

GS Paper 2

International Relations

Regional groupings /Agreements concerning South Asia

BIMSTEC

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Context

- **9 March 2023---Thailand as Chair of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) hosted the 19th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting virtually.** The Meeting discussed and approved the draft text of BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030, a leader-level document proposed by Thailand to guide BIMSTEC towards a prosperous, resilient and open region by 2030. The document aims to further promote BIMSTEC as a region of peace, stability, and economic sustainability. The document will go on to be later discussed at the 6th BIMSTEC Summit. **The 6th BIMSTEC Summit has been proposed to be held on 30th November in Thailand and is expected to be the first in-person summit in five years. A marine transport cooperation agreement is also expected to be concluded at the summit.**

- **August 2022**---Tenzin Lekphell, the Secretary-General of the seven nation grouping BIMSTEC came for a four-day visit to India beginning August 22 to explore ways to take forward the bloc's cooperative agenda.
- **June 6, 2022** ---marked the completion of 25 years since the 1997 Bangkok.
- **30th March 2022**----The 5th Summit of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was hosted by the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in and from Colombo, Sri Lanka, in hybrid mode.



Importance of BIMSTEC

- Accounts for **22%** of the world's population
- Combined GDP of **\$2.7 trillion**
- One-fourth of the world's traded goods cross the Bay every year
- Six focus areas—trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism and fisheries

What is BIMSTEC

- The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional multilateral organisation.
- Its members lie in the littoral and adjacent areas of the Bay of Bengal constituting a contiguous regional unity.

- **Out of the 7 members,**
 - **Five are from South Asia –**
 - Bangladesh
 - Bhutan
 - India
 - Nepal
 - Sri Lanka
 - **Two are from Southeast Asia –**
 - Myanmar
 - Thailand

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What is the Genesis of BIMSTEC?

- This sub-regional organization came into being in 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration.
- Initially, it was formed with four Member States with the acronym 'BIST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Sri-Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation).
- It became renamed 'BIMST-EC' in 1997, following the inclusion of Myanmar.
- With the admission of Nepal and Bhutan in 2004, the name of the grouping was changed to 'Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation' (BIMSTEC).

What are the Principles of BIMSTEC?

- Sovereign Equality
- Territorial Integrity
- Political Independence
- No-interference in Internal Affairs
- Peaceful Co- existence
- Mutual Benefit
- Constitute an addition to and not be a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation involving the Member States.

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What is the potential of BIMSTEC?

1) Bridge between South and South East Asia.

2) Platform for intra-regional cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN members.

3) High Growth Potential: Home to around 1.5 billion people that constitute around 22% of the global population and a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of USD 3.8 trillion.

4)Huge Market: BIMSTEC grouping is home to around 1.5 billion people that constitute around 22% of the global population.

5)Major Shipping route: A fourth of the world's traded goods cross the Bay of Bengal every year.

6)Important Connectivity Projects:

- **Kaladan Multimodal Project – links India and Myanmar.**
- **Asian Trilateral Highway - connecting India and Thailand through Myanmar.**
- **Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement - for seamless flow of passenger and cargo traffic.**

What is significance of BIMSTEC from maritime perspective

1)Ecological Importance: Bay of Bengal is home to mangrove forests of around 15,792 square kilometres, coral reefs of around 8,471 sq.km, sea grass meadows, fragile estuaries and mass nesting sites of sea turtles.

2)Fish resources: It is an important fishing region with an annual fish catch of around six million tonnes, constituting 7% of the world's catch and valued at around U.S.\$4 billion.

3)Support to Livelihood: Approximately 185 million people are dependent on the natural resources provided by the bay. The fishermen population alone is estimated to be around 3.7 million.

What is the Significance of BIMSTEC for India?

1)Manifestation of three important component of foreign policy

2.Strategic advantage due to proximity with Strait of Malacca : Nearly one quarter of world's traded goods transit through the strait of Malacca. The Bay of Bengal and Strait of Malacca are directly connected, so this grouping can have direct impact on the trade passing through strait of Malacca.

3.Materialising Sagarmala Project

4)Development of India's North-East

5)Counter China

6)Alternative to SAARC

7)Showcases Indian Leadership in region

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BIMSTEC : A Big Opportunity

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Revival after 2016

- Following the Uri attack in October 2016, India increased its efforts to promote BIMSTEC.
- The BIMSTEC members approved India's plan to boycott the SAARC conference in Islamabad in November 2016.
- Consequently, the SAARC summit has been postponed indefinitely, and India has switched its attention to other regional organisations such as BIMSTEC and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

Key Achievements

1) Much has been achieved in

- **Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief**
- **security including counterterrorism, cyber security and coastal security cooperation.**

2) **BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks**

3) **BIMSTEC Energy Centre in Bengaluru**

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4)BIMSTEC Business Council

5)BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group

6)Some key agreements signed by BIMSTEC members include **a convention for combating terrorism, transnational organised crime and illicit drug trafficking**. However, this awaits ratification.

7)BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection

8)2016---India held a joint BRICS-BIMSTEC Summit in Goa for the latter's regional outreach.

Key highlights of the BIMSTEC 5th summit (Srilanka)

- The theme of the fifth summit is **“Towards a Resilient Region, Prosperous Economies, and Healthy People.”**
- The main outcome of the fifth summit was the adoption and signing of the **BIMSTEC Charter**, which formalises the grouping into an organisation comprised of member states that are coastal and dependent on the Bay of Bengal. The members are expected to convene **once every two years** under this charter. As a result of the charter, it now has an international personality, an emblem, and a flag. The charter was aimed at **transforming BIMSTEC into a full-fledged regional organisation with a “distinct international personality”**.

- **Adoption of the “Master Plan for Transport Connectivity,” which lays out a framework for future connectivity-related activities in the region.**
- **Member country leaders have agreed to divide the grouping’s work into seven segments, with India leading the security pillar.**
- **India will contribute one million US dollars to the operational budget of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation secretariat.**

Major Challenges and Issues

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What could be the Way Forward?

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Practice Ques/- As SAARC becomes functionally defunct, can BIMSTEC play the role of a better alternative for technological and economic cooperation among South Asian countries in its stead? Comment

UPSC PYQ

Q/- Do you think that BIMSTEC is a parallel organisation like the SAARC ? What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the two ? How are Indian foreign policy objectives realized by forming this new organisation ? (2022)

