

BIMSTEC

Dhaka secretariat can play a vital role

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THE first BIMSTEC Secretary General, Ambassador Sumit Nakandala, a seasoned Foreign Office diplomat from Sri Lanka, assumed office in the new BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka on 10th August 2014. The decision to locate the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka was finally taken at the 3rd BIMSTEC Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar in March 2014. Bangladesh supremely qualifies to host the Secretariat as it centres the BIMSTEC regional grouping with India virtually bordering it, Sri Lanka and Nepal to the West, Bhutan to the North, and Thailand and Myanmar on the East of it. Perhaps this is the first time that Dhaka is hosting a regional grouping Secretariat and it should be proud of this accomplishment.

Unlike many other regional groupings, BIMSTEC is a sectoral cooperation driven organization. Starting with six sectors for sectoral cooperation in the late 1990's (trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism, and fisheries), it expanded to seven more sectors by 2005 (agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism, environment, culture, and people-to-people contact). Each member country has been assigned one, two or three sectors to coordinate. Although BIMSTEC mooted a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) at its first Summit in 2004 and Trade Negotiation Committees (TNCs) were formed to work out an FTA, there has hardly been any progress over it, perhaps due to the two key members of the grouping, viz., India and Thailand embarking on an FTA in 2004. As its new name – BIMSTEC: Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation – suggests, it is a multi-sectoral cooperation framework and that remains its key component. This approach creates many layers of cooperation to ensure quick integration.

Clearly what we see in the BIMSTEC is economic integration pursued through cooperation agreements among countries of the region which is policy-induced integration in contrast to market-driven integration. In this context, the BIMSTEC Secretariat has to play a vital role with existing BIMSTEC's structures in driving the integration process. So far, the role of the Secretariat was played by the BIMSTEC Working Group (BWG) based in Bangkok under the supervision of the Department of International Economic Affairs of the Thai Foreign Ministry and with the consultation of the BIMSTEC member country Ambassadors (or the representative) in Thailand. Monthly meetings took place until 2010 (and less frequently thereafter) to push forward the cooperation agenda in each sector and for identifying policy adjustments necessary for such cooperation in order to report to BIMSTEC's Senior Officials Meetings. Given that this was a loose arrangement, there was little positive outcome from the BWG.

Now the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka will take up the role of the BWG and direct and guide the activities of the organization. The Secretariat may focus on a few items to produce results rather than focusing on a grand agenda and dilute its efforts. The ADB completed the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistic Study (BTILS) and this could be a starting point for action. BTILS supported by ADB will enhance regional connectivity and for this purpose, concrete projects have been identified for implementation.

It may be noted that ADB has become BIMSTEC's development partner since 2005 and the ADB's successful involvement in promoting economic cooperation in the GMS (Greater Mekong Subregion) can be easily replicated in the BIMSTEC region with the much required funding from the ADB. BIMSTEC transport infrastructure connectivity will also benefit from the ongoing initiatives of the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) corridor. Thus, focusing on transport integration with subregional infrastructure investment support will be a good starting point for the Secretariat. Some of these transport integration is

linked to the Asia Highways and Trans-Asia Railway project that was initiated by ESCAP sometime back.

Three other areas that may be considered for immediate cooperation are: tourism promotion in the region using the BIMSTEC Buddhist circuits, fisheries cooperation in the Bay of Bengal -- first by compiling a Directory of BIMSTEC fisheries organizations, and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector which is closely related to transport integration. Strangely, ICT has not received much emphasis in BIMSTEC's sectoral cooperation dialogues. There is also a need to strengthen the BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce network to complement the policy-driven integration in such sectors with the much needed market-driven integration.

The third BIMSTEC Summit declaration directed the TNC to expedite its work to complete the FTA by end-2014 to boost the current intra-regional trade from 2.5 % to a higher level. If this does take place, the workload for the Secretariat will further increase. In the absence of a Charter, BIMSTEC leaders should empower the Secretariat to steer the organization in-between Summits as it will be the nerve centre which will coordinate all functions. It should not be in a position akin to the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu where very little powers have been delegated; rather it should be like the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta where power has been delegated by the ASEAN Heads of State to drive the organization. The recent remark by the Indian Prime Minister, Modi, that the SAARC Head Office should be located in Delhi is perhaps the manifestation of a similar line of thinking in regard to Secretarial powers.

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Unlike SAARC, BIMSTEC's economic agenda is less vulnerable to regional politics and therefore it should now also look at building a strong link between South and East Asia. This is essential for South Asian countries to join the ASEAN led RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) in a future date, for RCEP will be the building block of a future Asian Economic Community, that in turn will give full meaning to the idea of Asia's Century.

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Published: 12:00 am Wednesday, August 13, 2014

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