

BIMSTEC : A Subset of India's Look East Policy*

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One of the cornerstones of India's strategy has been to develop India economically and technologically. Another facet of India's policy has been to seek partnerships on the strategic, economic and technological fronts to widen its policy and development options in order to safeguard its interests. The strategy adopted to meet these policy objectives is to restore our traditional links and integrate India with its immediate and extended neighbourhood, besides responding positively to the imperatives of globalisation. This translates into an Indian vision of being well connected to Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asian Region and beyond on the western flank, and to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and beyond on the eastern flank through a network of multi-nodal transport corridors. These networks would facilitate trade, exchange of energy through oil and gas pipelines, promotion of tourism and increase of communication links leading to what can be termed as a zone of co-prosperity. Therefore, a number of regional and sub regional initiatives have been undertaken to promote economic and technical cooperation.

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is one such initiative for sub regional integration. The need for BIMSTEC and its progress has to be seen in the context of a number of other regional and sub-regional initiatives present in the region. For instance, BIMSTEC contains most of the major SAARC countries other than Pakistan. Further, India also has a trilateral dialogue with Myanmar and Thailand addressing the same issues. It can also be said that because SAARC has not made any progress due to intransigence of Pakistan, BIMSTEC was another alternative to engage most of the other the South Asian countries to promote economic cooperation. There is also a Ganga – Mekong Initiative to link countries of Mekong Basin (Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) with India. All these are in addition to the major organisation in South East Asia, i.e. ASEAN. Even though there is an overlap in goals and objectives of a number of regional and sub regional groupings, BIMSTEC remains an important sub set of India's 'Look East Policy' set in motion in the mid 1990s.

*Towards BIMSTEC - Japan Comprehensive Economic Cooperation. Edited by Crispin Bates (Anthem Press : London, New York, 2006); 539p, price not indicated, ISBN 1-84331-720-6 (Pbk).

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The book is a comprehensive treatise on the evolving relationship between Japan and the sub regional grouping. It is an edited volume of well researched papers by eminent authors who are specialists in their fields. The book has been divided into three parts to include emerging patterns of comprehensive economic cooperation in the first part and sectoral issues in the second part. Some development experiences, emerging issues, the trend and direction of future cooperation between Japan and the BIMSTEC have been plotted in the third part. Most of the essays are very informative, easy to read and give definitive recommendations and conclusions. Some authors have also used economic models which are more appropriate for consideration by technical experts. For example, in Chapter 6, the author uses the Gravity Model, which has been used for analysis of NAFTA and South Asia to examine prospects of BIMSTEC-Japan cooperation. In Chapter 7, the author uses econometric modelling to establish that geographical characteristics of a region also play an important role in facilitating trade. Thus, the book bears the stamp of rigorous research and technical analysis of the subject.

The initial chapters include a broad survey of the cultural contacts between Japan and the countries of the region. The need for working towards economic and trade cooperation which would lead to a mutual win-win outcome for all the involved entities both in the spheres of political as well as economic engagement has also been analysed. Complementarities in the economics and other fields are also highlighted. It is also visualised that such cooperation may lead to a broader strategic cooperation between Japan and BIMSTEC.

According to its charter BIMSTEC covers 13 priority sectors identified by member countries in a voluntary manner; namely, trade and investment, technology, energy, transport and communication, tourism, fisheries, agriculture, cultural co-operation, environment and disaster management, public health, people-to-people contact, poverty alleviation, and counter-terrorism and transnational crimes. However, six of the predominant sectors have been taken up for discussion in Part II of the book. Individual chapters in this part cover the areas of trade, investment, technology, energy, transport and tourism.

Trade and investment issues have been elaborated upon in six chapters; thus forming the major portion of the book, while technology takes up two chapters and discussion on energy, transport and tourism are taken up in one chapter each. Chapter 5 gives the Japanese perspective and recommends a number of measures for improving economic cooperation and trade. The author acknowledges that multi-lateral arrangements would be ideal. However, he concludes that given the current realities, bilateral

arrangements between Japan and BIMSTEC member countries may yield better results. Chapters 6 and 7 foresee a more hopeful and bright picture provided infrastructure is improved upon and foreign direct Investment especially, through Japan and other entities is injected into the region. Chapters 8 to 10 build up on some of the arguments advanced in the previous chapters to make a case for enhanced cooperation between Japan and BIMSTEC.

Part III of the book deals with future directions of BIMSTEC-Japan cooperation, emerging issues and two case studies of Japanese investments in India. Complementarity of Information Technology sector between India and Japan has also been emphasised upon in this part of the book. The book, therefore, covers a lot of ground in dealing with issues associated with BIMSTEC-Japan cooperation. Some comparisons with other regional and sub regional groupings have been done very succinctly throughout the book. Yet, a separate Chapter on a comparative analysis with the other regional and sub-regional organisations would have made the book more comprehensive.

Overall, the book has carried out an in-depth analysis and looks at barriers prevalent in the member countries and offers practical solutions to the same. It is a valuable book for researchers, policy makers and serious students of the mechanics of regional integration.