



Reviving Regionalism Through BIMSTEC

This editorial is based on “[At BIMSTEC summit, an opportunity for India to strengthen its Act East Policy](#)” which was published in The Indian Express on 07/04/2025. The article highlights India's renewed engagement with Southeast Asia at the Bangkok Summit has revitalised BIMSTEC as a strategic platform to advance regional cooperation, connectivity, and India's Indo-Pacific vision.

For Prelims: [6th BIMSTEC Summit](#), [Indo-Pacific vision](#), [BIMSTEC](#), [BIMSTEC Charter](#), [SAARC](#), [ASEAN](#), [Framework Agreement on the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area](#), [Kaladan Multimodal Transit](#), [India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway](#), [QUAD](#), [Indian Ocean Rim Association \(IORA\)](#), [The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#).

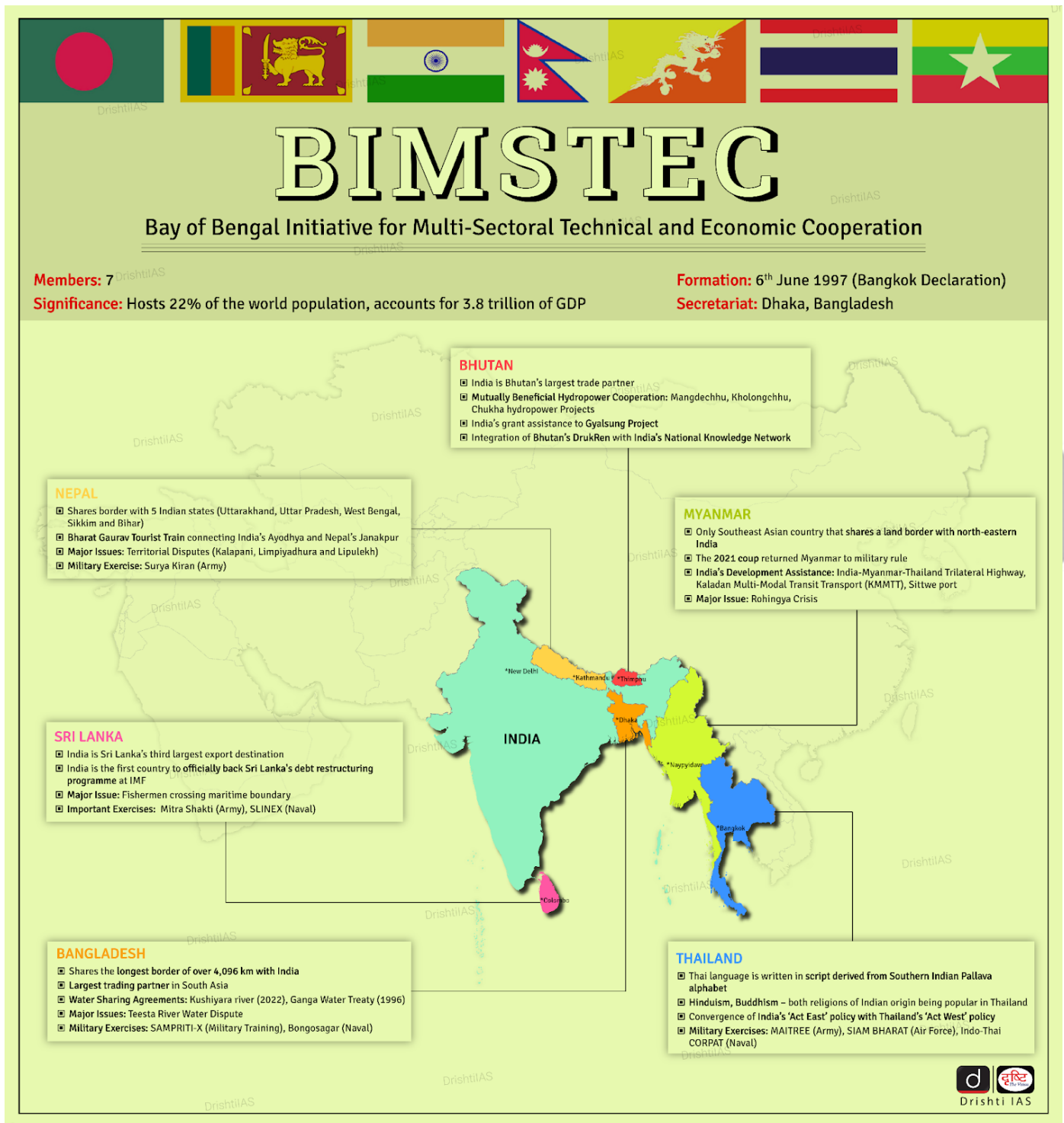
For Mains: Significance of BIMSTEC for [India's Act East](#) and [Neighbourhood First policies](#).

India's renewed outreach at the [6th BIMSTEC Summit](#) in Bangkok has revitalised **regional cooperation** and reinforced its [Indo-Pacific vision](#). With Thailand's visa waiver and deepening defence ties, India showcased its commitment to regionalism amid shifting geopolitics. [BIMSTEC](#) emerges as a vital platform to institutionalise connectivity, counter political volatility, and promote collective resilience. This aligns with [India's Act East](#) and [Neighbourhood First policies](#), offering strategic depth and recalibrated engagement with Southeast Asia in an era of stalled multilateralism.

What is BIMSTEC?

- **Regional Cooperation Platform:** The **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)** is a regional grouping for fostering cooperation between **South and Southeast Asian countries** across multiple sectors.
 - It includes seven nations: **Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand from the Bay of Bengal region.**
- **Formation and Evolution:** Founded in 1997 as BIST-EC, it was renamed BIMST-EC after **Myanmar** joined the same year.
 - **Nepal and Bhutan** joined in 2004, completing the current membership; it became BIMSTEC formally.
- **Institutional Foundation:** The [Colombo Summit of 2022](#) adopted the [BIMSTEC Charter](#), establishing it as a legal, institutionalised regional body.
 - The Charter outlines objectives, principles, and operational structures; it came into force after all members ratified it.
- **Secretariat and Structure:** The **BIMSTEC Secretariat** was established in 2014 in **Dhaka**.
 - It coordinates sectoral work and facilitates **inter-governmental cooperation** among members in priority areas.
- **Expansion of Sectors:** BIMSTEC started with six areas of cooperation; over time, it expanded to 14 key priority sectors.

- Each member state leads specific sectors, with India heading **Security, Counterterrorism, Disaster Management, and Energy**.
- **Strategic Connectivity Bridge:** The grouping functions as a bridge between **SAARC** and **ASEAN**, bypassing SAARC's limitations caused by Indo-Pak tensions.
 - It aligns with India's Act East and Neighbourhood First policies, pushing regionalism through connectivity and collaboration.



What is the Significance of BIMSTEC for India and the Indo-Pacific?

- **Strategic Relevance in Indo-Pacific:** BIMSTEC connects two geostrategic subregions, giving India a central role in **Indo-Pacific regionalism**.
 - The **Bay of Bengal** is crucial to **maritime trade routes** and **regional connectivity** in

the Indo-Pacific theatre.

- **Counterweight to SAARC's Limitations:** BIMSTEC provides an **alternative to SAARC**, which remains paralyzed due to India-Pakistan hostilities.
 - India has used BIMSTEC post-[2016 Uri attack](#) to enhance engagement, evident in the **BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach**.
- **Trade and Economic Value:** BIMSTEC countries represent **22% of the global population** with a combined GDP of \$5.2 trillion (2023).
 - The [Framework Agreement on the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area](#), though unimplemented since 2004, could significantly boost intra-regional trade beyond the current sub-10%.
- **India's Sectoral Leadership:** India leads four crucial sectors: Security, Counterterrorism, Energy, and Disaster Management within BIMSTEC.
 - This allows India to institutionalise regional public goods and shape strategic discourse across multiple domains.
- **Connectivity and Integration Goals:** The **BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity** is a blueprint for improving regional logistics and movement.
 - It includes **264 projects** across maritime, road, rail, and aviation sectors, helping regional trade corridors flourish.
- **Link to East and Southeast Asia:** Projects like the [Kaladan Multimodal Transit](#) and [India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway](#) are India's gateway to ASEAN.
 - These routes strengthen India's economic and **people-to-people ties** with Thailand, Myanmar, and beyond.
- **BIMSTEC and India's Diplomacy:** India's use of BIMSTEC reflects its multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific with [QUAD](#), [Indian Ocean Rim Association \(IORA\)](#), and [ASEAN](#).
 - MoUs with IORA and [The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#) signed at the 6th Summit expand India's diplomatic and functional footprint.
- **Focus on Inclusive Growth:** Through BIMSTEC, India can advance [inclusive development](#) aligned with SDGs and regional welfare imperatives.
 - Sectors like public health, climate resilience, and blue economy offer opportunities for targeted, people-centric diplomacy.

Why Has India Increasingly Shifted Its Focus From SAARC to BIMSTEC?

Criteria	BIMSTEC	SAARC
Member Countries	BIMSTEC = SAARC – (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Maldives) + (Myanmar, Thailand)	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
Strategic Focus	Indo-Pacific bridge, connectivity, maritime	South Asian identity, socio-economic issues
Functionality	Active institutional reforms, vision documents	Dormant due to political stalemates
India's Role	Leading sectoral efforts (security, energy)	Hindered by bilateral tensions with Pakistan
Key Bottleneck	Funding, FTA delay, institutional weakness	Indo-Pak rivalry blocks implementation
Recent Progress	Bangkok Vision 2030, Maritime Transport Pact	Last summit in 2014, no recent outcomes

- **BIMSTEC Offers A Smoother And Obstruction-Free Platform:** India prefers BIMSTEC as it excludes Pakistan, ensuring fewer political hurdles and enabling **functional cooperation** in connectivity and regional projects.
- **BIMSTEC Aligns With India's Strategic And Leadership Goals:** With cordial ties among members and India leading key sectors, BIMSTEC supports **India's Act East Policy** and regional agenda-setting more effectively than SAARC.

What are the Major Outcomes of 6th BIMSTEC Summit?

- **Adoption of Bangkok Vision 2030:** The Bangkok Vision 2030 is BIMSTEC's new strategic blueprint, anchored in the [UN SDGs](#) and **Thailand's Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) economy model**.
 - It focuses on shaping a **Prosperous, Resilient, and Open BIMSTEC** for the region's 1.7 billion people.
- **Introduction of PRO BIMSTEC:** PRO BIMSTEC is a thematic framework with three pillars: **Prosperity, Resilience, and Openness**.
 - It promotes trade and investment, strengthens agriculture and health systems, and advances [sustainable tourism](#).
- **Maritime Transport Cooperation Agreement:** Members signed the **Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation** to enhance cargo and passenger movement.
 - It supports **maritime safety, regional logistics**, and [blue economy](#) development in the Bay of Bengal.
- **Institutional Strengthening Measures:** The **Rules of Procedure for BIMSTEC** mechanisms were adopted, enhancing transparency and institutional efficiency.
 - These rules ensure procedural clarity for summits, ministerial meetings, and working groups.
- **External Collaborations Enhanced:** MoUs were signed with IORA and UNODC to broaden international collaboration and thematic convergence.
 - IORA partnership supports maritime connectivity; UNODC engagement targets crime prevention and governance.
- **Strategic Guidance from EPG Report:** The **Eminent Persons Group (EPG) Report** on BIMSTEC's future direction was finalised after year-long consultations.
 - It recommends prioritisation of sectors, **institutional rationalisation**, and performance-based implementation metrics.
- **Bilateral Diplomacy at Margins:** The Indian Prime Minister held talks with Myanmar's military leadership and Bangladesh's senior political figure during the summit.
 - These talks focused on earthquake aid, border security, and recalibration of bilateral ties post-political transitions.

What Key Challenges Undermine the Effectiveness of the BIMSTEC Grouping?

- **FTA Implementation Delay:** The BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, initiated in 2004, remains unimplemented after two decades of negotiations.
 - This delays **trade liberalisation**, undermining economic integration and investor confidence within the bloc.
- **Underfunded Secretariat:** The Secretariat in Dhaka suffers from **staffing shortages**, limited mandate, and poor financial autonomy.
 - This restricts its operational effectiveness, particularly in programme coordination and monitoring.
- **Connectivity Project Delays:** Transport connectivity plans like the **BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity** face implementation delays and cost overruns.
 - **Lack of funding** and coordination across ministries and countries hampers infrastructure delivery.
- **Political Instability in Region:** Myanmar's civil conflict and regime change in Bangladesh threaten **regional harmony and collaborative planning**.
 - Such instability disrupts consensus-building and slows down progress on common regional goals.
- **Lack of Financial Mechanism:** Absence of a dedicated BIMSTEC fund means projects depend on voluntary national contributions.
 - This results in inconsistent financing and gaps in implementing multi-country initiatives.
- **Consensus Decision-Making Hurdle:** The consensus-based model, while inclusive, leads to frequent policy paralysis on sensitive subjects.
 - **Security, counterterrorism, and migration cooperation** suffer due to divergent political interests.

What Strategic Steps Can Strengthen BIMSTEC's Role and Relevance in the Region?

- **Enhance Institutional Capacity:** The Secretariat should be strengthened with technical experts, adequate funding, and a broader functional mandate.
 - It must lead cross-sectoral integration and performance tracking of BIMSTEC programmes.
- **Create BIMSTEC Development Fund:** A dedicated funding mechanism is essential for financing connectivity, climate resilience, and digital public goods.
 - Member-state contributions and donor partnerships could sustain long-term cooperation.
- **Fast-track FTA and Trade Cooperation:** Set timelines for BIMSTEC FTA implementation covering goods, services, and investment.
 - This will boost intra-regional trade and reduce dependence on global north economies.
- **Accelerate Connectivity Masterplan:** Prioritise key infrastructure nodes under the BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity.
 - Regular updates and cross-border facilitation can address coordination failures.
- **Broaden Sectoral Depth:** New cooperation areas like [digital economy](#), [green technology](#), and [public health](#) must be institutionalised.
 - Post-Covid resilience requires **regional preparedness in health and disaster systems**.
- **Promote Stakeholder Engagement:** Track 1.5 and 2.0 diplomacy should bring in **academia, civil society, and business networks**.
 - This ensures inclusive ownership and bottom-up feedback for policy design.
- **Balance Leadership and Consensus:** India must lead without dominating, fostering equitable cooperation and trust among smaller members.
 - Leadership should focus on capacity sharing, humanitarian aid, and regional stability.

Conclusion

BIMSTEC must evolve from **vision to verifiable action**. Institutional reforms, trade frameworks, and inclusive engagement are pivotal to its credibility. With consistent leadership, shared financing, and resilient diplomacy, the group can transition from aspirational dialogue to a functional pillar of **Indo-Pacific integration, enabling stability, prosperity, and regional cohesion**.

Drishti Mains Question:

How does BIMSTEC complement India's Act East and Neighbourhood First policies in the evolving Indo-Pacific order?

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims:

Q. The term 'Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership' often appears in the news in the context of the affairs of a group of countries known as (2016)

- (a) G20
- (b) ASEAN
- (c) SCO
- (d) SAARC

Ans: (b)

Mains:

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)

PDF Reference URL: <https://www.drishtiias.com/current-affairs-news-analysis-editorials/news-editorials/07-04-2025/print>

