CHAPTER IV
THE FEATURES, STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS OF BIMSTEC

In the post-World War period, witnessed the creation of number of military or security organizations, namely, NATO, SEATO and CENTO in Europe and Asia. At the same time, in a move towards regional economic integration, the establishment of regional trading blocs like the EEC and its successor the EU demonstrated the exigencies of a progressively interdependent trade network in a changing world order (Chakraborti, 2008). As such, regional cooperation developed as an attractive cooperative complementary strategy to multilateralism (Rahman, 2007). Again, the post-Cold War world order characterized by globalization and liberalization further unleashed new avenues for regional and sub-regional economic integration in each corner of the globe. Regionalism in its new variant was used as an instrument to build synergies and bring economic dynamism, stability and growth in the third world countries’ economies in the context of the globalising world scenario (Upreti, 2007).

Developing countries are driving sub-regionalism to foster trade and investment and enhance the development process in their region through economic cooperation (Rahman, 2007). In the process, with the universal acknowledgement of the need for integrating national economies, sub-regional economic cooperation approach is receiving approbation everywhere, with a major portion of the global trade being encompassed by Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs). The Asian region is not an exception to this growing process of sub-regionalism. In recent years, Asia has witnessed a steady move towards sustained regional economic integration with the primary focus on sub-regional cooperation. In this region, the major integration initiatives include ASEAN, SAARC, and BIMSTEC among others. Thus, it can be held that a new trend has come up in the context of the emerging global order in which regionalism has come up to be a more comprehensive, open, and multi-dimensional phenomenon than before (Chakraborti, 2008). In this backdrop, BIMSTEC has surfaced as a relatively young sub-regional organization in the domain of the transnational political financial market.
Establishment of BIMSTEC

It was Thailand which first put forward the idea of establishing a sub-regional association in the Bay of Bengal zone. Thailand, being a developed economy of the ASEAN region, was looking towards expanding its economic relations with the SAARC countries. Hence, Thailand, in its efforts towards sub-regional cooperation under its LWP, backed the concept of the Bay of Bengal Community and enhanced its relations with the Indian subcontinent. In 1994, the then Deputy Foreign Minister of Thailand, Surin Pitsuwan came up with an idea towards establishing a ‘Growth Triangle’ between India, Sri Lanka and Thailand in the Andaman basin region. But, that proposal did not materialize because the dynamics of the Cold War unavoidably strained relations between India and Thailand. India used to be suspicious about Thailand and regarded it as an inseparable part of the US-led strategic alliance which was unfavourable to India’s pursuits in her neighbouring region. In contrast, India pursued the Non-alignment policy and maintained close relations with the Soviet bloc which was seen to be identical with anti-Americanism. But, the situation has changed after the approval and implementation of the ‘New Economic Policy’ and the then Indian Prime Minister the late P.V. Narasimha Rao’s subsequent visit to Thailand and other ASEAN countries in 1993 (Ram, 2007; Jha, 2009, p. 162).

Later, yet again, in 1996, Supachai Panitchpakdi, the then Deputy Foreign Minister of Thailand paid a visit to India including her neighbouring countries and discussed the outline of the founding of a sub-regional grouping transcending both the regions. Immediately, India responded positively on the condition that cooperation was to be of a solely economic nature. India conceded to this offer for two pressing reasons. Firstly, despite having completed two decades of existence by 1996, SAARC had not been able to take off as a meaningful framework for enhancing regional cooperation. The political baggage among member countries and other factors have thwarted the achieving of any remarkable progress within this region. Secondly, India had huge potential for economic benefits in the ASEAN region and it has been fostering close ties with countries of the ASEAN region since 1992 under the umbrella of its ‘Look East Policy’ (Das, 1997; Singh, 1999). Therefore, these factors have prompted India to take part in a sub-regional bloc involving a powerful ASEAN country i.e., Thailand (Michael, 2013).

On 6th June 1997, following a string of inter-ministerial discussions, the Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand initiated a sub-regional grouping
through the ‘Bangkok Declaration’ in Bangkok at the Ministerial level and named the grouping as BIST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand - Economic Cooperation), taking the first letters of the four countries’ names (Declaration on the Establishment of BIST-EC, 1997). The primary aim behind the formation of the BIST-EC grouping was to boost socio-economic cooperation among these four countries. Myanmar got observer status at its inaugural Meeting and later it was incorporated into this alignment as a full member at the Special Ministerial Meeting organized in Bangkok on 22nd December 1997. Subsequently, the organization was rechristened as BIMST-EC (Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand- Economic Cooperation) (Special Ministerial Meeting, 1997). The rationales for selecting all these five countries were geographical contiguity and economic complementarities among them. Nepal was given an observer status at the second Ministerial Meeting which took place in Dhaka in December 1998. Afterwards, Nepal along with Bhutan was admitted as a full member during the Sixth Ministerial Meeting in February 2004 at Phuket, Thailand. Thus, the grouping has now seven members (Upreti, 2007; Jha, 2009, p. 166). In 2004, the organization was institutionalized to Summit level. During the First Summit in Bangkok on 31st July 2004, without disturbing the alphabetical order of the grouping’s acronym, it was renamed as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a thematic name giving scope to other Bay of Bengal littoral countries to join into this grouping (Khan, 2007, pp. 1-2; Muni, 2014).

BIMSTEC as a Bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia

BIMSTEC lies at the crossroads of South Asia and Southeast Asia. It encompasses 1.5 billion people and constitutes around 22 percent of the world’s population, having a shared GDP of over US$ 2.7 trillion, with a considerable amount of complementarities (MEA, Govt. of India, 2016). Since most of the BIMSTEC countries lie in areas bordering the Bay of Bengal, it can be a potential hub to prop up regional cooperation in Asia. Furthermore, BIMSTEC has the potential to revive the connectivity lost in the region under the influence of colonization (Chand, 2014). In the opinion of a prominent scholar, “BIMSTEC can acquire a profile larger than SAARC if it acts as a bridge between the more inward-oriented South Asia and the more outward-oriented Southeast and East Asia” (Kaul, 2006, p. 315). Therefore, BIMSTEC can excel over both the SAARC and the ASEAN by its potential of connecting the two important regions of Asia. As well, BIMSTEC would draw the attention of the global community towards the emerging Bay of Bengal community as a distinctive arena of cooperation and
collaboration with respect to economic and maritime activities. According to a scholar, BIMSTEC’s lesser size in contrast to ASEAN or APEC would make it more fitting and practicable in joining two emerging markets (Kundu, 2014, p. 208). In view of another scholar, its wider membership would certainly help BIMSTEC to bridge the disproportion between SAARC and ASEAN (Kaul, 2006, p. 316).

In fact, the name of BIMSTEC was altered to the “Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation” in the first BIMSTEC Summit in Thailand on July 31, 2004, for generating a huge momentum in the course of multifaceted integration in the region. The developments in the region like endorsement of a free trade deal, commitment of India, Sri Lanka and Thailand towards trade liberalization and admittance of Bhutan and Nepal to FTA etc., could lead to surfacing of a single dovetailing common market of two billion people (Yahya, 2005). With this as a setting, it can be asserted that the BIMSTEC as a sub-regional mechanism has enough potential to facilitate cooperation between the member countries of the two sub-regional groupings, SAARC and ASEAN. Figure 4.1 shows the map of the BIMSTEC member countries.
BIMSTEC Priority Sectors

Basically BIMSTEC, a sector-driven cooperative alliance, differs from other groupings in its dynamism. The main objective of establishing such a grouping was to “harness regional resources and geographical advantages for achieving accelerated growth through mutual cooperation in different areas of common interests by mitigating the onslaught of globalization and by utilizing regional resources and geographical advantages” (BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2015).

At the outset, during the 2nd Ministerial Meeting in November 1998 at Dhaka, the member countries have identified six sectors. These sectors are mainly economic in nature and are called primary sectors. Each Sector is led by one member country. These sectors comprise: Trade and Investment under Bangladesh, Transport and Communication under India, Energy under Myanmar, Tourism under India, Technology under Sri Lanka, and Fisheries under Thailand.

Later, after the 8th Ministerial Meeting in Dhaka in 2005, seven more sectors were added. Consequently, the number of priority sectors rose from 6 to 13. The new seven sectors deal with social and security issues. These are: Agriculture (Myanmar), Public Health (Thailand), Poverty Alleviation (Nepal), Counter-Terrorism & Transnational Crime (India), Environment & Natural Disaster Management (India), Culture (Bhutan), and People-to-People Contacts (Thailand).

Furthermore, in 2009, at the Twelfth Ministerial Meeting in Naypyidaw, Myanmar, one more sector was incorporated as the 14th priority area of cooperation, namely, Climate Change (Bangladesh).

As a result, the number of priority sectors among member countries now became 14 (Michael, 2013; BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2015).

Objectives and Principles of BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC was created with the primary objective of rousing collaboration among its member countries for their economic development and prosperity. BIMSTEC is aimed at having its own Free Trade Area by the year 2017 (ADB Institute, 2015). Since its inception, the
BIMSTEC has focussed upon promoting trade and investment in addition to establishing harmony and solidarity in the region. The Bangkok Declaration on the Establishment of BIMSTEC, Bangkok on 6th June 1997, has pronounced the aims and purposes of BIMSTEC which are described in the following manner (Declaration on the Establishment of BIST-EC, 1997):

1. Building up an enabling environment for fast economic development.
2. Stepping up economic growth and social progress in the sub-region through joint actions.
3. Boosting active collaboration and mutual assistance on subjects of common interest in economic, social, technical and scientific fields.
4. Offering aid and support to each other through training and research facilities in the educational, professional and technical spheres.
5. Cooperating more effectually in joint efforts that are steadfast to, and corresponding to, national development plans of member states.
6. Preserving intimate and valuable cooperation with existing international and regional organizations with analogous targets and tenacities.
7. Cooperating in projects more productively on a sub-regional scale and making best use of existing synergies.

Furthermore, the basic principles enshrined in the 1997 Bangkok declaration of BIMSTEC are:

a. “Cooperation within BIMSTEC will be based on respect for the principle of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, and political independence, no-interference in internal affairs, peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit.

b. Cooperation within BIMSTEC will constitute an addition to and not be a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation involving the Member States”.

It is worth mentioning here that these fundamental principles are likely to guide the functioning of and cooperation among the member countries within BIMSTEC. In addition, these principles direct the activities of the organization.

Besides, BIMSTEC has certain specific objectives which have been identified by the scholars as follows (Upreti, 2007):
• Acceleration of the pace of development in the region for the purpose of attaining the twin objectives of economic growth and human development through multilateral efforts centred upon codes of equality and partnership.

• Development of the available pool of resources in the region for mutual benefits and development.

• Exchange of scientific and technological knowledge with an objective to enrich proficiencies of member countries.

• Establishment of better linkages between regional countries for facilitating mutual cooperation in various arenas.

• Promotion of trade and investment in the region by building up appropriate infrastructural facilities for that purpose.

• And, finally promotion of mutually beneficial linkages and correlation with the other similar organizations and institutions.

Apart from this, the BIMSTEC can serve the following purposes (Upreti, 2007):

❖ Opening up of new avenues of regional and sub-regional economic cooperation.

❖ Helping in joint exploration of maritime resources, and development of regional transport system like the Asian highway and railway networks.

❖ Lessening extra-regional economic dependence and enhancing South-South Cooperation by triggering cooperation at the sub-regional level.

**Cooperation with Asian Development Bank (ADB)**

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) became BIMSTEC’s development partner in 2005. Its active involvement in BIMSTEC has given a novel dimension and impetus to this grouping in enhancing connectivity among member countries. This is evident from some plans and projects undertaken by the ADB covering the BIMSTEC member states. The ADB proposed cross-country road transportation connectivity (ADB, 2008). In 2006, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) extended assistance for preparation of the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS). Again, at the request of the BIMSTEC Working Group to provide assistance for implementation of the BTILS recommendations, the ADB launched a
mission in May 2011 at Dhaka, Bangladesh and held consultations with the BIMSTEC Secretariat (ADB, 2011). Further, under the leadership of ADB, an Inception Workshop on BTILS updation and the first meeting of the Expert Group on Road Development were organized in Yangon in June 2013 (MEA, GOI, 2014).

**Modus Operandi of BIMSTEC**

**Organisation Structure of the BIMSTEC.**

Figure 4.2 shows organisation structure of the BIMSTEC
BIMSTEC Mechanism

The Bangkok Declaration, 1997, urged for the establishment of the following institutional mechanisms in order to carry out the aims and purposes of BIST-EC:

Chairmanship


MEETINGS

The BIMSTEC member countries gather regularly at various forums. Each type of meeting is assigned with distinct tasks. Nevertheless, these meetings are closely interconnected to one another. The modus operandi of BIMSTEC is classified as follows (BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2016):

POLICY-MAKING BODIES: The following are policy making bodies of BIMSTEC:

1. Summit Meeting

The Summit is the supreme policy and decision making body of BIMSTEC which is made up of Heads of State or government-level delegations from member countries. To date, 3 Summit Meetings have taken place. The first Summit was held on 31st July 2004 in Bangkok, Thailand; the Second Summit was on 13th November 2008 in New Delhi, India; and the Third Summit was on 4th March 2014 in Naypyidaw, Myanmar.

2. Ministerial Meetings

It is the second highest forum in the BIMSTEC process. Ministerial Meetings are further classified into two arrangements namely, Foreign Ministerial Meetings (MM) and Trade and Economic Ministerial Meeting (TEMM).
i). Foreign Ministerial Meeting (FMM)

It is the second highest policy making body next to the Summit Meeting. Ministerial Meetings are annually hosted by the Member States based on the alphabetical order and attended by the External/Foreign ministers of the member countries. The Foreign Ministerial Meeting works as a crucial force in shaping the overall policy as well as the agenda for the BIMSTEC Leaders Summit. As of August 2017, fifteen BIMSTEC Foreign Ministerial Meetings have taken place.

ii). Trade and Economic Ministerial Meeting (TEMM)

It comprises the Trade/Economic ministers of the member countries. Trade and Economic Ministers’ Meetings are instructed to follow up and expedite the implementation of economic activities. Besides, it supervises the progress in the Trade and Investment Sector as well as FTA policy. So far, the Trade and Economic ministers of the BIMSTEC countries have assembled five times.

OPERATIONAL BODIES

The BIMSTEC operational bodies comprise the Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM) and the Senior Trade/Economic Officials' Meeting (STEOM). Permanent Secretaries of the Foreign Affairs as well as Trade and Economic Affairs are the representatives of their countries in these forums.

1. Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM)

The Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM) paves the way for the Ministerial Meeting. It consists of the Senior Officials of the Foreign Ministers from the Member States at the Foreign Secretary level. Besides, a delegate from the Ministry of Commerce/Trade is also enlisted in the delegation. The SOM assists the Ministerial Meeting in supervising and giving complete direction to the BIMSTEC activities. Hence, SOM is an extremely significant policy level body of the BIMSTEC alliance reporting eventually to the Ministerial body. As of 2017, eighteen regular SOMs have taken place (BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2017). The SOM is entrusted with the task of monitoring the progress of the BIMSTEC sectors, except Trade and Investment, and finally to report to the Foreign Ministerial Meeting.
2. Senior Trade/Economic Officials' Meeting (STEOM)

The STEOM is an operational body which consists of Senior Officials of the Trade/Commerce Ministry including a representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of each member country. This meeting precedes the Foreign Ministerial Meeting and informs to the TEMM. So far, 5 STEOM meetings have been held. The STEOM is mainly connected with cooperation in the BIMSTEC countries in the Trade and Investment Sector and its 15 sub-sectors. Further, it also deals with the tasks related to the BIMSTEC FTA Framework Agreement. At the end, STEOM communicates all its results to the TEMM.

2.1. Business Forum and Economic Forum

There are two forums under the STEOM that permit full involvement of the private sector. The first one is the Business Forum in which representatives of the private sector from the BIMSTEC countries gather and talk about several issues. The outcomes of the Business Forum are sent to the Economic Forum where the private sector holds a series of discussions with the representatives of the public sector from the BIMSTEC member states. Eventually, the results of the Economic Forum meetings are reported to the STEOM. So far, seven BIMSTEC Business Forum meetings have been held.

COORDINATING BODY: BIMSTEC Working Group (BWG) acts as the coordinating body of BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC Working Group (BWG)

BIMSTEC Working Group (BWG) is a lower tier meeting in the BIMSTEC process and consists of Ambassadors of the BIMSTEC member states or their representatives from the concerned agencies. The Chairmanship of the BWG alternates together with the Chairmanship of BIMSTEC. The BWG conducts monthly meetings on a regular basis to monitor and examine progress as well as ensure coordination among all priority sectors of BIMSTEC cooperation. The BWG reports the outcomes of the meeting to the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM). Presently, all work of the BWG is assigned to the BIMSTEC Secretariat. To date, 147 BWG meetings have been held (BIMSTEC Newsletter, 2016).
Expert Group Meeting

The lead countries of the 14 priority sectors of BIMSTEC cooperation hold expert group meetings frequently in their respective fields. The outcomes of the Expert Group Meeting are forwarded to the BWG. Later, at the end, the results are further reported to the SOM.

BIMSTEC Secretariat

After a long gap of 17 years of the existence of BIMSTEC, its Permanent Secretariat was established in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 13th September 2014 and inaugurated by the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Ambassador Sumith Nakandala, from Sri Lanka, was appointed as the first Secretary General of BIMSTEC. The establishment of the BIMSTEC Secretariat was an important milestone in BIMSTEC cooperation framework and this institution is believed to play an important role in expanding regional cooperation among countries, especially in the areas of trade and cross-border connectivity (BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2015).

BIMSTEC Think-Tanks

BIMSTEC has a network of think-tanks which comprise the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) of Bangladesh, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries (RIS) of India, Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS) of Bhutan, Centre for Economic Development and Administration (CEDA) of Nepal, Indian Studies Center of Chulalongkorn University (ISCCU) of Thailand, and Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) of Myanmar. The first preparatory meeting of the BIMSTEC policy research institutes was held in 2004 in India under the leadership of RIS. The first meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think-Tanks (BNPTT) was convened by RIS on 18-19 February, 2010 in New Delhi. The second meeting took place in Bangkok, Thailand on 8-9 October, 2015 (RIS, 2016). The third meeting was convened on 22-23 April, 2017, at the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka, Bangladesh (BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2017).
MEETINGS AND SUMMITS OF BIMSTEC

The regular and frequent holding of summits and meetings are essential for scrutiny and the review of functioning of any organization including sub-regional groupings. The meetings and summits provide a common platform for the member countries of a sub-regional grouping to discuss, deliberate and take decisions on common issues for mutual benefit. Similarly, BIMSTEC, as a young sub-regional organization, holds frequent meetings where its member countries work out concrete proposals through consensus and set future goals for realizing the present and future potentialities of the body.

Ministerial Meetings

Ministerial Meetings are the second highest policy making body of the BIMSTEC forum which takes place annually. The External/Foreign ministers of the member countries attend the meetings. To date, fifteen BIMSTEC Ministerial Meetings have been held. These meetings have been discussed below in detail.

First Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

The first Ministerial meeting took place in 1997 in Bangkok, Thailand. At the meeting, a Declaration was made for the formal launch of the Bangladesh-India-Sri Lanka-Thailand-Economic Cooperation which is to be known as BIST-EC. The ministerial Declaration titled as ‘Bangkok Declaration’ outlining principles and sectors of cooperation of the new grouping was issued at the gathering. The meeting emphasized the need for an effective utilization of existing mutual interests, common concerns, complementarities and potential of the member countries which would pave the way for friendly relations and enhanced cooperation among them. Further, it also identified certain primary areas of cooperation such as trade, investment, technological exchange, industry, transportation, infrastructure, science and technology, human resource development, energy, fisheries, agriculture, natural resources and tourism (Declaration on the Establishment of BIST-EC, 1997).
Second Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

The meeting was convened in 1998 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In this meeting, the member countries identified six core sectors of cooperation such as trade and investment, technology, transportation and communication, energy, tourism and fisheries. In each of these sectors, one member country would act as the ‘Lead Country’. Further, the member countries agreed to grant observer status to Nepal in the grouping. Besides, they expressed satisfaction regarding the progress that had been achieved towards the realization of the objectives of BIMSTEC and stressed the development of an inclusive transport network among member countries. It was also agreed to currently focus upon consolidation of the grouping rather than on its expansion. In this meeting, the decision was taken to establish the Economic Forum and Business Forum as separate tools for greater economic cooperation by enhancing private sector participation in progress of the sub-region. Moreover, the meeting embarked upon the significance of Asian Camaraderie and increasing the scope of South-South Cooperation in this era of globalization and liberalization. The meeting also endorsed to build BIMST-EC’s ties with existing financial and developmental institutions, namely, the ADB and the UNDP (Chakraborti, 2008; Michael, 2013).

Third Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

India hosted the 3rd Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC on 6th July, 2000 in New Delhi. The respective officials of the member countries graced the meeting by their presence. It was agreed to create a joint BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce to engage the private sector in the efforts at economic cooperation. The meeting emphasized on strengthening and rationalizing the institutional mechanism. In addition to that, it threw light on the need to generate trade and investment opportunities and foster cooperation in the spheres of agricultural development and disaster management. The Joint Declaration issued at the meeting mainly focussed on the ‘software’ aspects of cooperation in the areas of transport, communication and tourism. Finally, the meeting concluded with the recommendations to enhance awareness about the grouping by ensuring deep involvement of people in its functioning and to raise BIMSTEC’s image and status in the global sphere (Nanda, 2003; Chakraborti, 2008).
Fourth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

It was held on 21st December 2001 in Yangon, Myanmar, and attended by the delegates of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In this meeting, a Joint Statement was released underlining the importance of accelerating the process of economic, commercial and technical coordination on the platform of BIMSTEC. In this meeting, the member countries welcomed the formation of a Group of Experts for the early establishment of a BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA), and stressed the need for a Business Forum to strengthen the linkages with and among the Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The meeting highlighted that the progress made in the six sectors of cooperation, with the respective Action Plans, was satisfactory. The Ministers of the member states gave their consensus to adopt the BIMSTEC Logo and consolidate its website with the purpose of demonstrating the identity and activities of BIMSTEC. Furthermore, the meeting acknowledged terrorism as a global menace threatening the sovereignty, territorial integrity, economic growth, and international peace and security of this region. And finally, the Ministers of member countries urged the international community to jointly tackle these critical issues and promote economic and social progress in this region (Bajpai, 2008; Chakraborti, 2008).

Fifth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

This meeting took place in 2002 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Nepal attended as an observer in this meeting. The leaders of the member countries endorsed the convening of the Business forum and the Economic forum meeting consecutively for accelerating useful interaction between the private and public sectors. Similarly, it was agreed to conduct the Expert Group Meetings in the energy, transport, gems and jewellery and the processed foods sectors. In the context of the challenges and opportunities posed by the twin processes of globalization and liberalization, the joint statement emphasized the urgency of consultations among member states on current developments with the view to develop closer ties with other international organizations and regional groupings. At the forum, all the leaders unanimously declared the year 2004 as ‘Visit BIMSTEC Year’ and advised the member states to intensify technical cooperation and assistance; combating international terrorism; maintenance of solidarity and friendship; and exchange of information etc. (Joint Statement of the Fifth BIMSTEC Ministerial meeting, 2002).
Sixth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

It was convened in 2004 in Phuket, Thailand. All the member countries participated in this meeting. Nepal and Bhutan were admitted as new members of BIMSTEC. The meeting reviewed the progress in the six priority sectors of cooperation. Apart from recognizing the central role of the private sector in advancing BIMSTEC’s trade investment and economic cooperation, it also endorsed the formation of a Technical Support Facility to serve the BIMSTEC Working Group and to coordinate its activities. Furthermore, the leaders expressed their concern about the threat of emerging infectious diseases and vowed members to ensure an efficient combined response through information sharing, capacity building and other measures (Bajpai, 2008; Chakraborti, 2008).

Seventh Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

The 7th Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC took place in Bangkok, Thailand on 30th July 2004 along with the first BIMSTEC summit (BIMSTEC Secretariat, 2016). But, unfortunately, the researcher could not get any information regarding the activities and decisions which were taken at this Ministerial Meeting either in any book or in the organization’s website.

Eighth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

Bangladesh was the host of this Ministerial Meeting in 2005. Besides emphasizing upon the timely operation of the BIMSTEC-FTA, it was stressed towards enhancing cooperation in science and technology, information and communication technology, biotechnology as well as the development of human resources in this region. At the meeting, decisions were taken to embrace a comprehensive plan of action on poverty alleviation in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at the forthcoming ministerial meeting on poverty alleviation. The participating countries also embarked upon triggering actions in order to combat terrorism and transnational crimes, threats to public health like AIDS/HIV, SARS etc. It was also emphasized to increase cultural cooperation and people to people contacts among the member countries in the region (Joint Statement of the Eighth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, 2005).
Ninth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

This meeting took place in 2006 New Delhi, India. All the member countries participated in the gathering. A joint statement was issued affirming the importance of a Free Trade Area in this region. At the meeting, it was underlined to facilitate varied means of transport connections and expedite regional cooperation in the sectors like energy, tourism, technology, counterterrorism, fisheries, poverty alleviation, disaster management culture, agriculture, public health and people to people contacts. It was highlighted at the meeting to set up a permanent BIMSTEC secretariat and publish a monthly newsletter by the BWG. The meeting concluded with the expression of content towards BIMSTEC’s achievements till date and the undertaking of the vow to further underpin partnership within it (Joint Statement of the Ninth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, 2006).

Tenth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

It was held in New Delhi, India, on 29th August, 2008. The meeting was attended by the delegations of respective member states. At the meeting, the member-countries reiterated their commitment to pursue cooperation in numerous areas namely, trade and investment, energy, transport and communication, tourism, culture, agriculture, technology, fisheries and people to people contacts. It was emphasized by the participating nations for the speedy realization of a BIMSTEC Free Trade Area and the conclusion of negotiations on trade in goods. In the meeting, the member countries approved the Memorandum of Associations (MoAs) in the spheres of energy and climate. The leaders at the meeting expressed the hope that the draft of the BIMSTEC Convention would be finalized as soon as possible during the next BIMSTEC Summit. At the meeting, a proposal for the setting up of the BIMSTEC Energy Centre in India was approved. The meeting came to an end with the declaration to organize the next ministerial meeting in India in November 2008 (Joint Statement of the Tenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, 2008).

Eleventh Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC

This meeting took place on 12th November 2008 in New Delhi, India. It was attended by the Foreign Ministers of the BIMSTEC member states. The holding of the BIMSTEC Business Summit on 12th November 2008 in New Delhi was appreciated at the meeting and it was hoped that the Business Summit would incentivize business activities within the BIMSTEC framework. The meeting provided a platform for the member countries to exchange their
ideas and views on global issues of their common interest. The meeting came to an end with the reiteration of the commitment among the member countries to undertake all endeavours for enhancing cooperation and collaboration within the framework of BIMSTEC (Joint Statement of the Eleventh BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, 2008).

**Twelfth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC**

Myanmar hosted the 12th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting in 2009. The meeting was remarkable for the inclusion of climate change as the 14th priority area of cooperation within the BIMSTEC Framework. The meeting took note of the ongoing progress in all the priority areas of cooperation of BIMSTEC. It was also stressed among the participating countries towards enhancing cooperation in all these sectors. The meeting emphasized on achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the region by addressing the issues relating to agricultural productivity, poverty alleviation and capacity building (Joint Statement of the Twelfth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, 2009).

**Thirteenth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC**

It was convened on 22nd January 2011 in Naypyidaw, Myanmar. The chair of the meeting was U Nyan Win, the then Foreign Affairs Minister of Myanmar. Like previous meetings, this meeting also began with the approval of the report of the 15th Senior Officials Meeting which took place on 21st January 2011. The meeting concluded with an issue of a joint statement focussing on all spheres of action. At this meeting, all the participating states endorsed the significance of the BIMSTEC-FTA in stimulating trade and investment and recognized the important role of the private sector in driving economic growth within BIMSTEC. It emphasized on the early conclusion of the negotiation of the Agreements on Trade in Goods, Services and Investment. The leaders of the member countries welcomed Thailand’s offer to provide training courses on road construction and maintenance and bridge engineering as well as India’s offer to conduct training programmes on highways and ports. Regarding the tourism sector, all the member countries were called upon to contribute to their Tourism Funds and to provide their publicity material to the BIMSTEC Information Centre for effective utilization there. Similarly in the energy sector, the member countries reiterated their agreement to expedite utilization of natural gas as a clean energy source and to increase governmental and private investments and natural gas infrastructure. Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, was selected as location of the BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat and Sri
Lanka was nominated as the first secretary general of BIMSTEC. Finally, the meeting concluded with the member countries expressing their satisfaction concerning the BIMSTEC achievements thus far and welcoming Myanmar’s offer to host the 3rd BIMSTEC Summit (Joint Statement of the Thirteenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, 2011).

**Fourteenth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC**

This meeting took place along with the Third BIMSTEC Summit, and the 16th BIMSTEC Senior Officials’ Meeting on 3rd March 2014, in Naypyidaw, Myanmar. All the Foreign Ministers of the BIMSTEC member countries were present at this gathering. The formal meeting began with reviewing the progress of all the priority sectors of BIMSTEC. It was agreed among the member countries to expedite the process of the signing of various Memoranda of Association (MoA) concerning establishment of the BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat, and relating to culture, weather and climate. The meeting focussed upon enhancing cooperation in the areas of trade, connectivity, tourism, climate change, energy security, food security, human security, transnational crimes, poverty eradication, public health and people-to-people contact. They also welcomed the formation of the BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat which is expected to ensure continuity of work and provide the necessary avenues for cooperation among them. The meeting finally came to end with the delivery of assurance among the member countries for continuing and furthering cooperation for the common benefit under the aegis of BIMSTEC (DoC, GOS, 2015).

**Fifteenth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC**

Nepal hosted the 15th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting together with 18th BIMSTEC Senior Officials’ Meeting on 10-11 August 2017. All the member countries participated in this gathering. The chair of the meeting was Krishna Bahadur Mahara, the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs of Nepal. Like previous meetings, this session also reviewed and ratified the reports of the 17th and 18th BIMSTEC Senior Officials’ Meetings which had taken place on 7th February 2017 and 10th August 2017 in Kathmandu respectively. At this meeting, the ministers of member states have agreed to take appropriate measures to clinch a Free Trade Area, carry out the Paris accord on climate change and enhance cooperation to cope with terrorism. In addition, the member countries reiterated the need for collaborative exertions to boost extensive regional cooperation in the region. The meeting approved the appointment of Ambassador Shahidul Islam, from Bangladesh, as the second Secretary General of
BIMSTEC. Finally, the meeting came to an end with the wholehearted approval of Nepal’s offer to host the 16th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting and 4th BIMSTEC Summit (MEA, GOI, 2017).

BIMSTEC Summits

So far, three BIMSTEC Summits have been organized with the aim of directing the functioning of BIMSTEC towards achieving the goals and targets for which the BIMSTEC grouping was designed and established. The achievements including the proceedings of these summits have been discussed below:

First Summit of BIMSTEC

The first BIMSTEC summit meeting took place on 31st July 2004 in Bangkok, Thailand. The representatives including the heads of government of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and the President of Sri Lanka were present at this gathering. In this meeting, without disturbing the alphabetical order of the grouping’s acronym, the grouping has been given a new name, i.e. Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and further it was elevated to Summit level. At this forum, the member countries committed themselves to the primary goals and principles of BIMSTEC. In addition, they also decided to speed up the early conclusion of the Free Trade Area so as to trigger the scale of trade and investment within BIMSTEC. In the meeting, it was finally decided to proactively promote connectivity in the region and make the organization more efficient and productive (BIMSTEC Summit Declaration, 2004).

Second Summit of BIMSTEC

India hosted the second summit meeting of BIMSTEC on November 13, 2008. It was attended by the leaders of Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, Sri Lanka and, Bangladesh. The participating countries discussed various issues pertaining to the energy sector, the environmental and disaster management sectors and, the transport and communication sectors. They recognized the various achievements of BIMSTEC with respect to setting up of the Energy Centre, the Weather and Climate Centre, and the Cultural Industries Commission. The member countries also agreed to continue their cooperation in the above mentioned spheres including poverty alleviation and food security measures. It was urged for prompting follow up actions on decisions taken within the BIMSTEC setting. The
summit came to an end with the affirmation among the participating member countries to expedite the process of institutionalization for better coordination (Second BIMSTEC Summit Declaration, 2008).

**Third Summit of BIMSTEC**

The third and the latest summit of the BIMSTEC was held on 4th March 2014 in Naypyidaw, Myanmar. The meeting was graced by the presence of the heads of the governments of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The theme of this summit was “Partnership for Harmony and Prosperity”. A wide range of issues including rules and implementation of the BIMSTEC- FTA, tackling poverty through action plans, contending with International Terrorism, and Illicit Drug Trafficking, and instituting the BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat, all were taken into consideration. The participating countries reiterated their commitment to foster cooperation and collaboration in the areas of tourism, fisheries, agronomy, environmental safeguard and sustainable development and capacity building in disaster management. At this meeting, the leaders highlighted the importance of BIMSTEC cooperation mechanism in rejuvenating and triggering the growth in this region by way of a close partnership (Third BIMSTEC Summit Declaration, 2014).

**OTHER MEETINGS**

Aside from Summit and Ministerial Meetings, the BIMSTEC countries in order to enhance the grouping’s profile as a sub-regional economic initiative, on international forums, for the first time hosted outreach summit.

**The BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit**

India hosted the joint BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit in Goa on 16th October 2016, under the auspices of the Eighth Annual BRICS summit which was held on 15th-16th October 2016 under the Chairmanship of India. The head of governments of all BIMSTEC member countries attended the joint meeting at the invitation of the India. They viewed that the joint summit between these two groupings would provide ample opportunities for debate and deliberation on common issues affecting the globe. The summit is also viewed as an opportunity for the BIMSTEC members to enhance the group’s visibility on issues ranging from combating terrorism to promoting tourism. Moreover, it indicates that India is becoming aware of the potential of BIMSTEC as a more viable alternative to SAARC (D'Ambrogio,
The leaders at the meeting resolved to collectively work against the predicaments such as terrorism by consolidating their intelligence agencies and law enforcement organizations (Sajjanhar, 2016). The leaders who attended the meeting gave their consensus to enhance closer cooperation on certain crucial issues like collaboration in disaster management through joint exercises, deepening cooperation in agriculture, fisheries, tourism, energy and public health. In addition, the meeting called upon the member countries to work towards the BIMSTEC Trade Facilitation Agreement and to accelerate the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement talks. It is also decided to initiate talks on BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and expand BIMSTEC Energy Trade cooperation. The meeting was finally acclaimed as a great endeavour on the part of India to bring together two vibrant groupings on the same platform and initiate informal talks and debate over crucial matters affecting the region. The first ever joint meeting between two regional groupings i.e., BRICS and the BIMSTEC would help to converge and strengthen these two groupings in their areas of functioning. In addition, the collaboration between these two viable groupings would lead to the emergence of a dynamic region (PIB, GOI, 2016).

To sum up, it can be said that the BIMSTEC has emerged as an efficient and effective tool to enhance its members’ economic growth and connectivity. In the current period, BIMSTEC has become more dynamic in accelerating cooperation among the regional countries through the implementation of the agreements on trade in goods and services, transport, communication, energy, and tourism. It has also been a stepping stone for closure ASEAN-India connectivity as well as for South Asian — Southeast Asian connectivity. Furthermore, BIMSTEC acts as a catalyst for attaining development and progress in India’s remote northeast region and Myanmar’s western regions (ADB Institute, 2015). It has huge potential to spearhead economic cooperation and spawn a stable and prosperous region. Again, the growing significance of BIMSTEC in the present times lies in its ability to open up India’s North Eastern States’ economies towards the global economy and reduce the dependency of the regional small countries on China and the West. Hence, in this context, it can be concluded that the BIMSTEC has evolved as a viable and relevant sub-regional cooperation mechanism in driving the regional economy and establishing peace and security in the Asian region.
Therefore, let us have a look at the performance of BIMSTEC in the primary sectors of cooperation in the succeeding chapter.

References


