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Choudhury, Angshuman. "A New BIMSTEC? : Reforms, Possibilities and Complexities" *National Security*, Vivekananda International Foundation Vol.III (1) (2020) pp. 91-118.

<https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/national-security-vol-3-issue-1-article-AChoudhury.pdf>

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Article

A New BIMSTEC? : Reforms, Possibilities and Complexities

Angshuman Choudhury

Abstract

BIMSTEC, formed in 1997, has had an unenviable run so far. It has failed, as noted by numerous scholars, analysts and practitioners, to leverage the natural complementarities in the Bay of Bengal subregion for regional or national development. But, in a refreshing turn, its member states have shown renewed interest in strengthening the organization during this decade. The rejuvenation has translated into actual reforms, reprioritisation and restructuring. This must be seen in the context of rapidly evolving geostrategic dynamics in the Bay of Bengal littoral sub-region, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. As an increasingly assertive China proliferates beyond its earlier regional reaches under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, small and middle powers in these regions appear eager to prop up a counter strategy to either balance or limit the rise. For India, specifically, this has become an unstated priority, and it is within this context that BIMSTEC acquires significance. However, there is a dire necessity to move beyond the available literature on BIMSTEC's objective potentialities and unravel the complexities and intricacies that it holds within. This essay explores the nature and scope of BIMSTEC's rebirth, its capacity to serve as a connector between South and Southeast Asia, and the space it gives New Delhi to advance its own regional aspirations.

By now, it has become common knowledge that the Bay of Bengal is one of the least integrated regions in the world. In fact, this assertion has been repeated so many times that it has taken on a tone of banality. Indeed, it is a region that, intuitively speaking, should have been seamlessly connected in every sense of the term, given its geographical continuities and sociocultural congruence, but continues to languish under “abysmal levels of trade, connectivity, and cooperation”.¹ This is even more so given that a regional multilateral body - the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic

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Cooperation (BIMSTEC) - was created by the littoral countries as far back as in 1997. Yet, more than twenty years since its modest formations, the BIMSTEC has been unable to significantly reverse the region's stunted links or leverage the natural relationships to foster all-round cooperation. The reasons for the same are many - from sluggish bureaucracies to political instability - but they do not fall within the remit of this paper. What this paper will address is the group's potential as of today, given the rapidly evolving regional dynamics. More specifically, it will assess the capacity of BIMSTEC to achieve two goals: forge a sustainable and mutually-beneficial regional order in South Asia and its geographical intersections with Southeast Asia; and from the Indian perspective, its potential capacity to create a more effective regional platform for New Delhi to advance its interests in this region. It will also explore how China understands and interacts with the grouping, and what that means for the grouping itself.

Much has already been written about the historical trajectory of BIMSTEC and the exact motivations and logic of its formation. This essay, therefore, does not focus on the past, but rather on the present and future. It gives a brief rundown, at the risk of repeating past academic understandings, of BIMSTEC's history. It then outlines the patterns of renewal that the organization has seen during this decade, particularly from 2014 when the 3rd BIMSTEC summit was held in Naypyitaw. Thereafter, it explores the capacity of BIMSTEC to serve as a connector between South and Southeast Asia in the context of the evolving geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics. Lastly, the essay examines the role BIMSTEC can play for India's regional aspirations, including New Delhi's unstated but unambiguous aim of balancing China's rapid strides in the Bay of Bengal (BoB) sub-region. In large parts, the essay explores, from an Indian perspective, the direction BIMSTEC needs to take and its feasibility. Additionally, it explores the divergent political dynamics and perceptions within BIMSTEC, in the context of the volatility of the current regional and sub-regional orders, and how they might shape the organization's future.

Formative Years

BIMSTEC began in 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration as a grouping of four countries - India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Thailand - or BIST-EC. Myanmar joined immediately after, prompting a change of name of BIMST-EC. Subsequently, Bhutan and Nepal joined the BIMST-EC, triggering another change of name to a more comprehensive and theme-oriented 'BIMSTEC'. Back then, it was the first singular regional multilateral formation that cut across South and Southeast Asia, and also, the first transregional diversification undertaken by South Asian small and middle powers. As stated in its first ministerial meeting joint statement² and the first summit declaration³, the central ideas

behind the grouping were to “reinforce complementarities arising out of the Bay of Bengal rim identity” of the constituent countries and “foster a sense of community that will lead to the economic and social development of the entire region.” The grouping projects itself as a “sector-driven cooperation organization” with the core objective of harnessing “shared and accelerated growth through mutual cooperation in different areas of common interests by mitigating the onslaught of globalization and by utilising regional resources and geographical advantages.”⁴ Initially, it began with just six “priority sectors” of cooperation, i.e., trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism and fisheries. Today, the list has expanded to fourteen, the additions being agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counter-terrorism and transnational crime, environment and disaster management, people-to-people contact, and cultural cooperation.

Right from its humble beginnings, BIMSTEC was an unusual and perhaps counterintuitive, multilateral grouping. Its members states have had “very different experiences with regional cooperation”⁵ - Thailand and Myanmar are members of the more-integrated and multi-sectoral Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), while the rest were members of the relatively less-endowed and loosely-integrated South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). There was also little congruence in terms of forms of social, economic and political systems that were in place in these countries - a few were secular democracies, and others, military juntas, monarchies or non-secular democracies. In fact, such fundamental divergences contributed significantly in eroding the “region’s sense of community” since the 1950s.⁶ The levels of economic development were divergent too - while India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had a combined annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of around USD 468 billion in 1997, Thailand alone had a robust annual GDP of a little above USD 150 billion.⁷ Southeast Asia also had higher levels of intra-regional trade as compared to South Asia.

Despite the aforementioned natural constraints, the formation of the BIMSTEC showed that certain South and Southeast Asian economies had a strong appetite for economic cooperation. In many ways, it “marked the beginning of a new era of political and economic cooperation” in the region where “India is not only a participant but an active initiator”.⁸ Kaul (2006: 314) explains this interest in regional integration based on four push factors: commonality of economic, political and security interests that took precedence over divergences; the need to reduce tensions with neighbours and share regional resources; the need to build economic interdependence, and hence bring more stability, through increased trade; the urge to

...the formation of the BIMSTEC showed that certain South and Southeast Asian economies had a strong appetite for economic cooperation.

forge cooperative regional security and manage asymmetric wars better.⁹ Beyond these realpolitik concerns, the concerned countries had some natural drivers towards regional integration.

The BIMSTEC region is home to 1.5 billion people or 22% of the global population¹⁰ - figures that lend significant demographic heft to the region and offer a natural motivation for economic integration. From India's perspective, the idea was to lead a South Asian push towards Southeast Asia, beyond the hassles of dealing with Pakistan, and secondarily, spur socio-economic development of the underdeveloped eastern¹¹ and northeastern states. This eastward push should be seen in the broader foreign policy context of India's Look East Policy (LEP), formulated in 1991, which overlapped well with similar regional diversifications by eastern neighbours, such as Thailand and Myanmar. In fact, some scholars have pointed out how the initial push to form a multilateral grouping around the Bay of Bengal came from the Thai government that wanted to implement its own 'Look West Policy' and also engage better with Myanmar.¹²

BIMSTEC's journey from an unusual start to a seemingly reinvigorated present has been less than impressive, perhaps best evinced by the fact that so far, it has only convened four summits - 2004 (Bangkok, Thailand), 2008 (New Delhi, India), 2014 (Naypyitaw, Myanmar) and 2018 (Kathmandu, Nepal). It did not even have a permanent secretariat until 2014, when one was finally opened in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It is fair to say that BIMSTEC lacked the institutional and financial capacity to implement its vision of regional integration and economic cooperation. As put by one close observer of the grouping (Xavier 2018), "its ambitions have sometimes outpaced its accomplishments."¹³ Nevertheless, it has managed to make some progress in different sectors at its own steady pace and establish multi-format mechanisms of cooperation on a host of critical issues. Of these, the Free Trade Area (FTA) Framework Agreement, signed on 8 February 2004, is a particularly significant achievement of BIMSTEC as it reflected the political will of member states to achieve real economic integration of the region. However, even after twenty rounds of negotiations and finalisation of several constituent agreements and protocols,ⁱ the FTA is yet to see the light of the day - another example of BIMSTEC's limited capacity, institutional constraints and political exigencies.

Other mechanisms set up by BIMSTEC include the Trade and Economic Ministerial

i Agreement on Trade in Goods of the Framework Agreement on the BIMSTEC FTA, Agreement on Trade in Services of the Framework Agreement on the BIMSTEC FTA, Agreement on Investment of the Framework Agreement on the BIMSTEC FTA, Agreement on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters for the BIMSTEC FTA, Agreement on Rules of Origin and Operational Certification Procedures for the BIMSTEC FTA, Agreement on Trade Facilitation for the BIMSTEC FTA, Protocol to amend the Framework Agreement on the BIMSTEC FTA

Meeting (TEMM), Senior Trade and Economic Officials' Meeting (STEOM), BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Exchange (BTTE), BIMSTEC Energy Centre (BEC), BIMSTEC Transport and Connectivity Working Group (BTCWG), BIMSTEC Tourism Fund, BIMSTEC Sectoral Committee on Fisheries (BSCF), BIMSTEC Experts Group Meeting on Agricultural Cooperation (EGMAC), BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO), BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC), BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise, BIMSTEC Network of National Center of Coordination in Traditional Medicine, BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT), Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crimes (CTTC), etc.

Renewed Focus, Recalibrations, and Reforms

In the initial decade since its founding BIMSTEC did not receive as much attention as it has during the past decade. For the purpose of this analysis, the renewal shall be noted from 2014 when BIMSTEC convened for the first time during this decade. The rejuvenation has not been absolute or across-the-board, but in certain aspects and within specific foreign policy frameworks of individual member states. There seems to be some degree of fresh interest in advancing regionalism in every member state in the BoB region, and the reasons for that are individual and collective. This renewal is best seen in the broader context of shifting geopolitical dynamics in the South and Southeast Asian region, accompanied by evolving geo-economic and geopolitical interests of major powers.

It has been argued that the success of a regional grouping rests on the success of bilateral relations between individual member states.¹⁴ The renewal of BIMSTEC may be seen within this context, along two inter-related axes - erosion of the SAARC framework due to rapidly deteriorating India-Pakistan relations, and subsequently, reinvigorated convergence of interests between the BoB rim states. While the former is clearer by virtue of identifiable incidents and events - such as the September 2016 cross-border attack on the military base in Jammu and Kashmir's Uriⁱⁱ and the subsequent cancellation of the SAARC Summit in Islamabad - the latter varies across case-specific contexts.

The reemergence, per se, of BIMSTEC may be seen within three structural clusters: refocus, recalibrations, and reforms.

Refocus

Regarding redirection of policy focus on BIMSTEC, 2014 was a decisive and eventful year, as both SAARC and BIMSTEC met for their own summits in Kathmandu and Naypyitaw

ii The Indian government attributed the attacks to militants sponsored and deployed by the Pakistan military.

respectively, within a span of just eight months. Two key things transpired from these two events that were to fuel renewed interest in BoB regionalism -- BIMSTEC decided to set up a permanent secretariat in Dhaka; and Pakistan refused to sign regional connectivity agreements within SAARC, which led to a rejuvenation of the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) grouping. Both set the stage for BoB regionalism to find new drivers. Thus, in many ways, BIMSTEC came back to life due to the same reason that spurred its birth in the first place - to move beyond a SAARC plagued by Pakistani intransigence and growing India-Pakistan differences, and find common regional interests in a different sub-region. Ultimately, the push came out of a mix of circumstantial developments in the region and converging interests of the BoB rim states on specific agendas for advancing their individual national interests.

This renewed impetus was furthered by the special attention that India, as the grouping's largest member state, began to give to its immediate neighbourhood and Southeast Asia through the Narendra Modi government's Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP) and Act East Policy (AEP), respectively. The special BIMSTEC retreat that the Modi government hosted on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Goa in October 2016 played a key role in providing a new lease of life and a new strand of affirmative leadership to the grouping. The member states responded favourably, agreeing to "intensify [their] efforts to realise the objectives and purposes of BIMSTEC as outlined in the 1997 Bangkok Declaration" and pledged to "work collectively towards making BIMSTEC stronger, more effective, and result oriented."¹⁵ A fresh regional consensus emerged, driven by the idea that "a more connected region will help [individual] countries to prosper and fulfill other important national goals."¹⁶ Within this context, much like 2014, 2017 was a crucial year for the grouping when it "enjoyed a great deal of visibility"¹⁷. That year BIMSTEC completed twenty years of formation, its ministerial and senior officials' meetings were held for the first time in three years, a new secretary general was appointed, and after a long wait, BIMSTEC decided to hold its fourth summit in 2018. The flurry of activity gave the necessary traction that the BoB regional framework was looking for.

Recalibrations

A large part of BIMSTEC's story of revival played out along minute but critical foreign policy recalibrations by BoB rim states. The Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, particularly showed great interest in advancing BoB regionalism in the hope of building bridges to Southeast Asian port economies, particularly Singapore.¹⁸ There was a renewed push from the Aung San Suu Kyi government in Myanmar to build deeper relations with South Asian powers, such as India and Bangladesh¹⁹, to overcome

the lacklustre history of diplomatic relations on that front and reap geo-economic benefits of regionalism. Bangladesh, under PM Sheikh Hasina, found new meaning in pursuing BoB regionalism to secure its own national developmental goals, and even more so after the establishment of the BIMSTEC secretariat in Dhaka. Thailand too saw new sense in pursuing closer trade relations and connectivity with South Asian powers under its flagship "Act West Policy"²⁰ and facilitate the reinvigoration of BIMSTEC through the proactive promotion of a permanent secretariat²¹. Bhutan and Nepal had already expressed interest in bypassing the SAARC structure to pursue their regional goals through the BBIN, largely to build overland linkages to ports to ensure market linkages and create new value chains.

From the Indian perspective, the recalibration of regionalism from SAARC to BIMSTEC became increasingly clearer as Modi's first term progressed. The October 2016 retreat was perhaps the first glaring marker of New Delhi's renewed interest in BoB regionalism. The Pakistan based terrorist attacks on India's Pathankot air base and the army camp at Uri that year set the stage for India's definitive departure from the SAARC framework, with the others also realising that the traditional South Asian grouping was fast becoming hamstrung. The latter was bluntly reflected in the large paragraph dedicated to terrorism in the 2016 retreat document in which the countries agreed to "take strong measures against States who encourage, support and finance terrorism, provide sanctuary to terrorists and terror groups, and falsely extol their virtues."²² The "state" in question here is unambiguous. Without doubt, New Delhi had successfully managed to convince the region of Pakistan's dispensability in any new regional order that emerges. Then in May 2019, armed with a landslide mandate for a second consecutive term, Modi invited the heads of all the BIMSTEC member states for his glitzy swearing-in ceremony. In his first swearing-in in 2014, he had invited the SAARC heads of state. Thus, this was a significant move, and once again, "signaled that Modi's second term as prime minister will see India pivoting from its focus on SAARC to BIMSTEC."²³ Then in June 2019, newly-appointed External Affairs Minister (EAM), Dr S Jaishankar, said that the Modi government sees "energy, mindset and possibility" in BIMSTEC, as opposed to the problem-ridden SAARC.²⁴

It has also been argued that there was a second reason behind the Modi government's affirmative focus on BIMSTEC, i.e., China's renewed focus on extending its clout to the BoB region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).²⁵ This includes Beijing's investments in the smaller economies of the region that is shaping "present day domestic politics and foreign policy of countries in the neighbourhood and beyond, including the BoB littorals."²⁶ Further, China's has been asking India to bring the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) formation under the BRI framework, a demand that it reiterated after revoking its longstanding opposition to sanctioning of Pakistani militant Islamic leader,

Masood Azhar ²⁷. These have compelled New Delhi to recalibrate its regional focus, away from the South Asian hinterlands to the BoB. BIMSTEC was the natural alternative here, which would, much to India's comfort, advance India's regional goals while excluding both Pakistan and China.

Notwithstanding the bitter regional rivalries, it has been argued (Yhome 2019) that BIMSTEC, as a distinct regional forum, "presents its own strengths and weaknesses for India, independent of Pakistan and the SAARC."²⁸ In terms of the core interests for pursuing BoB regionalism, India has more than one. They play out not sequentially, but simultaneously. First, it bolsters the Modi government's focus on the neighbourhood under the NFP; second, it gives a fillip to India's outreach to Southeast Asia under the AEP; and third, it creates a regional development platform for the "entire eastern seaboard"²⁹ and the underdeveloped Northeastern region, which it projects as the "land bridge" to Southeast Asia³⁰ as part of AEP. As framed by one "senior Indian official dealing with regional cooperation initiatives" to Xavier (2018), these reflect India's "three-in-one strategy" on BIMSTEC. ³¹ This hard-set three pronged strategy clearly has a realist underpinning - India needs BIMSTEC to contain a rapidly bulging Chinese sphere of influence in its own doorstep, while projecting itself as a constructive and responsible South Asian power that can facilitate the development of small powers through partnership-based regional action.

Reforms

BIMSTEC has taken a major step towards institutional reforms in this decade. For the first time since its inception, the organization devoted an entire section of the 2018 Kathmandu summit declaration to this matter. After all, despite the establishment of a permanent secretariat in 2014, the organization has been pointedly accused of being "bereft of the most basic capabilities to implement even a fraction of its increasing mandate"³² Three types of reforms were proposed in the 2018 declaration: internal structural reforms; reforms on external relations; and substantive reforms of areas of cooperation.

In the first category, BIMSTEC decided to begin work on two key matters: a charter, and a permanent working committee.³³ As strange as it may sound, even after two decades of formation, BIMSTEC was a multilateral organization sans a charter - which singularly reflected the ambiguity of vision that it has been accused of. The BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) was tasked with finalising the charter and also "prepare schedule of meetings, prioritise and rationalise the organization's activities."³⁴ Further, member states agreed to explore the possibility of establishing an internal research fund, known as the BIMSTEC Development Fund (BDF).³⁵ Countries also pledged to "enhance the institutional capacity of the BIMSTEC Secretariat, including through financial and human

resources.”³⁶

Within the second category, member states agreed to enhance the “visibility and stature of BIMSTEC in international fora by, inter alia, forging common positions, as appropriate, on issues of common interest and seeking group recognition in various multilateral organizations, institutions and processes.”³⁷ This is crucial as it signals the organisation’s intent to move towards a framework of ‘centrality’, not unlike ASEAN. At the same time, it indicates an internal realisation that without lobbying capacities, BIMSTEC can achieve little on the regional development front.

In the third category, the member states recognized the “need to accelerate progress in the core areas of cooperation” and to “review, restructure and rationalize” the existing areas of cooperation.³⁸ The countries also pledged to “streamline the operational modalities for activities, implementation of programmes and projects under BIMSTEC for bringing out tangible results.” Notably, Thailand took the lead in this by proposing a concept paper titled “Reprioritisation of BIMSTEC Pillars of Cooperation”, which the member states collectively decided to forward to BPWC for further discussions. Sectoral prioritisation might be a good idea in the short-term. Prior to the summit, policy analysts had recommended that BIMSTEC work on a few “priority sectors” out of the existing 14 areas of cooperation, especially ones that are “low hanging fruits”, in order “to win the trust and confidence of the people of BIMSTEC region especially when the wounds of Global Economic Recession of 2008-09 and stalemate in SAARC Process are still felt in the region.”³⁹

Can BIMSTEC connect South and Southeast Asia?

The region that BIMSTEC straddles is a geostrategic crossroads. In fact, the very geography of BoB reflects the fluid continuity and contiguity between South and Southeast Asia. The rapidly rising economic and political clout of small and middle powers in this region makes it the ideal theatre for a post-hegemonic international order where horizontal partnerships within plurilateral and minilateral frameworks become the norm. A formation such as BIMSTEC that is made up of rising small and middle powers across two Asian sub-regions can also serve as a time-tested balancer against big power domination. While South and Southeast Asia have never been distant from big power competitions, the two regions are increasingly turning into theatres of stiff competition between China and the United States. In such a situation, BIMSTEC can be more than a mere geostrategic connector - it can be a cumulative balancer, to be used by small and middle powers as leverage against big power politics. In a structural-geographic sense, BIMSTEC is naturally well-placed to connect South and Southeast Asia. The membership structure of the organisation holds within itself or opens access to other regimes that cut across both subregions.⁴⁰ Besides

SAARC and ASEAN, these include two major groupings: Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC)⁴¹ and the South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC)⁴²

Institutionally, there is a concrete recognition that BIMSTEC is a connector between South and Southeast Asia. For instance, in the 2018 Kathmandu summit declaration, the BIMSTEC member states decided to advance regional cooperation by “leveraging on BIMSTEC’s unique position as a bridge linking South and Southeast Asia”⁴³ Modi, in his opening speech during the summit, acknowledged that both NFP and AEP culminate in the BoB region⁴⁴ Sri Lanka has recognized BIMSTEC’s frontal role in building South Asian synergies with Southeast Asian multilateral regimes.⁴⁵ Nepal too has stated that through BIMSTEC, they will be able to build economic linkages with and attract investments from Southeast Asia.⁴⁶ The Bhutanese government has already been playing a central role in facilitating connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asia.⁴⁷ There is considerable interest within Bangladesh to forge closer linkages with economies of Southeast and East Asia under its “Look East Policy”⁴⁸, and there is a critical void to be filled in that space.⁴⁹ From the other side, i.e., Southeast Asia, faith in the BIMSTEC regional order remains firm as both Myanmar and Thailand seek out the BoB framework to advance specific sectoral interests. For Myanmar, energy and connectivity are two key sectors of cooperation⁵⁰, while for Thailand, port connectivity is a key driver.⁵¹ Therefore, BIMSTEC appears well placed to deepen the political, economic and territorial contiguities between the two rising sub-regions of Asia.

But, political will is hardly a sufficient precondition for full-spectrum regional integration. There are several other variables, ranging from economic incongruences and mismatch of priorities. By design, BIMSTEC includes only the westernmost fringes of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. This is a major geographic limitation that BIMSTEC faces while building linkages with Southeast Asia. While Thailand and Myanmar are crucial ASEAN members, their capacity to lobby for South Asian powers within ASEAN remains limited and contingent on specific sectoral priorities. Add to this the limitations of linking South Asian value chains with the ASEAN markets, which are relatively more interconnected than in South Asia. With China saturating the market even further, BIMSTEC might struggle to make meaningful inroads into the fast growing ASEAN economies. With India’s recent withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), alongside the non-participation of other BoB powers, BIMSTEC might find itself in a difficult knot in regard to building linkages between South and Southeast Asia. The primary hindrance is the deep mismatch between market integration in the two regions.

By now, it has become common knowledge that South Asian markets, which form the bulk of the BIMSTEC combined market, have completely failed to achieve internal integration, despite the existence of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) since 2006.⁵² Intra-regional trade in South Asia hasn't shot up much beyond 5% of its total trade with the outside world, unlike ASEAN, where it accounts for nearly 30%.⁵³ A recent World Bank-sanctioned report identifies four structural barriers that have hindered South Asian market integration: tariff and para tariff barriers; non-tariff barriers; high costs of connectivity; and the trust deficit among South Asian countries.⁵⁴ In fact, tariff restrictiveness in South Asia remains the highest in the world.⁵⁵ Further, and most relevant to South-Southeast Asia connectivity, South Asia suffers from a "lack of synchronized and coordinated border infrastructure in road freight, rail, shared waterways, and connectivity by sea" that continues to pose severe restrictions to geo-economic contiguities within the BoB region.⁵⁶ While proposed connectivity projects like the regional Motor Vehicle Agreements (MVAs)ⁱⁱⁱ and rail connections between India and Bangladesh could bridge the dis-connectivities, they are yet to be actualised. The ASEAN region is better off in these regards, and the bloc's intra-regional trade statistics only continue to go up the ladder, unlike South Asia's.⁵⁷ But, it too has a slew of non-tariff barriers and connectivity limitations that continue to hinder full-spectrum regional economic integration.⁵⁸ In this context, one of the BIMSTEC members - Thailand - has taken the lead in strengthening ASEAN connectivity through adoption of the "Master Plan on Asean Connectivity 2025: MPAC 2025".⁵⁹ Thus, it is well placed to propose and develop similar models for South-Southeast Asia integration using the BIMSTEC framework. In fact, Bangkok is already working on advancing BIMSTEC port connectivity through the "Connect the Connectivities" project under the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement.⁶⁰

BIMSTEC's potential to serve as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia faces another grave structural challenge, i.e., non-participation of all South Asian BIMSTEC members in the RCEP. India's recent withdrawal from the mega trade grouping⁶¹ that includes almost every Southeast and East Asian country, besides also Australia and New Zealand, has caused palpable anxieties within ASEAN. Certain countries, such as Singapore, have expressed concern,⁶² while others, like Indonesia, have shown optimism about India's participation in the future. But, most importantly, voices from within the Thai government have shown impatience over India's stalling, stating that RCEP can enter into force without New Delhi.⁶³ Moreover, one scholar (Alam, 2019) has argued that the "reticence" of South Asian economies such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan to "engage with the [Southeast Asian] region" by not joining RCEP "will hamper growth prospects." The moot

iii Some MVAs currently under discussion in the region are BIMSTEC, BBIN and 'India Myanmar Thailand (IMT)' MVA.

point here is that once RCEP comes into force, BIMSTEC, as a trade grouping, could find it harder to compete in ASEAN markets, thanks to the extreme export-import liberalisation that the FTA will endow the region with from within and without. Add to this the fact that BIMSTEC is yet to finalise its own FTA. Besides structural economic limitations, the broader South Asian reluctance to come on board, RCEP might have added to the trust deficit between the region and ASEAN. It is no new knowledge that for Southeast Asia, South Asia has never been a bright spot in trade or connectivity, thanks to its trade barriers and challenging political climate. Thus, for BIMSTEC to successfully deepen South-Southeast Asia relationship, the South Asian member states have to proactively engage with ASEAN countries on a bilateral basis, both economically and politically.

Can BIMSTEC be India's regional force multiplier?

As explained earlier, India's has a matrix of core and lateral interests in pursuing BIMSTEC that allows it to "combine important domestic, regional and international aspects of its foreign policy."⁶⁴The fundamental underpinning here, as pointed out by Wagner (2006), is the logic of "cooperation" from a dual institutional and neo-realist perspective.⁶⁵ Broadly, three logic clusters can be identified - development and connectivity, regional leadership, big power balance. Together, BIMSTEC appears poised to give New Delhi the ideal platform to cement its place as a responsible, constructive and astute Asian power. Further, unlike SAARC, it is less susceptible to being held back by zero sum power rivalries and security dilemmas. But, before probing deeper into whether BIMSTEC can actually facilitate India's regional success, one elephant in the room needs to be addressed.

India as a hegemon?

India is a disproportionately large power in the BoB region, compared to other member states - by size, GDP, geopolitical influence and military strength. In fact, it is the only "middle power"⁶⁶ in BIMSTEC. In that context, India is routinely accused by some of being a regional hegemon.⁶⁷ Through post-colonial history, India's smaller neighbours have been cautious of India's weight in South Asia, and in that vein, attempted to form alliances with the US or China to insure themselves against New Delhi's dominance.⁶⁸ In that sense, India has never been a true "hegemon" as its perceived dominance was never fully accepted by its neighbours, though they are intrinsically tied to it and benefit enormously from that relationship.

Add to this the overtly "anti-India" mainstream political factions in the neighbourhood. Thus, the nagging perception and insecurity still remain, adding to the "historical baggage of conflict and mistrust".⁶⁹ Notwithstanding India's attempts to

change its image, particularly through the Gujral doctrine, “it will take some time until the resentments from the past [are] removed in the smaller states”.⁷⁰ Smaller BIMSTEC members will continue to be mindful of potential Indian dependence and getting sucked into New Delhi’s sphere of influence. As argued by one retired Indian army officer (Kapoor, 2018), the recent pull-out by Nepal from the BIMSTEC military exercise substantiates this point.⁷¹ India has to proactively push back against this perception by sustaining its political will in BIMSTEC through practical implementation of its vision and pledges.

It has been argued that BIMSTEC would serve well to offset the perception of India as a “big brother” in South Asia.⁷² Unlike in South Asia, India is not perceived as a hegemon in Southeast Asia, but rather, as a counterweight to China.⁷³ Thus, a formation that contains two Southeast Asia countries would temper the perception of Indian hegemony that the South Asian small powers could bring to any BoB regional order. This, however, is not a sure-fire formula, and New Delhi would do well to not take it for granted. Former Indian ambassador to Myanmar, Rajiv Bhatia, delivers the crispest words of caution in this regard when he says that Indian leadership within BIMSTEC will have to be “exerted with a mix of sensitivity, generosity, astuteness and determination.”⁷⁴ India must take care to ensure that the entrenched insecurities of South Asian small powers do not spill over to Myanmar and Thailand, which could begin to make BIMSTEC look more like SAARC. This is even more so because of the frontal challenge that India faces from Xi Jinping’s China that, amongst other things, is singularly focused on building leverage in South and Southeast Asia through big-ticket, rapidly implemented development and connectivity projects. An obsession with isolating Pakistan could also disillusion the bloc’s other members. Likewise, India must be wary of apprehensions of some of its neighbours about not wanting “to get caught up in the high-powered game” between New Delhi and Beijing.⁷⁵

Geo-economic springboard

Structurally, BIMSTEC is an ideal platform for India to actualise both NFP and AEP. It can provide the necessary dialogue and consultation framework that India needs to identify the political, economic and strategic needs of its South Asian neighbours and the two gateway countries to Southeast Asia, allowing New Delhi to fine-tune the two foreign policy directives. More broadly, BIMSTEC gives India a wholesome springboard not just in the BoB region, but also the Indo-Pacific that it aspires to lead. As argued by one scholar (Hussain, 2018), “New Delhi has realised that BIMSTEC will allow for a broader playing field.”⁷⁶ In terms of connectivity, BIMSTEC allows India to reap two benefits: realising its own regional connectivity initiatives through combined capacity and renewed will; and extending its national connectivity plans to the entire subregion, thereby bringing down

costs through the use of common resources and third party funding (like SASEC, through ADB). Two good examples of the former are the long-pending Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport and Transit Project (KMMTTP)⁷⁷, which has dragged on since the last twenty odd years, and the IMT Trilateral Highway project. Both could be clubbed within the BIMSTEC connectivity schemes. Examples for the latter are the potential expansion of the UDAN air connectivity scheme to the BIMSTEC region, as proposed in 2017 by the Indian Minister of State for Civil Aviation⁷⁸, and a possible synchronisation of the 'Sagarmala' port connectivity project⁸⁸ with the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement. In this regard, South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC), which is already facilitating trade and connectivity projects in the BIMSTEC region,⁷⁹ could play an important role in providing the required financial and knowledge capacity to actualise these projects, thus also easing India's burden. However, this is a strictly neo-realist and utilitarian logic that does not take into account the gains that all involved parties make from expanded connectivity with Indian markets and techno-industrial capacities.

However, there is no denying that synchronisation of national developmental plan with those of BIMSTEC would allow India to play a leading and constructive role in strengthening sub-regional connectivity and trade cooperation. This, in turn, would contribute to building mutual trust with its neighbours. It might make sense for India to convince its neighbours to put bilaterally-agreed projects under BIMSTEC. This could render the grouping into a concrete counterweight to the BRI, at least in the regional context. In this regard, it may be argued that through BIMSTEC, India can take the lead in forging an equitable and mutually-profitable regional order that works for all. As argued by some (Mishra & Hashmi, 2017), it can advance "India's commitment to establish itself as a benign power" in the region.⁸⁰ By synchronising its own subregional initiatives with those of BIMSTEC and other transregional initiatives that straddle BIMSTEC,⁸¹ India can set a new template of constructive leadership for the BoB region based on horizontal partnerships.

Within this context, an academic exploration would remain incomplete without citing the role of third parties in advancing India's interests vis-a-vis BIMSTEC. In this regard, Japan is the most important partner than India has at the moment. Japan has direct geo-economic and geopolitical interests in the BoB region, alongside its demographic complementarities and cordial relations with BIMSTEC countries.⁸² In addition, Japan and India have grown closer under the Modi government, thanks to their concerns regarding China.⁸³ Both are not only collaborating on core sections like trade, investments, connectivity and digital infrastructure, but have also embarked on a larger BRI-like mission to build a cross-continental corridor from Asia to Africa.⁸⁴ This gives India a possibility to bring collaborations with Japan under the BIMSTEC framework. As argued by observers

(Chotani, 2018), since India does not as yet have the necessary “technological or economic bandwidth” to compete with the “fast-paced Chinese investments”, “partnering and cooperating with Japan within BIMSTEC projects, would enable India to give its members an alternative to China’s BRI within the region.”⁸⁵

A security alliance?

One key sector where the BIMSTEC can really act as India’s regional force multiplier is security cooperation. India has a host of security interests in the BoB region in both traditional and non-traditional domains, including cross-border insurgency along the India-Myanmar border, influx of asylum seekers from Myanmar and Bangladesh, arms and narcotics trafficking, combating piracy, counterterrorism, cyber security, and disaster mitigation.⁸⁶ Former External Affairs Minister (EAM) of India, Sushma Swaraj, had already stated during the 15th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting in Kathmandu in 2017 that the organization could play a meaningful role in cooperating to “counter the scourge of terrorism, violent extremism and transnational crimes” and strengthen “maritime and cyber security cooperation.”⁸⁷ The Indian PM also reiterated the importance of security cooperation during the BIMSTEC National Security Adviser (NSA)-level meet in New Delhi in July 2018.⁸⁸ India is already the lead country for the ‘counterterrorism and transnational crime’ sector within BIMSTEC. These complex issues necessarily require transnational cooperation, rather than separate approaches by individual member states. BIMSTEC offers the ideal platform to achieve that.

India is also engaged in a Trilateral Maritime Cooperation (TMC) with Sri Lanka and Maldives,⁸⁹ and it has also been argued that the Maldives should be invited into BIMSTEC, at least as an observer.⁹⁰ The TMC could be expanded to include other BoB rim states within the BIMSTEC framework. However, the Himalayan states like Bhutan and Nepal have little interest in any security-oriented maritime cooperation. This instead of strengthening BIMSTEC, could weaken it from within. The recent withdrawal of Nepal from the 2018 BIMSTEC joint military exercise was an indication of the pitfalls in security cooperation. Furthermore, some scholars (Xavier 2018) have pointedly argued that “geostrategic imperatives, security dialogues, or counterterrorism cooperation initiatives are no substitute for BIMSTEC’s primary mandate to increase regional connectivity and revive the Bay of Bengal community.”⁹¹

It needs to be noted here that security cooperation within BIMSTEC only covers areas that flow from enhanced connectivity, trade, people to people exchanges as well as measures to deal with common security challenges like cross-border terrorism and crime, money laundering, climate change, etc. BIMSTEC itself is not a security alliance.

The Dragon in the Room

An analysis of India's BIMSTEC strategy, if there is anything as such, will remain half-baked if the dragon in the room isn't addressed upfront - China. There is little denying in the fact that China's influence over India's neighbourhood is rising, with Bhutan being somewhat of an exception.⁹² Over the past five years, Beijing has managed to draw support for the BRI from every single BIMSTEC member, except Bhutan and India. Further, it has been argued by some that the "objectives of BIMSTEC are well in sync with the BRI that focuses on the connectivity, trade, investment and people to people relations across the continents." It is common knowledge by now that the BoB is a critical access route for Beijing, both in terms of geo-economic and geostrategic considerations, and a key nodal point for the Maritime Silk Route. It is natural, thus, that China would invest in building up a strategic sphere of influence here. Even the Indian Navy has acknowledged that "China is slowly and surely increasing its political, economic and military influence in inevitable competitions with the US and India", while also noting that there is "an amount of skepticism about their military initiatives in the region."⁹³ In this regard, two Chinese-owned ports in the region - Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Kyaukphyu in Myanmar - may prove to be strategically significant in the future. Further, Chinese arms sales to small powers in the core BIMSTEC region have even spurred discussions about an escalating "Bay of Bengal arms race".⁹⁴

There should not be any doubt that in the South-Southeast Asian context, China's interventions in the developmental and military realms are a direct challenge to India's standing and capacity to lead. By injecting financial and logistical resources into industrial, infrastructural and service sectors in the small BoB economies and bridging their security deficits through arms transfers, China shrinks India's space to make meaningful, need-specific interventions. Besides Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, Beijing is also pushing in large tranches of money into Myanmar and Thailand, both bilaterally and within the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS) framework.⁹⁵ There would be little reason for smaller BoB powers to look to BIMSTEC if China fulfils their developmental and security needs in a timely and cost-optimal manner. In other words, if the market for interventions is saturated, BIMSTEC can do little for the small powers in the region, if they reap benefits from BRI, beyond small-scale projects. For India, this is a challenge, largely because of its disagreements with China on BRI regarding transparency, terms and conditions, violation of sovereignty, etc. Political polarisation has come about within the regional political environment as a result. Combined with recent events like the Doklam standoff, India and China are not expected to find much common ground in BoB, despite mild successes of leadership diplomacy between Modi and Xi. Most importantly, the BRI could become a divisive element within the BIMSTEC, with most members openly accepting it and New Delhi and Thimphu rejecting it. There is little

reason to believe that the two approaches won't be at loggerheads with each other at some level, especially when it comes to sectoral prioritisation, project planning and investments.

There is also a looming possibility of China finding its way into BIMSTEC. Earlier in this decade, Beijing expressed interest to come on board the organisation, at least as an observer, through participation in the long-dormant Bangladesh China India Myanmar (BCIM) sub-regional grouping.⁹⁶ Recently, former foreign secretary of Nepal and ambassador to Bangladesh, Madhu Raman Acharya, said that BIMSTEC member states should think about accommodating China within the organisation and "take China as complementary to the BIMSTEC process".⁹⁷ As Beijing deepens its clout in other BIMSTEC countries, India might face a growing demand from some of the members to include China. In many ways, from the Indian perspective, that would turn the logic of BIMSTEC upside down. Yet, there might be a chink of an opening for India-China collaboration within BIMSTEC. In this regard, the biggest common ground, if anything at all, will be the BCIM.. While the BCIM has been in a dormant state for a long time due to clashing perceptions of India and China on regional cooperation, it has seen some modest revival during this decade. Beijing has been eager to revive it since long "in stark contrast to India" that hardly ever paid any heed to it.⁹⁸ Since the launch of BRI, Beijing has seen BCIM to be a part of the mega project and contrary to "India's cautious position, China is looking for immediate action and commitment to the initiative."⁹⁹ In 2015, BCIM met for its 12th forum in Yangon, followed by a meeting of the Joint Study Group (JSG) in April 2017. The JSG meeting indicated the sharp difference between the perceptions of India and China over BCIM, wherein India remains cautious and China remains eager to institutionalise it. Both Myanmar and Bangladesh would like to move ahead with the connectivity projects sanctioned in the region.¹⁰⁰ There was some chatter in the media that China had abandoned the sluggish BCIM (and replaced it with the newly-proposed China Myanmar Economic Corridor) when it failed to include the initiative in its updated list of BRI projects during the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) of April 2019.¹⁰¹ But, Beijing categorically denied this two months later, stating that it is "very much on board."¹⁰² In fact, in June 2019, Track II representatives from all the member states met in Kunming and agreed to revive connectivity projects.¹⁰³

From here, India could go two distinct ways: engage in BCIM without restraints or conditions; or continue to engage nominally through the JSG. If India goes the first way, then it could stumble in its BIMSTEC dreams, as China would continue to saturate the development and connectivity market with its big-ticket projects, including the "early harvest" projects, and cash transfers. The second way would maintain the status quo, allowing India to prioritise its interventions and collaborations through BIMSTEC. It could be unwise to dismiss the BCIM idea entirely as heightened trade and connectivity in the

sub-region could benefit all. But, India's concerns about BCIM aggravating its existing trade imbalance with China are legitimate. Hence, as stated by the Indian representative in the 2017 JSG meeting, trade could be good, but only if it is sustainable.¹⁰⁴

With China ramping up arms sales to the region's small powers to create dependencies in the security sector, BIMSTEC security cooperation could fizzle out under the prevailing geopolitical landscape of the region. Last year, Nepal pulled out of the BIMSTEC joint military exercise hosted by India, citing internal political pressure¹⁰⁵ - a justification that India found unconvincing.¹⁰⁶ This came in the backdrop of Kathmandu's growing intimacy with Beijing after a rough diplomatic phase with India over the 2015 Madhesi crisis and later, the coming of a communist coalition to power. For Myanmar and Thailand security cooperation under BIMSTEC could be a sticky prospect, given their own delicate equations with an ever-watchful China. A more assertive India - politically and strategically - could ultimately take away their core incentives for participating in a transregional regime like the BIMSTEC. Hence, India must keep its focus limited to non-strategic and non-traditional security sectors for now, while giving smaller powers their space to maneuver. India needs to continue to support BIMSTEC's framing of the current format of joint military drills under the counterterrorism domain. Anything otherwise could be seen as risky behaviour by the small powers. If anything, it makes more sense for India to strengthen its security cooperation with BIMSTEC small powers on a bilateral basis, as it is already doing.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

South and Southeast Asia are caught up in a fascinating, and perhaps debilitating, geopolitical flux. The BoB region, in particular, is witnessing some of the most volatile shifts in recent history. With China projecting its might across the region under the BRI and India positing one of its strongest and most proactive foreign policy approaches in the recent past, small powers in the region are faced with critical choices. Further, with Southeast Asia about to embark on the largest free trade arrangement in modern history with the RCEP, the geo-economic landscape of the region appears to be entering a whole new era.

In such times, a transregional grouping like the BIMSTEC holds a critical position. With member states showing renewed interest in it, this might be the golden moment for this long-dormant organization to establish a regional order that benefits all and keeps disruptive big power politics at bay. In this regard, much has already been written about the immense potential that BIMSTEC holds for its member states. Yet, if one scratches the surface, myriad dilemmas and intricacies emerge - those that member states need to handle with care. These complexities are most sharply visible across the South Asian segment of BIMSTEC. With the SAARC on a freefall, BIMSTEC comes as a difficult test for South Asian

resilience and cooperation. However, BBIN—an essential component of BIMSTEC-- has made significant progress in connectivity and trade cooperation in the past decade. With an assertive China breathing down the neck, the challenges have become harder. There is no doubt that BIMSTEC, if realised in full, can accrue great benefits for the member states, but much of it depends on how the power dynamic and perceptions within the group play out - particularly with respect to the delicate relations between India and its smaller neighbours.

For India, BIMSTEC can go both ways. If it manages to frame the organization as a platform for equitable and sustainable regional development, New Delhi can achieve the dual objective of development and perception management. BIMSTEC offers India the ideal platform to actualise both the NFP and AEP. In that sense, a BoB regional order makes the most geographic sense for the Modi government's flagship foreign policy templates, including its focus on the broader Indo-Pacific region. However, much work remains to be done on bilateral fronts with ASEAN countries before New Delhi can embark on a comprehensive project to link up BIMSTEC and Southeast Asia across the board.

Before all else, India has to walk the talk on its promises and vision if it wants to sustain its image as a viable balancer to China in both South and Southeast Asia. With China looking to make inroads into the BIMSTEC order, any slacking by India could render the organization as impotent and counterproductive as SAARC. BIMSTEC, as a grouping, needs to actively fight its image of indolence. As already stated by a chorus of policy experts and academics, BIMSTEC should start with fulfilling the ambitious brief that it has drawn up and take all the pending agreements to their logical conclusion. In this regard, selective prioritisation of agendas might be a prudent path to take, otherwise, the organization will continue to be cited as an anti-example of regionalism and would remain at the margins of Asian multilateralism.

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