



Mains Practice Question

Q. Is BIMSTEC emerging as an alternative to SAARC? Compare the two organisations in terms of structure and objectives, and analyse how BIMSTEC aligns with India's evolving foreign policy priorities. **(250 words)**

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Approach

- Provide an overview of BIMSTEC and SAARC with their regional objectives.
- Compare the two organizations in terms of structure, and objectives, with a focus on India's evolving foreign policy priorities.
- Conclude with the relevance of BIMSTEC in the current geopolitical landscape.

Introduction

The **SAARC** and the **BIMSTEC** were established to enhance **regional cooperation**, but due to SAARC's stagnation from geo-political tensions, BIMSTEC has emerged as a more effective platform aligned with **India's Act East and Neighbourhood First policies**.

BIMSTEC Emerging as an Alternative to SAARC:

- **SAARC's Political Challenges:** SAARC's progress has often been hampered by geopolitical tensions, particularly between India and Pakistan.
 - Since the **last SAARC summit** held in 2014, ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan have continued to hamper dialogue, stalling progress on regional cooperation.
 - In contrast, **BIMSTEC's framework** avoids the direct inclusion of contentious bilateral issues, **as Pakistan is not a member**, which allows for a more collaborative approach and greater effectiveness in pursuing development objectives.
- **Geographical Aspect:** While SAARC is confined to South Asia, BIMSTEC includes Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar and Thailand, offering a wider geographical scope for economic and strategic cooperation.
 - This broader reach aligns with India's **Look East Policy, now the Act East Policy**, as BIMSTEC helps India engage more effectively.

Comparison in terms of Structure and Objectives:

Aspect	SAARC	BIMSTEC
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Established in 1985 with 8 members: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Established in 1997 with 7 members: India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan, and Nepal.
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Focuses on regional cooperation, and strengthening collective self-reliance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Aims at enhancing sectoral cooperation, and improving connectivity

BIMSTEC's Alignment with India's Foreign Policy:

- **Regional Connectivity and Economic Integration:** BIMSTEC plays a critical role in improving **regional connectivity** through projects like **BBIN Initiative (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal)** enhance regional connectivity.
 - This is aligned with **SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure)** by improving infrastructure and fostering economic integration, vital for India's **North-Eastern development** and broader regional growth.
- **South-South Cooperation:** BIMSTEC promotes South-South cooperation, central to India's foreign policy, through initiatives like the **BIMSTEC Energy Centre** in **Bengaluru** and the **BIMSTEC Business Forum**, enhancing collaboration in energy and trade.
 - Strengthening BIMSTEC aligns with India's strategy to counter China's growing presence in the region.
- **Security and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation:** With shared security concerns, especially on terrorism, BIMSTEC provides India a platform for cooperation through the **Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime Working Group** and disaster relief mechanisms.
 - This aligns with India's regional security priorities and enhances its role as a stabilizing force in the region, especially in addressing common challenges like cross-border terrorism and natural disasters.

Conclusion

While BIMSTEC offers a more viable platform for economic cooperation, especially with Southeast Asia, SAARC remains significant for South Asian regional cooperation, though it faces challenges. **BIMSTEC complements SAARC's efforts** and offers India a chance to pursue its foreign policy objectives of economic integration and regional stability.