizens.



Professor Fahmida Khatun

Executive Director, CPD, Dhaka

- All the surveys conducted across the world and across South Asia and particularly in Bangladesh show that the extent of poverty and inequality has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides the health crisis, mismanagement in terms of deficiency and delivery has affected the city dwellers, informal sector workers and women badly.
- Although the overall economic environment in South Asia is not good, some economic indicators show signs of recovery in Bangladesh. For example, remittance flows have picked up after July 2020. Rise in exports has resulted in trade surplus and build up of foreign exchange reserves. Inflation is also under control.
- For economic recovery, two priority areas need attention in Bangladesh in next few years. One, containing the spread of the corona virus infections, and the other to reduce the economic distress and ensure revival of economic activity.
- Complete vaccination and behavioural change in terms of wearing masks, sanitizers, testing, isolation, etc would be key instruments of COVID-19 management.
- Like other countries in the region, stimulus package is the only option to manage the economic distress in Bangladesh. However, more than liquidity injections (monetary policy) fiscal policy measures would be more effective.
- Higher public investment is needed particularly in health infrastructure, digital infrastructure, green infrastructure, and so on.

Agenda for Fifth BIMSTEC Summit



BANGLADESH

- Trade integration within the BIMSTEC region is important, especially for Bangladesh to be integrated with the rest of BIMSTEC. In view of stalemate in multilateral trading system, regional trade integration is even more timely.
- Bangladesh would face trade shock in the coming years as the country is going to graduate from the LDC category by 2024. All the trade benefits and international support measures that are available to LDCs will disappear.
- The cost of compliance to new standards such as labour, environment and other regulations would also increase.
- For sectoral cooperation, health, FinTech, science and technology are important for the BIMSTEC region. During the pandemic the importance of digital education, and digital health was felt across the region.

Dr. K. G.Moazzem

Research Director, CPD, Dhaka

- It is important to understand the state of existing cooperation initiatives in BIMSTEC and identify the sorts of initiatives that are required to finally institutionalize those. Very often with newer ideas, those existing initiatives take back seat in terms of implementation.
- On the BIMSTEC website, there are some initiatives going on trade, connectivity and energy. Those initiatives should be given priority for institutionalization.

Dr. Surat Horachaikul

Director, India Studies Centre



THAILAND

- Although different sectors have been hit quite bad, tourism sector is the worst affected sector as bulk of the region's income comes from tourism. For example, many hotels in Thailand are to be closed down in view of fall in number of tourists visiting the country.
- One very important characteristic of the BIMSTEC region is that we care about our citizens regardless of the divergence in level of development in the member countries.
- In healthcare sector, the region has been able to pool the best medical knowledge available especially from India even though it is not comparable to the standards of knowledge in the United States, or in the European Union. Returns from Indian healthcare sector are very high.
- Collective action and regional cooperation in healthcare is necessary as market does not address the health requirements of the ordinary people in the region. Market often serves the healthcare requirements of those who can afford to pay for it.
- In crisis times like the COVID-19 pandemic, different kinds of spending budgets would be effective.
- In Thailand, Kon La Khreung is the most popular programme which implies that the citizens pay half and the government pays the rest half in case of purchases of food from street vendors, and so on. This is very popular among grassroot people and those who earn more than 300,000 baht a year.
- During the pandemic the private sector has been quite cooperative especially the banks those deferred the repayment of loans.
- FinTech solutions were found effective in Thailand during the pandemic especially in retails payments such as cash transfers and online purchases.
- Agriculture and food security is an important sector of BIMSTEC cooperation. Efforts should be directed towards standardization of food products.



Professor Arun Kumar Thakur

Executive Director, CEDA



NEPAL

- Nepal's preference is somewhat different from the other countries. Nepal is agrarian country and our main focus is how to employ the people.
- Most of the Nepalese people are engaged in India. In fact, many people are going to India for work even during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Regarding the COVID-19 exit plan, some provisions have been made regarding the economic recovery. It includes exemptions by banks in the form of extending the repayment period of loans, among others.
- Most of the countries are providing donations in the form of vaccine, but there is serious lack of freezing and other infrastructure to store and reserve the vaccines for future use.
- Tourism especially mountain tourism can be developed. However, melting of the glaciers is a major challenge as recharge is not maintained and destruction of the trees.
- Joint research and joint investment programs with India would be helpful for India.

Recommendations

BIMSTEC Leaders

- Effective political leadership and cooperation between BIMSTEC Member States can reduce vulnerability and help build resilience. Collective efforts and coordinated actions are required for robust and resilient economic recovery of the region in the post-pandemic period to mitigate the adverse socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 pandemic.
- While prioritization of sectors for regional cooperation is crucial, BIMSTEC Member States need to urgently address the immediate challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic through comprehensive policy responses in different sectors including ecommerce, public health, science, technology & innovation, renewable energy and disaster management, among others.
- BIMSTEC should promote regional public goods by ensuring a sustainable environment and mitigating climate change issues as activities in the Bay of Bengal have serious environmental implications for Member States.
- Improving visibility of Bay of Bengal identity and creating awareness about the unique importance of BIMSTEC are necessary building blocks for strengthening BIMSTEC cooperation.
- In view of untapped potential for harnessing regional resources, conservation and preservation of natural resources must assume importance and warrant collective action by the Member States, thus meeting the Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and Paris Agreement on Climate Change.
- BIMSTEC Secretariat has been playing a critical role in fostering cooperation among the Member States. In view of rapidly changing economic landscape and shift in priorities, the capacity of the Secretariat in both human and financial resources need to be strengthened.
- BIMSTEC Member States to facilitate pooling funding from national and multilateral sources such as ADB, UNESCAP, etc for facilitating joint research, dialogues on cross-cutting and immediate issues, among others. This would help in scaling up BNPTT engagements.
- Intra-regional trade in certain sectors in BIMSTEC is much higher than the overall trade. In order to reap the benefits of unrealized trade, BIMSTEC FTA should be finalized at the earliest.
- Trade in parts & components and strengthening Regional Value Chains (RVCs) are emerging trade

Recommendations

policy priorities. BIMSTEC Member States may undertake necessary reforms in FDI regimes, exploring alternative supply chains, promoting and preventing regional firms to migrate to other regions causing loss of income and revenue for the BIMSTEC Member States.

- Health sector cooperation assumes importance in mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic and preparing for future health exigencies. Necessary steps may include putting provisions in service trade agreement, vaccination programmes, harmonizing regulatory architecture, promoting technical cooperation, provision of universal healthcare, etc.
- FinTech, start-ups and several other emerging sectors offer greater investment and job opportunities for the people in the region. BIMSTEC must take initiatives to seize these opportunities.
- Science, technology and innovation in vaccination and cooperation in joint research is required.
- The region has faced huge revenue losses and job dislocations due to complete closure of tourism and hospitality sectors. Urgent policy measures to promote value-based tourism would help revive employment especially in the rural areas.
- Multilateralism is needed to restore the rule-based global trade and ensure orderly economic growth in BIMSTEC region. Trade facilitation for food trade is an example in that direction.
- Food security and safety in terms of access to adequate nutritious food (good food) empowers people, addresses health concerns, and contributes to social welfare. BIMSTEC should take necessary steps in this regard.
- Cooperation in renewable energy, quality and green infrastructure, etc. may be prioritized. Initiatives by organizations like International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) by India may be considered.
- The BIMSTEC Member States may consider a new paradigm for development by embracing the moral compass including the values of happiness, sufficiency, self-reliance, human-centric economic policies which put people at the centre of development with due recognition of the concerns of the vulnerable sections of the society.
- Lack of cooperation in cross-border payments often cause discomfort and increase cost of commissions in currency conversions for the ordinary people in the region. Difficulty in settling medical bills during COVID-19 times is an illustration of this deficiency. Cooperation in digital payments may be addressed with utmost priority.

BIMSTEC Secretariat

- BNPTT Meetings should be held on a regular basis, and events by individual BNPTT institutions in collaboration with the BIMSTEC Secretariat may be suitably factored into the composite BNPTT recommendations to the BIMSTEC Leaders.
- Given the core focus of BIMSTEC to promote greater People-to-People Contacts, education has been playing an important catalytic role. The Secretariat, with concurrence of the Member States, to facilitate exchange programmes, scholarships, capacity building programmes like Summer Schools, etc.
- The Secretariat may seek the guidance of the Member States in identifying a few key sectors for in-depth studies, preferably jointly by the BNPTT Members with concrete policy objectives and timelines.
- The Secretariat may facilitate communicating the results and outcome of the research studies carried out by the BNPTT Members to the Member States.
- The Secretariat may facilitate the Chair of BNPTT to present the recommendations of the BNPTT Meeting to the Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM).
- The Secretariat, with the concurrence of the Member States, may organize theme-based seminars and conferences to yield sector-specific recommendations for the Member States.

Recommendations

BNPTT Members

- BNPTT Members need to be in regular touch with their National Focal Points e.g. Ministries of External/ Foreign Affairs/ Foreign Ministry for taking forward policy research and advancing the cause of regional cooperation.
- The dedicated BIMSTEC website launched by RIS can be leveraged as a regional public platform for sharing and spreading knowledge on different contours of BIMSTEC cooperation in the form of policy briefs, monographs, etc.
- BNPTT Members may come up with innovative scholarship and exchange programmes for the students and young researchers from the region.
- BNPTT Members can nominate young researchers and policymakers for training and exchange programmes so as to identify complementarities for collective research and capacity building at their respective institutions specializing in different niche areas.
- Consensus-based joint position papers on key priority areas and collective guiding documents from BNPTT could be effective in mobilizing political support for regional and global challenges like COVID-19-driven pandemic.
- BNPTT should aim to enable and promote the grass-root connect of BIMSTEC cooperation agenda and provide innovative ideas for inclusive, sustainable and robust socio-economic growth in the Member States.
- BNPTT Members should also promote greater regional connectivity between South and Southeast Asia. Besides, BNPTT Members should provide research-based inputs on emerging sectors such as digital economy, fintech, food security and safety, and suggest the possible means of engagement among BIMSTEC Member States for seizing opportunities for job creation and business promotion in those sectors.
- BNPTT Members may promote visibility of BIMSTEC by engaging with other stakeholders of the host Member State by inviting them to a special reach-out session on the sidelines of BNPTT Meetings.
- BNPTT Members may draw with specific inputs on the above identified sectors and suggest policy initiatives to their respective National Focal Points and communicate to BIMSTEC Secretariat for taking up in the appropriate BIMSTEC mechanisms.
- Joint research on skills, technologies and human resources in selected sectors may be considered to help BIMSTEC Member States formulate policies in the emerging sectors.
- RIS may prepare policy brief on the identified sectors so as to generate informed debate among BIMSTEC policy makers and practitioners before the next BIMSTEC Summit.
- The BNPTT Members may prepare policy briefs in the core sectors of BIMSTEC cooperation based on their respective strengths in research areas.

Closing Remarks

Professor Sachin Chaturvedi

Director General, RIS & Chair, Fifth BNPTT Meeting



INDIA

- As we heard over the past two days, all the think tanks are very actively involved in the national agenda setting not only in terms of COVID-19 but also the post-pandemic recovery phase that their countries are going through.
- I am extremely thankful to the BIMSTEC Secretariat particularly to your Excellency Secretary General, Mr. Lekphell and Ms Pem, Director (Culture) for support, guidance and hand holding that this event particularly in this virtual mode required.
- We are all getting inspired by each other's advancements that are there in the promotion of BIMSTEC as a platform and Bay of Bengal as an identity for all of us to connect to.
- I think the Summit has been benefited immensely by the interventions by the Secretary (East), MEA, India, Ambassador Ms. Reva Ganguly Das.
- The Fourth BNPTT report received from Thimpu became the stepping stone for this meeting for last two days. Subsequently, it would be given to Ambassador Zau Goone to take it forward to Myanmar.
- Three points that have come up very strongly in the meeting which require reemphasizing.
- First, it is agreed to suggest the member institutions to hold at least one session to reach out to other stakeholders including parliamentarians, media, business and other academics who are not formally part of this dialogue. The host institution may do it at the local level so that it remains cost effective, but it still gives greater visibility to BIMSTEC.
- Second, it is suggested to step up our efforts for policy briefs, something that was agreed in Bhutan, as well.
- Third, it is agreed to identify and request the Secretariat and the member governments to mobilize resources for funding of joint studies.
- BIMSTEC website developed by RIS to facilitate BNPTT work and sharing of resources and creating global public good for the BNPTT community a milestone in that endeavour.
- The Report of the meeting would list out all the recommendations that we just finalized.
- With the hope of implementing all these interesting recommendations, I thank you all for participating and contributing to the success of this meeting.



AGENDA

21 December 2020	
10.00-11.00 hrs	Inaugural Session
10.00-10.10 hrs	<i>Welcome Remarks:</i> Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi , Director General, RIS
10.10-10.25 hrs	<i>Special Remarks:</i> Mr. Tenzin Lekphell , Secretary General, BIMSTEC, Secretariat, Dhaka
10.25-10.40 hrs	<i>Presentation of 4th BNPTT Report:</i> Mr. Chewang Rinzin , Director, Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies, Bhutan
10.40-11.00 hrs	<i>Keynote Address:</i> Ms. Riva Ganguly Das , Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, India
11.00-13.00 hrs	<u>Technical Session-I: Adoption of Agenda & Review of Past BNPTT Meeting</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Election of Chairperson and Appointment of Rapporteur Adoption of Agenda Remarks by BNPTT Members on Activities undertaken since the Fourth Meeting held in Bhutan on 27-28 December 2018
13.00-14.00 hrs	Lunch Break
14.00-16.00 hrs	<u>Technical Session-II: Review of Past BIMSTEC Summit Commitments and Future Priorities for BNPTT</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scope and Diversification of BIMSTEC Cooperation Agenda: Presentation by Host Institution (RIS) Comments and Remarks by BNPTT Members New Initiatives by BNPTT Institutions

22 December 2020	
10.00-12.00 hrs	<p><u>Technical Session-III: Future Roadmap for BIMSTEC Cooperation:</u> Agenda for Fifth BIMSTEC Summit in Sri Lanka</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation by BIMSTEC Secretariat • Presentation by BNPTT Member Institutions on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » COVID-19 Exit Plan and Economic Recovery » Trade, Investment and Economic Integration » Sectoral Cooperation (Health, Fintech, Science & Technology, etc.
12.00-13.00 hrs	<p><u>Closing Session</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of Fifth BNPTT Meeting Report prepared by Rapporteur and BIMSTEC Secretariat • Adoption of the Report • Vote of Thanks

Professor Sachin Chaturvedi

Director General, RIS & Chair, Fifth BNPTT Meeting

Very Good Morning to all and a very warm welcome to the Fifth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy think-tanks (BNPTT).

Your Excellency, Secretary General, Mr. Tenzin Lekphell.

Madam Ambassador Riva Ganguly Das, Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Government of India,

Professor Rinzin, Director, RIGGS, Bhutan;

Dr. Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director CPD; Bangladesh;

Professor S K Mohanty from RIS, India.

Dr Arun Kumar Thakur, ED, CEDA, Nepal;

Mr Lehpal Zau Goone, Member, MISIS, Myanmar;

Dr Dushnee Weerakon, Executive Director, IPS, Sri Lanka;

Professor Surat Horichaikul, Director, India Studies Center, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand;

Officials from Governments and colleagues from the BIMSTEC Secretariat and my academic community.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Warm Welcome to this two day in-depth discussions on BIMSTEC cooperation and our collective partnership for collective and inclusive development.

- RIS is happy to host the BNPTT meeting for the second time. RIS had steered the very establishment of BNPTT and organised the First BNPTT meeting in 2010.
- I am glad that, even in these difficult times we are able to meet for the 5th BNPTT meeting.
- We could have met in New Delhi a few months back for the meeting.
- But, nevertheless we would try our best to provide ideas and recommendations for the upcoming 5th BIMSTEC Summit to be held in Sri Lanka.
- All the 7 countries have nominated their experts and officials for the meeting. We have a total of 28 nominations including 7 officials from BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka.
- Barring experts from BNPTT member institutions, officials

- from Ministry of Foreign Affairs from BIMSTEC countries are also taking part in this meeting.
- We look forward to have your contributions to the successful outcome of the 5th BNPTT meeting.
 - Before we go to the substantive part of the meeting, let me highlight a few points on the current state of global economy and the BIMSTEC countries, and the range of issues that BIMSTEC leaders need to consider for enhancing cooperation in the region.
 - The world economy has experienced the worst crisis of the century i.e. the covid-19 pandemic affecting all countries regardless of their level of economic development and resource positions.
 - While no country was really insulated from contraction in economy, fall in trade & investment, rise in unemployment, loss to industrial sectors and private businesses, and so on, the human and social costs of the pandemic has fallen disproportionately on the poor and low & middle income countries.
 - According to IMF, the world economy would shrink by 4.4 per cent in 2020 reflected in falling income, job losses, inequality and social insecurity. Although forecasts suggest global growth bouncing back to 5.2 per cent in 2021, the downside risks and heightened uncertainty continues to lower confidence in the economies worldwide.
 - While IMF is projecting a smooth recovery in 2021, UNCTAD observes that if governments aid this recovery with fiscal tightening in view of rising public debt and aggressive cost-cutting for promoting exports, the recovery would become uncertain and double-dip recession as earlier predicted by OECD could become a reality in 2021-2022.
 - Advanced economies that are biggest trade destinations for most of the developing countries as a whole would experience high negative [(-)8.3 per cent] growth in 2020, including US and Euro Area of (-) 4.3 per cent and (-) 8.3 growth respectively.
 - Emerging and Developing economies, the major sources of global growth and investment would contract by 3.3 per cent in 2020; hopefully the projection of 6 per cent growth in 2021 materialize.
 - Moreover, developing countries are facing a financing gap of US\$2 to 3 trillion due to fall in export revenues and declined tax revenues.
 - As per UNCTAD, the world faces the risk of a sharp contraction to the magnitude of a complete wipeout of the economies of Brazil, India and Mexico. Further, trade would shrink by one-fifth, FDI flows by 50 per cent and remittances by US\$100 billion.
 - Coming to BIMSTEC countries, as per IMF, three countries such as India (-10.3 per cent), Sri Lanka (-4.5 per cent) and Thailand (-7.1 per cent) would register negative GDP growth in 2020, other four BIMSTEC countries are going to witness sharp cut in economic activity (GDP growth).
 - For instance, growth rates are estimated to fall from 8.1 per cent in 2019 to 3.8 per cent in 2020 for Bangladesh, from 3.8 per cent to 0.6 per cent for Bhutan, from 6.5 per cent to 2 per cent for Myanmar, and from 7 per cent to 0.02 per cent for Nepal. These numbers indicate the size and magnitude of shrinkage in economic activity.
 - Contract in global trade of BIMSTEC countries could be colossal as estimated by IMF. IMF estimates indicate that growth in volume of exports of goods and services in 2020 would fall by 12.5 per cent for Bangladesh, 10.9 per cent for India, 10.2 per cent for Myanmar, 19.9 per cent for Sri Lanka and 21.2 per cent for Thailand.

- Likewise, for imports it would fall by 3.3 per cent for Bangladesh, 17.4 per cent for India, 10.1 per cent for Myanmar, 13.3 per cent for Sri Lanka and 19.4 per cent for Thailand.
- As per UNCTAD estimates, job losses could reach 500 million worldwide by end of the year with between 90 to 120 million pushed to extreme poverty resulting in hunger, malnutrition and rising inequality.
- Regional cooperation in BIMSTEC will have to take off from this lower bottom to ensure normalcy in our economies and the extent possible, address the need for common policy responses in the post-pandemic economic recovery.
- While progress in different priority areas of cooperation are observed, it is imperative to give thrust to trade integration, improved transport connectivity, strengthening cooperation in health sector, emerging sectors like digital technology, fintech, etc, and social sector and other areas like tourism, culture, disaster management, and so on.
- BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity is likely to be finalized before the 5th BIMSTEC Summit.
- Besides BIMSTEC-level negotiations, the improved bilateral engagements between the BIMSTEC countries in recent years reveal the feasibility of concluding various BIMSTEC negotiations as common grounds are already drawn on many fronts at the bilateral level.
- Railways of India and Bangladesh played a crucial role in maintaining the uninterrupted supply chains during the Covid-19.
- Inland waterways and coastal shipping are the cost-effective means of cargo transport in the Bay of Bengal Region. Notable progress in trial run of transshipment of Indian goods from Kolkata to Agartala via Chattogram and Mongla Ports under the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT).
- Early operationalisation of BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement as recently agreed between India and Bangladesh indicates the importance of improving connectivity among the BIMSTEC countries.
- The willingness of Bangladesh to join the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project is recognition of the strong economic spillovers of connectivity projects in the region.
- Besides Bangladesh, India's bilateral relations with other BIMSTEC countries are equally gathering momentum. Likewise, other BIMSTEC countries are engaged among them for enhancing the scope of bilateral cooperation and anchoring it within the scope of BIMSTEC cooperation.
- In 2019, Sri Lanka and Myanmar also strived for strengthening bilateral cooperation including at the level of BIMSTEC.
- Similarly, on December 6, 2020 Bangladesh and Bhutan signed a preferential trade deal to promote duty-free trade between the two nations.
- As I mentioned above, these are illustrations of the thinking in the BIMSTEC region to engage in comprehensive and deeper economic relations rooted in land and maritime connectivity, seamless flow of trade & investment, cooperation in science & technology, and mutually-beneficial development partnership.
- This wider recognition entails the extent of interdependence among the BIMSTEC countries which can be scaled for regional cooperation for tangible economic gains in the field of connectivity, achievement of SDGs, and cultural and people-to-people interactions.
- Cooperation among the member countries for achieving the SDG targets assumes highest priority in the given circumstances as it addresses all aspects of development e.g. growth, inclusion, equity and sustainability.

- Further, UN has declared this decade as the 'Decade of Action' in order to achieve the SDGs.
- Cooperation in SDGs in BIMSTEC could be envisaged in the areas of localization, resource pooling and regional peer monitoring frameworks.
- In the maritime connectivity, all BIMSTEC countries use waterways and ocean shipping, joint cooperation for Bangladesh-Myanmar-India-Sri Lanka maritime connectivity should be explored.
- Lastly, activities in Bay of Bengal matters to all the BIMSREC countries including Nepal and Bhutan as

environmental spillovers like acidic rains in Nepal suggest. BIMSTEC countries can work for harnessing the ocean resources for promoting blue economy in the region.

- With these initial observations, let me stop here and hope for very productive deliberations over this one and half-day meeting.

Keynote Address

Ms. Riva Ganguly Das

Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs, India

Excellency Mr. Tenzin Lekphell, Secretary General of BIMSTEC

Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General of RIS

Heads and Members of the BNPTT Institutions and Government
Representatives of BIMSTEC Countries

Good morning and warm greetings from India!

It is indeed my pleasure to speak at this esteemed platform of
the Network of Policy Think Tanks of BIMSTEC countries.

My special thanks to RIS, the focal point for India for this
Network, for successfully organising this meeting. I also thank
the BIMSTEC Secretariat for smooth coordination in scheduling
and facilitating the meeting.

I am glad that the think-tank community of the region has
gathered at an opportune time to deliberate on key challenges
and opportunities for the BIMSTEC region. Think Tank
community as we heard has made very substantial contribution
to BIMSTEC. We have also just heard of the report of the 4th
BNPTT meeting from Prof. Rinzin. I am sure that it will be a
good food for thought for this meeting.

Distinguished delegates,

BIMSTEC enjoys the unique strength of connecting South and
South-East Asia. It links the ecologies of the Himalayas and the
Bay of Bengal. With shared histories, values and ways of life,
it is a natural platform, to build our common future. BIMSTEC
represents our common desire for peace and development.

India considers BIMSTEC as a natural strategic choice to
fulfill the objectives of our 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East'
policies. India, being the largest country in the region, has a
non-reciprocal commitment to BIMSTEC.

Presence of BIMSTEC leaders at our Government's swearing-
in ceremony in May 2019 is a reflection of the commonality of
interests and recognition of mutual gains from our extended
neighbourhood from South to Southeast Asia.

India is the Lead Country in 4 out of the 14 sectors identified
by BIMSTEC for cooperation, namely counter terrorism &
trans-national crime, transport & communication, tourism,
and environmental & disaster management. I am glad that
satisfactory progress is being made in all these areas.

At the 4th BIMSTEC Summit in Kathmandu, India
announced a number of initiatives to further strengthen

BIMSTEC cooperation and capacity-building in diverse areas. Out of these, the BIMSTEC Military Exercise, the BIMSTEC Ministerial Conclave at India Mobile Congress 2018, 2nd BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise, BIMSTEC Seminar on Climate Smart Farming Systems training of BIMSTEC Diplomats at the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Services have already been implemented. We are hosting BIMSTEC Startup Conclave in virtual format next month. Some of the initiatives had to be deferred because of the COVID pandemic and will be taken up when the situation normalizes.

We remain fully committed to further building the momentum of regional cooperation under the BIMSTEC framework.

Distinguished delegates,

BIMSTEC, with an economy of US\$ 3.8 trillion, is emerging as a promising sub-regional economic community in Asia. Over the period 2010-2019, the region has witnessed a compound annual growth rate (GDP growth) of 6.1 per cent.

It is heartening to see BIMSTEC making rapid strides in institution building and further deepening cooperation among the Member States. After two decades of existence, BIMSTEC Senior Officials have finalised the text of its Charter, which is expected to be adopted at the next BIMSTEC Summit.

Subject to the completion of internal procedures by respective countries, there are three other important agreements expected to be signed at the next BIMSTEC Summit. These are the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, Memorandum of Association (MoA) on the Establishment of BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility (TTF) in Colombo and MoU on Mutual Cooperation between Diplomatic Academies/Training Institutions of

the BIMSTEC Member States, etc. There is also a proposal for rationalization of sectors and sub-sectors of regional cooperation for consideration at the next Summit.

On connectivity, I am glad to inform you that the BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity was finalized by the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group at its third meeting chaired by India earlier this month. The Master Plan will now be considered by senior officials for adoption at the next BIMSTEC Summit. It would be an important milestone in enhancing regional connectivity and thus fulfilling aspirations of the people of our region.

We are simultaneously working on establishing legal framework to fully utilize the potential of the connectivity infrastructure. These include the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement. The two agreements will facilitate seamless transport of goods across our borders.

Distinguished delegates,

I am pleased to note that the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT) has over the years played an important role in shaping the BIMSTEC cooperation agenda and has provided a rich menu of issues for consideration of our leaders.

India has been at the forefront in taking forward the agenda of interaction between the think tank community of our region with the objective to strengthen people to people ties in the region. It had organised the first meeting of BNPTT in New Delhi in February 2010.

Our leaders, from time to time, have acknowledged and appreciated the role of BNPTT in bringing people of our region closer. At the fourth BIMSTEC Summit in Kathmandu, they had resolved to build a deeper understanding and trust among

the Member States and promote people-to-people contacts at various levels. They noted with satisfaction the activities of BNPTT in enhancing public awareness about BIMSTEC.

Distinguished delegates,

We are passing through the difficult phase of COVID pandemic. Transport, trade, tourism, hospitality and many other sectors have been drastically impacted. Poverty and unemployment are going to emerge as major issues for the region. Remittance flows to the region would also be impacted substantially.

Social security and public health issues have also come to the forefront. There has been renewed attention on skilled manpower in the public health sector and strong value chains in pharmaceuticals. Tangible cooperation for developing and supplying COVID vaccine in the region and regular exchanges between health professionals at regional level would be critical for all of us.

Food security, reducing vulnerability and achieving Sustainable Development Goals would be major policy challenges for the BIMSTEC region in the post-pandemic period. There is a need to focus on people-centric needs and

facilitating movement of essential products like food and medical supplies in the region.

Our Prime Minister has underscored the need to put people at the centre of our vision of global prosperity and cooperation, freely and openly share the benefits of medical research and development, develop adaptive, responsive and humane health care systems, promote new crisis management protocols and procedures for an interconnected world and work together to reduce economic hardships resulting from COVID-19 particularly for the economically weaker sections of the society.

Distinguished delegates,

I understand that today's meeting is going to discuss prospects of regional cooperation to achieve smooth recovery from the COVID crisis, measures to facilitate and further expand intra-BIMSTEC trade, cooperation in the health and financial sectors, collaboration in the field of Science, Technology & Innovation at regional level, among others.

I wish you fruitful discussions.

Thank you!!

Report of the Fourth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks

Agenda Item 01: Opening of the Meeting

01. The Fourth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT) was held on 27-28 December 2018 in Thimphu, Bhutan at the invitation of the Royal Government of Bhutan. The 4th BNPTT was organized by the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic

Studies (RIGSS) in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bhutan.

02. The BNPTT Members from the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the Kingdom of Bhutan, the Republic of India, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the Kingdom of Thailand participated in the Meeting. Besides, representatives of RIGSS and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bhutan were also present. The list of the participants is at Annex-I.

03. The welcome remarks was given by Director, Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS), Bhutan. Director of the Department of SAARC and Regional Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bhutan and Director, Social and Cultural Division of BIMSTEC Secretariat extended the special remarks, whereas the Keynote Address was given by the President of the Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies of Bhutan, who was also the Chief Guest of the event.

04. In his welcome remarks, Zimpon Wom Chewang Rinzin, Director, Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS), Bhutan welcomed the delegations to Bhutan and highlighted the importance of BNPTT, which is the only Track-II initiative to promote People-to-People

Contacts under BIMSTEC framework. He recalled the earlier meaningful discussions of BNPTT and stressed the need to continue BNPTT dialogue and process. He underscored the importance of the Terms of Reference (ToR) of BNPTT and hoped that the Member States will be able to approve the draft Terms of Reference (ToR) which was discussed and finalized at the Third Meeting of the BNPTT. He is confident that the Terms of

Reference (ToR) will be able to serve as a guide in the BNPTT process.

05. While addressing the Meeting, Mr. Rinchen Kuentsyl, Director, Department of SAARC and Regional Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bhutan, mentioned that BIMSTEC serves as a platform to bridge South Asia and Southeast Asia and expressed Bhutan's appreciation to host this important event. He stressed that one of the focuses of this meeting will be on review of the institutional reform. He highlighted the achievement of BIMSTEC since its establishment in 1997 and touched on the new agenda and directions provided by the recently held Fourth BIMSTEC Summit in August 2018. He mentioned to the meeting that Bhutan is fully committed to the BNPTT since its inception in 2008. He underscored the importance of BNPTT in promoting People-to-People Contacts and in shaping the policy of BIMSTEC in revitalizing the organization. Bhutan reiterated the importance of the network of Think Tanks and called for full support to BNPTT activities.

06. On behalf of the Secretary General of BIMSTEC, the Director in-charge of BNPTT Mr. Kunzang N. Tshering expressed his deep gratitude to the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Royal Institute for Governance and

Strategic Studies (RIGSS) for hosting the Fourth BNPTT Meeting in Bhutan and for the warm hospitality extended to the delegates. The Director informed the meeting that since its establishment, BNPTT has been making significant contribution to BIMSTEC process by serving as a platform to bring together highly qualified personalities of the Member States representing the constituent members of BNPTT to deliberate on relevant issues to promote regional cooperation within the framework of BIMSTEC as well as enhancing the visibility of BIMSTEC at the people's level. He expressed his appreciation to BNPTT for having come up with many important recommendations to strengthen BIMSTEC cooperation and apprised that many of their recommendations have either been implemented or are being considered for implementation. He further recalled that a major recommendation of the First BNPTT Meeting was the establishment of a Permanent Secretariat for BIMSTEC to support the Member States in taking their mandates forward. He also reported that BIMSTEC Leaders, at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit, had reiterated their commitment to strengthen the Secretariat with more resources, including increasing the number of Directors from 3 to 7, rationalization of the existing sectors of cooperation and establishment of a BIMSTEC Development Fund (BDF) to bring more focus and vigor to the future BIMSTEC activities. The full text of his remarks is at Annex-II.

07. The keynote address was delivered by Chief Guest, Dasho Karma Ura, President, Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies of Bhutan. He mentioned the role of Think Tanks and shared his ideas on the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration. In his Keynote Address, the Chief Guest reminded the Meeting of the role that Think Tanks can play not only in Gross National Happiness (GNH) but also in strengthening cultural linkages between the countries. He also alerted on possible adverse imperative on the flow of external funding to the Think Tanks and the importance of reflecting the general interest. While sharing his view on

the Fourth Summit Declaration, he expressed the need to take in consideration for the special needs of each Member State. He also mentioned that the problems of illegal drugs and terrorism are totally unacceptable for Bhutan and encouraged to collectively tackle on the question of illegal pharmaceutical products. He also called on the taking due measures on protecting against the climate change and the creation of an ambience where non-human life forms including wildlife are nurtured and protected. He encouraged the BIMSTEC Member States to do easy visa arrangements for business travellers and visa for educational purposes. Bhutan's unique role in GNH and sustainable development goals was also presented by the Chief Guest in his Keynote Address. GNH is a holistic and sustainable approach to development, which balances material and non-material values with the conviction that humans want to search for happiness. The objective of GNH is to achieve a balanced development in all the facets of life that is essential for our happiness. Bhutan offers rich experiences in GNH to other BIMSTEC Member States.

Agenda Item 02: Election of the Chairperson and Appointment of Rapporteurs

08. According to the existing practice, Zimpon Wom Chewang Rinzin, Director, Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS) and Leader of the Delegation of Bhutan was elected as Chair of the Meeting. In his initial remarks, the Chair welcomed the delegates to the Meeting and sought cooperation on matters pertaining to the conduct of the Meeting. Dr. Prabir De, Professor at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India was elected as the Rapporteur of the Meeting.

Agenda Item 03: Adoption of the Agenda

09. The Meeting considered and adopted the Provisional Agenda as contained in the Secretariat's Document Number BIMSTEC/BNPTT/04/2018/01 which is at Annex-III.

Agenda Item 04: Review of the activities undertaken by the BNPTT, since the Third Meeting of the BNPTT

10. The Meeting reviewed the Report of the Third Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 22-23 April 2017 as contained in Document Number BIMSTEC/BNPTT/04/2018/02. The Meeting also reviewed the activities undertaken by the Member States and the Secretariat after the Third Meeting of the BNPTT.

11. Mr. Kunzang N. Tshering, Director (Social and Cultural Division) of BIMSTEC Secretariat briefed the Meeting on the recommendations made at the Third BNPTT Meeting. BNPTT Members briefed the Meeting their past and also present activities on BIMSTEC.

12. The delegate of India informed the Meeting the activities Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India undertook since the Third BNPTT Meeting held in Dhaka in 2017. He informed the Meeting that RIS conducted Summer School on trade policy on regular basis which was also attended by several scholars and practitioners from BIMSTEC countries. He further mentioned that RIS also organized a roundtable on BIMSTEC at Kathmandu before the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit and recommendations of which were handed over to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of Nepal. He informed the Meeting that faculty members of RIS also contributed several research papers on BIMSTEC and in coming months, RIS plans to organize BIMSTEC lecture series in consultation with BIMSTEC Secretariat. In view of latest TNC round on BIMSTEC FTA, he mentioned that RIS has proposed to organize a conference on BIMSTEC FTA, and a volume can be published out of that conference. He indicated that the RIS has already extended the invitation for the Summer School to be opened in June 2019.

13. The delegate of Thailand, who is also a representative of the India Study Centre (ISC) of the Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, presented its past activities on BIMSTEC. He informed the Meeting that Thailand has organized three meetings and conferences, two film screenings, two public lecturers and radio programme entitled "Tales from the Bay of Bengal" in recent past. He further mentioned that ISC will continue to work on BIMSTEC with structured programmes closely in consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. The presentation by Thailand is at Annex-IV.

14. The delegate of Sri Lanka briefed the Meeting that contributions by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Sri Lanka were mainly towards publication of research articles and presentations on BIMSTEC. In this regard, the delegate mentioned of an important publication on BIMSTEC entitled "Regional Economic Integration in the Bay of Bengal" by Saman Kelegama, which is placed at Annex-V.

15. The delegate of Bangladesh discussed the activities Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh did in the past on BIMSTEC. He highlighted that faculty members of CPD wrote several research papers, contributed book chapters and made several presentations on BIMSTEC in seminars and conferences. One of the CPD publications on BIMSTEC entitled "Value Chains in BIMSTEC Region - Current Status, Possibilities and Challenges" by Estiaque Bari is at Annex-VI.

16. The delegate of Myanmar informed the meeting that Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) organized one seminar on BIMSTEC in collaboration with the Embassy of India in Yangon. He went on to mention that MISIS will continue to organize further events on BIMSTEC if opportunity arises.

17. The delegate of Nepal informed the Meeting that Nepal organized a workshop on BIMSTEC at Kathmandu in 2018.

18. The delegate of Bhutan informed the meeting that an article entitled “Culture: An Expression of Values” by Lungtaen Gyatso, President of the Institute of Language and Cultural Studies of Bhutan was contributed as a chapter in the book commemorating 20th Years of BIMSTEC published by BIMSTEC Secretariat in 2018. He further informed the meeting of a list of activities that Bhutan did in recent past such as writing articles on BIMSTEC, attending seminars and conferences etc.

19. Mr. Han Thein Kyaw, Director (Development Division) of BIMSTEC Secretariat informed the Meeting the activities that BIMSTEC Secretariat conducted in the recent months to enhance the visibility of BIMSTEC at the people’s level and to promote People-to- People Contacts among the Member States. He also highlighted that Secretary General of BIMSTEC Ambassador M Shahidul Islam attended conferences on BIMSTEC in India in April 2018, delivered a Lecture on BIMSTEC at the National Defence College of Bangladesh in July 2018 and participated at the Workshop on “BIMSTEC at 20: Priorities and Prospects” organized by Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) and the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT) in Singapore in September 2018 to raise the awareness of the BIMSTEC activities.

Agenda Item 05: Review of the implementation of the recommendations made by earlier BNPTT Meetings

20. The Chair opened the floor for discussion on the Review of the implementation of the recommendations made by earlier BNPTT Meetings as per the Note by the Secretariat as contained in Document Number BIMSTEC/BNPTT/04/2018/03.

21. Mr. Han Thein Kyaw, Director (Development Division) of BIMSTEC Secretariat updated the Meeting the

implementation of the recommendations made by earlier BNPTT Meetings and the activities conducted by the Secretariat to promote People-to-People Contacts at various levels. He informed the Meeting that a major recommendation of the First BNPTT Meeting has addressed by establishing the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2014. He also mentioned the importance of BNPTT Members to conduct regular consultations with their respective National Focal Points and to update them of the recommendations by the BNPTT meetings. To create awareness of BIMSTEC, he requested the meeting to provide available research articles on BIMSTEC by member Institutions to be uploaded on the Secretariat’s website. He informed the Meeting that the draft Terms of Reference (ToR), which was finalized at the Third BNPTT Meeting, will be discussed at the First Meeting of the BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) scheduled to be held in January 2019. He highlighted that the Secretariat will propose funding for three outstanding studies/ projects submitted by BNPTT members i.e. economic corridors, value chain and short courses. He also mentioned the Secretariat’s intention to propose inclusion of a standard item in the agenda of the Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM) so that the Chair of the BNPTT could present the report of BNPTT to SOM.

22. The delegate of India suggested that BNPTT chair may also report the outcome of BNPTT meeting to Heads of State of BIMSTEC. He also suggested that member organizations to undertake new areas of activities. The same was echoed by the delegate of Bangladesh. The delegate of Bangladesh suggested that some action-oriented agenda for the region be presented to SOM. Mr. Kunzang N. Tshering, Director (Social and Cultural Division) of BIMSTEC Secretariat informed the meeting the importance of moving step by step and the outcome of the BNPTT meeting be presented to SOM. He also informed that in view of the First Meeting of BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) to be held in January 2019, it is appropriate to table the outcome of the Fourth BNPTT meeting before the BPWC for further submission to SOM. The delegate of Nepal

suggested for a collective representation by all BNPTT members to SOM instead of presentation by Chair of BNPTT.

23. The Meeting, after deliberation, recommended the following:

(i) all BNPTT members to brief the BIMSTEC related activities to their respective National Focal Points/ Foreign Secretaries;

(ii) the Chair of BNPTT to present the outcome of BNPTT to the Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM).

Agenda Item 06: Deliberate on the Funding Mechanisms for BNPTT Meetings and its proposed policy research and studies

24. The Meeting discussed the funding mechanisms for BNPTT meetings and proposed activities, such as to conduct policy research and studies on the People-to-People Contacts, Regional Value Chain and Regional Connectivity as prioritized during the Second BNPTT Meeting held in Thailand in 2015.

25. While discussing Agenda Item 06, the delegate of India suggested the Meeting to consider discussing the funding mechanisms along with the Agenda Item 8 (New BNPTT initiatives) since both items were inter-related. It received support from the delegate of Bangladesh. However, the delegation of Bhutan emphasized the need for discussion on broad funding mechanism, particularly in view of ongoing BNPTT activities. The delegate of Sri Lanka suggested exploring funding mechanisms as emerged in other Think Tanks networks and regional organizations, which may provide important lessons and lead on the subject.

26. In replying to the query on BIMSTEC Development Fund (BDF), Mr. Han Thein Kyaw, Director (Development Division) of BIMSTEC Secretariat, by referring to the paragraph 8 of the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration,

informed the Meeting that BDF is in a stage of proposal which may take time to materialize. The BNPTT Members viewed BDF as a good initiative which can be utilized once it is ready.

27. The delegate of India suggested identifying collective works that BNPTT members can undertake, where relatively bigger Think Tanks can take larger responsibilities. He went on to mention that external sources of funding are also welcome such as from the European Commission. The delegate of Myanmar shared his view that foreign donors may prefer to support thematic projects. The delegate from Bangladesh suggested that the BNPTT members to prepare a list of activities which may need external funding. He explained that in general, small-scale projects can be covered by the member organizations themselves, whereas external funding is required for large-scale projects. He further highlighted the importance of prioritization of projects and activities.

28. Mr. Kunzang N. Tshering, Director (Social and Cultural Division) of BIMSTEC Secretariat informed the Meeting that the Secretariat is planning to seek funding approval of BPWC for the three studies/projects i.e. economic corridors, value chain and short courses for which proposals were already received. He further suggested the Meeting to continue with the three studies/projects and informed that the Secretariat can take up new projects as and when needed. The delegate of India also suggested for setting up a core fund for BNPTT which would then help institutionalize the BNPTT activities. The delegate of Bangladesh suggested deploying a dedicated resource person by each BNPTT member to work on BIMSTEC, while members continue working using the virtual network.

29. The Meeting extensively deliberated on the funding mechanisms for BNPTT. After deliberation, the Meeting recommended the following:

- (i) member organizations to continue to work at their own and explore possible support with BIMSTEC Secretariat;
- (ii) explore funding sources of ADB and other multilateral organizations; (iii) to further discuss on setting up of Trust Fund.

Agenda Item 07: Discussion on the Fourth Summit Declaration and its follow-up: Inputs from the BNPTT, specifically on the Institutional Reforms

30. The Meeting deliberated on the vision of Leaders reflected in the Fourth Summit Declaration as contained in Documents Number BIMSTEC/BNPTT/04/2018/04. Under this agenda item, members of BNPTT discussed the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration and its follow-up actions, specifically on the institutional reforms. The Members discussed the reprioritization of BIMSTEC pillars of cooperation as proposed by Thailand. While agreeing to the reprioritization of BIMSTEC pillars of cooperation, the Members emphasized the need to be specific and focused without regrouping all the existing areas of cooperation under the five pillars.

31. The Delegate of Bangladesh recommended preparing a list of activities which can be undertaken by BNPTT members as follow-up activities of Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration. The Rapporteur, Dr. Prabir De also presented his views on the line of activities that can be taken up as follow-up actions to the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration. The Meeting suggested that BNPTT members to work on the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration in terms of prioritization and works ahead.

32. After deliberations, the Meeting recommended the following:

- (i) the need to enhance the institutional capacity of BIMSTEC Secretariat including through financial and human resources;

- (ii) the BNPTT members to produce innovative ideas and pragmatic recommendations to facilitate early realization of the Summit Declarations;

- (iii) while agreeing to the reprioritization of BIMSTEC pillars of cooperation, the Members emphasized the need to be specific and focused without regrouping all the existing areas of cooperation under the five pillars.

Agenda Item 08: Discussion on the New BNPTT Initiatives and the Way Forward

33. The Chair invited suggestions/ views/ comments from the delegates on the New BNPTT Initiatives that the members of BNPTT think appropriate to undertake. The Meeting further deliberated on the new initiatives to be undertaken by the BNPTT.

34. The delegate of India proposed the Meeting to implement the following: digital and financial sector cooperation, the usage of local currencies in light of proposed BIMSTEC FTA in continuation with worldwide efforts for de-dollarization, cooperation in the areas of cross-border connectivity of sustainable development goals with focus on environment and climate change including blue and mountain economy. He also proposed to conduct the study for health sector financing. The Indian proposals on the priorities for BNPTT are at Annex-VII for consideration of the Member States.

35. The delegate of Sri Lanka suggested doing the study on BIMSTEC FTA with a particular focus on the Members' current thinking on FTA. The delegate of Bangladesh concurred with the proposal of Indian delegation and recommended the Meeting to continue work on the declaration of Fourth BIMSTEC Summit and identify research areas for future collaboration. The delegate of Thailand suggested to widen the discussions and to organize the international conference next to the BNPTT annual meeting.

He further recommended BNPTT Members to conduct the research on BIMSTEC related areas, preferably the same topic in order to produce as a book and to be used as a policy recommendation to the Member States. The delegate of Nepal highlighted that many research have been carried out and underscored the need to take into consideration of these previous research/ studies by the Member States. The delegate of Myanmar suggested to explore possibilities of establishing Buddhist circuit route and to find out the challenges faced with regard to connectivity especially air-linkages among the BIMSTEC Member States.

36. After deliberations, the Meeting recommended the following:

(i) to use the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit declaration as the guiding document to further the cooperation among the Member States;

(ii) endorsed Indian proposals as mentioned in paragraph 34 above;

(iii) to produce Policy Briefs, focusing on the respective lead areas of the Member States, during the Fifth BNPTT meeting. The format for the policy brief will be shared by the Bangladesh within January 2019;

(iv) to seek funding from the Member States to conduct studies on the earlier three proposals namely: economic corridor, value chain and short courses.

Agenda Item 09: Any other Matter

37. The Meeting suggested raising awareness of BIMSTEC by using social as well as mainstream media. The Meeting also encouraged BNPTT members to come up with proposals along with the modalities of the BIMSTEC Fellowship Programme for Young scholars and submit the same to the Secretariat.

38. The Meeting urged the BNPTT Heads of Institution to attend the BNPTT meetings and senior researchers may form a committee of rapporteurs so that their experience is leveraged for collective benefit.

Agenda Item 10: Date and Venue of the Fifth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks

39. The Delegation of India informed that India will host the Fifth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks. The date and the venue of the Fifth Meeting of the BNPTT will be communicated in due course by the Secretariat in consultation with the host.

Agenda Item 11: Consideration and adoption of Report of the Fourth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks

40. The Meeting considered and adopted the Draft Report of the Fourth Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks for submission to the next Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM).

Agenda Item 12: Closing of the Meeting

41. The Meeting conveyed its deep appreciation to the Royal Government of Bhutan for hosting the Meeting as well as for the warm hospitality. The Meeting also expressed its sincere thanks to the Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS), Ministry

of Foreign Affairs of Bhutan and the BIMSTEC Secretariat for their efforts in facilitating the Meeting to a successful conclusion. The Chair of the Meeting thanked the delegations for their valuable contributions and active participation in the Meeting.

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