

Bimstec to launch ambitious land, air, sea transport plan

BANGKOK MEET India leads multilateral grouping's renewed push for regional cooperation with a 'connectivity master plan'

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NEW DELHI: Senior officials of all seven countries of the Bay of Bengal Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) will meet in Bangkok from Monday to discuss an ambitious rail, road, port and air connectivity master plan in another sign that the grouping has renewed diplomatic energy and is becoming India's preferred mode of encouraging regional cooperation.

Coming just over a fortnight after the Bimstec Summit of top leaders on August 30 and 31 in Nepal, and on the heels of a joint military exercise in which several member states participated, the connectivity meet is a bid to shake off the grouping's image of moving slowly in their stated objectives, according to two government officials familiar with the developments.

Bimstec's member states include India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand.

The draft connectivity master plan, which has been seen by HT, has been arrived at after over a decade of discussions at various levels.

"The idea is to have a frame-

ON BIMSTEC AGENDA

- A draft master plan focusing on connectivity has been drawn after over a decade of discussions at various levels
- It complements the plans of other regional groupings with overlapping geographical territory, such as those of the ASEAN
- It underlines that the lack of a connectivity plan hampered the economic progress of the region
- The plan also calls for better facilitation of cargo movements

SOME KEY LINKS IN THE PLAN ARE:

India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway

Kolkata-Birgunj and Kolkata-Kathmandu links

Dhaka-Chittagong Corridor

Kolkata-Siliguri-Guwahati-Imphal link

Kandy-Colombo link

work for the organisation for seamless connectivity between and across Bimstec countries, through the use of different transport modes to increase transport and trade linkages for faster and more inclusive growth," said a senior government official.

The fact that the group is meeting less than a month after the Nepal summit shows a sense of purpose for the grouping, said a second government official. The summit -- attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi -- focused on strengthening the Bimstec institutional framework, narrowed down on specific priority areas, and committed to regular meet-

ings.

But a major factor working in favour of the grouping is the greater political commitment from India. "India has, for the past decade, been pushing connectivity. This is an ideal platform and stands at the intersection of our focus on developing the North-east, our Act East policy, and our Neighbourhood First policy," the second official said.

When asked if the grouping was being propped up as an alternative to the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc) because it also involves

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Pakistan, he said: "The problem in Saarc is not us. It is a country (allusion to Pakistan) which both uses terrorism as policy and which blocks forward movement on cooperation. Secondly, we consider all regional initiatives as supplementing each other."

To be sure, there are hurdles in strengthening Bimstec. Nepal backed out of the joint military exercise held in Pune from September 10 to 16, citing internal political pressure, because there was a section in the country that was uncomfortable with the military dimension to a platform seen largely for development cooperation. Thailand, too, participated only as an observer.

The connectivity plan, too, will take time to fructify. Officials admit they are up against the legacy issues. Bimstec has been slow in stitching up connectivity plans which made the region -- a population of about 1.5 billion and a gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$2.7 trillion -- lagging behind in intra-region trade and people to people movement.

A Bimstec Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS) was completed with Asian Development Bank (ADB) funding in November 2007. Since then, the plan went through many discussion processes, but a definite forward movement was far from sight.

"The objective of this Bimstec Transport Connectivity Master Plan is to provide a framework to the organisation for enhancing transport connectivity between and across its member states. The plan provides broad strategies and actions to strengthen Bimstec connectivity," says the draft report.

The plan complements the plans of other regional organisations or groupings with overlapping geographical territory, such as those of the Association of South-east Nations (Asean), the Ayeyarwaddy-Chao Phrya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (Acmeqs), the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), the Indian Rim Association (Iora), and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) program.

The plan underlines the fact that lack of a regional connectivity plans hampered the economic progress of the region that has an annual average economic growth rates of between 3.4% and 7.5% between 2012 and 2016. India has the largest regional economy, followed by Thailand and Bangladesh. To put in perspective, one quarter of the world's traded goods cross the Bay of Bengal.

"But while the region is of vital strategic importance, the Bimstec member states are not closely integrated and indeed

were more closely integrated 50 years ago," says the draft master plan.

Although the Bimstec region has been one of the fastest-growing economic regions in the world, intra-regional trade accounts for only about 5% of the total trade in the region, compared to 26% of the total trade within Asean, 52% of the total trade in the countries of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta), and 58% of the total trade within the European Union.

"Road transport accounts for about 70% of the freight movement within the Bimstec region and dominates the overall regional transport system. That said, Bimstec has one of the largest railway networks in the world. The region is also interconnected by both mainline and deep-sea container and feeder ships distributing containers throughout the region from hub ports... In addition, there are over 200 flights linking regional destinations," says the draft plan, which urges countries to identify the right projects.

Some of the arterial links the plan includes are the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, the Kolkata-Birgunj and Kolkata-Kathmandu links, the Dhaka-Chittagong corridor, the Kolkata-Siliguri-Guwahati-Imphal link, and the Kandy-Colombo link. The report also calls for better facilitation of cargo movements between the countries.

"Bimstec should immediately complete the ongoing transport corridor for better integration of the region. The member states should take help from funding agencies such as the Asian Development Bank for the same," said Sachin Chaturvedi, director general of New Delhi-based think-tank Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS).