

Summaries of
Monthly Researchers' Meet (MRM)
[April 2025]

8 April 2025 [Day 1 of 2]

**Shaping Regional Cooperation: Chief Adviser
Muhammad Yunus's Participation in the 6th BIMSTEC
Summit**



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Summary of Discussion:

The Monthly Researcher's Meet (MRM) held on 8 April 2025 at the BIISS Auditorium centred on a reflective discussion titled ***"Shaping Regional Cooperation: Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus's Participation in the 6th BIMSTEC Summit."*** The deliberation examined the implications of Dr Muhammad Yunus's participation in the 6th Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Summit, held in Bangkok on 3-4 April 2025, and its potential to renew momentum in regional diplomacy across South and Southeast Asia.

Participants analysed the evolving nature of BIMSTEC's institutional architecture and reflected on Bangladesh's renewed engagement within the organisation under Dr Yunus's leadership, positioning it as a key driver of inclusive and pragmatic regionalism.

A New Vision for Regional Cooperation

Discussions began by situating Dr Yunus's participation within the broader context of Bangladesh's foreign policy orientation. His emphasis on social business, inclusivity, and youth empowerment was seen as introducing a fresh normative layer to regional diplomacy, which is one rooted in human-centric development rather than purely geopolitical calculation. Participants highlighted that Dr Yunus's proposed *BIMSTEC Youth Festival* embodies the essence of soft power diplomacy, capable of nurturing a shared identity among the member states and enhancing people-to-people connectivity across the Bay of Bengal. This proposal was viewed as a reflection of Bangladesh's evolving diplomatic philosophy, which is one that integrates moral leadership with developmental pragmatism to bridge the gap between South and Southeast Asia.

Between Aspirations and Pragmatism

The discussion then turned to the outcomes of the 6th BIMSTEC Summit itself. Several participants noted that the meeting signalled a shift toward pragmatic cooperation, balancing aspirational rhetoric with actionable initiatives. Yet, questions were raised about BIMSTEC's institutional maturity and its capacity to respond effectively to complex transnational challenges such as climate change, digital transformation, and sustainable economic growth. While some argued that Dr Yunus's moral authority could catalyse institutional renewal within BIMSTEC, others cautioned that entrenched political and structural limitations continue to hinder consensus-based decision-making. The forum's persistent challenge, it was noted, lies in translating visionary declarations into sustained regional action.

Bangladesh's Bridge-Building Diplomacy

Attention then focused on Bangladesh's strategic role within BIMSTEC under the current leadership. The discussion acknowledged that Dr Yunus's engagement reaffirms Bangladesh's long-standing aspiration to act as a connector between South and Southeast Asia. Participants argued that the country's reputation as a responsible, development-oriented actor allows it to exercise quiet but effective influence in promoting cooperation in areas like trade facilitation, climate adaptation, and digital connectivity. Yet, maintaining this leadership requires careful balancing: leveraging Bangladesh's moral capital while safeguarding its strategic autonomy amid shifting Indo-Pacific power dynamics.

The Role of Soft Power and Youth Diplomacy

The conversation broadened to explore the transformative potential of youth-oriented and non-state-led diplomacy. Participants agreed that soft-power tools such as cultural exchange, youth engagement, and social entrepreneurship could complement traditional statecraft in fostering deeper regional cohesion. These instruments, they observed, align naturally with Dr Yunus's long-standing advocacy for bottom-up, inclusive development and could reinvigorate BIMSTEC's people-centred dimension. Such approaches were seen not only as diplomatic assets but as mechanisms to embed regional cooperation in societal consciousness beyond bureaucratic circles.

Reimagining BIMSTEC's Future

As the discussion concluded, attention turned to the question of whether BIMSTEC can serve as the primary vehicle for regional collaboration or whether smaller, issue-specific coalitions may prove more effective in the evolving geopolitical landscape. Participants recognised the importance of adaptability, suggesting that flexible cooperation models could enhance efficiency without undermining multilateral cohesion. The session closed with a shared reflection: Bangladesh's proactive leadership under Dr Yunus's stewardship has injected renewed vitality into BIMSTEC's agenda, demonstrating how soft power, moral credibility, and inclusive vision can together shape a more resilient and cooperative regional order. The discussion came to a conclusion that Bangladesh's engagement in BIMSTEC represents not merely diplomatic participation, but a broader effort to redefine the very character of regionalism: anchored in innovation, inclusivity, and the pursuit of collective progress across the Bay of Bengal.

This was part of a presentation in the in-house MRM, which was chaired by the Director General, BIISS. The Discussant for this event was Dr Benuka Ferdousi, Senior Research Fellow, BIISS.

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27 April 2025 [Day 2 of 2]

Rohingya Repatriation: Progress and Prospects



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Summary of Discussion:

The Monthly Researcher's Meet (MRM) held on 27 April 2025 at the BISS Auditorium centred on a critical and multifaceted discussion titled ***"Rohingya Repatriation: Progress and Prospects."*** The session examined the evolving dynamics of the Rohingya crisis, assessing both the modest steps taken toward repatriation and the entrenched obstacles that continue to hinder durable solutions. Against the backdrop of Myanmar's ongoing internal turmoil, participants reflected on how shifting political realities, fragile governance, and regional power recalibrations are reshaping the contours of the repatriation debate and Bangladesh's diplomatic options.

A Crisis Entrenched in Instability

Discussions began with a candid appraisal of the situation in Myanmar, where escalating clashes between the military junta and ethnic armed groups have fractured state authority, particularly in Rakhine State. Participants agreed that this instability has eroded the institutional capacity necessary for any credible repatriation process. The collapse of administrative control, coupled with the absence of enforceable international guarantees, was identified as the central impediment to ensuring safe, voluntary, and dignified returns. It was also noted that the ongoing violence has deepened mistrust among displaced Rohingya populations, who remain sceptical of the promises extended by Naypyidaw. The conversation underscored that without visible improvements in Myanmar's domestic conditions, repatriation remains a distant aspiration rather than an imminent possibility.

Diplomatic Efforts and the Limits of Engagement

Attention then turned to the limited diplomatic engagements between Bangladesh and Myanmar, including recent bilateral dialogues and pilot repatriation attempts. These initiatives, though reflective of Dhaka's persistent diplomatic outreach, were assessed as largely symbolic in nature, lacking tangible progress on the ground. The absence of an international verification mechanism and the continued ambiguity surrounding citizenship and rights guarantees were identified as critical barriers. Participants debated whether Bangladesh should continue relying on bilateral mechanisms or actively push for greater internationalisation of the issue through forums such as the United Nations and ASEAN. The prevailing sentiment suggested that while bilateral diplomacy remains necessary to keep channels open, it must be complemented by multilateral advocacy to sustain global pressure and accountability.

Balancing Security, Diplomacy, and Humanity

As the dialogue evolved, attention shifted toward Bangladesh's domestic and regional balancing act. Managing the security and humanitarian pressures of hosting nearly a million Rohingya refugees while preserving diplomatic equanimity was recognised as one of Dhaka's most delicate policy challenges. Participants acknowledged that the Rohingya issue has transformed from a bilateral concern into a test case for regional humanitarian governance. They emphasised that any viable repatriation framework must rest on three non-negotiable pillars: voluntariness, safety, and dignity. Concerns were voiced over the potential drift toward "forced voluntarism" if international scrutiny diminishes, reinforcing the need for sustained media attention, advocacy, and regional coordination.

Pathways Forward: Between Realism and Hope

In assessing future prospects, participants adopted a tone of pragmatic realism tempered by cautious optimism. While Myanmar's internal conditions remain deeply unfavourable, regional shifts involving particularly growing ASEAN engagement with

humanitarian issues and renewed global focus on forced displacement could open strategic windows for Bangladesh. Some discussants highlighted opportunities for Dhaka to leverage its diplomatic credibility and moral standing to champion more innovative repatriation mechanisms, such as third-party monitoring or mediation frameworks. Others argued that Bangladesh's focus should also include parallel strategies for long-term management of the refugee situation, encompassing education, vocational training, and social cohesion within host communities.

The Unresolved Test of Regional Cooperation

The session concluded with reflections on the broader regional implications of the Rohingya crisis. Participants agreed that the repatriation stalemate embodies the limitations of South and Southeast Asian regionalism in addressing cross-border humanitarian challenges. Despite Bangladesh's sustained advocacy, progress remains slow, constrained by geopolitical rivalries and the absence of regional enforcement mechanisms. Yet, the discussion reaffirmed that Bangladesh's leadership in maintaining principled diplomacy anchored in humanitarian norms and regional dialogue, continues to carry significant moral and strategic weight. The MRM discussion thus left a sobering but constructive conclusion: the path to Rohingya repatriation will be long, contingent, and fraught with political complexities, but sustained diplomatic and moral engagement remains Bangladesh's most powerful tool in keeping the issue alive within the regional and global setting.

This was part of a presentation in the in-house MRM, which was chaired by the Director General, BIISS. The Discussant for this event was Dr Benuka Ferdousi, Senior Research Fellow, BIISS.