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In Depth – BIMSTEC: Guests of Honour

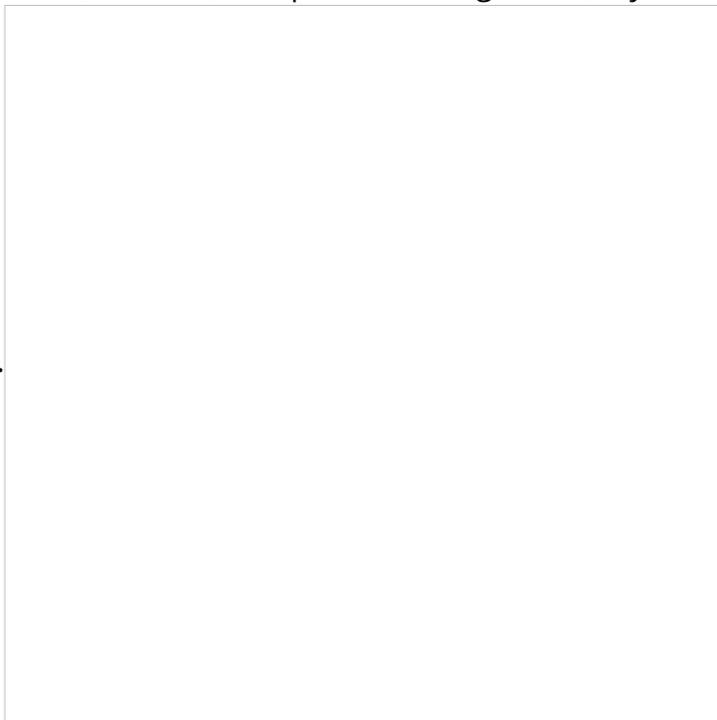
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Prime Minister Narendra Modi was sworn-in for the second straight term on 30th May, 2019. The grand ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhavan saw nearly 8,000 guests in attendance, prominent among them, being the leaders of the BIMSTEC countries.

Apart from India, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) comprises of Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and

Bhutan.



The invitation to BIMSTEC countries to be part of Prime Minister's swearing-in ceremony reflects the importance India attaches to its 'Neighbourhood First' policy. Besides, experts believe that the move also demonstrates the seriousness with which India wants to engage with maritime nations for security in the Bay of Bengal region. In addition, connectivity is also an important aspect of engaging with BIMSTEC countries.

BIMSTEC

- It was established on **6th June, 1997** through the **Bangkok Declaration**. It has its **permanent secretariat at Dhaka**.
- It constitutes **seven member states**, 5, deriving from South Asia, including **Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka** and 2 from Southeast Asia, including **Myanmar** and **Thailand**.
- Initially, the economic bloc was formed with four member states with the acronym 'BIST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation).
 - Following the inclusion of Myanmar on 22nd December 1997 during a special Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok, the Group was renamed 'BIMST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation).
 - With the admission of Nepal and Bhutan at the 6th Ministerial Meeting (February 2004, Thailand), the name of the grouping was changed to 'Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation' (BIMSTEC).
- The **objective** of building such an alliance was **to harness shared and accelerated growth through mutual cooperation in different areas of common interests** by

mitigating the onslaught of globalization and by utilizing regional resources and geographical advantages.

- Starting with six sectors—including **trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism and fisheries**—for sectoral cooperation in the late 1997, it expanded to embrace nine more sectors—including **agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism, environment, culture, people to people contact and climate change**—in the year 2008.
- It brings together 1.5 bn people, 21% of the world population and a combined GDP of over 2.5 trillion dollars.

All the seven countries have sustained average annual rates of growth between 3.4% and 7.5% from 2012 to 2016.

- Unlike many other regional groupings, **BIMSTEC is a sector-driven cooperative organization**. The primary objective of it is to facilitate technological and economic co-operation among its members.
- It is **based on two founding principles, to respect the principle of sovereign equality**, territorial integrity, political independence, non interference in internal affairs, peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit and not be a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation involving member states.

India and BIMSTEC

- BIMSTEC establishes India's willingness to give importance and cooperate with neighbours who want peace in the region and condemn terrorism.
- It also demonstrates the seriousness with which India believes it should engage with maritime nations for security in the Bay of Bengal region.
- **India's northeast will be playing a crucial role in increasing connectivity with BIMSTEC member countries.**

Connectivity has been described broadly by India as trade connectivity, economic connectivity, transport connectivity, digital connectivity and people to people connectivity.
- **Since 2014, the government is trying to shift the focus of India's neighbourhood policy from the west to the east.** The Indian foreign policy gets so consumed by Pakistan that at lot of times, India's attention does not get focussed on its eastern neighbours.
- **BIMSTEC countries represent the eastern part of the Look East policy of India** to strengthen relations especially with the countries towards the east.
- For India, BIMSTEC allows it to leverage its maritime geography in part of the world that is becoming increasingly contested and also **it allows India to focus on the wider Indo-Pacific which is increasingly becoming center of global politics.**
- BIMSTEC is now increasingly seen as **India's attempt at regional multilateralism minus Pakistan**. The government's stand on Pakistan has been very clear that is, talks and terror cannot go hand in hand.

Foreign Experts say that BIMSTEC provides India an alternative regional engagement platform. It has all the members of SAARC (Pakistan being not included) minus Afghanistan and Maldives, with whom India can engage separately.

- **India is the region's largest economy.** On 20th anniversary of BIMSTEC in 2016, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that BIMSTEC not only connects South and Southeast Asia but also ecologies of the great himalayas and the Bay of Bengal. He further said that BIMSTEC members have shared values, history, way of life and destinies that are interlinked. He said that BIMSTEC represents a common space for peace and development. He categorically defined the importance of BIMSTEC as a platform that fulfills India's Neighbourhood First and Act East Policy.

In the last swearing-in ceremony, India had invited SAARC nations which included Pakistan but this time, Pakistan was a big miss in the neighbour who was not invited to the oath taking ceremony due to its consistent support to terrorism against India and the recent Pulwama attack and **this is also a reason why SAARC nations of which Islamabad is a part were not called.** Earlier, India had refused to attend the SAARC summit in Islamabad in 2016 post the Uri terror attack. Most other SAARC nations had backed India's stand. **Since 2016, there has been no movement forward on resuming the SAARC summit. Interestingly after deciding to boycott the Islamabad SAARC summit in 2016, India invited the same grouping of BIMSTEC countries to Goa as part of the BRICS Outreach Initiative.**

Day after taking the oath, the Prime Minister of India held separate meetings with all BIMSTEC leaders exploring ways to further strengthen bilateral ties.

Meeting with Mauritius and Kyrgyzstan

India - Mauritius

- Leaders of both the countries have agreed to work together to achieve the shared vision of security and growth of the two countries as well as the Indian Ocean Region.
- The Prime Minister of India reiterated his commitment to further strengthening the bilateral ties between the two countries in all spheres.

India-Kyrgyzstan

- The President of Kyrgyzstan reiterated the invitation for the Prime Minister of India to visit Kyrgyzstan for the SCO summit and a bilateral visit during 13th - 15th of June.
- The two leaders also held deliberations on diversifying cooperation for the mutual benefit of citizens of both the countries.
- The Prime Minister of India also expressed satisfaction at the strengthening of

bilateral cooperation over the years.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

- SAARC comprises of eight member states: **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.**
- The **main objectives** of SAARC include:
 - to promote the welfare of the people
 - to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development
 - to promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia
 - to contribute to mutual trust and understanding among member countries
 - to strengthen cooperation with other developing countries;
 - to strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests.
- **As of 2015, 21% of the world's population and 3.8% or 2.9 trillion US dollars of the world's GDP was in the SAARC region.**
- Despite been around for over three decades, SAARC's performance has been less than satisfactory with its role in strengthening regional cooperation coming under scrutiny.

BIMSTEC vis-a-vis SAARC

SAARC

- While the SAARC has established itself as a regional forum, it has failed to attain its objectives. In the many failures of SAARC, **lack of trust among the member countries** has been the most significant factor between India and Pakistan.
- In recent times, **Pakistan's non-cooperation has stalled some major initiatives including the SAARC motor vehicle agreement**, which was crucial for harnessing regional connectivity across South Asia, could not be signed in 2014 due to Pakistan's dithering.
- SAARC has also been the **failure in the area of security cooperation**. For instance, while cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan is a major concern for India, Pakistan has failed to address this concern.
- The grouping faced another setback after **the 19th summit scheduled to be held in Pakistan in 2016 was suspended for an indefinite period** as member countries declined to participate, a signal that **there is an absence of a conducive regional environment**.
- In the past, **India has spent more political capital and efforts to make SAARC work than on BIMSTEC**. However, the latter lends itself more naturally to regional integration including physical connectivity and economic co-operation than SAARC which is dominated by India and Pakistan and naturally crippled by tensions between

the two countries.

BIMSTEC

- BIMSTEC provides the Bay of Bengal nations, an opportunity to work together to create a common space for peace and development.
- **It helps smaller countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan to develop connectivity with ASEAN nations, the hub of major economic activities globally.**
- BIMSTEC's major strength comes from the fact that it includes **two influential regional powers: Thailand and India. This adds to the comfort of smaller neighbours by reducing the fear of dominance by one big power.**
- Trade among the BIMSTEC countries reached 6% in just a decade, while in SAARC, it has remained around 5% since its inception.
- One of the reasons for BIMSTEC's popularity is that the **member countries have generally cordial relationships**, however there are shortcomings as well.
The grouping was formed in 1997 but its record in terms of tangible achievements is not impressive.

Rising BIMSTEC

- Since most of the members of BIMSTEC are either members of SAARC or ASEAN, it did not get much momentum earlier but now **after SAARC becoming almost defunct** because of Pakistan's allegiance to terrorism against India, **it is believed to emerge as a major and robust organization of South and Southeast Asia** that will include Myanmar and Thailand of ASEAN countries, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Bhutan of SAARC conglomeration, which will in a way **isolate Pakistan over its support to terrorism.**
- In over two decades of existence, BIMSTEC has achieved very little. India aims to reverse the trend by bringing in a significant improvement in its economic engagement within the region without any delay.
- **With differences between India and Pakistan coming in the way of smooth functioning of the SAARC, groupings like BIMSTEC can take forward the concept of regional cooperation in a different manner.**
- BIMSTEC is a platform by which lot of the issues in the region can be tackled and integrated.

The regional group forms a bridge between the South and the Southeast Asia and represents a reinforcement of relations between the countries belonging to these areas. It, basically, establishes a platform for inter-regional cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN members.

BIMSTEC has emerged as an alternative platform for engagement that India has with its neighbour, leaving the future of already stagnant SAARC bleak. Given the fairly amicable relationship among member states of BIMSTEC, increasing its performance and effectiveness is an

achievable goal as long as the countries exhibit enough political will and mutual respect.