

INDO-PACIFIC BUSINESS FORUM

CUTS International Summary

The fourth edition of the Indo-Pacific Business Forum was organised as a virtual event on October 28-29, 2021. Over the course of multiple sessions, the Forum saw wide-ranging discussions on major issues around business and commerce in the Indo-Pacific region. CUTS International has prepared a thematic summary of the Forum's sessions.

A predominant theme of the Forum was post-pandemic recovery and the manner in which it can be charted. Various Panel discussions highlighted how, despite the debilitating costs inflicted on lives and livelihoods, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth opportunities that can and must be exploited for sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific region.

- The pandemic has put a spotlight on vulnerabilities and forced stakeholders into action. For instance, there is a fresh enthusiasm for building supply chain resilience and revamping healthcare infrastructure.
- It has accelerated existing trends like liberalisation of rules on digital commerce, and making the Indo-Pacific region a fertile ground for ushering the new digital revolution.
- The pandemic and the climate crisis have reinforced the necessity for international cooperation. Since climate change and pandemics are transboundary and cannot be mitigated without international cooperation, various Indo-Pacific multilateral initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) become relevant. These can provide platforms for ensuring that economic growth is facilitated by a framework of openness, inclusivity, and sustainability.

Following are some of the major themes discussed at the Forum:

1. TRADE & INVESTMENT

- Trade policy can be used as an instrument to protect workers' rights and improve working conditions in the Indo-Pacific region. Governments, the private sector, and industry platforms must cooperate to address inadequate labour standards in supply chains through their harmonisation with International Labour Organisation standards.
- Transparent, and catalytic investments can drive the creation of high standard and sustainable infrastructure like climate-smart transportation in developing and less developed countries. Governments must facilitate such investment by addressing challenges posed by incoherent policies, red-tapism, and unavailability of land and skilled labour.

2. LOGISTICS & SUPPLY CHAINS

- Rising costs in traditional manufacturing hubs, supply chain instability, and a surging e-commerce market, have presented India and the broader Indo-Pacific region with an opportunity to stimulate regional economic recovery through manufacturing operations and reliable freight movement.

- There is a need for integration of regional supply chains that can build on this competitive advantage through regional connectivity, efficient logistics and transportation infrastructure, including multimodal hubs and last-mile connectivity.

3. ENERGY

- Ambitious climate commitments must be converted into concrete action by governments, investors, and private players. Cost effective renewables are only the low hanging fruits.
- Concerted efforts must be made by the government and private parties to enable the upscaling of technology models. Crucial roadblocks like energy storage, sourcing of rare earths, market linkages and financial flows must be addressed to drive energy innovation across geographical boundaries.

4. DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

- Future economic growth is crucially dependent on digitisation and thus, the inclusivity of such growth will be determined by technological and digital access.
- The experience of Bangladesh and Taiwan highlights how public private partnerships can facilitate financial inclusion of people and small-medium companies through digitalisation of processes, easier customisation of services and by providing other localised solutions.
- Such endeavours can overcome various inequities caused by gender gap in digital access, the rural-urban divide, and other economic, social, and geographical barriers. However, it must also be acknowledged that technology is an enabler and not a solution in itself.

5. INNOVATION & ENTREPREURSHIP

- Digital transformation and low carbon innovation will become the twin pillars supporting the B3W or ‘Build Back Better World’ agenda. New technologies such as hyperloop and hydrogen fuel need to be incorporated to usher deep decarbonisation of industries.
- In the long term, industry efforts towards large scale process modification will help in making such technologies affordable. This can be supplemented by awareness campaigns and policy advocacy efforts. For instance, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency’s Global Partnership for Climate-Smart Infrastructure - an initiative with U.S. industry and government partners can deliver clean energy and transportation solutions to emerging markets around the world.
- Novel start-ups that are breaking the glass ceiling and envisioning out of the box, tech-based solutions must be supported by conducive ecosystems. In a world where geographies have become irrelevant, and sovereignty is paramount, regulatory bodies in the Indo-Pacific must forge a sustainable environment for start-ups.

6. HEALTHCARE

- The pandemic induced momentum in public-private collaboration in healthcare must be sustained beyond times of necessity.

- Digitisation and emerging technologies like blockchain, machine learning and the internet of things offer unparalleled opportunities to provide innovative healthcare solutions. An emphasis on telemedicine, novel care models, and the strengthening of primary and preventive healthcare can build resilient healthcare systems.