



India & BIMSTEC

This article is based on [“BIMSTEC needs to reinvent itself”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 14/04/2021. It talks about the obstacles that limit the BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) in realizing its full potential.

Recently, the foreign ministers of [BIMSTEC \(the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation\)](#) met in a virtual conference. This is the first ministerial since the globe has been hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.

BIMSTEC as a regional organization has achieved a lot in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief and security, including counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and coastal security cooperation.

However, there are many obstacles that limit the regional body in realizing its full potential.

Highlights of the Meeting

- The foreign ministers cleared the draft for the BIMSTEC charter, recommending its early adoption.
- They endorsed the rationalization of sectors and sub-sectors of activity, with each member-state serving as a lead for the assigned areas of special interest.
- The ministers also conveyed their support for the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, which will be adopted at the next summit in Sri Lanka.
- Preparations have been completed for the signing of three agreements relating to mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, cooperation between diplomatic academies, and the establishment of a technology transfer facility.

Evolution of BIMSTEC

- BIMSTEC was established as a grouping of four nations — India, Thailand, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka — through the **Bangkok Declaration of 1997**.
 - BIMSTEC was expanded later to include three more countries — Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan.
- Initially, BIMSTEC didn't hold much geopolitical weight. This can be reflected by only just three summits in the first 20 years of its formation.
- However, BIMSTEC suddenly received special attention as India chose to treat it as a more practical instrument for regional cooperation, as SAARC continues to remain defunct.
- The BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat, followed by their Outreach Summit with the BRICS leaders in Goa in October 2016, drew considerable international limelight to the low-profile regional grouping.
- At the second swearing-in of the Indian Prime Minister in May 2019, the leaders of BIMSTEC, not SAARC, were invited as honored guests.
- Soon thereafter, the External Affairs Minister observed that India saw a mix of “energy, mindset

and possibility” in BIMSTEC.

Associated Challenges

- **Unfinished Economic Agenda:** BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement, was signed in 2004, but over 20 rounds of negotiations it is still to be operationalized.
- **Internal Tussle:** A strong BIMSTEC presupposes cordial and tension-free bilateral relations among all its member-states.
 - This has not been the case, given the trajectory of India-Nepal, India-Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh-Myanmar ties in recent years.
 - Moreover, both Nepal and Sri Lanka want the SAARC summit revived. However, India maintains that terror and talks can't go hand in hand.
- **China's Intrusion:** China's decisive intrusion in the South-Southeast Asian space is causing a limiting effect on India's zone of influence.
 - Moreover, a renowned Bangladeshi scholar argued at a recent conference that BIMSTEC would make progress if China is accepted as its principal interlocutor and partner.
- **Myanmar Coup:** The military coup in Myanmar, brutal crackdown of protesters, and continuation of popular resistance resulting in a protracted impasse have produced a new set of border management challenges for India.

Way Forward

- **BIMSTEC FTA:** In 2018, a study by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry had suggested that BIMSTEC urgently needed a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement to be a real game-changer.
 - It should cover trade in goods, services, and investment; promote regulatory harmonization; adopt policies that develop regional value chains, and eliminate non-tariff barriers.
- **Balancing Security & Economy:** India has led through constant focus and follow-up — to the extent that some member-states have complained about the 'over securitization of BIMSTEC'.
 - Hence, there is a need to ensure maintaining security and forging solid arrangements for economic cooperation.
- **Gujral Doctrine:** India would have to counter the impression that BIMSTEC is an India-dominated bloc, in that context India can follow the Gujral doctrine that intends to chalk out the effect of transactional motive in bilateral relations.

Conclusion

As BIMSTEC readies itself to celebrate the silver jubilee of its formation next year, it faces a serious challenge: to effect “a paradigm shift in raising the level of our cooperation and regional integration.”

Drishti Mains Question

BIMSTEC needs a paradigm shift in raising the level of cooperation and regional integration. Discuss.