



BIMSTEC

For Prelims: [Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation](#), [Indo-Pacific Region](#), [Indian Ocean](#), [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation](#).

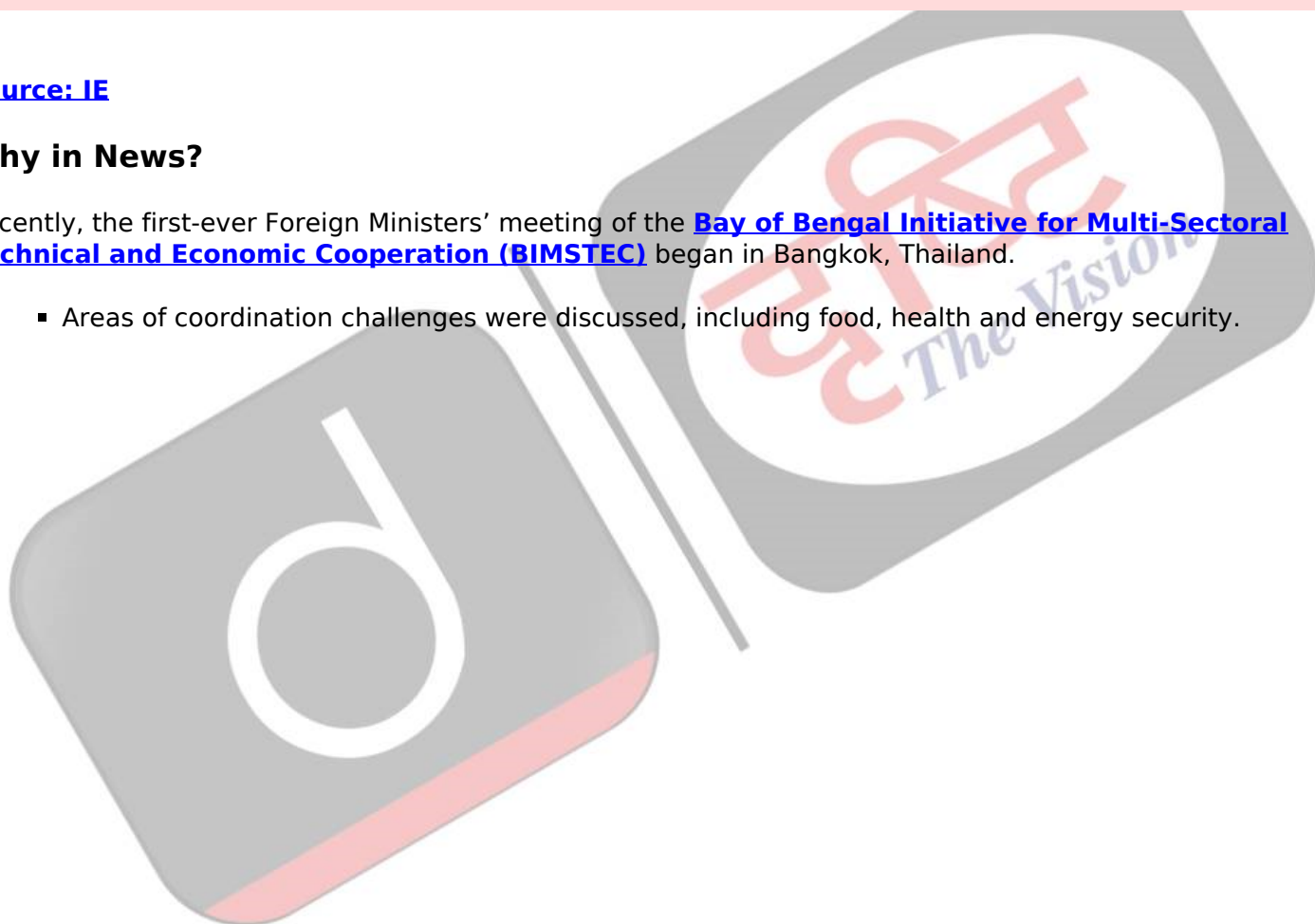
For Mains: Significance of BIMSTEC for Regional Cooperation.

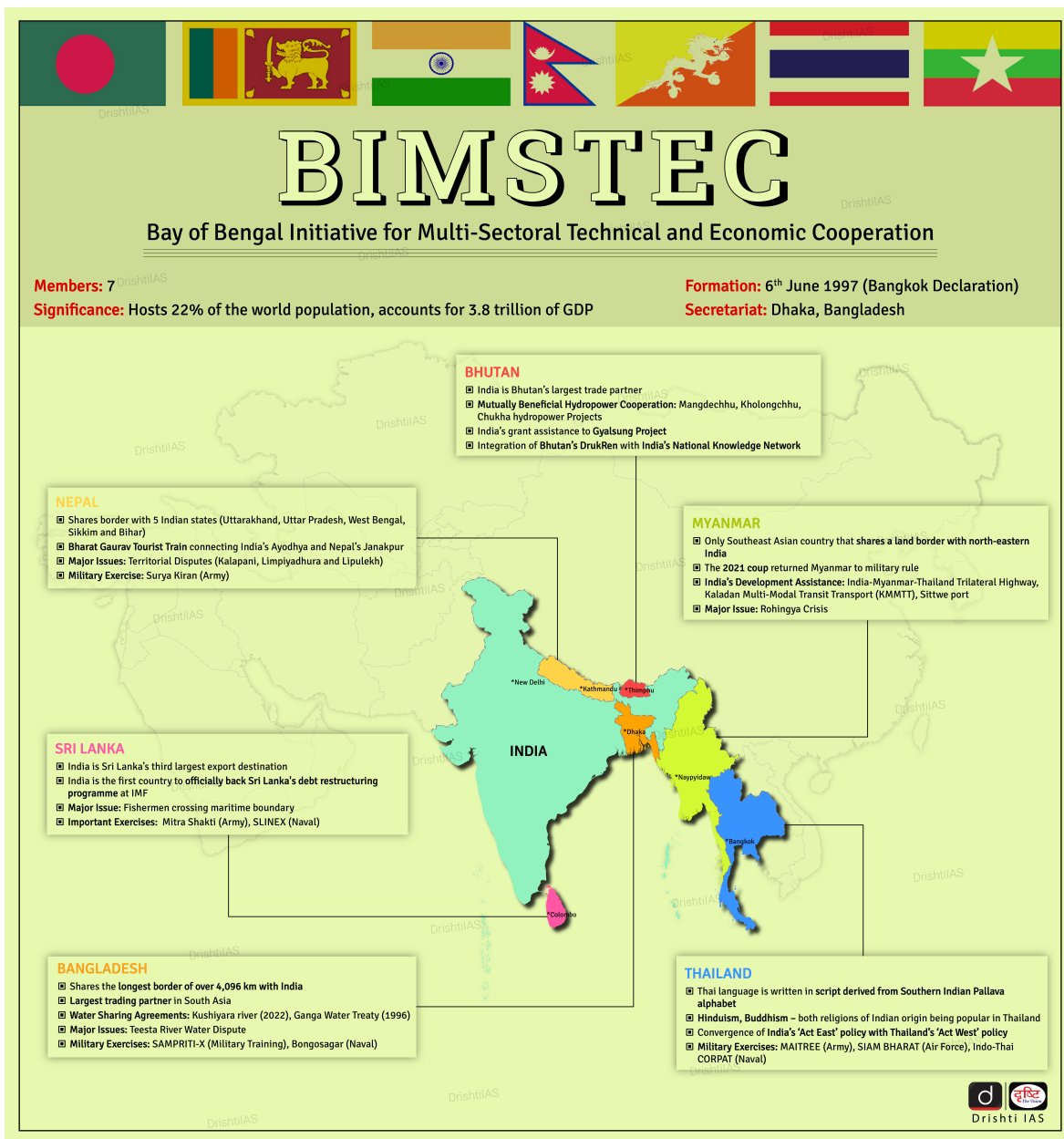
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Why in News?

Recently, the first-ever Foreign Ministers' meeting of the [Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation \(BIMSTEC\)](#) began in Bangkok, Thailand.

- Areas of coordination challenges were discussed, including food, health and energy security.





What is BIMSTEC?

▪ **About:**

- The BIMSTEC is a **regional organisation comprising seven Member States:** five deriving from South Asia, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and two from Southeast Asia, including Myanmar and Thailand.
- This sub-regional organisation came into being on **6th June 1997** through the **Bangkok Declaration**.
- The BIMSTEC Secretariat is in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

▪ **Institutional Mechanisms:**

- BIMSTEC Summit
- **Ministerial Meeting**
- Senior Officials' Meeting
- BIMSTEC Working Group
- Business Forum & Economic Forum

▪ **Cooperation:**

- Cooperation within the BIMSTEC had initially focused on six sectors in 1997 (trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism, and fisheries) and expanded in **2008 to other areas**.
- In 2021, a reorganization led to each of the Member States leading certain sectors.

- India focuses on **security, along with counterterrorism and transnational crime**, disaster management and energy.

What is the Significance of BIMSTEC?

- **Significant Global Weightage:**
 - Around 22% of the world's population live in the seven countries around the Bay of Bengal, with a combined GDP close to USD 2.7 trillion.
 - All seven countries have **sustained average annual rates of growth between 3.4% and 7.5%** from 2012 to 2016.
 - A fourth of the world's traded goods across the bay every year.
- **Regional Strategic Incentives:**
 - The BIMSTEC countries have **strategic incentives in the growth** of BIMSTEC.
 - For instance, Bangladesh sees BIMSTEC as a platform to **elevate its status beyond being a small state** on the Bay of Bengal.
 - Sri Lanka views it as an **opportunity to connect with Southeast Asia** and become a hub for the **wider Indo-Pacific Region**.
 - Nepal and Bhutan aim to connect with the Bay of Bengal region to overcome their **landlocked geographic positions**.
 - Myanmar and Thailand **see deeper connections with India and BIMSTEC as a means to access India's rising consumer** market, balance China's influence in the region, and develop alternatives to China's inroads into Southeast Asia.
 - It allows for economic integration, regional security cooperation, and leveraging **shared values and histories for peace** and development.
- **Importance for India:**
 - BIMSTEC not only connects **South and Southeast Asia** but also encompasses the ecologies of the **Great Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal**.
 - India sees BIMSTEC as a **natural platform to prioritize its foreign policy objectives of "Neighborhood First" and "Act East."**
 - The significance of BIMSTEC was highlighted when some of its member countries supported **India's call for a boycott of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** summit in Islamabad, leading to its postponement.
 - India claimed victory in isolating **Pakistan through this move**.
- **Crucial Against Assertive China:**
 - The Bay of Bengal is crucial for an **increasingly assertive China** in maintaining its access route to the **Indian Ocean**.
 - As China has undertaken a massive drive to finance and build infrastructure in South and Southeast Asia through the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** in almost all BIMSTEC countries, except Bhutan and India, BIMSTEC is a **new battleground in the India-China battle for dominance**.
 - BIMSTEC can allow **India to push a constructive agenda to counter Chinese investments**, and instead follow best practices for connectivity projects based on recognised international norms.
 - The Chinese projects are widely seen as violating these norms.
- **Preserve Peace and Freedom of Navigation:**
 - The Bay of Bengal can be showcased as open and peaceful, contrasting it with **China's behavior in the South China Sea**.
 - It can develop codes of conduct that preserve freedom of navigation and apply existing law of the seas regionally.
 - Moreover, BIMSTEC can stem the **region's creeping militarisation by instituting**, for instance, a Bay of Bengal Zone of Peace that seeks to limit any **bellicose behavior of extraregional power**.

How BIMSTEC is Different from SAARC?

SAARC	BIMSTEC
1. A regional organisation looking into South Asia	1. Interregional organisation connecting South Asia and South East Asia.

2. Established in 1985 during the cold war era.	2. Established in 1997 in the post-Cold War.
3. Member countries suffer for mistrust and suspicion.	3. Members maintain reasonably friendly relations.
4. Suffers from regional politics.	4. Core objective is the improvement of economic cooperation among countries.
5. Asymmetric power balance.	5. Balancing of power with the presence of Thailand and India on the bloc.
6. Intra-regional trade only 5 percent.	6. Intra-regional trade has increased around 6 percent in a decade.

Way Forward

- BIMSTEC member countries should focus on deepening cooperation in various sectors such as trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism, fisheries, security, counterterrorism, disaster management, and energy.
- The organization should work towards **implementing existing agreements and exploring new avenues** for collaboration.
- BIMSTEC should work towards **enhancing trade facilitation, reducing barriers**, and promoting economic integration among member countries.
- The organization should explore opportunities for a **free trade agreement (FTA)** to boost regional trade and investment.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Q. Do you think that BIMSTEC is a parallel organisation like the SAARC? What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the two? How are Indian foreign policy objectives realized by forming this new organisation? **(2022)**