



# POINTS OF VIEW

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## **The Visibility of BIMSTEC in Thailand:**

### **How to Increase People-to-People Connectivity<sup>1</sup>**

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The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a regional initiative which comprises Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, is not widely known in Thailand. There are limited numbers of people who are familiar with the existence of BIMSTEC and its relevance to Thailand's national interests. Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has been trying to promote the visibility of BIMSTEC to Thai society by organising activities in universities that encourage awareness in the younger generation, further increasing acknowledgement of BIMSTEC's work.

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The question of how BIMSTEC could help to link opportunities between South and Southeast Asia that are not only economic remain problematic. Cultural connectivity between South Asia and Southeast Asia has always been the focal point; however, when we think about the ‘in-visibility’ of BIMSTEC, two questions arise. First, what are the reasons why BIMSTEC has been comparatively less known among the public in Thailand? Second, how can the existence of BIMSTEC be promoted more?

I will neither talk about the background of BIMSTEC, nor discuss the institutionalisation issue of this organisation. On the other hand, I will analyse the visibility of BIMSTEC and the knowledge of its member states in Thailand. In other words, there are two main issues that we need to crystallise. Are we trying to make BIMSTEC visible, or are we trying to ensure that the public has a working knowledge of each member country? Are we trying to promote the visibility of this international initiative, or are we trying to make the public better understand diverse cultural and political contexts? By exploring these questions, we will have more understanding of the existing situation, which might lead to some policy recommendations.

### **Visibility**

In order to understand the visibility of BIMSTEC and South Asia, I browsed several webpages that promote or announce news about BIMSTEC, including the Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) website. This provides us with an overview of how the Thai government has been endeavouring to engage with BIMSTEC. The limitation of this methodology is that there might be some overlap between keywords or webpages. This, somehow, helps us to have an overview of the ongoing situation.

When I browsed the various news, publications, activities, speeches, and other relevant media about BIMSTEC on the website of Thailand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I found that the MFA has shared quite a good amount of content about BIMSTEC. We have witnessed an increasing number of activities that the MFA helps universities to organise that help to make BIMSTEC more widely known. For example, the MFA supported Chulalongkorn University, Ubon Ratchatani, and Chiang Mai University to organise a variety of activities, including academic competitions between secondary school students and university students.

**Table 1** Activities, Publications, and News about Regional Initiatives by Thailand’s MFA

	<b>Numbers</b>
<b>BIMSTEC</b>	138
<b>ACMECS</b>	394
<b>SAARC</b>	14
<b>GMS</b>	85
<b>Mekong</b>	302
<b>EU</b>	296

Browsed in <https://www.mfa.go.th/th/search/>

(Browsed on 26 April 2023)

Universities seem to be a good place to start disseminating knowledge about BIMSTEC. I browsed three university catalogues in Thailand, namely Chulalongkorn University (CU), Thammasat University (TU), and Chiang Mai University (CMU), to understand how existing Thai scholarship explores BIMSTEC and South Asia.

**Table 2** Browsing through University Catalogues by Using Different Keywords to Understand MA and PhD Theses

	CU	TU	CMU
<b>BIMSTEC</b>	0	1	1
<b>ACMECS</b>	4	1	0
<b>SAARC</b>	4	2	0
<b>Greater Mekong Subregion</b>	17	3	4
<i>(GMS)</i>	13	6	3
<b>ASEAN</b>	296	315	153
<b>Bangladesh</b>	41	19	12
<b>Bhutan</b>	48	19	13
<b>India</b>	185	35	8
<b>Myanmar</b>	404	58	124
<i>(Burma)</i>	208	13	7
<b>Nepal</b>	77	26	22
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	34	20	12

Browsed in <http://cuir.car.chula.ac.th/>; <https://digital.library.tu.ac.th/>;

<https://cmudc.library.cmu.ac.th/>

(Browsed on 26 April 2023)

What we can observe here is the limited number of existing literatures in the Thai epistemic community. Many of the theses were conducted by students who are from those countries

themselves and came to Thailand to conduct research within a wide range of disciplines. Surprisingly, BIMSTEC and ACMECS, although focused on international cooperation, received almost no interest from students. When compared to other regional initiatives, we can observe here that BIMSTEC has significantly less visibility.

Ubon Ratchatani University is now considered the Centre of Indian Studies in Thailand. Professor Piyanat Soikham who received his MA from India and PhD from Dundee University, has been working actively, closely, and tirelessly with the Embassy of India in Bangkok to promote Indian studies at Ubon Ratchatani University. When compared to other Indian Studies Centres in Thailand, namely Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University, and Chiang Mai University, Ubon Ratchatani University is outstanding. Chulalongkorn University's and Chiang Mai University's Indian Studies Centres are run by professors from the International Relations department. Chulalongkorn University focuses on cultural issues and yoga; Chiang Mai University's Indian Studies Centre was previously run by the Faculty of Social Science, focusing on social science and yoga; and Thammasat University's Indian Studies Centre is now run by Thammasat Institute of Area Studies (TIARA). Ubon Ratchatani University, then, is unique. They have a strong interdisciplinary approach and collaborate with various professors from different faculties to present Indian studies from the perspective of different disciplines. At Chulalongkorn University, although the Institute of Asian Studies houses the Centre of South Asia Studies which was inaugurated in 2017, the activities focus mainly on cultural aspects (e.g. language teaching [Tamil] and other cultural events.).

In terms of teaching and curriculum, South Asian studies appear in some curriculums across Thailand, including:

**Table 3** Modules Offered about South Asian and BIMSTEC's Member Countries

<b>Region</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Module</b>
<b>Bangkok</b>	Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University	Foreign Policies of South Asian States
	Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University	History of South Asia from the Colonial Period to the Present
		History and Civilisation of South Asia before the Colonial Period
	Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University	Politics and Government of South Asian Countries
		International Relations in South Asia
		South Asia in Global Politics (International Programme)
	Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat	Cultures and Societies in South Asia
	Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University	Contemporary History of South Asia
		History of India
	Faculty of Political Science, Ramkhamhaeng University	International Relations in South Asia

<b>Region</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Module</b>
	Faculty of Social Science, Srinakharinwirot University	Modern South Asian History
	Faculty of Social Science, Kasetsart University	Politics and Economy in South Asia
<b>Northern</b>	Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University	South Asia Studies
	Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University	History of South Asia
<b>North-Eastern</b>	Faculty of Political Science, Ubon Ratchatani University	Politics and Foreign Policy in South Asia
<b>Southern</b>	Faculty of Political Science, Prince Songkla University	Politics and Government in South Asia and Central Asia

Source: Author (Browsed on 2 March 2023)

Surprisingly, these modules are electives in the undergraduate programme, but are not offered in the postgraduate programme. The Political Science departments tend to be most interested in South Asian studies rather than language or archaeology departments. There are only two universities in Thailand that offer undergraduate programmes focused on South Asian languages, namely Chulalongkorn University and Chiang Mai University. Additionally, the interest in South Asia is mainly based in Bangkok, where foreign policy-making happens. When we look at the content of these modules, none mentions BIMSTEC.

Nonetheless, although Table 3 shows India as one of the BIMSTEC member countries that Thai university focus on, Myanmar, or Burma, studies have gained significant interest in the Thai

epistemic community. There are many universities across Thailand that provide modules on the language, politics, and culture of Myanmar. This is, however, understandable because Myanmar shares a border with Thailand. The economic and political relations between Myanmar and Thailand have imperative impacts on Thailand's security, politics, and economic dynamics. Therefore, Myanmar studies in Thailand is ubiquitous. Still, the knowledge of other BIMSTEC member countries is nearly non-existent in the Thai academic community.

Albeit BIMSTEC could be taught as part of South Asian Studies, or Indian Studies, which, arguably, is very interesting and should be beneficial to students who are interested to pursue a career in trade, investment, cultural management, or international relations in the future, it turns out that this approach has failed in Thailand. There was only one undergraduate programme on Indian Studies at Thammasat University, the second oldest university in Thailand. This programme uses English as a medium and received assistance from the Embassy of India in Bangkok. When we look into the context of Thai society, it could be assumed that this programme should be able to attract students who have an Indian family background, are part of an Indian community in Bangkok, or who grew up in a family that conducts trade within South Asia. However, this programme has not been able to attract new applicants. As there were not enough applicants for a few years, the programme was closed down.

We have seen thus far that knowledge of BIMSTEC and its member countries is not common in Thai society. As such, acknowledgment of the importance of South Asia in the economic, political or security sectors is scarce. Lacking institutionalised knowledge, the expectations of BIMSTEC are unlikely to be achieved. Unlike ASEAN, which is the top regional initiative promoted by the Thai government and other sectors in Thai society, BIMSTEC has to identify its own significance and use that as a starting point to gain people's attention.



What can we learn from other regional organisations? Let's look at the role of the European Union, where cultural connectivity has been significantly promoted. Erasmus Mundus is an exemplar of how education can help strengthen the younger generation, who are to become the leaders of both public and private sectors. The EU also aims to promote the notion of human rights, democracy, and other forms of social development to other countries in an effort to help raise awareness of democratic values, particularly by organising activities with young people. These activities raise awareness of how the EU contributes to human rights, the environment, and international development. Some such activities include film screenings on the death penalty, some environmental projects, and cultural activities.

People-to-people connectivity, thereby, could be initiated by increasing visibility through activities. The Thai MFA, for instance, has allocated some financial support for universities in Thailand to organise academic activities amongst university students and secondary school students. This could, at least, help students who reside outside of Bangkok to know more about BIMSTEC.

## **Recommendations**

I have shown above that the visibility of BIMSTEC is comparatively lower in the Thai epistemic community, not to mention the public space. The questions discussed include how to find opportunities and platforms to raise further awareness and to ensure that BIMSTEC receives wider acknowledgement within Thailand.

Apart from India, BIMSTEC could work collectively to support more area studies or country-specific modules in Thailand. Engaging in more activities with universities in Thailand might help to raise awareness of BIMSTEC member countries whilst emphasising cultural

connectivity. India has been trying to rely on cultural connectivity to demonstrate a long-lasting relationship between India and Thailand, and India and Southeast Asia; but there should be something more than that. Astronomy, science, technology, or start-ups could be additional areas of cooperation.

Increasing the knowledge of BIMSTEC as an international framework, or the knowledge of BIMSTEC member countries, could potentially have a great impact on image creation. This could be done by supporting publications on travelling in South Asia or BIMSTEC members' countries. The widening and deepening of social media could also help to create a culture of travelling within South Asia. The narrative of exploring 'unique' or 'exotic' cultures amongst the younger generations who are the primary users of social media would help to create more sentiment or ambition to explore BIMSTEC member countries.

BIMSTEC could also promote normative-oriented activities. Although BIMSTEC member countries have different economic and political regimes, leading to different normative standards and principles, it may benefit BIMSTEC to develop a core of ideas, principles, and values that could be shared with Thailand and Southeast Asia. International Relations theorists, for instance, have been trying to investigate the 'non-Western IR' that has been embedded in other regions. From this idea, BIMSTEC could commence a regional research project that explores the shared values and principles between South and Southeast Asia. This would not only extend research collaboration, but it would also help to explore shared normative values that could then be used to support diplomatic mechanisms.

Unless Thai society finds more relevance with BIMSTEC, business and academic communities will not understand its importance. Strengthening 'people-to-people connectivity' is not only about 'exchanges', but also encouraging society to see the significance of BIMSTEC as

an international organisation and to raise awareness about BIMSTEC's member countries. Cultural connectivity is not equal to people-to-people connectivity – we need to focus more on initiating people-to-people connectivity.

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