

Joint Ministerial Statement of the 12th Mekong - Ganga Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting

1. The 12th Mekong - Ganga Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting (12th MGC FMM) was held on 16th July 2023 in Bangkok, Thailand in a hybrid format. The Meeting was preceded by the 13th MGC Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on the sidelines of ASEAN FMM on 1st August 2022.
2. The Meeting was co-chaired by H.E. Mr. Saleumxay Kommasith, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lao PDR and H.E. Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India, and attended by H.E. Bundit Sopheacha Dr. Sok Siphana, Senior Advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia; H.E. Mr. Than Swe, Union Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar; H.E. Mr. Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand and H.E. Mr. Bui Thanh Son, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (virtually).
3. The Ministers reaffirmed the commitment of Mekong - Ganga Cooperation (MGC) to deepen cooperation among the six countries in the ten identified areas of tourism, culture, education, public health and traditional medicine, agriculture and allied sectors, transport and communication, Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs), water resources management, science and technology, skill development and capacity building with an aim to promote socio-economic development of the MGC countries, narrow the development gap among countries, support the ASEAN Community building, facilitate the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and strengthen the bond of friendship among MGC countries.

4. The Ministers noted the progress of cooperation under MGC since its inception in 2000 including the celebration of 20th anniversary in 2021 and commended the advancement of cooperation among MGC countries both bilaterally and under the MGC framework that has aided the socio-economic development of the region, enhanced connectivity and further strengthened the centuries - old civilisational ties. To give a further boost to this momentum, they agreed to further streamline the functioning of MGC under various areas of cooperation through the system of the lead country for each area of cooperation. **(Annex A)***

5. The Ministers reviewed progress in cooperation under MGC Plan of Action 2019 - 2022 in the prioritized sectors of MGC and welcomed the recent efforts for its implementation, including in the fields of preservation of historical and cultural monuments, eradication of communicable and non-communicable diseases, and tourism promotion. The Ministers, however, noted that the full implementation of MGC Plan of Action 2019 - 2022, which provided a good road map to further strengthen the cooperation, has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 - 2022 and agreed to extend it for another two years till 2024. The Ministers agreed that the future Plan of Action would emphasise on selected themes or areas to focus on each year, which are in line with the MGC countries' current needs.

Development Partnership

6. The Ministers welcomed India's assistance to Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam under the MGC Quick Impact Projects (QIP) Scheme and noted that since its inception in 2015-16, 78 projects have been completed so far at a cost of USD 3.9 million and 27 projects are under implementation. The Ministers also welcomed the increase of QIPs from 5 to 10 for all concerned countries.

7. The Ministers appreciated the Lines of Credit (LoC) extended by India over the years to the region. Under the bilateral track, India has been extending several Lines of Credit to CLMV countries worth about USD 1.76 billion for various projects in areas such as hydro power and water resource development, infrastructure development, digital connectivity, rural electrification, irrigation, and installation of transmission lines.

8. The Ministers stressed their commitment to strengthening cooperation on sustainable water resources utilization and management and welcomed the engagement between the MGC and Mekong River Commission (MRC) to enhance cooperation on water related issues in areas such as capacity building for flood and drought management, technical cooperation, exchanges of experience, knowledge, information and best practices in integrated and sustainable and transboundary water resources management, sanitation, irrigation, and fisheries etc.

Trade and Investment

9. The Ministers agreed to further deepen and expand trade and investment among MGC countries, including the early review of ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA). The Ministers agreed to expedite the implementation of projects identified under the Project Development Fund for CLMV countries in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam for collaboration with and further investment by the Indian private sector.

10. The Ministers reiterated their commitment to implement joint measures to enhance trade cooperation including by organizing an MGC Business Forum, with participation from stakeholders, in India, focusing on MSMEs as agreed during the 11th MGC FMM to ensure MSMEs'

increased participation in the regional and global supply chains. They also agreed to set up the MGC Business Council, with a view to promoting inclusive participation of Businesses in the MGC process and driving economic agenda with concrete actions to respond to the post-COVID-19 recovery challenges. **(Annex B)****

11. The Ministers looked forward to enhancing cooperation for a fair, transparent and secure digital economy among MGC countries through capacity-building activities, Fintech cooperation, organizing tech related events such as hackathons for youth in MGC countries and business matching events, among others.

Connectivity

12. The Ministers underscored their commitment to continue enhancing connectivity among MGC countries and expressed support for cooperation projects to develop sustainable and resilient infrastructure for inclusive growth in MGC countries including India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and its eastward extension, to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam as noted at the 17th ASEAN – India Summit on 12 November 2020, and Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Projects aimed at strengthening physical and people-to-people connectivity in the MGC region with its focus on East-West Economic Corridor.

13. The Ministers shared their views regarding the importance of synergizing the MGC with other sub-regional cooperation frameworks in the Mekong sub-region including the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025, its successor documents, and connectivity initiatives of other sub-regional and inter-regional frameworks such as BIMSTEC Masterplan for Connectivity in line with the “Connecting the Connectivities” approach. The Ministers also recognised the importance

of synergising the MGC with the Ayeyawady – Chao Phraya – Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) as a connector to bridge and align the strategic interests of MGC countries and partners. The Ministers welcomed India’s participation as Development Partner of ACMECS and the adoption of the Joint Development Plan between ACMECS and India. The Ministers also agreed to enhance air and maritime transport connectivity among MGC countries.

14. While embracing the effort in developing hard infrastructure connectivity, Ministers also recognised the importance of building soft connectivity infrastructure in the region, focusing on grasping the opportunities brought about by digital transformation, promoting ICT-driven projects such as e-Commerce, e-Government, and digital trade, addressing the digital gap among the MGC countries and promoting digital literacy, in building communities that are resilient, innovative, competitive, well-connected and sustainable through digital technologies in the Mekong - Ganga region.

15. The Ministers agreed to promote digital connectivity among MGC countries through fostering exchange of best practices, capacity building as well as by exploring city to city partnerships through the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) and India’s Smart Cities Mission to help build cities that are resilient, innovative, well-connected, and technically advanced.

Education, Skill development and Capacity Building, S&T and Agriculture

16. The Ministers appreciated the ongoing cooperation in the education sector and India’s contribution towards capacity building and human resource development in CLMV countries by offering scholarships and

building educational infrastructure. Noting the launch of ASEAN-India Network of Universities last year, the Ministers agreed that it would further strengthen cooperation and understanding among MGC countries in the field of education.

17. Recognising the role of science and technology in modern society and economy, the Ministers agreed to enhance cooperation in this field under the MGC framework and also under ASEAN-India Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation, through ASEAN-India S&T Development Fund (AISTDF), which received an additional contribution of USD 5 million during the 19th ASEAN-India Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN – India Dialogue Relations in 2022. They noted that cooperation in Space sector can be explored in areas such as crop monitoring, drought assessment, water resource management, disaster prevention and preparedness, climate change response and capacity building. The Ministers also encouraged the effective utilization of 1,000 Ph.D. Fellowships for ASEAN students at Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) by Mekong countries.

18. Noting the launch of the MGC website in 2021, for branding and visibility of the MGC and to act as an information centre for various MGC activities, the Ministers noted that a joint mechanism for maintenance and updating the website is being established and stressed on developing it as a resource hub for MGC to raise public awareness and draw attention of relevant stakeholders. The Ministers noted the need for expeditious sharing of information among MGC countries on various cooperation activities, including progress of various projects.

19. Recognizing the importance of food security for MGC countries, especially under the current global uncertainties, the Ministers agreed to enhance cooperation in the field of agriculture and allied activities,

including through observation of 2023 as International Year of Millet and encouraging the private enterprises to tap the opportunity to invest in the agricultural sector, primary production, product processing and value chain creation. They noted India's offer to share experience and expertise with MGC partners about its flagship programmes such as 'Soil Health Card scheme', 'Per Drop More Crop' for efficient use of soil and water in agriculture production.

Health

20. The Ministers appreciated the mutual support between MGC countries during the fight against COVID-19 and reaffirmed the importance of continued cooperation to prevent, detect, and respond to future pandemic threats and emerging diseases, and facilitate comprehensive post-pandemic recovery. In this regard, the Ministers looked forward to enhancing cooperation and collaboration among MGC countries in the areas of scientific research, development, production and distribution of anti-viral medicines, vaccines and pharmaceutical products in an affordable and timely manner, sharing of knowledge and expertise in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic and prevention of future pandemic threats, capacity building of health care professionals, boosting capacity in the pharmaceutical sector, and public health emergency preparedness.

21. The Ministers also agreed to take forward the cooperation in the area of traditional medicine among MGC countries and looked forward to the next iteration of Workshop on the Traditional and Complementary Medicine by India for enhancing cooperation in this field.

Tourism and Cultural Cooperation

22. The Ministers reiterated their commitment to enhance cooperation through collaborative projects among MGC countries to develop smart tourism in the region to serve as a vehicle for increasing people-to-people exchanges and enhancement of mutual understanding. In this regard the Ministers instructed for early implementation of the understanding of the 11th MGC FMM for a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Mekong - Ganga Cooperation in tourism to promote tourism exchanges in response to COVID-19.

23. Appreciating India's efforts towards the restoration and preservation of cultural heritage in the region, the Ministers also looked forward to further deepening of cultural linkages among MGC countries through initiatives such as revamping of the MGC Asian Traditional Textiles Museum (ATTM) in Siem Reap, Cambodia and India's support to ASEAN Cultural Heritage List and revisiting the idea of creating the MGC cultural and religious routes for tourism industry.

24. The Ministers agreed to hold the 13th MGC FMM. The date and venue would be communicated through diplomatic channels in due course.

***Annex A – Concept Note on MGC Lead Country Mechanism**

****Annex B – Concept Note on MGC Business Council**