



STRENGTHENING REGIONAL TIES: INDIA'S DYNAMIC ENGAGEMENT WITH BIMSTEC

RANIT ROY

Qualification – Masters in Political Science from the University of Kalyani, West Bengal

Qualified WBSET, NET and JRF for Assistant Professor of Political Science

UJJWAL SARKAR

Qualification – Masters in Political Science from the University of Kalyani, West Bengal

Qualified WBSET, NET and JRF for Assistant Professor of Political Science

ABSTRACT:

In recent years, India's participation in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has experienced rapid growth. This paper examines how India's relationship with BIMSTEC has changed over time and emphasizes how important it is to fortifying regional ties within the Bay of Bengal area. In addition to describing BIMSTEC's goals and areas of collaboration, the paper looks at the historical background of India's participation in the organization. It goes on to analysis the many channels via which India has actively supported the goals of BIMSTEC, including trade, connectivity, security, and interpersonal interactions. Also, it highlights how BIMSTEC's regional aspirations and India's "Neighbourhood First" policy complement one another and how their goals are beneficial to each other. The article also discusses opportunities and problems in India's engagement with BIMSTEC, including reducing inequalities among member states, utilizing the potential of the blue economy, and encouraging closer collaboration in new areas. The essay concludes by highlighting how crucial it is for India and the other BIMSTEC members to remain committed in order to fully achieve the potential of this dynamic cooperation, which has enormous promise for regional stability, economic growth, and improved connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region.

Key Words: Economic Cooperation, Trade, Connectivity, Development, Challenges, Opportunities.

Introduction:

The BIMSTEC is a regional economic organisation that connects South Asia with South-east Asia. Previously, it was BIST-EC, a Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand project for economic cooperation. With the adoption of the Bangkok Declaration on June 6, 1997, it was established. The name was then modified to BIMSTEC when Myanmar joined the coalition during a Special Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok in December 1997. BIMSTEC aims to address 14 sectors Trade and Investment, Transport and Communication, Energy, Tourism, Technology, Fisheries, Agriculture, Public Health, Poverty Alleviation, Counter-terrorism and Transnational Crime, Environment and Disaster Management, People-to-People Contact, Cultural Cooperations and Climate Change (A.S.Raju and A.B.Ray Chaudhury: New Futures for BIMSTEC: connectivity, commerce and security). BIMSTEC is founded on the geographic neighbourhood idea, whose economic tenet holds that countries sharing maritime and territorial borders have a greater chance of achieving economic integration. Territorially and maritimely, all of the BIMSTEC members are very close to each other. At the Second Ministerial meeting in Dhaka in 1998, Nepal was a observer country and acquired full membership in 2004. Bhutan joined as a BIMSTEC full member in 2004. The institutional development of BIMSTEC has been gradual. The BIMSTEC Secretariat was formed in Dhaka, Bangladesh, that same year as a

result of a decision made at the Third BIMSTEC Summit in 2014, offering an institutionalised framework for advancing and expanding collaboration.

Cooperation within BIMSTEC, which is a sector-driven organisation, was initially concentrated on six sectors in 1997 (trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism, and fisheries), and it was expanded to include agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counterterrorism, environment, culture, people-to-people contact, and climate change in 2008. Following initiatives to rationalise and reorganise sectors and sub-sectors, cooperation was then reorganised under the following sectors and sub-sectors in 2021, each of which was headed by a different Member State. Following sub-sectors led by the India Security, Sub-Sectors: Counter-Terrorism and Transnational crime and Disaster Management, Energy.

Objectives of the study:

- To examine the historical background and development of the regional organization known as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation).
- To evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of India's participation in BIMSTEC for promoting regionalism.
- To examine the impact on regional growth of the various BIMSTEC sectors and areas of cooperation where India has actively participated.
- To investigate how BIMSTEC helps member nations facilitate trade, investment, and economic integration with a focus on India's involvement.
- To investigate BIMSTEC's involvement in addressing regional issues like climate change, disaster preparedness, and maritime security, as well as India's role in meeting these challenges.
- To offer policy suggestions for India that will help it deepen its relationship with BIMSTEC and take full advantage of the group's capacity to advance regional integration and cooperation.
- To evaluate India's prospects and constraints in using BIMSTEC to balance out other regional organizations and activities.

Methodology:

The present study has been descriptive and analytical research method. This study was carried out using the qualitative research strategy. This article aims to explore The Strengthening Regional Ties: India's Dynamic Engagement with BIMSTEC. Only secondary data sources have been used in the study. The secondary data have been collected from the related books, journals, articles, newspapers, and web resources. This included official statements, policy documents, agreements, and reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Historical Context of BIMSTEC:

Due to changing geopolitical dynamics and the requirement for greater connectivity and cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) arose as a regional cooperation framework. The Bangladesh-India-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIST-EC), which was founded in June 1997, is where BIMSTEC had its start. This sub-regional alliance's initial goals included fostering economic cooperation and growth between the four nations.

The group became the Bangladesh-India-Sri Lanka-Myanmar-Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) after Myanmar joined in December 1997. Myanmar's accession broadened the grouping's geographic scope to include nations from both South Asia and Southeast Asia. The awareness that both sub-regions needed to actively participate in the Bay of Bengal region's economic integration served as the impetus for the growth.

The organization became known as BIMSTEC in 2004, during the first BIMSTEC Summit held in Bangkok, reflecting the broader goals of improving multi-sectoral cooperation beyond economic challenges. The seven nations that make up BIMSTEC at this time are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. First off, the area includes a major chunk of South and Southeast Asia, which are linked historically, culturally, and economically. The member states attempted to take advantage of these similarities and address the problems preventing regional integration as they recognized the potential advantages of closer cooperation.

Second, the perceived limitations and sluggish development of other regional cooperation frameworks in the area, such as SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), had an impact on the founding of BIMSTEC.

The member states saw BIMSTEC as a different forum where they could pursue their objectives for regional cooperation without being constrained by the same political issues and old disagreements that prevented development in other settings.

Finally, the Bay of Bengal's strategic position and growing significance in international trade and marine security increased the urgency of regional collaboration. The area is home to important global maritime routes, important communication sea lanes, and an abundance of natural resources. Member governments sought to take advantage of the Bay of Bengal's potential by cultivating tighter economic, political, and security connections after taking these aspects into consideration.

The Bay of Bengal region's member states' objectives for deeper regional integration, improved connectivity, and all-encompassing collaboration are highlighted by the historical setting of BIMSTEC. It demonstrates their dedication to overcoming shared obstacles and taking advantage of chances for growth and development.

India's Engagement with BIMSTEC:

India has been actively involved in promoting cooperation within the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and has played a vital role in its development. India's participation in BIMSTEC is motivated by its strategic goals of advancing Bay of Bengal region integration, Economic Cooperation, connectivity and Infrastructure Development, People-to-People Exchanges and security cooperation.

- **Economic Cooperation:** Within BIMSTEC, India has actively promoted economic cooperation. Initiatives to improve investment flows, trade facilitation, and connectivity infrastructure have all been encouraged. In order to encourage frictionless trade among member states, India has pushed for the removal of trade restrictions, streamlining of customs procedures, and harmonisation of standards. To further economic integration, projects like the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the BIMSTEC Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) have been sought.
- **Connectivity and Infrastructure Development:** India has actively promoted both physical and digital connectivity within BIMSTEC, realising the significance of connectivity in regional integration. In order to increase road connection between member states, it has financed the construction of transport infrastructure, such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the Trilateral Highway. Additionally, India has emphasised the necessity of improved digital connectivity and has put forward steps to close the digital divide among the union's members.
- **People-to-People Exchanges:** India has emphasised the value of people-to-people exchanges in developing stronger regional linkages within BIMSTEC. It has backed initiatives to encourage tourism, educational partnerships, and skill-building activities among member states. Through these initiatives, the regional cooperation's focus on people will be strengthened while also fostering more social and cultural linkages.
- **Security Cooperation:** India understands how crucial security cooperation is to maintaining tranquilly and stability in the Bay of Bengal region. In order to address common security issues like maritime security, counterterrorism, and transnational crimes, it has aggressively collaborated with member states. To improve security cooperation within BIMSTEC, India has taken part in joint military drills, shared intelligence and best practises, and run capacity-building programmes. Additionally, India has worked with member states to improve the capacity for disaster management and response to natural disasters. India has actively contributed to the institutional development of BIMSTEC and has demonstrated leadership within the organisation.

India's participation in BIMSTEC is a sign of its dedication to advancing Bay of Bengal regional integration, economic development, and security cooperation. India has worked to expand member state connections, commerce and investment, and cultural and interpersonal contacts by actively taking part in a number of projects. India's

initiative and leadership within BIMSTEC demonstrate its dedication to the group's goals and its function as a major force for regional cooperation.

Sectoral Cooperation within BIMSTEC:

In order to promote sustainable development and deepen regional ties, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) encourages comprehensive cooperation among member governments in a variety of areas. India has actively participated in sectoral cooperation activities to improve sectoral cooperation and address shared concerns within BIMSTEC, which spans a diverse range of industries. Key areas of sectoral cooperation within BIMSTEC include the following:

1. **Trade and Investment:** For BIMSTEC member states, promoting trade and investment has been a top goal. India has taken a proactive role in regional efforts to improve economic integration, lower non-tariff barriers,

and facilitate trade. There have been efforts to identify new investment areas, increase intra-BIMSTEC commerce, and harmonise trade-related legislation and regulations. India has worked to promote economic cooperation and foster an environment that is favourable for trade and investment within the BIMSTEC region through business conferences, trade promotion events, and capacity-building initiatives.

2. **Transportation and Connectivity:** Improving transportation facilities and connectivity is essential for regional economic integration. India has contributed significantly to the promotion of BIMSTEC's physical connectivity initiatives. It has aided efforts to create effective transit systems, expand port connectivity, and construct transportation corridors. Through partnerships like the Asian Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, India has helped to increase connectivity and facilitate easier movement of people, products, and services among member states.
3. **Energy Cooperation:** BIMSTEC places a lot of emphasis on addressing energy requirements and advancing sustainable energy sources. India has actively participated in energy cooperation projects, promoting renewable energy, looking into possibilities for international energy trade, and easing the transfer of energy technologies. Energy-related cooperation attempts to resolve concerns about energy security, advance sustainable development, and improve regional energy connectivity and integration.
4. **Agriculture and Food Security:** The economy of BIMSTEC member states depend heavily on agriculture. Within the framework, India has actively promoted agricultural cooperation. There have been initiatives to ensure food security, exchange knowledge more easily, increase agricultural output, and share best practises in the agriculture industry. India has worked to advance agricultural development and boost the livelihoods of farmers in the area through capacity-building initiatives, research partnerships, and the sharing of agricultural innovations.
5. **Environment and Disaster Management:** BIMSTEC actively collaborates in the fields of environmental sustainability and disaster management. In order to solve common environmental issues, lessen the effects of climate change, and improve disaster planning and response systems, India has actively worked with member states. Initiatives include the sharing of knowledge and best practises, collaborative research initiatives, and programmes that create capacity for biodiversity conservation, catastrophe risk reduction, and climate resilience.

Within BIMSTEC, there are numerous areas of sectoral collaboration, each of which is essential to supporting sustainable development and tying together the region. India has made a significant contribution to creating a resilient and connected Bay of Bengal area by active participation in trade and investment, transport and connectivity, energy cooperation, agricultural and food security, and environmental and disaster management programmes. These cross-sectoral partnerships demonstrate India's dedication to fostering regional cooperation, tackling shared problems, and maximising the potential of BIMSTEC for mutual growth and prosperity.

Challenges and Opportunities:

There are several opportunities and challenges that must be taken into account for further deepening regional ties, despite the fact that India's dynamic participation with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has achieved tremendous success. These challenges and opportunities for cooperation within BIMSTEC help to frame the way forward for greater integration.

Challenges:

1. Diverse Socio-economic Conditions: The BIMSTEC member nations exhibit a range of socio-economic conditions, including differences in infrastructure capacities, resource endowments, and levels of development. Implementing regional programmes and efforts can be difficult because bridging these gaps and ensuring equal growth can be difficult. To encourage equitable growth in the area, it is necessary to overcome the developmental divide through targeted capacity-building programmes, technology transfers, and sharing of best practises.

2. Connectivity Gaps and Infrastructural Restrictions: Despite connectivity measures, the BIMSTEC region still has major gaps in both physical and digital infrastructure. Transportation infrastructure shortcomings, poor digital connectivity, and logistical difficulties obstruct the smooth movement of products, services, and people. It will need teamwork to develop transport corridors, enhance connection networks, and improve cross-border trade facilitation mechanisms in order to overcome these infrastructure limitations.

3. Non-tariff Barriers and Trade Imbalances: Non-tariff barriers, such as technical standards, sanitary and phytosanitary regulations, and customs processes, can obstruct free trade between member states. Harmonisation of

rules, mutual recognition of standards, and simplification of customs procedures are all necessary to remove these barriers and create a level playing field for trade. Furthermore, resolving trade imbalances and looking into possibilities for trade diversification can promote further economic cooperation within BIMSTEC.

Opportunities:

1. Geographic advantage and strategic location: The member countries of BIMSTEC are strategically positioned, providing a wealth of opportunities for connectivity, trade, and investment. As a crossing point between South Asia and Southeast Asia, the Bay of Bengal region has enormous potential. By utilising this advantage, member states will have the chance to take use of their geographic location for mutual gain through improved economic integration, trade diversification, and seamless connection.

2. Complementary Economies and Resource Endowments: Economies are diversified and resource endowments are abundant among BIMSTEC member states. This offers chances for collaboration and complementarity between industries like agriculture, industry, tourism, and energy. Member states can improve intra-regional commerce, stimulate innovation, and develop a competitive regional market by using one another's capabilities and fostering value chains.

3. Common Security Challenges and Disaster Management: BIMSTEC member states deal with a variety of security issues, such as threats to maritime security, international crime, and natural disasters. Addressing these issues cooperatively can improve regional security and stability. The region's collective security and resilience can be improved through exchanging intelligence, engaging in cooperative military exercises, and organising disaster response systems.

India and other BIMSTEC member states may further develop regional ties and realise the full potential of the organisation by recognising and tackling the difficulties while seizing the opportunities. To overcome challenges, establish trust, and foster a climate that supports shared progress, prosperity, and regional integration, member states must maintain a commitment to communication, cooperation, and sustained commitment.

Conclusion

India's active participation in BIMSTEC demonstrates its dedication to fostering inclusive growth and enhancing regional linkages in the Bay of Bengal area. India has significantly shaped the goals and priorities of BIMSTEC by actively participating in economic cooperation, connectivity efforts, sectoral collaborations, and institutional growth. By fostering mutual trust, shared wealth, and shared security, it has helped to create a resilient and cohesive Bay of Bengal area.

To overcome obstacles and seize chances for deeper integration in the future, BIMSTEC member states, including India, must continue to be committed to conversation, cooperation, and sustained commitment. Utilising BIMSTEC's potential will enable member states to improve regional connectivity, increase economic growth, and handle mutual security issues. India's continuous participation in BIMSTEC demonstrates its dedication to regional cooperation and its goal of creating a peaceful, stable, and wealthy Bay of Bengal area.

Reference:

Chowdhury, A. B. (2013). An Economic Overview of BIMSTEC Countries: (1997-2011). *Journal of Asian Business Strategy*. Retrieved July 14, 2016, from [http://www.aessweb.com/pdf-files/3-90-JABS-3\(8\)2013,%20210-223.pdf](http://www.aessweb.com/pdf-files/3-90-JABS-3(8)2013,%20210-223.pdf)

Batra, A. (2010). *Asian Economic Integration and Sub-regionalism: A Case Study of the BIMSTEC*. *International Studies*, doi:10.1177/002088171104700101

Devi, T. N. (2007). *Economic Cooperation in BIMSTEC: Emerging Trends and Prospects*. In T. N. Devi (Ed.), *India and Bay of Bengal Community: The BIMSTEC Experiment*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.

Kumar, A. (2013). *BIMSTEC: Opportunities and Challenges*. In CSIRD (Ed.), *BIMSTEC: What is Achieved and Where to Go?*. Kolkata: CSIRD. Retrieved July 25, 2016, from http://www.bntt.org/Books/BIMSTEC_WAW.pdf

De, Prabir (2019). *Twenty Years of BIMSTEC: Promoting Regional Cooperation and Integration in the Bay of Bengal Region*. London: Kw Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 2018

Raju, A.S & Ray Chaudhury, A.B (2022). *New Futures for BIMSTEC: Connectivity, Commerce and Security*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2022.