



**Pondicherry University**  
**School of Social Sciences & International Studies**  
**UGC Centre for Maritime Studies**

**Call for Papers**  
**Concept Note for International Seminar**  
***BIMSTEC: Constructing New Pathways in the Context of Rising Asia***  
**11-12 February 2020**  
**UGC Centre for Maritime Studies, Pondicherry University**  
**in collaboration with**  
**Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Kolkata**

Seven countries across the South and Southeast Asian regions formed in 1997 a sub-regional cooperative framework premised in promoting their mutual interests. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) aimed at encouraging multilateral cooperation between India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan. BIMSTEC aims to address 14 sectors: Trade & Investment; Transport & Communication; Energy; Tourism; Technology; Fisheries; Agriculture; Public Health; Poverty Alleviation; Counter-Terrorism & Transnational Crime; Environment & Disaster Management; People-to-People Contact; Cultural Cooperation; Climate Change. BIMSTEC is based on the principle of 'geographic neighbourhood,' whose economic philosophy is that the prospect for economic integration is more possible between those countries sharing territorial and maritime borders. All the BIMSTEC members are immediate neighbour of each other – territorially and maritime.

After having witnessed South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) flounder in its course, primarily due to the demonstrated positions of India and Pakistan on terrorism, BIMSTEC ushered in a new chapter in intra and extra regional cooperation in South Asia. Extending its reach to Myanmar and Thailand who are members of ASEAN, it enabled an outreach for the South Asian countries into East- the dynamic growth pole of Asia. Academic scholarship has attributed this outreach to India's Look & Act East Policies that have been making (however haltingly!) to expand India's sphere of influence into the underbelly of China, the regional hegemon. In the second tenure of NDA government which commenced after the decisive mandate given to BJP in the recent Indian elections, BIMSTEC appears poised for emerging into a major intra-regional alliance. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's government extended an invite to BIMSTEC leaders to attend his swearing-in ceremony on 30 May 2019. The high profile attendance (minus Pakistan, not a BIMSTEC member) in the ceremony yet again demonstrated India's commitment to expand BIMSTEC framework while sending a clear message that countries supporting terrorism are unwelcome to share cooperative ties with India, This renewed Indian interest merits debating BIMSTEC in the sub-regional and regional context.

BIMSTEC connects the robust Indian economy and emerging Bangladesh economy to the vibrant markets of ASEAN. Although only two of ASEAN's members are in BIMSTEC, India's existing pattern of relations with other ASEAN countries like Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia gets a boost by partnering with Myanmar and Thailand. India conceives Myanmar as 'gateway to the East.' Land-locked Bhutan and Nepal, whose partnership potential as SAARC members is restricted by the Indo-Pak regional divide, are expected to enjoy greater opportunity to engage with BIMSTEC, a group surely more cohesive than the skewed and troubled SAARC. Each of the areas of cooperation that BIMSTEC has taken up has huge domestic implications for the member states. For example, the 1400 km long India-Myanmar-Thailand highway which India's Transport Minister Shri Gadkari said will be completed by December 2019, will speed up developmental activities all along the route providing fillip to local livelihoods.

Each member state, barring Bhutan and Nepal, have substantial populations dependent on the sea. While over-fishing and trawling are threatening to endanger fishing in many parts of the world, framework cooperation between BIMSTEC members could further the sustainable use of their fishing and other marine resource for mutual development. Towards this purpose, BIMSTEC must initiate institutional frameworks for realizing the agenda set at its Fourth Summit at Kathmandu, which stated: "Stress on continued cooperation in conservation, management and sustainable use of marine resources in the region; agree to deepen cooperation in fisheries to ensure food security and improve livelihoods of people in our region and task the relevant national agencies to explore the possibility of meaningful collaboration to promote sustainable marine fisheries and direct the relevant authorities to explore how the landlocked Member States can benefit from inland fisheries".

Myanmar has attracted considerable interest from China apparently for the as-yet-unexploited energy sources. A frame-work cooperation among BIMSTEC members with substantial financial assistance could ensure that the growing energy need among the member states gains priority, thus providing much needed energy supplies in the future. Being vested with unlimited natural sources like sunlight, sea and wind, developing mutually beneficial agenda for tech-financial cooperation for exploitation of these sources could change livelihoods to even remotely located populations in these countries.

These are but few of the positives of BIMSTEC. On the other hand, there are some limiting factors that need to be worked together to strengthen BIMSTEC.

India-Bangladesh and India-Sri Lanka have a number of issues concerning sharing of river waters and the Gulf of Mannar for fishing. Unless these issues are visited by high power committees with a time bound plan for resolving them, the possibility of BIMSTEC being diluted remains.

Unlike India that has demonstrated the strength and vibrancy of its democracy (strong institutional framework), some members of BIMSTEC are not so stable. India must take the lead to extend its support for strengthening democracies in member countries. This would have two-fold benefits. India's own institutional framework would get strengthened and a stable democratic environment in the neighbourhood could be ensured, hopefully.

Notwithstanding the merits of mega-development plans like road networks, port development, construction of hydro projects, etc, it is important to remember that large populations depend on the tracts of forests and hills that need to be harnessed for developmental cooperation in these countries. Sustainable development should therefore be the key guiding narrative. Whatever be the growth perspectives of the countries concerned, inclusive approach is imperative for the less developed countries/communities of the region.

There is also a need to revisit the traditional concepts of sovereignty that countries in South Asia have. The sense of self-interest with which countries tend to visit agendas for cooperation should be tempered with pragmatic considerations.

BIMSTEC is a unique multilateral framework focused on sectors that have huge potential for cooperation among member countries. Unlike SAARC which has nobler ideals (promoting peace, stability, amity and progress in the region through strict adherence to the principles of the UN Charter and Non-Alignment, respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and peaceful settlement of all disputes, for example), BIMSTEC has an earthy flavour. Being concerned with areas that could help the members address issues common across their territories, it has the potential to become an alliance that could actually touch millions of lives. The techno-economic agenda needs to be driven by political leaders in these countries drawing upon the advice from experts in concerned fields, entirely in a sustainable mould. That way, BIMSTEC could help ordinary citizens in these countries to realize their dreams for sustainable livelihoods.

Contemplating these aspects, UGC Centre for Maritime Studies, Pondicherry University in collaboration with Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Kolkata, is organizing a two day International Seminar on the above mentioned topic during 11-12 February 2020. The objectives of the seminar are:

- Regional and Extra-Regional Cooperation in South and Southeast Asia
- BIMSTEC: Genesis and assessment of its progress as a sub-regional group
- BIMSTEC: Opportunities and Challenges
- BIMSTEC and other groupings (SAARC & BCIM): Conflict or Complimentary
- BIMSTEC: Members' Roles and Strategies
- BIMSTEC: Cooperation in Blue Economy
- Conceptual deliberations on issues and challenges

In keeping with the objectives, the Centre invites papers from academics as well as practitioners in all the areas concerning BIMSTEC. Broadly, the papers must deal with the following:

- Conceptual debates on regional cooperation and integration
- Subject specific and country specific perspectives that address one or multiples areas for cooperation in BIMSTEC.
- Perspectives on regional cooperation and challenges to it.

- Policy perspectives and recommendations in specific areas of cooperation.

**Output:** The Seminar proceedings will be published in the form of a volume. It will facilitate different stakeholders including policy planners/ makers, bureaucrats, naval personnel, statesmen and researchers to know about various issues related to BIMSTEC as a sub regional group.

The Centre invites papers (5000-6000 words) for the above mentioned Seminar. Abstracts/papers will be scrutinized and invitation will be sent to those papers selected. The Centre will bear the expenses of accommodation and local hospitality.

**Last date for submission of one page abstract (about 350 words) and title of the paper: 15 December 2019.**

**Last date for submission of full Paper: 30 January 2020.**

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