



# POINTS OF VIEW

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## **BIMSTEC: Bridging South Asia and Southeast Asia**

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The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) stands as a pivotal organisation fostering regional integration between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Established in 1997, BIMSTEC brings together seven member countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand—uniting over 1.5 billion people in a cooperative framework. Its strategic importance lies in its unique geographic and economic positioning, connecting the two dynamic regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The forthcoming BIMSTEC Summit in September 2024 presents a significant opportunity for India to intensify its focus on this regional grouping, aligning with its strategic, economic and geopolitical interests. With India hosting a [BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers Meeting](#) on 11 July as a prelude to the main summit in September, India renders due importance to the regional organisation. The Foreign Ministers' Meeting is likely to focus on [creating crisis response mechanism](#) to coordinate for

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different ‘contingencies’. Food, public health, energy, financial security as well as trade and economic cooperation will be at the core of discussion. Establishment of [digital payments system and trade](#) settlements as well as strengthening cooperation in cyber security and prevention of transnational crimes may also be discussed during the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting.

### **Strategic Importance of BIMSTEC**

BIMSTEC serves as a crucial linkage between South Asia and Southeast Asia, enhancing connectivity and cooperation across these regions. This connection is increasingly important in the current geopolitical landscape, where strategic alignments are continually evolving. As China’s influence expands across Asia, BIMSTEC offers a counterbalancing platform for India. By actively participating in BIMSTEC, India can enhance its strategic footprint, promoting stability and development in a region that is pivotal to its security and economic interests.

The economic significance of BIMSTEC cannot be overstated. The member countries collectively represent a substantial market with immense potential for trade and investment. The initiative aims to create robust economic corridors, improve infrastructure and facilitate smoother trade routes. These efforts can significantly boost economic growth, create jobs, and foster regional prosperity. For India, deeper economic engagement with BIMSTEC countries means accessing new markets, enhancing trade flows, and driving investment opportunities in sectors like infrastructure, energy and technology.

One of BIMSTEC’s primary objectives is to enhance connectivity among its member states. Improved transport and logistics networks, including highways, railways, and ports, are vital for regional integration. Projects like the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project exemplify efforts to improve connectivity, facilitating easier movement of goods and people. Additionally,

energy cooperation within BIMSTEC, particularly in renewable energy projects, can address shared energy security concerns, further binding the region together.

The member countries of BIMSTEC share deep historical and cultural ties, which can be leveraged to strengthen regional unity. Promoting cultural exchanges, tourism, and educational cooperation can foster mutual understanding and cooperation. Simplifying visa procedures and enhancing people-to-people connectivity are essential steps in building a more integrated and cohesive regional community.

### **Why India Should Pay More Attention to BIMSTEC**

BIMSTEC provides India with a strategic platform to enhance its regional influence. By taking a leadership role, India can shape the regional agenda, drive initiatives that align with its strategic interests, and foster a cooperative environment independent of other major powers. This leadership can also project India as a stabilizing force in the region, enhancing its diplomatic standing. BIMSTEC provides India with a platform to enhance its strategic autonomy by fostering regional cooperation independent of other major powers.

Active participation in BIMSTEC can yield significant economic benefits for India. Opening new markets for Indian goods and services will boost exports and economic growth. Additionally, Indian businesses can explore new investment opportunities in BIMSTEC countries, particularly in infrastructure, energy, and technology sectors. This economic engagement can also contribute to the development of India's eastern and northeastern states, aligning with the country's broader development goals.

Security cooperation within BIMSTEC is crucial for addressing common security threats, including terrorism and transnational crime. Joint military and security exercises can enhance

interoperability and coordination among member countries, contributing to regional stability. Enhanced maritime security in the Bay of Bengal is also vital for protecting vital sea lanes and ensuring freedom of navigation, which is critical for regional trade and energy supplies.

BIMSTEC's focus on inclusive development aligns with India's broader vision of a cooperative and integrated neighbourhood. Collaborative efforts in disaster management can enhance regional resilience to natural disasters, a common challenge in the Bay of Bengal region. By supporting BIMSTEC initiatives, India can contribute to regional stability and development, promoting a more stable and prosperous neighbourhood.

### **Steps for India to Enhance Its Focus on BIMSTEC**

To enhance its focus on BIMSTEC, India must demonstrate strong political will and commitment. High-level political engagement through regular summits, ministerial meetings, and diplomatic dialogues can reinforce India's dedication to the organization. By prioritising BIMSTEC in its foreign policy agenda, India can send a clear message of its intent to collaborate closely with member states.

**Diplomatic Engagement:** Strengthening dialogue and regular high-level summits are essential for enhancing political and diplomatic engagement within BIMSTEC. Supporting the strengthening of BIMSTEC institutions will enhance their capacity for effective regional cooperation.

**Economic Initiatives:** Negotiating and implementing comprehensive trade agreements within BIMSTEC will facilitate smoother trade flows. Investing in regional infrastructure projects and leveraging initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) for funding are critical steps for enhancing economic connectivity.

**People-to-People Connectivity:** Promoting cultural exchanges, tourism, and educational cooperation can strengthen people-to-people ties. Simplifying visa procedures to enhance mobility and tourism within the BIMSTEC region is also crucial.

**Security Cooperation:** Conducting joint military and security exercises will enhance interoperability and coordination among member countries. Establishing mechanisms for regular information sharing on security threats and challenges is vital for regional security.

BIMSTEC stands as a vital bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia, offering immense potential for regional integration and cooperation. The forthcoming BIMSTEC Summit presents a timely opportunity for India to intensify its focus on this regional grouping. By enhancing its engagement with BIMSTEC, India can not only bolster its regional influence and economic prospects but also contribute to regional stability and development. This strategic focus aligns with India's broader geopolitical objectives and its vision of a cooperative and integrated neighbourhood with Act East Policy, Neighbourhood First and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision.