

Report Part Title: Conclusion

Report Title: BRIDGING THE BAY OF BENGAL

Report Subtitle: Toward a Stronger BIMSTEC

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in 2014, the BIMSTEC Sub-Group on Combating the Financing of Terrorism hosted a productive discussion on counterfeit currency across the region.¹⁴⁰ To multiply such channels, BIMSTEC must now build on the outcome of the first meeting of its national security chiefs, which called for a conference on counter-radicalization, a Track 1.5 security dialogue, and a joint forum on cybersecurity.

- Set up information-sharing mechanisms: Beyond consultative channels, BIMSTEC should strive to develop new regional institutions for member states to share information. This could include, for example, white shipping agreements for coast guards and navies to exchange data on commercial vessels in the Bay of Bengal. By adopting region-specific mechanisms such as the Automatic Identification System, Port Community System, Vessel Traffic Management System, and Electronic Data Interchange, BIMSTEC would support greater awareness in the maritime domain among its member states. The BIMSTEC Sub-Group on Intelligence Sharing has also discussed the possibility of a region-wide intelligence-sharing mechanism and identified relevant nodal agencies and contacts.¹⁴¹
- Cultivate operational coordination: BIMSTEC would also do well to serve as a platform for member states to conduct joint military exercises and increase their preparedness to collectively address common threats, crises, and contingencies. Building on the first BIMSTEC disaster management exercise, held in 2017, the organization should push for an annual BIMSTEC joint naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal focusing on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. On land, members should join forces to conduct a regular BIMSTEC counterinsurgency exercise. In the long run, such joint training should eventually lead to operational coordination, whether the aim is to combat pirates at sea or to deny extremist safe havens in borderlands.

Conclusion

As BIMSTEC celebrates its twentieth anniversary, its member states must reflect on how the institution can become a more effective platform to further regional cooperation around the Bay of Bengal. The diverse range of organizational and sector-specific recommendations put forward above cover a variety of issues, and they require different types and levels of investment of financial and technical resources. Given BIMSTEC's wide regional mandate, the secretariat, member states, experts, and other interested parties will naturally diverge on the hierarchy and relative urgency of many of these recommendations.

Such differences, however, will remain on paper as long as BIMSTEC is not backed politically. This is the single most important—and only necessary—factor for the organization to increase its capacity to implement all the

above recommendations and, in so doing, contribute to reviving regionalism in and around the Bay of Bengal. It is, therefore, imperative for governments of BIMSTEC's seven member states, and of India in particular, to commit financial and political resources beyond mere expressions of intention and support. Repeated delays and the consequent inability to hold the fourth BIMSTEC summit on the organization's twentieth anniversary in 2017 does not demonstrate such commitment.

The organization now faces an opportunity to realize the vision of an integrated economic space and a bridge between South and Southeast Asia that drove its founding members. Whether it is India's Act East policy, Thailand's Look West strategy, Nepal's search for a coastal connection, or Bangladesh's commitment to take a leading role in promoting a new brand of regionalism, the interests of BIMSTEC's seven member states are finally aligned. The key word will be connectivity—be it maritime hubs, riverine links from the

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Himalayas and hinterland regions to the coast, economic topics like free trade and investments, or the cultural foundations of people-to-people exchanges. Such cross-border linkages in and around the Bay of Bengal are crucial for establishing the region as a distinct economic space and cultural community.

On the other hand, while the organization is pivotally important for fostering economic integration around the Bay of Bengal, this should not preclude its member states from pursuing parallel paths to increase connectivity

between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. As the only multilateral organization focused on the Bay of Bengal, BIMSTEC's priority areas, in fact, overlap with and complement many other initiatives that seek to bridge what remains one of the world's least integrated regions.

Fulfilling the Bay of Bengal's tremendous economic potential requires a cooperative approach. BIMSTEC is well equipped to play a major role in facilitating this new regionalism. But its member states will have to endow the organization with adequate resources to transform its bold vision for the Bay of Bengal into reality.