

Punching Above Weight? The Role of Sri Lanka in BIMSTEC

N. Manoharan and Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan*

Why do small states like Sri Lanka show a keen interest in being a part of regional organisations? Why does Sri Lanka wish to punch above its weight in such groupings? What does it strive to achieve in the process? How far has it been successful? It is worth addressing these questions to understand the role of India's small neighbours vis-à-vis regional groupings by looking at the case of Sri Lanka.

In the increasingly globalised world, international cooperation has become imperative. States are finding it difficult to overcome economic, security, socio-political, and other challenges on their own. This is more than true for small states which are militarily less powerful, have low GDP, are geographically small, and have a relatively small population.¹ In international relations, social Darwinists have, in fact, written off small states as “insignificant”, and have been confident that they would disappear *en masse*. The birth of the United Nations and the proliferation of numerous regional organisations in the post-Second World War era has changed the dynamics in favour of small states by giving them a sense of family like protection as is given to infants and children.² Multilateral organisations are, therefore, imperative for the very survival of small states. No wonder, small states tend to have “high levels of activity in international organisations”, and “support for international legal norms”.³

Jennie Hey argues that “small states choose to participate in multilateral organisations to attain foreign policy goals.”⁴ These goals vary from security and economic development on the one hand, to enhancing their image and stature in the international arena on the other. The cooperative arrangements could be at regional or global levels. But, statistically speaking, small states give preference to regional organisations, especially in their respective vicinities,

***The Author**, Dr. N. Manoharan and Mr. Ashwin Immanuel Dhanabalan are, respectively, Associate Professor and a Masters scholar with the Department of International Studies, Political Science and History, CHRIST (Deemed to be University). Dr. Manoharan had earlier served at the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), Prime Minister's Office, New Delhi.

(This article was received from the author on January 13, 2021)

to achieve their security and development interests. For instance, regional groupings like ASEAN, SAARC, BIMSTEC are populated by and, in fact, propelled by small states. The rationale is based on “the need for transnational pooling and coordination of state functions to adjust to and facilitate the transnationalisation of capital.”⁵

In cooperative arrangements, especially in regional groupings, small states “enjoy greater freedom of action, including free riding, which is accepted by the international community.”⁶ As such, small states may be of little value individually; but they carry considerable weight collectively. Regional groupings also give small states a level of confidence to resist the undue influence of large states from the same organisation by ganging up. SAARC is a classic case.⁷ Crucially, small states look at regional groupings as protective umbrellas in order to deal with various vulnerabilities: economic, disasters (natural or manmade), security threats (traditional or non-traditional), and so on. In a regional cooperative arrangement, guided by the principle of good neighbourliness, small states feel safer.⁸ In the economic domain, cooperative mechanisms give small states better market access and lower tariffs for their goods, and better import terms through preferential or free trade agreements. Given their limited resources and feeble negotiation capacity, herding strategies work better for small states. Else, negotiating free trade agreements with each and every country bilaterally would be a huge task.

With this analytical backdrop, the paper seeks to find answers to the following questions: How significant is BIMSTEC for Sri Lanka? What role has Colombo been playing to augment the contours of the regional arrangement? Are there any national interests involved in such a robust role? What challenges are confronted in the process? How does India see this?

BIMSTEC and Sri Lanka: The Context

Established in 1997, the ‘Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation’ (BIMSTEC), is a sector-specific cooperative arrangement, aimed at synchronising the ‘Look West’ policy of some countries of ASEAN with the ‘Look East/Act East’ policy of certain South Asian countries. The Bangkok Declaration of 1997 clearly spelled out the aims of the new grouping as being to “create [an] enabling environment for rapid economic development ... accelerate economic growth ... promote active collaboration ... provide assistance ... and to cooperate on various areas identified.”⁹ At its second Ministerial Meeting in 1998, six sectors were identified for cooperation: Trade and Investment, Transport and Communication, Energy, Tourism,

Technology, and Fisheries. Later, in 2005, at the eighth Ministerial Meeting, seven new areas of cooperation were added: Agriculture, Public Health, Poverty Alleviation, Counter-terrorism and Transnational Crime, Environment and Disaster Management, People-to-People Contact, and Cultural Cooperation. Given its significance, Climate Change was added as the 14th area of cooperation in 2008.¹⁰

Eventually, the number of sectors were concretised to seven: Science, Technology and Innovation; Trade and Investment; Environment and Climate Change; Agriculture and Food Security; Security; People-to-People Contact; and Connectivity. Two reasons were behind the idea of reducing the number of sectors by half: to avoid the overlapping of the scopes of sectors; and to entrust each country with the leadership of a sector by giving focused attention for advancing cooperation among the member countries of the region.

The following table details the sectors and the lead countries:

Table 1: Country-wise Distribution of Sectors in BIMSTEC

Lead Countries	Sectors
Bangladesh	Trade, Investment and Development
Bhutan	Environment and Climate Change
India	Security (Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime, Disaster Management & Energy)
Myanmar	Agriculture and Food Security
Nepal	People-to-people contact (culture, tourism, forums of Think Thanks, Media)
Sri Lanka	Science, Technology and Innovation
Thailand	Connectivity

Source: www.bimstec.org

In terms of methodology, the lead countries are in charge of facilitating cooperation in the areas allotted to them through an Expert Group for each of the sectors drawn from the member countries. The country in charge has to ensure the conceptualisation, implementation, and constant monitoring of the cooperation in the specified area.¹¹

As a small state, Sri Lanka lays more emphasis on being part of cooperative frameworks - global or regional - to push its national interests. As a result, Colombo is part of several global and regional groupings. BIMSTEC is not just one among them, but is one of the principal ones. Sri Lanka is a key founding member and outgoing chair of BIMSTEC (2018–2020).

For three major main reasons, Sri Lanka is deeply interested in BIMSTEC:

1. There is a special bond between the island state and the grouping. Since its independence, Sri Lanka wished to be a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. That is exactly what BIMSTEC aspires to do: “The regional group constitutes a bridge between South and South East Asia and represents a reinforcement of relations among these countries.”¹² Not only being a bridge between two regions, BIMSTEC also has set-up a platform for cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN members.
2. Significantly, BIMSTEC is a sector-driven cooperative organization unlike various other regional groups. So far, 14 sectors have been identified: trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism, fisheries, agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism, environment, culture, people to people contact, and climate change.¹³ This is exactly what Sri Lanka wants at this juncture. Being an island country, cooperation based on a sea-based grouping is as natural for Sri Lanka as fish to water. According to Sri Lanka, “BIMSTEC means connectivity, engagement and prosperity” that the island state desperately needs at any point in time.¹⁴
3. Being realistic, Sri Lanka is also going with the flow. Stuck in myriad issues and bottlenecks among some of its members, SAARC is struggling even to conduct its regular summit meetings. Consequently, the South Asian grouping’s key member, India, has been trying to shift its focus towards Southeast Asia, and towards sub-regional groupings, so as not to get stalled by SAARC’s switch-on and switch-off mode, as dictated by Pakistan. In this regard, of late, India has started giving much importance to cooperative arrangements like Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), BIMSTEC, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC), and East Asia Summit (EAS)¹⁵. Can Sri Lanka afford to ignore signals sent by India?

Role in Key Sectors

It is significant that Sri Lanka figures in the upper tier of the classification of states in BIMSTEC: Developing and Least Developed. In the former category, India and Thailand figure, along with Sri Lanka; in the latter category four countries - Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh - are clubbed. Entrusted with Science, Technology, and the Innovation sector, Colombo has taken a keen interest in all the sectors identified, especially trade, and security. It is significant that Colombo, as the Chair of the Organisation, has been instrumental

in enhancing the profile of the organisation through various initiatives. Colombo's role in BIMSTEC is seen in these three predominant areas.

Technology

Technology is a vital sector in propelling economic growth. Sri Lanka is designated to lead the grouping on the technology sector, both in capacity-building and in technology management (this includes IPRs, technology forecasting, and technology intermediation). In this regard, the island state has put in effort in two directions: intra-grouping technology transfer and inter-regional technology exchange - for the benefit of the member countries.¹⁶ Some of the key areas identified for technology cooperation include, "agro-based technologies, food processing, herbal products, biotechnology, information and communication technology."¹⁷ It should be noted that Sri Lanka is the first country in South Asia, and the second country in Asia after Japan, to be part of the Budapest Convention. Sri Lanka's e-Sri Lanka initiative by the Information and Communication Technology Agency in 2005 has enabled various online initiatives in the island.¹⁸ All these refer to the technological acumen and preference given by the island state to technology-driven governance and its development trajectory.

In due course, advanced areas of fundamental scientific research in both software and hardware development as well as Geographical Information Systems (GIS) were identified for cooperation. To firm up all the above areas of technology cooperation and exchange, Colombo proposed the setting up of the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility (TFF) way back in 2006. This idea was endorsed at the second BIMSTEC Summit in 2008, and an Expert Group was duly formed to draft a Memorandum of Association (MoA). However, though the MoA is ready, the TFF is yet to see the light of the day even after a decade.¹⁹ The challenge before the country is how to build technology-driven knowledge-based economies despite the prevalence of illiteracy and the low income of its people.

Trade

Trade is gradually picking up in BIMSTEC. Intra-regional trade among the grouping countries is around US\$ 70 bn; but that constitutes only seven percent of the total global trade of the member states. This is far less when compared to ASEAN's US\$ 600 bn (intra-regional trade constituting 23 percent of its global trade), although it is not fair to compare with a grouping that is

old and well entrenched.²⁰ Free trade agreements among BIMSTEC countries are a good option to enhance intra-regional trade volume. However, issues of trade patterns and complementarities remain hurdles that also bothers Sri Lanka. Interestingly, it was India that went ahead and signed the first free trade agreement with Sri Lanka in the region.

Yet another issue is the skewed nature of the economy of the countries of BIMSTEC. Of the combined US\$ 3.5 trillion GDP of member states, India accounts for whopping 74 percent, Thailand 13 percent, Bangladesh 7.3 percent, Sri Lanka four percent, Myanmar two percent and Nepal and Bhutan less than one percent.²¹ However, it is significant to note that the Bay of Bengal is strategically located at the centre of the Indo-Pacific region which witnesses a chunk of world trade flows. Sri Lanka, especially, is at the entry point of the Bay, connecting to the Indo-Pacific maritime highway. In this sense, Sri Lanka is crucial for enhancing BIMSTEC's maritime trade connectivity to the outside world. Three important harbours - Trincomalee, Hambantota, and Colombo - would serve both as transshipment and trading ports.²²

With these potentials, free trade agreement is an obvious choice. The BIMSTEC members already have either bilateral or regional free trade arrangements in the vicinity. Some of the regional FTAs include: ASEAN FTA involving Thailand and Myanmar, ASEAN-India FTA, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) involving Myanmar, Thailand and India, ASEAN-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership, South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) involving Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan, and Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA) involving Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. Some of the bilateral FTAs include India's bilateral FTAs with Sri Lanka and Bhutan, and a Treaty of Trade with Nepal. Therefore, going by the web of free trade agreements touching almost all the member countries, BIMSTEC FTA looks to be a smooth sail. The member countries did, indeed, make it a priority since the beginning to enhance trade in goods and services, apart from investments. However, the progress has been very slow. Although a Framework Agreement was signed way back in 2004 by establishing a Trade Negotiating Committee, the negotiations are still on. The principal hurdle posed has been differences over market access between the two big economies of BIMSTEC: India and Thailand. In 2016, the countries agreed to pace-up the negotiations on at least two issues in the FTA: preferential treatment to Least Development Countries, and pushing relaxations in services and investments.²³

Sri Lanka will, nevertheless, benefit from BIMSTEC FTA because of free trade opportunity with six countries in the neighbourhood in one go. BIMSTEC countries account for around 18 percent of Sri Lanka's total trade in goods. Of this, 23 percent are imports and only seven percent are exports. There is, thus, a huge gap between import and export figures. Crucially, India accounts for around 80 percent of goods exported, and 87 percent of goods imported. This does not cover informal trade between these two neighbours, which is mostly one-way from India to Sri Lanka. In this context, an FTA in the Bay of Bengal area would benefit the island state in the form of trade diversification.²⁴

Sri Lanka's specific role in certain sub-sectors within the trade sector is important to note. The trade sector of BIMSTEC is broadly divided into two categories: goods and services, and trade and investment. There are eight sub-sectors under goods and services, and seven sub-sectors under trade and investment. Sri Lanka is entrusted with two sub-sectors - gems and jewellery and processed food - in the goods and services category. Under the trade and investment category, Sri Lanka has been identified as the lead country to take care of two sub-sectors: banking arrangement and mobility of businesspeople.²⁵

Table 2: Sub-sectors and Lead Countries in the BIMSTEC Trade Sector

Category I: Good and Services	
Country	Sub-sector
Bangladesh	Textile and clothing
India	Drugs/Pharmaceuticals & coconut and spices
Sri Lanka	Gems and Jewellery & processed food
Thailand	Automotive industry and parts; horticultural/floricultural products & rubber, tea, coffee
Category II: Trade and Investment Facilitation	
Bangladesh	Customs procedures
India	Promotion of intra-BIMSTEC investments; intellectual property rights & e-BIMSTEC
Sri Lanka	Banking arrangement & mobility of business people
Thailand	Standards and conformity

Source: Nepal-India Chamber of Commerce and Industry

The country-wise allocation of sub-sectors in the following table will give a wider idea.

It should be noted that in the sub-sector allocation, three countries - Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan - were not given any charge. Perhaps this was because of their underdevelopment. But sometime in the future, these three countries could be given an opportunity to look at some of these sub-sectors in both the categories. Both India and Sri Lanka support this standpoint, recognising the increasing economic capabilities of Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan. Perhaps, handholding for some time before giving full responsibility of the sub-sectors may be considered.

Security

Security is yet another important sector of cooperation. Some of the common threats faced by BIMSTEC countries include terrorism, organised crime, drug-trafficking, human trafficking, illegal migration, and radicalisation. A Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) was established to jointly fight against terrorism as well as organised and related threats in the Bay of Bengal region. Six Sub-Groups, each working on a specific aspect of CTTC cooperation, were formed to report to the BIMSTEC Joint Working on CTTC.

The following table provides details of the sub-groups and the countries responsible (called as ‘Lead Shepherd’):

Table 3: Sub-groups and Lead Shepherds in BIMSTEC Security Sector

Sub-Group	Lead Shepherd
Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals	Myanmar
Intelligence Sharing	Sri Lanka
Legal and Law Enforcement Issues	India
Anti- Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism	Thailand
Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration	Bangladesh
Countering Radicalization and Terrorism.	India

Source: www.bimstec.org

As a ‘Lead Shepherd’ of intelligence sharing, Sri Lanka is strategically located to effectively coordinate intelligence sharing among the member countries. Such coordination goes well with its lead role in technology cooperation. Presently, the sub-group is involved in creating a database on all aspects of terrorism and transnational crimes in the region. In addition, under the auspicious of the United Nations Office on Drugs Crime (UNODC), a collaboration between BIMSTEC and the South Asia Regional Intelligence

Sharing and Coordination Centre (SARICC) has been taken forward to know more about the drug trafficking in the region.²⁶ Sri Lanka's capability in intelligence sharing was questioned in the wake of the Easter attacks of April 2019. The intelligence inputs that were provided by India on the imminent attacks were not acted upon. However, with the assumption of a new government under the Rajapaksas, attempts are being made to plug the loopholes. When it comes to legal frameworks on security cooperation, they are not disappointing. Way back in 2009, the member countries signed the BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime, and Illicit Drug Trafficking. Though awaiting ratification from all member states, the Convention provides "each [member state] the widest possible measure of mutual assistance in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and suppression of such crimes."²⁷ Significantly, Sri Lanka's over three-decade-old ethnic war with the LTTE ended in that year. Sri Lanka was at the forefront to push such security cooperation to blunt LTTE's strong international financial, arms, and other support networks. And now, there is a reason for taking security issues more seriously in the wake of the Easter attacks.

The BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, which "aims to extend [the] widest possible assistance to each other through mutual cooperation for enhancing capability and effectiveness of the Member States in investigation and prosecution of crimes, including crimes related to terrorism, transnational organized crime, drug trafficking, money laundering and cyber-crimes", has been finalised but awaiting signature.²⁸ Yet another legal framework favoured by Sri Lanka that is on cards is the BIMSTEC Convention on Human Trafficking. Sri Lanka has also been actively participating in the BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs meetings since 2017 to give impetus to the monitoring and implementation aspects of the legal frameworks on security.²⁹ In all these, Colombo has been ably guided and supported by New Delhi.

BIMSTEC as an Institution

As one of the key founding members, Sri Lanka is keen to establish strong institutions for the grouping. When Colombo held the chair during 2002–2003, "the importance of the political commitment of member countries was underlined for promoting a more intensified sub-regional cooperation."³⁰ At a later date, the island state proposed a 'troika system', comprising former, current, and upcoming chairs, to establish continuity in policy formulation

and implementation in all the identified sectors. The idea of having “observers” and “dialogue partners” in the grouping on the lines of SAARC/ASEAN has also been floated for greater inclusivity and support systems for the effective cooperation in all the sectors.³¹ Interestingly, it is Sri Lanka that has been pushing the idea of including ‘observers’ and ‘dialogue partners’ to complement gaps in resources, expertise, technology, and so on. But there is also politics in such a suggestion: bringing big powers like China would help in checking on India. In that case, it may scuttle the very purpose of cooperation. Therefore, such ideas of the inclusion of extra-regional members require careful deliberation.

Colombo also has highlighted the issue of the BIMSTEC charter. Having a charter on the lines of other regional groupings like ASEAN, SAARC, and the EU would provide them much-required standards. But, at the same time, not having a charter gives the grouping enormous flexibility in decision-making and operations.³² However, as the chair, Sri Lanka finalised a charter for BIMSTEC, keeping in mind both flexibility and having standard rules of procedures. Colombo has also been advocating a “revisit the Declaration” in the light of changes in the past two decades. This idea is worth looking at, considering the new additions in memberships and the rising aspirations and needs of the existing members. It is also important to note that Sri Lanka was instrumental in the rationalization of sectors and the Memorandum of Understanding on Mutual Cooperation between Diplomatic Academies/Training Institutions of BIMSTEC Member States.³³ India’s support, in this regard, is immense. Sri Lanka has also advocated “outreach activities” with the UN and other similar regional organisations for maximum benefit, including “recognition, financial assistance, expert assistance, market access, etc.”³⁴

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is undoubtedly a key member of BIMSTEC, and has been intensely involved in making the grouping more vibrant in all the 14 sectors identified for cooperation. The fact that India is keen on energising BIMSTEC, is a big plus for Sri Lanka’s ambitions. As the current chair (2018 to 2020), it has facilitated conduct of three Permanent Working Committee Meetings and a Senior Officials Meeting.³⁵ Over a period of time, Sri Lanka did inject dynamism and added vitality to the organisation in various capacities.

As a sector-in-charge of technology, Sri Lanka has a pivotal role to enhance cooperation in those fields that revolves around technology. Technology Transfer Facility that “aims to expand the technological knowledge and skills

of micro, small, and medium sized enterprises in the Bay of Bengal, and thereby build knowledge-based economies” is one important aspect.³⁶ Sri Lanka has also been playing a pivotal role in the trade and security sectors. Yet, it should be acknowledged that the enormous potential of BIMSTEC remains untapped. Human and natural resources are a plenty. Given the level of synergies and complementarities among the member states, it is viable to realise the Bay of Bengal Economic Community at some point. India is at the forefront in pushing this point.

In this regard, the formation of BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (RC-BNPTT) for wider regional consultations on policy matters is a good move. At the same time, for wider acceptability and entrenchment, it is vital to take the grouping to the level of the people. Sri Lanka’s pitch for track 1.5, track 2, and track 3 dialogues among BIMSTEC members, and public diplomacy to reach out to the people would work to a greater extent in this regard. Presently, BIMSTEC hovers around at political and bureaucratic levels. Linking up with other like-minded regional groupings is important. Engagement with BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) is a good move. At the same time, Colombo should not neglect SAARC. Sri Lanka could take a lead in reviving the South Asian grouping rather than putting it in cold storage. No country other than Sri Lanka is in a good strategic position to strengthen regional groupings in the area. Colombo undoubtedly has a strong supporter in India.

Notes :

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