



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**BIMSTEC SUMMIT AND INDIA'S
UNILATERAL ROLE IN BAY OF BENGAL**

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BIMSTEC SUMMIT AND INDIA'S UNILATERAL ROLE IN BAY OF BENGAL

Context

- As India prepares for the **6th Summit** of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), its role in fostering connectivity and addressing shared challenges in the Bay of Bengal region is under scrutiny.

About the BIMSTEC

- It is a regional organization that fosters economic and technical collaboration among countries in the Bay of Bengal region.
- The **Bangkok Declaration (1997)** formally laid the foundation for the organization, as **BIST-EC** (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation).
 - Myanmar joined later that year, transforming it into BIMST-EC, and Nepal and Bhutan became members in 2004, finalizing the present-day BIMSTEC.
- Since then, BIMSTEC has expanded its focus to include connectivity, counterterrorism, technology, trade, security, and people-to-people ties.

6th BIMSTEC Summit, 2025 (Bangkok, Thailand):

- **Theme:** 'Prosperous, Resilient, and Open BIMSTEC'
- **Possible Outcomes:**
 - Adoption the Bangkok Vision 2030
 - Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation

Earlier BIMSTEC Summits

- 1st BIMSTEC Summit, 2004 (Bangkok, Thailand):** Strengthening economic cooperation among member countries.
 - ◆ Adoption of the Bangkok Declaration, formalizing BIMSTEC as a regional group.
- 2nd BIMSTEC Summit, 2008 (New Delhi, India):** Energy, transport, and trade connectivity.
 - ◆ Agreement to establish the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA).
 - ◆ India proposed a regional energy grid for better power-sharing.
- 3rd BIMSTEC Summit, 2014 (Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar):** Strengthening security and regional connectivity.
 - ◆ Endorsement of the BIMSTEC Convention on Counter-Terrorism.
 - ◆ Formation of an expert group on energy cooperation.
- 4th BIMSTEC Summit, 2018 (Kathmandu, Nepal):** Strengthening institutional mechanisms and transport linkages.
 - ◆ Adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter (to institutionalize the organization).
 - ◆ Proposal for a BIMSTEC Development Fund.
- 5th BIMSTEC Summit, 2022 (Colombo, Sri Lanka):** Post-pandemic economic recovery and security cooperation.
 - ◆ Adoption of the **BIMSTEC Charter** (formalizing the structure of BIMSTEC).
 - ◆ Establishment of **7 key sectors of cooperation like:**
 - **Trade and Investment (Bangladesh):** Strengthening economic integration and trade facilitation.
 - **Transport & Communication (India):** Improving regional connectivity via highways, railways, and shipping.

- **Energy Cooperation (Myanmar):** Enhancing energy security, cross-border power trade, and renewable energy projects.
- **Counterterrorism & Security; Climate Change & Disaster Management (India):** Coordinating efforts against terrorism, human trafficking, and cyber threats; Addressing environmental challenges and disaster resilience.
- **Technology & Innovation (Sri Lanka):** Promoting research and innovation.
- **Public Health (Thailand):** Enhancing healthcare cooperation and pandemic preparedness.

Significance of BIMSTEC

- **Boost Trade and Investment:** Facilitate intra-regional trade and economic collaboration.
- **Enhance Connectivity:** Develop infrastructure, transport, and digital connectivity.
- **Strengthen Regional Security:** Cooperate on counterterrorism, cyber-security, and transnational crime.
- **Sustainable Development:** Address climate change, disaster management, and sustainable energy.
- **People-to-People Exchanges:** Promote cultural ties, tourism, and educational collaboration.

Importance of BIMSTEC for India

- **Strategic Connectivity:** Enhances Northeast India's linkages with Southeast Asia.
 - ♦ **'Act East' Policy:** India plays a leading role in BIMSTEC as the largest economy in the bloc. BIMSTEC aligns with India's **'Act East' policy**, strengthening ties with Southeast Asian nations.
 - ♦ India is actively involved in BIMSTEC-led projects such as the **BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) Motor Vehicle Agreement**, trilateral highways, and port connectivity programs.
- **Economic Growth:** Expands markets for Indian businesses.
- **Energy Security:** Facilitates regional power trade and renewable energy projects.
- **Geopolitical Influence:** Strengthens India's presence in the Indo-Pacific region.
- **Alternative to SAARC:** Overcomes challenges posed by Pakistan in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) by focusing on like-minded nations.

Major Initiatives

- **BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement (FTA):** The long-pending BIMSTEC FTA aims to boost intra-regional trade.
 - ♦ Negotiations focus on tariff reduction, trade facilitation, and investment flows.
- **BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan:** India has proposed multi-modal transport networks linking ports, roads, railways, and air routes.
 - ♦ The **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (India-Myanmar)** and the **Trilateral Highway (India-Myanmar-Thailand)** are part of this initiative.
- **BIMSTEC Energy Grid:** Plans for a regional electricity grid to facilitate cross-border energy trade.
 - ♦ India and Myanmar are leading efforts in renewable energy and power sharing.
- **BIMSTEC Security Cooperation:** The BIMSTEC Convention on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime aims to strengthen security collaboration.
 - ♦ India and Thailand are leading cybersecurity and maritime security initiatives.
- **BIMSTEC Disaster Management Mechanism:** Regional response frameworks for natural disasters, climate change adaptation, and humanitarian assistance.

Challenges Facing BIMSTEC

- **Slow Progress on Agreements:** The FTA and key connectivity projects have seen delays.
- **Institutional Weaknesses:** BIMSTEC lacks a permanent secretariat with sufficient funding and staffing.

- **Unequal Member Commitments:** Some member nations prioritize ASEAN or SAARC over BIMSTEC.
- **China's Growing Influence:** Chinese investments in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Thailand pose strategic challenges for India.
- **Geopolitical Issues:** Border tensions (e.g., India-Myanmar) and internal instability (Myanmar's political crisis) affect cooperation.

Way Forward

- Accelerating FTA negotiations to enhance regional trade.
- Boosting connectivity projects for better economic integration.
- Institutional Strengthening – Establishing a fully operational BIMSTEC Secretariat.
- Enhancing security cooperation on terrorism, cyber threats, and transnational crimes.
- Increasing investment in infrastructure and digital trade.
- India, as the regional leader, must prioritize BIMSTEC in its foreign policy by investing in capacity-building, trade facilitation, and technological collaboration.

Conclusion

- BIMSTEC holds immense potential as a regional economic and strategic bloc, bridging South Asia and Southeast Asia.
- With India's leadership and enhanced cooperation among members, BIMSTEC can emerge as a key driver of regional growth, connectivity, and security.
- However, it requires stronger political will, infrastructure development, and institutional reforms to achieve its full potential.
- If implemented effectively, BIMSTEC could redefine regional diplomacy and economic partnerships in the Bay of Bengal region.

Source: IE

Mains Practice Question

[Q] How does India's proactive role in the BIMSTEC framework reflect its strategic vision for regional integration and its response to geopolitical challenges in the Bay of Bengal region?

