

State Minister for Foreign Affairs , Vasantha Senanayake was a panelist at the discussion on 'Towards a Bay of Bengal Community: Development, Growth & Security'. The panel was moderated by Baijayant Panda, Member of Parliament of India, and other speakers included Preeti Saran, Secretary, (East), Ministry of External Affairs, and Shankar Das Bairagi, Foreign Secretary, Nepal.

Opening the Panel Discussion Baijayant Panda noted that BIMSTEC serves as a bridge between SAARC & ASEAN nations. It is a platform to fulfill key foreign policy objectives. The growth rate of the BIMSTEC nations are 6%. These nations constitute 2.6% of global trade.

In his opening remarks Minister Vasantha Senanayake stated that the Bay of Bengal region is the least integrated regions in the world and that BIMSTEC has the potential to pool in strengths from both South and Southeast Asia. He further said that as much as we have become competitive in the asian century, we need physical connectivity, institutional connectivity, information connectivity and trade and investment facilitators to integrated each group in the bay of Bengal region. He stressed that there are both security and non security threats in the region that has to be addressed through a strategic framework. India can play a vital role in to succeed in this task by spearheading its role to take BIMSTEC forward. Freedom of navigation & rule based order is in the long term interest of the region. This can facilitate the stability and security cooperation between BIMSTEC and with IORA & IMO.

The Foreign Secretary of Nepal said that, BIMSTEC has great potential to realise high growth trajectory of the region and contribute towards an 'asian century'. Key areas of priorities include trade, energy and security. Connectivity is at the core of BIMSTEC and investment, trade, infrastructure, people to people connectivity should be a priority. The pace of cooperation has unfortunately not been satisfactory. Some barriers has restricted regional integration. BIMSTEC connects India's neighbourhood policy with act east policy. It is a focal point of India's foreign and economic outreach strategy. India wants to include its neighbours in its growth story. Therefore, India remains committed to BIMSTEC.

Minister Senanayake responding to a question raised by the audience noted that the main difficulty is that each country is at different stage of economic growth. The need is to think of BIMSTEC beyond borders. BIMSTEC should emulate the ASEAN model of betterment of the entire member countries and India needs to play a greater role.

