



SEMINAR PROCEEDINGS

ON

THREE DECADES OF BIMSTEC: ADVANCING REGIONAL COOPERATION FOR SHARED PROSPERITY

20 July, 2026

Jointly Organised by



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Proceedings

Seminar on

Three Decades of BIMSTEC: Advancing Regional Cooperation for Shared Prosperity

The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a seminar on “**Three Decades of BIMSTEC: Advancing Regional Cooperation for Shared Prosperity**” on Monday, 20 July 2026 at the BIISS Auditorium, Dhaka. **Shama Obaed Islam, MP**, Honourable State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, graced the seminar as the Chief Guest. **Ambassador**



Indra Mani Pandey, Secretary General, BIMSTEC, attended as the Special Guest. **Major General A S M Ridwanur Rahman, awc, afwc, psc, G**, Director General, BIISS, delivered the Welcome Address. The Keynote Presentation was delivered by **Dr Mahfuz Kabir**, Research Director, BIISS. The seminar featured panellists **Professor Dr Rasheduzzaman**, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, and **Professor Dr Kazi Maruful Islam**, Director, Centre on Budget and Policy, University of Dhaka. The session was chaired by **Major General A N M Muniruzzaman (Retd)**, President, Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS).

Senior officials from different ministries and government agencies, ambassadors and high commissioners, representatives of BIMSTEC member states and international organisations, members of academia, researchers, university faculty members and students, representatives of the armed forces, development partners, private sector stakeholders, media representatives, and policy practitioners participated in the seminar.



Welcome Address



Major General A S M Ridwanur Rahman, awc, afwc, psc, G
Director General, BIIS

Major General **A S M Ridwanur Rahman** began his welcome address welcoming the Chief Guest, the Honorable State Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Special Guest, the BIMSTEC Secretary General, and the wider audience. He recalled that BIMSTEC was founded on the conviction that the Bay of Bengal could serve as a bridge rather than a divide between South and Southeast Asia, and noted that although this conviction still held true after thirty years, relevance alone did not suffice while regional aspirations remained unfulfilled. He observed that BIMSTEC represented over a quarter of humanity and thus held enormous potential, but acknowledged

that the grouping's three-decade record showed aspiration consistently outpacing actual outcomes.

He reflected on BIMSTEC's restructuring of cooperation into seven pillars, each led by a designated country, and remarked that while the framework appeared coherent and ambitious on paper, its implementation varied considerably in practice. He attributed this unevenness to a lack of dedicated financing, unresolved bilateral tensions, and insufficient political momentum among member states. He then noted that Bangladesh had assumed the BIMSTEC Chairmanship for the 2025–2027 term in April of the previous year, and that the current government, which took office in February, had made regional cooperation a stated priority in its pre-election manifesto. This commitment, he said, formed the backdrop against which the seminar had been organised to bring together scholars, policymakers, and practitioners.

He argued that Bangladesh's dual position as the Chair and host of the BIMSTEC Secretariat carried both a distinct responsibility and a unique opportunity to move the organisation from what he called "aspirational regionalism" toward functional and operational efficacy. As lead country for the Trade, Investment and Development pillar, he said Bangladesh was well placed to advance practical progress, including in the Blue Economy, and to position BIMSTEC as a bridge linking South Asia, Southeast Asia, and West and Central Asia. He also referred to earlier remarks by the State Minister affirming that SAARC and BIMSTEC were complementary rather than mutually exclusive frameworks.



The Director General expressed hope that the discussion would be candid and rigorous rather than ceremonial, and stated that the seminar’s purpose was not merely to mark BIMSTEC’s thirtieth anniversary but to identify shortcomings and produce evidence-based recommendations for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Finally, he thanked the State Minister for gracing the seminar as Chief Guest and said the audience looked forward to hearing her government’s strategy for translating the “Bangladesh First” vision into more effective regional engagement. He concluded by expressing anticipation for a substantive and forward-looking discussion and thanked the attendees for joining the seminar.

Keynote Presentation

BIMSTEC's Next Horizon: Strengthening Sectoral Cooperation for a Shared Future



Dr Mahfuz Kabir

Research Director, BIIS

The keynote presentation delivered by Dr Mahfuz Kabir provided a comprehensive assessment of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as the organisation approaches its 30th anniversary, highlighting BIMSTEC's evolution since its founding in June 1997 via the Bangkok Declaration as a bridge connecting South and Southeast Asia. Home to approximately 1.7 billion people (22% of the global population) with a combined economy of roughly \$5.47 trillion (5% of global GDP), the bloc represents a vibrant regional market led by India (\$4.4 trillion), Thailand (\$576 billion), and Bangladesh (\$511 billion).

The presentation outlined the institutional chronology of the bloc, detailing the entry of Myanmar in December 1997, the accession of Bhutan and Nepal in February 2004 under GATT transit provisions for landlocked and near-coastal states, and the formal adoption of its current name at the first BIMSTEC summit. Key structural milestones included the signing of the Memorandum of Association for the Permanent Secretariat in Dhaka on 4 March 2014, the adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter on 30 March 2022, and its subsequent entry into force on 20 May 2024 following full ratification by member states.

A central focus of his presentation was the historical trajectory and operational delays of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Despite the Framework Agreement being signed in 2004, negotiations regarding the exchange of goods, trade in services, rules of origin, and procedural rules have faced repeated setbacks. Dr Kabir detailed the current distribution of sectoral leadership across the seven member states: Bangladesh (Trade, Investment and Development, including the Blue Economy); Bhutan (Environment and Climate Change); India (Security, counter-terrorism, and hosting the Energy Centre); Myanmar (Agriculture and Food Security); Nepal (People-to-People Contact and Tourism); Sri Lanka (Science, Technology and Innovation); and Thailand (Connectivity, along with the PRO-BIMSTEC “Bangkok Vision 2030” aligned with UN SDGs).

Analysing the region's economic geography, the keynote speaker emphasised key complementarities, such as the untapped hydropower potential of Bhutan and Nepal, Bangladesh's strategic maritime access linking the Bay of Bengal to landlocked neighbors and

Northeast India, India's large and diversified market, Thailand's outward-oriented production networks and ASEAN linkages, Myanmar's role as a land bridge, and Sri Lanka's position along major east-west shipping lanes.

Dr Kabir identified geographic proximity, resource diversity, market scale, shared connectivity goals, energy complementarity, and an absence of major bilateral rivalries impeding functional cooperation as core building blocks of BIMSTEC. Conversely, he identified limited institutional capacity, staffing shortages at regional centers, lack of data, regulatory fragmentation, weak commercial orientation, and the incomplete FTA as stumbling blocks. Drawing on stochastic frontier gravity model research, the speaker demonstrated significant unrealised trade potential across member states - including 44 per cent unrealised export potential for Bangladesh, 73 per cent for Sri Lanka, and unrealised import potential reaching 34 per cent for India and 65 per cent for Thailand. Simulations indicated that a fully realised FTA could increase India's intra-regional imports by 127 per cent with minimal tariff revenue loss (6.2%). Present merchandise trade within BIMSTEC stands at a mere 5.2–5.4 per cent of its total global trade, lagging drastically behind Mercosur (10–15%), ASEAN (22%), NAFTA (~50%), and the European Union (62%).



Addressing trade logistics, Dr Mahfuz Kabir highlighted the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan, comprising 267 projects initially valued at \$124 billion (2018 prices), covering road, rail, ports, airports, and trade facilitation mechanisms. He reviewed progress across working groups, including the operation of the Maritime Transport Cooperation agreement. Regarding strategic partnerships, he noted caution within track-two networks, such as the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks, against over-expanding external partnerships to prevent geopolitical friction, while maintaining collaboration with entities like the ADB, UNODC, IFPRI, and IORA.

Concluding with a roadmap for Bangladesh's chairmanship, Dr Mahfuz Kabir advocated for operationalising the concept of "variable geometry" to advance prioritised, bankable infrastructure projects. His key recommendations included integrating Bangladesh's port infrastructure (Chattogram, Mongla, and Matarbari deep-sea port) with regional land ports and inland waterways, securing political consensus on a firm FTA timeline, facilitating digital trade and cross-border payment systems, and building public constituencies beyond central governments through trade fairs, academic exchanges, and track-two diplomacy to ensure genuine regional integration.

Speech by the Special Guest



Ambassador Indra Mani Pandey

Secretary General, BIMSTEC

Ambassador Indra Mani Pandey began with his observation that claims were sometimes made that BIMSTEC had not achieved anything or had not achieved much. He therefore considered it important to address that question. At the same time, he offered a qualification: when he stated that BIMSTEC had made significant progress, he did not mean to suggest that the organisation could not have done better. In his view, BIMSTEC should have done better and could certainly do better in the future, but it had nevertheless made meaningful progress.

Ambassador Pandey observed that the rules-based international order had weakened considerably and that the world was experiencing a period of uncertainty in global politics, the global economy and international trade. He remarked that even uncertainty itself had become unpredictable, which added to the challenges confronting countries and regional organisations. At the same time, there had been a declining salience of global multilateralism. Multilateral institutions, including organisations within the United Nations system, were going through a difficult period, with reductions in budgets and staff. Against this global backdrop, he argued that regional multilateralism provided a way forward. Regional multilateralism had always been relevant, but in the present circumstances it had become even more important because smaller groups of countries could conduct business together, take decisions, identify areas of convergence and develop acceptable solutions to address their unique regional challenges.

Ambassador Pandey then turned to the agenda for cooperation under BIMSTEC. He noted that BIMSTEC had around 18 to 19 distinct areas of cooperation identified by its Member States. He emphasised that all the items on the BIMSTEC agenda had been introduced with the consensus support of all Member States. Consequently, the agenda reflected the collective desire of the Member States to engage in cooperation across these areas. He explained that BIMSTEC had a structure comprising what could broadly be described as core and sectoral mechanisms. At the apex was the BIMSTEC Summit, followed by the meetings of Foreign Ministers and Senior Officials. At the sectoral level, cooperation was organised through different mechanisms. In sectors such as agriculture, culture, energy, health, poverty alleviation, security, tourism, and trade and investment, sectoral ministerial meetings and senior officials' meetings were held, while in other sectors cooperation was supervised through meetings of Foreign Ministers and Foreign Secretaries.

He then explained that within each sector BIMSTEC had established various mechanisms, including joint working groups, expert groups, technical groups and study groups. A particularly distinctive feature of BIMSTEC was its system of designating lead Member States for individual sectors of cooperation. This arrangement had been adopted to ensure that every Member State received an equal opportunity to contribute to regional cooperation based on its own capacity and its preference regarding the sectors it wished to lead. Each sector had a sectoral plan of action, while BIMSTEC had also negotiated a number of conventions, agreements and memoranda of understanding, established centres of excellence and developed partnerships with external organisations. Ambassador Pandey stressed that these institutional arrangements and sectoral initiatives were important because there remained a lack of information about what BIMSTEC had actually achieved and what it was currently attempting to accomplish.

He noted in the area of agriculture that BIMSTEC had a sectoral action plan for agricultural cooperation and had initiated a process for establishing a food reserve. There was also a proposal to create a BIMSTEC Seed Bank, for which India had circulated a concept paper among all Member States. BIMSTEC was seeking to promote greater regional trade in agricultural commodities, and a proposal had been made to establish a sub-group to examine this specific issue. The organisation was also focusing on promoting climate-resilient agriculture and had recently established a network of agricultural research and development institutions from its Member States. India had proposed establishing a centre of excellence in agriculture, while cooperation was also being pursued in related sectors such as fisheries and livestock.



Ambassador Pandey identified connectivity as another important area of BIMSTEC cooperation. He noted that an agreed Master Plan for Transport Connectivity was in place and was being updated in cooperation with the Asian Development Bank. BIMSTEC had recently signed an Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation, which had already been ratified by four Member States and had entered into force for those countries. Efforts were under way with the remaining three Member States to facilitate their ratification as soon as possible. Beyond maritime connectivity,

BIMSTEC was also seeking to enhance land connectivity through negotiations on a BIMSTEC Motor Vehicles Agreement. India had proposed establishing a BIMSTEC Sustainable Maritime Transport Centre, and two editions of a BIMSTEC Sustainable Maritime Transport Conclave had already been convened. He highlighted that, during a review of the implementation status of the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, Member States had reported on the initiatives they had undertaken, and it had been found that approximately 60 per cent of the proposals contained in the Master Plan were under implementation. In his assessment, this demonstrated tangible progress and reflected the commitment of Member States to contributing to the physical and economic connectivity of the region.

Culture had also been an important area of cooperation since the establishment of BIMSTEC. Ambassador Pandey explained that BIMSTEC had established a BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission and a BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory. He acknowledged that questions could arise regarding the emphasis on cultural industries, but argued that cultural industries were an important instrument for economic growth and had been expanding rapidly. BIMSTEC Member States were interested in harnessing their cultural synergies by developing their cultural industries collectively. Several proposals were under consideration, including the creation of a BIMSTEC Cultural Heritage Inventory, the development of a BIMSTEC Buddhist Circuit, the establishment of a BIMSTEC network of cultural experts, and capacity development for cultural professionals. Nepal had proposed establishing a centre of excellence for cooperation in tourism and culture, the two sectors it leads within BIMSTEC. He further noted that a series of celebrations and cultural activities would be organised to mark BIMSTEC's 30th anniversary.

Disaster management was another significant area of regional cooperation. Ambassador Pandey noted that BIMSTEC had a sectoral action plan for disaster management and a proposal to establish a centre of excellence in disaster management to strengthen coordination of regional responses to disasters. In preparation for such cooperation, BIMSTEC had already conducted four rounds of disaster management exercises and would now move towards real-time exercises among its Member States. He also highlighted the recent decision to establish an expert group on women's development. Women's development had not previously been included as a distinct area on the BIMSTEC agenda, and several partners had expressed the view that BIMSTEC should give greater attention to the issue. Member States were therefore in the process of nominating representatives to the expert group, and Ambassador Pandey expressed his expectation that its first meeting would be held soon.

He stated that environment and climate change were also extremely important areas for regional cooperation. Together with the mountain economy, Member States were dealing with the consequences of climate change, making adaptation an increasingly high priority. BIMSTEC's plan of action was therefore focused substantially on adaptation. He particularly highlighted the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate, which had been functional for several years and included the meteorological departments of all Member States as constituent members. The Centre regularly provided tailored weather forecasts and early warnings, while also conducting capacity-development activities for Member States. Ambassador Pandey described the Centre as an effective institution and suggested that its success had encouraged Member States to establish additional centres of excellence that could become regional nerve centres for cooperation in specific areas.

In the energy sector, BIMSTEC had so far focused primarily on the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection. Ambassador Pandey explained that the rationale for this priority was straightforward: some Member States required additional electricity, while others had the capacity to produce surplus power. An interconnected regional grid could therefore allow Member States to benefit either by supplying additional electricity or by importing power when required. He also noted that the BIMSTEC Energy Centre had become functional approximately one year earlier and had already been engaged in capacity-building activities. Some of its initiatives had attracted participation from more than 150 experts, demonstrating the importance Member States attached to technical capacity development in the power sector.

Health was another important area of BIMSTEC cooperation, with Sri Lanka serving as the lead Member State. A plan of action on health cooperation was already in place. Ambassador Pandey highlighted that BIMSTEC was implementing a project with the World Bank through the Food and Agriculture Organization to strengthen Member States' capacities for pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. He noted that the inaugural meeting of BIMSTEC Health Ministers and Health Secretaries was scheduled to take place in October 2026. Ahead of that meeting, Sri Lanka had proposed establishing a centre of excellence for public health. Thailand had proposed establishing a BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence in Tropical Medicine, while India had proposed a centre of excellence in traditional medicine. He argued that these initiatives demonstrated the strong interest of Member States in expanding cooperation in health. Although Sri Lanka was the lead Member State in the sector, Thailand and India had also taken the initiative to propose specialised centres, illustrating the collective willingness of all Member States to contribute.

Ambassador Pandey subsequently highlighted the importance of people-to-people contacts. BIMSTEC had established a network of policy and think tanks from its Member States, and Member States had recently responded positively to proposals to associate additional think tanks with the network in order to facilitate a more productive exchange of views. There was also a plan to establish an association of BIMSTEC speakers and parliamentarians, which would bring together the region's important parliamentary institutions. Youth engagement and sports events had also been organised under BIMSTEC, with Member States planning to expand cooperation further in these areas.



In the area of science, technology and innovation, Ambassador Pandey highlighted the proposed BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility. A Member States' agreement and memorandum of association had already been concluded, while the host country agreement was expected to be signed soon. Even before the formal inauguration of the facility, its Board of Governors was scheduled to meet to identify ways in which Member States could benefit from technology transfer. BIMSTEC was also working with the World Intellectual Property Organization on capacity building in intellectual property rights, which would have implications for technology transfer across the region.

Security cooperation had been considered a priority by BIMSTEC Member States from the organisation's beginning. Ambassador Pandey noted that a Joint Working Group on security cooperation had been established in 2005 and had met ten times. BIMSTEC had negotiated the Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking, which had entered into force and was under implementation. Another Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters had also been signed and was awaiting ratification by one Member State before entering into force. Looking ahead, BIMSTEC was negotiating three additional conventions covering human trafficking, extradition, and the transfer of convicted persons. To further strengthen cooperation in the security sector, BIMSTEC leaders had agreed at the most recent Summit to institutionalise meetings of BIMSTEC Home Ministers. As India leads the security sector, the inaugural meeting was scheduled to be hosted by India in New Delhi in October 2026. He expressed the expectation that this mechanism would strengthen regional security cooperation. Cybersecurity was also an important area for BIMSTEC Member States, and a five-year action plan had been agreed. Similarly, a BIMSTEC plan of action on drug control had been negotiated and approved.

Ambassador Pandey further explained that BIMSTEC leaders had decided in 2016 to establish a mechanism for meetings of BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs or National Security Advisers. These officials had already met five times, with the fifth meeting having taken place in New Delhi only a few days earlier. BIMSTEC National Security Advisers had participated

in the meeting, with some Member States being represented by their Defence Secretaries or Home Secretaries. Two important guidelines had been approved at the meeting: one concerning the maritime component Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), and another concerning guiding principles for conduct by law-enforcement agencies during their interactions at sea. BIMSTEC had also finalised guidelines for coordinated maritime law-enforcement responses, which were awaiting comments from one Member State before formal approval. Given the importance of preventing terrorist financing and money laundering, the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering had recognised BIMSTEC as an observer, allowing it to participate regularly in relevant activities.

He explained that the National Security Advisers' mechanism had focused on maritime security, cybersecurity and human security. Significant decisions had been taken at the latest meeting to strengthen cooperation in these areas. The National Security Advisers had also identified several new areas for cooperation, for which formal processes would be initiated. However, because those discussions had been confidential, Ambassador Pandey stated that he was not in a position to disclose further details regarding the new areas of cooperation identified by the National Security Advisers.

Tourism remained another important area for all BIMSTEC Member States. At the time of his presentation, the BIMSTEC Network of Tour Operators was meeting, while several BIMSTEC tourism circuits were being considered to facilitate the equal participation of all Member States in regional tourism development. BIMSTEC had established a Tourism Development Fund and a Tourism Information Centre, alongside other initiatives designed to promote tourism. Ambassador Pandey expressed his expectation that these initiatives would produce significant results on the ground. Member States were also considering measures to enhance ease of travel, including visa facilitation. An agreed visa facilitation scheme was already under consideration by Member States for implementation.



Turning to trade and investment, Ambassador Pandey noted that this was the sector led by Bangladesh and that a detailed presentation on the progress of cooperation in this area had already been made. Six separate working groups were negotiating the constituent agreements

of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, covering trade in goods, trade in services, investment, dispute settlement, customs cooperation and trade facilitation. Significant progress had been made in negotiating some of these constituent agreements, and he expressed confidence that agreements in some areas could be successfully concluded in the near future. Looking beyond the Free Trade Area, which remained extremely important, BIMSTEC was considering a proposal to establish a BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which would again be an initiative led by Bangladesh. There was also a proposal under consideration to create a platform bringing together the investment promotion authorities of Member States, as BIMSTEC needed to encourage greater intra-BIMSTEC investment. In addition, an expert group on fiscal and monetary policy coordination had been established following a proposal by Sri Lanka and with the agreement of all Member States. The group was scheduled to hold its first meeting in Colombo in the following month.

Ambassador Pandey then referred to the various facilities that BIMSTEC had established or was in the process of establishing. Four facilities were either already fully functional or, in the case of the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility, expected to become functional very soon. At the same time, Member States had proposed a range of additional centres of excellence, including centres focusing on agriculture, disaster management, maritime transport, traditional medicine, tropical medicine, public audit, tourism, skill development, and public health. Bangladesh had proposed the centre of excellence for skill development, while Sri Lanka had proposed a centre of excellence for public health. Once these centres became operational, he argued, the benefits of regional cooperation would become increasingly visible on the ground because the centres would function autonomously and engage in tangible and practical cooperation.

With regard to external partnerships, Ambassador Pandey noted that BIMSTEC currently had four external partners. The Asian Development Bank had been a partner since 2005, while the International Food Policy Research Institute had become a partner in 2022. BIMSTEC had also established partnerships with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, with the relevant memorandum of understanding with IORA having been signed in the previous year. With the UNODC, BIMSTEC was working on a plan of action covering both drug control and organised crime. The plan had been shared with Member States and, once their concurrence was received, implementation would proceed. BIMSTEC was also exploring cooperation with a number of other organisations, including ASEAN, its sister regional organisation, as well as UN agencies and other international organisations. BIMSTEC had already engaged with several of these organisations to identify areas of cooperation and, in some cases, had implemented projects together.

Ambassador Pandey stated that he remained very positive about BIMSTEC and believed that the organisation was poised to emerge as a leading regional organisation in the Indo-Pacific. He emphasised that BIMSTEC was located in a strategically vital part of the Indo-Pacific and had now created the institutional mechanisms required for regional cooperation. It had developed a broad agenda covering approximately 17 to 18 areas of cooperation and, importantly, continued to enjoy the political support of all its Member States. BIMSTEC had deliberately stayed away from political issues and focused instead on tangible cooperation. He noted that the organisation was currently undergoing a process of reform and revitalisation and expressed confidence that, in the years ahead, BIMSTEC would emerge as an efficient, effective and dynamic regional organisation.

Ambassador Pandey then focused on Bangladesh's role as one of BIMSTEC's founding members. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh had participated in the very first BIMSTEC Summit, and Bangladesh had continued to play an important role in the organisation ever since. Bangladesh hosted the BIMSTEC Secretariat and had assumed the chairmanship following the Sixth BIMSTEC Summit in April 2025. He therefore considered Bangladesh's role particularly significant in shaping the future direction of regional cooperation under BIMSTEC.



He then stated that it was his firm conviction that regional cooperation was a prerequisite for the development and security of the region and that the BIMSTEC platform was currently the most appropriate mechanism for realising that objective. He argued that BIMSTEC served the core security and developmental interests of Bangladesh as well as those of the other Member States. He further noted that BIMSTEC had enjoyed bipartisan political support in Bangladesh. In this regard, he recalled that at the very first BIMSTEC Summit, the late Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia had represented Bangladesh and conveyed her strong support for strengthening BIMSTEC. He therefore expressed the view that BIMSTEC enjoyed support across the political spectrum in Bangladesh.

Ambassador Pandey emphasised that Bangladesh's BIMSTEC chairmanship presented a historic opportunity for the country to lead regional cooperation through the organisation. He also argued that comparisons between BIMSTEC and SAARC were misleading and misplaced and could ultimately harm the interests of BIMSTEC. The two organisations were different entities with different charters and different ways of working, and it was therefore unfair to assess BIMSTEC primarily through comparisons with SAARC. His appeal was consequently for BIMSTEC to be viewed as an independent regional organisation, not merely in the context of SAARC, but in the broader context of the need for regional cooperation and the role that BIMSTEC had already played and could play in the future.

Ambassador Pandey concluded expressing his expectation that BIMSTEC would engage in significantly greater cooperation in the future than it had in the past. He stressed that the organisation's past performance should not be used as the sole basis for assessing its future performance.

Panellist I



Dr Rasheduzzaman

*Professor, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Dr Rasheduzzaman opened his speech by citing a number of quotations to emphasise the critical importance of regional cooperation. Drawing on historical insights regarding European integration, Jean Monnet and Octavio Paz's reflections on the nature of borders, he asserted that while connectivity serves as the engine of BIMSTEC, security forms its essential foundation. He argued that without firmly incorporating security into regional deliberations, advancing the vision of regional integration remains exceptionally difficult.

He highlighted several pressing security concerns facing the region, foremost among them being the forced displacement of Myanmar nationals. Now entering its second decade, this crisis poses complex border, maritime and cross-border security challenges for the whole region. He noted that these displacement zones have increasingly transformed into hotspots for arms and drug trafficking, human smuggling and cross-border criminal activities, thereby elevating the matter from a bilateral humanitarian issue to a wider regional security concern for BIMSTEC.

Addressing internal developments within Myanmar, Professor Dr Rasheduzzaman raised critical questions concerning state fragmentation and the challenges of engaging with non-state actors, examining what this implies for the Westphalian state system and established diplomatic norms. He further drew attention to organised crime and narcotics, emphasising that drug production extends well beyond conflict-ridden border areas into systematic networks affecting both South and Southeast Asia.

Turning to non-traditional security issues, he addressed the management of shared cross-border rivers and the escalating impacts of climate change. Noting that the Bay of Bengal region acts as an epicentre for severe cyclonic storms and unpredictable weather patterns, he stressed that environmental risks have direct transboundary consequences for countries such as Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. He urged that BIMSTEC mechanisms, such as the Centre for Weather and Climate, must move beyond meeting-based coordination towards jointly financed and executed adaptation infrastructure, early warning systems, coastal protection and disaster management.

In addition, Dr Rasheduzzaman highlighted key developments in maritime geopolitics, notably India's large-scale port infrastructure development in the Andaman and Nicobar

Islands (Galathea Bay). He pointed out that such mega-projects will significantly alter the geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal, presenting both economic opportunities and strategic realities that BIMSTEC member states need to evaluate carefully. Furthermore, he emphasised the critical necessity of safeguarding undersea submarine cables, which are the primary channels for global data traffic and advocated for stronger regional collaboration in hydrography, search and rescue operations and ocean studies.

Professor Dr Rasheduzzaman concluded by outlining both the inherent strengths of South Asia, such as high population density and geographic proximity, and the persistent power asymmetries and political frictions that hinder integration. Quoting Samuel Johnson, he expressed his sincere hope that BIMSTEC's future trajectory would represent a triumph of genuine regional progress and strategic cooperation and strategic cooperation.

Panellist II



Dr Kazi Maruful Islam

*Professor of Public Policy and Development Studies,
Director, Centre on Budget and Policy
University of Dhaka*

Dr Kazi Maruful Islam began by mentioning that in trying to prepare his own notes on BIMSTEC's achievements and challenges, he had searched the web and found surprisingly little scientific literature on the subject. Listening to the Secretary General, though, he said it became clear that a great deal of work has in fact happened on the ground, even if it hasn't made its way into research. For that, he congratulated the Secretariat.

He then flagged that he had noticed two biases while digging through the literature. In one search, he came across a list of 32 journal papers on BIMSTEC. Of these, 23 dealt with economic cooperation, mostly infrastructure and connectivity, and the remaining nine were on security, covering maritime and border issues. To him, this pointed to a narrow framing of regional cooperation in the academic space, one that keeps circling back to economics and security. He acknowledged that economic cooperation is the heart of the relationship while security is the hardware holding it together. Yet, he did not think that these two constituted the whole picture. BIMSTEC has several centres of excellence, he pointed out, and these are institutions capable of addressing what the region actually needs: climate change, poverty, health, education, science and technology. Too often, he said, this fact is ignored.

Dr Islam then offered a few points. He started with two assumptions that he thinks are worth keeping in mind. First, regional cooperation isn't a purely technical or diplomatic exercise, it is shaped by the interplay of political power and economic interest. Second, the region carries real asymmetries: large economies like India and Thailand sit alongside smaller states like Bhutan and Nepal, and differences in size, development and geopolitical weight tend to produce uneven outcomes. These asymmetries, he said, create a kind of dichotomy, a sense of dominance on one side and dependence on the other and that dynamic is one of the things holding cooperation back.

He drew on his own experience at a BIMSTEC conference in New Delhi last February, where discussions explored people-to-people and business-to-business connections, including ways for youth across member states to collaborate. That experience, he said, convinced him that there is real room to move beyond infrastructure and security. Science, technology, and innovation stood out to him as an area BIMSTEC has not fully capitalised on; centres of excellence exist or are proposed, but the results have not followed. Climate change was

another problem that does not respect borders, and one the region is particularly exposed to, yet collaboration between government research institutions and universities across countries remains thin. Digital technology came up too in his discussion. He noted that Bangladesh, Thailand and India are all at different stages of digital development, and asked how member states might learn from each other, both to capture the benefits and to manage the social and security risks that come with it.

He closed by returning to people-to-people connectivity, which he framed as the way to push the cooperation agenda past economics and security. That means bringing in non-state actors, such as media, students, academics, the business community to build a foundation underneath what governments work. He acknowledged this has not happened as much as it should, pointing to practical barriers like visa processes, travel constraints and currency exchange.

His final point borrowed from the organisational theorists James March and Johan Olsen, and the distinction between the “logic of appropriateness” and the “logic of consequences.” When BIMSTEC was founded in 1997, he said, it was driven by appropriateness - a shared sense of poverty, culture and common problems. Thirty years later, he thinks the organisation has been pulled more by the logic of consequences: narrow, interest-based calculation among member states. Interest will always matter, he said, but not at the cost of that original sense of appropriateness. He ended on the hope that the two logics find their way back together in the years ahead.

Open Discussion



Ambassador Shahed Akhter

Vice President

Association of Former Ambassadors (AOFA)

Ambassador Shahed Akhter opened the floor discussion by reflecting on BIMSTEC's evolving institutional journey as it enters its fourth decade following 30 years of existence. He noted that each decade has marked distinct milestones for the organisation and emphasised that its cumulative achievements should not be understated. Drawing from his personal diplomatic career, he recalled attending the historic first BIMSTEC Summit held in Thailand in 2004, which was attended by former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia along with regional leaders, describing it as a landmark event for regional integration.

In light of current foreign policy priorities focusing on a proactive, “Bangladesh-first” orientation, Ambassador Shahed stressed the paramount importance of regional platforms like BIMSTEC. While recognising past progress, he argued that BIMSTEC must move toward formalising critical data-sharing mechanisms. Specifically, he highlighted the urgent need for systematic, institutionalised exchanges of climate change data, transboundary river information, border management intelligence, and public health updates to strengthen disaster response and flood preparedness in vulnerable downstream nations like Bangladesh. Citing the COVID-19 pandemic as a prime example of global vulnerability, he drew a parallel to SAARC's emergency consultations and contended that BIMSTEC and SAARC should function in a complementary and supplementary manner rather than in opposition, maximising overall regional security and socio-economic welfare.

M S Siddiqui

Legal Economist and

Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Bangla Chemical

M S Siddiqui raised a critical intervention regarding the commercial and trade integration architecture under BIMSTEC, directly addressing the observations made earlier by Dr Mahfuz Kabir. He expressed deep concern over the persistent delays surrounding the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA). He pointed out that although the overarching Framework Agreement for the BIMSTEC FTA was



signed as early as 2004, the comprehensive agreement remains non-operational and lacking formal final signatures two decades later. Mr Siddiqui urged the BIMSTEC Secretariat and member states to expedite the process by at least initiating dedicated, structured negotiation tracks to address non-tariff barriers (NTBs) and trade facilitation hurdles, thereby unlocking immediate intra-regional trade potential even while broader FTA negotiations continue.



Naveedul Haque Ontik

Student

Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP)

Naveedul Haque Ontik directed a specific question to the Secretary-General of BIMSTEC, Ambassador Indra Mani Pandey, regarding regional digital security and cyber resilience. He highlighted the increasing vulnerability of global cyber infrastructure to complex security threats, specifically referencing recent developments surrounding the launch of Claude Mythos. In light of these technological risks, Mr Ontik inquired how BIMSTEC plans to hyper-adapt its security framework, build adaptive technological resilience, and establish robust collective mechanisms to protect the regional digital infrastructure of its member

states against emerging cyber threats.

Responses from the Speakers



Ambassador Indra Mani Pandey

Secretary General, BIMSTEC

Ambassador Indra Mani Pandey addressed the floor to respond to specific questions raised by the audience during the open discussion segment. At first, addressing the query posed by Mr Naveedul Haque Ontik regarding BIMSTEC's plans to hyper-adapt its cybersecurity strategy following the developments of novel security challenges to global cyber infrastructure, Ambassador Pandey assured that cybersecurity remains high on the regional security agenda. He shared that cybersecurity-related issues topped the agenda during the recent meeting of National Security Advisors, where extensive discussions took place on emerging digital threats. While a five-year action plan is already in motion, proposals are underway to establish CERT-to-CERT cooperation and dedicated platforms for capacity building. He highlighted that emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and future quantum computing capabilities, present novel threats to regional cyber infrastructure. Consequently, BIMSTEC is prioritising capacity building and institutional cooperation to address these advanced technological challenges.

Responding to the question from Mr. M. S. Siddiqui regarding the status of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA) signed in 2004 and the potential to initiate discussions on non-tariff barriers, Ambassador Pandey acknowledged that while FTA negotiations typically require considerable time, relevant constituent agreements are currently under active discussion. He noted that recent working group meetings have taken place, expressing optimism that these dialogues will yield concrete progress on constituent terms and non-tariff measures.

Additionally, Ambassador Pandey highlighted BIMSTEC's commitment to strengthening collaboration among research and development (R&D) institutions across member states. Citing the recent formation of a regional network for agricultural R&D institutions as a successful model, he affirmed that similar initiatives will be replicated across health and other technological sectors to institutionalise regional research cooperation.



Dr Mahfuz Kabir

Research Director, BIISS

Dr Mahfuz Kabir responded to the point raised by M S Siddiqui concerning the prolonged delay in making the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA) operational. Dr Kabir emphasised that a firm timeline must be established to conclude FTA negotiations rather than allowing them to continue indefinitely. Drawing a comparative parallel, he noted that while SAARC established an FTA framework 21 years after its formation, BIMSTEC has yet to finalise its agreement despite starting negotiations much earlier. He recalled that initial plans aimed for fast-track tariff liberalisation by 2016 and normal track negotiations by 2021. Although external disruptions

such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East caused delays, he stressed that member states must now conclude negotiations on critical components including rules of origin, investment, trade in services, and technical cooperation. He concluded by stating that the formal signing of the BIMSTEC FTA should be achieved well before 2030 to align with the Pro-BIMSTEC Vision 2030 goals.

Dr Rasheduzzaman

Professor

*Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Professor Dr Rasheduzzaman reflected on the broader scope of regional cooperation and non-traditional security threats in response to the overall discussion from the floor. He clarified that BIMSTEC and SAARC should not be viewed as regional rivals, but rather as complementary frameworks aimed at collective welfare. Stressing the necessity of factoring political and non-traditional issues into regional deliberations, Dr Rasheduzzaman argued that pressing challenges such as climate change, transboundary water dynamics, and illicit drug trafficking directly affect the well-being and economic prosperity of member nations. He maintained that whether dealing with cybersecurity or other non-traditional security threats, BIMSTEC must actively adapt its institutional mechanisms to address these evolving regional dynamics in the coming years.



**Dr Kazi Maruful Islam**

*Professor, Public Policy and Development Studies
Director, Centre on Budget and Policy
University of Dhaka*

Dr Kazi Maruful Islam shared the perspective of the research community and urged BIMSTEC leadership to operationalise the proposed regional Centres of Excellence as swiftly as possible to support collaborative research. Furthermore, taking note of the presence of the Chief Guest, the Honorable State Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr Islam submitted a request to the Government of Bangladesh to undertake a comprehensive, systematic review and evaluation of BIMSTEC's performance over its past 30 years. He emphasised that such an evaluation is essential to formulate a robust, actionable strategic vision for the organisation's next two decades.

Session Chair's Remarks



Major General Muniruzzaman (Retd)
President

*Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security
Studies (BIPSS)*

Major General Muniruzzaman (Retd) observed that no nation today can achieve sustainable prosperity in isolation that economic growth, climate resilience, energy security, technological innovation and peace are increasingly tied to regional cooperation. Within this framing, he described BIMSTEC as one of the most promising platforms for South Asia and the Bay of Bengal to realise this vision. Touching upon the background of the organization, he noted that over three decades, it has evolved from a modest regional initiative into what he called a strategic bridge connecting South and Southeast Asia.

Turning to Bangladesh's position, he said that BIMSTEC represents a genuine strategic opportunity rather than simply another regional body. As a founding member sitting at the heart of the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh holds a unique geographic advantage, and its ambition to become a regional hub for trade, connectivity, energy and maritime cooperation aligns closely with BIMSTEC's objectives. He cited deep-sea port development, regional highways and cross-border energy cooperation as projects capable of turning Bangladesh into a gateway between South and Southeast Asia, generating employment and strengthening resilience against shocks such as conflict, pandemics and supply chain disruptions.

He then addressed SAARC, recalling that it was founded in 1985 on a concept first put forward by President Ziaur Rahman, and had achieved notable successes in education, health, poverty alleviation and cultural exchange, though disputes among members have often stalled its initiatives. He framed BIMSTEC not as a replacement for SAARC but as a complementary platform, offering a more focused, pragmatic framework connecting South and Southeast Asia through the Bay of Bengal and expanding rather than narrowing SAARC's objectives.

He argued that for South Asia, regional cooperation is no longer a matter of choice but a necessity, given shared challenges of poverty, unemployment, climate

change, natural disasters, food insecurity, energy shortages and public health crises, none of which respect national borders. On the economic front, he noted that intra-regional trade remains among the lowest in the world despite geographic proximity, and argued that easing customs procedures, improving transport corridors and investing in cross-border infrastructure could unlock substantial potential, with the Bay of Bengal serving as a corridor of commerce and shared development.

He further pointed to energy cooperation, cross-border electricity trade, renewable energy partnerships and regional power grids alongside collaboration in science and technology, cybersecurity, healthcare and education, as key to preparing the region for 21st-century challenges. He closed by emphasising the role of the region's youth, calling for greater dialogue among the population, and noted that regional organisations ultimately succeed not through diplomatic arrangements alone, but because people believe in them and see a shared future.

Remarks by the Chief Guest



Shama Obaed Islam MP

*State Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Government of the People's Republic of
Bangladesh*

Shama Obaed Islam, MP, began by expressing her sincere gratitude to the Session Chair for chairing the seminar, and to the Director General of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) and his team for organising the important event. She also extended her appreciation to the Secretary-General of BIMSTEC, the distinguished keynote speaker, panelists, and all participants for their valuable insights and thoughtful presentations.

She observed that, as BIMSTEC approaches three decades of regional cooperation, it has evolved from a modest initiative on the shores of the Bay of Bengal into a regional platform of growing strategic and economic significance. Its seven member states are home to more than 1.7 billion people and collectively connect South Asia with Southeast Asia. She emphasised that the Bay of Bengal lies at the intersection of major economic and maritime routes linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This unique geography presents enormous opportunities, but it also imposes a shared responsibility on the countries of the region.



She stated that Bangladesh has assumed the BIMSTEC chairmanship at a time of profound global uncertainty. Geopolitical tensions, disrupted supply chains, economic fragmentation, climate change, food and energy insecurity, and evolving transnational threats have reinforced one simple reality: no country can overcome these challenges alone. Effective regional cooperation, therefore, is not merely desirable; it is indispensable. At this juncture, she recalled with profound respect the vision and contribution of the late Begum Khaleda Zia to the early development of BIMSTEC. She noted her participation in the first BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok in 2004, her support for regional trade, connectivity, energy cooperation,



and people-to-people contact, as well as Bangladesh's chairmanship during 2005–2006.

According to her, these initiatives reflected a farsighted vision of Bangladesh as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. She stressed that this vision remains highly relevant as Bangladesh seeks to build a more connected, prosperous, peaceful, and cooperative Bay of Bengal region. She further noted that the adoption of the **Bangkok Vision 2030** at the Sixth BIMSTEC Summit has provided the region with a clear direction towards building a prosperous, resilient, and open BIMSTEC. The BIMSTEC Charter and the reorganisation of cooperation around seven sectors have also created a stronger institutional foundation.

The State Minister emphasised that the priority now should be to fully operationalize these instruments and close the persistent gap between commitment and implementation. She then flagged on Bangladesh's approach to the BIMSTEC Chairmanship. She stated that Bangladesh approaches its responsibility through the guiding vision of its foreign policy, "Bangladesh First." This principle affirms that Bangladesh's national interest remains the compass of its diplomacy and that international commitments should ultimately serve the

interests of its people, economy, and security.

She stressed that “Bangladesh First” does not mean “Bangladesh Alone.” As an open and outward-looking country situated on the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh can best serve its national interests by contributing to the creation of a peaceful, connected, and prosperous region that benefits all its peoples. Accordingly, she identified three principles that would guide Bangladesh’s BIMSTEC chairmanship: implementation over intention; inclusivity over exclusivity; and delivery over declaration. She emphasised that the success of Bangladesh’s chairmanship should not be judged by the number of meetings convened or declarations adopted, but by the practical benefits delivered to the people of the region.

She expressed that as the lead country for trade, investment and development,

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including the blue economy, Bangladesh attaches the highest importance to regional economic integration. She observed that intra-regional trade remains far below its potential, while the constituent agreements required to implement the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area remain unfinished more than two decades after the framework agreement was signed. She stated that Bangladesh would work with all member states to build consensus and inject fresh momentum into these negotiations.

She also highlighted the blue economy as another major avenue for shared prosperity. The fisheries, shipping, renewable energy, and marine resources of the Bay of Bengal constitute a shared inheritance that must be responsibly managed and sustainably utilized. Bangladesh, she noted, would support practical cooperation, scientific research, and capacity building so that the Bay of Bengal could become a source of inclusive growth for present and future generations.

The State Minister emphasised that connectivity must remain the flagship of BIMSTEC’s regional ambition. The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity provides an important blueprint, but the principal challenge now lies in its implementation.

Bangladesh would support progress on transport linkages and the proposed coastal shipping agreement while also pursuing deeper energy and digital connectivity. She noted that achieving these objectives would require stronger institutional coordination, innovative financing, meaningful engagement with development partners and the private sector, and sustained political commitment.

She then drew attention to one of the most pressing challenges confronting Bangladesh and the wider region—the Rohingya crisis. She stated that, as a trusted partner and friend, Bangladesh genuinely hoped that BIMSTEC and its member states would remain committed to creating the international pressure necessary for the safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar. She emphasized that regional prosperity could only be sustained in an environment of peace, security, and resilience.

She further observed that the BIMSTEC region faces a wide range of traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including terrorism, violent extremism, human trafficking, drug trafficking, cyber threats, illegal fishing, climate-induced disasters, and humanitarian crises. BIMSTEC should therefore deepen practical cooperation in areas such as: maritime security; law enforcement; disaster risk reduction; humanitarian assistance; counter-trafficking; cybersecurity; and capacity building. She stressed that climate resilience and disaster preparedness must remain at the heart of the regional agenda, particularly because few countries understand the human and economic costs of climate change as intimately as



Bangladesh.

The State Minister then underscored the importance of investing in people. According to her, students, researchers, entrepreneurs, professionals, media representatives, and cultural practitioners create the human connections upon which durable regional cooperation depends. She suggested that easier exchanges, stronger academic and professional networks, and closer collaboration among think tanks could contribute significantly to building a genuine people-centric model. As the current chair and host of the BIMSTEC Secretariat, Bangladesh recognises that its responsibility goes well beyond convening meetings.

The Chief Guest stated that Bangladesh would work closely with Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, as well as with the Secretary-General, to strengthen the capacity of the BIMSTEC Secretariat, fully operationalise the Charter, and translate the commitments of regional leaders into practical outcomes. Over the coming months, Bangladesh would work to ensure that the Permanent Working Committee, Senior Officials Committee, sectoral bodies, and other BIMSTEC mechanisms produce measurable progress in preparation for the next Summit in Dhaka. Bangladesh would also seek deeper engagement with ASEAN and other development partners wherever such cooperation could strengthen regional value chains, connectivity, innovation, and resilience.

She expressed that the seminar was particularly valuable because it provided an opportunity not merely to identify the challenges facing BIMSTEC but also to develop practical and evidence-based solutions. She expressed confidence that the ideas and recommendations generated through the seminar would provide valuable intellectual support to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the BIMSTEC Secretariat as Bangladesh carries forward its chairmanship.

While concluding, she observed that the coming decade of BIMSTEC should be remembered not merely for the documents it produces, but for the prosperity it delivers. She stated that if, by the time regional leaders gather in Dhaka, BIMSTEC can demonstrate meaningful progress in trade, connectivity, the blue economy, security cooperation, climate resilience, people-to-people contact, and institutional strengthening, it will have reaffirmed the organisation's credibility and relevance.

She emphasised that the region already possesses the political commitment and institutional foundations necessary to move forward. What is required now is renewed purpose, stronger coordination, and sustained implementation. She therefore called upon all BIMSTEC member states and stakeholders to work together to transform BIMSTEC from a forum of great promise into a platform of effective regional cooperation—from declarations to delivery, from vision to implementation, and from shared aspirations to shared prosperity.

She concluded by once again thanking BIISS, the Chair, the Secretary-General of BIMSTEC, the keynote speaker, panelists, and all participants for organising and contributing to the important seminar. She wished everyone fruitful deliberations and concluded with her sincere thanks to the audience.

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