

Report Part Title: Deepening Sector-Specific Cooperation

Report Title: BRIDGING THE BAY OF BENGAL

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identity should be recaptured. Rather than an obstacle, if appropriately institutionalized, multispeed, multifaceted cooperation through BIMSTEC may actually lead to positive spillovers across different sectors.

Fourth, BIMSTEC would do well to keep China out. Beijing poses a particular challenge, as it has informally expressed interest in obtaining observer status within BIMSTEC and in rendering specific project support.⁹⁰ While bringing China into BIMSTEC could lead to immediate financial dividends, it would also likely weaken the organization in the long term, given Beijing's history of adopting divide-and-rule practices toward other regional organizations like ASEAN and the EU.⁹¹ According to one Indian official, in 2017, China tried to pressure Nepal to "go slow" on BIMSTEC and, instead, push for a revival of SAARC, which includes Pakistan and to which China is an observer.⁹² Given these concerns, at least in the short run, it would be advisable to insulate BIMSTEC from any geopolitical competition and protect its multilateral corridors from Chinese diplomatic interference. This could be achieved by establishing clear criteria for membership, including geographic continuity to the Bay of Bengal. If the organization decides to institute an observer status, Beijing could then be invited along with other extraregional powers and multilateral institutions to develop a more formal, albeit limited, relationship.

Deepening Sector-Specific Cooperation

Apart from efforts to sharpen BIMSTEC's mandate and strengthen its capabilities, India and other member states should also strive to shore up BIMSTEC's efforts in particular areas, including physical connectivity, trade promotion, and people-to-people exchanges.

Enhance Physical Connectivity

Plans to expand regional integration in the Bay of Bengal will remain a pipe dream unless BIMSTEC members ensure that the hard infrastructure is in place to accelerate the flow of vehicles, vessels, people, and goods across borders. Connectivity will emerge as BIMSTEC's key challenge for the next few years, and all member states should make this area their utmost priority. No other areas are as important as developing the foundational infrastructure to foster regional ties. As senior Indian official Preeti Saran noted in comparison to trade, "if BIMSTEC were to have land and maritime connectivities as a grouping, that would go a much longer way rather than just keep struggling with [a free trade agreement]."⁹³

The appalling current state of affairs is apparent in two areas especially. First, in continental terms, the India-Myanmar border remains one of Asia's least open. Until 2015, when a second border point was installed, archaic barter trade prevailed even at what was then the single border point with a full-fledged

customs station in Moreh. Land-based trade between the two neighbors remains abysmal at just \$71 million (3.5 percent of the bilateral trade).⁹⁴ As recently as 2015, even antagonistic states such as North Korea and South Korea traded more with each other than India and Myanmar have.⁹⁵ Second, on the maritime front, BIMSTEC countries do rather poorly in the World Bank's Logistic Performance Index. On quality and timeliness of port infrastructure, for example, BIMSTEC countries score a collective average rank of ninety, considerably worse than ASEAN members' average rank of sixty-nine.⁹⁶

With borders often acting as barriers in the Bay of Bengal, BIMSTEC faces the challenge of encouraging member states to reorient their infrastructure development plans to privilege mutually beneficial connectivity by land, sea, and air. In 2017, Thailand took the initiative by forwarding a draft concept paper for a BIMSTEC Master Plan for Connectivity, and the organization should seek to further such attempts in at least four ways.

First, BIMSTEC should push members to implement existing infrastructure projects that it has already designated as priorities. BIMSTEC launched the seeds of connectivity in the region after it endorsed the BTILS in 2009. It must now revive its recommendations and ensure member states implement them. Out of the 166 infrastructure projects the BTILS identified, sixty-five were given priority—more than half (thirty-three) of which are either in Bangladesh or India. This includes thirty-five projects for road connectivity, twelve projects for railways, and nine each for air and maritime connectivity.⁹⁷

Second, BIMSTEC should seek other ways to facilitate the free flow of vehicles, vessels, energy, and information throughout the region, so as to deepen integration beyond hard infrastructure projects. As promised in the 2017 ministerial meeting, BIMSTEC must expedite the adoption of the Framework Agreement on Transit, Transshipment and Movement of Vehicular Traffic and the Coastal Shipping Agreement.⁹⁸ In addition, after the establishment of a BIMSTEC Energy Center, the organization must sign and build on the memorandum of understanding for the establishment of a BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection, which would be an important confidence-building measure for electricity-deficient states such as Bangladesh and Myanmar. Finally, building on the new JIPMER-BIMSTEC Telemedicine Network and the experience of the South Asia Satellite launched earlier this year by India, the organization should also develop resources for a BIMSTEC satellite to share medical, educational, and climate information.

Third, BIMSTEC should devote particular attention to an oft-neglected aspect of regional connectivity: linking the mountain and maritime economies adjacent to the Bay of Bengal. The organization's members should focus on multimodal connectivity projects that link the Himalayan regions in Bhutan, India, and Nepal to the coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal. Besides geostrategic

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advantages, such ties would give export-intensive industries in the landlocked highlands a maritime outlet. The development of inland waterways, especially through Bangladesh, will be essential for increasing such alternative transportation connectivity. India's attempts to offer Nepal privileged coastal access through Visakhapatnam, in Andhra Pradesh, marks a positive step in this direction.⁹⁹

Fourth, BIMSTEC should consider creating a forum for the border regions of member states. The success of cross-border connectivity projects in the Bay of Bengal region is dependent on member states' capacity to rope in their border regions, states, and provinces as key stakeholders. BIMSTEC could host a regular dialogue with chief ministers and other leaders from all border regions in its member states to share best practices on increasing transnational cooperation and connectivity.

Encourage Trade

BIMSTEC can take a leading role in facilitating smoother trade flows of goods and services, as well as investments, across some of the world's most formidable geographic and protectionist barriers. Such efforts will start from a low baseline. Between 2002 and 2014, the share of intraregional trade among BIMSTEC member states rose from 3.6 to just 4.3 percent.¹⁰⁰ This remains significantly lower than comparable figures in any other regional trade bloc, including 7 percent among SAARC members, 16 percent among South American Common Market (Mercosur) countries, and 29 percent among ASEAN states.¹⁰¹ Similarly, BIMSTEC's 3.4 percent share in the world's total foreign direct investment stock is less than half of ASEAN's.¹⁰² For India, in particular, the BIMSTEC economies continue to represent a negligible fraction of its total trade balance, worth 7 percent of its total exports (\$22 billion) and 2 percent of its imports (\$9 billion).¹⁰³

Though driven from the outset by an economic agenda, BIMSTEC has struggled for twenty years to advance integration. Beginning with a 2004 framework agreement for a BIMSTEC FTA, enthusiastic attempts to liberalize trade across the region have failed to make any significant impact. Twenty rounds of talks by BIMSTEC's Trade Negotiation Committee have been held since then; the last one, in late 2015, ended in stark disagreement and the process stalled.¹⁰⁴

In 2016, as part of its renewed focus on BIMSTEC, the Indian government voiced support for reviving negotiations on the FTA among BIMSTEC members. But there seems to be little hope for any major breakthrough in the short term.¹⁰⁵ It is worth considering, then, what other dimensions of economic cooperation can be pursued instead of, or in parallel to, trade talks. In that spirit, Sri Lankan analyst Saman Kelegama has noted:

BIMSTEC should not have high hopes on an FTA coming into operation. Indications are that it will drag on for a long time. In this situation, more emphasis should be given to trade facilitation via liberal transit, business-friendly customs, transport corridors, etc. Such a process will partly address some of the non-tariff barriers in the region and catalyze trade.¹⁰⁶

While the issue of physical connectivity has taken center stage instead of trade, there are parallel ways for BIMSTEC to push the trade and economic agendas forward in the meantime. First, BIMSTEC members can consider settling for a limited FTA. Given a variety of obstacles facing trade talks, a limited trade deal is currently better than no deal at all. As Sri Lanka's state minister for foreign affairs, Vasantha Senanayake, has pointed out, "the relevance of BIMSTEC may truly be envisioned only after the proposed FTA comes to fruition."¹⁰⁷ Former BIMSTEC secretary general Sumith Nakandala concurs: "Let's do the bad deal [and] then revisit it later [because the] FTA is a necessary first step."¹⁰⁸ More than a face-saving exercise, a curtailed FTA would in all likelihood bring at least some benefits to the organization's least-developed economies, especially Bangladesh and Nepal.¹⁰⁹ As Prabir De has noted, such an agreement could help maintain BIMSTEC's institutional "momentum" and keep the "engine" of integration running for another few years.¹¹⁰

Second, BIMSTEC can seek to target nontariff trade barriers. However bold it may be, a BIMSTEC FTA will only prove beneficial if nontariff barriers are brought down among the organization's member states as well. Prabir De has emphasized that these less tangible obstacles are the "actual culprits" impeding integration. He has urged that in parallel to tariff negotiations, BIMSTEC should sequentially focus on facilitating the (1) mutual recognition of national standards, (2) harmonization and development of common standards, and (3) identification and targeted exploration of existing value chains across the region.¹¹¹

Third, when possible, BIMSTEC should seek to enlist the help of external stakeholders. Regional economic cooperation is more likely to thrive if BIMSTEC can engage with private actors to advocate for and reap the benefits of greater integration. The organization should adopt the Indian-founded Consumer Unity and Trust Society's recommendation for an annual BIMSTEC economic summit with representatives from the region's top trade and investment houses. The BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce and Industry should be revived to take this idea forward, and BIMSTEC members should seek to create an intergovernmental Bay of Bengal investment fund to support seed money for innovative regional entrepreneurship projects.

Fourth, BIMSTEC should consider declaring the bay a blue economic zone. The general idea is that a blue economy seeks to "promote economic growth, social inclusion, and the preservation or improvement of livelihoods while at

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the same time ensuring environmental sustainability of the oceans and coastal areas.”¹¹² Accordingly, BIMSTEC should build on Bangladesh’s initiative to develop a Bay of Bengal blue economy partnership.¹¹³ A first step could be to develop a variety of codes of conduct for resource exploration that could eventually become binding on all private actors operating in member states. The UN’s Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project, set up in 2008 with several regional partners, offers an interesting model that could be replicated.

Identify Secondary Priority Areas

To increase the effectiveness of cooperation, BIMSTEC will have to resist the temptation to do too much at the same time and instead focus on consolidating its limited resources on a few priority sectors. Such progress is contingent on many of aforementioned organizational reforms. After being founded with just six working groups, BIMSTEC added seven new areas for cooperation in 2005 and another one in 2008. Its fourteen current sectors include issues ranging from climate change to tourism, with different lead countries and further subgroups.¹¹⁴ Officials from different countries have pointed to BIMSTEC’s broad portfolio as one of the organization’s principle weaknesses, hindering efforts to deepen focused cooperation in key areas. At the 2014 summit, Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid suggested that BIMSTEC focus on just five areas: connectivity, economic cooperation, energy, security, and people-to-people exchanges.¹¹⁵

Beyond just reducing the number of sectors, BIMSTEC should employ the right criteria to identify what specific areas are ripe for further collaborative efforts. The most important condition in this regard is a realistic assessment of how feasible it is to ensure the participation and involvement of member states, rather than letting ambitious agendas divert the organization’s limited resources. Tangible success in one area, however small, tends to reduce reluctance and increase incentives for member states to collaborate again in other areas. By focusing on a few priority areas and sequencing them, cooperative behavior could progressively spill over into new areas, deepening regional integration. For former Bangladeshi diplomat Tariq Karim, BIMSTEC should therefore “focus on can-do sectors first” and “leave others for later.”¹¹⁶ There are various ways to achieve this. Each member’s rotating chairmanship could, for example, focus on one specific area that each country could then continue to lead after its chairmanship ends, or the organization could revive attempts to have dedicated annual themes.¹¹⁷ Beyond such formal initiatives, four specific areas have potential to serve as priorities for cooperation.

First, BIMSTEC offers the ideal platform for member states to devise an internal code of conduct and best practices to regulate fisheries and protect the Bay of Bengal from overfishing, given that this significant challenge to the bay’s ecosystem is chiefly a problem among BIMSTEC members.¹¹⁸ In

recent years, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar have adopted domestic measures, including seasonal bans, to protect their marine resources.¹¹⁹ However, foreign fishing trawlers regularly violate these regulations, leading to detention and complex repatriation processes that often escalate and affect bilateral relationships.¹²⁰ BIMSTEC should facilitate a dialogue aimed at implementing multilateral mechanisms that regulate sustainable fishing in the Bay of Bengal and, in case of conflict, offer mediation and support efforts aimed at resolution.

Second, BIMSTEC should help its members coordinate their national efforts to monitor the environment. Faced with the disruptive impact of climate change and natural disasters, the Bay of Bengal countries would benefit from pooling their scientific and technological resources to mitigate the effects of climate change. According to one 2015 study, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar in particular were profoundly affected by extreme weather events between 1994 and 2013.¹²¹ These environmental challenges are not restricted to coastal states but also affect the wider Himalayan region, connected through the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) River Basin. Stretching across 1.7 million square kilometers, the GBM is the third-largest freshwater outlet into the world's oceans and is home to 630 million people in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal.¹²² BIMSTEC should prioritize efforts to set up regional mechanisms that allow member states to coordinate, cooperate, and share their national resources to monitor and forecast a variety of natural phenomena, including monsoons, winds, tides, riverine flows, and pollution levels.

Third, BIMSTEC should promote the Bay of Bengal region as an integrated tourism area. Speaking at the Colombo International Maritime Conference, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe noted that “the Bay of Bengal has the potential to be the [world's] biggest [tourist] destination, even rivalling the Caribbean.”¹²³ Following ASEAN's example in Southeast Asia, BIMSTEC members should launch joint campaigns to promote the entire region, emphasizing its shared heritage and many man-made and natural wonders. By facilitating a dialogue on best practices and strategic plans to develop tourism across borders, BIMSTEC could indirectly create the conditions for greater regional connectivity and mobility. Given the Bay of Bengal's cultural and religious links, there is particular potential to increase intraregional tourist flows by facilitating visa-free travel. For example, defying the logic of geographic proximity, currently the number of Indians visiting the United States (1.2 million) is almost as many as the number of those visiting the other six BIMSTEC countries combined (1.6 million).¹²⁴ The 2017 announcement of a BIMSTEC Tourism Fund and Network of Tour Operators is a step in the right direction.

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Rekindle People-to-People Ties

Given the Bay of Bengal's abysmal levels of intraregional connectivity in recent decades, it is essential for BIMSTEC to foster people-to-people links that can help revive a sense of common belonging in the Bay of Bengal. Former BIMSTEC secretary general Sumith Nakandala has thus stated that the organization's main mission is "to re-enable the environment of cooperation and community in the Bay of Bengal."¹²⁵ This requires an investment into less tangible forms of connectivity that increase flows of knowledge among scholars, experts, and various other key audiences in different BIMSTEC countries. High-quality research and mutual exposure to counterparts in other member states can accelerate the rediscovery of a common narrative in which the Bay of Bengal is a distinct community with its own historical, cultural, and geo-strategic character. Former Thai ambassador Kobsak Chutikul underlines that "when we imagine a bridge spanning the Bay of Bengal it is not only physical infrastructure—a two-lane highway for trucks—but also a bridge of the mind, a bridge for imagination."¹²⁶ To foster such exchanges through expanded people-to-people ties, BIMSTEC must focus on three fronts:

First, BIMSTEC ought to aim to bolster its brand. Despite celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 2017, the organization remains largely unknown to most people in BIMSTEC states beyond government officials. To change this, member states must shore up their budgets for promotional campaigns and activities, following India's lead this year, as New Delhi announced that it would dedicate new funds to "enhance the visibility of 'Brand BIMSTEC.'"¹²⁷ The organization's annual foundation day, marked on June 6, could be renamed Bay of Bengal Day with a wider set of celebratory initiatives across the region. Finally, the name BIMSTEC is one of the longest and most complex names among regional organizations, a fact that has prompted many experts to suggest a change. The Bay of Bengal Community would be one option.

Second, BIMSTEC should engage sector-specific technical experts. Situated between the government and the wider public, expert groups play a crucial intermediary role in advancing regional integration agendas. BIMSTEC must expand efforts to engage these communities as advocates for greater regional cooperation and leverage their technical know-how in specific areas. Established in 2008, the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks should be separated into different subsectors and convened annually. Rather than a one-time affair to launch a vision for 2030, the BIMSTEC Eminent Persons' Group should be formalized as an advisory council with senior representatives from government, business, and other interest groups committed to the organization's objectives. BIMSTEC should also reinstitute its young ambassadors program, inactive since 2006, and revive plans for a cultural industries observatory.

Third, BIMSTEC ought to strive to foster community through academic exchanges. No new Bay of Bengal narrative will emerge unless scholars are

incentivized to dig into the past and recover the rich sense of community that animated the region until the twentieth century. As historian Sunil Amrith has pointed out, the “hope for a new regionalism lies in recognizing that the bay’s history, as much as its ecology, transcends national frontiers.”¹²⁸ In coordination with BIMSTEC, member states should commit dedicated resources for cross-country scholarship that identifies both past and present flows of people, capital, and ideas across the region. This should also include specific BIMSTEC scholarships and grants for educational exchanges and collaborative research programs, visiting chairs, and a network of universities focusing on the Bay of Bengal region. Following the Thai government’s announcement of a new BIMSTEC Center, other member states should also be encouraged to designate nodal research institutions for Track II and other people-to-people initiatives.

Stimulate Security Cooperation

BIMSTEC must also boldly embrace its role in encouraging cooperative practices among its member states to address transnational security challenges. It may be tempting to divorce security and economic issues, but doing so is impracticable given the variety and complexity of cross-border challenges in the Bay of Bengal region. For example, as long as insurgent and other armed groups are in effective control of large stretches along the India-Myanmar border, there will be little scope to establish new connectivity projects and accelerate economic development.

At their first meeting, in New Delhi, the BIMSTEC national security chiefs therefore “underscored the importance of recognizing the Bay of Bengal as common security space and agreed to work out collective strategies for common responses.”¹²⁹ There are currently three main nontraditional security threats that affect all member states and illustrate the need for more coordinated and cooperative behavior.

First, the Bay of Bengal region has witnessed some of the world’s largest refugee flows. In 2017, more than 500,000 people crossed the Myanmar border from Rakhine State into Bangladesh.¹³⁰ India now hosts an estimated 40,000 displaced people from Myanmar, and there are also small refugee populations in Nepal and Sri Lanka.¹³¹ The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that the Bay of Bengal is three times more deadly than the Mediterranean for such refugees.¹³² Between 2008 and 2013, roughly 1,200 people are believed to have died at sea trying to reach Australia via the Bay of Bengal.¹³³ The flow of such populations has important security implications beyond the region, affecting Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

Second, the Bay of Bengal is prone to some of the world’s worst natural disasters. Between 1996 and 2015, calamities in the region took 317,000 lives and displaced more than 16 million people in BIMSTEC countries.¹³⁴ The

region was devastated by the 2004 Asian tsunami, whose death toll was concentrated mostly along the bay's shores from Sri Lanka to Indonesia. According to one study, seventeen of the world's twenty-five most devastating tropical cyclones over the last two centuries were located in the Bay of Bengal, with the two most recent ones—Sidr (2007) and Nargis (2008)—claiming almost 150,000 lives and causing an estimated \$12.7 billion in economic damage to Bangladesh and Myanmar.¹³⁵

Finally, the region has witnessed a spike in maritime criminal activities, including piracy and trafficking. In recent years, thousands of Bangladeshi fishermen have been attacked, killed, or taken hostage off the coast of the port of Chittagong. Pirates made more than \$1 million in ransoms between late 2011 and late 2012, severely affecting the fishing industry.¹³⁶ As the main maritime outlet for the Golden Triangle, one of the world's largest opium-producing areas, the Bay of Bengal also contains key global routes for narcotics smuggling.¹³⁷ Regional criminal groups also engage in the trafficking of humans and weapons, posing a regional security threat.

To mitigate such complex security challenges, BIMSTEC will have to nudge its member states to share threat assessments and best practices and, in the long run, set up mechanisms to operate collectively. As noted in the joint declaration of the BIMSTEC national security chiefs, this will require initiatives that “enhance cooperation and coordination among their [member states’] law enforcement, intelligence and security organisations and enhance capacity building.”¹³⁸ BIMSTEC can implement this agenda by focusing on four areas:

- **Develop common legal instruments:** To facilitate cooperation between police, security, and judicial agencies in its respective member states, BIMSTEC must accelerate efforts to develop common legal frameworks across the region. Signed in 2009, the Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Trans-National Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking still requires ratification by two states (Nepal and Bhutan) to come into force. Meanwhile, after an exchange of draft texts, the Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons and Convention on the Extradition of Fugitive Offenders are still being negotiated as is the Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters. Finally, in 2017, member states began negotiating a Convention Against Trafficking in Persons.¹³⁹ Until such foundational agreements are signed, BIMSTEC members will have trouble acting collectively against common security threats.
- **Offer consultative platforms:** BIMSTEC must aim to create forums for government officials and experts from member states to have free and frank dialogues on various security issues affecting the region. Held at various levels, such platforms should institute a more regular exchange of threat assessments, operational experiences, and best practices. For example,

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