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The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), an international organisation of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka and Thailand held its fourth Summit in Kathmandu on 30th and 31st August this year.

At the end of the Meeting, the members signed an eighteen point declaration that emphasised cross country energy grid connection to working out a comprehensive approach to combat terrorism. There was a general agreement to make the region a dynamic, effective and result-oriented body providing connectivity, energy and trade.

Together, the seven countries form 23 percent of the global population and a GDP of 2.8 trillion.

The eighteen- point declaration at the end of the summit drafted by Nepal referred to some important points to make the initiative a successful one. These included

- It acknowledged the importance of trade and investment as one of contributory factors for fostering economic and social development.
- Deplored terrorist attacks in all parts of the world including Bimstec countries.
- To speed up Bimstec coastal shipping agreement and Bimstec Motor Vehicle agreement.
- Early conclusion of FTA (Free Trade Association) negotiations.
- To go for a Bimstec Development Fund with voluntary contributions from member countries.

As one could see, the declarations consisted mainly of generalities and the only specific item was the signing of a memorandum on the establishment of a BIMSTEC Grid interconnection to enhance energy cooperation among the countries.

What is really noticeable in BIMSTEC is that for a nation to achieve peace, prosperity and development its neighbor has to be progressive, participative and likeminded. All the BIMSTEC nations has this agenda. Instead of becoming an obstacle to neighbor's progress they should provide a deeper cooperation for common success.

From this point of view, the BIMSTEC Initiative has better prospects of success than the decades old SAARC which could not move forward in view of the obstructive tactics of Pakistan and that of Maldives that has a different agenda altogether.

BIMSTEC countries are strongly connected by their civilisation, history, art, culture, language and even the cuisine.

In the Summit in Nepal the Leaders of BIMSTEC countries have shown their joint commitment towards a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable development in Bay of Bengal region through collective efforts. They also recognised poverty, connectivity, terrorism, transnational organized crime, environment & disaster management and climate change as the greatest regional challenges.

India should perform a major role in BIMSTEC

India as the largest nation in this forum can play a lead role to make it a vigorous body with result oriented initiatives rather than indulging in generalities. The possibilities are immense and it is up to the countries in the region to make it a success. The areas that would need attention are-

- **Connectivity**

In land, in sea, in air, in IT sector and also in the cyber space. BIMSTEC must take the advantage of the free satellite service which was offered by Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi to all the SAARC nations.

- **Energy**

India is one of the world's largest renewable energy producing country. Other countries in BIMSTEC could benefit by it.

- **Environment and Disaster management**

India is best equipped in disaster management system among all the BIMSTEC nations.

- **Counter terrorism.**

There is need for sharing of specific, actionable and time bound intelligence among the countries.

- **Public Health**

India can provide low price and world class health care.

- **Tourism**

Visa Free movement among the countries could be a long term goal.

- **Education**

Indian Educational Institutions are qualitatively as good as other advanced countries and comparatively cheaper.

From the geographical point of view India's north east will act as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asian BIMSTEC nations. The ecosystem, the terrain, the rivers and all the geographical parameters could be integrated for a regional approach to the problems

India's active participation has be a part of India's Act East policy and could eventually replace the ineffective SAARC initiative.

The main challenge for India will be not in cooperation with other BIMSTEC countries but in ensuring that equal space is given to all big and small countries in the region without giving any impression of dominance of one country over the other. Another major challenge will be to have a mutually acceptable and satisfactory Free trade Agreement and also ensuring no major deficits for the countries involved.

The BIMSTEC need not and should not be an alternative to the BRI initiative of China in which barring India, other countries have shown a keen interest. Both the initiatives could move together. The Indian focus could be on development and development- oriented strategies in the region.

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