



Enhancing Cooperation Within BIMSTEC

This editorial is based on [“BIMSTEC After the Colombo Summit”](#) which was published in The Hindu on 02/04/2022. It talks about the key highlights of the fifth summit of the BIMSTEC grouping and its significance.

For Prelims: BIMSTEC, SAARC, Indo-Pacific, Bay of Bengal, India’s Neighbourhood, Rohingya Crisis, FTAs, BCIM, Blue Economy, First and Act East Policies.

For Mains: India’s Relations with BIMSTEC countries, Regional and Global Groupings - BIMSTEC: Significance of the Grouping, Issues.

The economic and strategic significance of the Bay of Bengal is growing rapidly with a re-emergence of the idea of the [‘Indo-Pacific’ region](#).

The recently held [fifth summit of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation \(BIMSTEC\)](#) has advanced the cause of regional cooperation and integration.

As the BIMSTEC turns 25 this year, it needs single-minded focus and cooperation among the member countries to make visible progress across sectors such as security, trade, connectivity and innovations.

Why is BIMSTEC Significant?

- The [BIMSTEC](#) has **huge potential as a natural platform** for development cooperation in a rapidly changing geopolitical calculus and can leverage its unique position as a pivot in the Indo-Pacific region.
- The growing value of BIMSTEC can be attributed to its **geographical contiguity, abundant natural and human resources, and rich historical linkages** and a **cultural heritage** for promoting deeper cooperation in the region.
- The Bay of Bengal region has the **potential to become the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific** idea, a place where the **strategic interests of the major powers of East and South Asia intersect**.
 - It serves as a **bridge between two major high-growth centres of Asia** — South and Southeast Asia.

What are the Highlights of Colombo Summit?

What is The Colombo Package?

- The Summit resulted in a package of decisions and agreement which includes the grouping’s charter. The charter, adopted formally, presents **BIMSTEC as “an inter-governmental organisation”** with **“legal personality.”**

- The charter defines BIMSTEC's purposes, enlisting 11 objectives with key focus on the **acceleration of "the economic growth and social progress** in the Bay of Bengal region", and **promotion of "multidimensional connectivity"**.
 - The grouping now views itself **not as a sub-regional organisation but as a regional organisation** whose destiny is linked with the area around the Bay of Bengal.
- The second element of the 'Colombo package' is the decision to re-constitute and **reduce the number of sectors** of cooperation from the unwieldy 14 to a more **manageable seven**. Each member-state will serve as a lead for a sector:
 - Trade, investment and development (Bangladesh)
 - Environment and climate change (Bhutan)
 - **Security, including energy (India)**
 - Agriculture and food security (Myanmar)
 - People-to-people contacts (Nepal)
 - Science, technology and innovation (Sri Lanka)
 - Connectivity (Thailand)
- The countries also adopted the **Master Plan for Transport Connectivity** applicable for 2018-2028 which was devised and backed by the [Asian Development Bank \(ADB\)](#).
 - It lists 264 projects entailing a total investment of \$126 billion; projects worth \$55 billion are under implementation.
- The package includes three new agreements signed by member states, relating to **mutual legal assistance** in criminal matters, **cooperation between diplomatic academies**, and the **establishment of a technology transfer facility** in Colombo.

How is the Summit Significant?

- BIMSTEC has special significance for India as the Bay of Bengal region is integral to **India's 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies** which can accelerate the process of regional integration.
- The adoption of the Charter at this summit promises to **re-energise the 25-year-old grouping** at a time of **growing global uncertainties**.
- It is expected to help **impart a more connected vision** to the seven-member organisation.
- The summit's decision for **India to lead the 'security pillar'** out of the seven designated pillars of the revived BIMSTEC, has **given India's regional aspirations a new orientation**, away from the **stalemated SAARC** that has been unable to meet since 2014.

What are the Roadblocks to Smooth Multilateral Cooperation?

- **Bilateral Issues between Members:** One of the major obstacles to enhanced cooperation among the countries is the [Rohingya crisis](#) that has weakened bilateral Bangladesh-Myanmar ties, with Dhaka seeking full repatriation of the refugees and **Naypyidaw disinclined to respond positively** to international pleas.
- **Inadequate Focus on Economic Cooperation:** A quick look at the unfinished tasks and new challenges gives an idea of the **burden of responsibilities on the grouping**.
 - Despite signing a framework agreement for a comprehensive [Free Trade Agreement \(FTA\)](#) in 2004, BIMSTEC stands far away from this goal.
 - Of the seven constituent agreements needed for the FTA, **only two are in place as of now**.
- **Unfinished Projects:** The general formulations of the Colombo Declaration instil **little confidence about prospects of early progress**.
 - Despite talks for the need for expansion of connectivity, much of the **work is unfinished when it comes to finalising legal instruments** for coastal shipping, road transport and intra-regional energy grid connection.
- **Role of BCIM:** The formation of another sub-regional initiative, the [Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar \(BCIM\) Forum](#), with the **proactive membership of China**, has created more **doubts about the exclusive potential of BIMSTEC**.

What Can Be The Way Forward?

- **Multilateral Discussions:** Given the complexity of domestic and geopolitical factors, this sphere will require **sustained bilateral and group-level discussions** to **prevent problems such as the Rohingya crisis** from becoming impediments to the smooth delivery of economic and security outcomes.
 - India too will have to ensure equally sustained **political engagement with partners** such as Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to **prevent any domestic political spillover** from affecting bilateral and group-level working relationships.
 - India and other members will also need to be **astute in managing Myanmar's engagement** until the [political situation in the country](#) becomes normal.
- **Boosting Connectivity and Cooperation:** For India's vision to bolster trade connectivity in the grouping, an **FTA spanning the maritime resource-rich members** such as **Myanmar and Sri Lanka** could bring dramatic gains for all members.
 - A '**coastal shipping ecosystem**' and an **interconnected electricity grid**, in addition to the adopted Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, have the **potential to boost intraregional trade** and economic ties.
 - Also, BIMSTEC needs to generate **additional funding and push for timely implementation** of the projects.
- **Lessons From Past:** Having walked away from mega trade blocs such as the [China-led RCEP](#), India's willingness to explore an FTA within the framework of a near-home regional grouping may provide **greater accommodation for multi-party interests**.
 - The security- and trade-related lessons from the troubled SAARC experiences also ought to serve BIMSTEC well in the long run.
 - Unlike SAARC, which is burdened by India-Pakistan hostilities, BIMSTEC is relatively free of sharp bilateral disagreements and **promises to provide India with a co-operative sphere of its own**.
- **India as the Torchbearer:** For the revived grouping to realise its trade and economic potential, India will have to take a leadership role **in assuaging any apprehensions among the smaller members** of intragroup power imbalances and strive to **facilitate greater cross-border connectivity and flow of investments** by lowering barriers to the movement of people and goods.
 - Even at the summit, India was the **only country to offer additional funding to the Secretariat** and also to support the Secretary General's proposal to establish an **Eminent Persons Group (EPG)** for producing a vision document.
 - **Other countries need to emulate this** sincere matching of words with action.
- **Others Areas of Focus:** BIMSTEC should focus more in the future on new areas such as the [blue economy](#), the [digital economy](#), and **promotion of exchanges** and links among **start-ups and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)**.

Drishti Mains Question

"The quest for economic growth and the development of the BIMSTEC region can be achieved with enhanced cooperation among the member countries. India has a key role in making the BIMSTEC more vibrant, stronger and result-oriented". Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs):

Q. India maintained its early cultural contacts and trade links with Southeast Asia across the Bay of Bengal. For this pre-eminence of early maritime history of Bay of Bengal, which of the following could be the most convincing explanation/explanations? (2011)

- (a) As compared to other countries, India had a better ship building technology in ancient and mediaeval times
- (b) The rulers of southern India always patronised traders, Brahmin priests and Buddhist monks in this context
- (c) Monsoon winds across the Bay of Bengal facilitated sea voyages

(d) Both (a) and (b) are convincing explanations in this context

Ans: (d)

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