

## **India-Myanmar Relations With Reference To Bimstec**

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**Abstract:** *BIMSTEC is a potential forum to increase the trade among member countries by taking advantage of their geographical location in the region of the Bay of Bengal and the Eastern coast of the Indian Ocean. BIMSTEC represents one of the most diverse region of the world in terms of living, religion, language and culture which make this region entirely different from others. BIMSTEC has become a unique bridge between Southeast Asia and South Asia. Therefore, India has a crucial and challenging role to play with Myanmar as this will power up India's Act East Policy. Presently Myanmar is open to the outside world after facing the period of international sanctions. India has been a confident support to Myanmar and now India can help in nurturing democracy in Myanmar. Both neighbours have a significant opportunities to come closer to each other and transform their bilateral relations to multi lateral level as well as with the larger region. Myanmar is rich in natural resources. India's cooperation with Myanmar will help in transforming the North-East unrest into normalcy, reinforce its Act East Policy through BIMSTEC, India's energy quests and help India in emerging as a major Asian power.*

**Keywords:** Bimstec, Act East Policy

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

India's Look (Act)<sup>1</sup> East Policy was formally launched in early nineties and has its genesis in the end of the cold war. It was the period when India went for economic reforms followed by its Act East Policy (AEP) which is directed towards the countries of Southeast Asia. By the time, a new dimension emerges that is increasing importance of India's Northeast. In this emerging changes Myanmar has become a top priority in the optimal success of India's new foreign policy of engaging with its distant and immediate Eastern neighbours, taking into consideration the dimension of India's Northeast. Thus, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is further an extension of India's Act East Policy, coinciding with Thailand's Look West Policy. India's vision is to have connectivity and linkages, socio-economic development and signifying Myanmar's geo-strategic position as India's land corridor to Southeast Asia, with India's Northeast as linkage.

India's focus on BIMSTEC is with a view to reinforce the Act East Policy and boost the development for the Northeast region of India. The main aim of such group is to create an enabling environment for rapid economic development through identification and implementation of specific cooperation projects in trade and investments, industry, technology, human resources development, tourism, agriculture, energy, infrastructure, technology, transport and communication and many more potentialities.

A proper synchronisation and synergy among the three blocks namely BIMSTEC initiative, India's Myanmar policy and the India's Northeast is an interesting equation for bringing a rational all round regional development and a secured regional security. At this point of time the immediate concern of policy makers is in dealing with various issues of mutual interest of all the three stakeholders (BIMSTEC, Myanmar and India) and Myanmar has the potential to be the deciding factor as positive changes have been emerged in Myanmar and one is the establishment of New Democratic Government in Myanmar. In fact, if BIMSTEC is able to lead an era of productive integration of South Asia and Southeast Asia then it could enhance the economies of these regions more with expansion of the market for goods and services, reduction of prices of outside competitors, more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), reduction in cost of production and welfare gains and reduction in trade barriers. What is also hoped is that this will create many opportunities for India in developing its potential through proper linkages with other nearby countries and regions. Therefore, when the BIMSTEC utility is discussed, the unavoidable role of Myanmar automatically comes on the screen. Ultimately, this is to see how Myanmar could act as a fulcrum in the growing BIMSTEC-India equation.

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<sup>1</sup> India's Look East Policy was initiated in early 1990s to have progressive connectivity in the fulfilment of its national interests with ASEAN; gradually it has been called India's Act East Policy under the vision of present Government of India.

### Significance of BIMSTEC: A Growth Oriented Mechanism

Contemporary BIMSTEC, the brainchild of Thailand, was launched in Bangkok on 6 June, 1997; Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIST-EC). Myanmar was an observer in the inaugural meeting and joined the bloc as a member on 22 December, 1997, which led to change its name to BIMST-EC. Nepal and Bhutan were added in 2003 and granted full membership. In the first Summit on 31 July, 2004, leaders of the group renamed it as BIMSTEC. In fact its emergence was really well-timed as it coincided with the continuing wave of regionalism and regional groupings in Asia since the 90s where a concerted effort is on for a harmonious blending among the South and Southeast Asian economies.

The vision of BIMSTEC is to improve connectivity among India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and other members through a network of multi-modal 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.<sup>1</sup> BIMSTEC connects the 'Look West' policy of Thailand and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and 'Act East' policy of India and South Asian

Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), thereby linking between the ASEAN and SAARC. BIMSTEC has identified 14 priority areas where a member country takes the lead.<sup>2</sup>

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|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| (i) Trade and Investment                   | (ii) Technology                                   | (iii) Energy         |
| (iv) Transport and Communication           | (v) Tourism                                       | (vi) Fisheries       |
| (vii) Public Health                        | (viii) Cultural Cooperation                       | (ix) Agriculture     |
| (x) Poverty Alleviation                    | (xi) People-to-People Contract                    | (xii) Climate Change |
| (xiii) Environment and Disaster Management | (xiv) Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crimes. |                      |

India is the leading country for transport and communication, tourism, environment and disaster management and counter terrorism and transnational crime. On the other hand, Myanmar is the lead country for energy and agriculture cooperation.

Therefore, BIMSTEC has a potential to increase the trade among member countries by taking advantage of their geographical location in the region of the Bay of Bengal and the Eastern coast of the Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup> BIMSTEC is home of around 1.8 billion people (22% of global people) a combined GDP of about US\$ 2.7 trillion economy.<sup>4</sup> BIMSTEC as a region has grown faster than the world average of 6.05 % GDP growth in recent years. FDI inflows in the region rose from 5% in 1995 to 20% in 2011 and now it has been reached to 36% in 2015.<sup>5</sup> The region has 3 critical elements missing- harmonization of railway network, all weather paved roads and modern port. These require a sound infrastructure and transport base for movement of goods and people in the region.

BIMSTEC underlines seamless connectivity in 5 areas;

- |                              |                                   |                               |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (i) Transport Connectivity   | (ii) Trade Connectivity           | (iii) Investment Connectivity |
| (iv) Energy Connectivity and | (v) People-to-People Connectivity |                               |

BIMSTEC is an opportunity for the countries to be a part of powerful region by exploring and utilising areas for regional economic growth, technological cooperation and trade liberalisation. Trade among BIMSTEC countries shows positive Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR), which is 25.16 % (during the period 2005-2014); highest CAGR (during the period 2005-2014) in terms of trade was found with Thailand (30.43%) and the least was found with Bhutan (7.7%). While there was a decline in India's exports in the year 2014 (-3%), the exports growth was at 10.37% with the BIMSTEC countries. The share of BIMSTEC countries in India's total trade was 3.89%, whereas in exports, the share was 6.74%, and in imports the share was 1.94% in the year 2014. This shows that there is a large scope in enhancing India's trade with other BIMSTEC countries; India's share of trade with BIMSTEC countries is significantly low as of now.<sup>6</sup>

The most important driving force should be the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA). While a Framework Agreement has been signed, it is yet to be fully implemented. The agreed conclusions of the BIMST-EC Economic Ministerial Retreat held in Bangkok, Thailand, on 07 August, 1998 mentioned that the BIMSTEC should aim and strive to develop into a FTA and focus on the activities that facilitate trade, increase investments and promote technical cooperation among the member countries. It is driven by the need for strengthening economic cooperation in the region to realise the potential of trade and development fully for the benefit of the member countries and fill the development gap in the region.<sup>7</sup>

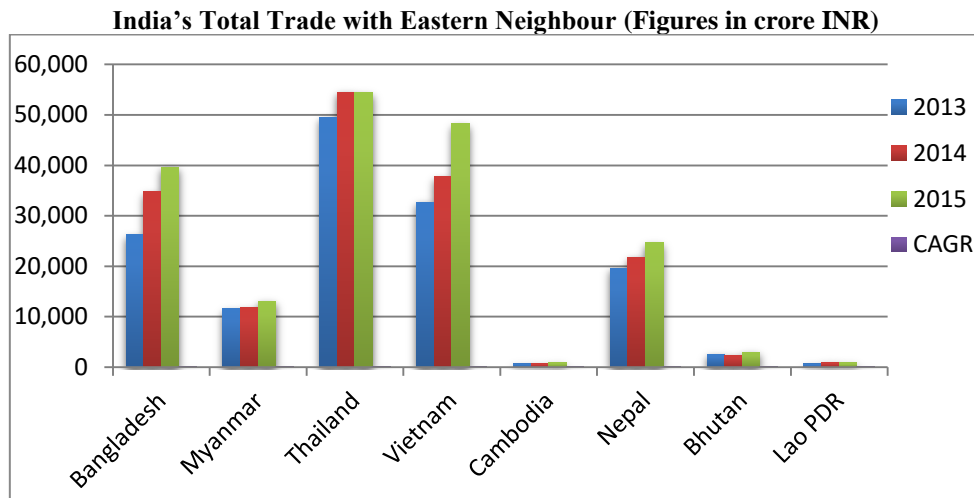
The 2nd BIMSTEC Summit was hosted by India in New Delhi, November 2008. The 2nd Summit took place four years after the 1st BIMSTEC Summit which was held in Thailand. The growth of BIMSTEC as a sub-regional group between the two summits can be traced by the statements of the leaders as they expressed satisfaction at the progress that has been made in the negotiations for FTA in trade in goods thus called for its early conclusion. They also expressed concern at the threat posed by terrorism to the region and appreciated the

finalization of the BIMSTEC Convention on Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking.<sup>8</sup>

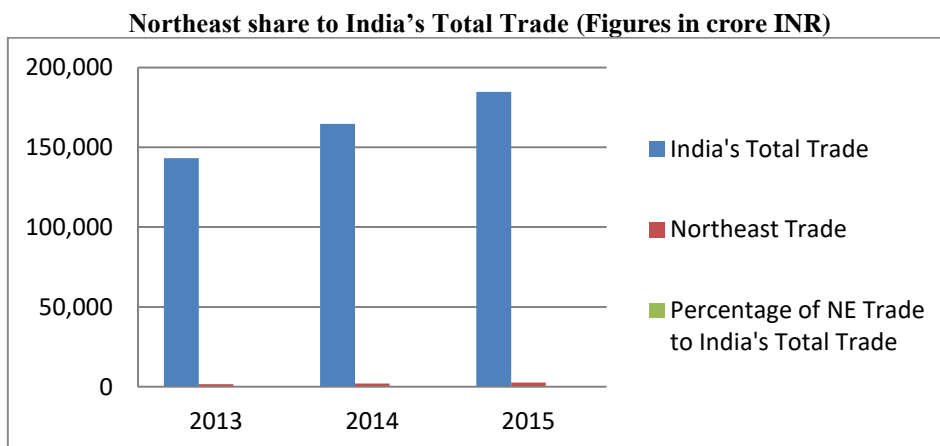
The Third BIMSTEC Summit was held in Myanmar, March 2014, where leaders reaffirmed their commitments to accelerating the pace of regional integration and bringing prosperity to the people in their respective nations. India's then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh underscored the relevance of BIMSTEC, stating that "BIMSTEC is a natural grouping of countries. We are bound by geography and linked by history. Our culture, religions and architecture bear eloquent testimony to our ancient bonds."<sup>9</sup> The region faces many common challenges - from natural disasters to terrorism which have to be collectively addressed to make an important contribution to peace, harmony, security and prosperity in Asia and the world.

**India's Northeast Approach**

The indispensability of northeast came in the focus of Indian Policy makers mainly with the initiation of the Act East Policy. Before that the region was merely viewed from security point only. Indeed, situated at the tri-junction of South, Southeast and East Asia. Northeast has a geographical importance of its own in the shifting regional economic trends. It is in the transit of many of the newly formed sub-regional groupings with a vast amount of untapped potential, but yet to be fully developed. Today realisation has dawn on the foreign policy makers in India that any proper physical connectivity with Southeast Asia, the main decisive factor for the success of AEP, could be possible only through this region. In the same vein North Eastern Region Vision 2020 also emphasised the need for refashioning the development process of northeast so as 'to ensure that the region plays the arrow-head role it must play in the vanguard of the country's Act East Policy'.<sup>10</sup> Implication is clear of the long term potential and importance of the region yet at the same time the continuing negligence and indifference towards the same. The unfortunate part of northeast in the emerging scenario is that India's economic engagement with Southeast Asia has expanded, but nothing has been seen as the advantage for Northeast. Even in the existing bilateral trade among India and eastern countries the share of northeast forms only about 1% of India's total trade with the latter.



Source: Export-Import Bank of India, Ministry of Commerce



Source: Export-Import Bank of India, Ministry of Commerce

Northeast India, consisting of eight Indian states, is one of the naturally most endowed but highly neglected regions in the country, more to do with the way of governance. Representing 7.9 percent of the country's geographical area, 3.8 percent of its total population and 2.7 per cent of GDP, characterised by an extraordinary mixture of ethno-cultural heritage and intertwining realities of ethnonationalism and sub-regionalism, northeast is considered to be one of the most complex regions of India with over 200 ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup> Being a latecomer in the national mainstream the questions of transition and alienation always loom large in the mind of its natives - leading to anti-Indian tensions in various stages. Further, despite its unique biodiversity, hydro-electric potential, hydro-carbon reserves (38%), forests wealth, rich soil and abundant flora and fauna, the area remain a neglected area because of geographical bottlenecks and lack of adequate and right type of policy implementation - thus limiting its access to international market. Nevertheless, because of its geographical location it has got a high potential market value which will roll once the right type of exposure is made.

India's primary objective within BIMSTEC is to develop the northeast region by integrating it with existing trade networks while capitalising on future opportunities. BIMSTEC could be a "potential game changer" for the Northeast's overall development. While considering the potential of BIMSTEC to bring trade, transport, tourism and other linkages to the states of the Northeast. "It is in India's interest to make sure that northeast does not fall behind, that it develops as well in a manner that is commensurate to its potential."<sup>12</sup>

The integration of the Northeast with the fast-developing economies of ASEAN is fundamental to peace, security and development within the region. BIMSTEC has the potential of producing trade worth USD 43-50 billion under a proposed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that the grouping is in the process of finalising.<sup>13</sup> An early conclusion of the planned FTA among BIMSTEC member states is of the utmost necessity for the acceleration of trade and investment in the Bay of Bengal region. "We should aim for an early conclusion of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement for trade in goods and extend it to investment and services. Most of us are connected with each other through one or more regional economic arrangements and it should not be difficult for us to conclude one for BIMSTEC."<sup>14</sup>

The Northeast is pivotal to this vision as it shares international borders with five neighbouring countries and is home to many ethnic groups, languages and dialects. People of some of the bordering states have close familial and community links with those across international borders, especially in Myanmar. Despite its economic focus, BIMSTEC is also aimed at the integration of people of different socio-cultural and politico-economic backgrounds throughout the region via greater people-to-people contact among citizens of all member states.

Thus, in the present era of globalisation where distances are decreasing and boundaries are changing into gateways the potential of northeast can no longer be sidelined with transnational dimension gradually picking up. In the present context northeast specifically has to act as India's land bridge to Myanmar and outlet to the rest of Southeast Asia.

### **BIMSTEC and India**

BIMSTEC offers India an opportunity to get its ties with its eastern neighbours reinforced, much in conformity with the core of India's Act East Policy. Describing BIMSTEC importance to India, Prime Minister of India stated, "We consider our participation in BIMSTEC as a key element in our Look East Policy and long standing approach of good neighbourliness towards all our neighbours— by land and sea. The challenges before us are to transform the richness of our human and natural resources into cooperative regional activities promoting development, enhancing prosperity and the well being of our people, and ensuring our collective security in all its multifarious dimensions."<sup>15</sup> BIMSTEC in order to act as a proper linkage between South and Southeast Asia needs.

Even after many years of developmental strategy required level of basic infrastructure growth which is missing in northeast. In this background balanced and sustainable economic growth under the new market equation becomes difficult. Development of the potentials are always curtail by various challenges such as ethnic insurgency, inefficient and corrupt governance, militarisation of the region or a warehousing atmosphere, lack of financial discipline, lack of proper marketing channel and proper all mode connectivity etc. Thus, what is hoped is that regional grouping like BIMSTEC will be a means to pull it in the normal global economic flow by gradually overcoming the existing development deficit. It is viewed as a growth engine for transforming northeast by making it a gateway to the East with the right type of linkages. Indeed sub-regional developments are mean to link adjacent areas with different factor endowments and different comparative advantages. In this scenario northeast is very much suited for the BIMSTEC initiatives.

The success of BIMSTEC will definitely contribute and complement to the development of India's AEP in general and northeast in particular. Indeed, for India, this regional grouping acts as a medium for achieving the three-pronged strategy of its AEP;

- (i) Closer link with its proximate and immediate neighbours,

- (ii) Economic integration with Southeast Asia, and
- (iii) Security considerations of northeast and development of its untapped potential.

Various infrastructural efforts will be enhanced with the participation of the member countries which in turn will also bring out reciprocal benefits. An effective and progressive cooperation is very much in demand between BIMSTEC and India's northeast so that when the Free Trade Agreement really materialised northeast does not lag behind or it pose a hurdle to the grouping itself.

#### **Myanmar Factor and Issues over Common Interests**

India and Myanmar relations are rooted in shared historical, cultural, ethnic and religious ties. In addition to these commonalities, both these Asian countries share a long geographical land border and maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. One of the most integral parts of India's Act East Policy is its Myanmar policy with the obvious reality that in the process northeast issue have to catch up with the nearby regional groupings - BIMSTEC being not an exception. India looked upon Myanmar as an indispensable medium for acquiring more economic benefits as well as to put India in a strategically more advantageous position through its Northeast. It is northeast transnational dimension which brought to its fold both problematic as well as prospective facets, specially associated with Myanmar. Dealing with the problematic issues for removing the negativities and the prospective one for further speeding up growth and increase positivity, is a must. Proper synergy between India's northeast and BIMSTEC thus calls for an understanding of these facets and dealing with them thereof. Myanmar is crucial to India's economic engagement with Southeast Asian countries. The country shares a 1643 kilometre border with the Northeast states of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Under the Indo-Myanmar Trade Agreement of 1994, formal border trade is conducted through the designated custom posts at Moreh in Manipur to Tamu in Myanmar, and Zowakhatar in Mizoram to Rhi in Myanmar.<sup>16</sup> In enhancing sub-regional cooperation, extending current transit and transport connectivity is vital. While several trade routes existed between India and Southeast Asian countries prior to British colonial intervention, they were disrupted as a result of the narrow business and imperial interests of the British. In the post-independence period, trade and cultural exchanges have, for the most part, remained stagnant and road connectivity between India and Myanmar underdeveloped. The planned extension of the Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road will link Mandalay with the Trans-Asian Highway, while states that possess modern medical facilities such as Assam and Manipur are being touted as possible destinations for medical tourists from Myanmar.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Economic Cooperation: Regional Economic Integration**

The economic relevance of BIMSTEC in the region could be further enhanced when India established proper cooperation with Myanmar. It becomes an imperative in the changing economic architecture of the region. Closing the gap between India and Myanmar in the realm of economic relations could be traced to the signing of an MOU on trade and economic cooperation, particularly in terms of border trade in 1994. Subsequently, the Moreh-Tamu Border Trade was opened in April 1995, followed by steps to materialise the Zowakhatar (Champhai) Border Trade Post in Mizoram State adjoining Rhi in Myanmar, which was inaugurated in January 2004. In addition, in March 2007, India approved the setting up Border Trade Centres (BTC) along the Indo-Myanmar border in the state of Nagaland. In recent trade meetings between the two countries it was decided that the present border trade at the Tamu-Moreh and Rhi-Zowakhatar border points be converted into normal trade and to expand the list of items that can be legally traded.<sup>18</sup> Though Moreh-Tamu Border Trade does not form a very large share of the total trade volume between India and Myanmar, yet it is considerably significant from the angle of India's move toward Southeast Asia through northeast. Diversification and expansion in trade cooperation continues between India and Myanmar. India is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest trade partner of Myanmar (3<sup>rd</sup> largest export destination for Myanmar and 7<sup>th</sup> largest source of imports into Myanmar).<sup>19</sup> India has already given preferential tariff to most of the items imported from Myanmar namely wood products, legumes, gems etc. It also supported the setting up of various factories and plants. Here, most of India's economic cooperation with BIMSTEC touching northeast is inclusive of its initiative for promoting vibrant economic partnership with Myanmar. To promote the existing multilateralism presently effort is being extended by India for early materialisation of the BIMSTEC FTA.

#### **Ventures in Infrastructure Sectors: Roadmap for Connectivity**

The BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS) has identified as many as 100 projects that would promote connectivity within the region. These projects are to be funded by the Asian Development Bank.<sup>20</sup> Apart from these there are Kaladan Multi-Modal Project that would connect India to ASEAN countries and is expected to be completed by 2016, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is expected to be completed also by 2016 and the ESCAP dream project of Asian Highway. Infrastructure in the form of transport and communication constitutes one of the priority sectors of BIMSTEC with India as the lead

country. Entry of northeast in the BIMSTEC initiative means opening up through proper infrastructure development with proper coordination with Myanmar. In the first meeting of BIMSTEC Expert Group on Transport and Communication Sector, held in New Delhi in April 2001, discussion was made on issues concerning transport and cross border facilitation, multi modal transport and logistics, infrastructure development, aviation, maritime transport, as well as communication linkages and net working.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, many infrastructure ventures between India and Myanmar came up as integral part of the above move. Changing northeast from being mere border point to profitable economic gateways has become an urgent imperative for India for which a proper infrastructural link is much needed with Myanmar.

In road sector, India has extended assistance for road development projects which include upgradation of the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo road (about 160 kms); Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project which envisages development of road and inland waterways from Sittwe port in Myanmar to Mizoram. Border Road Organisation has completed the resurfacing and maintenance work of 132 kms Tamu-Kyigone-Kalemyo stretch of the road and handed over to Myanmar.

**Projects between India-Myanmar to Promote Connectivity**

S.No.	Name of Stretch	Status/Remarks
1.	Tamu-Kalewa	Part of the Friendship Road
2.	Kalewa-Yagyi	Myanmar wants India to construct the Kalewa-Yagyi stretch.
3.	Yagyi-Chaungma-Monywa	India wants Myanmar to construct the Yagyi-Chaungma-Monywa stretch. It is understood that section Yagyi-Chaungma-Monywa is under construction on BOT basis.
4.	Monywa-Mandalay	Monywa-Mandalay stretch is already developed.
5.	Mandalay-Meiktila bypass	Under Consideration of MEA
6.	Meiktila bypass-Taungoo-Oktwin-Payagyi	The section between Meiktila and Payagyi is part of the Yangon-Mandalay highway that has been constructed.
7.	Payagyi-Theinzayat-Thaton	Under Consideration of MEA
8.	Thaton-Mawlamyine-Kawkareik	It is understood that for the Thaton-Mawlamyine-Kawkareik sector, the Government of Myanmar has apparently sought a loan from ADB.
9.	Kawkareik-Myawaddy	It appears that the Myanmar Government shall be completing the road construction between Myawaddy-Kawkareik out of its own resources soon.
10.	Myawaddy-Mae Sot	Under Consideration of MEA

Source: Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, India

Several BIMSTEC centres are being launched throughout the region, including three in India, to foster greater technical exchanges between member countries. Another significant move in this direction is the initiative for earliest materialisation of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway linking India's Moreh to Mae Sot of Northern Thailand through Bagan in Myanmar. This is an important BIMSTEC project. To add to it is the recent handing over of the Tamu-Keygone-Kalemyo stretch of road, built with Indian assistance, to Myanmar in October 2009. Effort is also on for the development of "Stillwell Road" (the old Burma Road). Further, India and Myanmar is engaged in completing the missing links in the Trans Asian Railways (TAR) in different parts of their countries. In this direction India has already approved the signing and ratification of the Inter Governmental Agreement on TAR on 8 March 2007. With all these, an Optical Fibre Telecommunication project to run along the Trilateral Highway is coming up under the aegis of BIMSTEC. Efforts have also been taken up between India and Myanmar for the early materialisation of other joint infrastructure projects within the framework of BIMSTEC development programme. Tamanthi Hydro-Electric Power Project in the Chindwin River, once completed could supplement the power needs of northeast; and the Dawei Deep-Sea port. According to an official of the External Affairs Ministry of India the time table for all these projects is the next 5-10 years, so that by the time India-ASEAN and BIMSTEC FTAs are fully operational the infrastructure is in place to sustain the anticipated much higher level of trade and economic interaction.<sup>22</sup> The grouping's project in the form of BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS) undertaken under Asian Development Bank also proved helpful in this direction by identifying the bottlenecks that need to be overcome. In all these equal share and eager support from the side of Myanmar is vital.

**India's Energy Pursuit**

Growing Indian economy needs a sustained energy supplies. Its need is estimated to climb up to 400 million standard cubic meters per day by 2025.<sup>23</sup> As such India's economic diplomacy has attached due importance to energy security. Myanmar provided the nearest and the most feasible source. India is the sixth

largest energy consumer of the world, while Myanmar has enough gas to last for another many years at the current rate of extraction. According to figures from the Energy Information Administration of U.S.A., Myanmar has abundant amount of crude oil reserves approximating to the tune of 150 million barrels, while its natural gas reserves are around 10 to 13 trillion cubic feet. Lobbying for this huge quantity of gas has become an important objective of India's diplomatic equation. Presently India's public sector undertakings GAIL and ONGC Videsh Ltd on the one hand and private enterprise Essar on the other are engaged in gas extraction work. An agreement was signed between the two countries on 23 September 2007 in Nay pyi tau to this effect.<sup>24</sup> And, in this pursuit for energy security India's northeast has an importance of its own because of its geographical importance for any future transportation of oil and gas to India from Myanmar. Further as Bangladesh is also determined to ensure regional cooperation, the Myanmar-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline can be a reality.

Greater understanding with Myanmar in the area will also help in bringing better commercial cohesion within BIMSTEC with energy as the linking basis, without the exception northeast. Myanmar as a lead country in the energy sector of the grouping, and India with its expertise could contribute to the overall objective of BIMSTEC by using the energy demand-supply aspect for regional resource cooperation with related reciprocity.

### **Tourism Interests**

While tourism is also one of the priority sectors of BIMSTEC where India is the lead country, developing tourism forms another area of India-Myanmar cooperation, with India giving emphasis to its Northeast. Tourism is one particular sector in which India's northeast and Myanmar are rich and have got abundant amount of untapped business potential. The region is an exceptional tourism destination with the exotic flora and fauna, natural scenic beauty, unique performing arts and varied cuisine and handicrafts. The presence of large number of religious places of different cultures in the region could also help in promoting pilgrim tourism. India is gradually trying to add this dimension in its AEP. The objective is to renew and rejuvenate the age-old cultural and historical ties between the peoples of India's northeast and Southeast Asia through Myanmar for enhancing the avenue for tourism growth. A declaration known as the Kolkata Declaration on Tourism Cooperation was also adopted in February 2005 with Indian initiative. The Proposed Plan of Action includes the suggestion to establish the BIMSTEC Tourism Information Centre in India as well as to explore the possibility of setting up a BIMSTEC Tourism Fund with financial contributions from each member country.<sup>25</sup> A BIMSTEC Tourism Working Group has also been formed to initiate common steps in the issue. Thus, when these features are open up with the proper linkages and infrastructure northeast could become one of the best tourism hubs of the world, which in turn will show the flow of income and investment.

### **Security Concerns of India**

Security challenges both natural and man-made require collective vision and determination to be overcome. In the security sphere, India has steadily put in place enabling legal instruments for regional approaches to international terrorism, transnational crime, drug trafficking and mutual legal assistance in criminal matters. Home grown insurgency, cases of Islamic terrorism, small arms infiltration and ever increasing Narco-trafficking are main areas of serious security concern in Northeast India with Myanmar dimension. In this atmosphere one could not be optimistic of the benefits of BIMSTEC contributing to the growth of the region. As mentioned India has 1643 km long border with Myanmar, which lies entirely in its Northeast, inhabited by trans-border tribes and very porous in nature. On the other hand, the whole of northeast is linked with the mainland by a very narrow 22 km wide 'Siliguri Corridor'. Ample potential for much better link is open towards its Eastern side.

Numbers of states of Northeast are grappling with the problem of endemic insurgency which is sustained most by the availability of cheap weapons and easy sanctuary from the Myanmar side. It is believed that at present there are still about 30 camps belonging to ULFA, NSCN (K), CNF, UNLF and PLA insurgents inside Myanmar, with or without the awareness of the local government, despite Myanmar's repeated assurance that it will not allow them to work inside its territory.<sup>26</sup> In the absence of proper controlling mechanism the number of multilateral and bilateral cooperation initiated by India touching this region become less practical. Curbing insurgency, small arms proliferation and Narco-smuggling became an urgent requirement. Collateral damage in the form of mass scale drug addiction and AIDS/HIV has become a common happening in the region. Overall security problem of Northeast forms an important aspect which possibly will have a direct impact on any India-BIMSTEC cooperation where again full support from Myanmar is required.

Maritime surveillance was required in Bay of Bengal as its sea lanes were being used by terrorists to transport arms and ammunition and drugs. A significant step in this direction was the endorsement and signing of a Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking in the 12th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting held in Naypyitaw, December 2009.<sup>27</sup> India raised the issue of insurgents groups operating from Myanmar soil with the Government of Myanmar on the sidelines of the same meet.

## II. CONCLUSION

BIMSTEC is relevant as most of the issues are commensurate with the priority sectors taken up by it. At the same time it could act as an important medium for synchronisation of the different aspects of the region through a single line process - an interlinking mechanism for linking these different aspects, which will be beneficial for both India and Myanmar. The new changes in and around the BIMSTEC region must be used for promotion of trade, development of infrastructure, proper linkages, border trade, tourism and security which in turn will promote economic activity in northeast, with lots of positive multiplier effects. Presently, India, development of northeast and its integration with larger regional integration processes have become imperative, going beyond the security aspects. However, sense of alienation, insurgency, excessive militarisation, health hazards, drug trafficking, porous border with unscrupulous activities, etc., still remain issues that creates cleavages from time to time in all these initiatives. India's northeast specially needs to be viable from security angle as this region is to be the focal point for many of the bilateral and multilateral cooperation projects. A right type of synergy in the India-Myanmar relation and adjusting it with BIMSTEC efforts will go a long way in pulling up this region towards sustained economic growth and socio-political stability.

Despite these prospects,

- As a sub-regional grouping, BIMSTEC has made little headway in terms of the implementation of its various agreements.
- The goal of regional integration has also remained unfulfilled as infrastructural bottlenecks persist.
- A lack of cross-border physical connectivity is a major obstacle in expanding trade and investment between India's Northeast and BIMSTEC and Southeast Asian states.
- The framework agreement on the BIMSTEC FTA was signed in 2004, but it is not yet fully operational.

The India-BIMSTEC equation within the broader perspective of AEP with Myanmar playing a pivotal role could move towards further enhancement with a pragmatic and rational policy. Myanmar is not an all in all factor, yet it still form one of the most decisive factor when it comes to northeast, and could be an enterprising potential within BIMSTEC if put in the right track for all round progress of the aspects. A new democratic government has been elected in Myanmar this year which may intensify regional cooperation. For India, BIMSTEC's development and peacemaking potential must be seized.

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