

NATIONAL SECURITY

A VIF Publication

[Instructions for authors](#)

Regional Connectivity and India's BIMSTEC Policy

Constantino Xavier & Riya Sinha



Xavier, Constantino., Riya Sinha. "Regional Connectivity and India's BIMSTEC Policy". *National Security*, Vivekananda International Foundation Vol.III (1) (2020) pp.34-51.

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

- This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.
- Views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the VIF.
- The author certifies that the article/paper is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed, and are believed to be correct.

Article

Regional Connectivity and India's BIMSTEC Policy

Constantino Xavier
Riya Sinha

Abstract

This article reviews how regionalism is making a comeback in the Bay of Bengal, the challenges of connectivity, and the opportunities and limitations of India's new approach to BIMSTEC. The paper first delves into the history of integration and convergence in the Bay of Bengal region in the 20th century, followed by reviewing the legacy of the organization on cooperation in trade, visa policies, air transport and other critical connectivity indicators. Finally, the paper concludes by arguing that New Delhi will have to focus on two critical dimensions in its new BIMSTEC policy: 1) strengthening the organization's bureaucratic capacity in terms of financial and human resources; and 2) focus on the organization's essentially economic and technical mandate and avoid excessive emphasis on security and military cooperation. BIMSTEC will only enhance India's long-term interests if the organization's multilateral and institutional instruments are able to lower member-states' transaction costs to cooperate and enhance regionalism in the Bay of Bengal.

Compared to Europe or Southeast Asia, few people today think of the Bay of Bengal as a distinctive region or of the “Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation” (BIMSTEC) as a relevant organization. As historian Sunil Amrith notes, “the absence of BIMSTEC from the public consciousness is a problem,” and this reflects a “challenge of the imagination” given that that this used to be one of the world’s most integrated areas until the early twentieth century.¹ However, after the 1940s, as the Bay of Bengal’s newly-independent countries embraced divergent alliance systems in the

Constantino Xavier, Fellow, Brookings India & Riya Sinha, Research Consultant, Brookings India.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the research inputs and data analysis from Aarushi Aggarwal and Charvee Puri.

twentieth century, instituted borders as barriers, and pursued different socio-economic models, the region's sense of community has almost completely eroded.

No other organization than BIMSTEC is today better placed to overcome this mental, economic and geostrategic divide that split the Bay of Bengal across two regions, South and Southeast Asia. Rather than artificially *inventing* a new region into being, BIMSTEC's main mission is therefore to merely *revive* past levels of integration and mutual attachment. The organization's first Secretary General, Sumith Nakandala, thus observed that "we are not reinventing the wheel" but just "rediscovering the common heritage around the Bay of Bengal."² Similarly, in his statement on the organization's twentieth anniversary, in June 2017, Prime Minister Modi underlined that "with shared values, histories, ways of life, and destinies that are interlinked, [the Bay of Bengal] represents a common space for peace and development."³

BIMSTEC's main mission is therefore to merely revive past levels of integration and mutual attachment.

Founded in 1997, BIMSTEC is a sector-driven organization for sub-regional cooperation between Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan. Multiple levels of technocratic meetings in fourteen working groups feed into the policy-making summit. The first summit, held in Bangkok in July 2004, included the Framework Agreement for a BIMST-EC⁴ Free Trade Area, which has failed to progress since then. But the second, third and fourth summits were held in 2008, 2014 and 2018, respectively, all with significant delays. But after the initial momentum, in the 2000s, the organization failed to make substantive progress.

The 2018 Kathmandu summit renewed the vigor in BIMSTEC wherein the leaders "reaffirmed their commitment to the BIMSTEC Bangkok Declaration" and renewed their commitment towards making BIMSTEC "a dynamic, effective and result-oriented regional organization for promoting a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable Bay of Bengal Region through meaningful cooperation and deeper integration."⁵ The new momentum, mostly driven by India, was reflected in the BIMSTEC Leaders Retreat in Goa, India, in 2016, where the leaders expressed their commitment to revive the organization.

This article reviews how regionalism is making a comeback in the Bay of Bengal, the challenges of connectivity, and the opportunities and limitations of India's new approach to BIMSTEC. The first part shows that the Bay of Bengal is a region in its own right, based on a history of integration and convergence until the early 20th century. Beyond the usual understanding of "South Asia" as India's traditional region, institutionally anchored around the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), there is thus scope to

consider different, flexible regional constructs like the Bay of Bengal. The second part proceeds to review the legacy of economic, political, and geostrategic divergence and fragmentation of the Bay of Bengal since the 1950s. Indicators such as trade, visa policies, air transport and other critical infrastructure show that the seven BIMSTEC member-states remain largely disconnected from each other. Without recognizing this abysmal state of integration, it makes little sense to burden a weak organization such as BIMSTEC with undue ambition and expectations.

Finally, the third and concluding section assesses India's new approach to BIMSTEC and argues that New Delhi will have to focus on two critical dimensions: strengthening the organizations' s bureaucratic capacity in terms of financial and human resources (including significant institutional autonomy), and resisting attempts to securitize the organization's essentially economic and technical mandate. BIMSTEC will only enhance India's interests if it is empowered to focus on its priority areas, including economic and infrastructural connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region.

Region no more? Convergence and divergence in the Bay of Bengal

No regional cooperation initiative will succeed unless one first acknowledges that the Bay of Bengal used to be one of the most integrated spaces in the world until the twentieth century. Its history reflects intense flows of people, goods and ideas at the crossroads of the Indian subcontinent and Indochina and links the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. As pointed out by historian Sunil Amrith, the "hope for a new regionalism lies in recognizing that the bay's history, as much as its ecology, transcends national frontiers."⁶

Historically, trade across the Bay of Bengal was encouraged by monsoon, which provides regular southwesterly winds from April to September that reverse from November to March. Regular rainfall along its coastline allowed for intensive agricultural production, thereby producing a regional surplus for trade.⁷ From the eight century onwards, maritime routes between India and China through the Andaman and Nicobar Islands flourished in the ports of Bay of Bengal linked to Sumatra and the South China Sea.⁸ With the advent of Islam, the region turned into the Indian Ocean's commercial pivot area, linking East Asia to Europe. For centuries local merchants moved along the stretch of the Coromandel Coast to Southeast Asia. Tamil Muslim merchants of Nagore and Nagapatnam from India sojourned in the port cities of Malay. Under the Sultanate of Bengal (1368-1576), Chinese ceramics entered India in large quantities through the ports of Sonargaon and Satgaon.⁹

In the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese sailed up the Hooghly River to procure Bengal's textiles to be exchanged for spices across Asia. Their trading activities stretched

from Satgaon to Chittagong covering all mouths of the tributaries of the river Ganga.¹⁰ While this marked the beginning of global economic exchanges, it was only under the British Empire that the Bay of Bengal emerged as a modern economic space, with the massive exchange of capital and people. By the late nineteenth century the British dominated the Bay of Bengal as no previous power had ever done, from Madras to Malacca.¹¹ With the subsequent rise of large rubber plantations in Malaysia, rice in Burma, and coffee and tea in Ceylon, between 1840 and 1940 the British Raj mobilized almost 30 million workers to cross the Bay of Bengal.¹² In 1926 and 1927 such flows reached an all-time peak, as more than 150,000 people arrived in Malaya from India and nearly 300,000 in Ceylon. The number of journeys from India to Burma exceeded 400,000 each year from 1926 to 1929, with a peak of 428,300 arrivals in Burma in 1927.¹³

Such migration was facilitated by an impressive infrastructure facilitating connectivity. Starting in the 1860s, the British India Steam Navigation Company began regular ship connections between Calcutta and Rangoon, further expanding the network in subsequent years to dozens of ports on the Eastern and Western coasts of the Bay of Bengal, to Singapore.¹⁴ The first regular airline connections between India, Burma and Malaya were established in the 1930s. In an ironic twist of history reflecting these flows across the Bay of Bengal, the British Raj forced the last Indian and Burmese sovereigns to switch sides in exile: Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar died in Rangoon, in 1862, and the last Burmese King Thibaw Min perished in Ratnagiri (Maharashtra), in 1916. Just before the Second World War erupted, the Bay of Bengal region reached its peak level of integration. Rangoon's population was predominantly Indian, including large communities of Chettiyars, Bengalis, and Punjabis. In the opposite direction, many Burmese found an entrepreneurial and intellectual home in Calcutta, which witnessed the beginnings of some of the Burmese Communist factions.¹⁵

However, with the inauguration of New Delhi as the Raj's new capital, in 1931 (replacing Calcutta), and the administrative separation of Burma from India, in 1937, the Bay of Bengal also entered a process of political, economic and geostrategic divergence. India's focus moved to the hinterland, preoccupied with its freedom struggle and the delineation of its future sovereign borders. Disintegration culminated in the subcontinent's partition of 1947, with the creation of independent India, Ceylon, Burma and East Pakistan. The links across the Bay of Bengal had already been temporarily severed in 1942, when the Japanese Army conquered Malaya, Singapore, Siam, and Burma.

Following decolonization, the new countries in the region adopted different political systems. Nepal initially experimented with democracy but eventually embraced an

absolutist monarchy focused on isolation, as in the case of Bhutan. While India and Sri Lanka adopted parliamentary democracy, Burma plunged into military authoritarianism in 1962. Thailand, in time, adopted a hybrid military-monarchical regime. With the establishment of new political borders, the region's economic openness receded. Except for Thailand, all countries adopted various models of state-driven economic development, autarky and isolation. By focusing on socialist and protectionist models, free trade and market economy were discarded and borders turned into bulwarks against the mobility of people, capital, goods and ideas. South Asia turned inwards, prioritizing political consolidation at home over economic openness and interdependence. Similarly, security was to be achieved through isolation, not integration into the global alliance systems.

The political and economic divergence across the Bay of Bengal region soon found expression in divergent geostrategic alignments. With the crystallization of the American and Soviet blocks during the Cold War, and the creation of ASEAN, in 1967, the Bay of Bengal countries gravitated towards different spheres of influence. India focused

Decades of such political, economic and geostrategic divergence have eroded the sense of community in the Bay of Bengal region.

on non-alignment and insulation, seeking to preserve its predominant role in South Asia. Burma morphed into a geostrategic pariah, especially after deciding to leave the Non-Aligned Movement, in 1979. Thailand, in turn, joined the American-led Asian alliance system early on, as a founding member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), in 1954. By the 1970s, the idea of an "Asia-Pacific" region was therefore generally understood to stretch from the Korean peninsula to Indochina, covering ASEAN but excluding the Indian subcontinent.¹⁶ The subsequent creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), in the mid-1980s, formalized the regional divide between "South" and "Southeast" Asia, further dividing the Bay of Bengal into opposing geopolitical camps.

Decades of such political, economic and geostrategic divergence have eroded the sense of community in the Bay of Bengal region. After the end of the Cold War, India and Thailand attempted to reconnect with each other through their respective "Look East" and "Look West" policies. The creation of BIMSTEC, in 1997, reflected such initiative to revive cooperation in the region. This post-Cold War narrative about the resurgence of the Bay of Bengal is driven by a variety of actors and interests. For India, which has almost one quarter of its population living in states bordering the bay, growth and development are increasingly seen to hinge on the degree of connectivity with the Southeast Asian markets, as reflected in its 'Act East' policy. As the Belt and Road Initiative increases China's North-South access routes to the Indian Ocean, especially via Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, New Delhi

is accelerating alternative East-West connectivity plans across the Bay of Bengal, focused on the Ind-Pacific.¹⁷

Mind the Connectivity Gap

Despite an enthusiastic push for sub-regional cooperation since the 1990s, the Bay of Bengal remains fundamentally disintegrated and split between South and Southeast Asia. BIMSTEC will continue to face significant challenges towards regional cooperation and integration if obstacles to the free flow of people, ideas and goods are not addressed. This section focuses on three key areas of disconnectivity in the Bay of Bengal region.

a). Visas and Tourism

Bureaucratic hurdles make it extraordinarily difficult for citizens of BIMSTEC member states to move around the region today. Almost a third of visa applications for intra-BIMSTEC travel require appearing in person at a consular mission. While the number of visa-on-arrival and exemptions have increased, they only apply to a third of all application processes (Table 1). As seen in the Intra-BIMSTEC Visa requirements and Accessibility Index below, Nepal is the most accessible country, giving visa-on-arrival to citizens of all other six BIMSTEC countries. Bangladesh and Bhutan, in turn, are the two least accessible countries, each requiring citizens of four other BIMSTEC countries to appear in person at their consular missions for a visa application (Table 1). Costs can also be prohibitive, with an Indian or Thai multiple visa for citizens of Myanmar or Bangladesh, respectively, amounting to USD 200. With such barriers, today it is paradoxically easier and cheaper for a Chinese citizen to visit BIMSTEC countries than for BIMSTEC nationals to visit each other's countries.¹⁸

Visa obstacles are only one indicator of barriers hindering human mobility across the Bay of Bengal. Tourism serves as another indicator of how the region's societies have become disconnected. The region has a rich and shared heritage of Buddhist monuments and pilgrimage places, which are located in, or connect all seven BIMSTEC countries. Four countries (Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Myanmar and Thailand) have a Buddhist-majority population, whereas Bangladesh, Nepal and India are home to important Buddhist sites which could attract more tourists from and to the region, leading to significant earnings in foreign exchange.¹⁹

Table 1: Intra-BIMSTEC Visa requirements and Accessibility Index (total 42)²⁰	
Type 1: No Visa required or Visa on Arrival without prior clearance:	16
Type 2: Visa on Arrival with prior online clearance:	14
Type 3: Visa application at the embassy with interview:	12
1. Nepal (6: most accessible)	
2. India (11)	
3. Myanmar (11)	
4. Sri Lanka (12)	
5. Thailand (12)	
6. Bangladesh (14)	
7. Bhutan (14: least accessible)	

Despite such potential, the intra-BIMSTEC flows of tourists remain abysmally low. This is particularly apparent in the case of India. The number of incoming visitors from BIMSTEC countries to India has increased by almost 166 per cent (Table 1(a)) in the last five years (2013-2017), but data available indicates that half of the total entries are from Bangladesh and not likely for the purposes of tourism. On the other hand, the total number of outgoing Indian visitors to the other six BIMSTEC countries has also increased (by 35 per cent since 2013 – Table 1(b)), but at the same rate as the growth in the total number of Indian tourists going abroad.²¹

Table 2: Tourism flows between India and BIMSTEC countries^{22'}

(a) Incoming BIMSTEC country tourists to India

Country	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	TOTAL	Percentage change (2013-2017)
Bangladesh	524923	942562	1133879	1380409	2156557	6138330	311
Myanmar	34916	54631	55341	51376	56952	253216	63
Sri Lanka	262345	301601	299513	297418	303590	1464467	16
Thailand	117136	121362	115860	119663	140087	614108	20
Bhutan	15016	16001	19084	20940	25267	96308	68
Nepal	113790	126416	154720	161097	164018	720041	44
TOTAL	1068126	1562573	1778397	2030903	2846471	9286470	166

Source: UNWTO Statistics and Tourism Council of Bhutan

(b) Outgoing Indian tourists to BIMSTEC countries

Country	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	TOTAL	Percentage change (2013-2017)
Bangladesh	78975	77177	N/A	N/A	N/A	156152	N/A
Myanmar	52284	62117	59692	63864	86907	324864	66
Sri Lanka	229674	238951	278017	317419	386131	1450192	68
Thailand	1050889	932603	1069149	1194508	1415197	5662346	35
Bhutan	54083	54935	89780	114301	172751	486804	219
Nepal	180974	135343	75124	118249	160268	669958	-11
TOTAL	1646879	1501126	1572716	1808341	2221254	8750316	35

Source: UNWTO Statistics and Tourism Council of Bhutan

b). Transportation infrastructure

The past flow of people and goods in the region stands in stark contrast with the state of dis-connectivity today. Obstacles to mobility hinder greater people-to-people exchanges and make travel in and around the Bay of Bengal both expensive and time-consuming. In terms of river and maritime connectivity, cross-border inland waterway links have been almost completely severed.²³ Attempts to revive the routes were made in 2015, when India and Bangladesh signed the Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade, and in 2018, when India and Nepal issued a joint statement on increasing connectivity using inland waterways.²⁴ Furthermore, until India and Bangladesh signed the Coastal Shipping Agreement in June 2015, containers between both countries had to be transhipped via Sri Lanka. Decades of economic autarky have left the ports of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar disconnected. Today, it is therefore paradoxically three times cheaper to ship a container from Delhi to Singapore (USD 800) than to Dhaka (USD 2500), and it takes approximately the same time (15 days) despite the longer distance.²⁵

Railways, which spurred growth in much of the Bay of Bengal region after the late nineteenth century, have also been scaled back. The multi-modal rail-ship link between India and Sri Lanka was deactivated in the 1980s. The last passenger rail connection between India and Nepal was severed in 2014.²⁶ While one of South Asia's busiest railway routes (between Kolkata and Dhaka) was restarted in 2008, after 43 years, dozens of links between India and Bangladesh remain inactive.²⁷ The rupture between South and Southeast Asia is also reflected in the absence of any rail links between India and Myanmar, Bangladesh and Myanmar, and Myanmar and Thailand.

In terms of air connectivity, the level of connectivity remains minimal, with just three weekly connections between India and Myanmar. Similarly, cross-border regions have also been taken off the air connectivity map in the Bay of Bengal. For example, until the 1970s, the Northern Sri Lankan city of Jaffna had direct flight connections to the South Indian cities of Trichy and Madras (now Chennai), and it was also possible to fly from Burma's Sittwe across into Chittagong, in Southern Bangladesh.²⁸ The Chennai-Jaffna air connectivity was finally restored in October 2019, after 40 years.²⁹ As of 2017, there were more weekly flights between New Delhi and Bangkok (46) than between the Indian capital and the three BIMSTEC capitals of Thimpu, Colombo and Yangon (instead of Nay Pyi Taw) combined. Yangon, in turn, had 126 direct eastward flights to Bangkok per week, but only seven westwards to the five other BIMSTEC capitals. This reflects the poor state of air connectivity in the Bay of Bengal as an immense flyover region. The aerial black hole between South and Southeast Asia is also reflected in the fact that, as of 2014, among India's top twenty air routes by passenger volume (see Table 3), just four had connections to BIMSTEC countries (total 2.6 million passengers transported), against six to ASEAN countries (3.7 million).³⁰

Table 3: Connections to BIMSTEC countries among India's 20 busiest air routes (2014)³¹

1. Bangkok-Delhi (8.3 million passengers)
2. Kathmandu-Delhi (7.2)
3. Chennai-Colombo (6.3)
5. Bangkok-Mumbai (4.3)

Table 4: Air Passenger traffic between India and BIMSTEC countries (2014-19)³²

Air Passengers	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Bangladesh	4,23,315	5,79,673	6,31,139	3,82,816	5,37,034	6,26,681
Bhutan	59,660	54,655	81,437	49,656	53,727	61,083
Burma	35,842	46,442	44,553	31,201	32,939	34,047
Nepal	8,80,634	10,10,173	7,15,198	4,23,861	5,01,734	4,88,552
Sri Lanka	15,93,881	16,50,657	19,63,116	10,53,613	12,86,677	14,11,448
Thailand	22,13,960	21,87,031	25,71,769	15,01,340	17,32,178	20,46,785
Total Annual:	52,07,292	55,28,631	60,07,212	34,42,487	41,44,289	46,68,596
Growth Rate (2013-14 to 2018-19):						-6%

Source: Directorate General of Civil Aviation

c. Economic exchanges

Connectivity between business communities across the region is an essential pre-requisite for the development of Bay of Bengal as a common economic area. However, the existing challenges on this front are daunting. For example, the 1,600 km long India-Myanmar border remains Asia's least open. Until 2015, even archaic barter trade prevailed at what was then the single border point with a full-fledged customs station, in Moreh (Manipur).³³ In 2017, land-based trade between the two neighbours therefore remained symbolic, at just USD 71 million (3.5 per cent of the bilateral trade), which was less than India's total trade with distant Nicaragua.³⁴

Consequently, today the Bay of Bengal region is one of the least integrated worldwide. In 2014, intraregional trade among BIMSTEC countries was less than 5 per cent compared to 29 per cent among ASEAN countries.³⁵ India's economic detachment from the Bay of Bengal is also reflected in the share of its trade with BIMSTEC countries, in the double digits until the 1950s, and currently only little more than four per cent.³⁶ Different economic models have also led to stark developmental divergences among its members. Per capita GDP varies starkly between just USD 2,500 in Nepal, still a least developed country (LDC), to USD 16,000 in medium-income Thailand.³⁷

Table 5 depicts the example of India's trade with other BIMSTEC countries between 2012-13 and 2018-19. While trade with the other six member-countries has increased by 15 per cent, its relative share in India's total trade has increased by little more than one per cent.

Table 5: Trade between India and BIMSTEC countries³⁸

Total trade (in USD million)	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Bangladesh	5,784.31	6,651.27	7,072.84	6,762.09	7,521.79	9,299.99	10,254.86
Bhutan	397.22	507.77	483.81	750.22	817.1	924.11	1,028.29
Myanmar	1,957.35	2,182.68	2,004.78	2,054.92	2,175.14	1,605.84	1,727.10
Nepal	3,631.94	4,122.23	5,198.68	4,400.67	5,898.72	7,051.34	8,274.34
Sri Lanka	4,609.68	5,201.27	7,459.89	6,052.32	4,515.35	5,249.09	6,198.60
Thailand	9,085.78	9,043.47	9,330.71	8,498.03	8,548.84	10,788.29	11,883.21
TOTAL	25,466.28	27,708.69	31,550.71	28,518.25	29,476.94	34,918.66	39,366.40

Per cent of total Indian trade	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Bangladesh	0.73	0.87	0.93	1.05	1.14	1.21	1.21
Bhutan	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.12
Myanmar	0.25	0.29	0.26	0.32	0.33	0.21	0.20
Nepal	0.46	0.54	0.69	0.68	0.89	0.92	0.98
Sri Lanka	0.58	0.68	0.98	0.94	0.68	0.68	0.73
Thailand	1.15	1.18	1.23	1.32	1.29	1.40	1.41
TOTAL	3.22	3.63	4.15	4.43	4.44	4.54	4.66

Source: Export-Import Data Bank, Ministry of Commerce, Government of India

Capacity and Security Challenges in India's BIMSTEC policy

BIMSTEC will have to overcome several challenges to address these connectivity gaps in the Bay of Bengal. Despite its foundation more than twenty years ago, the organization lost initiative and stagnated in the 2000s. The creation of a BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka, in 2014, created a new momentum, followed by India's commitment to make the organization a centerpiece of its new regionalism. On September 27, 2016, approximately two years after Prime Minister Modi had celebrated SAARC at its 18th summit in Kathmandu, the Ministry of External Affairs issued a short but extremely significant declaration: due to "increasing cross-border terrorist attacks in the region and growing interference in the internal affairs of Member States by one country [Pakistan]," India was "unable to participate in the proposed [19th] Summit in Islamabad."³⁹ The statement, however, noted that India "remains steadfast in its commitment to regional cooperation, connectivity and contacts," suggesting that alternative organizations would be explored. This was indeed signaled by Prime Minister's unprecedented decision to host an outreach meeting between BRICS and BIMSTEC leaders, just two weeks later, in Goa. Analysts then promptly proclaimed SAARC to be "dead" and announced a new Indian "sub-regional" strategy popularized as "SAARC minus one" to bypass Pakistan.⁴⁰

India's subsequent willingness to invest in BIMSTEC reflects a new commitment to pursue institutional regionalism *without* Pakistan. This is reflected in External Affairs Minister Jaishankar's reference to BIMSTEC having "energy" and a "mindset" that "fits in with that optimistic [Indian] vision of economic cooperation."⁴¹ Since 2016, India's institutional vision for the region has accordingly shifted East and South, towards the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and larger Indo-Pacific regions. More than a mere temporary

suspension of SAARC, this represents a medium- or even long-term alternative to pursue regional integration. More than a political or tactical move, it also indicates an Indian strategic reading of Pakistan's growing disinterest in greater connectivity with South and Southeast Asia. Commenting on Islamabad's investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as well as growing links to Central Asia and the Gulf, the head of India's economic policy planning unit, Rajiv Kumar, thus observed that the "Pakistan Establishment ..., at present, does not see a greater integration of Pakistan's economy in South Asia to be in its national interest."⁴²

India's new interest in BIMSTEC, however, will face two significant challenges to promote alternative integration in the Bay of Bengal region. First, the effectiveness of India's new approach to regional institutions boils down to its bureaucratic and financial investment to strengthen BIMSTEC as an organization. There is a fundamental shortcoming in administrative capabilities to translate Prime Minister Modi's political activism into bureaucratic achievements. This implementation gap reflects India's limited diplomatic resources, with one of the world's smallest foreign service per capita. For example, despite professing to make BIMSTEC a political priority, it took the Ministry of External Affairs almost three years to depute its representative director to the organization's Secretariat, in Dhaka.⁴³

..the effectiveness of India's new approach to regional institutions boils down to its bureaucratic and financial investment to strengthen BIMSTEC as an organization.

On the other hand, there are also encouraging developments. For the first time in twenty years, the MEA's budgetary support for BIMSTEC-related activities has reached parity with that of SAARC.⁴⁴ The 2018 summit in Kathmandu also saw a focus on strengthening the BIMSTEC secretariat through finalization of the Charter, Rules of Procedure and expansion of the organization's human and financial resources.⁴⁵ These commitments were followed up at the first and second meeting of the BIMSTEC Permanent Working committee, in January and October 2019, respectively. The meeting also finalized the draft Terms of References for the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT) and discussed the modalities of a new BIMSTEC Development Fund. Member states reiterated their commitment to deploy a Director each from respective countries to increase the number of Directors at the Secretariat.⁴⁶

The second challenge relates to India's attempts to focus BIMSTEC on greater security, military and intelligence cooperation. On the one hand, India's "can do" and "out of the box" approach to implement its new regional connectivity strategy is laudable, pushing

cooperation into new security domains. On the other hand, such proactivity can also be counter-productive to bottom-up integration. By leapfrogging to security and military affairs without significantly enhancing technical and economic integration, India may end up undermining an already stressed organization. After 2016, New Delhi persistently tried to move BIMSTEC beyond trade and push instead for greater coordination on military, counter-terrorism and even intelligence sharing. India is the leader for the organization's working group on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime – which includes a sub-group on intelligence sharing – and the working group on Environment and Disaster Management. The underlying logic is that India needs BIMSTEC to further its aim of combating the threats from cross-border terrorism, an area where SAARC allegedly “failed to deliver.”⁴⁷

Following Prime Minister Modi's suggestion, India thus hosted the first-ever meeting of BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs, in 2017, and subsequently pushed for the organization to agree to a regular meeting of Home Ministers on internal security issues.⁴⁸ In pursuance of its commitment, New Delhi also hosted the Dialogue of Think Tanks on Regional Security at Vivekananda International Foundation in November 2018 and 2019, and the IDSA-BIMSTEC Workshop on Cyber Security Cooperation, in December 2018. Such Indian drive marks a significant and welcome change from the past, where BIMSTEC rarely pursued security cooperation.

The securitized approach after 2016, however, has also brought up significant challenges. Nepal and Thailand, for example, failed to join the first BIMSTEC Military Field Training Exercise (MILEX), in 2018, hosted by India with a focus on counter-terrorism operations.⁴⁹ Both countries ended up sending only observer missions after opting out last minute, mostly due to internal political pressures or lack of timely planning.

Conclusion

While the Bay of Bengal used to be an integrated area in the early twentieth century, much still lies ahead of BIMSTEC to grow as a regional organization. To achieve this, it is imperative that all member states, especially India, increase their commitment towards the organization. Regional institutions aren't built in a day or through lofty statements. While political leadership from member-states is necessary, the history and practice of multilateralism worldwide shows that success is best achieved through bottom-up cooperation anchored in specific, technical and economic domains. This was BIMSTEC's original “sub-regional” mandate, as reflected in its name and founding document. In South Asia, where connectivity remains abysmal, this technocratic and economic focus is all the more urgent – whether in the road, rail or air transportation sectors, the digital and cyber domains, or the cooperative management of water and other energy sources. Fisheries,

climate change or public health, which are the focus of three of BIMSTEC's fourteen working groups, reflect areas where the potential for cooperation remains to be explored. Contrasting with these sectors, since 2016 India's new approach has put a renewed, but also disproportionate emphasis on disaster management, counter terrorism, transnational crime, military cooperation and intelligence-sharing. The examples discussed above reflect that this approach is not always shared by some of India's neighbours and fellow BIMSTEC member-states, even leading to some negative results as during the 2018 BIMSTEC military exercise. Not surprisingly, states are most reluctant to cooperate in security or military affairs. If the European Union or ASEAN have not achieved such levels of trust and integration after seventy or fifty years of institutional cooperation, respectively, it is unreasonable to expect that BIMSTEC will somehow rapidly succeed on these "high sovereignty" issues. While non-traditional security should not be abandoned as an area for cooperation, India as the largest BIMSTEC member-state would do well to first strengthen the organization's bureaucratic and financial capacity and autonomy to take initiatives and, in parallel, prioritize economic and technical cooperation towards correcting the Bay of Bengal's regional connectivity gap.

Endnotes

1. Hssain, Shoumik. 2017. "Building a Stronger BIMSTEC in next 20 years." *bdnews24.com*. May 29. <http://bdnews24.com/neighbours/2017/05/29/building-a-stronger-bimstec-in-next-20-years>
2. Mohan, C Raja, and Sumith Nakandala. 2016. "Carnegie India." *BIMSTEC and the Bay of Bengal*. November 4. Accessed October 2019. <https://carnegieindia.org/2016/11/04/bimstec-and-bay-of-bengal-event-5419>.
3. Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi. 2017. "Prime Minister's Message on the 20th Anniversary of Establishment of BIMSTEC." June 6. http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28514/Prime_Ministers_message_on_20th_anniversary_of_establishment_of_BIMSTEC.
4. BIMSTEC has evolved from 'BIST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation) during its founding to BIMST-EC with the inclusion of Myanmar in December 1997. Post admission of Nepal and Bhutan in 2004, BIMSTEC acquired its present name.
5. BIMSTEC Secretariat. 2018. "Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration." August 30-31. Accessed October 2019. https://bimstec.org/?page_id=942.

6. Amrith, Sunil S. 2013. "The Bay of Bengal in Peril from Climate Change." *The New York Times*, October 13. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/14/opinion/the-bay-of-bengal-in-peril-from-climate-change.html>.
7. Brewster, David. 2015. "The Rise of the Bengal Tigers: The Growing Strategic Importance of the Bay of Bengal." *Journal of Defence Studies* Volume 9 Issue 2. p: 88. http://idsa.in/jds/9_2_2015_TheRiseoftheBengalTigers.html.
8. Sen, Tansen. 2016. *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400*. P. 176. Rowman & Littlefield.
9. Amrith, Sunil S. 2013. *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*. P. 185. Harvard University Press.
10. Raychaudhuri, Ajitava, and Tuhin K Das. 2005. *West Bengal Economy: Some Contemporary Issues*. P. 70 Allied Publishers in Collaboration with DSA Centre, Department of Economics, Jadavpur University.
11. Amrith, Sunil S. 2013. *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*. P. 1-2. Harvard University Press.
12. Bhandari, Bishnu B. 2016. "The Bay of Bengal: A Forgotten Sea." In The Proceeding of the Symposium on the Bay of Bengal, 8-9. http://rcj.o.007.jp/english/2016_myanmar_mission/BOBpercent20Symposiumpercent20Report.pdf.
13. Amrith, Sunil S. 2013. *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*. P. 146. Harvard University Press.
14. Lucassen, Jan, and Leo Lucassen. 2014. *Globalising Migration History: The Eurasian Experience (16th - 21st Centuries)*. P. 133. Brill. See also: Amrith, Sunil S. 2013. *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*. P. 107-108. Harvard University Press.; and Frost, Mark Ravindra. 2004. "Asia's Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840-1920." *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*. Volume 6 (2). P: 70. http://www.nzasia.org.nz/downloads/NZJAS-Deco4/6_2_5.pdf.
15. In February 1948, for example, Burma Communist Party leader Thakin Than Tun and his deputy Thakin Ba Thein (also known as Goshal, of Indian origin) attended the South East Asian Youth Conference in Calcutta: Litner, Bertil. 2015. *Great Game East: India, China, and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier*. P. 235-236. Yale University Press.
16. Brewster, David. 2015. "The Rise of the Bengal Tigers: The Growing Strategic Importance of the Bay of Bengal." *Journal of Defence Studies* Volume 9 Issue 2. p: 88. http://idsa.in/jds/9_2_2015_TheRiseoftheBengalTigers.html.

17. This paragraph draws from: Xavier, Constantino, and Darshana Baruah. 2018. "The Problem: Connecting the Bay of Bengal." Seminar, March. https://www.india-seminar.com/2018/703/703_the_problem.htm.
18. As of 2017, Chinese citizens were entitled to visa on arrival or exemption for six out of seven BIMSTEC countries, with an average cost of USD 30.
19. News Age Bangladesh. 2015. Buddhist heritage sites can fetch \$6b a year. September 2. <http://archive.newagebd.net/153712/tourism-surrounding-buddhist-heritage-sites-can-fetch-6b-a-year-seminar/>.
20. Multiplication of instances and visa type (1, 2, or 3). For example, Nepal scores best (6) by giving visa-on-arrival (type 1) to citizens of all other (six) BIMSTEC countries (6 x 1). Based on on-line compilation of requirements of various BIMSTEC consular and immigration sources, as of August 2017.
21. Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. 2017. "India Tourism Statistics at a Glance 2017." <http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/Other/english%20India%20Tourism%20Statics%20020917.pdf>.
22. Based on World Tourism Organizations (UNWTO) Statistics at <http://www.e-unwto.org/>. Bhutan data collected from annual tourism reports: <http://www.tourism.gov.bt/annual-reports> (Unlike UNWTO, Bhutan data uses country of residence rather than nationality).
23. Pillai, Aditya Valiathan. 2017. "The Promising Future of Inland Waterway Trade in South Asia," *The Asia Foundation*. May 10. <https://asiafoundation.org/2017/05/10/promising-future-inland-waterway-trade-south-asia/>.
24. Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy. 2019. "India to allow Nepal use of three rivers for inland waterways to push regional connectivity". *Economic Times*. October 7. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-to-allow-nepal-use-of-three-rivers-for-inland-waterways-to-push-regional-connectivity/articleshow/71473974.cms?from=mdr>.
25. Shipping a full container 20'ST- 1 m from Delhi to other BIMSTEC capital cities (Yangon in the case of Myanmar), based on Sea Rates: <https://www.searates.com/>, August 2017.
26. Singh, Karishma. 2017. "Nepal revamps colonial-era railway line," *Reuters*, June 15. <https://www.aol.com/article/news/2017/06/15/nepal-revamps-colonial-era-railway-line/22287945/>
27. Mamun, Shohel. 2017. "Government to restore rail links to India, Nepal, Bhutan," *Dhaka Tribune*. April 5. <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2017/04/05/govt-restore-rail-links-india-nepal-bhutan/>

28. Information in this paragraph based on official schedules from various airlines from India, Sri Lanka and Burma, available on <http://www.timetableimages.com>.
29. Satish, D P. 2019. "New Airport Connects Chennai and Jaffna After 40 Years as Air India Flight Makes First Landing," *News 18*. October 17. <https://www.news18.com/news/india/new-airport-connects-chennai-jaffna-after-40-years-as-air-india-flight-makes-first-landing-2349317.html>
30. Data in this paragraph based on analysis was conducted on various on-line travel agencies for the sample week of Aug 6-12, 2017, and on Statistical Division of the Director General of Civil Aviation: <http://dgca.nic.in/reports/rep-ind.htm>
31. Data for 2013-14: http://ris.org.in/images/RIS_images/pdf/ASEAN-Indiapercen20Airpercen20Connectivitypercen20Report-PPTpercen2028percen20Seppercen202015.pdf
32. Based on [http://www.dgca.nic.in/pub/pub15-16/PDF/INTERNATIONALpercen20OPERATIONS/1.03percen20\(INTERNATIONALpercen20OPERATIONS\).pdf](http://www.dgca.nic.in/pub/pub15-16/PDF/INTERNATIONALpercen20OPERATIONS/1.03percen20(INTERNATIONALpercen20OPERATIONS).pdf)
33. A second one was inaugurated in 2015 at Zorinpui, in the Lawngtlai district of Mizoram.
34. Export-Import Bank of India. 2017. "India's Engagements with CLMV: Gateway to ASEAN Markets," Occasional Paper no. 180. February . <https://www.eximbankindia.in/Assets/Dynamic/PDF/Publication-Resources/ResearchPapers/Hindi/69file.pdf>. Data for Nicaragua from India's Ministry of Commerce, <http://commerce.nic.in/eidb/default.asp>.
35. Rahman, Mohammad Masudur, and Kim, Chanwahn. 2015. "BIMSTEC Regional Integration: Prospects and Challenges," *Advanced Science and Technology Letters*. Vol. 114. P. 92, http://onlinepresent.org/proceedings/vol114_2015/18.pdf
36. Data compiled for 2016-17 from Export-Import Data Bank, Department of Commerce, Government of India: <http://commerce.nic.in/eidb/iecntq.asp>
37. World Bank Data, 2016.
38. Data compiled for 2016-17 from Export-Import Data Bank, Department of Commerce, Government of India: <http://commerce.nic.in/eidb/iecntq.asp>
39. Ministry of External Affairs. 2016. "India's participation in the SAARC Summit in Islamabad." *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*. September 27. https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/27442/Indias_participation_in_the_SAARC_Summit_in_Islamabad.

40. Miller, Manjari Chatterjee, and Gopaldaswamy, Bharath. 2016. "SAARC Is Dead; Long Live SAARC." *The Diplomat*. November 05. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/saarc-is-dead-long-live-saarc/>
41. Roche, Elizabeth. 2019. "Jaishankar sees Bimstec as a key platform for boosting regional links." *LiveMint*. June 06. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/jaishankar-sees-bimstec-as-a-key-platform-for-boosting-regional-links-1559844997246.html>
42. Kumar, Rajiv. 2015. "Introductions Towards New Beginnings in South Asia." Quarterly Files. IIC New Delhi. Volume 41. P. 6. http://www.iicdelhi.nic.in/writereaddata/Publications/QuarterlyFiles/63569369093338293_Thirty%20Years.pdf.
43. Xavier, Constantino. 2018. "India needs to walk the talk on Bimstec" *LiveMint*. August 28. <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/wqT03pNM5tC5bP3MgcxMhl/Opinion--India-needs-to-walk-the-talk-on-Bimstec.html>
44. Financial Express. 2019. "Union Budget 2019: Budget announced for MEA increases contributions to SAARC, Africa and BIMSTEC". February 2. <https://www.financialexpress.com/budget/union-budget-2019-budget-announced-for-mea-increases-contributions-to-saarc-africa-and-bimstec/1472838/>.
45. BIMSTEC Secretariat. 2018. "Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration." August 30-31. Accessed October 2019. https://bimstec.org/?page_id=942 .
46. Colombo Page. 2019. "Colombo meeting presses for rationalization of areas of cooperation and adoption of a BIMSTEC Charter." October 16. http://www.colombopage.com/archive_19B/Oct16_1571246864CH.php.
47. Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy. 2018. "BIMSTEC Summit Delivers on Terror where SAARC Failed." *The Economic Times*. August 31. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/bimstec-summit-delivers-on-terror-where-saarc-failed/articleshow/65623374.cms>.
48. Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi. 2017. First meeting of the BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs (March 21, 2017). March 21. https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28193/First_meeting_of_the_BIMSTEC_National_Security_Chiefs_March_21_2017
49. Ministry of Defence, Government of India. 2018. Opening Ceremony: Bay of Bengal initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). September 10. <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=183360>