



People-to-People Ties in the Bay of Bengal Region: Investing in Mobility, Sub-national and Research Engagements

Constantino Xavier*

1. Introduction: Engines of Change

It is easy for us scholars to meet and discuss when conditions are favourable, such as when summits are held regularly, when governments cooperate, and when there is political will to promote regional collaboration in the Bay of Bengal. We have experienced such good periods since the 1990s, notably in the early 2000s and more recently, after 2016. There was a sense of optimism about regionalism and some advancement, particularly regarding BIMSTEC, which saw the establishment of a new Secretariat in Dhaka, a new

organisational charter, a consolidation of sectoral areas, and more frequent engagements over the last ten years.¹

Yet, it is now, in these challenging days of regional and global turmoil, protectionism, and conflict, that we can evaluate the true strength and influence of think tank and research communities. Are we capable of continuing to foster people-to-people connections despite these barriers and obstacles, and, dare I say, a loss of momentum for BIMSTEC and the agenda of Bay of Bengal regionalism? Is it possible to promote regionalism even when there is limited or no political will? Can regional

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Constantino Xavier

This Policy Brief is written by Constantino Xavier is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) e-mail: cxavier@csep.org. An earlier version of the article was presented by the author at the 4th BoBED, held at Delhi on 16-17 January 2026. Author is grateful to Professor Sachin Kumar Sharma, Director General, RIS for providing support to prepare this Policy Brief. Views expressed are personal. Usual disclaimers apply.



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CMEC

Centre for Maritime Economy
and Connectivity
समुद्री अर्थव्यवस्था व संयोजन केंद्र



¹ Refer, Xavier (2018)

² Refer, Khosla (2014)

³ Refer, Xavier and Palit (2023)

⁴ Refer, Xavier and Sinha (2020)

scholars and experts keep meeting and exchanging ideas even when one key bilateral relationship, like the one between India and Bangladesh, faces a very difficult period?

I believe so, or else I would not have accepted Dr. Prabir De's kind invitation to join this Fourth Bay of Bengal Economic Dialogue, which is more important than ever. I would like to give a special shoutout to RIS and all the other partner organisations from across the region, who have persisted and carried this forward despite difficulties. Frankly, when we last met in Bangkok, I was not so optimistic. You have proven the realist in me wrong! And I hope to be wrong many more times.

There are two different approaches to the role people-to-people ties play. One approach is less optimistic about its agency: we often say that people-to-people and community ties follow (and result from) good regional infrastructural connectivity, economic integration, and so on. In simple terms: when there are strong G2G relations, extensive trade, and good transportation and energy links, people-to-people ties benefit and develop. The other approach gives more agency to people as catalysts of change: these are cases where deep infrastructural and economic linkages are lacking, but civil society mobilises to deepen and formalise regional integration. Here, research and expert communities are seen as important agents for change.²

Since we are located in what, by many accounts, is the least integrated region in the world, I assume that the challenge today for all of us is to consider the second approach: how can

people-to-people ties foster, accelerate, and enhance regional infrastructural and economic connectivity, leading to greater economic interdependence and integration in the Bay of Bengal region?³ With that in mind, let me propose three ideas that could serve as catalysts for change.

2. Mobility: Liberalize Visa Regimes

This first engine must be a more liberal visa mobility regime, particularly aimed at facilitating the movement of researchers, business elites, and tourists. In 2020, together with Riya Sinha, we conducted a study to understand how difficult it is for citizens of the seven BIMSTEC member states to visit and do business in each other's countries. The index evaluated which countries are more open and which are more closed within these seven nations. This might now be somewhat outdated, but I suspect it has not changed significantly.⁴

Our index revealed that Nepal is the most accessible country, offering visa on arrival to all other six member states. The least performing BIMSTEC country was Bhutan, with 14 points, indicating it is the least accessible. This means that most of the time, travellers need to obtain pre-arrival or online authorisation, or in some cases, attend in person at a consular mission to apply for a visa. Overall, one third of all visa applications in the BIMSTEC region required in-person visits. There were also many instances of prohibitive costs; for example, Thailand charged US\$ 200 for Myanmar or Bangladesh

citizens to obtain a multiple-entry visa. Paradoxically, we observed that it was (and still is) easier for citizens from other countries—such as those in Southeast Asia, China, the United States, and the European Union—to travel to BIMSTEC countries than for citizens within this region.

Therefore, we must find ways to reform this system: this does not mean open borders, which would be very difficult and sometimes counter-productive for regional economic integration. However, BIMSTEC member countries need to reconsider their visa and immigration policies, designed to support intra-regional mobility for various groups that are vital for connectivity (especially researchers, traders, and tourists).

3. Governance: Engage Sub-national Units

The second pillar of people-to-people connections for regional integration must be sub-national actors. Beyond central governments (G2G), we must find ways to promote dialogues for exchanging best practices between different states/provinces, cities, districts, and other levels of governance. We live in a community of seven countries with very strong decentralised governance mechanisms, some of which are federal.

The first tier of engagement (central governments) is not only well developed within the BIMSTEC region but, I would argue, it is relatively overdeveloped. There are many frequent interactions between central government authorities, ministries, and institutions. However, our

main weakness lies in the engagement at tiers two and three of governance. These are the sub-national levels that are closer to citizens since they often have more direct contact with voters, industries, NGOs, and civil society organisations. We need these levels to share learnings and best practices across various development sectors that are often dismissed as mundane local issues, including urbanisation, sanitation, health, and education.

By tier two here, I mean states and provinces that have some constitutional, legislative, or governance autonomy. I'll give you one example. Within BIMSTEC, I would say that the BBIN core region is critical for BIMSTEC tier 2 engagements: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal. Here, I am referring to regular exchanges between subnational governance units such as the Rangpur and Rajshahi divisions in Bangladesh, the *dzongkhags* between Samtse and Sarpang in Bhutan, including the new city of Gelephu, the states of Bihar and West Bengal in India, and the new federal provinces of Madhesh and Koshi in Nepal. Can we imagine a regional BBIN dialogue, for example on health or water resources, between representatives from these different units?

And by tier three, I mean local, district-level governance units. I believe there is significant potential for exchanges between municipal, city governance bodies, mayors, and other local entities to connect across the BIMSTEC region. I understand this must be done sequentially, mindful of each country's political, security, and constitutional sensitivities. However,

our task today is to expand our imagination, and in that regard, I hope we can work towards making this track of cross-border, sub-national and local engagements a reality sooner rather than later.

4. Research: Build Knowledge Networks

The third and final engine I propose is rooted in research, scholarship, and policy expertise. Unless we meet, study, and learn from each other within this region, it will be very challenging for policymakers to maximise opportunities and minimise risks for regional integration. Our knowledge networks in the BIMSTEC region are limited and fragile. Initiatives like this dialogue are valuable as touchpoints, but our aim should be to establish more sustained, collaborative, and even joint research efforts across the region – and for that, we require significant investments from our respective governments and industry stakeholders to support fellowship programmes that nurture the next generation of scholars.

By now, right here in India, we should have dozens of specialised study centres at think tanks and universities focusing specifically on each of the other six BIMSTEC countries, covering areas such as health, education, technology, and their respective political economies. Sadly, we don't have a single such centre for Thailand or Bhutan. Even regarding Nepal, next door, the knowledge is very limited. The situation is not much better in the other six countries, where there is growing interest in India, but think tanks and universities

possess very limited research expertise and collaboration with their Indian counterparts.

I believe it is now a good and urgent time for each institution involved in this dialogue to invest in a dedicated BIMSTEC fellowship and scholarship. These BIMSTEC fellows should support the next generation of young, emerging researchers under 40, to study topics aligned with BIMSTEC's interests and priorities. It's easy for us to propose broad ideas, but someone needs to conduct in-depth research.

Allow me to be frank and clarify what we should not confuse this with. First, the BIMSTEC Eminent Persons Group (EPG). It was a good initiative, but we have far too many EPGs in this region. This was an EPG that met over six times, with very eminent and distinguished members – but it consisted of six men and one woman, with an advanced average age. We now need to concentrate on new, evidence-based ideas, grounded in research by younger individuals. Second, I know some of you might say that there are already BIMSTEC scholarships in place. But if we examine more closely, we will see that many member countries have relabelled existing bilateral scholarships as BIMSTEC – and this is not the same as a BIMSTEC fellowship. Let me explain with an example: India offering a scholarship to a Thai student for some research on any topic in Chennai or Nalanda is beneficial, but will this study have a regional relevance to facilitate integration and cooperation? Does it have a focus on BIMSTEC?

Let us establish a BIMSTEC Policy Research Fellowship. For this, we need

BIMSTEC post-doctoral or doctoral-focused fellowships for individuals under 40 years of age. We should have one hundred of every year, at least ten for each country. But we can start small right now. Each think tank, perhaps within our existing network, can commit to hosting one of these fellows. While we can do much more, perhaps the immediate step is for every think tank to pledge to host one BIMSTEC fellow under this age who works on regional issues rather than bilateral or country-specific topics—such as supply chains, visa regimes, tourism circuits, or any issue spanning three or more BIMSTEC countries. Ideally, the fellowship should include a compulsory period at the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka to gain a cross-regional perspective and aid capacity building there.

5. Conclusion: The Way Ahead

Whatever happens around us in this turbulent world, this is the important thing: meeting and discussing, presenting, exchanging ideas because that is what we as researchers and scholars do best. And this should be independent of how the G2G relationship is working out across the region, with its ups and downs. As soon as the tides turn – and the India-Bangladesh relationship augurs well in the coming months – we must be ready.

We must persist and prevail, especially in these challenging times. It is good to see the Ministry of External Affairs supporting this initiative; it reflects the realisation that our belief and investment in a stronger regional think tank and research ecosystem must continue, whatever happens.

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RIS specialises in issues related to international economic development, trade, investment and technology. It is envisioned as a forum for fostering effective policy dialogue and capacity-building among developing countries on global and regional economic issues. The focus of the work programme of RIS is to promote South-South Cooperation and collaborate with developing countries in multilateral negotiations in various forums. Through its following centres/forums, RIS promotes policy dialogue and coherence on regional and international economic issues.



The word “DAKSHIN” (दक्षिण) is of Sanskrit origin, meaning “South.” The Hon’ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, inaugurated DAKSHIN – Global South Centre of Excellence in November 2023. The initiative was inspired by the deliberations of Global South leaders during the Voice of the Global South Summits. DAKSHIN stands for Development and Knowledge Sharing Initiative. Hosted at the RIS, DAKSHIN has established linkages with leading think tanks and universities across the Global South and is building a dynamic network of scholars working on Global South issues.



AIC at RIS has been working to strengthen India’s strategic partnership with ASEAN in its realisation of the ASEAN Community. AIC at RIS undertakes research, policy advocacy and regular networking activities with relevant organisations and think-tanks in India and ASEAN countries, with the aim of providing policy inputs, up-to-date information, data resources and sustained interaction, for strengthening ASEAN-India partnership.



CMEC has been established at RIS under the aegis of the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPS&W), Government of India. CMEC is a collaboration between RIS and Indian Ports Association (IPA). It has been mandated to act as an advisory/technological arm of MoPSW to provide the analytical support on policies and their implementation.



FITM is a joint initiative by the Ministry of Ayush and RIS. It has been established with the objective of undertaking policy research on economy, intellectual property rights (IPRs) trade, sustainability and international cooperation in traditional medicines. FITM provides analytical support to the Ministry of Ayush on policy and strategy responses on emerging national and global developments.



BEF aims to serve as a dedicated platform for fostering dialogue on promoting the concept in the Indian Ocean and other regions. The forum focuses on conducting studies on the potential, prospects and challenges of blue economy; providing regular inputs to practitioners in the government and the private sectors; and promoting advocacy for its smooth adoption in national economic policies.



FIDC, has been engaged in exploring nuances of India’s development cooperation programme, keeping in view the wider perspective of South-South Cooperation in the backdrop of international development cooperation scenario. It is a tripartite initiative of the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, academia and civil society organisations.



FISD aims to harness the full potential and synergy between science and technology, diplomacy, foreign policy and development cooperation in order to meet India’s development and security needs. It is also engaged in strengthening India’s engagement with the international system and on key global issues involving science and technology.



As part of its work programme, RIS has been deeply involved in strengthening economic integration in the South Asia region. In this context, the role of the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) is very important. SACEPS is a network organisation engaged in addressing regional issues of common concerns in South Asia.



Knowledge generated endogenously among the Southern partners can help in consolidation of stronger common issues at different global policy fora. The purpose of NeST is to provide a global platform for Southern Think-Tanks for collaboratively generating, systematising, consolidating and sharing knowledge on South South Cooperation approaches for international development.



DST-Satellite Centre for Policy Research on STI Diplomacy at RIS aims to advance policy research at the intersection of science, technology, innovation (STI) and diplomacy, in alignment with India’s developmental priorities and foreign policy objectives.

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Core IV-B, Fourth Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110 003, India.,

Tel. 91-11-24682177-80, Email: dgooffice@ris.org.in, Website: www.ris.org.in

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