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Shared Aspirations, Diverse Priorities: BIMSTEC Perspectives on Connectivity

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Shared Aspirations, Diverse Priorities

BIMSTEC Perspectives on Connectivity

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Introduction: Unlocking BIMSTEC's Potential

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As an emerging zone of convergence between South and Southeast Asia, the Bay of Bengal has gained strategic and economic prominence within the broader Indo-Pacific framework. At the heart of this regional cooperative architecture lies the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which emphasises connectivity as a cardinal pillar to regional growth and development. Since its inception in 1997, BIMSTEC has identified 'transport and communication' as a key area of cooperation. At the 5th BIMSTEC Summit in March 2022, this sector was reorganised and renamed 'connectivity' (1). Anchored in principles of equality, non-interference, and mutual benefit, the BIMSTEC Charter (adopted in March 2022) entrusts Thailand with leadership in advancing this sector.

This volume examines how BIMSTEC's connectivity agenda reflects the collective aspirations of its member states—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—for shared prosperity, regional resilience,

and openness in a multipolar Indo-Pacific. Despite differences, these countries share a broad consensus that greater connectivity is key to unlocking the region's economic potential and advancing its development. BIMSTEC encourages cooperative integration and open regionalism through port development and cross-border electricity trade. Simultaneously, efforts to enhance resilient infrastructure, coupled with diversification of supply networks, address the region's growing vulnerability to economic disruptions, environmental challenges, and geopolitical changes.

Member states regard connectivity as an engine of economic integration and political cohesiveness, while infrastructure development is largely regarded as a logistical activity. From a geographic point of view, Nepal and Bhutan have deemed BIMSTEC programmes as important to open access to the blue and digital economies. While the connectivity agenda also seeks to position Sri Lanka and Myanmar in regional supply chains and movement corridors, this agenda also captures national interests related to port development, trade facilitation, and maritime cooperation for coastal nations such as Bangladesh, India, and Thailand.

With projects such as cross-border electricity trade and resilient infrastructure development, BIMSTEC tries to establish open regionalism that benefits all, regardless of size or geography. Thus, these efforts aim to reduce shared vulnerabilities to climate change, economic shocks, and geopolitical uncertainties—the issues increasingly highlighted by the smaller and more vulnerable economies in the grouping. However, the connectivity discourse today also encompasses domains beyond physical infrastructure: digital connectivity, supply-chain security, blue economy cooperation and disaster-risk management, all of which now form essential building blocks for a future-ready regional order. By placing BIMSTEC's evolving connectivity vision within the broader Indo-Pacific discourse, this volume tries to link regional perceptions with cooperative integration. Thus, it asks how BIMSTEC can be made into a vehicle for creating a Bay of Bengal community that is more prosperous, resilient, and inclusive, in harmony with the Charter's founding spirit.

Bangkok Vision 2030

The Bangkok Vision 2030 (2), adopted and spearheaded by Thailand during the 6th Summit in March 2025, is an overarching document that revolves around the theme 'A Prosperous, Resilient and Open BIMSTEC by 2030 for our people and future generations'. This vision document undertakes a value-laden reclassification of the Bangkok Declaration of 1997, which serves as BIMSTEC's foundational mandate, and recategorises BIMSTEC's seven comprehensive areas of cooperation under the three crucial heads: 'prosperous', 'resilient', and 'open'.

This document sets clear directions towards a 'prosperous BIMSTEC' through economic integration and inclusive development, with special emphasis on supporting the developmental needs of the least developed countries (LDCs; Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal) (3); a 'resilient BIMSTEC' through stability, preparedness, and institutional robustness to effectively mitigate non-traditional security challenges that has been facing the region; and an 'open BIMSTEC' through inclusive dialogue, people-to-people engagement, cultural exchanges, tourism and so on. However, despite such an ambitious roadmap and the immense potential the region offers, several areas need strengthening for effective implementation, including enhancing institutional

capacity, improving financing, and resolving political and security divergences among member countries. Initiatives such as the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity and the Grid Interconnection Master Plan mark significant progress toward realising this vision. However, key gaps persist, including the lack of strong conflict-resolution mechanisms, insufficient gender-responsive policies, significant environmental vulnerabilities, and an unclear approach to external engagement.

A further challenge lies in resource mobilisation. While Vision 2030 outlines aspirations across multiple sectors, it does not provide clarity on financing models, the role of multilateral development banks, or how to systematically engage the private sector. The Vision's implementation thus hinges on BIMSTEC's ability to complement state-driven efforts with private investment, regional value chains, development partnerships, and climate-finance frameworks. Strengthening the secretariat, increasing predictable funding, and developing a monitoring mechanism remain important prerequisites for transforming the Bangkok Vision into tangible progress.

The Master Plan for BIMSTEC Connectivity

The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity (as designed by the Asian Development Bank) (4), comprising 267 projects (216 in infrastructure, 51 in soft infrastructure), is closely aligned with the Bangkok Vision 2030 and reflects strong progress toward its framework. Finalised under India's chairmanship and adopted in March 2022, the plan aims to create a seamless multimodal transport network to improve the movement of goods and people. Its implementation is evident in major achievements such as the Akhaura–Agartala rail link (yet to be operationalised), highlighting effective India–Bangladesh cooperation. Complementary developments, including coastal shipping arrangements and expanded inland waterway protocols also strengthen bilateral connectivity. Ongoing initiatives, such as the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway, are expected to provide Nepal and Bhutan with better access to regional markets. Other significant projects, such as the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Railway Bridge and the Matarbari deep-sea port in Bangladesh, underscore the plan's broader goal of enhancing intra-regional trade and integration.

Yet the Master Plan, ambitious and holistic in scope, needs convergence with border management systems, customs modernisation, digital trade mechanisms, and regulatory harmonisation. Without unified standards, interoperable logistics systems, and coordinated infrastructure planning, physical connectivity alone cannot translate into trade gains. The absence of dedicated dispute-resolution frameworks and slow progress in modernising land customs stations further limit the Master Plan's transformative potential. Moreover, the Plan requires stronger links with the private sector, which will be key to maintaining transport fleets, operating logistics corridors, and transforming ports into competitive regional hubs.

Current Hiccups

A key insight shared by both the Vision and the Master Plan is that BIMSTEC's relevance depends on turning ambitious plans into practical outcomes. With a population of 1.7 billion and a combined GDP of US$5 trillion (5), the region holds vast potential. Unlocking it, however, requires sustained commitment to harmonising standards, easing customs procedures, and addressing political differences to position BIMSTEC as a vital bridge between the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The current situation presents significant challenges. Weak regional coordination, inadequate information sharing, and uneven technical standards obstruct the development of seamless road connectivity across BIMSTEC. Ageing transport fleets and cross-border restrictions also inflate costs and reduce efficiency, highlighting the need for private investment and aligned operational frameworks. Ongoing security concerns, particularly in conflict-affected areas such as Myanmar, continue to slow progress and impede the establishment of dependable regional transport networks.

Compounding these operational difficulties are climate-induced disruptions—cyclones, floods, landslides, and coastal erosion—which significantly affect transport corridors, supply chains, and border infrastructure. Without climate-proof planning and early-warning systems, connectivity projects risk becoming vulnerable to recurring environmental shocks. The Bay of Bengal is one of the world's most disaster-prone regions, and BIMSTEC's connectivity ambitions can succeed only when resilience becomes integral to corridor planning.

Recent political turbulence in Bangladesh and the ensuing constitutional crisis have clouded the prospects for India–Bangladesh cooperation. The resulting instability has disrupted trade flows and infrastructure projects: rail services linking the two countries have reportedly been suspended, jeopardising cross-border connectivity vital for BIMSTEC ambitions (6). Moreover, the protracted Rohingya crisis is also a cause for concern. The continued influx of refugees and the absence of progress on safe repatriation have heightened Dhaka's security and humanitarian burdens. Together, these pressures have become significant irritants for Bangladesh on both the domestic and regional fronts, thereby challenging the momentum of BIMSTEC connectivity and integration efforts. Additionally, the recent death-sentence verdict for Bangladesh's former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has introduced fresh uncertainty into India–Bangladesh relations (7). Strategically, this instability raises questions about the long-term feasibility of major regional infrastructure initiatives—potentially undermining the momentum of the BIMSTEC transport plan.

These political developments highlight a larger structural gap: BIMSTEC lacks mechanisms to shield connectivity initiatives from domestic political fluctuations. Until the organisation institutionalises dispute-management tools, risk-sharing mechanisms, and long-term project safeguards, progress will remain vulnerable to shifting national politics, geopolitical pressures, and security disruptions.

About the Volume

This volume is divided into four major sections.

The first section, 'Common Goals, Open Futures: Strengthening Regionalism through Collaboration in the Bay of Bengal', comprises three essays that collectively underscore BIMSTEC's strategic potential as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia while highlighting the persistent challenges that impel its effectiveness. The essays assess how the organisation's strategic promise is shaped—and often constrained—by institutional capacities, political conditions, and the differing national priorities of its member states. Together, they offer a grounded understanding of the opportunities and structural reforms necessary to strengthen BIMSTEC's regional relevance and effectiveness. Sreeradha Dutta emphasises BIMSTEC's growing relevance amid SAARC's stagnation but notes that political instability, weak institutional capacity, and funding shortages continue to hinder progress. She identifies security cooperation, trade facilitation, and multimodal connectivity as priority areas requiring renewed commitment, with India playing a central role. Pratnashree Basu focuses on the widening gap between BIMSTEC's ambitions and its institutional reality, arguing for stronger structures—such as a more empowered secretariat, streamlined mechanisms, and sustainable financing—drawing lessons from organisations like ASEAN and the European Union. Complementing these perspectives, Nishchal Nath Pandey highlights Nepal's proactive engagement and BIMSTEC's value to landlocked states, while cautioning that geopolitical tensions, limited capacity, and structural weaknesses still impede deeper integration. Together, the essays call for incremental yet determined efforts to strengthen BIMSTEC's institutional foundations, enhance connectivity, and reinforce collective regional resilience.

The second section, 'Connectivity for Prosperity: Member States' Priorities to Achieve Common Goals', has five essays that highlight the varied yet interconnected perspectives of the BIMSTEC countries on regional connectivity, economic integration, and security cooperation. Together, these essays map the ambitions, constraints, and strategic choices that inform BIMSTEC's evolving approach to building an integrated and future-ready Bay of Bengal region. In this context, U Kyaw Nyunt Lwin underscores Myanmar's strategic role as the land bridge between South and Southeast Asia, noting both its geographic advantages—spanning ancient trade routes and key ports—and the setbacks caused by ongoing political instability. From Thailand's standpoint, Surat Horachaikul emphasises Bangkok's centrality in driving BIMSTEC connectivity through its 'Thailand 4.0' vision, Eastern Economic Corridor, and middle-power diplomacy that balances relations with India and China. Roshan Saha and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury focus on energy security, arguing that despite strong economic and sustainability incentives, political mistrust, regulatory inconsistencies, and infrastructure deficits continue to impede meaningful cross-border energy cooperation. Offering a Sri Lankan lens, Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy notes Colombo's renewed interest in trade and connectivity amid its economic recovery, even as slow BIMSTEC progress pushes it toward bilateral engagements, particularly with India. Complementing these dimensions, Sohini Bose highlights the critical role of maritime connectivity, observing that while BIMSTEC has made some progress, it lacks a dedicated port development agenda—an area where India's decade-long Sagarmala programme offers valuable lessons for strengthening regional maritime infrastructure. Together, these contributions illustrate both the promise and persistent challenges of advancing a cohesive and resilient BIMSTEC connectivity framework.

The third section, 'Sustainable Growth and Economic Diversification: Responses from the Regional Stakeholders', includes four essays that examine how BIMSTEC members are shaping a forward-looking development agenda rooted in national priorities and regional synergies. Collectively, these contributions explore how diverse economies—from Bhutan and Bangladesh to India and the wider region—are leveraging BIMSTEC to advance sustainability, economic diversification, geoeconomic cooperation, and climate resilience. The essays capture the growing recognition that long-term prosperity in the Bay of Bengal hinges on aligning domestic development strategies with BIMSTEC's emerging vision for an integrated, resilient, and future-ready region. Karma Dorji illustrates Bhutan's value-driven engagement rooted in Gross National Happiness, showcasing its initiatives in digital connectivity, organic agriculture, and energy diversification as aligned with BIMSTEC's sustainable development goals. Soumya Bhowmik charts BIMSTEC's transformation from inertia to institutional renewal—with the Charter, sectoral rationalisation, and Vision 2030—arguing that its future credibility hinges on delivering tangible outcomes in trade, connectivity, and geoeconomic cooperation. Nilanjan Ghosh presents an eight-pillar 'India Wishlist', outlining how a functional BIMSTEC can drive trade growth, supply-chain de-risking, trusted connectivity, blue economy collaboration, digital public infrastructure, value chains, knowledge creation, and institutional strengthening. Complementing these perspectives, Khondaker Golam Moazzem and Sabiha Sharmin situate Bangladesh's participation as a strategic balance between domestic resilience and regional interdependence, emphasising connectivity expansion, trade diversification, renewable energy cooperation, and climate adaptation as key to its post-COVID-19 recovery and LDC graduation. Together, these contributions highlight BIMSTEC's potential to emerge as a collaborative, future-ready platform anchored in shared prosperity, sustainability, and strategic coherence.

The fourth section, 'Building Resilience: Considering Non-Traditional Security Among Member States', has five essays that collectively highlight the breadth and urgency of non-traditional security (NTS) challenges confronting the BIMSTEC region, emphasising the need for coordinated, multidimensional, and people-centred responses. These contributions show how challenges such as trafficking, food insecurity, climate pressures, health risks, and human-development gaps now spill across borders, making coordinated, people-centred regional responses more urgent than ever. Taken together, the essays demonstrate that strengthening BIMSTEC's NTS agenda is essential not only for safeguarding communities but also for reinforcing the region's long-term stability, connectivity, and shared resilience. Sreeparna Banerjee draws attention to the growing threats of trafficking in persons, drugs, arms, and wildlife, exacerbated by porous borders and uneven enforcement capacities, calling for harmonised legal, operational, and community-level interventions. Shoba Suri underscores persistent nutritional vulnerabilities aggravated by climate shocks and limited agricultural trade, proposing a BIMSTEC food security framework rooted in climate-resilient agriculture, technology transfer, and equitable nutrition. Arpan Tulsyan positions education as a strategic yet underutilised tool for enhancing regional resilience, strengthening skills, connectivity, and people-to-people linkages to address a spectrum of NTS threats. Sufia Khanom highlights environmental degradation and climate change as the region's most acute NTS risks, using Bangladesh as a case study to show how ecological stress drives broader insecurities, and argues that BIMSTEC's unique geopolitical positioning offers a promising basis for collective action. Complementing these perspectives, Oommen C. Kurian and K.S. Uplabdh Gopal examine

efforts to build health resilience through stronger primary care, digital health systems, and cross-border cooperation, asserting that integrated data, referral mechanisms, and social protection can help convert uneven national capacities into a shared buffer against future shocks. Together, these essays outline pathways for a more coordinated, resilient, and future-ready BIMSTEC security architecture.

This volume arrives at a crucial moment for BIMSTEC, offering a timely and multidimensional assessment of its evolving role in a rapidly changing Bay of Bengal region. Bringing together diverse scholarly and policy perspectives, it highlights both the organisation's strategic potential and its persistent institutional, political, and developmental challenges. By examining connectivity, economic cooperation, and non-traditional security in an integrated manner, the volume aims to provide a holistic understanding of BIMSTEC's connectivity roadmap and the member states' aspirations. It presents analyses that outline the obstacles and practical pathways for strengthening BIMSTEC, making it a valuable resource for shaping a more connected, resilient, and future-ready regional architecture.

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Common Goals, Open Futures

Strengthening Regionalism Through Collaboration in the Bay of Bengal

Reenergising the BIMSTEC Through an Internal Refocus

Sreeradha Datta

The current global political landscape is marked by considerable fluidity, with new alliances and partnerships emerging regularly. Some bilateral relations are strengthening, while others are losing momentum. At the same time, several multilateral initiatives are evolving to enhance cooperation, reflecting shifting patterns of geopolitical engagement. In South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) remains largely inactive due to political differences among its members. In contrast, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), although progressing gradually, is better positioned to harness the region's economic potential.

However, the BIMSTEC is not without constraints; indeed, its member states seem plagued with internal dissonance. South and Southeast Asia have both been struggling with quick political changes; four of the seven BIMSTEC countries have experienced political disruptions in recent times. This began with the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, leading to several rounds of inconclusive

ethnic wars. The situation remains volatile, but after consolidating its presence over a significant geographical area, the military has announced a limited election for late December (1). Thailand's parliament has chosen its third prime minister in two years and is gearing up for elections early next year. Sri Lanka appears to have stabilised to some extent following the victory of the National People's Power coalition, but Bangladesh and Nepal are still in the throes of severe political and economic challenges.

While there were deep underlying political, financial, and social problems in Nepal (2) and Bangladesh (3), and to some extent in Sri Lanka (4), the economic stresses will need urgent attention. While these issues will require domestic and internal resolution, the BIMSTEC grouping can serve as a platform for economic support. Additionally, India, as one of the larger member countries and with experience as a first responder in humanitarian and economic crises, can also be relied upon. BIMSTEC, one of the first sub-regional groupings worldwide to attempt building a security framework, should also promote the flexibility of non-binding, voluntary political decision-making among its members. Indeed, establishing it as a platform for discussion and dialogue can be a constructive exercise rather than being seen as a measure to intrude or intervene.

BIMSTEC: The Aspirational Platform

Regional cooperation in South Asia has been slow and limited for a variety of reasons. While SAARC was formed in 1985 as an attempt to integrate the region economically, the grouping failed even to establish a preferential trade regime due to a lack of agreement. Thus, while the South Asian region was unable to deliver on regional cooperation, there was an expectation that forming a group to bring together South Asia and Southeast Asian states would be a far more enriching experience. The lack of political hostility was, of course, the most assuring factor within BIMSTEC. Given the relatively robust economic growth of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc, expectations from BIMSTEC were thus high.

While BIMSTEC has a combined GDP exceeding US$5.2 trillion with a population of 1.7 billion (2023) (5), it remains an underutilised economic corridor. Although it had identified all the sectors relevant to the region, its subgroupings progressed at a snail's pace in the initial years. However, restructuring of the previous sectors has resulted in seven priority areas: trade, investment, and development (with Bangladesh as the lead country); environment and climate change (Bhutan); people-to-people contact (Nepal); agriculture and food security (Myanmar); science, technology, and innovation (Sri Lanka), connectivity (Thailand), and security cooperation (India) (6). While there is a common aspiration, each country has varied perceptions and expectations. While India has been keen to build on the momentum, ably supported by Thailand, in recognition that larger economies have a responsibility to advance smaller nations, the hesitancy to accelerate is evident.

Although each country is working on the sectors assigned to them to build greater momentum and ensure that BIMSTEC develops into an effective functional organisation, this essay suggests a greater focus on three core areas to accelerate momentum. In some ways, each sector is connected to the others and will serve as a force multiplier. It is imperative to identify the challenges that have stymied the organisation so far. Security cooperation is identified as the core factor that

binds the members together, providing a common framework for all. The essay also recommends extending BIMSTEC membership to Indonesia to leverage its economic strength, while accounting for external factors.

Security Cooperation

While BIMSTEC is often criticised for a lack of visibility in the public domain, several dialogues and agreements have taken place. India has previously suggested developing the Bay of Bengal region as a 'common security space'. Sharing best practices on such a counterterrorism platform will be a first-of-its-kind initiative, enabling all members to converge on formulating common responses to security challenges (7).

In 2016, at the BIMSTEC leaders' retreat hosted by India, the member states determined the need to boost cooperation between their intelligence and security organisations. India hosted the first meeting of the BIMSTEC national security chiefs in March 2017. A key outcome of the meeting was the recognition of the need to transform BIMSTEC into a "common security space" (8). The meeting was held annually for the next three years, and again in July 2024 in Myanmar. The security dialogues have suggested various initiatives that have led to cooperation at several levels, including the establishment of the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region in 2018. India had also offered 100 training slots for capacity building in the security domain, cybersecurity cooperation, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and the use of emerging space technologies to address security challenges (9).

India has also hosted two meetings of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Cyber Security Cooperation (in 2022 and 2025) (10), the objective of which is to formulate an action plan to strengthen cybersecurity in the use of information and communication technologies, and is expected to be implemented within the next five years (11).

Importantly, BIMSTEC must not only coordinate evolving security cooperation among member nations but also be cognisant of each country's domestic challenges. Indeed, domestic political resilience is a prerequisite for regional security. BIMSTEC should not be seen as an intrusive group, but its support may be a necessary mechanism to address any exigencies.

Additionally, having a broad understanding of security issues will also ease cooperation in other sectors.

Trade Facilitation

One of the primary objectives of establishing BIMSTEC was to promote intra-regional trade and investment in the Bay of Bengal region. In 2004, the grouping concluded a free trade framework agreement, which encouraged the establishment of trade and investment facilitation measures, including simplifying customs procedures and developing mutual recognition arrangements. However, there are several challenges to realising free trade among the member states. Apart from differences in each country's conditions and capacities to facilitate trade, some states have

yet to undertake many of the activities needed to improve trade (12). Notably, most BIMSTEC countries lag behind global standards in adopting modern logistics practices. This is perhaps why most BIMSTEC countries perform poorly on the World Bank's Logistics Performance Index.

India has on several occasions called for deeper integration among the member countries to provide feedback and help strengthen trade facilitation and the cross-border movement of goods. Indeed, at the inaugural edition of the BIMSTEC Business Summit, India's commerce and industries minister Piyush Goyal identified many trade facilitation measures to strengthen partnership in e-commerce and digital public infrastructure, as well as improve the integration of customs borders with the aid of technology, including computerising border controls and faster import-export online clearances (13).

Agricultural trade can become a key driver of economic growth for the region. While tariff protection is high in this sector to maintain food and livelihood security, liberalisation is needed to augment regional trade. This can be done by focusing on specific sub-sectors within the larger agricultural sector (14). The member states will need to address many of the often-cited gaps, such as lower yields, non-similar food standards, demand-supply imbalance, and protectionist policies that affect enduring food security, to ensure progress in the region. India and Thailand will need to actively participate in lowering non-tariff barriers and improving trade facilitation measures, thereby enabling greater access for smaller economies and giving them an advantage in trade within the group. If the larger economies cannot dilute their protectionist measures, it is unlikely that BIMSTEC will emerge as a robust trade bloc.

The BIMSTEC Charter will provide the framework and greater impetus to the region's progress and growth. However, the lack of institution-building has left the organisation with a distinct weakness. To maximise potential, the larger economies will have to provide incentives for the smaller economies to trade with other member countries. To be sure, trade potential can only fully develop when land, air and marine routes are connected. Thus, towards that end, BIMSTEC had also laid out a plan.

Multi-Modal Connectivity Plans

The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity identifies 141 'flagship' projects to enhance connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region at an estimated cost of US$47 billion. Implementing the plan will require commitment from all member states and international development partners to carry out necessary reforms and capacity development (15). The plan adopts a holistic approach, covering both hard infrastructure (such as roads, railways, ports, inland waterways, and airports) and soft infrastructure (such as the services using the hard infrastructure for international transport, namely capacity building, transport access agreements, and the harmonisation of rules, regulations and policies).

Many BIMSTEC countries have been working on increasing their physical connectivity with other member states, but this has been at cross-purposes with China's transport connectivity plans in the region. China's attempts to increase connectivity with some BIMSTEC countries are a concern,

given the heightened hostility with India in recent years. Although a binding factor among the BIMSTEC members is the lack of hostility and political differences, China's growing presence in the region is a sore point (16).

Another underlying issue is the lack of funds, which is a significant constraint for the BIMSTEC process (17). As such, BIMSTEC is not in a position to demonstrate its role and relevance in promoting improvements in intraregional transport connectivity. Indeed, for the ambitious connectivity plans to materialise, the cooperation of external organisations will be crucial.

The Way Ahead

BIMSTEC holds strategic and economic importance for India. A successful BIMSTEC will be able to support India's foreign policy initiatives focused on the region, such as 'Act East', 'Neighbourhood First', and 'Security and Growth for All in the Region'. In recent years, India has focused on developing infrastructure in its Northeast, as it is pivotal for growth and as a means to connect with the BIMSTEC region. The Kaladan Multimodal Project, now a part of the BIMSTEC master plan, was designed as a cross-border connectivity initiative with Myanmar and also aims to revive traditional routes and ties. While many of these initiatives have achieved some success, bolstering them through BIMSTEC and integrating them with other overlapping policies will certainly consolidate them and lead to more positive outcomes. Many of India's foreign policy outreach efforts naturally align with BIMSTEC, and thus, greater momentum in one will invariably support the other.

Still, BIMSTEC faces one key dilemma—whether to become more effective from within through its existing members or by expanding its membership to cover a larger geographical area. To be sure, BIMSTEC will undoubtedly benefit from the support of other larger economies. For instance, the grouping should consider expanding its membership to include Indonesia—the largest economy, with the largest population, and covering the largest geographic area in Southeast Asia—and one that is growing in importance in the Indo-Pacific region. Cooperation and convergence in the Bay of Bengal and the wider region are essential to ensure a stable Indo-Pacific and a peaceful international system. Not only do India and Indonesia share a strong historical relationship, but Indonesia also faces common trade, economic, environmental, and traditional security issues with the other member-states (18).

External pressures will lead to changes in how international trade is conducted, and it is critical that trade facilitation in the BIMSTEC region can respond positively to these adjustments to avoid the emergence of new non-tariff barriers (19). Indeed, the way ahead is echoed in the words of India's foreign minister at the 2025 BIMSTEC Summit: "[The] Task before BIMSTEC is to be realistic about where we stand today, confident about the foundation of our endeavours and optimistic about its coming possibilities... India is aware of its special responsibility in regard to BIMSTEC. India connects most of them, provides much of the interface between the Indian Sub-continent and ASEAN" (20). As such, all member countries must hold similar aspirations and accord a similar level of interest and efforts to make BIMSTEC a truly effective regional partner.

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Bridging the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality Institutionalising BIMSTEC

Pratnashree Basu

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) occupies an important, albeit mostly dormant, position in the Indo-Pacific. At the global level, the effectiveness of regional organisations often depends less on rhetoric and more on institutional resilience. Yet, many such entities suffer from "under-institutionalisation"—a lack of formal structures, stable financing, enforcement mechanisms, and consistent operations (1). BIMSTEC exemplifies this challenge. Although a Secretariat was finally inaugurated in Dhaka in 2014, the institution remains under-resourced and structurally weak, undermining its capacity to translate vision into action. High-level meetings are scarce, the absence of binding decision-making powers hampers implementation, and a strong institutional identity has yet to emerge.

Encompassing seven nations—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—it brings together around 1.8 billion people over a region that spans vital maritime and overland corridors linking South Asia

and Southeast Asia, serving as both a conduit for global trade and a potential maritime-security domain. For India, BIMSTEC is not only a linchpin of its 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies, but also a means to offer a forward-looking regional alternative to the fraught South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) framework (2).

Why, then, must BIMSTEC strengthen its institutional architecture? The answer lies in credibility—the extent to which member states and external partners perceive an organisation as reliable, actionable, and capable of delivering tangible outcomes. For BIMSTEC, institutional depth is not an end in itself; it is the mechanism by which its broad agenda—spanning trade facilitation, connectivity, energy, disaster resilience, and people-to-people ties—can materialise into concrete benefits. In a region marked by growing geopolitical competition and development gaps, BIMSTEC's ability to serve as an operational regional actor depends squarely on stronger institutional capacity.

Although BIMSTEC's strategic heft and functional promise are real, unless the organisation anchors itself in robust structures, standardised financing, and operational legitimacy, it risks remaining a declaratory platform rather than a credible linchpin of regional collaboration.

Evolution of BIMSTEC's Institutional Framework

In its early years, BIMSTEC operated via loosely structured working groups and informal mechanisms. Its agenda was modest, focused on a few economic and technical areas, and the grouping lacked a permanent institutional base, relying instead on ad hoc coordination. Over time, BIMSTEC expanded its mandate significantly. Initially covering six sectors (trade, technology, transport, tourism, energy, and fisheries), by 2008, it had broadened this list to 14 areas—adding agriculture, public health, poverty alleviation, counterterrorism and transnational crime, environment and disaster management, climate change, culture, and people-to-people contacts. While this expansion demonstrated ambition and inclusivity, it also introduced complexity and diffusion, thus highlighting the need for future rationalisation.

A breakthrough came in 2014, during the Third BIMSTEC Summit, when member states signed the Memorandum of Association to establish a permanent Secretariat in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The Secretariat became operational later that year and was ceremonially inaugurated on 13 September 2014 by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh. This marked a turning point, transforming BIMSTEC from an informal forum into an institution harbouring greater continuity and bureaucratic coherence. However, the Secretariat's resource base and mandate remained limited, with staffing and funding constraints hindering its ability to effectively spearhead regional initiatives.

In 2022, BIMSTEC took another major institutional step by adopting its Charter during the Fifth Summit. The Charter laid down a legal foundation for the organisation and introduced additional instruments such as the Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters and a memorandum of understanding on diplomatic and training cooperation. It also witnessed the endorsement of a Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, signalling a revived vision for

economic integration. With the Charter entering into force on 20 May 2024, BIMSTEC gained legal personality, enabling it to engage in structured diplomatic relations and enhancing its regional clout (4).

Current Institutional Weaknesses and Gaps

One of BIMSTEC's most enduring structural challenges lies in agenda overstretch relative to institutional capacity. Complementing its original six areas of cooperation, the grouping expanded to 14 sectors by the mid-2000s, adding critical domains such as public health, counterterrorism, climate change, and poverty alleviation. While this breadth underscores ambition, it risks diluting focus and institutional efficacy. As analysts note, "making progress in each of them will be a drag for the organisation, making it a forum for deliberation rather than an effective vehicle for regional cooperation" (5). Presently, the sectoral agenda has again been streamlined into seven priority areas—trade, environment, security, agriculture, people-to-people contact, science and technology, and connectivity—albeit with little progress in each.

Closely linked to this is the Secretariat's budgetary and staffing constraints. Over a decade since its inauguration, the Secretariat remains chronically under-resourced. Estimates suggest its annual budget hovers around US$1 million—a figure grossly inadequate for coordinating cross-sectoral programmes across seven diverse economies (6). The lack of financial autonomy and technical staffing limits the Secretariat's ability to drive initiatives, monitor implementation, or sustain institutional memory, undermining continuity and credibility.

A further institutional lacuna is the absence of enforcement and monitoring mechanisms. BIMSTEC's consensus-based decision-making ensures inclusivity but often translates into policy paralysis, especially on sensitive issues such as trade facilitation, counterterrorism, and migration. Discussions on a free trade agreement, initiated in 2004, have remained stalled for nearly two decades, highlighting how consensus without compliance can hinder regional integration. Unlike the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), BIMSTEC lacks a structured mechanism to hold member states accountable or systematically review progress, leaving commitments unfulfilled amid a weak enforcement architecture.

Moreover, the rotating chair, coupled with uneven leadership commitment, undermines strategic continuity. Although rotating alphabetically, this system has occasionally led to variable engagement levels, depending on the chair's national priorities and domestic politics. For instance, political transitions in host countries have delayed high-level meetings; the Fourth Summit was postponed due to Nepal's internal instability, while Myanmar's ongoing political turbulence has further impaired coordination (7). As a result, summit-level momentum often falters, and implementation suffers from sporadic focus (8).

Finally, there is no compliance framework within BIMSTEC, unlike more institutionalised regional counterparts. Without mechanisms for arbitration or compliance, disagreements—even on trade or infrastructure projects—can stall indefinitely. The lack of such channels contributes to stalled energy cooperation and grid agreements, as well as uneven project execution (9). The thin

institutional enforcement further exacerbates trust deficits, particularly among smaller economies wary of India's dominance, and diminishes incentives for mutual, timely implementation.

Comparative Lessons from Other Regional Organisations

ASEAN: Consensus-Based with a Strong Institutional Identity

ASEAN exemplifies a model of "soft regionalism" anchored in informal norms, consensus-building, and non-interference, collectively known as the "ASEAN Way (10)." While this approach has fostered cohesion among highly diverse member states, allowing norms to subtly shape behaviour and maintain stability, it also limits the organisation's capacity to mount unified action when consensus falters. The ASEAN Charter of 2007 represents institutional progress—establishing legal mechanisms, dispute-resolution avenues, and a structured Secretariat with a defined budget and mandate—but these measures have not overcome the entrenched culture of informality. The Secretariat remains a modest administrative body, constrained in initiative and authority by adherence to consensus and sovereignty norms (11). ASEAN's experience underscores that a strong regional identity can be built even without heavy institutionalisation, yet it also signals that weaker institutions may struggle with strategic enforcement.

IORA: Resource Limits, but Selective Functional Successes

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) faces structural limitations typical of loosely formed regional organisations. The organisation's resource constraints, dispersed leadership, and limited political visibility are notable. High-level summits are rare, and operational capacities remain weak, with IORA's small budget and understaffed Secretariat significantly curtailing its ability to deliver on its mandate, making ambitious sectoral activities difficult to sustain (12). Despite these challenges, IORA has achieved tangible outcomes by focusing on niche, sector-specific institutions. The Fisheries Support Unit (13), hosted by Oman, serves as a key regional hub for knowledge sharing, capacity building, and policymaking in sustainable fisheries. Similarly, the Regional Centre for Science and Technology Transfer in Iran enables technological collaboration through networks, training, and policy support.

What IORA demonstrates is the viability of a calibrated institutional approach; rather than scaling across every thematic domain, it has chosen focused, functional cooperation, such as fisheries, maritime safety, and science diplomacy, that leverages minimal institutional infrastructure but delivers impact. This approach offers a pragmatic blueprint for other regional groupings seeking to maximise efficacy within structural constraints.

EU and AU: Advanced Institutionalisation—Templates, Not Blueprints

At the other end of the spectrum, the European Union (EU) represents a highly institutionalised regional order featuring supranational legal structures, binding treaties, enforcement mechanisms, and a well-resourced bureaucracy. Member states have ceded sovereignty in numerous domains—including trade, competition policy, and the single currency—to institutions like the European Commission and the Court of Justice of the EU, which can issue binding decisions and sanctions (14). The EU's complex, multi-level governance model balances formal integration with democratic

accountability and legitimacy. Meanwhile, the African Union (AU) also exhibits advanced institutional design—such as the Peace and Security Council (PSC) and specialised agencies—but its effectiveness has been tempered by political fragmentation and limited implementation capacity. AU-led reform efforts often falter due to weak execution, even when institutional frameworks are in place (15). Furthermore, analyses highlight bureaucratic rigidity and overlapping authority, particularly within the PSC and Assembly of Heads of State, as key obstacles that weaken the AU's ability to mount coherent regional responses (16).

Both models offer valuable institutional lessons—such as how legal commitment, judicial mechanisms, and regional bureaucracies can enhance implementation. However, their scale, complexity, and centralised nature render them poor fits for the BIMSTEC context, where member states demand flexibility, an equitable balance of sovereignty, and tailored capacity.

Table 1: Comparative Lessons—Regional Organisations as Templates

Organisation	Strengths	Cautions
ASEAN	Strong brand identity; routine SOPs; regional centres; informal dispute-resolution	Still consensus-based, slow in political-security domains
EU / AU	Advanced legal frameworks, compliance mechanisms, and centralised budgets	Over-bureaucratisation; high political cost
IORA	Issue-specific collaboration (maritime); selective institutional functions	Under-resourced Secretariat, variable member engagement

Source: Author's own

The varied trajectories of ASEAN, IORA, the EU, and the AU illustrate a spectrum of regional institutionalisation—from informal networks to robust supranational structures. For BIMSTEC, this means crafting an institutional architecture that offers sufficient capacity and continuity to deliver results, without inheriting the rigidity and resource intensiveness of deep integration models. The aim should be a mid-level institutional model: anchored by a capable Secretariat, outcome-focused working groups, sustainable financing, and light monitoring frameworks—strong enough to act, flexible enough to adapt.

How Member States View Institutional Strengthening in BIMSTEC

Across the Bay of Bengal, member states broadly acknowledge that BIMSTEC's effectiveness will depend on stronger institutions, but their priorities diverge in scope and emphasis. India, for instance, views institutionalisation as a pragmatic tool to transform commitments on trade, security, and connectivity into outcomes, positioning BIMSTEC as an alternative platform amid SAARC's stagnation. This makes Secretariat capacity, financial sustainability, and leadership continuity central to New Delhi's discourse (17). Bangladesh, in contrast, interprets institutional reform primarily through a developmental lens, emphasising predictable financing, stronger implementation mechanisms, and equitable benefit-sharing to ensure that smaller members are not sidelined (18). Thailand has promoted the idea of a "Prosperous, Resilient and Open BIMSTEC," favouring targeted institutional measures that improve efficiency in trade and connectivity, while avoiding duplication with ASEAN's already elaborate mechanisms (19). Similarly, Sri Lanka highlights pragmatic opportunities (20), treating institutionalisation as a pathway to boost trade, port development, and tourism, with Colombo supporting the BIMSTEC Charter and the Secretariat as vehicles for delivering tangible results.

The perspectives of the smaller and more constrained members reflect a mix of optimism and caution. Myanmar acknowledges the potential of BIMSTEC to deliver connectivity and disaster-relief cooperation, but its domestic political crisis has limited proactive engagement, exposing weaknesses in the organisation's institutional response to emergencies (21). Nepal supports institutional strengthening to secure transit solutions and infrastructure financing, calling for predictable resources and robust monitoring (22) to ensure that BIMSTEC commitments translate into practice. Meanwhile, Bhutan remains cautiously supportive, emphasising political trust, people-to-people exchanges, and gradual, capacity-driven reforms that avoid over-bureaucratisation (23). Taken together, these positions underline both convergence and divergence: convergence in recognising that institutionalisation is critical to BIMSTEC's credibility, but divergence over how far and how fast reforms should proceed. While larger economies focus on leadership, financing, and visible project delivery, smaller states stress equitable benefits, incremental reform, and capacity support. The challenge for BIMSTEC (24), therefore, is to design an institutional framework that is sufficiently robust to implement decisions yet flexible and inclusive enough to sustain buy-in across its diverse membership.

Pathways to Strengthening BIMSTEC Institutions

Enhancing the Secretariat's Mandate and Capacity

A strong and empowered Secretariat is crucial for advancing BIMSTEC's agenda beyond summit declarations. Member states should significantly bolster the Secretariat's technical and human resources, expanding leadership from three to seven directors (one from each member state) to deepen regional representation and managerial capability (25). In tandem, greater financial autonomy and bureaucratic stature are essential to attract skilled professionals and enable proactive programme leadership (26). Empowering the Secretary-General with greater operational

autonomy can allow the initiation of cross-sector initiatives without waiting for summit directions, injecting institutional momentum.

Establishing Sector-Specific Working Groups with Deliverables

To avoid overreach and streamline functionality, the Secretariat should organise dedicated, thematic working groups aligned with BIMSTEC's seven priority pillars. Each should be mandated to develop clear, time-bound deliverables, such as finalising trade protocols, connectivity projects, or disaster response frameworks. A nodal structure for each sector would facilitate focus and accountability while ensuring member states bear ownership through lead-country mechanisms.

Creating Sustainable Financing Mechanisms

Institutional resilience demands dependable and sustainable financing. A formal BIMSTEC Development Fund can comprise two tranches: Fund A, sourced from member-state contributions for public goods projects; and Fund B, mobilising concessional funds and private investments via blended finance or public-private partnerships (27). Guidelines should govern external funding and private sector participation, ensuring the transparent and strategic use of resources (28). Innovative financing strategies—such as land-value capture, securitisation, or asset recycling—could enhance project bankability and attract institutional and commercial investors.

Building Monitoring, Evaluation, and Compliance Frameworks

BIMSTEC must move beyond consensus without consequences by instituting a lightweight but credible monitoring regime. Periodic peer assessments, progress dashboards, and transparency in reporting will provide a foundation for accountability. The Secretariat, granted authority to track deliverables and flag delays, can ensure early detection and corrective action (29). A culture of "agreeing to disagree," endorsed by the Charter, can maintain inclusivity while safeguarding performance.

Encouraging Leadership Rotation with Continuity

The alphabetical rotation of leadership, though fair, often yields uneven engagement due to domestic priorities. Institutional mechanisms, such as a rotating deputy chair or a coordinating bureau, can ensure continuity during transitions. Stabilising the tenure of leadership cycles would guard against summit delays and preserve agenda momentum.

Institutionalising Partnerships with Think Tanks, the Private Sector, and Civil Society

Track-1.5 and Track-2 dialogues, which bring together academia, think tanks, civil society, and business, can supplement formal diplomacy with innovative policy insights and stakeholder buy-in. Establishing platforms, such as the BIMSTEC Business Summit (as India did in 2024), can strengthen public-private links and ground policymaking in economic realities. These alliances can enrich institutional capacity and legitimise regional initiatives across society and sectors.

Strengthening BIMSTEC demands a calibrated approach—one centred on bolstering the Secretariat with a clear mandate, adequate staffing, and autonomy; creating disciplined yet focused working structures; ensuring sustainable and diversified financing; embedding credible accountability systems; stabilising leadership transitions; and embracing inclusive stakeholder engagement. Together, these pathways offer a realistic roadmap for transforming BIMSTEC from a declaratory platform into a results-driven regional institution.

The Role of Political Will and Strategic Convergence

India and Thailand: Sustained Leadership Pillars

India's leadership within BIMSTEC is both infrastructural and strategic. As the largest economy and single biggest funder of the Secretariat (contributing around 32 percent of its budget), India has actively shaped BIMSTEC's trajectory—hosting key centres of excellence (for weather, energy), offering US$1 million for Secretariat capacity-building, and launching multiple integrating initiatives ranging from digital infrastructure proposals to disaster preparedness and human resources programmes (30). These efforts reinforce the notion of BIMSTEC as a practical, action-oriented forum rather than a symbolic multilateral entity. Thailand also plays a critical role in maintaining platform cohesion. Bangkok traditionally provides drafting leadership and regional outreach. Political stability in these states creates the enabling environment required for BIMSTEC's effective performance.

Ensuring Smaller States' Engagement Through Equitable Returns

For institutionalisation to succeed, large member states must amplify capacity-building and equitable benefit distribution to smaller partners. Bangladesh stands to gain significantly from streamlined trade policies (especially in garments, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals) and improved infrastructure linkages (31). Similarly, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar—each with limited institutional reach—benefit from shared regional public goods such as disaster management, people-to-people programmes, and connectivity corridors.

India's BODHI initiative, which offers annual training and scholarships to youth and diplomats, exemplifies capacity building that fosters both goodwill and future-ready regional human capital. By promoting culturally grounded, inclusive cooperation (for instance, music festivals and athletics events), BIMSTEC can converge shared futures, strengthening institutional legitimacy through citizen engagement (32).

Navigating Great Power Dynamics While Preserving Autonomy

BIMSTEC's institutional legitimacy hinges on maintaining autonomy even as external geopolitical forces intensify. Regional powers such as China are exerting influence through infrastructure investments and regional connectivity initiatives, which may sideline BIMSTEC's own frameworks (33). Countries such as Myanmar and Thailand navigate this dynamic by balancing their ties, with BIMSTEC acting as a stabilising forum that can counter excessive dependence on any one power.

India, mindful of these pressures, anchors its regional leadership within BIMSTEC by offering inclusive, transparent, and practical partnerships—critically, without coercion. By reinforcing regional infrastructure, trade modalities, and security collaboration, BIMSTEC provides a mechanism for member states to assert agency, collaboratively prioritising regional interest over great-power dependency.

In BIMSTEC, political will and strategic alignment are essential for institutional consolidation. Sustained leadership from India, institutional balance from member states like Thailand, inclusive capacity support for smaller members, and a careful balancing of external influences can transform BIMSTEC into a credible regional institution. Crucially, BIMSTEC must deliver tangible benefits while preserving autonomy—firmly rooting regionalism in shared goals and open futures.

Conclusion

The trajectory of BIMSTEC underscores a recurring lesson in regional cooperation: declarations and vision statements, while symbolically significant, are insufficient to sustain credibility without institutional depth. Over the past two decades, BIMSTEC has survived precisely because its functional agenda—connectivity, trade, energy, and disaster management—has remained relevant to the needs of its member states. However, substantive outcomes—from energy grids to coastal shipping frameworks—have been undermined by a Secretariat that remains under-resourced and lacks the enforcement authority necessary to transform vision into action. Strengthening BIMSTEC's institutional capacity is thus not merely procedural—it is the critical pathway from paper commitments toward impactful, enduring regional cooperation (34). This process-oriented approach ensures that BIMSTEC remains responsive to its members' needs, avoids bureaucratic rigidity, and maintains relevance amid shifting regional and global contexts.

BIMSTEC's future relevance will hinge less on the proliferation of communiqués and summit-level commitments, and more on the strengthening of its institutional foundations. Enhancing the Secretariat's mandate, building financing mechanisms, and institutionalising monitoring and evaluation will enable BIMSTEC to deliver tangible outcomes. Political will from leading states, such as India, Thailand, and Bangladesh, combined with equitable benefits for smaller members, will be crucial in sustaining momentum (35).

Institutionalisation, however, should not be viewed as an end-state modelled on external templates such as the EU. Instead, it must be understood as an ongoing process—one that strengthens BIMSTEC's ability to adapt to changing geopolitical and economic contexts, while retaining flexibility and responsiveness. Done correctly, this process can align the collective aspirations of member states with the theme of 'common goals, open futures'. BIMSTEC's promise lies in becoming a platform where functional cooperation gradually builds trust, and where institutional resilience transforms shared objectives into sustained regional gains.

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Towards Stronger Regionalism through BIMSTEC: A Nepali Perspective

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Nepal has attached great importance to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) since becoming a full member in February 2004. As the only regional body that links South Asia and Southeast Asia, Nepal views BIMSTEC as a vital bridge connecting the two regions politically, economically, and through increased exchanges at multiple levels. BIMSTEC aims to promote inclusive economic and social development by deepening cooperation in mutually beneficial sectors and addressing common challenges in a manner that aligns with national development priorities. Nepal has assumed the lead role in coordinating activities for the grouping's 'people-to-people contact' sector (with culture, tourism, poverty alleviation, and people-to-people contact through forums as the sub-sectors). Nepal has also actively participated in various other sectors, including connectivity, trade, energy, poverty alleviation, climate change, and counterterrorism. For a landlocked country like Nepal, BIMSTEC holds particular significance as a platform that can potentially pave the way for enhanced access to larger

regional markets beyond India and China, as well as for securing transport corridors and an energy grid extending to Bangladesh and beyond. Indeed, as the 'bridge' between two regions, BIMSTEC can unlock economic rewards through greater regional connectivity" (1).

Representing over 20 percent of the world's population, the BIMSTEC region has seen substantial growth in trade and has consistently outperformed the global average in terms of GDP growth. Between 2001 and 2020, the region attracted 2.78 percent of global foreign direct investment, a rise from 0.96 percent over the previous two decades (1981–2000) (2). By recognising and building on their shared historical, cultural, and civilisational ties, BIMSTEC countries have also enhanced people-to-people connectivity and mobility across borders. The organisation continues to harness this potential through the implementation of key agreements, declarations, restructured priority sectors and institutional reforms to align more closely with global economic trends.

The 'Bangkok Vision 2030' (3), adopted at the Sixth Summit held in April 2025, offers a roadmap for transforming the region into a "prosperous, resilient and open" community by the end of the decade. Nepal, situated at the crossroads of South Asia and Southeast Asia, has the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to this vision.

Key Issues

Nepal is a founding member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the SAARC Secretariat is based in Kathmandu. Nepal is the current SAARC chair, largely by default, as there has been no summit since 2014. Pakistan was supposed to host the summit in 2016, but it was stalled indefinitely after India pulled out following the terror attacks at Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir. Critics argue that the SAARC cannot be reinvigorated unless India and Pakistan resolve their differences (4). In parallel, BIMSTEC has a better balance, as without Pakistan, it has a better chance to fulfil the lofty objectives enshrined in its charter. Unlike SAARC, BIMSTEC was envisioned as a more pragmatic alternative, one that could bypass contentious issues and focus on shared development goals. However, BIMSTEC is not devoid of tensions among its member states. Relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh have been strained due to the Rohingya refugee crisis, with Bangladesh hosting approximately 1.3 million refugees who fled Myanmar (5). Bangladesh has been pressing Myanmar to stop the mass exodus and allow safe repatriation. The Rohingya situation has become a major irritant, straining bilateral relations, creating border security concerns, and impacting the environment and resources of the host country.

It is vital that the bilateral tensions—the cause of SAARC's paralysis—should not stymie BIMSTEC, resulting in another round of missed opportunity for the people of this vast region. As such, BIMSTEC should not be viewed as a substitute for SAARC. Indeed, Nepal regards both organisations as equally important and considers each complementary to the other.

Although BIMSTEC represents a cross-regional bridge between South and Southeast Asia, with two Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members as part of it, their presence does not guarantee that the dynamism associated with ASEAN's model of regionalism will carry over into this grouping, nor does it guarantee the fast implementation of projects. Like SAARC, BIMSTEC needs to proceed cautiously and incrementally in advancing economic integration, energy cooperation, and enhanced connectivity.

For instance, Nepal is the only country in the BIMSTEC region to provide a visa on arrival for all BIMSTEC nationals. Sri Lanka has also arranged a much more flexible e-visa scheme. Meanwhile, Thailand does not grant visas on arrival to citizens of Nepal and Bangladesh. An easy visa regime among member states for nationals of BIMSTEC countries is vital for the organisation to outperform SAARC. Similarly, track II conferences and academic exchanges will sustain the momentum as they will provide the necessary critical input from theoreticians. BIMSTEC needs a pool of its own experts, rather than officials from various line ministries of member states who are routinely transferred and often never oversee grouping activities again. As a regional cooperation project, universities in member countries should incorporate BIMSTEC studies into their programmes, preferably in political science, economics, and international relations degree courses. Leading universities in the region should also provide scholarships to students from the BIMSTEC region. For instance, Thailand's Asian Institute of Technology provides scholarships to students from the continent.

Another key area for the BIMSTEC countries to advance is deeper economic integration and connectivity. Despite BIMSTEC's significant population and a combined GDP of nearly US$5 trillion, intra-regional trade remains far below potential, at a mere 5 percent. The long-awaited BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement must be expedited to stimulate trade flows, investments, and industrial cooperation across borders. Landlocked Nepal will benefit from enhanced connectivity infrastructure, including the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway, cross-border rail networks, and maritime agreements that facilitate smoother transit to ports. The implementation of the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and initiatives to harmonise customs procedures can also help Nepal overcome its geographic limitations by gaining direct access to global markets. Furthermore, strengthening digital connectivity and e-commerce linkages could empower Nepalese startups, small businesses, and youth innovators to engage in cross-border trade and digital services.

Promoting openness and people-centric cooperation is essential for making regionalism sustainable and meaningful. Strengthening people-to-people ties through cultural exchanges, academic collaborations, and regional tourism will build mutual understanding and trust among BIMSTEC nations. For instance, as the birthplace of the Buddha and home to a mix of cultures and natural heritage, Nepal can promote the Buddhist circuit and other cultural linkages within the region. Additionally, engaging with the private sector through the proposed BIMSTEC Business Advisory Council and enhancing the role of the BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce and Industry can mobilise private capital, technology, and entrepreneurship. Additionally, programmes such as the BIMSTEC youth forum can empower youth leaders and innovators to co-create sustainable futures for the region.

Challenges as a Regional Group

Decades since its inception, BIMSTEC continues to face structural, political and operational challenges that have hindered its progress. Although it took nearly two decades to adopt its formal Charter and establish a Secretariat, BIMSTEC has the political will but lacks the institutional capacity and implementation mechanisms to address pressing regional concerns in a meaningful way. Without sustained commitment and out-of-the-box thinking, it risks becoming another ceremonial forum that hosts summits and issues declarations but delivers limited, concrete outcomes. Some member states are very eager, while others are a step behind in several initiatives, such as the BIMSTEC military drill, due to domestic political constraints (6).

Another challenge is that of political instability in the member countries. Bangladesh, which hosts the Secretariat, recently experienced a mass uprising against the government. Nepal has also witnessed large-scale protests recently. Similarly, the military rule in Myanmar, and the subsequent sanctions against the regime that have led to its increased international isolation, is another issue of concern. By engaging with the junta through its various fora, BIMSTEC risks western pressure, which smaller countries in the region cannot afford. Additionally, the organisation does not possess sufficient gumption to pursue a peaceful resolution of the Myanmar crisis, nor does it have the clout to forge a diplomatic resolution of the Rohingya refugee issue.

Another challenge is the absence of a unified system for the cross-border movement of goods, services, and people. Disparate national regulations, inconsistent customs procedures, and varied legal frameworks inhibit seamless regional integration. BIMSTEC can consider establishing a single-window clearance mechanism across its member countries, allowing stakeholders to submit standardised documentation for cross-border trade and travel. This will enhance efficiency, build trust, and create a more predictable environment for economic cooperation.

Institutional and structural weaknesses within BIMSTEC further exacerbate these issues. Decision-making is often slow, and the BIMSTEC Secretariat remains under-resourced in terms of personnel and finance. Like SAARC, BIMSTEC has also begun to focus on all aspects of human activity, such as climate change and environmental protection, agriculture and food security, science and technology, and trade and investment. In the absence of a pool of experts, it relies on the line ministries in the member states to send officials for periodic meetings. Such bureaucratisation stymies decision-making that can harmonise the various national interests for the collective regional good.

Compounding these internal weaknesses are overlapping memberships with other regional groupings, such as SAARC, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and ASEAN, which may create coordination difficulties and dilute BIMSTEC's strategic focus. Without a clear delineation of roles and improved synergy between these platforms, BIMSTEC's ability to deliver on its agenda will remain limited. The BIMSTEC Secretariat must also prioritise establishing an annual sideline meeting of member country foreign ministers during the UN General Assembly, which will enable them to take stock of the regional situation and direct the Secretariat on key matters of concern.

Outlining the Way Ahead

The Sixth BIMSTEC Summit marked a significant turning point for the group. Convening amid intensifying geopolitical unrest, growing climate vulnerabilities, and the need for post-pandemic recovery, the summit provided a platform to refine strategic direction while delivering institutional reforms aimed at deepening regional integration.

This summit sought to move beyond rhetorical commitments and lay the groundwork for action-oriented cooperation in priority areas, including trade, connectivity, climate resilience, public health, and maritime development. Several key agreements were adopted, signalling a shift towards results-driven regionalism. The following summit outcomes demonstrate the organisation's commitment to strengthening its institutional architecture and delivering tangible benefits.

Adoption of 'Bangkok Vision 2030'

A key outcome was the formal adoption of the 'Bangkok Vision 2030', a forward-looking strategic roadmap that sets the developmental agenda for the next five years and beyond. Anchored in the principles of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and inspired by Thailand's bio-circular-green economy model, the Vision document envisions transforming BIMSTEC into a "prosperous, resilient, and open" regional community. This vision aims to enhance the quality of life for the region's approximately 1.8 billion people by promoting inclusive economic growth, environmental sustainability, and technological innovation across the Bay of Bengal region.

Introduction of PRO BIMSTEC Framework

To operationalise the Bangkok Vision, leaders endorsed the PRO BIMSTEC framework, a thematic and action-oriented structure comprising three central pillars: (i) Prosperity: emphasis on enhancing intra-regional trade and investment, developing resilient supply chains and advancing digital and physical connectivity; (ii) Resilience: strengthening public health systems, agricultural productivity and disaster risk management to prepare for future shocks, especially in the context of climate change and pandemics; and (iii) Openness: promoting sustainable tourism, cultural exchange, and people-to-people connectivity while enhancing transparency and good governance across member states.

This framework is designed to streamline sectoral priorities and ensure coherence between national and regional development strategies.

Maritime Transport Cooperation Agreement

A significant step was the signing of the BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation, which aims to enhance both cargo and passenger maritime connectivity among the member states. The agreement lays the foundation for enhanced regional logistics, facilitates safer and more efficient shipping routes, and supports the development of the blue economy. By strengthening maritime links, the agreement is expected to significantly reduce transport costs, promote coastal

trade, and stimulate investments in port infrastructure and shipbuilding. The deal is promising for landlocked Nepal, which has been seeking riverine connectivity to India and Bangladesh.

Institutional Strengthening through Rules of Procedure

In a long-awaited move toward institutional consolidation, the summit adopted the rules of procedure for BIMSTEC mechanisms, which will guide the functioning of summits, ministerial councils, sectoral working groups, and the Secretariat. These rules improve procedural clarity, ensure consistency in decision-making processes, and enhance the overall transparency and efficiency of the organisation. This institutional reform is expected to accelerate implementation timelines and improve accountability within BIMSTEC's governance architecture.

Strategic Guidance from the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) Report

The finalisation of the EPG report offered critical strategic insights for BIMSTEC's future trajectory. Drawing on a year-long consultative process, the report presents recommendations on: rationalising the number of focus sectors to avoid duplication and enhance effectiveness; institutional restructuring, including strengthening the Secretariat; and developing performance-based evaluation frameworks for ongoing and future projects.

These recommendations are expected to help BIMSTEC transition from a sector-heavy structure to a more focused and delivery-oriented regional mechanism.

Conclusion

The world is experiencing unprecedented chaos with multiple crises unfolding in several theatres. This is compounded by rising economic nationalism, supply chain disruptions, intensifying US-China and US-Russia rivalry, and the weakening of the UN system. In this context, BIMSTEC must strive to emerge as a pragmatic and functional sub-regional grouping and as a viable alternative platform for regional cooperation linking South and Southeast Asia.

As the global order becomes increasingly fragmented and uncertain, regional cooperation platforms have no doubt acquired strategic and developmental significance. BIMSTEC is not merely a geographical construct, but also embodies a shared vision among countries bound by the Bay of Bengal, aiming to forge stronger ties in trade, connectivity, security, sustainability, and human development. The challenges faced by the region can no longer be effectively addressed in isolation. They demand coordinated responses, joint initiatives, and a commitment to collective resilience.

The region must work toward finalising key agreements, institutionalising regular coordination mechanisms, and strengthening sectoral collaboration across priority areas. The roles of civil society, academia, think tanks, media, and youth must be elevated within the BIMSTEC fora. This will enable the grouping to position itself as a regional actor with global relevance.

Nepal's proactive stance within BIMSTEC reflects a broader vision of geoeconomic engagement, peaceful coexistence, and inclusive regionalism. It underscores Nepal's aspiration to act not merely as a beneficiary but also as a contributor to regional peace, prosperity, and resilience. While BIMSTEC continues to evolve, balancing economic growth, connectivity and cultural cooperation, Nepal's role within it will remain critical in shaping an integrated and inclusive regional future.

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Connectivity for Prosperity
Member States' Priorities to Achieve Common Goals

Connectivity as the Driver of Prosperity: The Myanmar, ASEAN, and BIMSTEC Perspective

U Kyaw Nyunt Lwin

The global economic centre of gravity is shifting towards Asia, driven by rapid growth, innovation, and regional integration. Asia is becoming a global hub for technology and trade. Countries like India, China, Vietnam, and Indonesia are emerging as major players. It is expected that by 2031, ASEAN exports are projected to surge by nearly 90 percent to about US$3.2 trillion a year, even as global trade expands by less than 30 percent. Overall, ASEAN trade is expected to increase by roughly US$1.2 trillion over the next decade, underscoring the emergence of the "Asian era" (1).

This shift is resulting in economic fluctuations. In the era of tariffs and other restrictions, especially imposed by the West, short-term slowdowns due to trade tensions and weaker global demand are expected. Growth in Asia-Pacific is projected to slow to 3.9 percent in 2025, down from 4.6 percent in 2024 (2). Despite this, long-term prospects remain strong, especially with innovation and regional cooperation. India's GDP is projected to outpace Japan's by 2025 and Germany's by 2030, reaching over

US$7 trillion (3). India is leading in digital public infrastructure and expanding its consumer base rapidly (4). China has rebounded quickly post-COVID-19 and is expected to match the US GDP by 2030. However, this declined to about 70 percent last year, owing to surging US nominal GDP amid high inflation and a depreciation of the renminbi against the dollar (5). Currently, China leads in electric vehicle production, advanced semiconductor engineering, the digital economy, and several other sectors. By 2030, the world's economic centre of gravity is expected to be near the China-India-Pakistan region (6), reflecting Asia's growing influence. Notably, intraregional exchange remains central to the region's merchandise trade. In 2024, about 53 percent of exports and 56 percent of imports were directed to or sourced from Asia-Pacific markets. China remained the leading trading partner, absorbing 20 percent of the region's exports and providing 26 percent of its imports (7).

The Bay of Bengal region has a long history of connectivity between immediate and close neighbours in the Indo-Pacific, to encourage the flow of people, goods, ideas, and culture. Myanmar has a vital position in this regional connectivity, linking West Asia, India, China, and Southeast Asia through major infrastructure projects that aim to transform trade, transport, and strategic relations across the region. Additionally, Myanmar is an active participant in regional platforms such as the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), ASEAN, and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC).

Myanmar's Geostrategic Advantage

Myanmar has a pivotal role in regional connectivity, playing a significant role in both the historical and modern Silk Road networks, serving as a vital link between China, India, and Southeast Asia. The Myanmar–India border is a strategically significant and complex frontier that spans 1,643 km, connecting four northeastern Indian states (Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram) with Myanmar's Sagaing Region and Chin State.

Myanmar has a diverse and extensive coastline stretching about 2,300 km along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. The 713-km-long Rakhine (Arakan) coast is rugged and mountainous, with steep headlands and sandy beaches (Ngapali beach is a popular tourist destination). It includes Ramree Island and Cheduba Island, known for mud volcanoes and oil deposits. The Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) Delta Coast is flat and deltaic, formed by the Irrawaddy River's distributaries. It is rich in mangroves and tidal mudflats, and is vital for agriculture and fisheries. The Tanintharyi (Tenasserim) coast runs 1,078 km with narrow and steep terrain, running north-south. It has famous tourist spots with coral reefs, offshore islands, and rainforest-covered slopes. The Tanintharyi coast is less developed but ecologically rich. Myanmar has nine main ports, and Yangon Port is its most significant (8). It handles over 90 percent of Myanmar's imports and exports from its 28 berths in the Inner Harbour and 20 berths in Thilawa Outer Harbour (9). Kyaukphyu Port is strategic for China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines, and India's trade from its Northeastern states to other Bay of Bengal countries (through the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project).

Strategic Infrastructure in the Region

The India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway is a major regional connectivity project aiming to link South and Southeast Asia by road. The approximately 1,360-km highway runs from Moreh in India, through Tamu, Kalewa, and Myawaddy in Myanmar, to end at Mae Sot in Thailand. It could enhance trade, tourism, and people-to-people connectivity between the three countries, and support India's 'Act East' policy. Although the highway is near completion, there are some obstacles, mainly due to security issues in Myanmar. For instance, the Kalewa–Yagyi section has faced delays due to steep terrain and political instability. Additionally, there is a possibility of extending the highway to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, forming part of the East-West Economic Corridor. The under-negotiated BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement will also enable seamless cross-border movement of goods and people.

The development of coastal and inland regions in the Bay of Bengal coastal countries—Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—involves various dimensions, including economic, social, and environmental aspects. Each of these countries has a significant and diverse coastal economies that boost its GDP and employment. The coastal economy is based on sectors such as fisheries, tourism, trade, shipping, energy, and conservation. These sectors are now vulnerable to climate change, natural disasters, pollution, and conflicts. Despite the challenges, there is high potential for growth and regional economic integration by harnessing ocean and coastal resources. Additionally, the Bay of Bengal coastal countries have large and densely populated land regions, with agriculture, industry, and services. Developing land regions necessitates a comprehensive approach that addresses the needs and interests of land resources and sectors.

Countries could benefit from cooperating in the blue economy to sustainably harness the economic potential of oceans, seas, and coastal areas while ensuring environmental protection and social equity (10). The blue economy goes beyond traditional marine industries by integrating ecological stewardship and inclusive development. Additionally, the Bay of Bengal is a significant reserve for hydrocarbon resources and vital living resources. The blue economy in the Bay of Bengal area emerges as an important domain in current maritime discourse (11). The growth of the blue economy in the Bay of Bengal will contribute significantly to regional GDP and global trade.

BIMSTEC plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration among member nations in addressing issues such as piracy, overfishing, and climate-related events. However, challenges remain in operationalising these efforts due to inconsistent financial support and disparities in safety procedures and the rule of law across member states' ports. One way to address this issue is for governments in the region to focus on turning the promises for blue growth into actions by encouraging collaboration and investment (12).

River deltas, such as the Ayeyarwady in Myanmar, the Mekong in Southeast Asia, and the Ganges-Brahmaputra in Bangladesh and India, are vital economic regions facing distinctive challenges even as they contribute significantly to economies. The Ayeyarwady River Delta, encompassing

a vast area in Myanmar, is pivotal for the country's economy, supporting agriculture, fishing, and industries. However, this delta faces numerous challenges, such as cyclones and natural disasters that result in infrastructure damage and impact agricultural productivity and livelihoods. Limited infrastructure development and agricultural issues like land degradation and lack of modern farming techniques, coupled with poverty and restricted access to education and healthcare, further hinder economic growth and human development in the region. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving governments, the private sector, civil society, and international groups to ensure resilience and long-term economic prosperity.

Archipelagos exhibit a wide range of islands, varying in size, shape, and topography. They are crucial for scientific research about unique ecosystems, biodiversity patterns, and the impact of human activities. Island types range from low-lying reef islands to uplifted volcanic islands. Compared to the volcanic islands, low-lying reef islands have limited agricultural potential and a higher vulnerability to some impacts of climate change. Mergui Archipelago, also known as Myeik Archipelago, is in the southernmost part of Myanmar and has over 800 islands. The archipelago's near-isolation has resulted in the islands and the surrounding waters having diverse flora and fauna.

The integration of archipelagos in the Bay of Bengal region for better economic collaboration is a complex decision that involves geographical proximity, shared economic interests, and political will. The development of coastal and land regions in the coastal countries requires understanding and addressing complex interdependencies and challenges. Integrated and adaptive strategies and policies on blue economy, delta economy, and the archipelago economies of the Bay of Bengal coastal countries are essential for sustainable coastal and ocean development.

Strengthening Regional Ties through Infrastructure

Some Asian countries like India, China, Myanmar, and Thailand are member countries of four regional groupings: ACD, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and LMC. BIMSTEC and ASEAN are increasingly aligning their efforts to promote regional integration, economic growth, and security cooperation. The 2024 Jakarta Futures Forum was a landmark event that brought together leaders from ASEAN and BIMSTEC to discuss the blue economy, green growth, and strategic connectivity. Myanmar is a bridge country between South and Southeast Asia, making it central to BIMSTEC-ASEAN coordination.

In BIMSTEC, Myanmar is the lead country for the energy and agriculture sectors, and is actively participating in the LMC. The LMC includes China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and focuses on water resource management, agriculture, poverty reduction, connectivity, and infrastructure. While the LMC is viewed as more 'China-centric', there are indirect linkages with BIMSTEC and ASEAN through shared member states like Myanmar and Thailand. As such, increased cooperation between these regional organisations will significantly benefit domestic security and stability, fund respective institutions, and help realise bilateral free trade agreements. Additionally, the region will benefit from shared infrastructure projects, joint climate action, disaster relief, and a more enhanced regional voice in global forums.

Conclusion

The global economic shift towards Asia underscores the strategic importance of connectivity as a driving force shaping regional dynamics, trade, and cooperation. In this context, Myanmar's geostrategic location assumes exceptional significance. Positioned at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, Myanmar serves as a vital bridge linking the economies of the ASEAN and BIMSTEC member states. This unique positioning enhances its potential to act as a conduit for energy trade, transport networks, digital corridors, and cultural exchange across the Bay of Bengal region. Strengthening Myanmar's connectivity infrastructure, including ports, highways, and power grids, can therefore play a transformative role in promoting regional integration and sustainable growth. As global supply chains reorient and regional partnerships deepen, Myanmar's role as a connector between BIMSTEC and ASEAN becomes increasingly crucial in advancing shared goals of economic resilience, energy security, and inclusive development in the decades ahead.

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Thailand's Connectivity Priorities to Achieve Common BIMSTEC Goals

Surat Horachaikul

Connectivity has become central to international relations, especially in Asia, where demographic, geographic, and developmental factors intersect. For the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) members—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—it extends beyond infrastructure to energy, digital, and cultural links, serving as both a driver and outcome of regional cooperation, economic growth, and stability. Established in 1997, BIMSTEC has evolved into a key subregional framework linking South and Southeast Asia (1). Bridging regions long divided by limited infrastructure, political differences, and colonial legacies (2), its seven members remain united by proximity to the Bay of Bengal and shared principles of equality, coexistence, respect, and mutual benefit.

Thailand holds a pivotal role within BIMSTEC as both a founding member and the lead nation for connectivity. Leveraging its strategic location between South and Southeast Asia—anchoring the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN) to the east and facing South Asia across the Andaman Sea—it serves as a crucial bridge between the two regions. As a Thai diplomat observed, Thailand's prosperity relies on engagement and building links across Asia, connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans (3).

The adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter in 2022 represented a major milestone, affirming Thailand's leadership and prioritising connectivity as a key pillar. Thai officials frequently reiterate that connectivity is the "backbone of regional prosperity" and a "necessary condition for community-building (4). This focus complements the 'Thailand 4.0' vision, which strongly emphasises innovation, digitalisation, and deep integration into global value chains.

From a theoretical perspective, Thailand's consistent emphasis on connectivity can be viewed through the lens of functionalism and middle power diplomacy. Functionalist theory posits that successful cooperation in technical and economic domains can gradually spill over into generating broader political trust. Simultaneously, as a middle power, Thailand seeks to exert regional influence through niche leadership in non-contentious areas. By taking the lead on functional connectivity, Thailand strategically avoids entanglement in the more politically divisive debates that frequently impede cooperation in other regional organisations, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. BIMSTEC thus provides Thailand with a stage to perform a form of quiet diplomacy, grounded in technical achievements rather than high-stakes geopolitical strategy. More so, Thailand's unique geography—combining continental and maritime strengths with economic scale—gives it a strategic edge, enabling it to anchor major regional projects and serve as a vital bridge across the Bay of Bengal.

This essay explores Thailand's comprehensive perspective on BIMSTEC connectivity, arguing that the approach rests upon three interconnected strategic dimensions:

- Physical connectivity through transport networks and supporting infrastructure.

- Energy and digital connectivity as crucial frontiers for future economic growth.

- Maritime and people-to-people connectivity as the necessary anchors of regional legitimacy and trust.

The essay draws on interviews with senior Thai officials and policymakers (5), providing rare insights into Thailand's regional strategy, perceptions of BIMSTEC, and internal policy debates. Unlike formal documents, these firsthand accounts reveal underlying motivations and evolving priorities, offering a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Thailand's regional engagement and decision-making.

Thailand's Vision of Connectivity

Thailand's aspiration to lead the BIMSTEC connectivity agenda aligns closely with its domestic development and foreign policy goals. Strategically positioned between South and Southeast Asia, Thailand has long projected itself as a 'connector' or 'gateway state'. The 'Thailand 4.0' strategy,

launched in 2016, embodies this vision—seeking to transform the nation into a high-income, innovation-driven economy through major investments in infrastructure, logistics, and global supply chain integration. As a Thai official noted, connectivity is not optional but the foundation of future economic growth (6).

The Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) represents the most visible, high-profile component of the Thailand 4.0 strategy. Located in Chachoengsao, Chonburi, and Rayong provinces, the EEC is designed to be the nexus for Thailand's next-generation industries, including biotechnology, robotics, and advanced digital services. Crucially, the EEC is concurrently conceived as a sophisticated logistics hub designed specifically to connect Thailand westward to its South Asian neighbours. Major infrastructure investments, such as the third phase expansion of the Laem Chabang Port, the upgrading of U-Tapao International Airport, and new high-speed rail links, are designed not only to meet surging domestic demand but also to firmly position Thailand within the larger connectivity networks that span Asia. An EEC official confirmed that the effort is "about situating Thailand at the heart of regional value chains that extend to India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka" (7).

Thailand's location between the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand positions it as a vital bridge between ASEAN and BIMSTEC (8). Through middle-power diplomacy, it advances connectivity, infrastructure, and digital cooperation (9). The 2022 BIMSTEC Charter formalised its leadership, which now depends on strengthening trust, growth, and regional security.

Furthermore, Thailand's private sector is a powerful internal driver. Groups like the Thai Chamber of Commerce consistently advocate for deeper integration with South Asian economies, viewing them as crucial opportunities for trade diversification and investment, particularly at a time when economic reliance on China is subject to increasing domestic scrutiny. For Thai companies, BIMSTEC represents a gateway to large, expanding markets, including India's growing middle class, Bangladesh's established garment industry, and Sri Lanka's potential logistics sector.

Thailand's holistic connectivity vision integrates hard and soft dimensions—combining infrastructure with customs facilitation, regulatory alignment, and cultural exchange. Building on its Greater Mekong Subregion experience, Thailand extends this model westward through BIMSTEC, promoting digital, energy, and cultural links. Anchored in 'Thailand 4.0' and middle-power diplomacy, this multidimensional strategy aims to position the country as a regional hub while advancing shared prosperity and deeper people-to-people ties across BIMSTEC.

Challenges to the Connectivity Agenda

While Thailand's vision to serve as the regional connectivity hub is clear and forward-looking, translating this ambition into reality is a persistent challenge. A complex array of constraints, both domestic and external, shapes the limits of Thailand's leadership and implementation capabilities. These challenges fall into three broad, interconnected categories: internal political and institutional limitations, intense geopolitical rivalries within the Bay of Bengal, and the structural weaknesses inherent in the BIMSTEC.

Domestic Political and Institutional Limitations

Thailand's domestic politics, marked by repeated coups and instability since 2006, have caused policy discontinuity that has disrupted long-term infrastructure projects. The Dawei special economic zone (SEZ) in southern Myanmar (intended to connect Thailand, Myanmar, and India through a deep-sea port) illustrates this challenge, facing persistent delays due to shifting political priorities. Financing also remains a key constraint, given that large-scale projects demand sustained commitments across political cycles amid competing domestic needs like welfare and post-pandemic recovery. One transport official noted that Thailand's projects falter not from lack of ambition but from discontinuity and funding gaps. Institutional fragmentation further hampers progress, with limited coordination among ministries, such as transport, energy, and digital economy, weakening the interagency cooperation that is vital for advancing BIMSTEC connectivity goals. Thailand's bureaucratic structure is highly compartmentalised, resulting in often weak coordination across key ministries. The interagency efforts are frequently unaligned, which slows down the crucial implementation of BIMSTEC-wide initiatives.

Geopolitical Constraints

The Bay of Bengal is increasingly viewed as a critical arena for intensifying great-power competition, primarily between India and China. Thailand, situated precariously between these strategic poles, must carefully navigate this rivalry. China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has channelled significant investments into several BIMSTEC member states, notably Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, covering port infrastructure, energy grids, and digital networks. While Thailand has engaged with BRI projects, it remains wary of excessive economic or strategic overdependence on Beijing. Simultaneously, India's proactive 'Act East' policy mandates New Delhi to increase its strategic engagement in Southeast Asia, largely channelled through the BIMSTEC framework. This scenario forces Thailand into a complex balancing act: maintaining robust economic ties with China while simultaneously viewing India as a vital strategic partner for regional balancing.

Furthermore, the strategic retrenchment of the US from Southeast Asia during both Trump administrations, which many senior Thai diplomats interpret as Washington's deliberate disengagement from the region, has prompted Bangkok to more closely monitor and leverage India's deepening involvement within BIMSTEC. Thailand views this engagement as a necessary counterbalance that can effectively bridge South and Southeast Asia (10).

Geopolitical competition increasingly shapes Thailand's connectivity agenda. The proposed extension into Laos and Cambodia for the India–Myanmar–Thailand Highway has drawn Chinese BRI interest, while Japan's Official Development Assistance and the US Indo-Pacific strategy add further layers. Thai policymakers must balance these rival influences to keep BIMSTEC focused on cooperation rather than competition, preserving its original integrative spirit.

Institutional Weaknesses within BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC's institutional weaknesses constrain its effectiveness. Unlike ASEAN, it lacks strong structures, with a small, underfunded secretariat in Dhaka and slow, consensus-based decision-making, which hampers its implementation capacity for large-scale initiatives such as the

BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity (adopted in 2018) (11). The absence of a permanent financial mechanism forces a reliance on ad hoc or external funding, undermining credibility. Ambitions often exceed delivery; initiatives like the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection and digital connectivity progress slowly due to limited capacity, funding, and political momentum, highlighting the gap between vision and implementation (12).

Other Challenges

Beyond political and structural hurdles, new challenges intensify Thailand's difficulties. The Bay of Bengal's extreme climate vulnerability—marked by rising seas, cyclones, and flooding—threatens coastal infrastructure, underscoring the need for climate-smart connectivity, as stressed by National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) officials. The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted progress through border closures, fiscal strain, and construction delays. These compounded pressures reveal that Thailand's connectivity success depends less on ambitious plans than on resilient, sustainable implementation.

Policy Recommendations

Despite the significant challenges, Thailand's leadership of the BIMSTEC connectivity pillar offers immense strategic opportunities. Bangkok's strategic location, its sophisticated domestic development agenda, and its preference for middle power diplomacy provide critical comparative advantages that must be skilfully leveraged to transition from aspiration to solid achievement. To achieve this, Thailand must focus on practical, actionable policy avenues that ensure all connectivity initiatives are inclusive, sustainable, and resilient.

Leveraging Geography for Strategic Advantage

Thailand's geography remains its most potent asset. Its position as the only BIMSTEC member in South and Southeast Asia, thereby linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans, is invaluable. Thailand's proposed Land Bridge Project is a prime example of leveraging this geography. The project aims to connect deep-sea ports on the Gulf of Thailand with others on the Andaman Sea, a connection that could drastically reduce traditional maritime transit times, thereby transforming Thailand into a major logistics hub for ASEAN and BIMSTEC partners seeking efficient alternative sea routes. Thailand should proactively integrate this project into the overarching BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity. By strategically aligning domestic infrastructure initiatives with regional frameworks, Thailand can ensure that its national investments simultaneously serve the wider collective needs of the region, maximising both domestic economic returns and regional benefits.

Completing Flagship Connectivity Projects

Thailand's leadership in BIMSTEC connectivity depends on completing key projects such as the long-delayed India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Dawei SEZ. Prioritising these, resolving financial and political hurdles, and rebranding Dawei as a multilateral BIMSTEC initiative could attract wider support and demonstrate Thailand's commitment to advancing regional connectivity and economic integration across the Bay of Bengal (13).

Expanding Maritime Cooperation

Maritime connectivity within BIMSTEC remains limited despite the Bay of Bengal's strategic significance. Thailand can lead by strengthening the Ranong and Phuket ports as gateways to South Asia and establishing regular shipping links with Colombo, Chittagong, and Chennai to reduce the reliance on distant hubs such as Singapore. Thailand can propose a BIMSTEC Maritime Connectivity Forum to advance cooperation in port modernisation, green shipping, and maritime security, while its strong logistics sector can champion regional shipping liberalisation and efficiency (14).

Advancing Energy and Digital Frontiers

Energy and digital networks represent the future frontiers where Thailand can make a profound and necessary contribution. Thailand already possesses significant experience in cross-border electricity trade with its neighbours, including Laos and Myanmar. By actively supporting the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Plan, Bangkok can play a central role in forging a more resilient, integrated regional energy network. Investing in and championing renewable energy sources, particularly solar and wind power, also offers the country an opportunity to lead on sustainability. According to an energy ministry official, the Thai government views regional cooperation as a critical means of advancing energy security and attaining its carbon-neutrality targets (15). Digital connectivity is equally indispensable. Under its 'Digital Thailand' initiative, Bangkok has promoted robust development in fintech, e-commerce, and digital infrastructure. Thailand should propose a BIMSTEC Digital Innovation Platform to stimulate cooperation in shared areas such as digital payments infrastructure, enhancing regional cybersecurity standards, and regulating cross-border data flows. This will not only boost intra-regional trade but also significantly strengthen the overall resilience of the BIMSTEC economies in a rapidly digitising and interdependent era.

Strengthening BIMSTEC Institutions

For connectivity goals to transition successfully from mere vision to sustained implementation, fundamental institutional reforms are required. Thailand must actively advocate for the establishment of a BIMSTEC Connectivity Fund, ideally modelled after the successful ASEAN Infrastructure Fund. Such a dedicated financial mechanism will be crucial in providing predictable, sustainable financing for priority connectivity projects across the region. Furthermore, capacity building for the BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka is essential. As one of the more resource-rich members, Thailand should commit specific financial and human resources to strengthen the secretariat's ability to coordinate, monitor, and execute complex regional projects. Enhanced institutional capacity will improve BIMSTEC's overall credibility, enabling it to engage more effectively with major external financial partners such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

Promoting Soft Connectivity

Meaningful connectivity extends beyond infrastructure, relying on regulatory alignment, cultural diplomacy, and people-to-people ties. Thailand should champion simplified visa regimes for BIMSTEC professionals, students, and entrepreneurs, and establish a BIMSTEC People's Exchange Fund to promote educational and cultural mobility, drawing from ASEAN's experience. Leveraging

its Buddhist heritage, Thailand can advance regional heritage tourism that connects minds and markets. To realise this vision, Bangkok must align domestic projects like the Land Bridge with regional plans, revive initiatives such as Dawei through multilateral support, foster maritime and digital cooperation, establish a BIMSTEC Connectivity Fund, and prioritise soft linkages, ensuring sustained progress toward a more resilient and interconnected Bay of Bengal region. In this context, cultural diplomacy also holds significant potential. Thailand's deeply rooted Buddhist heritage provides a natural cultural link with much of South Asia. Initiatives to develop regional heritage tourism circuits could generate both economic benefits and foster deeper mutual cultural understanding. As a well-known Thai social scientist observed, "connectivity must connect minds as much as markets" (16).

Policy Pathways for the Future

To solidify its leadership role and move forward, Thailand must focus on five strategic policy pathways:

- Prioritising Flagship Projects: The immediate completion of the existing segment of the Trilateral Highway and the definitive revival of the Dawei SEZ are non-negotiable priorities. These successes are essential to demonstrate BIMSTEC's ability to deliver tangible progress.

- Expanding Maritime Cooperation: Thailand should strategically position the Ranong and Phuket ports as essential regional maritime hubs and actively promote necessary cooperation in areas such as port modernization and green shipping practices.

- Leading Energy and Digital Innovation: By actively championing the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Plan and proposing dedicated digital cooperation platforms, Thailand can establish itself as the central leader in next-generation connectivity within the region.

- Strengthening Institutions: Advocacy for the creation of a BIMSTEC Connectivity Fund and providing concrete support for the capacity building of the secretariat in Dhaka are vital steps to improve implementation capacity and enhance institutional credibility.

- Enhancing People-to-People Ties: Institutionalising scholarships, tourism circuits, and robust cultural exchanges under dedicated BIMSTEC frameworks will ensure that connectivity benefits the citizens directly and fosters enduring mutual trust.

The success of Thailand's leadership extends well beyond the BIMSTEC framework itself. Successful regional connectivity initiatives in the Bay of Bengal can serve as crucial models for other regions in the Global South that face similar challenges stemming from complex politics and difficult geography. As one diplomat argued, "regionalism evolves not only through the creation of institutions but also through the practical experience of states working together repeatedly" (17). Thailand's functional leadership exemplifies this dynamic learning process. For comparative politics, Thailand's case provides a compelling illustration of how middle powers can effectively carve out indispensable leadership roles by concentrating on functional cooperation. Unlike

major powers, which often attempt to dominate agendas, middle powers generate legitimacy by providing practical, depoliticised solutions. BIMSTEC connectivity demonstrates this potential unequivocally.

Thailand's stewardship of the connectivity pillar showcases both the profound promise and the structural pitfalls inherent in contemporary regional cooperation. It confirms that policy vision, ambition, and geographic advantage can successfully converge to create immense opportunities, yet it equally stresses that continuity, resilience, and inclusivity are essential requirements for achieving long-term, sustainable success. If Thailand maintains this momentum, completes key projects, and skilfully balances the inevitable external influences, it will not only secure its own national prosperity but also fundamentally contribute to transforming the Bay of Bengal into a highly integrated zone of shared growth and stability, thus reinforcing BIMSTEC's vital role as the central bridge between South and Southeast Asia within the Indo-Pacific.

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Endnotes

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(2) Constantino Xavier, *Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Toward a Stronger BIMSTEC*, Carnegie India, 2018, 13-14, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/CP_325_Xavier_Bay_of_Bengal_Brief.pdf.

(3) Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, interview with the author, October 2025. A similar sentiment was echoed by the other interviewees (who requested to be anonymous), emphasising Thailand's outward-looking approach and its commitment to advancing regional connectivity as a foundation for sustained prosperity.

(4) Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, interview with the author, July 2025.

(5) All interviewees requested to be anonymous.

(6) Thai Ministry of Commerce official, interview with the author, September 2025.

(7) Eastern Economic Corridor Office senior policy analyst, interview with the author, August 2025.

(8) Thai Diplomat, interview with the author, September 2025.

(9) Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, interview with the author, September 2025.

(10) Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, interview with the author, July 2025.

(11) Xavier, *Bridging the Bay of Bengal*, 9, 14.

(12) BIMSTEC Secretariat official, interview with the author, September 2025.

(13) According to interviews with four senior officials from Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Transport, the country is expected to play a proactive and strategic role in advancing the Dawei Special Economic Zone. For related analyses, see Yukari Sekine, *A Case Study of the Dawei Special Economic Zone* (Bangkok: Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 2015), 39; K.M. Htun, "ASEAN-India Connectivity: A Myanmar Perspective," in *ASEAN-India Connectivity: The Road Ahead*, ed. L. Kesavapany (Jakarta: Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2011), 197; and "Embedded Enclaves? Initial Implications of Development of Special Economic Zones in Myanmar," *Journal of Asian Development Studies* (Yangon University, 2024).

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(16) Thai social scientist, interview with the author, October 2025.

(17) Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, interview with the author, October 2025.

Building Energy Partnerships in BIMSTEC: From Bilateral Relations to Regional Networks

Roshan Saha and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) region is endowed with vast natural and renewable energy resources, including 331 billion tonnes of coal, 718 million tonnes of oil, and 76 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, along with 386 GW of hydropower and 1,359 GW of renewable energy potential (1). Resource distribution varies across the member states: India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan hold most hydropower potential; India leads in coal, solar, and wind; and natural gas reserves are concentrated in India, Myanmar, Thailand, and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka's offshore exploration may further expand regional reserves. However, these resources are finite—Bangladesh's and Thailand's gas may be depleted within six and five years, respectively, while India's could last 42 years, and Myanmar's reserves may last for six decades (2); and coal reserves are expected to last around 200 years in India and 72 years in Thailand.[3] Growing energy demand highlights the need for intra-regional cooperation to diversify sources, optimise costs, and harness complementary resource endowments (4)(5).

Against this backdrop, this essay examines the evolving landscape of cross-border energy trade within BIMSTEC, analysing both the opportunities presented by the region's abundant energy endowments and the challenges that continue to impede comprehensive regional integration (6). The analysis documents significant progress in cross-border electricity trade, particularly the landmark tripartite agreement enabling Nepal's electricity exports to Bangladesh via India, marking a watershed moment in regional energy cooperation. It further explores member states' perceptions, noting convergences around economic opportunity and sustainability, alongside divergences shaped by national priorities and sovereignty concerns.

Energy Consumption Mix

In general, energy consumption across the BIMSTEC countries is still dominated by biofuels, waste, and oil products (as depicted by the red and grey lines in Figure 1). Each country has its own unique energy consumption mix. In the decade since 2014, there has been a surge in the use of natural gas in Bangladesh, whereas oil products have emerged as the primary source of energy consumption in India. Myanmar continues to rely on biomass and waste, but has since 2010 experienced a surge in oil products. Electricity consumption, driven by national plans for universal electrification, has also grown rapidly across most BIMSTEC nations since 2010. In the overall energy consumption mix for 2023, electricity was second (after natural gas) in Bangladesh and Thailand (after oil products), and third in India (after oil products and biofuel) , Myanmar (after biofuel and oil products), and Sri Lanka (after biofuel and oil products) (7). Electricity consumption has increased in Nepal as well, but it still lags behind biomass, oil, and coal. According to Bhutan's Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, in 2022, the country's energy consumption mix was dominated by thermal energy (60.4 percent), with electricity making up the rest. The majority of this thermal energy is obtained from biomass (25.2 percent), coal and derivatives (19.6 percent), and petroleum products (17.6 percent); while electricity is generated primarily through hydropower (37.5 percent); solar and wind also account for a small share of electricity generation (8).

Figure 1: Energy Consumption Across BIMSTEC Countries (1990-2023)
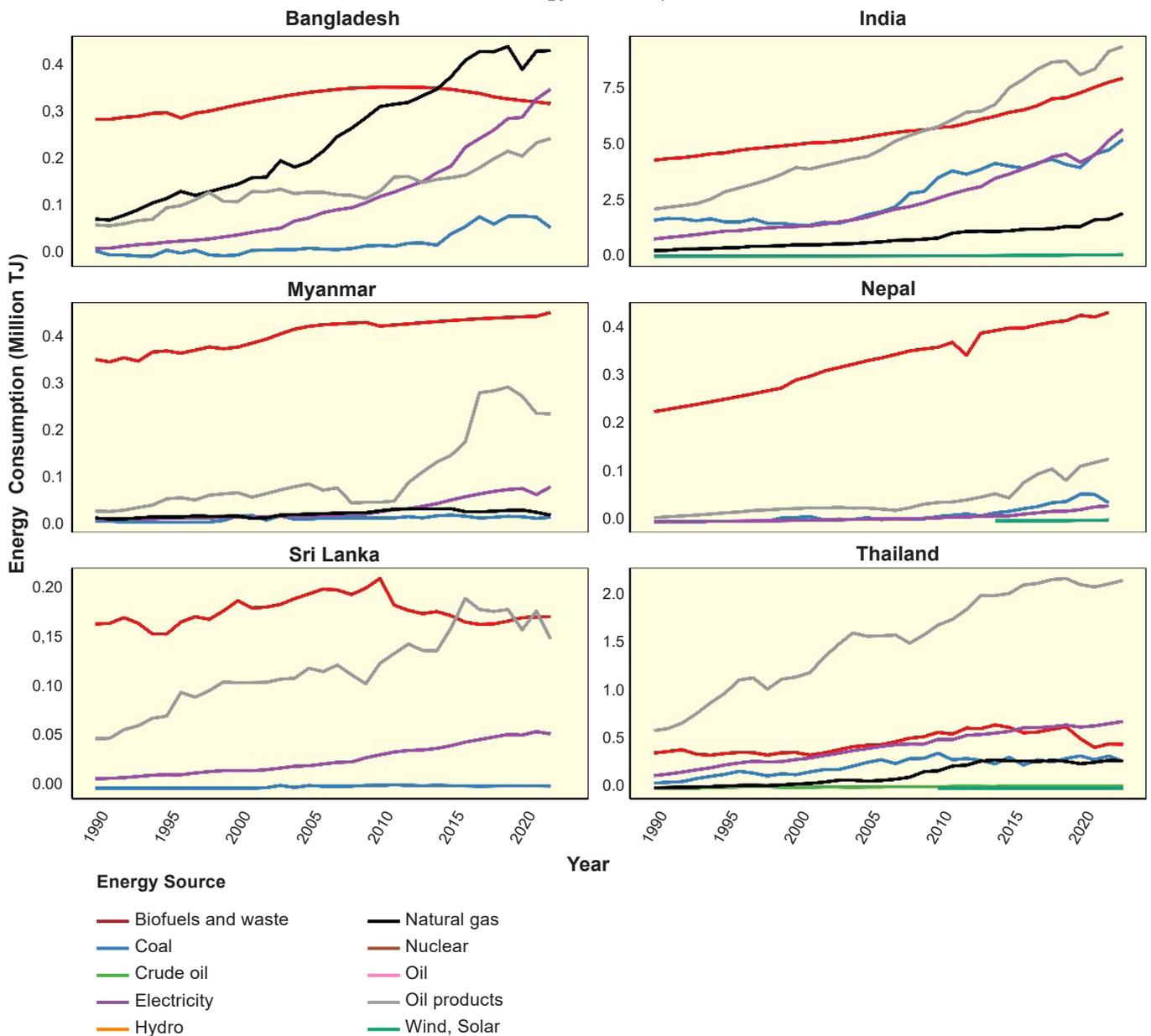
Note: Bhutan's energy consumption dynamics are not depicted due to insufficient data.
Source: Authors' own, based on International Energy Agency data (9).

Potential for Renewable Energy

Figure 2 presents the share of renewables in total final energy consumption across the BIMSTEC nations, excluding Bhutan, which already achieves 100 percent renewable electricity generation through hydropower. Bhutan and Sri Lanka lead the region's transition towards clean energy, aligning with goal 7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all) (10)(11)(12). Nepal has made notable progress since 2010, while Myanmar and Bangladesh continue to show comparatively low shares of renewable energy in their consumption mix.

Figure 2: Share of Modern Renewables (% of Energy Consumption)
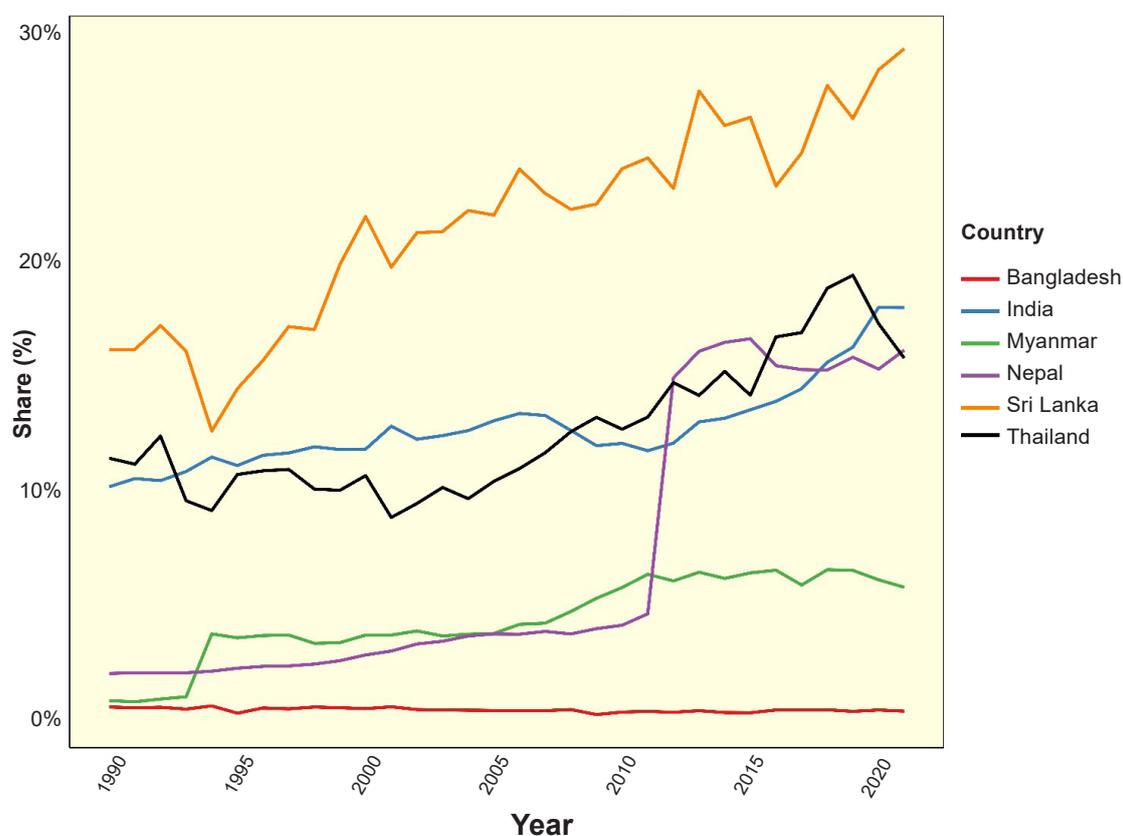
Source: Authors' own, based on International Energy Agency data (13).

The relatively low share of renewables in Bangladesh and Myanmar largely reflects their reliance on conventional energy sources, particularly natural gas. As shown in Figure 1, BIMSTEC nations are gradually shifting from biomass to non-renewable sources such as oil, coal, and gas, while electricity's role in the energy mix is steadily rising. Figure 2 indicates strong potential for Bhutan, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, and Nepal to expand renewable-based electricity generation. Although coal, gas, and oil will continue to dominate, electricity is projected to form 17 percent of the energy mix by 2035 (14), with about half sourced from renewables like hydropower, solar, and wind. Planned electricity expansion in the region—estimated at US$958.4 billion—is concentrated on large hydropower projects in India(43,157 MW), Nepal (16,720 MW), Bhutan (10,074 MW), and Myanmar (6708 MW) (15). The majority of this electricity (approximately 50 percent) is estimated to be generated through renewable sources such as hydropower, solar, and wind (16).

Supply Versus Consumption and Import Dependency

To better understand the BIMSTEC energy sector, Figure 3 compares total energy supply and consumption from 1990 to 2023, highlighting the supply gap by energy source. A positive gap indicates surplus supply, often driven by imports. The gap remains small for most sources, except natural gas (Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand) and coal (India and Sri Lanka) (17), reflecting resource availability. Minimal gaps for other sources suggest a dependence on imports, as shown

in panel b. Except for Myanmar, all countries are net energy importers, with imports accounting for between 10 percent and 30 percent of India's final energy use and between 30 percent to 70 percent for Sri Lanka.

Figure 3: Energy Supply vs. Consumption Gap and Net Imports
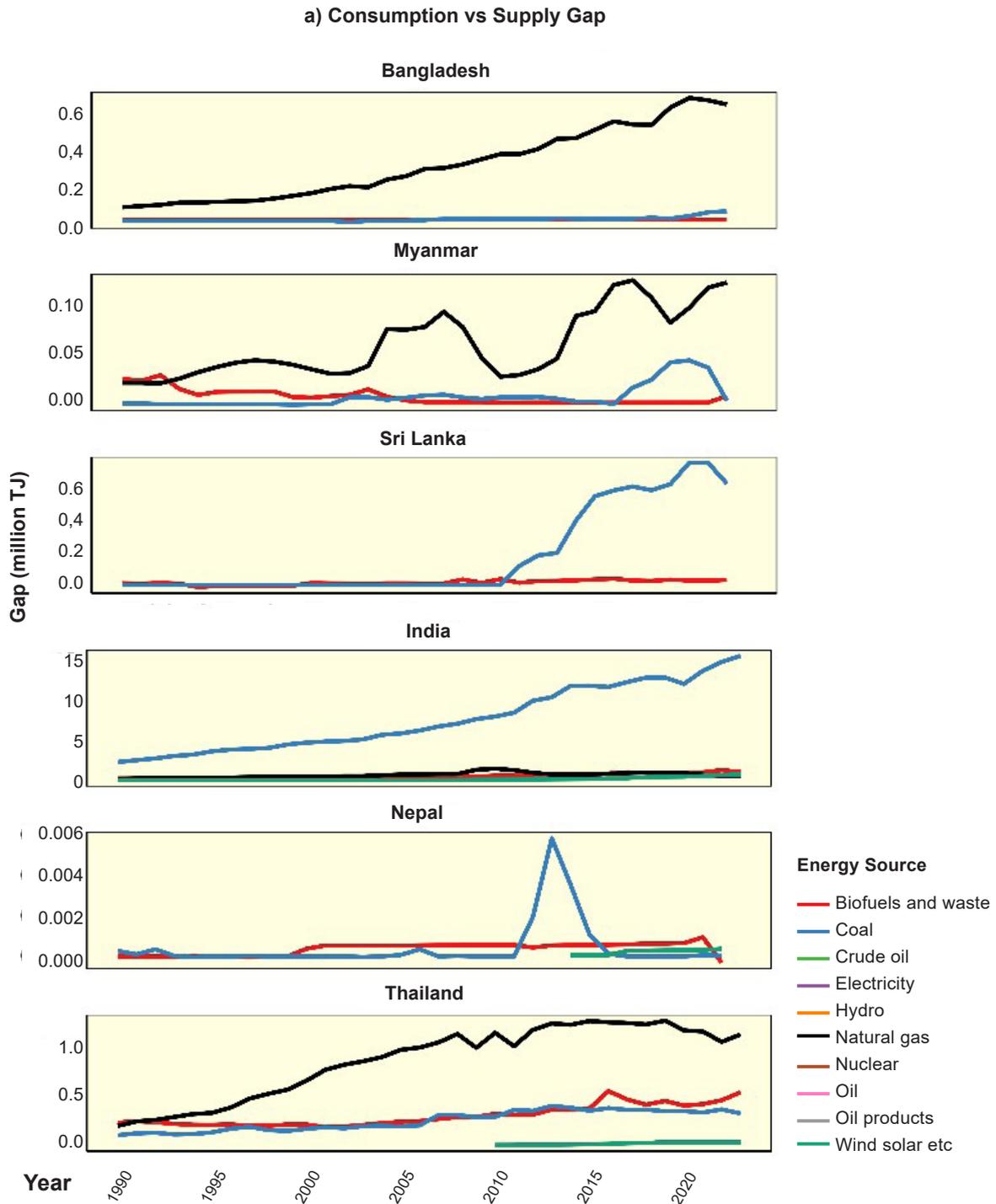
Note: based on total energy supply and consumption data from the International Energy Agency (IEA). Figures are expressed in Terrajoules (T3). 1 TJ is equivalent to approximately 0.278 gigawatt hours

b) Import Share (% of energy use)
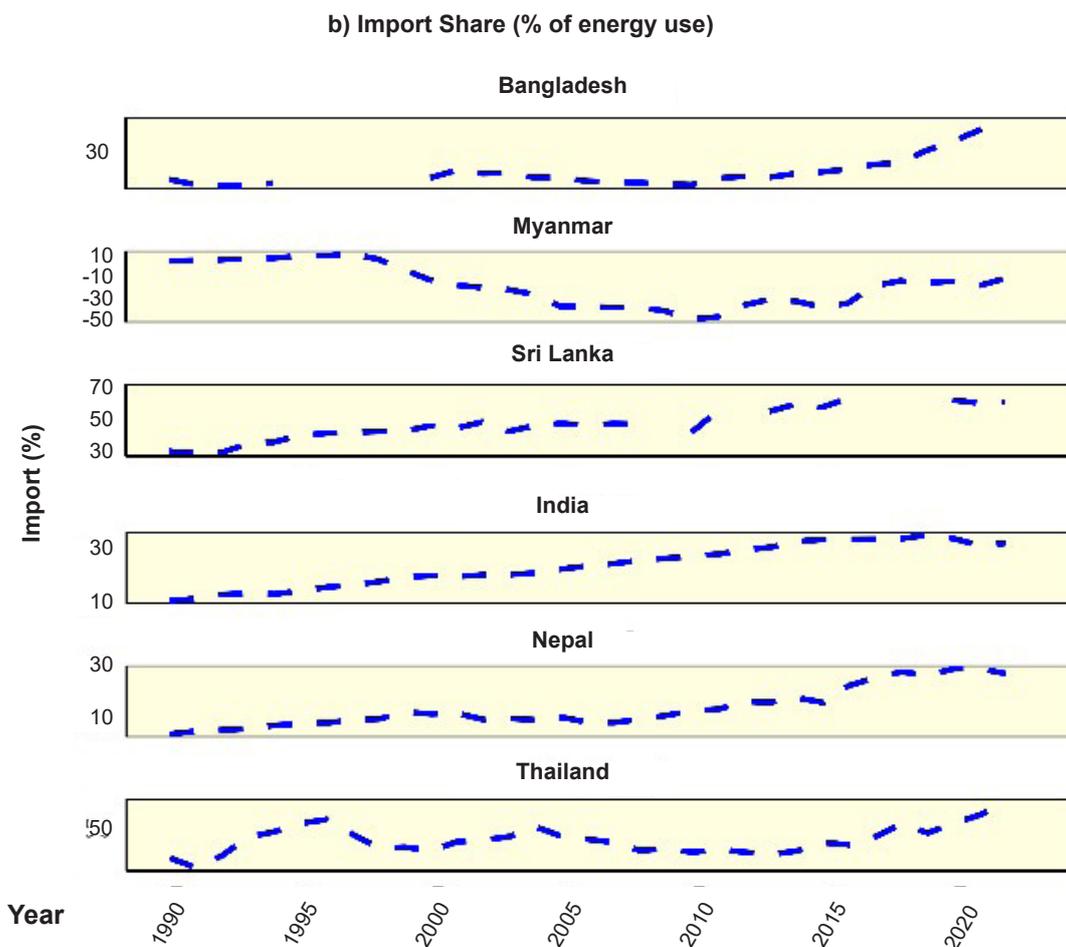
Source: Authors' own, based on International Energy Agency (18) and World Integrated Trade Solution data (19).

Existing Trading Partners

Mineral trade patterns among BIMSTEC countries have undergone significant transformation over the past 25 years, reflecting broader shifts in global supply chains, regional integration efforts, and geopolitical realignments. UN COMTRADE data on mineral imports (HS code 27) (20) by partner country rankings between 2000 and 2024 reveal distinct trajectories, highlighting the complex interplay between geographic proximity and strategic partnerships in shaping mineral imports by BIMSTEC nations (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Evolution of Mineral Import Trading Partnerships

Bangladesh

Legend:
- Bahrain
- India
- Kuwait
- Malaysia
- Saudi Arabia
- Singapore
- United Arab Emirates

Myanmar

Legend:
- China
- Iran
- Malaysia
- Singapore
- Thailand
- United Arab Emirates

Sri Lanka

Legend:
- Bahrain
- China
- India
- Iran
- Malaysia
- Oman
- Saudi Arabia
- Singapore
- South Africa
- United Arab Emirates

India

Nepal

Thailand
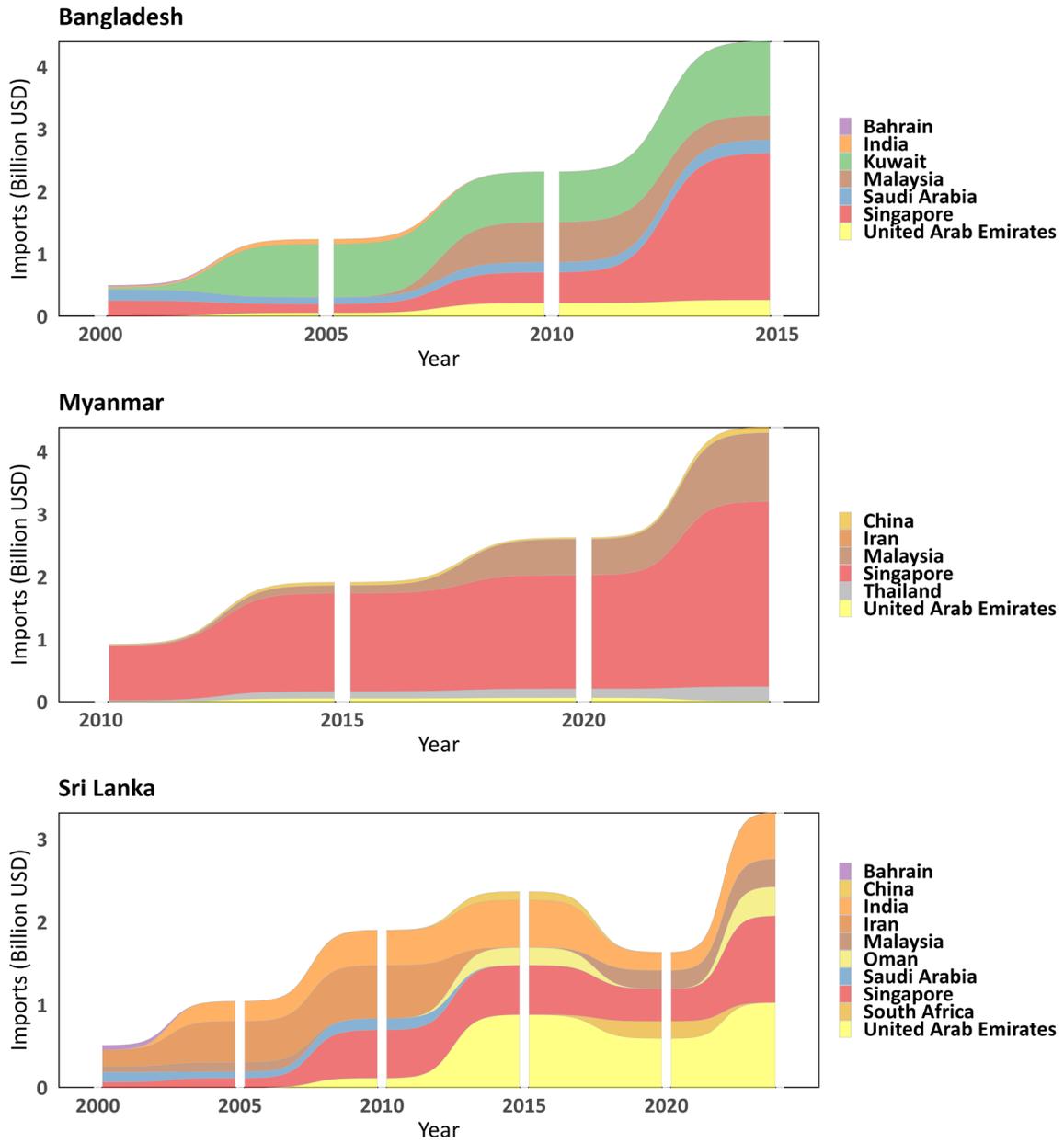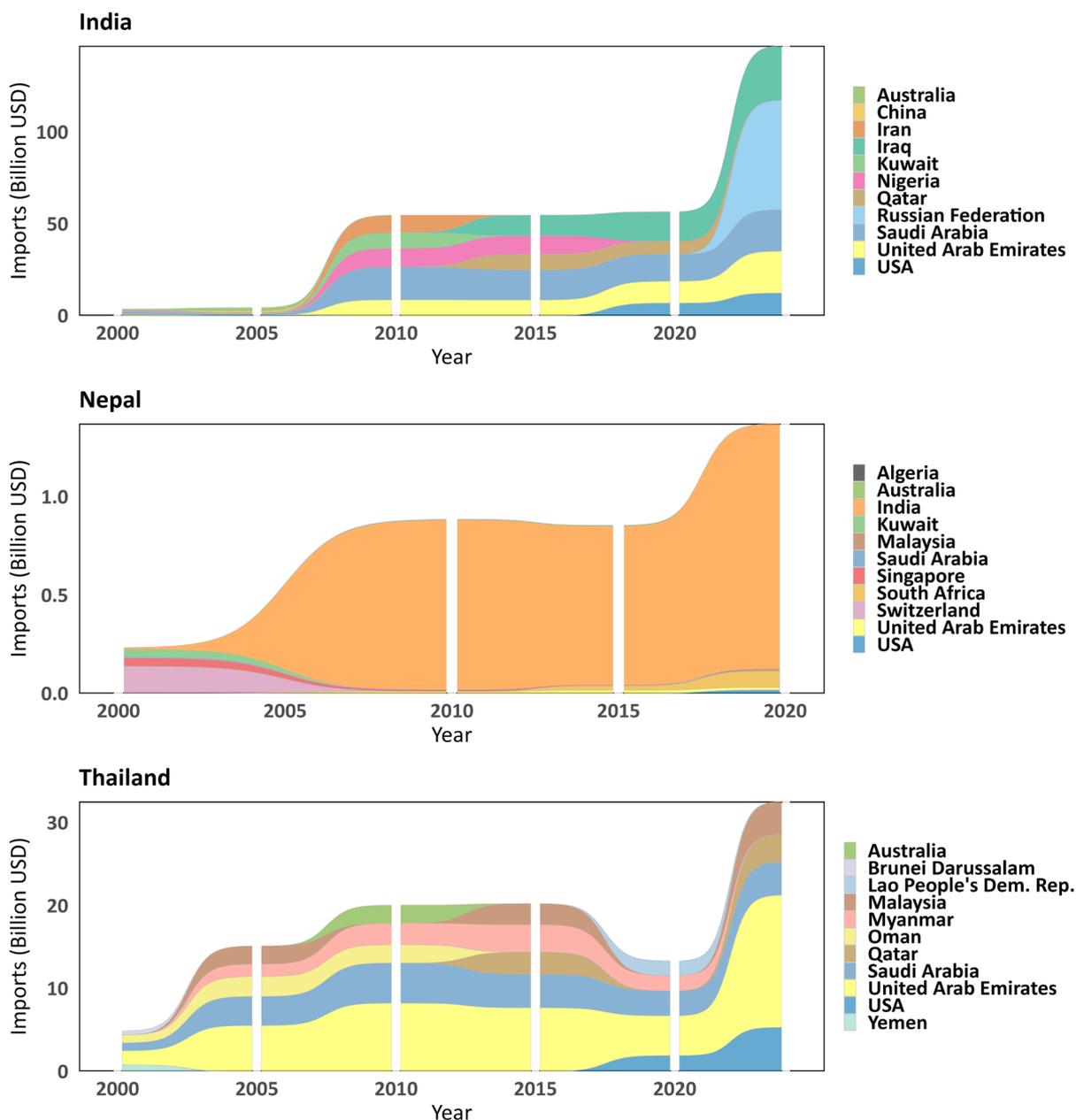
Note: Values for Bhutan is not depicted in the plot but India was the major trading partner.
Data reported here represents total value of Mineral (HS Code 27) imports by partner country
and where the second partner country was 'World'.

Source: Authors' own, based on UN COMTRADE data (21).

BIMSTEC's mineral import patterns have transformed over the past 25 years, reflecting shifts in global supply chains and regional integration. UN COMTRADE data highlights three key trends: Singapore's rise as a dominant transshipment hub; the continued strategic importance of West Asian suppliers like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; and growing intra-BIMSTEC trade. Singapore now leads in mineral trade with Myanmar and Sri Lanka, while India's emergence as Nepal's primary partner and stronger Thailand–Myanmar linkages underscore deepening regional connectivity and evolving trade realignments within the BIMSTEC framework.

These bilateral relationships are increasingly embedded within broader regional integration initiatives that promise to further strengthen intra-BIMSTEC trade flows. The ongoing negotiations for a BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement similarly aim to eliminate many of the regulatory barriers that currently constrain regional trade flows, potentially accelerating the trends toward regional integration observed in the mineral import data (22).

Energy Cooperation Within BIMSTEC

Import data indicate emerging regional partnerships in mineral trade, complementing earlier findings on BIMSTEC's energy cooperation efforts and their limitations (23). Such cooperation has been primarily bilateral, with India playing a central role due to its size, location, and energy needs. Recent developments, including new initiatives between India and Sri Lanka, India and Myanmar, and Nepal and Bangladesh—most notably the Bangladesh–Nepal memorandum of understanding (MoU) on power cooperation—reflect growing momentum, although several challenges still impede deeper regional integration (24).

Status of cross-border electricity trade

Cross-border electricity trade (CBET) is currently operational and thriving across the BIMSTEC region, with significant bilateral exchanges between Bhutan and India, India and Bangladesh, India and Nepal, and India and Myanmar. These interconnected trading relationships facilitate a substantial aggregate electricity exchange of approximately 15,681 million units, which translates to roughly 1,790 MW on a continuous operational basis. The actual power transmission volumes are expected to exceed these figures due to temporal and seasonal fluctuations in demand and supply patterns (25). Additionally, CBET activities transcend the formal BIMSTEC framework, encompassing electricity trade arrangements with countries outside the organisation. Notable examples include Myanmar's hydropower exports to China and Thailand's electricity imports from multiple countries from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region, specifically Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia (26). Installing electricity interconnections between India and Sri Lanka has also been under discussion for nearly two decades, but prohibitive costs have made implementation unviable (27).

Most electricity interconnections so far have been bilateral initiatives: the 1200 MW Puntsangchu-I, the 1020 MW Punatsanghcu II, and the 720 MW Mangdechhu Hydropower Projects between Bhutan and India; and the India–Nepal cross-border transmission interconnection, called the Dhalkebar–Muzaffarpur Line, a 400kV line project (completed in 2016) through which Nepal imports 80 MW of power from India (28). In 2018, Nepal and Bangladesh initiated talks on electricity trade, but this will require India's participation, making it a tripartite agreement (29). The Dorjilung Hydropower Project (1125 MW)—jointly proposed in 2017 by the Bhutan Electricity Authority, Bangladesh Power Development Board, and India's Ministry of Power—is another example of an agreement that requires India's participation to allow transmission of electricity from Bhutan to Bangladesh. Under the terms of the MoU signed as part of this agreement, Bhutan will export power produced from this project via India (30).

In October 2023, Nepal, India, and Bangladesh signed a tripartite MoU that permits Nepal to export its excess hydroelectric power to Bangladesh during the rainy season, from June 15 to November 15 each year. Initially, Nepal was set to export 40 MW of electricity to Bangladesh through the Dhalkebar-Muzaffarpur 400 kV transmission line. In June 2025, Nepal began exporting the 40 MW of electricity envisaged under the MoU. This is the first-ever interconnection involving more than two countries in the BIMSTEC region. Nepal has also been selling excess electricity to India at competitive rates through the Indian Energy Exchange (IEX), including in the day-ahead and real-time markets (since 2021), as well as under bilateral medium-term power sale agreements to the states of Haryana and Bihar (31). In 2023-24, Bhutan also participated in the IEX Day-Ahead Markets. Since August 2023, provisions have been in place to allow Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar to participate in the IEX's real-time markets (32).

Although India–Bangladesh energy cooperation made significant progress through multiple interconnections, such as the Bahrampur-Bheramara, and Surjyamaninagar-North Comilla- South Comilla (33). Following the political upheaval in Bangladesh in August 2024, the two countries have taken multiple trade-related retaliatory measures, including the cancellation of transshipment facilities and restrictions on land port imports by India and the denial of the extension of duty-free rice imports through the Hili and Benapole land ports by Bangladesh. Notably, no restrictions were placed on the export of Bangladeshi goods to Nepal and Bhutan via Indian ports (34). Electricity continues to dominate Bangladesh's imports from India, amounting to approximately 2.5 GW (35). These interconnections continue despite political differences between the two nations due to the long-term nature of the power purchase agreements.

Status of cross-border pipeline interconnections

Most energy cooperation initiatives are through trans-border electricity interconnections, but there are also a few oil pipeline connections. The Motihari (India) to Amlekhgunj (Nepal) pipeline, which became operational in 2019 (36), was the first cross-border pipeline in South Asia. It has the capacity to carry two million tonnes of petroleum products annually, providing Nepal with cost-effective, uninterrupted fuel supply. The second phase, extending the pipeline to Lothan in Chitwan in Nepal, commenced in 2025 (37).

Another significant milestone in cross-border energy cooperation is the India-Bangladesh Friendship pipeline. In April 2015, India's Numaligarh Refinery Ltd and the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation signed an agreement for the export of petroleum products to Bangladesh through the proposed 130-km-long Indo-Bangla Friendship Pipeline from the Numaligarh oil refinery's Siliguri marketing terminal to Parbitipur in Bangladesh. This became South Asia's second cross-border pipeline, and Bangladesh received its first gas oil delivery in March 2023 (38). Political uncertainties between the two countries have delayed the pipeline extension (39), but India remains committed to supporting Bangladesh's energy needs (40).

BIMSTEC Grid interconnection

The 2018 MoU on BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection holds promise for further energy cooperation within the grouping (41). Envisioned as a framework for cross-border electricity trade, the initiative aims to interlink the power grids of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand to allow the member states to share surplus energy, particularly renewable sources like hydropower, solar, and wind, thereby improving overall energy efficiency and reliability.

The MoU lays the foundation for regional power cooperation by aligning technical standards, regulations, and market frameworks for cross-border electricity trade. While Bhutan and Nepal can emerge as major hydropower exporters, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka could benefit as importers. However, progress remains slow due to infrastructure, financing, and regulatory challenges, highlighting the need for stronger political commitment and coordinated grid development across the region. In this context, attracting investments is vital. Although national governments provide most of the funding, financial institutions and multilateral development banks—such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and New Development Bank—are prepared to increase their support, provided that conducive policies, favourable conditions, and appropriate incentives are in place (42).

Building Trust for Power

Achieving universal access to affordable and sustainable energy in the BIMSTEC region hinges on deepening cross-border energy trade and cooperation. The BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection offers a strategic pathway to bridge supply–demand gaps, leverage diverse energy endowments, and promote cleaner, low-carbon growth. However, realising this vision requires more than technical integration—it demands political commitment, institutional alignment, and mutual trust among member states. As energy remains central to national security, overcoming entrenched bilateralism and policy fragmentation is critical. Strengthening collaborative frameworks, harmonising regulations, and ensuring equitable benefits will be key to transforming BIMSTEC into a robust platform for regional energy security, economic resilience, and sustainable development aligned with the UN 2030 Agenda.

Several structural and political barriers hinder cross-border energy trade between the BIMSTEC countries. These challenges can be grouped into six key categories: (a) the dominance of bilateralism and underlying political mistrust, (b) resource nationalism and the influence of electoral politics, (c) domestic political instability, (d) environmental and social concerns related to large infrastructure projects, (e) security vulnerabilities arising from cross-border dependencies, and (f) regulatory and institutional gaps that complicate coordination (43). While notable progress has been made in addressing some of these issues—such as through the tripartite agreement on cross-border energy trade between India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, and the establishment of real-time electricity markets via the IEX that allow participation by Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh—several challenges persist. Continued cooperation, policy harmonisation, and trust-building remain essential to realising a fully integrated and resilient BIMSTEC energy market.

Although political uncertainties in Bangladesh have hindered cooperation on several fronts, existing energy trade agreements have not been impacted. However, it is unlikely that India and Bangladesh will undertake new projects until mutual trust is restored. Another major concern is the domestic political turmoil in Myanmar. Since the 2021 military coup, several foreign governments have imposed financial sanctions on the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise. Thailand imports 14 percent of its total gas supply from Myanmar (2023 estimates) (44). While the missing gas supply from Myanmar can be replaced by other sources, this will increase the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand's operating costs (45). The ongoing crisis in Myanmar is a significant bottleneck in the overall integration and implementation of a regional grid interconnection. Nonetheless, the continued supply of oil between India and Bangladesh, and Myanmar's growing mineral imports from Thailand (see Figure 4), despite political differences and external sanctions, suggest that member states' perceptions often converge around economic opportunities.

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The BIMSTEC Promise, from Sri Lanka's Perspective

Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy

The Bay of Bengal, a vast water body connecting South and Southeast Asia, is home to several strategic sea lanes. It has fuelled major economies, including India, Japan, China, and South Korea. Much of the trade between the countries in the region was facilitated by monsoon cycles and winds. However, colonialism and the practice of protectionism by post-colonial governments contributed to its diminishing geoeconomic importance (1).

In 1997, the Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation (better known as BIST-EC) group was formed to revive the region's economic potential (2). With the addition of Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan, the grouping was renamed the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and focused on promoting economic integration and facilitating connectivity and cooperation across sectors.

Still, bilateral irritants between member states, political instability, a lack of political will, poor customs

harmonisation, weak infrastructure, untapped supply chains, and corruption have continued to hinder the prospects for cooperation and connectivity in the BIMSTEC region. Furthermore, intra-BIMSTEC trade remains low, at a mere 6.7 percent as of 2023 (3), and BIMSTEC free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations have been ongoing since 2004 (4).

Notably, there have been some positives in recent years. The BIMSTEC charter was adopted in 2022 (5), and came into effect in 2024 (6). In 2022, the organisation adopted a Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, comprising 267 projects, to enhance connectivity in the region (7). In 2025, members signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on maritime transport connectivity and adopted a vision document outlining a roadmap for regional prosperity (8).

Located in the middle of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has been a key point of commercial, trade, and economic engagement between South Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, and Africa. Sri Lanka, the only island nation in the BIMSTEC, is keen to promote connectivity, despite not being physically connected to any other member state. Given its location, its expectations to enhance connectivity and trade with BIMSTEC are largely dependent on its ties with India. Sri Lanka leads the science, technology, and innovation pillar in BIMSTEC.

This essay attempts to present the Sri Lankan perspective on the BIMSTEC. It argues that economic recovery and geopolitical churning in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean regions have motivated Sri Lanka to enhance trade and connectivity in physical, maritime, energy, and digital spaces. However, due to slow progress in BIMSTEC and Sri Lanka's geopolitical and economic compulsions, bilateral engagements have taken precedence for the country even as it remains hopeful of BIMSTEC as a regional organisation.

New Compulsions and Priorities

Sri Lanka's focus on BIMSTEC and regionalism has become increasingly critical following its economic crisis, which exposed its structural weaknesses and vulnerability to external shocks (9). Amid its recovery, Sri Lanka is keen to diversify and strengthen its economy, aiming to become a regional logistics hub and increase its energy self-sufficiency (10). The country has continued to pursue economic and regional partnerships to enhance trade and connectivity across the physical, maritime, digital, and energy sectors. As such, bilateral partnerships with BIMSTEC members and revitalising the organisation have become a crucial agenda item.

Geopolitical developments in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal region have also prompted Sri Lanka's desire to enhance its trade and connectivity. Over the last two decades, China has expanded its presence in the area by investing in both soft and hard infrastructure under its Belt and Road Initiative, with a particular focus on the port sectors of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. These projects, along with the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, have also provided China with access to the Bay of Bengal region.

India, a predominant power in the Bay of Bengal, is pushing back against China by trying to reverse or deter further Chinese presence. It promotes connectivity and infrastructure in the

neighbourhood across various sectors, including energy, ports, roads, and airports, by offering credit lines, loans, grant assistance, and investments. It is also enhancing cooperation at regional and sub-regional levels, such as through the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative.

Amid the competition between India and China, smaller nations in the region, including Sri Lanka, see significant economic opportunities to bridge their infrastructure funding gap.

Maritime and Physical Connectivity

A crucial geoeconomic and geopolitical zone, the Bay of Bengal is home to many major ports (11) (12). In the aftermath of its economic crisis, Sri Lanka is seeking to transform into a service-oriented economy. It is upgrading its infrastructure (rail, roads, ports, and airports) to transform into a logistics and transshipment hub in the Bay region, and increase its trade (13).

Sri Lanka has four main operational ports: Colombo in the West, Galle in the Southwest, Hambantota in the South, and Trincomalee in the East. The fifth, Kankesanthurai in the North, is still being upgraded through an Indian grant. Like many BIMSTEC countries, Sri Lanka also faces issues of congestion at its ports and the inadequate use of technology (14). Most of the traffic is concentrated at the Colombo Port due to its location and infrastructure facilities. The Hambantota and Trincomalee ports, both located in the Bay of Bengal arc, lack similar facilities and have been unable to absorb some of the traffic from the Colombo port (15).

Notably, the country has undertaken several port projects in recent years (see Table 1). Other development efforts are also underway. India and the UAE have invested significantly in Trincomalee's energy and socioeconomic sectors. The Sri Lankan government will also operate 75 of 99 oil tank farms in Trincomalee, either entirely or partially (16). China has also invested US$3.7 billion in an oil refinery and in industrialising Hambantota (17). These initiatives will help Sri Lanka enhance its trade capacity, especially in the energy sector, and establish itself as a logistics hub for BIMSTEC members and other countries.

Additionally, in April 2025, BIMSTEC adopted an agreement on maritime transport cooperation aimed at reducing bottlenecks in maritime connectivity and deepening economic integration by establishing a framework to streamline shipping and mitigate logistical issues and costs (18). These developments will significantly benefit Sri Lanka as the fast-tracking of clearances, an improved logistics network, simplified customs processes, and reduced costs will increase its port activities and efficiency, thereby boosting trade.

Table 1: Recent Port Projects

Port Project	Purpose	Status
Extension of Colombo Port's East Terminal	Improved handling of cargo, including transshipment and bilateral traffic with BIMSTEC	Completed; Funded by Sri Lanka
Construction of Colombo Port's West Terminal	Provision of additional capacity to handle mega container ships	Operational; Indian investment (51%) stake
Business development plan covering Colombo, Hambantota, and Trincomalee ports	Identifying their specific niches to attract new businesses and enhancing trade	Ongoing; Chinese investments in Hambantota; Indian development projects, grants and investments in Trincomalee.

Source: Compiled by the author from various sources.

Another significant concern for Sri Lanka is that connectivity between its ports and cities is inadequate, with ships often preferring to circumnavigate the island nation rather than transship through its territory. Consequently, Sri Lanka is also focusing on enhancing rail connectivity, with several projects included in the BIMSTEC master plan (see Table 2). While China has had a crucial role in funding several of these lines, India is involved in restoring and renovating a few existing tracks and railway stations (19).

Table 2: Recent Railway Projects

Project	Purpose	Status
Matara to Kataragama Railway Extension Project	Enhanced rail connectivity with sea and airports in southern Sri Lanka, including Hambantota seaport and Mattala Rajapaksa Airport	Phase 1 was completed in 2019 with Chinese assistance; phase 2 and 3 are yet to make progress
Kurunegala to Habarana new rail project	Connection of hinterlands and air and sea ports; improved rail connectivity between western, northwestern, and north central and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, and catalysing the proposed East–West economic corridor linking Colombo and Trincomalee	Chinese-assisted project; suspended in 2018 due to a lack of transparency and tender

Project	Purpose	Status
Colombo Suburban Railway Development Project	Development of multimodal transport hubs and new rail and road links connecting major air and sea ports in the Colombo metropolitan area.	Asian Development Bank-funded project; feasibility study completed in 2010
SAARC Railway Corridor 5	Linking Sri Lanka and India, including Colombo and Chennai (to be linked by ferry).	No Progress

Source: Compiled by the author from various sources.

Similarly, connectivity between cities is taking precedence with the development of crucial roads. Several projects are also part of the BIMSTEC master plan (see Table 3) and have picked up momentum since the economic crisis.

Table 3: Recent Road Projects

Road Project	Purpose	Status
Southerly extension of Colombo–Katunayake Expressway	Road linking Colombo city and port to the expressway network and the main airport in Katunayake	China-funded; Completed
Asian Highway 43	Linking India and Sri Lanka	Uncertain
Asian Highway 44	Dambulla to Trincomalee, connection to the eastern port	Ongoing; partially self-funded, rest provided by China
Central Expressway, Phases 1-4	Improved connectivity between Colombo port and the northern part of the country	Phase 2 completed; Phases 1 (China-funded), 3, and 4 are ongoing
Port Access Elevated Highway Project	Reduction of urban congestion and transport costs at the access point to Colombo Port	Ongoing; self-funded
Phase III of the Outer Circular Highway in Colombo	Improvement of connectivity with both the port and the international airport	Completed; China-funded
Colombo Elevated Expressway Program	Connect the Outer Circular Highway with the centre of the city (100% elevated). Reduction of traffic in the congested area near the port	Ongoing; Asian Development Bank-funded

Road Project	Purpose	Status
Stage 4 of Southern Expressway	Connecting Matara with the Hambantota seaport and the new Mattala International Airport Linking of the new seaport and new airport	Completed; China-funded
Ratmalana (Colombo) Airport to Southern Expressway	Connecting airport to port(s)	Completed; Asian Development Bank-funded

Source: Compiled by the author from various sources.

Notably, as an island nation, Sri Lanka has a limited ability to promote road and rail connectivity with other BIMSTEC states. India, the closest country, is its best hope for better integration with the region, particularly as India enhances its road and rail connectivity with the BIMSTEC under its 'Act East' policy.

Energy Connectivity

Sri Lanka is mainly dependent on non-renewable energy sources, with over 40 percent of its energy demands met through imports (20). This extensive dependence on imports and on fossil fuels had also contributed to the economic crisis (21). Sri Lanka has now shown substantial interest in increasing self-sufficiency and eventually exporting energy. In this regard, the plan to establish a BIMSTEC grid interconnection can help Sri Lanka attract investments in the sector and produce and trade surplus energy (22).

Renewable energy is crucial to reducing Sri Lanka's dependence on imported energy sources. It aims to generate 70 percent of its energy from the renewable sector by 2030 (23). It will need over US\$12 billion to fulfil its COP commitments in this sector (24). As such, it has continued to seek assistance and investments from other countries for both renewable and non-renewable energy. In March 2023, it also liberalised the fuel retail market by letting Chinese, American, and Australian oil companies distribute and sell petroleum products in the country (25).

India and China are also investing in oil facilities in Trincomalee and Hambantota, respectively. India is also helping the country develop a solar project in Sampur, and three hybrid energy projects in the Jaffna peninsula. Furthermore, Sri Lanka and India are hoping to have a multi-product petroleum pipeline that could facilitate bi-directional trade. Negotiations are also underway to interlink the energy grids of both countries. These initiatives could help Sri Lanka trade electricity and petroleum products directly. Furthermore, with India facilitating trade between Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, Sri Lanka will be able to trade energy with the BBIN countries. This will eventually enable the island nation to trade with other BIMSTEC countries once the MoU on BIMSTEC grid interconnection is fully implemented. Overall, these initiatives have the potential to help Sri Lanka evolve into a hub for energy production and export to other BIMSTEC members, as well as to Asian and African countries.

Digital Connectivity

Sri Lanka has also prioritised digitalisation and digital connectivity to transform itself into a trade and logistics hub, promote good and efficient governance, reduce corruption, and excessive documentation. The Digital Economy Strategy, adopted in 2023, emphasises better connectivity and infrastructure, digital transactions and safeguards, and the integration of digital technologies with society and the economy (26). In this regard, BIMSTEC's focus on technology and innovation, a vertical in which Sri Lanka leads, will be crucial to promoting economic growth and integration.

BIMSTEC has held several high-level meetings regarding digital technology (27), but little seems to have been achieved. The declaration following the April 2025 BIMSTEC summit in Bangkok emphasised the importance of the digital economy, encouraging member countries to establish digital cross-border payments, close digital divides, promote digital connectivity, foster an inclusive digital space, and expand digital cooperation. It also stressed the need for cooperation to curb scams across digital channels (28). While BIMSTEC countries recognise the immense potential in the digital sector, they have yet to institutionalise initiatives on digitalisation and digital cooperation.

Sri Lanka has several bilateral initiatives on this front, particularly with India. In a December 2024 joint statement, India expressed its willingness to assist Sri Lanka with digitalisation and digital public infrastructure, and to share learnings and experiences (29). India has also provided Sri Lanka with grant assistance of INR 300 crore (about US$33 million) to implement the Sri Lanka Unique Digital Identity project (30). Sri Lanka and Myanmar are cooperating on combating cybercrimes and trafficking, whereas cooperation in this sector remains minimal with other countries.

Trade

Sri Lanka has long faced budget and trade deficit issues (31). Its dependence on imports and limited success in diversifying and amplifying its exports have exacerbated these vulnerabilities (32). Custom duties, trade barriers and non-tariff barriers have further deterred it from being an efficient part of global value chains (33). These factors eventually depleted its foreign reserves and contributed to the economic crisis. Sri Lanka now aims to enhance its infrastructure and foster trade partnerships to integrate with global markets, thereby promoting exports and competitive trade. The BIMSTEC FTA, once finalised, will significantly enhance this trade potential. It is expected to increase trade in goods and services, as well as investment flows. The FTA will help the Sri Lankan economy integrate with Association of Southeast Asian Nations members, and also open its market to BIMSTEC countries.

However, BIMSTEC's intra-trade remains scant. India is Sri Lanka's only major trading partner in the BIMSTEC region due to geographic and economic factors. In 2023, Sri Lanka's total trade (including services) totalled US$32 billion (34), with BIMSTEC countries accounting for just US$4.5 billion (or 14 percent of total trade), over 88 percent of which was with India alone (see Table 4).

Table 4: Sri Lanka's Trade with BIMSTEC Countries, 2020-2023 (in US$ million)

Country	2020	2021	2022	2023
Bangladesh	201	277	306	241
Bhutan	0.38	0.04	0.99	0.03
India	3,612	3,815	5,855	4,001
Myanmar	32	7.5	10.8	5.77
Nepal	5.48	12.1	2	1.06
Thailand	405	315	373	300
Total	**4256**	**4427**	**6548**	**4549**

Source: Collated from multiple sources (35).

As such, Sri Lanka is pursuing FTAs bilaterally. Sri Lanka already has an FTA with India and is currently negotiating the Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement, which covers services, investments, and regulatory cooperation, enabling service expansion in sectors such as IT, logistics, and education. In 2024, Sri Lanka and Thailand signed an FTA to enhance trade, investment, and tourism. It is expected that this will increase bilateral trade to US$1.5 billion (36). Sri Lanka is also exploring the possibility of an FTA with Bangladesh (37). The two countries had previously signed an MoU on economic partnership, which also aimed to conclude the FTA by 2017 (38).

These bilateral FTAs are expected to increase investments and enhance connectivity with Sri Lanka. With India expected to become the second-largest, Bangladesh the sixth-largest, and Thailand the ninth-largest markets globally by 2030 (39), Sri Lanka must focus on promoting trade and investments. Sri Lanka is also discussing the possibilities of joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (40). China and Sri Lanka are also keen to extend the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (41), which is expected to boost trade between the three countries and revive the Hambantota port (42).

These bilateral and regional efforts will continue to help Sri Lanka capitalise on its geographical advantage and expand trade with South and Southeast Asian countries. Furthermore, the increased focus on infrastructure and connectivity will help the country boost exports and trade, enhance shipping links with BIMSTEC countries and other major economies, and reform and revive its economy.

Conclusion

Recent economic and geopolitical crises have motivated Sri Lanka to adopt a more robust approach to connectivity, particularly in trade, as well as the physical, maritime, digital, and energy sectors. However, due to its location and the slow progress of BIMSTEC initiatives, Sri Lanka's expectations to enhance connectivity are largely dependent on its bilateral relations, particularly with India. Still, in recent years, BIMSTEC has shown an interest in a revival. Discussions on digitalisation and the connectivity master plan are promising developments, but the grouping must strive to shed the burden of its slow progress in the past. A proactive BIMSTEC will bode well for the interests and ambitions of countries like Sri Lanka that are seeking urgent reform and economic diversification.

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The Prospects of Ports: India's Sagarmala and BIMSTEC's Maritime Future

Sohini Bose

S ince the onset of its trade liberalisation post-1991, India has looked eastwards to cultivate commercial ties with the countries in the region. As these countries lie across the Bay of Bengal or form its hinterland, it became essential for New Delhi to develop its maritime connectivity through bilateral and multilateral means. The Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a regional organisation with membership encompassing all Bay littoral and hinterland countries, was well-suited for this pursuit, especially as India was the lead for its sector of cooperation on 'transport and communication' (1).

BIMSTEC's history is marked by a series of meetings, discussions, and plans aimed at strengthening regional maritime connectivity, as this is fundamental to progress in several sectors, such as trade (notably, all member countries rely on overseas commerce for the bulk of their trade), tourism, people-to-people connectivity, and security. While some of BIMSTEC's initiatives have helped identify the key opportunities and challenges necessary to

promote regional maritime transport, the grouping still lacks an initiative dedicated to building port efficiencies in the region.

As key facilitators of maritime commerce, ports play a direct role in a country's economic prosperity. They are also strategic assets, allowing countries greater influence over supply chains and more decision-making power (regarding vessel prioritisation for berthing and other services). Thus, a functioning infrastructure that increases port efficiency and expands its services is a fundamental necessity, and the coastal BIMSTEC states are keen to achieve this.

India launched the Sagarmala Programme in 2015 to promote port-led development in the country (2). Bangladesh emphasises port development through its Delta Plan 2100 for land and water management (3), and the Perspective Plan 2041, to achieve its vision of becoming a high-income country by 2041 (4). Sri Lanka has outlined its Vision 2025 (5) and Port Development Master Plan (6), which is primarily focused on the Colombo Port hub. Myanmar has a National Transport Master Plan (7), but port development is not its only focus. Thailand has a strategic logistics policy, the Thailand 4.0 (8) and Eastern Economic Corridor plan (9), which incorporates port development.

While Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand view ports within broader transport or industrial plans, India's Sagarmala treats ports as the central driver of growth. This focus can be attributed to the country's numerous ports, which far outnumber those in other BIMSTEC states. Furthermore, unlike these countries, which concentrate their trade on a single port, India's maritime traffic is distributed across numerous ports, giving it wider experience in managing port efficiency. The Sagarmala Programme stands out for its scale, comprehensiveness, and integration of port-led development with industrialisation and logistics, as well as its focus on ports as the catalysts of growth.

In the absence of a regional framework for port development, BIMSTEC member states can draw knowledge from effective national initiatives such as Sagarmala. Although the organisation has not undertaken any regional initiatives of port development, it has, in recent years, hosted 'port conclaves', reaffirming the collective commitment to strengthening maritime connectivity. This indicates regional efforts towards developing efficient port logistics. While full-scale standardisation may be unrealistic, Sagarmala offers a body of experiences and practices that can guide knowledge sharing and capacity building across the Bay of Bengal.

As improving port logistics is a shared aspiration among BIMSTEC countries, the platform is ideally suited for India to share its experiences and realise its priority of better connectivity across the Bay. Such regional outreach initiatives align with New Delhi's strategic aspirations of strengthening ties with its eastern neighbourhood, in accordance with its Act East and Neighbourhood First policies. Connectivity is at the forefront of both, as it not only nurtures diplomatic ties but also promotes public goodwill through people-to-people connectivity, garnering India the prominence and engagement it seeks in the region.

Tracing BIMSTEC's Port Development Efforts

BIMSTEC's sector on 'transport and communication' was renamed 'connectivity' and the leadership passed from India to Thailand ahead of the 5th Summit in March 2022 (10). Two efforts are prominent in the organisation's long journey of developing maritime connectivity. The first is the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, a 10-year strategy and action plan that details 141 projects within the Bay of Bengal, encompassing physical connectivity, trade facilitation, and human resource development. It was formulated by the Asian Development Bank and adopted by BIMSTEC in 2018, and an updated version was adopted in 2022 (11). A segment of the plan is devoted to maritime connectivity, noting that port connectivity is more complex than rail and road, as ports differ in their physical infrastructure, layouts, cargo, services provided, and container handling performance. Furthermore, as ports are designed to serve their home country, they compete with other ports and are not designed for regional cooperation. However, their proper functionality is critical for regional prosperity.

According to the Master Plan, ports within BIMSTEC face two logistical concerns, bearing regional implications: the container handling performance of some key ports, and problems with access to deeper water to accommodate larger vessels. However, several key ports around the Bay's coastline, such as India's Kolkata, Visakhapatnam, and Chennai ports, Bangladesh's Mongla and Chattogram ports, Myanmar's Yangon port, and Sri Lanka's Colombo port, face several other operational concerns that curb their logistical prowess. These are:

- **Low drafts**: As the northern coast of the Bay of Bengal is deltaic, several seaports—Kolkata and Haldia Docks on the Rivers Hooghly and Haldi, respectively, the Mongla Port on the confluence of the Rivers Mongla and Prasur, and the Chattogram Port on the River Karnaphuli— are essentially riverine. These ports experience heavy siltation, which reduces their already low drafts and ability to berth large vessels. Naturally, these ports spend on dredging the river channels to avoid additional operational costs and delays in cargo movement. This curtails the ports' profits, hampering developmental prospects (12).

- **Unpredictable berthing**: As riverine facilities, these ports also face the consequences of erratic tidal currents. Their already shallower drafts are further reduced during low tide; for instance, the draft of the Mongla Port rises from 8.5-6m to almost 4.5 m. Thus, the port's optimal usability is compromised. While tidal forecasts are helpful, inaccuracies in predictions disrupt the scheduled berthing of ships, undermining the port's efficiency (13).

Although these issues are internal to each port, they are common logistical concerns faced by several BIMSTEC ports, compromising regional maritime connectivity. The organisation is yet to address these issues on a regional scale, and its review of port problems thus remains limited. Port inefficiencies, such as a lack of separate berthing facilities and inadequate bulk cargo handling facilities at ports around the Bay, among other issues, also impede coastal shipping, which the Master Plan believes will benefit the region (14). It is perhaps in recognition of the challenges to coastal shipping that BIMSTEC transformed the idea of forging an agreement on it into one on maritime transport cooperation instead.

The Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation, signed in 2025, is the second major initiative. It is BIMSTEC's first legal consensus on measures to promote maritime connectivity, outlining the terms of how the vessels and crews of member states will be treated in each other's ports and sovereign waters (15). It includes certain details on the use of ports, which can be summed up as:

- **Access and use**: Each BIMSTEC member country must treat the vessels, crew, and cargo of their counterparts as it treats its national vessels used in international sea transportation. This pertains to levying port dues, providing access to ports, berthing duration, port use for loading and unloading operations, using other port facilities, as well as maritime commercial navigation services (16).

- **Prevent unnecessary delays**: Member states must take measures to avoid unnecessary delays at their ports for other BIMSTEC vessels. They must also accelerate and simplify the administrative, customs, immigration, and sanitary formalities at their ports (17).

- **Harmonising port controls**: Member country vessels possessing certificates issued in accordance with the International Convention on Tonnage Measurement of Ships (1969) will not be remeasured in other BIMSTEC ports. In instances of alleged flouting of guidelines, the vessel's home country should be informed to direct a surveyor and issue a ruling in accordance with the convention. All vessel inspections operating under this Agreement will be conducted in accordance with international standards, as mutually agreed by the BIMSTEC states or as stated in a prescribed standard operating Procedure (18).

While this Agreement does not directly necessitate improvements in port infrastructure across the Bay, it requires certain standardisations to boost regional connectivity. BIMSTEC has viewed port development not in isolation, but as one component of its broader connectivity agenda. This has prevented an inspection into more nuanced challenges. Indeed, the only specific efforts toward building port efficiencies in the region are the BIMSTEC's port conclaves, hosted by India.

The first was held in Vishakhapatnam in November 2019 and provided a platform for strengthening maritime interaction, port-led connectivity initiatives, and sharing best practices among member countries. Three memoranda of understanding were signed between Ranong Port (Port Authority of Thailand) and the port trusts of Chennai, Vishakhapatnam, and Kolkata to strengthen connectivity and enhance economic partnership by reducing the sea travel time between India and Thailand from 10-15 days to 7 days. This is part of India's 'Act East' policy and aligns well with the country's 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' (or SAGAR) vision (19).

The second iteration was also held in Visakhapatnam in July 2025, under the theme 'Navigating the Future: Blue Economy, Innovation and Sustainable Partnerships'. Diverse issues were discussed at the event, including harmonising customs procedures, enhancing logistical links to boost intra-regional trade, port-linked industrial zones, cruise tourism, digital integration, upskilling the marine workforce, industry-academia ties, and green shipping. The initiative aligns with India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy of strengthening maritime cooperation in the Bay of Bengal (20).

Although Thailand leads the BIMSTEC 'connectivity' sector, both port conclaves have been hosted by India, reflecting New Delhi's foreign policy priorities.

This suggests that India has carved a niche in port development, with its role in spearheading regional initiatives in this field acknowledged by other BIMSTEC members, positioning the Sagarmala programme as an essential guide.

The Success of Sagarmala

India's maritime sector plays a vital role in its trade and economic growth, as 95 percent of the country's trade by volume and 65 percent of trade by value is undertaken through maritime transport (21). Recognising the importance of its ports, India launched the Sagarmala programme to unlock the untapped potential of the country's extensive coastline, navigable waterways, and strategic maritime trade routes, for port-led development and the upliftment of coastal communities. The programme has four main aspects:

- Reduce logistics costs for exports and imports (Exim) and domestic trade with minimal infrastructure engagement

- Enhanced domestic waterways (inland and coastal) in multimodal transport

- Lower logistics costs of bulk commodities by locating industries close to the coast

- Create jobs and develop skills in the ports and maritime sector

Sagarmala intends to enhance and modernise infrastructure for the more efficient and effective transportation of goods, utilising improved logistics and practices. It is built on the foundation of integrated planning, connectivity enhancement, and sustainable development (22).

Sagarmala has enhanced the logistical performance of India's ports, stimulated the coastal economy, revitalised inland waterways, and elevated the country's position in global logistics rankings. Coastal shipping grew 118 per cent between 2015-2025, Ro-Pax ferries moved over 40 lakh passengers, and inland waterway cargo increased 700 percent (23). In the 2023 Container Port Index prepared by the World Bank, eight Indian ports ranked in the world's top 100, with Visakhapatnam among the top 20 container ports (24). An overview of the performance of India's major ports on the east coast, which are the primary facilitators of trade and connectivity with the BIMSTEC member countries, before and after the implementation of the Sagaramala programme, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Performance of India's Eastern Major Ports Before (2010-11) and After (2021-22) Sagarmala

India's Major Ports along the Bay of Bengal	Cargo Handled			Container Traffic			Port Capacity		Turnaround Time	
	2010-11	2021-22	CAGR	2010-11	2021-22	CAGR	2010-11	2021-22	2010-11	2021-22
	MT	MT	(%)	MT	MT	(%)	MT	MT	Hours	Hours
Shyama Prasad Mookherjee Ports, Kolkata Dock	35	15.30	-7.9	6.22	8.44	3.1	67.05	92.77	149.04	82.8
Haldia Dock	12.54	42.88	13.1	2.84	3.35	1.7			106.8	51.19
Paradip Port	56.04	116.13	7.6	0.07	0.18	10.3	76.5	289.75	185.52	53.16
Visakhapatnam Port	68.04	69.30	0.2	2.57	8.58	12.8	64.93	134.18	140.16	73.83
Kamarajar Port (Ennore)	11.01	38.74	13.4		9.27		31	91	66.72	46.38
Chennai Port	61.46	48.56	-2.3	29.42	30.93	0.5	79.72	135	104.64	53.19
V.O.Chidambaranar Port (Tuticorin)	25.73	34.12	2.9	8.17	15.91	6.9	27.04	111.46	96	48.54

Source: Assessing Performance and Productivity of Major Ports of India (25)
Notes: Port capacity of Kolkata and Haldia is combined, MT- Million Tonnes, CAGR- Compound Annual Growth Rate.

India's eastern ports have seen significant improvements since the implementation of the programme. Key areas where improvements have been observed are:

- **Structured approach to dredging**: To ease the problem of heavy siltation and the repeated need for dredging, Sagarmala has established 'Guidelines on Dredging at Major Ports'. This creates a structured approach to address the concern, outlining timelines for drafting proposals, undertaking necessary surveys, engaging project management consultants, establishing clear prequalification criteria for selecting competent dredging firms, formulating transparent tenders, monitoring projects, and settling disputes. This helps avoid unnecessary delays and costs, and ensures compliance with regulations (26).

- **Integrated modernisation and port-led development**: Disproportionately high logistics costs had strained India's economic prosperity. Sagarmala, focused on port modernisation and port-led development, has striven to lower these expenses via an integrated approach that seamlessly connects the entire trade ecosystem—from the factory gate and the farm to the port terminal and the global shipping lane—into a cohesive, predictive, and efficient value chain. Concentrated efforts have been made to close the last-mile gap in hinterland connectivity, dedicated freight corridors have been built, and a conscious shift has been made to utilise inland waterways for cheaper cargo transfer, among many other efforts (27).

- **Digitising operations**: A definitive transformation has been the push for digitalisation. Recognising data flow to be as critical as cargo flow, Sagarmala has engineered an evolution from the siloed, first-generation Port Community System to a unified National Logistics Portal (Marine). This one-stop digital portal connects all stakeholders, ports, customs, shipping lines, freight forwarders, and transporters on a single platform, enabling real-time data exchange and paperless transactions. Several other pioneering initiatives, such as the Logistics Data Bank project, which provides real-time tracking of EXIM container movement in India, have helped reduce documentation and clearance times, contributing to improved port efficiency (28).

While these initiatives have significantly enhanced India's port efficiency, they are not foolproof. For example, riverine ports continue to face siltation issues, which have spurred the search for deep-sea ports at Tajpur in West Bengal. In port modernisation, new constructions have not always addressed old problems; often, they 'shift the bottleneck' rather than removing it. For example, the creation of a new six-lane highway near a port gate that has inefficient internal circulation creates a new point of congestion. In the virtual sphere, existing bureaucratic processes have often been 'digitised' rather than fundamentally 're-engineered' for efficiency. Sagarmala has created a port network, where some ports have surplus capacity ahead of current trade requirements. This has led to underutilised maritime assets. Sagarmala is a work in progress, facing dynamic challenges but aiming for long-term resilience (29). As BIMSTEC pursues improved maritime connectivity, it is essential to explore whether and how India's Sagarmala programme's domestic successes can have regional reflections in the Bay of Bengal and its littorals.

Regional Prospects for Sagarmala

While Sagarmala is primarily a domestic programme, it has also advanced India's foreign policy aspirations. Not only has it helped improve the major ports on India's east coast, enhancing maritime connectivity within the Bay of Bengal region, but it has also advanced the Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade.

Sagarmala has the impetus to undertake projects that will result in a shift of cargo from land-based transportation to the coastal and inland waterways mode. Sagarmala currently has 38 inland waterway projects, at an estimated investment of INR 448,990 million (US$590.24 million). Six projects, including terminals at Pandu and Dhubri, have been completed, while 18 are underway, connecting Allahabad with Haldia and linking to the India-Bangladesh Protocol Route. It has also launched ROPAX, a water transport service that enables reduced travel time, lower vehicular emissions, and less traffic on the road. Various projects also focus on promoting cruise passenger transport, Ro-Ro ferry, and Ro-Pax movement across several routes (30).

Additionally, Sagarmala has enhanced coastal shipping between India and Bangladesh by investing in infrastructure for cargo handling. It encompasses 25 projects worth INR 29,060 million (US$350.12 million), with five completed, eight underway, and 12 in various phases of planning. While six projects are concentrated in major ports, 19 others aim to enhance facilities at non-

major ports. Collectively, the focus on inland waterways and coastal shipping demonstrates how Sagarmala indirectly advances India's regional outreach (31).

In 2018, India Ports Global Ltd (IPGL), a state-owned company that develops and operates overseas ports, became a wholly owned subsidiary of Sagarmala Development Corporation Ltd, thereby aligning India's port-modernisation know-how with its foreign operations. India's terminal operation rights to the Mongla (Bangladesh) and Sittwe (Myanmar) ports were secured under the IPGL. In February 2025, Bharat Ports Global (BPG) formed a consortium of IPGL, Sagarmala Development Co. Ltd., and Indian Port Rail and Ropeway Corporation Limited to drive port expansion, operations, and financing in alignment with the country's strategic interests. The idea is to position India as a key player in international trade and logistics. (32)

Building the Sagarmala Brand

One of the most credible ways to harness the programme's potential to inspire port development in the region would be to familiarise the BIMSTEC countries with its workings and witness its successes. This can be done by sharing the Sagarmala experience, best practices, knowledge, and innovations among BIMSTEC member states. The port conclaves are suitable platforms for such dissemination. Not only will this showcase India's growing maritime prowess in port development, but it will also create the scope for forging diplomatic partnerships in port development with other member states on a bilateral level, serving India's Act East and Neighbourhood First policies and its aspirations for greater prominence in the region.

Another way to familiarise the BIMSTEC countries with the workings of the Sagarmala Programme could be through implementing its practices and innovations in port development and operational projects that India has acquired in these countries. India is the only BIMSTEC country to have developmental stakes in the ports of other member states. It is currently engaged in modernising Mongla Port (dredging, container handling, rail/road links) in Bangladesh (33), and Indian firms (IRCON, RITES) are involved in related connectivity projects (rail link Khulna–Mongla) (34). India also has joint development rights with Sri Lanka over the Trincomalee Port. As the Indian Oil Corporation operates the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm (35), it also controls significant energy infrastructure inside the harbour. In Myanmar, India financed, designed, and constructed the Sittwe Port under the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project. It holds direct operational rights over the port through India Ports Global Limited, a government-owned company tasked with managing the port (36). Aligning the development of these ports with the best practices of Sagarmala through the BPG will not only streamline India's port development efforts across the Bay of Bengal region, but will also build the Sagarmala 'brand', elevating a domestic programme to regional recognition. However, India's diplomatic relations with each of the BIMSTEC members will also be a crucial factor in determining the success of this endeavour.

Conclusion

Sagarmala, which will complete a decade in 2025, underscores India's achievements in modernising ports, improving logistics, and advancing coastal and inland waterways. BIMSTEC, while prioritising connectivity, has yet to focus directly on port development, where India's experiences offer valuable guidance. As the Bay of Bengal region aspires to enhance maritime cooperation, India's priorities of deepening ties with its eastern neighbours through the Act East and Neighbourhood First policies align seamlessly with BIMSTEC's shared aspirations for stronger port development, and Sagarmala has the potential to align regional goals with national priorities.

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Sustainable Growth and Economic Diversification

Responses from Regional Stakeholders

BIMSTEC and Bhutan's Path to Sustainable Growth and Economic Diversification

Karma Dorji

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was established in 1997 to foster regional integration and promote socioeconomic development in South and Southeast Asia. Bhutan joined BIMSTEC in 2004 to leverage its potential through collaborative efforts in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity (1). While other member states focus on a Gross Domestic Product (GDP)-driven model of development, Bhutan, a landlocked Himalayan nation, is guided by its national philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). This concept was promulgated by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth king of Bhutan, in the 1970s, who, despite his youth, demonstrated remarkable foresight. He questioned the prevailing measurement system, guided by GDP, for its overt focus on economic pursuits and intended to provide a comprehensive approach towards measuring progress, prioritising well-being, and happiness (2). His Majesty believed that happiness was an indicator of progressive

development for the Bhutanese people, and believed that public discussion should help define Bhutan's development goals.

BIMSTEC serves as a vital platform for realising Bhutan's potential for sustainable growth and economic diversification. This essay examines how Bhutan's engagement with BIMSTEC aligns with its development priorities by facilitating green initiatives, enhancing economic diversification via digital payments, organic agriculture, and innovative trade mechanisms. Bhutan's contributions to BIMSTEC's connectivity agenda, particularly through its investment in enhanced internet infrastructure, can help promote a resilient and equitable Bay of Bengal community. A key example is DrukRen, a high-speed 10 Gbps national research and education network established in 2014, which provides connectivity to universities, research institutes, educational institutions, hospitals, and schools across 11 districts in Bhutan (3).

Redefining Growth: Bhutan's GNH Model

Bhutan's development is rooted in the GNH philosophy, balancing economic progress with environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and equitable growth. The 13th Five-Year Plan (2024-2029) articulates this vision by targeting the transformation of Bhutan into a high-income GNH economy by 2034 and aiming for a US$5 billion GDP by 2029 through sustainable innovation, infrastructure development, and investment in human capital. Key priorities mentioned in the plan include skill development, skilling, prioritising employment, ensuring quality healthcare and education, a robust social protection system, and enhanced security and resilience. The plan adopts a strategic path with eight national programmes and a four-cluster implementation approach to rebalance development, retain human capital, and ensure inclusive and sustainable prosperity (4) (5).

Bhutan's engagement with BIMSTEC aligns perfectly with its national objectives. BIMSTEC's connectivity agenda supports Bhutan's goals by enhancing access to regional markets and digital ecosystems, which is extremely critical for Bhutan, a landlocked country that relies heavily on Indian trade routes. Bhutan leverages BIMSTEC to gain access to Bangladesh's ports and digital networks, fostering economic diversification and sustainable growth. Apart from access to riverways, fostering connectivity with Bangladesh has helped establish a third internet gateway, which boosts Bhutan's digital connectivity, currently entirely dependent on the Siliguri corridor, and supports broader digital integration under BIMSTEC's connectivity agenda.

BIMSTEC's connectivity agenda also aligns with Bhutan's commitment to carbon neutrality. With Bhutan undergoing a green transition and diversifying its renewable energy portfolio through solar, wind, and hydrogen initiatives, BIMSTEC's connectivity agenda helps complement this effort through connectivity, infrastructure, and climate-resilient projects. A notable example is the Gelephu Mindfulness City, a planned special administrative region established as a 'vibrant economic hub' that provides a conducive business environment and compelling incentives. It is envisioned as a model of eco-friendly urban development, encompassing conscious and

sustainable businesses, inspired by Buddhist spiritual heritage, and distinguished by the uniqueness of the Bhutanese identity (6) (7).

This model of eco-friendly urban development reaches new heights when integrated with regional collaboration on green investments, helping Bhutan emerge as a regional leader in climate finance. In November 2024, Bhutan signed an Implementation Agreement to cooperate on carbon credits under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. The Implementation Agreement enables project developers to establish carbon credit initiatives in line with the Article 6 rulebook, ensuring transparency and environmental integrity. These projects are designed to provide concrete benefits to local communities, such as job creation, better access to clean water, improved energy security, and lower environmental pollution (8).

Key instances of regional collaboration in green investments include Bhutan leveraging India's renewable energy expertise and Thailand's green port advancements, which provide technical support. Additionally, Bangladesh's flood-resilient infrastructure offers vital lessons for Bhutan, which is increasingly becoming vulnerable to glacial lake outburst floods (9).

BIMSTEC's agenda for climate-resilient infrastructure, eco-friendly transport networks and cross-border energy trade supports Bhutan's agenda of sustainable growth. The commissioning of Bhutan's third international internet gateway via Bangladesh and India in 2023, which offers bandwidth at a rate of US\$3 to US\$4.50 per Mbps, reduces costs and enhances connectivity, a crucial factor for sustainable digital initiatives.

Innovation and Digital Payments

Bhutan's 13th Five-Year Plan prioritises IT services and creative industries, and is complemented by BIMSTEC's connectivity agenda, which aims to promote economic diversification through linking regional value chains and digital economies. Bhutan's tourism industry, which accounts for nearly 10 percent of its GDP, needs widespread innovation in digital payment and financial technology.

The 'Digital Drukyul' strategy advances e-commerce and broadband access, supporting virtual trade corridors and blockchain-based finance (10). The Gelephu Mindfulness City serves as a hub for Bhutan's third internet gateway via Bangladesh, thereby reducing the country's reliance on India and enhancing its digital trade capabilities. In May 2025, Binance Pay partnered with DK Bank to enable over 1,000 merchants in Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha to accept certain cryptocurrency payments for flights, hotels, visas, and street-side snacks (11). This initiative enhances financial inclusion for small businesses and attracts tech-savvy tourists (12). However, inconsistent internet connectivity in urban and rural areas hinders adoption, with reports describing Bhutan's internet as "horrendously slow" (13). The introduction of Starlink in December 2024 transformed this landscape. Offering speeds of between 23 Mbps and 110 Mbps, Starlink's Residential Lite and Standard Residential plans provide affordable high-speed

internet, enabling reliable crypto transactions in remote areas (14). These advancements align with BIMSTEC's digital connectivity goals, boosting Bhutan's tourism economy. BIMSTEC's digital platforms enable Bhutan to host regional data centres and explore tokenisation of natural resources, aligning with its GNH-driven diversification goals, balancing modernisation with ecological well-being.

Organic Agriculture and Geographical Indication Products

Bhutan's rich biodiversity supports a high-value agriculture sector. In June 2024, Bhutan launched the National Geographical Indication System to protect unique local products, including *Bumthang Yathra* (a traditional hand-woven wool textile), *Dhur-Tandigang Gonthok* (buckwheat flour), *Merak-Sakteng Zoetey* (fermented yak cheese), and Bumthang Honey, thereby enhancing their regional market value (15). Additionally, in October 2024, Bhutan launched an organic outlet in Thimphu to promote organic produce, supporting rural livelihoods and sustainable trade (16). BIMSTEC's trade standards harmonisation facilitates exports of these products, reducing non-tariff barriers.

Inclusive Growth and Gender Equity

Bhutan promotes sustainable and inclusive growth, in keeping with its core ethos of GNH. Gender disparities in labour and digital literacy persist, but BIMSTEC fosters gender-responsive policy exchanges. Many scholars advocate for integrating women into fintech, eco-tourism, and organic agriculture, leveraging initiatives like the Thimphu organic outlet (17). Drawing lessons from Bangladesh's female-led micro-enterprises and Sri Lanka's gender-focused trade policies, Bhutan can shape its diversification agenda into a more inclusive one (18). BIMSTEC programmes must also prioritise women in STEM to ensure equitable economic diversification, particularly in digital payment systems and organic trade.

Regional Stakeholder Synergies

BIMSTEC members have diverse priorities: coastal nations like Bangladesh and Thailand focus on maritime trade, while Bhutan and Nepal emphasise digital and energy connectivity. Bhutan contributes to regional energy security through hydropower exports to India and potential grid links with Bangladesh, as outlined in the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection memorandum of understanding (19). Through carbon credit trading and digital payment systems, Bhutan sets precedents for green finance and digital economies. Bhutan's GNH-based leadership influences BIMSTEC's sustainability agenda, promoting green and inclusive connectivity (20).

Conclusion

Bhutan's engagement with BIMSTEC highlights how smaller economies can creatively align national priorities with regional aspirations. By integrating its GNH philosophy into BIMSTEC's connectivity and economic frameworks, Bhutan demonstrates that development can be both people-centred and sustainable. Its emphasis on innovative practices—ranging from carbon credit trading and organic farming to digital initiatives like crypto-based tourism payments and enhanced internet access—illustrates a forward-looking approach to regional cooperation. Moreover, BIMSTEC's efforts to build digital ecosystems, streamline trade, and foster green growth create opportunities for Bhutan to deepen its integration with Bay of Bengal economies while preserving its ecological balance. By positioning itself at the intersection of sustainability, innovation, and well-being, Bhutan not only advances its national development goals but also makes a meaningful contribution to shaping a resilient, inclusive, and future-oriented regional community within the BIMSTEC framework.

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Bay of Possibilities: Assessing BIMSTEC's Geoeconomic Awakening

Soumya Bhowmick

The Bay of Bengal region sits at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, and several overlapping regional initiatives shape its geoeconomic landscape. These range from India's 'Act East' policy, aimed at strengthening ties with Southeast Asia, to formal groupings such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and subregional partnerships like the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC), the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative, and the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle. Each framework has specific goals for trade, connectivity, and development, often intersecting over the Bay's promising waters.

For instance, the Asian Development Bank (ADB)-led SASEC programme unites seven South Asian countries (comprising several BIMSTEC nations alongside the Maldives) in a project-based effort to boost intraregional

trade and improve links to Southeast Asia via Myanmar (1). Likewise, the BBIN initiative focuses on seamless subregional transport—exemplified by a Motor Vehicles Agreement to enable cross-border road travel—enhancing overland connectivity across the Bay's hinterland.

Meanwhile, Thailand's participation in both BIMSTEC and ASEAN reflects the region's bridging role, but Bangkok's perception of BIMSTEC has evolved strategically over time. Thai policymakers view BIMSTEC as a platform to expand manufacturing supply chains into South Asia and tap into a vast consumer base there. Thailand's manufacturing sector, particularly in the automotive and electronics industries, views the Bay of Bengal corridor as an opportunity to diversify from traditional ASEAN markets and tap into India's growing middle class. From Thailand's perspective, BIMSTEC complements rather than competes with ASEAN membership, positioning Thailand as a nodal point connecting Southeast and South Asia. Thai strategists perceive this dual engagement as enhancing the country's geoeconomic leverage by offering alternatives to China-centric supply chains while maintaining access to regional manufacturing networks (2).

These overlapping currents highlight the Bay's potential as a vital hub connecting two dynamic regions. However, they also highlight the need for a coherent platform that can harmonise ambitions and deliver tangible integration. One primary reason a platform like this is needed is the decline of SAARC as a functional regional body. SAARC, which once grouped all South Asian nations, has been effectively moribund since its last summit in 2014, stalled by the intractable rivalry between India and Pakistan. Geopolitical deadlock—exacerbated by cross-border terrorism and mutual mistrust—has paralysed SAARC's decision-making and left South Asia without a viable forum for economic cooperation (3).

In this vacuum, countries have sought solutions elsewhere. India's 'Look East' policy, now rebranded as the 'Act East' policy, exemplifies this shift: rather than pinning hopes on an unproductive SAARC, New Delhi has turned to outreach that connects South Asia with East Asia. A telling signal emerged in 2019, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited BIMSTEC leaders—but not SAARC counterparts—to attend his inauguration for his second term. This marked a strategic pivot aligned with Act East—a recognition that the Bay of Bengal, straddling South and Southeast Asia, could host a more pragmatic coalition free of the India-Pakistan impasse.

BIMSTEC has thus emerged as a natural platform to realise the Bay's geoeconomic potential. Encompassing five South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and two Southeast Asian countries (Myanmar and Thailand), BIMSTEC bridges the two subregions. Notably, its architecture excludes Pakistan, avoiding the chronic fault line that crippled SAARC. This gives BIMSTEC a pragmatic edge: it can prioritise functional economic cooperation unencumbered by the politics of India-Pakistan relations.

Following its inception in 1997, BIMSTEC experienced prolonged stagnation but has recently seen a revival. Initially formed as BIST-EC, the grouping quickly expanded to include Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan, bringing together seven Bay of Bengal nations but excluding Pakistan and China, thus reinforcing India's leadership (4). However, for nearly two decades, the bloc remained politically marginal, with a complex agenda spanning 14 sectors, weak institutional structures,

and an underfunded secretariat. The BIMSTEC Charter, adopted in 2022 at the 5th Summit in Sri Lanka, streamlined the group's focus into seven core pillars and initiated efforts to strengthen the secretariat (5). This institutional transformation continued with the adoption of the BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030 and the recommendations of an Eminent Persons Group at the 6th Summit in Thailand (2025), which introduced 'rules of procedure' and reinforced governance mechanisms (6). These developments mark BIMSTEC's evolution into a more focused and rules-based organisation with a collective vision for a prosperous, resilient, and integrated Bay of Bengal community.

India has also played a pivotal role in reviving BIMSTEC, anchoring its agenda on infrastructure linkages and supply chains, which align with the Act East priorities (7). Frustrated by SAARC's stagnation, the smaller South Asian states also view BIMSTEC as an opportunity to diversify economic partnerships beyond their immediate neighbourhood. Additionally, BIMSTEC offers Thailand and Myanmar a platform to look westward without having to navigate the full complexities of South Asian politics. BIMSTEC can serve as a vehicle for sustainable growth and economic diversification, uniting a populous market of 1.73 billion people with a combined GDP exceeding US$5 trillion (8).

Economic Currents: BIMSTEC's Blueprint for Inclusive Growth

Having repositioned itself with a forward-looking agenda, BIMSTEC is now pursuing several geoeconomic initiatives aimed at unlocking sustainable growth for its member states. At the heart of this effort is the push to increase intraregional trade, which remains strikingly low compared to other trade blocs (see Table 1). Despite encompassing a sizeable market, intra-BIMSTEC trade accounts for only about 6 percent of their total commerce (9). These underscore both the unrealised potential and the structural impediments, ranging from tariff and non-tariff barriers to poor transport links and limited production complementarities. To address this, finalising the long-delayed BIMSTEC free trade agreement (FTA) is a top priority. Members signed a framework FTA in 2004, but negotiations stagnated for nearly two decades, owing to divergent tariff sensitivities, concerns over revenue loss, and fears of asymmetric gains (with smaller economies wary of being swamped by India or Thailand's exports) (10). Current global trends, including rising protectionism elsewhere, have added urgency to break this deadlock.

Table 1: Intraregional Trade Across Key Trade Blocs

Regional Bloc	Intra-regional Trade (% of Total Exports, 2024)
European Union (EU)	62
ASEAN	22
MERCOSUR	10
SAARC	5
BIMSTEC	6

Sources: Author's own, based on data from Eurostat (2024) (11), ASEAN Annual Report (2024) (12), MERCOSUR Secretariat (2024) (13), World Bank & SAARC Chamber (2023) (14), South Asian Voices & Carnegie (2024) (15).

At the 2025 Summit, Thailand's then-Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra urged accelerated FTA talks, noting that BIMSTEC's combined population and GDP warrant far greater internal trade volumes (16). On the sidelines, Bangladesh's Chief Advisor (interim head of government) Muhammad Yunus pressed Modi to help conclude the FTA, signalling Dhaka's hope that India would be flexible on contentious issues to clinch a deal (17). These appeals reflect a shared understanding: a tariff-free or preferential trade area across the Bay of Bengal could serve as an engine of diversification and resilience, particularly for smaller countries seeking alternatives to dependence on a single market. While entrenched differences mean the FTA has yet to materialise, the political will to "unlock the region's trade potential" is at its highest in years (18). Clear timelines for concluding negotiations on goods, services, and investment, possibly by the late 2020s, are being debated, as members recognise that boosting intra-BIMSTEC trade is pivotal for sustainable growth.

Trade facilitation, however, extends beyond mere tariff cuts; it hinges on connectivity. Indeed, BIMSTEC has turned a keen focus to developing both land and maritime linkages as 'engines of growth'. On the land front, there is progress on the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity (2018–2028), a comprehensive strategy that identifies over 140 projects (roads, railways, ports, and airports) to better interlink member countries (19). Among the signature projects is the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which aims to eventually stretch from the Indian border to Bangkok, with further ambitions to extend it to Laos and Vietnam, effectively creating a new overland Asian highway. Unfortunately, some of these corridors have encountered setbacks; notably, sections of the trilateral highway through Myanmar have stalled due to the country's ongoing internal strife.

In parallel, BIMSTEC has focused on maritime connectivity, leveraging the Bay of Bengal itself as a bridge. A landmark Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation was signed at the 2025 Summit (20), creating a framework to ease shipping protocols, harmonise standards at ports, and develop short-sea shipping routes among member-state ports. The aim is to reduce logistics costs and transit times, enabling goods to move more efficiently by sea, which is vital given the Bay of Bengal's centrality to regional trade. Over a quarter of global traded goods already cross these waters annually, and streamlining intra-Bay shipping could further catalyse commerce (21).

For coastal nations like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, improved maritime links promise to streamline the shipping sectors and boost their role as regional transhipment hubs. Landlocked Nepal and Bhutan, in turn, stand to gain new access to global markets via their neighbours' ports, integrating them into regional value chains in a way geography previously impeded. India's vast hinterland, especially its Northeast states, could benefit from multimodal connectivity; for instance, goods from Assam could move by road into Myanmar and then by sea to Sri Lanka, or vice versa (22).

Another pillar of BIMSTEC's sustainable growth strategy is the blue economy, the responsible exploitation of marine resources and maritime cooperation for shared prosperity. The Bay of Bengal is rich in fisheries, hydrocarbon reserves, and other ocean wealth, yet these remain underutilised by the region's economies. To tap this potential, BIMSTEC has enhanced cooperation in areas such as sustainable fishing, marine conservation, and offshore energy. Initiatives are underway

to share research and technology for aquaculture and to coordinate coast guard efforts against illegal fishing.

Moreover, with climate change posing threats (such as rising sea levels and increased cyclones) to the Bay communities, BIMSTEC members are collaborating on disaster risk reduction and coastal resilience as part of their blue economy agenda. For instance, India is establishing a BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate, which will enhance regional early warning systems for natural disasters. There is also a discussion to pool resources to develop offshore wind or solar farms in the Bay, to further the push for renewable energy. In 2022, BIMSTEC established an Energy Centre in Bengaluru to facilitate such cooperation. Subsequently, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for grid interconnection was under consideration to enable power trade across borders (23).

Crucially, BIMSTEC's geoeconomic initiatives are driven by each member state's specific development aspirations and distinct perceptions of regional opportunity. Bangladesh perceives stronger regional trade and transit as vital to its Vision 2041 (24), of becoming an upper-middle-income country, viewing BIMSTEC as a pathway to secure preferential access to Indian markets while diversifying away from dependence on traditional textile buyers. Bangladeshi policymakers see BIMSTEC's connectivity projects, particularly the proposed Sittwe-Kaladan corridor, as transformative for the country's landlocked northern regions and its position as a regional transhipment hub. Nepal and Bhutan perceive BIMSTEC as their most promising avenue to break landlocked isolation, with Nepal viewing regional integration as essential for accessing maritime trade routes and exporting surplus hydropower to energy-deficient neighbours. From Kathmandu's perspective, BIMSTEC offers an alternative to overdependence on India for market access, which is critical, given past experiences with border closures (25). Sri Lanka, emerging from economic crisis, perceives the Bay's revitalised sea lanes as an opportunity to position the Colombo and Trincomalee ports as regional logistics centres competing with Singapore and Dubai (26).

Thailand, with a more industrialised economy, brings a slightly different perspective: it considers BIMSTEC a bridge to extend its supply chains into South Asia and access a vast consumer base there. Thai leaders have championed BIMSTEC as a complement to ASEAN, positioning Thailand as a nodal point connecting Southeast and South Asia. Even Myanmar, despite its ongoing political instability, stands to benefit geoeconomically through BIMSTEC projects, such as the India-backed Sittwe port and proposed economic corridor schemes. Under stable conditions, these initiatives could transform Myanmar into a transit artery linking South Asia and Southeast Asia. In essence, each engine of growth that BIMSTEC is trying to ignite—whether trade integration, connectivity, or blue economy development—corresponds to the tangible interests of its member countries. The promise of BIMSTEC lies in synchronising these efforts so that the Bay of Bengal region can grow more sustainably and equitably.

However, these ambitions face headwinds (27). Intraregional initiatives often confront the reality of asymmetric benefits—larger members, such as India or Thailand, might reap disproportionate gains from an FTA or a new highway, which can cause some hesitation among smaller states.

Political instability is another spoiler. Myanmar's ongoing civil strife is a stark example, having already halted construction on key stretches of connectivity projects and raising doubts about the country's ability to fulfil regional commitments.

The region also suffers from glaring infrastructure deficits and a lack of financing. While institutions like ADB and other partners have invested billions through SASEC and related programmes, BIMSTEC still needs robust funding mechanisms (hence the interest in a project fund) (28). There are also latent protectionist pressures and bureaucracy within each country; for instance, sensitive sectors like agriculture often enjoy heavy protection, complicating FTA talks, and red tape at border checkpoints can nullify tariff concessions if not addressed. Nonetheless, with the geoeconomic momentum building, BIMSTEC members appear more determined than ever to navigate these challenges by leveraging their collective strength.

Staying the Course: Can BIMSTEC Deliver on Its Vision?

Despite recent progress, BIMSTEC's journey to transform from a promising vision to a tangible driver of development remains uncertain. The bloc faces an array of persistent challenges— some inherited from the past, others new—that it must navigate carefully to stay the course. One fundamental hurdle is the implementation gap. Over the years, BIMSTEC summits and ministerial meetings have generated a series of agreements, action plans, and declarations; however, translating these into tangible results has been a slow process. The FTA, for instance, has languished for years with over 20 rounds of negotiations yielding no final treaty. Similarly, infrastructure projects under the Master Plan have seen delays due to funding shortfalls and bureaucratic inertia in member countries (29).

To address this, the bloc must prioritise certain high-impact, near-term deliverables, such as improving one-stop border facilities, launching a coastal shipping service, or operationalising the BIMSTEC power grid interconnection. BIMSTEC policymakers have also proposed establishing a project monitoring unit at the secretariat to track progress and address any delays.

Institutional capacity remains another pressing concern. While steps are being taken to augment the secretariat's resources, it will take time for the institution to coordinate multi-country initiatives effectively. Compared to ASEAN's well-established bureaucracy or even the African Union, BIMSTEC's central apparatus remains modest. Increasing the secretariat's annual budget (currently around US$1 million) and hiring more technical experts could empower it to drive the organisation's objectives rather than merely servicing meetings (30). Member states that currently contribute the largest share of the budget, such as India, may need to commit additional funds, while others could contribute or allow the secretariat to seek donor support.

The idea of a BIMSTEC Development Fund has gained traction; if established, even a modest pool of about US$2 billion (with contributions from richer members and partners, such as Japan or the ADB) could underwrite critical regional connectivity projects and feasibility studies. Such institutional strengthening is vital to ensure BIMSTEC cooperation continues. Encouragingly, some foundational reforms are underway. The adoption of new rules of procedure is professionalising

how BIMSTEC conducts its business, and the Eminent Persons Group's recommendations—many aimed at boosting efficiency—are being gradually implemented. Such fine-tuning can keep the BIMSTEC running smoothly as it takes on more complex tasks.

BIMSTEC's geoeconomics is shaped by divergent member perceptions: Bangladesh and Thailand tend to view Chinese finance and connectivity as complementary to regional aims, while India perceives China's Bay of Bengal footprint—via Sri Lanka's Hambantota and Myanmar's Kyaukpyu—as a strategic concern. Similarly, Myanmar's junta is perceived variably, with India seeing engagement as a strategic necessity against Chinese influence, and Bangladesh emphasising humanitarian-security risks tied to refugee flows. These differing threat-opportunity perceptions, alongside episodic diplomatic unease between India and Bangladesh, mean that geopolitics is an ever-present variable, even though the bloc was designed to bypass the India-Pakistan rivalry.

Although BIMSTEC has steered clear of taking up divisive political disputes, these issues can indirectly slow cooperation. For example, if Myanmar's situation deteriorates, other members might be reluctant to deepen economic ties or could face domestic backlash for doing so. Additionally, external powers cast a shadow. Beijing's growing presence in the Bay of Bengal is watched warily by New Delhi and other capitals. Although China is not a member of BIMSTEC, its influence could test the bloc's cohesion if the interests of member states diverge. BIMSTEC will need to manage these issues deftly, perhaps by developing principles for engagement with outside partners.

To navigate this external landscape, BIMSTEC has adopted the principle of an open architecture for cooperation, welcoming support from friends like Japan or the European Union on infrastructure or capacity building, provided it aligns with BIMSTEC's priorities and does not infringe on the autonomy of its members. This balanced approach can help inoculate the group against becoming a venue for great-power rivalries.

New Delhi emphasises that BIMSTEC is now the primary vehicle for regional cooperation in its neighbourhood (31). Still, early deliverables are crucial for maintaining credibility (for example, launching the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement within a year and concluding FTA talks before the halfway mark of Vision 2030). Analysts underscore that BIMSTEC's success will depend on whether it can avoid the mistakes of SAARC by keeping the agenda practical and inclusive. They applaud BIMSTEC's focus on economic issues and avoiding contentious politics, but also suggest it cannot remain entirely apolitical; humanitarian assistance, anti-trafficking efforts, or joint disaster response will be essential to underpin economic gains (32).

There are also calls for BIMSTEC to expand stakeholder engagement. Business communities in the region, for instance, are eager for improved connectivity and trade facilitation (33), their input could help shape the FTA to be more business-friendly. Regular BIMSTEC business forums or investment summits could generate momentum and public-private partnerships for projects. Civil society groups, on the other hand, emphasise sustainability and inclusion, advocating that large infrastructure projects undergo thorough environmental and social assessments and that local communities be fully consulted (34). Incorporating such feedback can ensure that growth

is not only fast but also fair and sustainable, aligning with the Vision 2030 mantra of a 'resilient and open' Bay of Bengal.

Notably, some progress is already visible, which, if built upon, can keep BIMSTEC on track. In the energy sector, a BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection MoU has been signed, laying the groundwork for electricity trade that could help countries like Nepal and Bhutan export surplus hydropower to energy-hungry India or Bangladesh. The BIMSTEC Energy Centre is facilitating knowledge exchange on renewables and energy security. In October 2023, the first-ever BIMSTEC Port Conclave was held in Vishakhapatnam, bringing together port authorities to discuss direct coastal shipping links (35). Such sector-specific cooperation can yield incremental benefits even as larger, more comprehensive agreements are being negotiated. Furthermore, BIMSTEC has established new centres of excellence—a Technology Transfer Facility in Sri Lanka and a Weather and Climate Centre in India—that will provide regional public goods, including innovation sharing and cyclone forecasting (36).

Conclusion

As BIMSTEC moves forward, a few practical steps are needed to maintain momentum and deliver results. These include focusing on 'early harvest' projects—such as activating the Kolkata-Chattogram-Sittwe shipping route or digitising trade clearance—that can show quick, tangible benefits. Second, securing reliable financing through joint mechanisms or multilateral institutions is key to sustaining critical infrastructure development. Third, given regional political volatility, especially in Myanmar, infrastructure should be resilient and include alternative routes to ensure uninterrupted connectivity. And finally, deeper engagement with the private sector and civil society through institutional platforms can inject fresh ideas, enhance transparency, and ensure projects remain responsive to regional needs.

The coming years, including Bangladesh's leadership in 2025-26, will test the bloc's ability to maintain momentum amid elections, potential crises, and global economic swings (37). If member states stick to the course—implementing what they agree, supporting the institutions they have created, and pragmatically navigating obstacles—the Bay of Bengal's tides of opportunity could well lift all boats. For a region long fragmented by historical and political rifts, this would mark a significant shift towards a more integrated and sustainable Bay of Bengal.

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India's Wish List from BIMSTEC: Strategic Priorities, Trade–Economy–SDG Linkages, and Risk Management

Nilanjan Ghosh

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), linking Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, has transformed from a diffuse cooperation platform to a Charter-backed entity with a rationalised agenda and a growing pipeline of connectivity, energy, and trade-facilitation initiatives. For India, this architecture serves as the subregional framework for integrating its eastern and Northeast states with Southeast Asian markets, establishing trust-based connectivity, and mitigating risks associated with overexposure to a single country.

The adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter in 2022 and its coming into force in 2024 have stabilised the grouping's objectives, structures, and decision-making processes (1). Each pillar is anchored by a member state—for example, connectivity under Thailand's leadership, and security and energy co-led by India—thereby clarifying responsibilities and enabling prioritisation and sequencing of efforts (2).

The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity provides a decadal vision, identifying the priority sector investments for multimodal connectivity around the Bay (3). In the energy domain, the BIMSTEC Energy Centre in Bengaluru is moving toward full operationalisation, while the understanding of grid interconnection lays the foundation for cross-border power trade and balancing (4). Together, these steps hold the promise of a Bay-wide power pool that can link Himalayan hydropower with coastal renewables and other dispatchable resources.

On the trade track, the progress is slow. Negotiations for a goods free trade agreement (FTA) are ongoing, but there is already a BIMSTEC Trade Facilitation Strategic Framework 2030, which envisions coordinated border management, harmonisation of standards related to sanitary and phytosanitary measures and technical barriers to trade, and a move toward paperless trade (5,6). Meanwhile, India's bilateral trade with BIMSTEC partners has crossed US$40 billion, with Thailand and Bangladesh emerging as key drivers (7).

These baselines, while demonstrating a pragmatic start, are not sufficient. The real test for BIMSTEC lies in mobilising financing, developing credible metrics, and instilling management discipline to ensure timely and effective delivery.

Further, the context in the region is not benign. Bangladesh has undergone a turbulent political transition since mid-2024, with episodic public-order disruptions and heightened rights concerns. The September 2025 uprising in Nepal reveals deeper frustrations over corruption, youth unemployment, and service delivery. In this state of flux, a rules-based, transparent BIMSTEC can offer itself as an institutional stabiliser.

From an Indian perspective, while there are some doubts about BIMSTEC's importance, it is crucial to determine how to make it more central to New Delhi's regional economic and development imperative. Given this, what is India's wish list from the BIMSTEC? India needs to establish a practical wish list, including instruments, milestones, and buffers against political volatility in neighbouring countries. This essay attempts to address this concern through an eight-pillar agenda.

India's Wish List: Eight Pillars for Action

This section highlights eight pillars for action as India's wish list from the BIMSTEC: (i) developing hard connectivity that is in the form of physical infrastructure; (ii) redesigning trade architecture; (iii) actions on energy and climate; (iv) blue economy; (v) the digital domain; (vi) developing regional value chains; (vii) soft connectivity in the form of people, knowledge and mobility; and (viii) institutional reforms.

(i) Connectivity that Works

Ask 1: Bay of Bengal Connectivity Acceleration Facility
The BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity identifies 267 transport projects, with an estimated cost of US$124.4 billion for 2018–2028 (8). Financing such a portfolio requires new and integrated thinking, a pooling of resources, and a more holistic institutional mechanism.

A co-anchored blended finance facility—the Bay of Bengal Connectivity Acceleration Facility (BoB-CAF), supported by Asian Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, the European Union (EU), and sovereign funds—will help address chronic underfunding (9). The funds may be disbursed based on results, climate-resilient infrastructure standards, and transparent governance. This includes an independent review of performance using measurable key performance indicators, which will also encompass service metrics.

Ask 2: Coastal shipping and inland waterways regime
There is a need to align and harmonise port charges, paperwork, and navigation rules, thereby establishing a common framework for coastal and inland shipping across the various coastal routes. This will not only reduce the transaction costs of trade and businesses but also mitigate risks through route diversification, especially when road and land borders are disrupted (10).

Ask 3: Border performance compact
At major gateways, such as Petrapole–Benapole, phased round-the-clock customs operations, risk-based inspection, and green lanes for authorised economic operators will institutionalise performance. Public dashboards of clearance times align with practices under the World Trade Organization's Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) (11).

(ii) Trade Architecture

Ask 4: Phased liberalisation
With the BIMSTEC FTA long pending, a more practical pathway, given the political constraints, is a sequential movement. This can entail an initial preferential trade agreement covering 8-10 percent of tariff lines, later evolving into a goods-first FTA, and finally adding services annexes (12).

Ask 5: Rules of origin with regional cumulation
There is a need to evolve simplified, digitised rules of origin across BIMSTEC, complemented by post-clearance audits. Such reforms, consistent with TFA disciplines, will lower compliance costs and enhance business competitiveness (13).

Ask 6: Early mutual recognition agreements in three sectors
Pharmaceuticals, food processing, and textiles—India's three major export items to the BIMSTEC—face stringent testing and certification requirements. Placing them under recognition agreements will help with faster approvals. This process can be made more reliable and trusted by building a regional lab network and sharing auditors (14).

Ask 7: Peer-reviewed facilitation scorecard
An annual peer review linked to the 2030 plan is needed to promote transparency and accountability, as proposed under the TFA (15).

(iii) Energy and Climate Actions

Cross-border power trades and risk-pooling function as stabilisers during political or fiscal shocks. Therefore, BIMSTEC action should be targeted in that direction, along with mobilising the most crucial resource (financing) for the most critical climate action in the region (adaptation).

Ask 8: Operationalising the Energy Centre
The BIMSTEC Energy Centre should provide a work plan on power-trade harmonisation, a Bay-wide renewable balancing study, an interconnection pipeline, and a clean-cooking alliance.

Ask 9: Pilot trades and grid realisation
Concrete pilot trades will move the grid from paper to practice. Transparent grid codes and wheeling charges are vital.

Ask 10: Climate and disaster-risk compact
An integrated system of cyclone early warning, parametric insurance for coastal small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and mangrove restoration as protective infrastructure should accompany energy integration.

Ask 11: Mobilising adaptation financing
As a framework institution, BIMSTEC should work to mobilise private sector finance for adaptation. As one of the most climate-vulnerable regions, it will need to survive the long gestation period until net zero is achieved. Given this imperative, BIMSTEC should voice its adaptation concerns in global platforms and partner with the EU, which has been working with Africa through its Global Gateway initiative, and bilateral and multilateral financing institutions to mobilise adaptation funds by creating marketable and bankable projects.

(iv) Maritime Security and Blue Economy

Ask 12: Bay of Bengal Maritime Domain Awareness Grid
To address the persistent risks from illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, narcotics and arms smuggling, human trafficking, and recurring climate-related disasters, BIMSTEC countries could link their national maritime domain awareness (MDA) fusion centres into a shared 'BoB-MDA Grid'. This will enable members to track vessels in real time, share white-shipping data, and coordinate patrols across jurisdictions. Beyond security, such cooperation will safeguard the maritime commons that millions of coastal citizens rely on for transport, fishing, and tourism.

Ask 13: Fisheries governance and port state measures
In its attempt to promote sustainable fishing, BIMSTEC members should adopt the Food and Agriculture Organization's Port State Measures Agreement, which empowers ports to deny entry or services to vessels engaged in illegal fishing. Alongside this, scaling up community-based vessel tracking—through low-cost GPS devices and digital logbooks—can help ensure compliance while empowering artisanal fishers. Taken together, these steps will create a balanced regime that secures food supplies, sustains biodiversity, and protects the incomes of small-scale fishers.

Ask 14: Blue economy incubator

A blue economy incubator can help BIMSTEC countries pilot projects in seaweed farming, mariculture, ecotourism, and other ocean-based sectors. These pilots should be anchored in sustainability standards (to prevent over-exploitation), incorporate livelihood metrics (such as jobs created and incomes raised), and attract blended finance from development banks, sovereign funds, and private investors. This can also serve as an incubator for a regional innovation platform—helping coastal communities diversify their incomes, strengthening resilience against climate shocks, and positioning the Bay as a hub for sustainable ocean-based industries.

(v) Digital 'Rails' for Trade and Finance

When physical infrastructure fails to guarantee seamless trade, digital systems become the 'rails' on which commerce continues to move. By reducing paperwork, enabling faster payments, and lowering foreign-exchange risks, digitalisation can deliver both day-to-day efficiency and crisis-time resilience.

Ask 15: Cross-border QR and local currency settlement

Establishing interoperable QR code payment frameworks across willing BIMSTEC members could allow traders and small businesses to settle invoices directly in local currencies. This can remove the steep barriers faced by regional MSMEs, such as forex risks and banking delays. By setting low-value transaction limits, embedding anti-money laundering (AML) and countering the financing of terrorism safeguards, and designing clear dispute-resolution rules, this system will ensure both trust and security.

Ask 16: Paperless trade stack

A second pillar of digitalisation is the movement of trade documents across borders. Mutual recognition of electronic phytosanitary certificates, certificates of origin, and electronic invoicing will curb duplication, reduce clearance times, and provide greater transparency. Over time, such a 'paperless trade stack' could be integrated with the proposed border performance compacts, providing real-time clearance data and reducing opportunities for rent-seeking.

(vi) Regional Value Chains

Ask 17: Supplier upgrading missions

For BIMSTEC to become more than a transit corridor, it must build deeper regional value chains. Given the complementarities, i.e., India's scale in intermediates, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka's processing strength, and Thailand's advanced clusters, a focused 'missions approach' could accelerate progress in three sectors:

Mission 1–Textiles and Apparel 2.0: Aligning standards and rules of origin could create 'fibre-to-fashion' supply chains. Support for supplier upgrading in testing, dyeing, and sustainable production will help smaller firms meet compliance norms.

Mission 2–Pharma and Med-Tech: Regional mutual recognition agreements on good manufacturing practices and bioequivalence will reduce duplication, while upgraded funds could finance certification, packaging, and clinical trial infrastructure, enhancing both trade and health security.

Mission 3–Electronics and Auto-Components: Indian tier-2 suppliers often struggle to meet global standards, while Thailand hosts established original equipment manufacturer ecosystems. Linking them through corridor-based logistics agreements, just-in-time delivery standards, and common quality benchmarks will embed Indian firms in regional supply chains.

Each mission should be backed by supplier-upgrading funds and B2B consortia led by chambers, such as the Confederation of Indian Industries, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and their regional counterparts. By pooling resources and aligning standards, BIMSTEC can shift from fragmented trade to co-production and shared competitiveness.

(vii) People, Knowledge, and Mobility

Ask 18: Skills and research mobility

Short-term skills visas, recognition of micro-credentials, and joint doctoral programmes in logistics, power systems, and climate science could be financed through a BoB-CAF technical window. These measures will not only expand career pathways for young professionals but also build a regional pool of expertise directly aligned with BIMSTEC's connectivity and sustainability priorities.

Ask 19: Health security

Shared disease-surveillance dashboards and a telemedicine regulatory sandbox will improve preparedness for cross-border health risks. In doing so, the region can enable faster outbreak detection, more efficient resource sharing, and equitable access to medical expertise across remote and underserved areas.

(viii) Institutional Reform: Delivery, Data, and Dispute Avoidance

Ask 20: Secretariat delivery unit

A small, professional delivery team embedded within the BIMSTEC Secretariat could be tasked with tracking a set of 50 flagship outputs across connectivity, trade, and energy. Learnings from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation programme performance management systems will be helpful. Publishing quarterly traffic-light dashboards and conducting regular problem-solving sprints by bringing together line ministries, regulators, and private stakeholders can help identify bottlenecks and improve time management.

Ask 21: Good offices and mediation panel

Composed of independent experts, such a panel could provide a voluntary early-resolution mechanism before conflicts escalate to formal arbitration or state-to-state disputes. This will lower transaction costs, build confidence among firms, and create a predictable environment for investment. Over time, the panel could evolve into a trusted forum for dialogue, similar to soft mechanisms used by other regional organisations.

Ask 22: Public-Private Partnership Project Preparation Facility

A public-private partnership project preparation facility (PPF) can help transform politically endorsed projects into commercially viable ventures. This can be done by standardising contracts, clarifying risk-sharing arrangements, and ensuring projects meet international due diligence standards. Pairing these efforts with partial credit guarantees will help in the crowding in of private capital at scale, by creating a pipeline of trusted 'ready-to-finance' projects, and reducing delays and cost overruns.

India's Wishlist: Aligning Trade, Economy, and SDG Priorities

The articulated wish list, consisting of 'eight pillars for action', serves the dual purpose of reflecting India's strategic interests and addressing broader concerns in the BIMSTEC region in terms of trade facilitation, economic resilience, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each of these action points links structural gaps in the regional economy with the imperatives of sustainable and inclusive development.

Connectivity: SDG-9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure)

India's emphasis on financing connectivity infrastructure under the proposed BoB-CAF, with 267 identified projects worth US$124.4 billion, along with the focus on blended finance, performance-based disbursals, and transparent metrics, directly contributes to SDG-9 by fostering sustainable infrastructure (16). Furthermore, harmonising port regulations and developing inland waterways reduces trade transaction costs, thereby strengthening regional economic integration. The proposed border performance compact ensures efficiency and transparency at critical gateways, further aligning with SDG-16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

Trade Architecture: SDG-8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)

India's call for phased liberalisation through a PTA represents a pragmatic approach that balances political feasibility with economic necessity (17). Smoother trade in pharmaceuticals, food processing, and textiles—sectors that employ millions—aligns directly with SDG-8 by promoting sustained, inclusive economic growth and productive employment.

Energy and Climate Action: SDG-7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and SDG-13 (Climate Action)

While operationalising the BIMSTEC Energy Centre, piloting cross-border trades, and harmonising grid codes can accelerate progress toward SDG-7, the emphasis on adaptation finance and disaster-risk compacts, cyclone early-warning systems, mangrove restoration, and parametric insurance underscores the climate vulnerability of the Bay of Bengal littoral, making SDG-13 a shared imperative (18).

Maritime Security and Blue Economy: SDG-14 (Life Below Water)

India's proposal for a Bay-wide MDA grid simultaneously addresses security concerns and ensures the sustainability of marine resources, thereby advancing SDG-14. The idea of promoting the

Port State Measures Agreement and incubating blue-economy projects in seaweed farming, mariculture, and eco-tourism clearly acknowledges the role of marine ecosystems in fostering inclusive and sustainable growth while meeting conservation goals (19).

Digitalisation: SDG-9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) and SDG-17 (Partnerships for the Goals)

India's advocacy for interoperable QR-based cross-border payments and local-currency settlements can particularly empower SMEs by lowering foreign-exchange risks. Similarly, the 'paperless trade stack' aligns with the TFA and represents a digital public good that could significantly cut clearance times and enhance transparency (20). These initiatives support SDG-9 by driving innovation and infrastructure, while also advancing SDG-17 by embedding cooperative digital frameworks across the region.

Regional Value Chains: SDG-8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG-12 (Responsible Consumption and Production)

The proposal for 'supplier upgrading missions' in textiles, pharmaceuticals, and electronics advances SDG-8 and SDG-12. For instance, fibre-to-fashion chains spanning India and Bangladesh, or med-tech collaborations linking India and Thailand, demonstrate how complementarities can be harnessed for shared competitiveness.

People, Knowledge, and Mobility: SDG-3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG-4 (Quality Education)

Human capital development through short-term skills visas, micro-credential recognition, and joint doctoral programmes directly responds to SDG-4. The creation of shared health-surveillance dashboards and telemedicine sandboxes contributes to SDG-3, especially in combating cross-border health risks. These initiatives not only build trust but also create the epistemic infrastructure necessary for long-term cooperation in logistics, energy, and climate science.

Institutional Reform: SDG-16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG-17 (Partnerships for the Goals)

Institutional innovations such as a Secretariat delivery unit, good offices and mediation panel, and a PPF embody the governance dimension of India's wish list. These proposals institutionalise accountability through traffic-light dashboards, reduce conflict costs through mediation, and crowd in private capital through standardised risk-sharing mechanisms. Such reforms directly advance SDG-16 by fostering effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions, and SDG-17 by strengthening implementation mechanisms.

Mitigation of Political-Economy Frictions and the Indian Imperatives

While the integrated approach presented in the form of the wish list may not be easy to achieve, it addresses the deeply embedded concerns that plague the regional economic connectivity

and integration of the BIMSTEC. First, the combined ideation of BoB-CAF and PPF offers one pathway to internalise project design and monitoring while reducing transaction costs. By linking disbursements to performance and embedding third-party verification, these mechanisms help mitigate execution slippage and strengthen credibility. Second, the protectionist pressures and insulating tendencies of economies, along with the risk of rules-of-origin manipulation, create another pressure point. Here, the phased liberalisation, starting with a narrow PTA and further supported by clear cumulation rules and post-clearance audits with public facilitation scorecards, can help the process of compliance and reduce opportunities for abuse. Third, security concerns, particularly in fragile borderlands such as Myanmar, reinforce the importance of redundancy and resilience in regional integration. Applying a 'willing-and-able' corridor logic, backed by catastrophe and political-risk insurance, provides safeguards against disruptions. Fourth, prioritising maritime and riverine routes ensures trade continuity where overland connections face heightened risks. Fifth, the early adoption of capped, low-value QR-based settlements, harmonised know-your-customer and AML frameworks, and privacy-by-design protocols can ease concerns of both regulators and firms, while laying the foundations for a more robust digital economy across the Bay.

For India, this will entail three notable shifts in foreign economic policy. First, there must be a gradual transition from a reliance on personalities and ad-hoc-ism to a reliance on processes. Second, India will be in a position to hedge against its excessive exposure to China by cultivating thicker ties within the BIMSTEC for trade in manufacturing and services. Third, India can play a crucial role in transforming BIMSTEC from aspirational rhetoric into a performance-managed programme that delivers visible dividends for India's eastern Northeast regions, as well as the neighbouring economies.

Conclusion

BIMSTEC's maturation into a Charter-backed, pillarised institution coincides with a volatile neighbourhood and a fragmenting world economy. India's wish list presented here, therefore, needs to adopt *principled pragmatism* and be timely. The eight-pillar agenda offers a comprehensive strategy to integrate trade, economic growth, and sustainable development. By weaving together hard infrastructure, soft connectivity, sectoral missions, and institutional reforms, it creates synergies between national priorities and regional imperatives. Crucially, the framework embeds SDG concerns within practical policy measures—whether through adaptation finance, blue-economy incubators, or digital trade facilitation. For BIMSTEC, the challenge lies not in identifying priorities but in sustaining political will, mobilising resources, and ensuring delivery. If pursued effectively, the Indian wishlist could transform the Bay of Bengal into a hub of sustainable prosperity, advancing both regional integration and global SDG targets.

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Driving Regional Prosperity: Bangladesh's Approach to Sustainable Growth and Economic Diversification in BIMSTEC

Khondaker Golam Moazzem and Sabiha Sharmin

Economic, environmental, and political challenges at the domestic, regional, and global levels have reignited the need for stronger cooperation among the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries. Indeed, the seven member states have already pursued initiatives such as adopting the BIMSTEC Charter, Bangkok Vision 2030, and the Transport Connectivity Master Plan. Recent summits have emphasised trade facilitation, digital payments, climate action, and energy grid links, yet these measures remain limited amid post-pandemic recovery, geopolitical tensions, climate risks, and internal political instability.

Bangladesh, with a growing industrial base, youthful population, and strategic trade corridors, faces both opportunities and challenges within BIMSTEC. Its trade and investments with other member countries remain limited. India is its largest partner, trading around US$14 billion in FY2025 (1); Bangladesh exports both traditional and non-traditional products to India, while importing essential food, industrial raw materials, machinery, and

finished goods. Thailand ranks second, with trade of US$1.13 billion in 2024, while trade with other BIMSTEC members remains below US$1 billion (2). Most trade occurs via land routes, making improvements in land connectivity and seaport infrastructure critical.
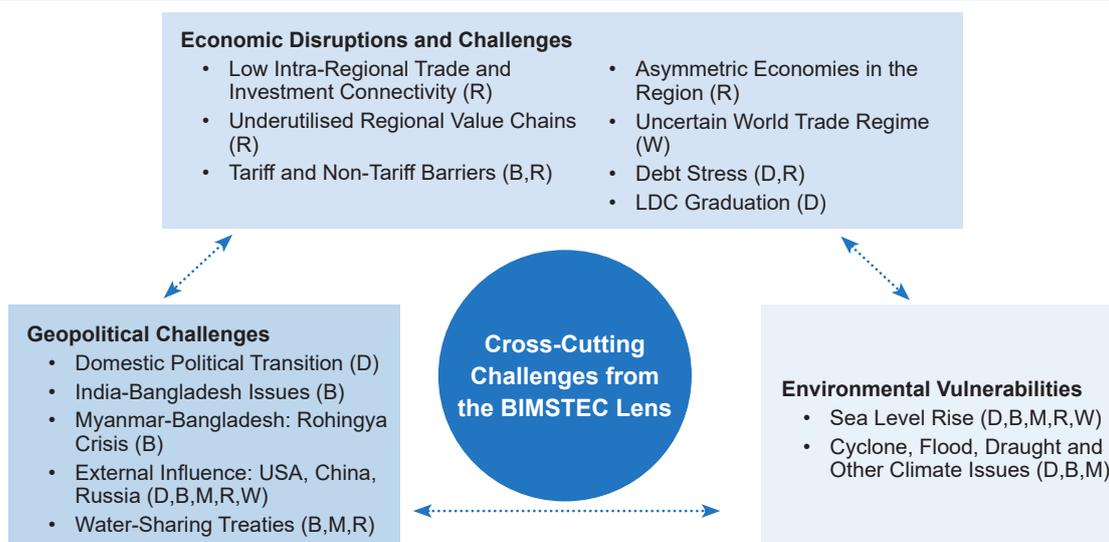
Foreign direct investment (FDI) is similarly concentrated, with India contributing US$647 million (3.4 percent of total stock) in textiles, banking, and energy, and Sri Lanka US$104.13 million, mainly in textiles (3). Investment from other BIMSTEC countries, including Thailand, is limited. China is a key trading partner, supplying raw materials and finished goods, highlighting the need for Bangladesh to balance trade and investment strategies across India, China, and other global partners. As such, BIMSTEC engagement largely remains bilateral.

This essay highlights the long-term sustainability and economic diversification of Bangladesh within the BIMSTEC framework, through the lens of connectivity, with a view to addressing recent economic, environmental, and political uncertainties and risks.

Recent Changes and Challenges in the BIMSTEC Region: Implications for Bangladesh

In recent years, the BIMSTEC region has been confronting multidimensional challenges, which can broadly be grouped under three key umbrellas: (a) economic, (b) environmental, and (c) geopolitical (see Figure 1). These challenges manifest across different levels—global, bilateral, multilateral, and intra-regional—and exert significant influence on the economies of BIMSTEC member states. Importantly, several of these challenges also resonate at the domestic level in Bangladesh, reflecting the interconnected and cross-cutting nature of national, regional, and global vulnerabilities.

Figure 1: Multidimensional Challenges

Economic Disruptions and Challenges
- Low Intra-Regional Trade and Investment Connectivity (R)
- Underutilised Regional Value Chains (R)
- Tariff and Non-Tariff Barriers (B,R)
- Asymmetric Economies in the Region (R)
- Uncertain World Trade Regime (W)
- Debt Stress (D,R)
- LDC Graduation (D)

Cross-Cutting Challenges from the BIMSTEC Lens

Geopolitical Challenges
- Domestic Political Transition (D)
- India-Bangladesh Issues (B)
- Myanmar-Bangladesh: Rohingya Crisis (B)
- External Influence: USA, China, Russia (D,B,M,R,W)
- Water-Sharing Treaties (B,M,R)

Environmental Vulnerabilities
- Sea Level Rise (D,B,M,R,W)
- Cyclone, Flood, Draught and Other Climate Issues (D,B,M)

W: Worldwide Issue
R: Regional Issue
M: Multilateral Issue
B: Bilateral Issue
D: Domestic Issues of Bangladesh

Source: Authors' compilation from various literature

Economic Factors

The macroeconomic state of the BIMSTEC countries reflects a post-pandemic recovery trajectory complicated by global geopolitical tensions, climate vulnerabilities, and internal political challenges.

Sluggish growth and structural divergences within BIMSTEC member states: Several BIMSTEC countries—such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar—have faced sluggish economic growth for over a year, resulting in rising poverty, unemployment, and a contracting job market. Despite their varied economic bases—such as service-driven Thailand and agriculture-focused Bangladesh and Nepal—these structures have fostered competition rather than complementarity, particularly in textiles, garments, leather, and light manufacturing. Economic asymmetry between large members such as India and Thailand and smaller ones such as Bhutan and Nepal raises concerns over market dominance and political leverage, discouraging liberalisation (4). Moreover, China's indirect market influence and extra-regional trade dependencies further limit BIMSTEC's prospects for deeper economic integration.

Global trade uncertainty and rising protectionism: The global trade regime is facing profound uncertainty, spilling over into South and Southeast Asia. The weakening of multilateralism threatens the World Trade Organization's (WTO) rule-based system, while rising protectionism—through tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and trade restrictions—adds volatility (5). Protectionist shifts in the US and trade frictions with China and India further deepen instability. For BIMSTEC members, such trends may lead to inflation and a decline in global imports. Bangladesh currently benefits from US market access, while ongoing talks with India on tariff reductions offer potential relief (6).

Debt distress and risk-aversion in trade commitments: Several BIMSTEC member states are operating under International Monetary Fund-supported programmes, reflecting tightening fiscal and external constraints. Bangladesh reached a reform agreement in 2023, committing to unlock US$4.6 billion in loans for foreign reserves and structural reforms (7). Sri Lanka is in a debt restructuring programme, prompting risk-averse countries to be more cautious about opening markets or making long-term financial commitments.

Debt stress is likely to remain a major challenge for some BIMSTEC countries. Without undertaking economic and financial reforms to reduce public spending, lower dependence on high-cost commercial loans, and increase domestic resource mobilisation through tax system restructuring, the debt distress is likely to continue in the coming decade, including in Bangladesh.

Bilateral tensions between India and Bangladesh under the interim government: Since the interim government assumed power in 2024, India-Bangladesh relations have faced continuous strain. Land-port trade between the two countries has been suspended (8), though trade via Nepal and Bhutan continues, slowing overall bilateral commerce. Visa issuance for Bangladeshi citizens has dropped significantly (9), and several government-to-government projects have been delayed or cancelled (10). Given the current situation, Indian FDI to Bangladesh is also expected to slow. These tensions are likely to exacerbate structural challenges in advancing economic cooperation within the BIMSTEC region.

Navigating least developed country graduation: Bangladesh and Nepal will graduate from the least developed country (LDC) category in November 2026, exposing them to economic asymmetries, non-tariff barriers, and geopolitical frictions. The withdrawal of duty-free, quota-free (DFQF) access after LDC graduation will raise export tariffs, making products from these economies less competitive and reducing trade earnings, particularly in labour-intensive sectors like apparel.

Trade competitiveness will hinge less on preferential treatment and more on policy agility, bilateral diplomacy, and infrastructure resilience (11). Failure to strategically navigate these shifts could slow export diversification, constrain FDI inflows, and heighten regional dependence on transit partners, particularly India (12).

Geopolitical Challenges

The BIMSTEC countries face several domestic, regional, and global geopolitical challenges.

Political transitions in member states: Several BIMSTEC member countries are currently experiencing domestic political unrest and transitions (i.e. Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka). As these countries undergo political transformations, their internal crises divert attention and resources from collective goals, erode trust among member states, and undermine BIMSTEC's effectiveness in addressing regional challenges.

Bangladesh–India relations: While Bangladesh's domestic economy is recovering from a challenging year and efforts are underway to rebuild investor confidence, some bilateral relationships have been strained in the process. Trade tensions have escalated, with India restricting imports of garments and jute via land ports, while Bangladesh halted imports of Indian yarn (13)(14). While India has long regarded Bangladesh as a key ally in South Asia, its latest actions appear severe. Bangladesh's diplomatic shift towards China, coupled with India's strategic concerns, makes it a multilateral problem that needs careful navigation to maintain regional stability and foster cooperative relations among these nations.

Bangladesh–Myanmar bilateral issues over the Rohingya crisis: The Rohingya crisis remains a critical issue in Bangladesh–Myanmar relations. Bangladesh has increasingly leveraged BIMSTEC as a platform to press for recognition and accountability regarding about 180,000 Rohingya refugees within its territory (15). While this represents a shift from bilateral dependency to multilateral assertiveness, incorporating the crisis into BIMSTEC's broader mandate remains essential for regional cooperation.

External power dynamics and BIMSTEC: China's growing influence in certain BIMSTEC member countries, particularly Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal, introduces external dynamics that complicate regional cooperation. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar. China's increasing presence in and across not only the Indian Ocean region but also the Eurasian landmass is a new reality that BIMSTEC countries should view from a fresh perspective beyond traditional narratives (such as the cause of a debt burden).

Transboundary water politics and maritime geopolitics: The Bay of Bengal is the core of BIMSTEC, representing both economic potential and complex geopolitical challenges. Its sea lines of communication are vital for global commerce, carrying 55 percent of container traffic and 33 percent of bulk cargo (16). While disputes between Bangladesh and India and between Bangladesh and Myanmar were resolved through international arbitration, tensions still exist between Myanmar and Thailand (17). New concerns include China's proposed dam projects (18), India's dam plans, Bangladesh's Teesta reservoir, and the absence of renewed bilateral water-sharing agreements between India and Bangladesh (19)(20)(21)..

Maritime connectivity and port development constraints: Port development in the Bay of Bengal faces challenges like inadequate infrastructure, shallow waters, and limited connectivity, particularly in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India. The Chattogram, Sittwe, and Hambantota ports struggle to accommodate large vessels due to insufficient dredging and outdated facilities. This hinders regional trade and integration. Additionally, maritime transport initiatives between Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand have stalled (22).

Environmental Vulnerabilities

The BIMSTEC region contains four of the world's top 10 climate-vulnerable economies: Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (23). These countries share geographical proximity and also common environmental challenges, including climate change, natural disasters, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable resource exploitation (24).

Sea level rise and coastal risks: Five BIMSTEC countries border the Bay of Bengal. They are highly vulnerable to sea level rise due to low-lying coasts and dense coastal populations. Urban areas in Bangladesh and Myanmar face flooding and salinity intrusion, while India's coastal zones risk infrastructure and agricultural losses. Thailand and Sri Lanka experience shoreline erosion and threats to freshwater and ecosystems. Rising seas exacerbate displacement, economic loss, and ecosystem degradation across the region. Coordinated regional strategies for climate adaptation, resilient infrastructure, and sustainable coastal management are crucial to reduce these risks (25).

Cyclones and other natural calamities: Rising ocean temperatures and heat content intensify tropical cyclones, with 80 percent of Northern Indian Ocean storms occurring in the Bay of Bengal. Between 1981 and 2018, 40 percent of severe cyclones became very severe, including 15 extreme events from 2000 to 2018 (26). Bangladesh's densely populated, low-lying coast amplifies climate damage, while vulnerabilities in other BIMSTEC countries—such as Nepal's hydropower disruptions and India's monsoon floods—indirectly affect cross-border electricity trade and goods movement.

Agreements on common rivers of India and Bangladesh: Bangladesh shares 54 rivers with India, including the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna basins, which are vital for agriculture, fisheries, and inland navigation (27). Upstream activities, such as dam releases and sedimentation, can lead to flooding and reduced navigability, disrupting river transport and trade flows (28). These cross-border environmental issues exacerbate the constraints on Bangladesh's trade, investment, and connectivity.

Climatic risks in Nepal and energy import: Nepal's climate and environmental risks spill over to Bangladesh mainly through the energy and value chain linkages (29). Bangladesh has taken concrete steps toward energy imports from Nepal under a tripartite agreement (Bangladesh–Nepal–India), but these flows depend heavily on Nepal's river system stability (30). Glacial melt, erratic monsoon rains, and landslides increase the risk of seasonal power fluctuations or infrastructure damage, making electricity supply less predictable. For instance, in 2024, Nepal experienced severe flooding and landslides that caused significant damage to infrastructure, including hydropower facilities. Such events underscore the environmental risks that can disrupt energy exports to Bangladesh, potentially leading to increased risk premiums for investors and complicating regional value chain linkages.

Sustainable Growth and Economic Diversification of Bangladesh Under the BIMSTEC Framework and Beyond

The challenges the member countries face in terms of economic, political, and environmental issues are challenging to address through the traditional BIMSTEC framework only. While there are multiple trade, connectivity, and energy-related agreements under process through the BIMSTEC platform, the traditional connectivity framework will not be sufficient to capture the broader needs of connectivity within and beyond the region to address uncertainty, risks, and resilience.

Addressing Economic Challenges

Given the growing protectionism across the world, BIMSTEC countries need to work to exploit markets both within and across the region, especially the neighbouring countries. The BIMSTEC economic partnership is primarily focused on traditional free trade agreements (FTAs) and cross-border MVA, which are insufficient to address the challenges posed by global trade protectionism.

Since Bangladesh conducts the bulk of its trade with BIMSTEC countries through India's land ports, the two countries should discuss and resume bilateral land-port trade. The countries are expected to revive bilateral trade and investment relations following Bangladesh's democratic election. Both countries should focus on reducing the bilateral trade deficit by withdrawing tariff and non-tariff barriers on key products. Maritime connectivity between ports in Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand also needs to be accelerated. Additionally, the long-discussed MVA must be completed quickly, as this will increase BIMSTEC-wide trade.

BIMSTEC countries share close geographic links, and so there is strong potential to expand cross-border digital connectivity (31). Bangladesh was one of the first countries to sign the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, and has already introduced several key measures, including automated customs systems, electronic application and issuance of import/export permits, and e-payment of customs duties and fees (32). To fully realise the benefits, Bangladesh should prioritise implementing electronic exchange systems for certificates of origin and sanitary and phytosanitary certificates. Additionally, establishing a recognised certification authority, enabling the electronic exchange of customs declarations, and

adopting paperless payment collection via documentary letters of credit should be expedited to streamline trade processes and reduce transaction costs.

Bangladesh, which imports over 17 percent of its electricity from India, faces supply volatility and geopolitical risks due to its limited bilateral agreements (33). Simply negotiating additional power deals with India, Bhutan, or Myanmar is insufficient unless accompanied by robust regional regulatory harmonisation, modernised transmission infrastructure, and integrated grid planning. The cross-border transmission upgrades, for instance, must be complemented by coordinated disaster resilience, standardised operational protocols, and loss-minimisation technologies to ensure reliable energy flows across the BIMSTEC grid.

Opening a regional electricity grid focused on renewable energy generated in Nepal, Bhutan, India, and Bangladesh could promote regional energy transition. BIMSTEC-level trade would be significantly increased through opening the regional motor vehicle agreement (MVA) initially within the BBIN countries.

BIMSTEC may explore a partnership with China, Japan and Korea, much like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) did under the ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan and Korea) format, with a view to broadening the market in major Asian countries.

A BIMSTEC investment cooperation agreement could help reduce the debt burden for some debt-stressed member states. India should consider Bangladeshi proposals for investment in various sectors. Along with creating investment scope, such an agreement will ensure investments are made after understanding the risks and implementing mitigating measures.

Additionally, given China's massive capital base, technological advancement, and domestic market, BIMSTEC should consider a stronger partnership with China to secure its long-term interests. Partnering with China can help balance the asymmetric markets in the BIMSTEC countries.

Addressing Market Diversification Issues

Since key BIMSTEC countries already engage in regional and bilateral trade agreements, a significant challenge for the BIMSTEC FTA will be to generate additional trade opportunities. Therefore, negotiations should focus on promoting incremental trade within the region, while considering provisions such as sensitive product lists, rules of origin, and regulations on services and investment, to ensure equitable benefits for all members, especially smaller economies.

BIMSTEC may draw examples from ASEAN. To address the challenge of overlapping export profiles, ASEAN has identified sectors of comparative advantage—intensive vs. capital-intensive—and has developed intra-regional supply chains rather than competing in the same segments (34). Key lessons include unilateral tariff reductions, participation in the WTO Information Technology Agreement, and improved border clearance.

ASEAN's experience in managing external shocks, such as those emerging from US-China trade tensions, highlights the importance of regional cooperation in enhancing economic resilience. By strengthening intra-regional trade and investment, ASEAN has mitigated the impact of external disruptions. BIMSTEC can benefit from a similar approach to enhance its resilience against global economic fluctuations.

Bangladesh's potential accession to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade agreement encompassing 15 Asia-Pacific countries, presents a significant opportunity (35)(36). Engaging with RCEP could provide Bangladesh with preferential access to major markets, particularly in East and Southeast Asia, thereby diversifying its export destinations beyond traditional partners.

Additionally, in the case of transport connectivity, as many BIMSTEC countries rely heavily on extra-regional trade, cross-border connectivity should support not only intra-regional trade but also trade with external partners. Therefore, future regional connectivity agreements should allow for the transportation of goods to and from third countries via BIMSTEC routes.

Addressing LDC Graduation-Related Challenges

The BIMSTEC countries graduating from the LDC category need significant investment in their technology, tax systems, compliance systems, and human capital. These countries face challenges in investing in education, healthcare, and climate change adaptation. As Bangladesh approaches LDC graduation, it is focusing on preserving its competitiveness in the European Union (EU) market, its largest export destination. The EU Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus scheme requires ratifying 32 conventions and strict rules of origin, which could cut apparel exports by over 25 percent (37). With the reform deferred to 2027, Bangladesh has a strategic window to negotiate more favourable terms, including flexible rules of origin, extended transition periods, and exemptions from safeguard provisions. Bangladesh should also initiate discussions on FTAs with important trading partners, including China, India, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Addressing Political Issues

Political issues are currently beyond BIMSTEC's purview. However, the BIMSTEC Charter should allow for member states to discuss bilateral/regional political issues. Bilateral tensions between Bangladesh and India, India and Nepal, and Bangladesh and Myanmar should be discussed. A standard frame will be necessary to understand the scope and level of discussion of such political issues.

The Indo-Pacific framework, which is currently promoting non-intervention, free speech, and open regionalism, needs to revisit its scope and agenda and accommodate other key regional partners at the discussion table.

Addressing Environmental and Climatic Challenges

Considering the BIMSTEC region's significant exposure to climate-related hazards, adaptation measures need to move beyond isolated national initiatives and embrace integrated, region-wide strategies (38). National adaptation strategies, though necessary, are insufficient in a region where climate shocks—such as transboundary flooding in India or Nepal, cyclones in the Bay of Bengal, and glacial melt in the Himalayas—directly impact Bangladesh's economy and trade infrastructure.

To move beyond a reactive approach, Bangladesh and its BIMSTEC partners must adopt a proactive, coordinated, and enforceable regional strategy. This entails investing in climate-resilient infrastructure, expanding renewable energy capacity, and strengthening early warning systems. Community-level programmes (local adaptation plans of action) should be linked to regional risk-sharing mechanisms, and standardised cross-border protocols for disaster response, environmental compliance, and infrastructure planning are crucial.

Additionally, in the blue economy, Bangladesh can leverage BIMSTEC FTA provisions to attract FDI in high-value sectors, stimulate innovation, and create employment opportunities, contributing to economic diversification and progress toward middle-income status. By engaging in joint research, technology transfer, and training programmes with resource-rich BIMSTEC members like Thailand, India, and Myanmar, Bangladesh can enhance its expertise in sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, and offshore renewable energy.

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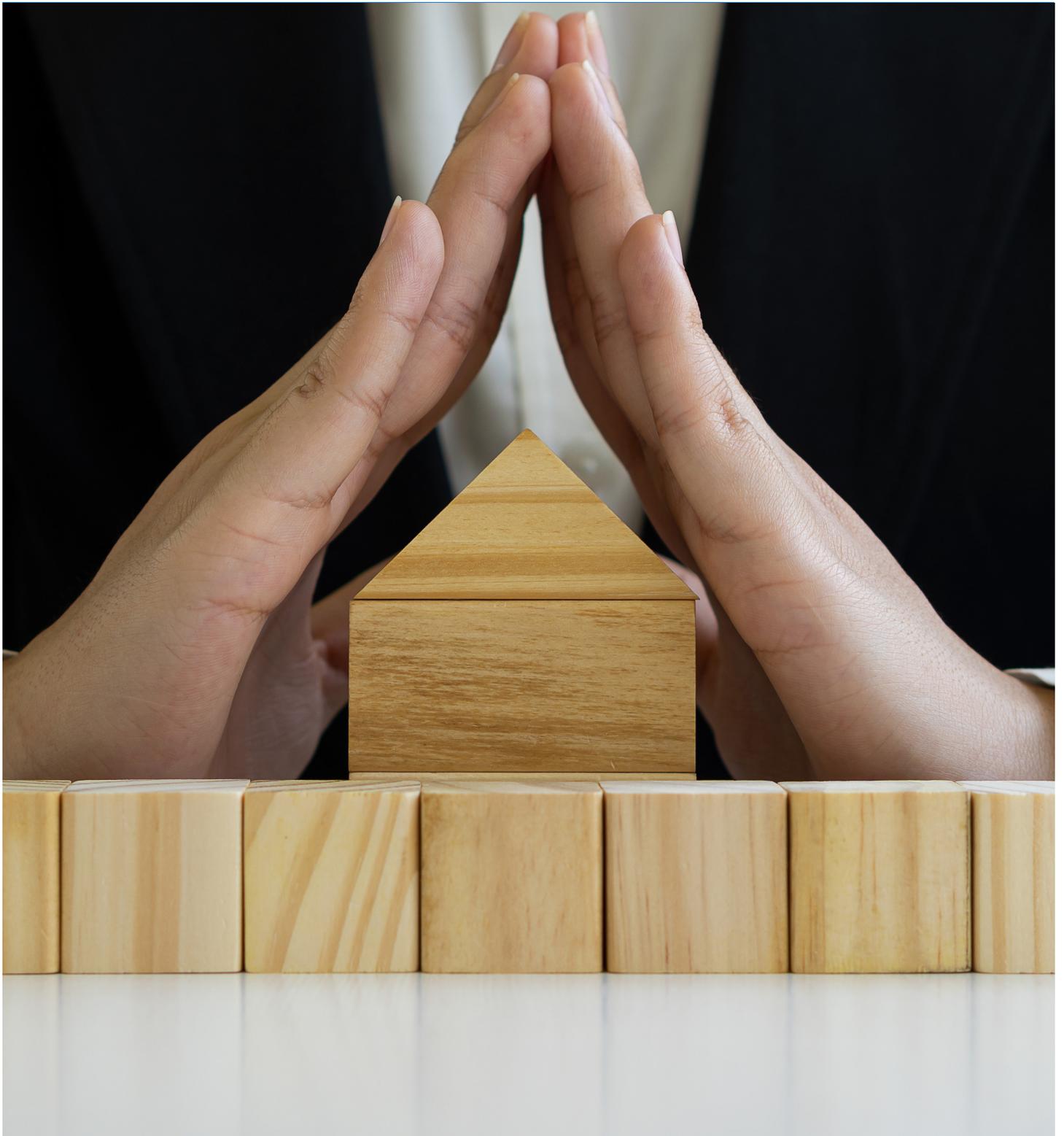
Building Resilience
Considering Non-Traditional Security
Among Member States

From Commitments to Action: BIMSTEC's Challenge in Combating Trafficking

Sreeparna Banerjee

Non-traditional security (NTS) threats are a key concern for regional stability in South and Southeast Asia, particularly across the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) region, which comprises Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. NTS refers to challenges that transcend national borders, are non-military in nature, and often involve societal vulnerabilities. These include climate change, pandemics, natural disasters, energy insecurity, cyber threats, and trafficking. Unlike conventional security threats, NTS issues are challenging to address unilaterally, requiring cooperative and multisectoral responses.

Among the various NTS threats, trafficking in its multiple forms—human, drug, arms, and wildlife—has emerged as a pressing concern in the BIMSTEC region. Porous and open borders, shared coastlines, ethnic linkages across frontiers, and uneven law enforcement mechanisms make the area particularly vulnerable to transnational trafficking networks (1).

These networks undermine governance and the rule of law, intersecting with broader development and human security concerns, including forced migration, public health, and conflict dynamics.

Trafficking in the BIMSTEC Region

Trafficking in the Bay of Bengal region is part of a broader illicit economy shaped by porous borders, vast coastlines, uneven governance capacity, and persistent instability. These vulnerabilities create permissive conditions for organised crime, allowing human trafficking and drug smuggling to reinforce each other across land and maritime routes.

Drugs: Drug trafficking has emerged as a central driver of insecurity. The BIMSTEC region sits between the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent (2), making it highly exposed to narcotics flows. Myanmar's Shan State remains the epicentre of synthetic drug production, with 236 tonnes of methamphetamine seized across East and Southeast Asia in 2024—a record high and a 24 percent increase from 2023 (3).

These narcotics flow into Thailand, Bangladesh, and India's Northeast before dispersing further into Nepal and Sri Lanka, often through maritime routes. Bangladesh, positioned along the Teknaf–Cox's Bazar corridor, has become South Asia's largest market for methamphetamine tablets (yaba), with seizures running into millions of tablets annually, including a 460,000-tablet haul from a trawler in August 2025 (4). India seized 216 kg of methamphetamine, 108 kg of cocaine, 50 kg of heroin, and more than 7,400 kg of ganja in early 2025, alongside a 6,000 kg methamphetamine bust in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in late 2024 (5), where traffickers used Starlink-enabled boats to evade detection. Sri Lanka, too, remains a key maritime transit hub, with its Operation Yukthiya intensifying seizures but raising human rights concerns due to mass arrests (6).

Traditional narcotics remain a major challenge. Myanmar's opium cultivation—while down slightly from 47,100 hectares in 2023 to 45,200 hectares in 2024—continues to produce nearly 995 tonnes, with an estimated 52 tonnes to 140 tonnes of heroin derived annually, despite the modest contraction in planting area (7). Poppy cultivation has shifted spatially, with Chin and Kayah States reporting an increase in planting despite a national decline (8). The proceeds of this illicit trade finance ethnic armed organisations and insurgent militias, fuelling further instability (9).

Emerging Trends in Human Trafficking: Human trafficking in the Bay of Bengal region has become increasingly sophisticated and networked, with forced labour, sexual exploitation, and the rise of cyber scam slavery. For instance, about 300,000 individuals—many young, educated people from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh—are reportedly confined in scam compounds in Myanmar's Myawaddy region after being deceived by fake job offers in Thailand and the Gulf (10). These operations thrive in conditions of corruption and weak law enforcement, often with the collusion of local officials, business interests, and non-state armed actors.

Conventional trafficking targeting vulnerable populations also persists. Nearly 79 percent of trafficked women and girls in South and Southeast Asia are exploited for forced labour, with about one-third subjected to sexual exploitation (11).

This convergence of human trafficking with narcotics smuggling and cyber-enabled crimes underlines the need for BIMSTEC to adopt an integrated response, emphasising intelligence-sharing, harmonised enforcement practices, and coordinated cross-border rescue and rehabilitation efforts.

Trafficking Routes in the BIMSTEC Region

Human trafficking is pervasive across the BIMSTEC region, with member states experiencing either source, transit, or destination pressures. In South Asia, the India–Bangladesh–West Asia corridor is particularly notorious—Bangladeshi women and children are often trafficked across porous land borders into India and subsequently sent to the Gulf states, with the Dhaka–Mumbai–Karachi–Dubai route functioning as a significant channel (12). Similarly, the Indo–Nepal open border, which allows visa-free movement, facilitates the large-scale trafficking of Nepali women and girls into Indian brothels (13). From there, many victims are transported to Southeast Asia or West Asia. Myanmar is central to trafficking flows, with routes leading eastward into Thailand, where men, women, and children are exploited in industries such as fishing, construction, and sex work, and northward into China, where women are sold into forced marriages. The plight of the Rohingya has further complicated the picture: these displaced people in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar are highly vulnerable, with traffickers moving them into India, Malaysia, or other destinations under exploitative circumstances (14).

Drug trafficking in the region is equally entrenched. Myanmar, one of the world's leading producers of methamphetamine and heroin, remains the epicentre of narcotics flows in the Bay of Bengal subregion. The Shan and Wa States host large-scale production facilities for yaba and crystalline methamphetamine, which are smuggled into India through the porous borders of Manipur and Mizoram, and into Bangladesh across the Naf River (15). Maritime routes originating from Myanmar's coastal ports in the Rakhine and Tanintharyi States are increasingly important, allowing traffickers to move narcotics southwards to Malaysia, Indonesia, and beyond, and westwards into South Asia, including India and Sri Lanka. The India–Bangladesh border also remains a hotspot for illicit flows. Indian-produced phensedyl cough syrup, banned in Bangladesh, is smuggled in significant quantities, while yaba pills produced in Myanmar enter eastern India via Bangladesh (16). Nepal, though not a major producer, has become an important transit hub for cocaine, mainly due to its location and the limited surveillance at Kathmandu airport (17). The Free Movement Regime (18) has allowed cross-border ethnic communities along the India–Myanmar border to travel freely, but has also been misused for human, arms, and narcotics smuggling (19). Meanwhile, Bhutan has remained relatively insulated, facing only limited trafficking of pharmaceuticals and small arms through its southern borders with India.

National and Bilateral Mechanisms

Several BIMSTEC member states have developed national frameworks to combat trafficking, though with varying levels of effectiveness. In India, the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act addresses trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation, while the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita include provisions for prosecuting broader forms of trafficking, including forced labour, slavery, and organ removal, as well as organised and transnational crime, and enhanced protections for victims, particularly women and children (20). Narcotics-related crimes are addressed under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, which criminalises the production, possession, and trafficking of drugs and precursors. Complementing the legal framework are institutional mechanisms, such as Anti-Human Trafficking Units, the Narcotics Control Bureau, and the multi-agency Narcotics Coordination Centre, all of which focus on intelligence sharing and enforcement. Together, these measures allow India to respond more effectively to evolving forms of trafficking, including cyber-enabled and cross-border crimes.

Bilaterally, India's cooperation with Bangladesh through the Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation, and Integration Task Force provides an institutionalised mechanism for victim repatriation and joint crackdowns (21). India has a similar agreement with Myanmar, signed in 2019. However, the toppling of the civilian government made it problematic for the military government to honour the deal and its clauses (22). India engages with Myanmar through its 2014 Border Cooperation Agreement, which facilitates joint patrols and information-sharing on narcotics and arms smuggling. With Nepal, India shares an open border and has developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) for tackling human trafficking. Nepali trafficking victims are routinely rescued in India and repatriated through government-NGO coordination (23). With Thailand, coordination occurs largely under regional mechanisms such as the Colombo Process (24) and BIMSTEC itself, though ad hoc intelligence-sharing and police-to-police cooperation have been used in cases involving trafficked Indian nationals routed through Thailand to third countries (25).

Bangladesh has established one of the most comprehensive legal frameworks in the region, with the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (2012) criminalising all forms of trafficking and prescribing severe penalties (26). Similarly, the Narcotics Control Act (2018) provides a robust legal basis for drug enforcement (27). Bangladesh's bilateral cooperation with India remains central to its counter-trafficking efforts, while its engagement with Myanmar has been limited due to strained relations following the Rohingya crisis (28). Despite these constraints, Bangladesh has taken proactive steps, including community-based awareness campaigns in border regions and public campaigns against drug use.

Nepal has enacted the Human Trafficking and Transportation Control Act (2007), supported by the Narcotic Drugs Control Act (1976) (29). Its open border with India necessitates close collaboration with Indian authorities, and the two countries regularly engage in joint patrols and information exchanges. Nepal has also signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with India on Drug Demand Reduction and Preventing Illicit Trafficking (2017), providing a framework for cooperation on narcotics (30). Despite these initiatives, enforcement remains weak due to resource constraints and corruption.

Although it is comparatively less affected by trafficking, Bhutan recognises its vulnerabilities. Human trafficking is criminalised under amendments to the penal code, and the Narcotic Drugs Psychotropic Substances and Substance Abuse Act (2015) governs drug-related offences (31). Bhutan works closely with India under a 2009 MoU on narcotics control, and conducts regular border coordination meetings to share intelligence and conduct joint operations (32).

Despite being at the centre of trafficking routes, Myanmar's enforcement capacity has weakened since the 2021 coup. While anti-trafficking laws and border liaison offices exist on paper, their implementation has been undermined by political instability and conflict. Nevertheless, Myanmar continues to cooperate with Thailand on trafficking and labour migration, though its relationships with Bangladesh or India remain strained at times (33).

Thailand has strengthened its anti-trafficking framework through the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (2008), which criminalises all forms of trafficking and provides for victim protection and compensation. The police force has dedicated anti-people trafficking divisions, supported by national action plans aligned with the Palermo Protocol (34) (35) . Thailand is also a frontline state in counter-narcotics efforts in the region, given its proximity to Myanmar's Shan State and the Golden Triangle. It has ramped up seizures of methamphetamine and precursor chemicals, enhanced cross-border intelligence-sharing with Myanmar and Laos through joint task forces, and cooperates with India and Bangladesh under BIMSTEC and Mekong mechanisms to coordinate rescue, repatriation, and interdiction operations.

Some member governments have already taken steps to address these emerging threats. India has launched coordinated rescue operations, bringing back nationals trapped in cyber scam compounds in Myanmar and Cambodia (36). Bangladesh has expanded its victim repatriation mechanisms in cooperation with India (37), while Nepal has strengthened airport surveillance and issued renewed travel advisories to prevent citizens from falling prey to fraudulent recruitment and trafficking networks in countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand (38). At the broader regional level, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has initiated dialogues on cyber scam trafficking, offering an opportunity for BIMSTEC to learn from and possibly align with these measures, creating a stronger inter-regional front against the evolving nature of human trafficking.

Multilateral BIMSTEC Frameworks

At the multilateral level, BIMSTEC has steadily developed an institutional framework to address trafficking as part of its broader security agenda. The BIMSTEC Charter, which entered into force in May 2024, granted the organisation legal personality and codified seven priority sectors, with India given leadership over the security pillar (39). This significantly elevated security into a core operational domain. Security within BIMSTEC now encompasses counterterrorism, transnational crime, and disaster management, ensuring that issues such as trafficking are central to regional cooperation.

The process of institution-building, however, began much earlier. The BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime, and Illicit Drug Trafficking, signed in 2009, entered into force in 2021 after years of delayed ratification. It provides a comprehensive foundation for regional collaboration, including provisions for extradition, mutual legal assistance, and the sharing of intelligence. Complementing this legal framework is the BIMSTEC Sub-Group on Prevention of Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and Precursor Chemicals, established in 2005, which serves as a technical and operational arm. Through data exchange, capacity building, and regular coordination, it provides the practical means for addressing cross-border narcotics trafficking.

Notably, the 2009 Convention initially overlooked human trafficking. To address this, the 7th Meeting of the Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime in 2015 agreed to establish a dedicated Sub-Group on Human Trafficking. Progress has been consistent, but gradual. The third meeting of the sub-group in April 2025 focused on implementing the Plan of Action to Combat Human Trafficking in the Bay of Bengal Region, developing a secure digital platform for cooperation, and drafting SOPs for the rescue and repatriation of trafficked persons. Meanwhile, the Sub-Group on Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances continues to deliberate on curbing synthetic drug production and trafficking.

Institutional innovations have further reinforced these initiatives. The Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, signed in 2022, provides a formal framework for cross-border investigations and prosecutions. The 2025 MoU between BIMSTEC and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) aligns the grouping's mechanisms with international best practices. In parallel, BIMSTEC's national security advisers, who met annually until 2019 and resumed in 2024, have consistently emphasised the urgency of establishing institutionalised mechanisms for real-time intelligence sharing and joint enforcement.

Challenges and Implementation Gaps

Despite important advances, significant challenges continue to weaken BIMSTEC's ability to combat trafficking and related crimes effectively. Porous, open, and largely unfenced borders remain a significant vulnerability, allowing traffickers to exploit unguarded stretches along the India–Bangladesh, India–Myanmar, India–Nepal, and Bangladesh–Myanmar frontiers. Maritime routes add another layer of complexity. Sri Lanka, positioned at the centre of key Indian Ocean shipping lanes, functions as both a source and transit country (40). Thailand presents a dual challenge: it is a destination for trafficked persons from Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal— particularly as labour in fishing, construction, and domestic work—while also serving as a transit hub. Recent cyber scam slavery cases underscore how Thailand's busy ports, airports, and porous borders are being exploited by organised crime networks, including those engaged in drug trafficking. Indeed, Thailand is also a frontline state in counter-narcotics efforts, regularly seizing record volumes of methamphetamine tablets flowing from Shan State into the region. Still, the sheer scale of production continues to overwhelm enforcement efforts.

Political and operational barriers remain significant. Intelligence-sharing, while recognised as vital, is limited by mistrust and the absence of a centralised BIMSTEC intelligence database. Myanmar's political instability has impacted its enforcement capacity, leaving its territory a hub for drug production, human trafficking, and cyber scams, and complicating cross-border coordination for neighbours. Smaller states, such as Nepal and Bhutan, face resource shortages, with enforcement agencies having limited workforce, technology, and training, which hinders their ability to monitor flows consistently.

Corruption and official complicity further undermine enforcement, with reports of border guards and local authorities colluding with traffickers (41). Even in countries with robust legal frameworks, such as India and Bangladesh, conviction rates remain low due to poor investigations, weak evidence gathering, no witness protection and lengthy judicial processes. Victim protection mechanisms are patchy, and reintegration programmes are underfunded, leaving survivors vulnerable to re-trafficking.

At the multilateral level, BIMSTEC's institutional architecture has not kept pace with its ambitions. Conventions and sub-groups often see slow and uneven ground-level action. Operational coordination is voluntary, and security initiatives frequently compete with economic and connectivity priorities for resources (42).

Additionally, structural constraints also hinder effective action. The BIMSTEC Secretariat remains underfunded and understaffed, which limits its ability to follow up on summit decisions and drive sustained implementation (43). Political will is inconsistent; larger states often prioritise other forums, while smaller ones lack the resources to champion BIMSTEC initiatives (44). Ongoing regional tensions also complicate security cooperation (for instance, reluctance to confront Myanmar's military junta has limited BIMSTEC's unity on issues like terrorism or human trafficking) (45).

Institutional Challenges and Member-State Perceptions

BIMSTEC has increasingly recognised trafficking as a core NTS threat, but its institutional response has struggled to keep pace with the scale of the problem. The Sub-Group on Legal and Law Enforcement Issues, established in 2004, has been tasked with drafting key security instruments. Its landmark outcome—the 2009 Convention on Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking—only came into force in 2021 after years of ratification delays, leaving the region without a functioning legal framework at a time when trafficking networks were rapidly consolidating. More recently, the Sub-Group finalised the BIMSTEC Convention Against Trafficking in Persons in June 2023, a long-overdue response to growing exploitation across the Bay of Bengal. However, other crucial instruments, such as the Convention on Extradition and the Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, remain stuck in negotiations. For India and Bangladesh—both at the frontlines of trafficking flows—such delays are a source of frustration as they prevent timely cooperation in prosecuting traffickers or securing victim repatriation.

Beyond law-making, BIMSTEC's ambitions have often exceeded its implementation capacity. The Expert Group on Space Security has never convened, the proposed home ministers' meeting has not taken place, and the Expert Group on Cybersecurity, although more active, has met only twice. Its 2025 session produced a five-year action plan, a framework for Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT)-to-CERT cooperation, and proposals for countering cybercrime, but these remain in the early stages of operationalisation (46). On the ground, there has been little consistency in joint activity. No regular naval or border enforcement exercises have followed, even though such efforts could have directly targeted trafficking networks operating across land and maritime routes (47) (48). This lack of operational depth has shaped the perceptions of member states. India, as the leader of the security pillar, has repeatedly pressed for more regularised joint exercises and real-time intelligence sharing to combat trafficking syndicates. Bangladesh, which faces acute trafficking pressures linked to the Rohingya crisis and its role as a transit hub, has sought stronger BIMSTEC-backed mechanisms on victim protection and repatriation, but progress has been slow.

Other member states approach these shortcomings differently. Nepal and Bhutan, with limited enforcement resources, still value the incremental advances of BIMSTEC (49). For them, even a draft trafficking convention or sporadic capacity-building programme adds applicable supplements to bilateral arrangements with India. Myanmar, however, remains the weakest link. Once an active participant, its domestic instability has impacted its enforcement capacity, leaving it a source and host of trafficking activity. While formally supportive of BIMSTEC's initiatives, Myanmar's reluctance or inability to advance commitments—especially amid its ongoing political turmoil—has increasingly frustrated its BIMSTEC partners. India has sought decisive action in many bilateral and multilateral fora (50), while Bangladesh has made repeated appeals for regional support to stem the security and humanitarian consequences of Myanmar's instability (51).

Taken together, these institutional challenges and varied perceptions illustrate why trafficking has become the litmus test for BIMSTEC's security credibility. The organisation has developed legal frameworks, expert groups, and sub-groups that signal intent, yet delays in ratification, weak operational follow-through, and uneven participation continue to undermine outcomes.

The Way Forward

To address trafficking more effectively within the BIMSTEC framework, member states must move beyond fragmented national and bilateral responses to embrace stronger regional coordination. Operationalising BIMSTEC's conventions by harmonising national laws will help align legal frameworks and ensure consistency across the region. Establishing a regional intelligence centre under BIMSTEC could facilitate the sharing of real-time data on trafficking networks and routes. The creation of joint operations and regional task forces could provide enforcement mechanisms that transcend national jurisdictions.

Maritime cooperation must also be prioritised, given the growing importance of the Bay of Bengal as a trafficking corridor. BIMSTEC should incorporate coastal surveillance and naval interdiction into its security agenda, leveraging joint patrols and regional monitoring mechanisms. Capacity-

building programmes under the BIMSTEC–UNODC partnership could help enhance the skills and technological capabilities of border and law enforcement agencies. Victim-centric policies are equally essential, and BIMSTEC should consider developing a regional framework for victim protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration to ensure consistent standards across member states. Crucially, adequate and sustainable funding, mobilised through member states and multilateral partnerships, is essential to support enforcement, capacity-building, technology upgrades, and victim assistance. Finally, community engagement at the grassroots level can serve as a crucial complement to state-led enforcement. Cross-border communities, particularly those in vulnerable areas, must be integrated into broader counter-trafficking strategies.

Trafficking in persons and narcotics remains one of the most urgent non-traditional security challenges facing BIMSTEC. While member nations have taken measures through national laws and bilateral agreements, the transnational character of trafficking requires a more robust and coordinated regional response. BIMSTEC has established a legal and institutional framework, but its effectiveness depends on turning these frameworks into real-time intelligence sharing, joint operations, and victim-centred approaches. Member-state perspectives—shaped by their unique vulnerabilities and priorities—will continue to influence the pace and scope of cooperation. Bridging the gap between intention and action is essential if BIMSTEC is to be recognised as a credible regional security actor.

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Nature, Nations, and Nourishment: Reframing Food Security in BIMSTEC

Shoba Suri

Food security—defined as the state of having consistent and reliable access to enough affordable, safe, and nutritious food (1) —remains a pressing challenge for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) region. The regional grouping is home to 1.8 billion people (approximately 22 percent of the global population) and has a combined GDP of US$3.6 trillion. Despite its economic and demographic heft, food insecurity persists across the BIMSTEC countries (2).

The drivers of this insecurity are multiple and intersecting. Climate-induced disruptions, such as floods in Bangladesh and droughts in India, have destabilised food production. At the same time, socioeconomic barriers, such as poverty and gender inequality, continue to limit access to nutritious food, particularly in rural communities of Myanmar and Nepal. The ecological foundations of the region—monsoons, mountains, mangroves, and marine systems—have long evolved alongside human systems, shaping agrarian livelihoods and food cultures (3). These environmental

resources, which have historically provided the BIMSTEC countries with ecological capital to ensure nourishment through nutrition-sensitive food systems, remain critical for building resilient agri-food futures aligned with goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), zero hunger.

Over the years, BIMSTEC has positioned itself as a vital sub-regional forum linking South and Southeast Asia. Its member states have repeatedly affirmed their commitment to achieving SDG-2. Yet, the paradox persists. Despite rich biodiversity and substantial natural resource bases, large segments of their populations remain food insecure and nutritionally vulnerable. High stunting rates in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, coupled with maternal anaemia affecting half of all women in India and one-third across much of the bloc, highlight persistent deficiencies (4). Furthermore, evolving climate-induced hazards—such as salinity ingress in coastal Bangladesh, sea level rise, erratic monsoons in the Indo-Gangetic Plains, and an increased frequency of cyclones in the Bay of Bengal region—threaten yield stability and fishery livelihoods. Compounding these challenges, intra-BIMSTEC agricultural trade also remains limited, constituting a mere 10.5 percent of global agricultural trade, indicating unrealised market integration and opportunities for collaboration on food security challenges (5).

Notably, BIMSTEC's institutional architecture offers potential for cooperation. Since its establishment in 1997, agriculture and food security have featured prominently on the organisation's agenda, with Myanmar designated as the lead country for this sector since the 5th Summit in 2021 (6). Recent initiatives, such as India hosting the 2022 Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture that promoted millets and regional agricultural transformation, as well as commitments like the 2023–2027 Plan of Action and India's proposed Centre of Excellence for Agricultural Cooperation, underscore a growing recognition of the importance of shared learning, sustainable innovation, and cross-border resource management (7).

Yet, despite these advances, existing approaches remain confined to immediate production and distribution concerns. A more detailed framing of food security is required, one that interlinks ecological sustainability (nature), institutional cooperation (nations), and equitable nutrition (nourishment). Such an integrated framework is essential for addressing the regional challenges, including climate change, population growth, and economic disparities.

BIMSTEC: Nutrition Progress, Food Insecurity, and Environmental Concerns

The nutrition profile of the BIMSTEC region reveals both progress and persistent challenges (8). Figure 1 illustrates the prevalence of malnutrition among children under five across member states. Stunting remains highest in India (32 percent), closely followed by Bangladesh and Nepal (27 percent and 26 percent, respectively), then Myanmar (24 percent), Bhutan (23 percent), and Sri Lanka (16 percent). Thailand has the lowest prevalence at 12 percent. Although stunting has decreased in recent years, performance is uneven across the bloc. Only Bangladesh and Thailand appear on track to meet the global target of reducing stunting by 40 percent among children under five, while India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have made only partial progress (9).

Figure 1: Incidence of Stunting, Wasting, and Overweight in Under-Five Children (in percent)
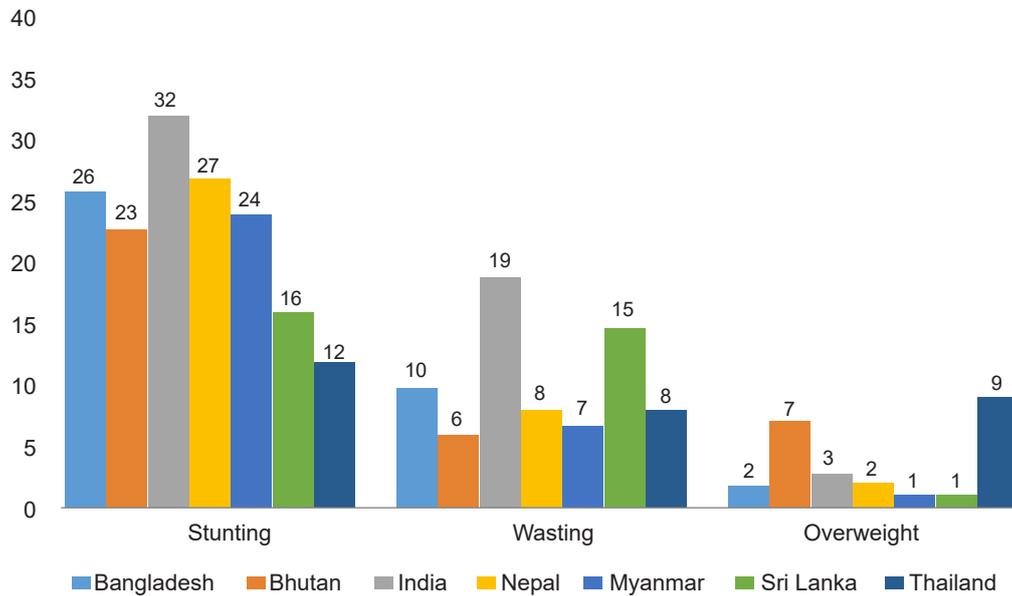
Source: UNICEF (10).

Maternal malnutrition further compounds this burden. Figure 2 shows that anaemia among women aged 15-49 years remains alarmingly high, with India recording the highest prevalence (53 percent), followed by Myanmar (42 percent) and Bhutan (39 percent). Roughly one in three women in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal is also anaemic. These trends perpetuate an intergenerational cycle of poverty and hunger. Adolescent pregnancies are further associated with higher risks of stillbirths and neonatal mortality. Maternal undernutrition and anaemia contribute to low birth weight and subsequent stunting or wasting in children (11). Meanwhile, underweight prevalence among women varies sharply, from 5 percent in Thailand to 19 percent in India (12). The provision of maternity benefits is thus essential, not only to safeguard women's health and nutrition but also to ensure successful exclusive breastfeeding practices.

Figure 2: Prevalence of Malnutrition Among Women
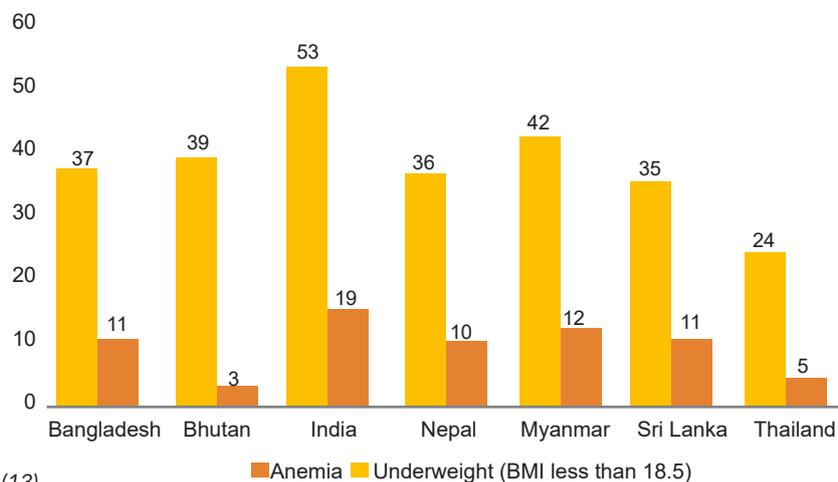
Source: UNICEF (13).

Food insecurity in BIMSTEC cannot be understood without situating nutrition outcomes within the broader socioeconomic context. Poverty remains a significant determinant, with most of the region's poor living in rural areas and lacking adequate access to education, healthcare, and clean water. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 36 percent of the world's extreme poor were estimated to live in South Asia, with several BIMSTEC members having high poverty rates: Nepal (~25 percent), India (~22 percent), Bangladesh (~18 percent), and Myanmar (~17 percent) (14). The pandemic has exacerbated these vulnerabilities, intensifying rural underemployment, low per-capita GDP, and unequal access to services. This is mirrored in nutrition outcomes, with BIMSTEC countries carrying a disproportionate share of Asia's hunger burden. In 2024, more than half (51 percent) of the world's under-five stunted children lived in Asia, with significant numbers concentrated in BIMSTEC nations (15).

Most BIMSTEC economies are agrarian and labour-intensive, but agricultural performance differs widely across geographies. Cropping systems feature staples such as rice, maize, pulses, sugarcane, and wheat, with yields heavily dependent on irrigation access, inputs, and technology adoption. While Nepal and Bhutan's Himalayan systems support resilient crops like millets, ongoing deforestation in Myanmar (546,000 ha annually) threatens vital genetic resources for rice varieties (16). Bangladesh is a success story in this case, having tripled rice production through the adoption of high-yield varieties and sophisticated irrigation systems (17). In contrast, other members remain dependent on imports or food aid for staples (18).

Climate change threatens to erode these fragile gains; sea levels are projected to rise by 0.5–1 meter by 2100, which could submerge 40 percent of Bangladesh's arable land, displacing seven million coastal farmers (19). Erratic monsoons, which sustain 60 percent of India's rain-fed agriculture, have already reduced rice yields by between 5 percent to 10 percent in recent years. These vulnerabilities underscore the urgency of climate adaptation (20).

Local innovations demonstrate pathways toward resilience. Bangladesh's floating gardens allow vegetable production during floods, while Thailand's organic rice farming offers scalable models for sustainable agriculture (21). Such initiatives highlight the potential for a shared BIMSTEC environmental strategy, including joint water management and biodiversity conservation, to reinforce regional food security.

National Policies and Regional Collaboration

National policy approaches to food security vary widely across BIMSTEC members, reflecting differences in institutional capacity, agricultural systems, and political priorities.

In India, the National Food Security Act (2013) provides subsidised grains to 813 million people (approximately 67 percent of the population) (22). Yet, inefficiencies in distribution and leakages remain persistent challenges, undermining its effectiveness. Among the BIMSTEC nations, Bangladesh, India, and Thailand are rice exporters, collectively accounting for 37 percent of global rice exports, underpinned by extensive subsidy regimes that support domestic farmers (23). In contrast, Myanmar's weak rural infrastructure restricts market access for nearly 70 percent

of farmers, while Nepal's mountainous terrain limits food distribution and raises costs (24). Sri Lanka's short-lived 2021 policy of transitioning abruptly to organic farming led to a 20 percent drop in crop yields, illustrating the risks of poorly sequenced reforms (25).

At the regional level, BIMSTEC has increasingly prioritised agriculture and food security. However, intra-regional agricultural trade remains modest, constrained by tariffs, logistics, and regulatory mismatches (26). Some bilateral efforts have been promising—for example, the India-Bangladesh rice trade agreements that support food security in crises (like floods), while Bhutan-Thailand exchanges in organic farming have promoted sustainable practices (27). Looking ahead, the establishment of the proposed BIMSTEC Food Security Task Force could provide a mechanism to effectively harmonise food standards, lower tariffs, and promote technology-sharing. Successful national-level innovations, such as India's Soil Health Card system, which has already benefitted 100 million farmers, could be adapted across the bloc (28). Still, barriers remain, including political tensions (such as India–Myanmar border challenges), funding shortages, and limited institutional capacity.

Nourishment: Uniting Efforts for Food Security

The BIMSTEC framework serves as a vital platform for connecting South and Southeast Asia to enhance economic cooperation, driven by members' shared goals of growth, development, trade, and technology (29). However, economic downturns lead to higher unemployment, reduced incomes, and greater challenges for the poor in accessing food and essential social services. Additionally, the rising cost of nutritious, high-quality meals exacerbates malnutrition, leaving 1.9 billion people in Asia unable to afford a healthy diet (30).

Policies and resilience measures are critical to mitigate the decline in purchasing power caused by economic downturns, protecting the food security of those affected by economic shocks (31). For example, trade policies can enhance the availability of and demand for nutritious foods, significantly improving nutritional outcomes in food-insecure regions. However, trade policies often worsen malnutrition because they rarely prioritise nutritional outcomes or healthy diets. For instance, foreign direct investment in food processing drives higher consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, contributing to a global rise in overweight and obesity rates (32).

A multi-sectoral strategy is essential to tackle the social inequalities perpetuated by global economic trends and to guarantee fair access to nutrient-rich diets. Physical food accessibility is vital; specifically, by boosting the productivity of disadvantaged farmers, food production and availability for the poor across the country can be enhanced.[33] Complementary long-term investments in social protection mechanisms, job creation programmes, support for low-income farmers, and rural development efforts are also crucial to shield vulnerable groups from economic shocks and ensure that the most impoverished populations can obtain nutrient-dense foods (34).

Alongside essential government-level changes to achieve the SDGs, community-led initiatives play a vital role in addressing global food insecurity. Studies show that community-driven efforts, such as home gardens promoting entrepreneurship and rural development, not only generate income

but also enhance livelihoods and improve household economic well-being, proving transformative (35). Research from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Indian states of Odisha and Gujarat indicates that families with kitchen gardens have greater diversity and quantity of fruits and vegetables, as well as improved livelihoods (36). Similarly, school gardens in Nepal and Bhutan have positively influenced children's food preferences, fostering better health and nutrition habits (37).

Solutions rooted in equity can help close these gaps, like India's Anganwadi program, which provides nutrition to 80 million beneficiaries annually through 1.4 million frontline workers (*Anganwadi* workers) (38). Empowering women farmers is particularly powerful, as "if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30 percent, potentially resulting in 100-150 million fewer hungry people in the world" (39). Bhutan is addressing youth disengagement by training 10,000 young farmers annually (40). Sri Lanka's rice fortification pilot has reduced micronutrient malnutrition by 15 percent among adolescents, while Bangladesh's school feeding programme, covering three million children, has improved both nutrition and school attendance (41).

Several countries have also sought to transform agricultural systems beyond rice monoculture. Bangladesh's Crop Diversification Programme, launched in the 1990s, has improved rural nutrition, created employment opportunities, and enhanced soil health by promoting alternative non-rice crops (42). Similarly, India's investments in natural farming and organic methods underscore a recognition of the need to balance yields with long-term soil fertility and climate resilience (43). Integrated mangrove-rice-fish systems in coastal areas represent another example of food system innovation rooted in ecological sustainability (44).

Toward a Sustainable Future: Innovations and Strategies

Building sustainable and equitable food systems will require a cohesive strategy that integrates innovation, regional collaboration, inclusive institutions, and strong social protection mechanisms. Such a multidimensional approach is indispensable for addressing the dual objectives of enhancing agricultural productivity and ensuring equitable access to nutritious food.

Innovations Driving Agricultural Transformation

Technological and ecological innovations are reshaping agriculture across the bloc. In India's Punjab, precision agriculture tools such as drones and Internet of Things sensors have boosted crop yields by 15 percent while reducing input waste (45). Bangladesh's adoption of genetically modified crops, such as Bt brinjal, has benefited 65,000 farmers by improving pest resistance and reducing pesticide use (46). India's zero-tillage techniques, adopted by over five million farmers, have helped save water and reduce greenhouse gas emissions (47). Bhutan's ambitious commitment to transitioning towards 100 percent organic farming reflects its ecological values, though scalability challenges remain (48). These diverse innovations illustrate how BIMSTEC countries can integrate technology and sustainability to strengthen food security.

India's Namo Drone Didi scheme, which trains women-led teams in drone-based crop monitoring, illustrates a deliberate shift toward balancing productivity with ecological sustainability (49). Sri Lanka, meanwhile, demonstrates the role of digital innovation in a smaller agrarian economy through mobile platforms such as Govi Mithuru, providing farmers with tailored advice on pest management, soil health, and nutrition (50). These communication technology-based approaches have mitigated food shortages during climate shocks and offer scalable models for other BIMSTEC members, particularly in states with high mobile penetration, such as Bangladesh and India.

Inclusive Institutions and Social Protection

Food security depends not only on production but also on equitable access. Bangladesh exemplifies this dynamic by demonstrating that higher output alone is insufficient without robust safety nets. Programmes like the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) scheme and rice subsidies have proven to be critical, especially during COVID-19, though targeting and funding challenges persist (51). Community-based initiatives (such as school meals, public food distribution, and localised food banks) proved vital in cushioning vulnerable households during crises. In this case, regional knowledge-sharing can play a transformative role., India's nutrition-sensitive agriculture training programmes, for example, can be adapted across the region, which could help align BIMSTEC strategies and strengthen nutrition policies (52).

Community-Based Interventions: School Meal Schemes and Safety Nets

School meal programmes improve both nutrition and education outcomes. India's mid-day meal scheme (PM Poshan Scheme), one of the world's largest, serves 120 million children daily across 1.27 million schools. Studies indicate that the scheme has had a positive impact on reducing the incidence of underweight among schoolchildren and school dropouts (53). Safety nets programmes provide another layer of resilience; for instance, India's public distribution system delivers subsidised grains to over 800 million people through half a million fair price shops and proved critical during COVID-19 by expanding free rations (54). Similarly, Nepal's community-seed banks play a vital role in ensuring food security and agricultural biodiversity (55).

Perceptions of BIMSTEC Member States on Community-Led Food Security

The BIMSTEC recognises food security as a cornerstone of economic development and poverty alleviation. With the 'Bangkok Vision 2030' detailing the vision for a "prosperous, resilient, and open" region, BIMSTEC nations are committed to ensuring food availability, accessibility, and stability to achieve SDG-2 (56). However, challenges such as climate change, resource constraints, and inconsistent agricultural productivity pose significant threats to this goal. To address these, BIMSTEC is fostering a cohesive blend of grassroots, community-led initiatives and top-down regional policies to build sustainable, inclusive, and resilient food systems (57). In India and Bangladesh, community-led programmes are gaining traction, enabling farmers to adopt climate-smart practices and improve local food distribution networks (58). Collaborative research plays a pivotal role in this strategy. Memoranda of understanding with institutions like the International Food Policy Research Institute and roundtables with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

foster knowledge exchange and innovation (59). These partnerships drive the development of climate-resilient crops, efficient farming techniques, and data-driven policies tailored to the region's diverse agroecological zones. By aligning national policies with regional goals, BIMSTEC can ensure a cohesive approach to tackling food insecurity.

A Vision for Community-Led Food Security

Looking forward, a BIMSTEC Food Security Framework should embed community-led programmes as a central pillar, strengthening school meals, safety nets, and regional knowledge-sharing. To achieve zero hunger by 2030, the framework should rest on four pillars:

- Climate-adaptive agriculture to withstand environmental shocks

- Harmonised trade policies to expand food access

- Technology transfer to scale innovations

- Community empowerment to ensure inclusivity

A regional BIMSTEC Food Bank, modelled on the ASEAN framework, could help stabilise prices and provide emergency reserves during global disruptions, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which destabilise grain exports (60). At the same time, investment in scalable models like India's mid-day meal and Bangladesh's VGD scheme, combined with Sri Lanka's nutrition data platforms and Bhutan's organic farming networks, can help build resilient and inclusive food systems.

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Enhancing Resilience Against Non-Traditional Security and Boosting Connectivity in BIMSTEC Through Education

Arpan Tulsyan

Education has historically built connectivity and enhanced resilience among the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries by fostering intellectual exchange, building professional networks, and nurturing a shared cultural identity. Ancient centres of learning in India, such as Takshashila, Nalanda, and Vikramshila, were vibrant locations to which ideas, texts, and people traversed across the Bay of Bengal area. They not only advanced knowledge but also cultivated enduring networks of scholarly and cultural exchange, laying the foundations for the interconnectedness that the BIMSTEC aspires to revive and strengthen today.

Education is also a vital lever for building resilience to non-traditional security (NTS) threats such as extremism, cyber threats, natural disasters, climate change, public health emergencies, and issues related to migration and human trafficking. This essay examines the role of education in advancing the BIMSTEC agenda, particularly in strengthening cooperation to address NTS challenges, building resilience, and enhancing connectivity.

Building Resilience to NTS Threats

The BIMSTEC region faces several complex NTS challenges that threaten regional stability and development. These threats, ranging from public health crises and climate-induced disasters to cybersecurity risks and social cohesion pressures, are worsened by a lack of education or skills. Indeed, robust education can empower countries with the critical knowledge and technical expertise needed for effective prevention, coordinated cross-border responses, and strengthened regional cooperation (1). Therefore, education is a cornerstone for building resilience against NTS threats, enhancing awareness, preparedness, and response at various levels (see Figure 1) (2).

Figure 1: Building Resilience to NTS Threats Through Education
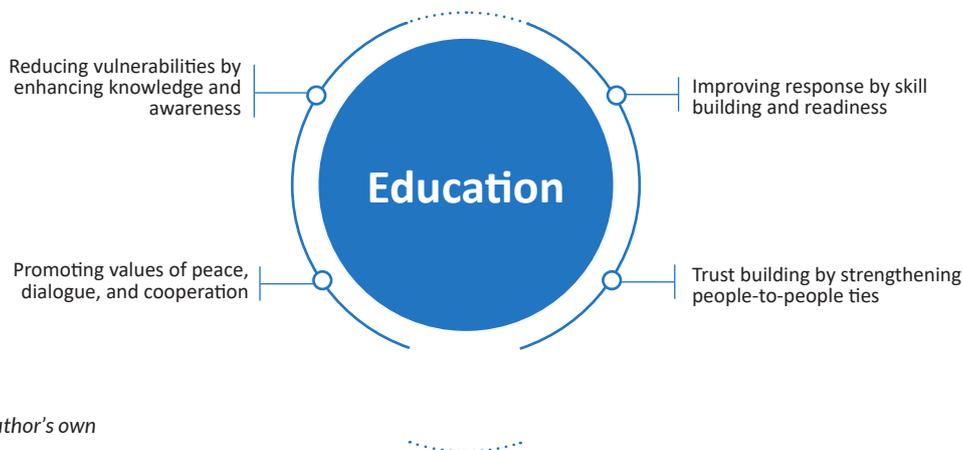
Source: Author's own

Maritime threats

Maritime threats such as piracy, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU), human trafficking, and the smuggling of narcotics and arms are persistent concerns in the BIMSTEC region, affecting livelihoods and economies, and straining bilateral relations (3). A lack of education worsens these issues in three key ways. First, there is low maritime literacy among small-scale fishers regarding issues such as licensing, seasons, by-catch rules, and reporting, which raises non-compliance and fuels IUU catch (4), deepening the already-significant losses (5). Second, weak capacity-building, monitoring, control, and surveillance skills, as well as gaps in workforce training and harmonised protocols result in inadequate IUU response (6)(7)(8). Finally, a lack of awareness and quality alternative-livelihood education keeps coastal youth locked in high-risk fisheries and trafficking value chains, the pressure of which can be reduced by promoting multiple educational pathways.

To strengthen maritime governance regionally, BIMSTEC could prioritise non-formal, participatory education programmes across coastal states to boost maritime literacy and sustainable practices. Non-formal training and capacity building, including those in digital or hybrid mode, have been shown to improve knowledge among and the practices of the fisher community (9)(10). Joint capacity-building platforms, such as the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Centre's Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance training, tailored to BIMSTEC's enforcement architecture, will enable member states to collaboratively strengthen their capacities to combat IUU fishing

(11). These training can standardise enforcement skills, foster information sharing, and build interoperability among national agencies, to address technical enforcement and also create a trust-based regional mechanism (12).

Terrorism

All BIMSTEC countries grapple with the issues of terrorism and extremist activities. Education, particularly effective media literacy, and civic- and peace-focused education, is a vital tool to combat polarising narratives, online recruitment, and disinformation (13). By equipping individuals with critical thinking skills, the ability to evaluate sources, and resilience against misleading information, countries can tackle misinformation, cyberbullying, and online polarisation that threaten social cohesion. At present, significant legislative and policy gaps limit the effective governance of digital spaces and the ethical use of technology, both of which are essential for peace education. The education systems in most BIMSTEC nations face challenges due to the insufficient integration of media literacy, digital citizenship, and peace education in curricula, compounded by a lack of trained educators and resources, diminishing resilience against divisive narratives and disinformation online (14)(15)(16).

Regional platforms can pool resources to train educators, develop culturally contextualised peace education modules (17) and share good practices, serving as a foundation for grassroots counter-extremism resilience (18). For this, they should leverage existing national strengths, such as India's National Curriculum Framework (19) and Bangladesh's peace education projects (20).

Climate change and natural disasters

The BIMSTEC region also faces significant threats from climate change and natural disasters, with projected increases in severity and frequency impacting member countries' response capacities (21). Rising sea levels, frequent cyclones, floods, landslides and environmental degradation cause immediate loss of lives and livelihoods and also erode long-term development gains, exacerbating poverty, food insecurity, and displacement.

Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, BIMSTEC has identified 'environment and disaster management' among its priorities for cooperation (22). Since then, there has been a growing institutionalisation of cooperation on disaster risk reduction (DRR) within BIMSTEC, particularly in strategic planning, maritime aspects, and early warning capabilities (23). No BIMSTEC country has an explicit DRR education initiative, but they must develop education and training modules focused on DRR protocols, early warning interpretation, and climate adaptation techniques. Education cooperation can significantly enhance BIMSTEC's response to climate change and natural disasters by fostering regional knowledge sharing, capacity building, and coordinated training. Moreover, regional cooperation in research and development promotes innovative solutions tailored to the Bay of Bengal's unique environmental challenges.

Public health

Pandemic outbreaks or new and re-emerging infectious diseases (such as SARS, MERS-CoV); climate-related health threats (such as water-, food-, and vector-borne diseases) and the rising

burden of non-communicable diseases (such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases) are straining BIMSTEC health systems (24).

While pandemics were initially a focal point in South Asian cooperation groups as health and economic security concerns (25), their framing has now broadened to embrace a plurality of approaches included in wider development, human rights, and equity agenda (26). In this regard, educational cooperation in the BIMSTEC region holds high potential to develop aligned school and community health education on aspects such as hygiene, vector control, nutrition, and risk communication for early detection and adaptive behaviours as climate change shifts disease ecologies (27). By jointly developing regionally relevant health curricula, investing in training educators, and supporting collaborative research, member countries can strengthen foundational and functional health literacy, protect human capital, and promote economic growth. Education initiatives can foster widespread adoption of evidence-based self-care and prevention strategies, improve risk communication, and promote adaptive health behaviours (28). These joint educational responses to public health not only improve compliance and self-management but also enable more equitable access to health services and better public health outcomes in general.

Cybersecurity and critical digital infrastructure

The BIMSTEC region is also facing rapidly evolving cybersecurity concerns amid expanding digitalisation, booming mobile usage, and deepening digital economies (29). Cybercrime, attacks on critical infrastructure, financial fraud, and the misuse of cyberspace for recruitment and radicalisation spotlight the need for robust regional coordination (30). Currently, weak regulatory frameworks and varying levels of cyber maturity across member states create vulnerabilities that can be exploited by transnational actors, threatening economic stability and social trust (31).

BIMSTEC meetings and strategic documents explicitly discuss the need to address cybersecurity issues through robust education cooperation (32). Ongoing initiatives emphasise developing harmonised and jointly recognised industry-linked certification for cybersecurity professionals, targeted awareness campaigns to build cyber hygiene and resilience across society, regular regional workshops or seminars and cross-border information sharing, and simulation exercises for practical training and coordinated incident response (33)(34). As such, BIMSTEC's cooperation strategy on cybersecurity clearly underscores education as a foundational tool (35).

Migration and displacement

Migration is a significant socioeconomic phenomenon within the BIMSTEC region, driven by diverse factors such as labour opportunities, environmental vulnerabilities, political instability, and cultural linkages. BIMSTEC does not have a dedicated migration policy, and the issue is often addressed indirectly through its cooperation pillars. For example, BIMSTEC has discussed irregular migration, trafficking, and terrorism risks in its security dialogue track, especially in relation to refugee inflows (such as the Rohingya), but these discussions remain intergovernmental and not translated into education or social integration programmes.

Nevertheless, education can play a significant role in addressing migration-related challenges. Cross-border frameworks for the recognition of school records, mobile learning platforms, language support and bridging curricula can reduce dropout rates among displaced or migrant children. A mutual recognition system for prior learning and vocational training aligned to local labour markets can reduce precarity for adult migrants (36). Additionally, targeted interventions like community-level cohesion education (intercultural dialogue, rights awareness, labour standards) are particularly needed in border districts where migration is most pronounced.

Role of Education in Building Connectivity

Education plays a crucial role in enhancing connectivity and people-to-people ties within BIMSTEC. By fostering shared learning experiences, building cross-border academic partnerships, and promoting multicultural understanding, education serves as both a bridge and a catalyst for regional integration (37). Within BIMSTEC, India is a major destination for higher education for students from other member countries (38), with many prominent figures having studied in the country (39). The largest share of foreign students in India is from Nepal (28 percent), while Bangladesh (5.6 percent) and Bhutan (3.3 percent) are the other prominent sources of students among the BIMSTEC countries (40).

Figure 2: BIMSTEC Students in India (2021-22)
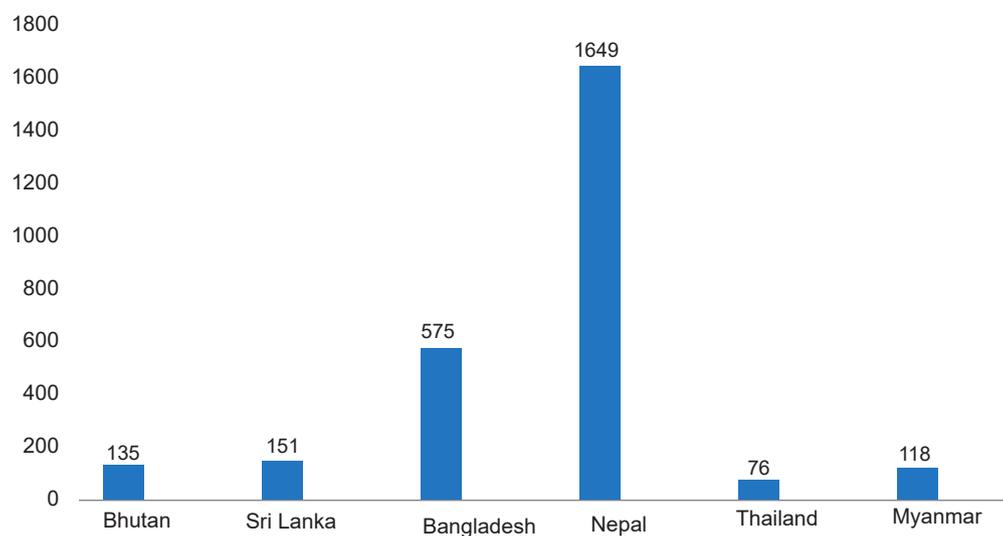
Source: All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22 (41).

India has initiated several programmes and scholarships for students from the BIMSTEC countries. For example, the BIMSTEC-India Marine Research Network enables doctoral students from these countries to conduct research in India through split-site fellowships, research grants, and twinning projects. Scholarship opportunities have been expanded at premier Indian institutions such as

Nalanda University, the Forestry Research Institute, through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and for AYUSH students. Additionally, the BIMSTEC for Organised Development of Human Resource Infrastructure (BODHI) initiative trains around 300 youth from BIMSTEC countries annually in India.

India has also focused on youth engagement. India hosted the 1st BIMSTEC Youth Summit in Gujarat in February 2025 (42), aiming to foster regional cooperation among young leaders, encouraging their active participation in addressing economic and social challenges, and building ties that transcend national boundaries. Over 70 youth delegates from all seven member countries participated in discussions covering entrepreneurship, digital connectivity, cyberspace, and sustainable development (43). India has also announced it will host a BIMSTEC hackathon and a young professional visitors programme (44). It is also engaging with the youth through sports, hosting the 'BIMSTEC Athletics Meet' in 2025 and the upcoming first BIMSTEC Games in 2027 (45).

Connectivity is also being enhanced through targeted capacity building and training initiatives. Under the BODHI initiative, each year, India will train 300 youth from the other BIMSTEC countries. At the same time, scholarships at premier institutions such as the Forestry Research Institute and Nalanda University contribute to developing human capital (46). Other initiatives include specialised training for young diplomats and centres of excellence in traditional medicine and agriculture to foster knowledge exchange and best practices (47).

Such initiatives are important in three key ways. Firstly, educational interactions through international students, faculty and student exchanges, and collaborative research projects cultivate relationships between future leaders, professionals, and communities across the member states. They also enhance mutual understanding and help develop a sense of regional identity and solidarity, reducing stereotypes and fostering respect for cultural diversity (48). For instance, BIMSTEC's ongoing scholarship programmes and proposed higher education networks have enabled students from countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal to study together, laying the foundation for lifelong personal and professional networks.

Secondly, harmonising curricula and certifications, as well as promoting regionally relevant subjects (such as disaster management, climate adaptation, heritage studies, and entrepreneurship), ensures that knowledge and skills are readily transferable across borders (49). This common educational ground is vital for developing a workforce that can seamlessly participate in regional initiatives, boosting social and economic connectivity.

Thirdly, joint educational initiatives at the school and community level, including language learning, intercultural dialogue programmes, and youth festivals, help cultivate empathy, dispel prejudices, and promote peacebuilding. Such early investments increase acceptance and cooperation among BIMSTEC's diverse societies, making collaboration more resilient amid geopolitical or economic shifts. As such, education underpins the social infrastructure necessary for robust BIMSTEC connectivity.

Recommendations to Enhance Resilience and Connectivity

To advance BIMSTEC's vision of fostering resilience, strengthening regional cooperation, and enhancing connectivity, education must be placed at the centre of its agenda. The following recommendations, grouped under five thematic areas, outline tailored priorities that the member states can pursue:

Institutionalise regional frameworks for education and skills

- BIMSTEC should set up a dedicated regional institution to coordinate training, curriculum development, and research on NTS topics such as DRR, public health, cybersecurity, peace education, and migration management. This institution should facilitate knowledge exchange, policy dialogue, and harmonisation of curricula, serving as a hub for sharing best practices and joint research outputs.

- Member states should consider developing a BIMSTEC Education Action Plan, which gives a roadmap aligned with the BIMSTEC Charter and includes measurable goals for digital literacy, disaster risk education, health education, and cross-border student mobility.

- Member states should negotiate a framework for the mutual recognition of school certificates, vocational qualifications, and higher education degrees, similar to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Qualification Reference Framework. This will ease migration, support labour mobility, and ensure continuity of learning for displaced children.

Leverage education to build resilience to NTS threats

- BIMSTEC nations should develop regionally harmonised modules on NTS, such as DRR education, media literacy, and peace education, to be integrated across school systems of all countries. The curricula should include hands-on exercises, risk mapping, and partnerships with local agencies to enhance preparedness for cyclones, floods, landslides, epidemics, and other threats.

- For maritime threats, community-based training can be organised for small-scale fishers on sustainable practices, licensing, and maritime safety. Joint capacity-building workshops on monitoring, control, and surveillance training can strengthen enforcement against IUU fishing.

- Another priority is to develop standardised and common industry-recognised certification courses for cybersecurity professionals. Regular, jointly held online and in-person awareness campaigns and workshops that target the youth, small and medium enterprises, and public sector employees, and promote best practices for cyber hygiene, secure coding, and incident response, are other actionable steps.

Enhance connectivity through education

- Member nations should increase scholarships and fellowships for BIMSTEC students at regional universities, including transnational doctoral and joint degree programmes. Existing initiatives should be strengthened to scale mobility.

- BIMSTEC should consider establishing a higher education network that connects universities, research institutes, and technical training centres across the region. The network should facilitate joint degree programmes, collaborative research, and faculty exchanges on pressing issues such as climate adaptation, artificial intelligence in education, and heritage preservation.

- Youth exchanges through regular summits, regional hackathons, sports meets, and innovation challenges will strengthen people-to-people ties. The grouping can consider introducing a 'Young BIMSTEC Professionals Programme' to place youth in think tanks and civil society organisations.

Advance multi-stakeholder partnerships

- Stakeholder partnerships to co-develop education solutions for NTS challenges is a must. For example, tech companies can partner in cybersecurity training and digital inclusion campaigns, while NGOs and research institutes can help design and deliver education programmes on peace, rights, and health.

- BIMSTEC diaspora can participate in mentorship programmes, faculty exchanges, and invest in education technology and research.

Invest in research, innovation, and knowledge sharing

- BIMSTEC must support joint research and innovation to support collaborative projects on climate change education, AI-driven learning tools, and sustainable livelihoods.

- A BIMSTEC Education Portal can host open-access resources, best practices, and toolkits in multiple languages.

By acting on these recommendations, BIMSTEC countries can jointly harness education as a strategic lever for enhancing regional resilience, addressing NTS challenges, and building meaningful connectivity. These efforts will underpin regional integration and sustainable development, and ensure that education becomes both a shield against vulnerabilities and a bridge for deeper regional integration.

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Bangladeshi Views on the Environment and Human Security in the BIMSTEC Region

Sufia Khanom

The 'terrain of security', long dominated by Realist theories focused on military capability and territorial sovereignty, has undergone a radical reconfiguration in the post-Cold War era. The dynamics of globalisation and complex interdependence have rendered apparent a basic fact: the most direct and urgent threats to states and their peoples no longer emerge from invading armies as much as from sources that are nonmilitary in character, such as pandemics, economic breakdowns, resource shortages, and ecological disasters. These are generally categorised as non-traditional security (NTS) threats—transnational in scope, with a direct bearing on the welfare of individuals and communities at both the individual and collective levels, and instinctively demanding cooperative (as opposed to confrontational) solutions (1).

In the midst of these overlapping NTS challenges, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has emerged as a crucial regional forum. The intergovernmental forum comprises

five South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and two South East Asian countries (Myanmar and Thailand), located on the confluence of Asia's two great rivers (the Ganges and Mekong), which together make for a region that has over 1.7 billion people. A significant proportion of this population is financially weak and resides in low-lying coastal areas that are highly susceptible to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. The Bay of Bengal, while representing a critical geographical and economic nexus, also serves as a shared point of vulnerability—frequently afflicted by catastrophic cyclones, storm surges, and the steady rise of sea levels (2).

In this particularly sensitive area, Bangladesh is a typical and illustrative example. It is rated as one of the most climate-affected countries worldwide, findings that stand in sharp contrast with the fact that it contributes negligibly to global greenhouse gas emissions. Its dense population, agrarian economy, and low-lying deltaic topography render it a 'ground zero' for climate impacts. Still, Bangladesh belies this story of pure victimhood. It has developed an array of innovative adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies while gaining global recognition for its local approaches and progressive policy frameworks; therefore, epitomising the rude awakening of climate vulnerability and the indomitable spirit needed to combat it.

This essay contends that ecological issues are the most serious NTS threat in the BIMSTEC region, serving as a powerful 'threat multiplier' that exacerbates underlying socioeconomic vulnerabilities and directly threatens the human security of its large population. It traces the transformation of environmental pressures into daily human vulnerabilities and the impact on people's livelihoods, health, and homes (3). In addition, it seeks to situate BIMSTEC in the larger landscape of regional organisations, and suggest that its position as a 'bridge', geographically and organisationally, between South and Southeast Asia, represents a unique and, in some instances, an untapped resource for addressing transboundary NTS challenges—one that other forums such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) are, for political and bureaucratic reasons, less well-placed to harness. Finally, this essay argues that meaningful and deepened regional cooperation through a revitalised BIMSTEC is not only beneficial but also a necessary prerequisite for envisioning and building a shared, secure, and resilient future for all its members.

The BIMSTEC Region: Centre Stage for NTS Challenges

The BIMSTEC area represents a powerful macrocosm for the global NTS challenges, forming a tangled web of overlapping vulnerabilities and linked destinies. The unique geography, demography, and economics make it particularly vulnerable to environmental and human security threats.

A Regional Vulnerability Profile

Complex and deeply ingrained factors make the region extremely susceptible to NTS threats. It is also extremely fragile, geographically and climatically. The Bay of Bengal is a prolific source of tropical cyclones, the power and frequency of which are fuelled by rising sea surface temperatures, an established effect of human-caused climate change (4). Additionally, the area features vast,

low-lying coastal areas, including mega deltas such as the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM), which are among the most vulnerable to sea-level rise. Socioeconomically, the region is marked by high levels of poverty and dependence on sectors that rely on the climate (including rain-fed agriculture, fisheries, and forestry) (5). This economic dependence poses a significant constraint on the potential for adaptation. This is combined with high population density, particularly in cities along coasts, such as Dhaka (an urban area of 19 million people), Chittagong (4 million), Kolkata (15 million), and Yangon (6 million). Such demographic pressures intensify exposure to climate-related disasters and place significantly greater strain on resources and infrastructure. A further layer of vulnerability stems from the region's reliance on the large transboundary river systems, particularly the GBM and the Irrawaddy. While these rivers are economic and agricultural lifelines, they are also sources of conflict related to water sharing, siltation, and flood control, tying the hydrological destiny of upper riparian countries (Bhutan, Nepal, and India) to that of their downstream neighbours (Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar) (6).

Current BIMSTEC Mechanisms

In theory, BIMSTEC has recognised these grim realities. Its initial sectoral focus was centred around the pillars of environment and disaster management, as well as people-to-people contact, with a clear NTS relevance. It has also taken some serious measures, such as the establishment of the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC) in India, and has discussed the frameworks for disaster management and mutual assistance at certain intervals. However, there have always been several structural impediments that hinder these efforts. First, there continues to be an under-prioritisation as geopolitical issues and traditional security topics consistently dominate the NTS agenda in high-level discussions. Second, like many other intergovernmental bodies, the agency has suffered from bureaucratic sluggishness and an inability to deliver results on the ground, with constant complaints of tardy progress; declarations remain declarations rather than becoming tangible outcomes that can reach vulnerable communities. Finally, insufficient resources are a perennial problem; under-resourced institutions like the BCWC are unable to leverage the funding and political power needed to steer an ambitious and coherent regional resilience agenda. This discursive recognition gap divides the region, which is ill-equipped to address the mounting scale of NTS.

A Case Study from the Frontlines: The Bangladeshi View

What has unfolded in Bangladesh is a stark, nuanced, and critically important glimpse of the future challenges facing the BIMSTEC region. It illustrates extreme susceptibility to environmental threats and the imaginative, bottom-up ethos needed to create resilience.

Geographic and Climatic Reality

The nation's susceptibility is, first and foremost, a consequence of its fixed geography. Bangladesh is essentially a vast, marshy river delta, situated at the head of the Bay of Bengal, formed by the confluence of the Ganges (Padma), Brahmaputra (Jamuna), and Meghna rivers, along with their tributaries. More than 80 percent of its territory lies on floodplains, with much of the land less than 10 metres above flood level. This morphology renders it particularly susceptible

to a range of climatic perturbations. Annual riverine and pluvial flooding, once beneficial for agriculture, has become increasingly unpredictable and destructive due to variability in monsoon rains and melting snow in the Himalayas. Bangladesh is situated in the Bay of Bengal, the rise of which causes severe cyclones that push seawater tens of kilometres inland, uprooting coastal communities and ecosystems. Salinity intrusion, a slow-onset calamity, has been gradually encroaching on freshwater aquifers and agricultural soils, as water from the rising sea seeps into these underground reservoirs, rendering the water undrinkable and land uncultivable for conventional crops. Finally, riverbank erosion, caused by powerful, sediment-laden rivers, eats away thousands of hectares of land each year, uprooting communities and claiming houses and farmland with ruthless success.

Effects on Human Security

These environmental occurrences affect the human security of millions of Bangladeshis. Food and water insecurity are mounting, with agricultural productivity declining significantly due to salinity intrusion and the unpredictable nature of floods. According to the World Bank, coastal areas, including those in Bangladesh, are experiencing significant declines in rice production (7). The salinity-based pollution of drinking water sources has resulted in public health emergencies, including hypertension and pre-eclampsia among pregnant women (8). Post-climate disaster water contamination can lead to the rise of vector-borne diseases, such as dengue and malaria, as well as water-borne diseases, including diarrhoea and cholera. Additionally, the combination of very high temperatures and humidity substantially increases the risk of heatstroke, especially among outdoor workers.

Economic security is equally eroded. The recurrent destruction of crops, livestock and fisheries ruins the livelihoods of millions of people, pushing vulnerable households into cycles of debt and further impoverishment. Climate change is projected to reduce Bangladesh's GDP by up to 3 percent annually by 2050 (9). Additionally, by 2050, one in every seven Bangladeshis is likely to become a climate refugee (10). While most of this migration is projected to be internal (from the rural coastal villages to urban centres), the possibility of cross-border movement, particularly to neighbouring Indian states such as West Bengal and Assam, is a key issue of concern in bilateral relations and is a classic NTS challenge, one that risks major tensions if it cannot be managed as a sensible part of the relationship rather than as a securitised 'other'.

National Policy Efforts

Faced with these existential threats, Bangladesh has become a leader in adaptation and disaster risk reduction efforts. The country has formulated forward-looking policy frameworks, with a warning tone, such as the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (11) and the ambitious Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (12) that aims to shift from vulnerability to resilience and towards prosperity. The country has also made significant investments in practical adaptation measures, such as a world-class cyclone early warning system, thousands of lifesaving cyclone shelters, the elevation of homestead plinths, and the pioneering of saline-tolerant rice varieties. Its local adaptation models are studied and replicated worldwide (13). Still, there is a limit to what unilateral actions can accomplish. Bangladesh cannot control the flows of the transboundary

rivers on which it relies, nor can it prevent cyclones from developing in the Bay of Bengal. The cross-border nature of such issues implies that even the soundest national actions will be effective only to a certain degree. Thus, from the Bangladeshi perspective, regional cooperation is no longer a matter of option, but an imperative for national and human security in the longer term.

BIMSTEC: A Regional Architecture for Cooperation

The following are some key areas of cooperation where BIMSTEC can play a pivotal role to ensure human security among member countries.

Share of River Basins and Water Security

Cooperative management of the GBM basin constitutes the most critical and complex transboundary concern. Bangladesh, being a lower riparian state, is almost entirely dependent on the water flow that originates in India, Nepal, and China (which is not a BIMSTEC member but has an interest in the region). Major flashpoints will be the need for water, particularly to ensure equitable sharing of dry season flows, which remains a perennial and delicate two-way issue between India and Bangladesh. A more comprehensive regionalism, featuring Nepal's active involvement in upstream water storage and hydropower, can benefit all riparian states. Furthermore, the effective management of floods is not possible without the real-time sharing of information on rainfall and river flows between upstream and downstream countries, which necessitates the establishment of a trusted multilateral mechanism. Finally, issues such as heavy sedimentation, which have a major impact on navigation, water quality, and flood patterns in Bangladesh, will require jointly managed river basins. BIMSTEC is uniquely placed to play a role among its member states to ensure this.

The Bay of Bengal Commons

The Bay of Bengal functions as a shared ecological and economic space. The similarities include a range of common threats that require a collective response. The management of fisheries is a contentious issue, and overfishing by different countries is threatening significant fish stocks, an essential source of protein and income to millions of people. Combatting illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing requires a solidly regulated regional framework, which is currently lacking. Plastic waste and oil from busy shipping lanes pollute the marine environment, putting coastal ecosystems at risk. The creeping threats of sea-level rise and ocean acidification necessitate collaborative research, monitoring, and adaptive strategies across all coastal areas, with solutions that could include a cohesive approach to mangrove rehabilitation and preservation. The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, is an ideal area for cooperative management under the BIMSTEC.

Disaster Preparedness and Response

Although a few examples of bilateral collaboration in disaster response are available, a standardised regional structure is absent. There is great potential in enhancing BCWC to deliver an integrated, real-time, and accurate cyclone tracking and forecasting service for the entire Bay of Bengal. Beyond prediction, BIMSTEC must also develop specific common protocols for disaster response,

which will include pre-positioning relief supplies and, most importantly, enabling the rapid travel of emergency personnel across borders during crises. Additionally, Bangladesh's experience in community-level disaster management and building cyclone shelters is a paramount regional public good that can be imparted to other vulnerable members, especially to Myanmar and to Sri Lanka, through BIMSTEC-moderated training and knowledge-sharing initiatives.

Climate Migration: The Case for Regional Schemes

Climate-induced displacement and the possible consequent mass movement are arguably one of the most politically sensitive NTS issues in the region. Instead of approaching it as an independent border security issue to be solved with fences and patrols, BIMSTEC countries can offer a future-oriented, humane, and cooperative system. This will require looking at and modelling the migrant movement together to better understand and forecast what will happen next. This can inform discussions on the development of formal labour mobility agreements for the legal admission of migrants across sectors in instances of labour scarcity in the receiving states, thereby transforming potential chaos into an opportunity for managed migration. However, such a regional strategy must be founded on a commitment to upholding the fundamental rights of the displaced, deliberately shifting the conversation from security to protection and managed adaptation.

The absence of collaboration on these issues is a misstep, and the 'basketisation' of reactions will continue, leading to inefficiency, duplication of efforts, and an actual risk that these human security issues could result in full-blown inter-state disputes and conflicts, unravelling generations of diplomatic work.

Conclusion

The old cannons of state security, built for a different era, now lie silent amid newer challenges in the Bay of Bengal, particularly those related to climate change. For the BIMSTEC region, the facts are irrefutable, and the answer is inevitable—the gravest security imperatives of the twenty-first century are unconventional and manifestly environmental. These are threats that directly endanger the lives and existence of people, and which undermine the foundations and prospects of stability and prosperity in states.

Bangladesh's lived experience makes this nexus excruciatingly clear. Its geographical fate has put it on the frontline, where the ethereal 'climate change' materialises on the ground in the form of salted earth, drowned villages, and uprooted lives. However, in its proactive and innovative national response, Bangladesh is also a striking beacon of hope and a critical resource for the region.

These challenges are all fundamentally transboundary—the rivers, the weather systems, the common sea, and the water and people that need to move. Resilience cannot be built in isolation and must be a common goal. Other regional organisations, such as SAARC or IORA, have their own place and purpose, but BIMSTEC is filling a vital and special void. It is free from the stultifying bilateral bickering that haunts SAARC, and is more tightly focused on the unique ecological and

human realities of the Bay of Bengal than IORA's sweeping, ocean-spanning mission. This makes BIMSTEC the most potent and promising driver of collective action.

The question before BIMSTEC now is whether to cooperate for mutual benefit or not to cooperate for mutual peril. The platform exists, and the potential is unlimited. This potential remains latent and will only thrive with the intervention of sustained, strong political will, revitalised institutions, and a vision towards a human security-centric paradigm. By adopting this new concept of security—one that favours cooperative action on addressing climate change, disaster management, and sustainable resource sharing—BIMSTEC can rise above its legacy of small measures. It can transform the Bay of Bengal from a place of shared vulnerability into a community of shared resilience. To construct this collective future is the most crucial non-traditional security imperative of our lifetime.

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Bridging the Bay: Toward a Connected Health Architecture in BIMSTEC

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The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has always carried a clear promise: to go beyond trade and guide the Bay of Bengal's geography towards regional resilience by making the movement of people, data, standards, and finance work for the benefit of health (1). Despite having different health pathways and systems, the BIMSTEC countries have many common problems that are best addressed by learning from one another rather than reinventing fixes in parallel (2). A stock-taking during COVID-19 emphasised that a strong primary-care base, common quality norms, and modular digital public infrastructure can convert national reforms into a regional buffer against non-traditional security threats such as pandemics, climate shocks, and supply-chain volatility, without forcing institutional uniformity (3).

However, the empirical picture has undergone significant changes in recent years. Global child survival indicators continue to improve, but progress has slowed, with 4.8 million under-fives dying worldwide in 2023, nearly 2.3

million in the neonatal period. These numbers are stark reminders that system reliability in labour rooms, newborn care, and referral remains the truest test of resilience (4). Within BIMSTEC, trajectories differ, but most members exhibit steady declines in neonatal mortality and under-five mortality rates (U5MR). India has reduced its U5MR to 28 per 1,000 live births (2023), with neonatal mortality down to 17 per 1,000, a trajectory of improvement similar to that of most BIMSTEC members (5). Despite improvement over time, the absolute levels of child mortality remain high in a majority of BIMSTEC countries (see Table 1).

Table 1: Under-Five Mortality Rates in BIMSTEC Countries in 2023 (deaths per 1,000 live births)

Country	Under-Five Mortality Rate
Bangladesh	31
Bhutan	23
India	28
Myanmar	39
Nepal	26.5
Sri Lanka	6
Thailand	9

Source: UNICEF Country Profiles, compiled by authors (6).

Weak health systems often lead to patient mobility, a key form of connectivity. For example, Bangladesh is a significant source of intra-regional medical travellers, with its citizens spending over US$5 billion annually on overseas treatments, primarily in India and Thailand, concentrated in tertiary oncology, cardiac, and neurosurgical care (7).

This essay analyses country commitments on universal health coverage (UHC), one health, digitisation, workforce, and preparedness, based on the member countries' submissions (8) to the United Nations (UN), illustrating how they can be viewed as interconnected rather than siloed reforms. It argues that if BIMSTEC diligently utilises existing tools, such as epidemiological surveillance that speaks the same language, referral and documentation packages that travel with the patient, and digital rails that respect consent, it can transform uneven national progress into collective resilience the next time risk arrives by road, rail, sea, or air.

VNR Consensus: Where BIMSTEC Can Cooperate Now

A Voluntary National Review (VNR) is a country's self-assessment to the UN on how it is progressing toward the Sustainable Development Goals (9). Within the framework of this essay, the VNRs serve as windows into the health aspirations of each BIMSTEC country, which either

enable or hinder 'connected' resilience. According to the latest available VNR reports (with Nepal and Sri Lanka drawing on earlier cycles), a clear cross-cutting focus emerges across Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand: expand UHC on a primary-care foundation, institutionalise one health and pandemic preparedness, digitise systems, and close equity gaps for the financially weak, remote, migrant, and otherwise vulnerable. Read through a connectivity lens, VNRs are building blocks of a region-wide health architecture that can better manage non-traditional security risks.

Financial Protection

Coverage and financial protection exhibit the strongest convergence, yet also the sharpest contrasts, which invite cross-learning. Thailand's universal scheme now covers roughly 99 percent of the population, with catastrophic out-of-pocket spending hovering near 1.6 percent and skilled birth attendance essentially universal (10). Sri Lanka's long-standing free public system continues to deliver excellent maternal and child outcomes, yet out-of-pocket payments still account for about 46 percent of health spending (11). Bangladesh, by contrast, faces a steep financial-protection challenge with out-of-pocket spending at about 73 percent of total health expenditure and essential-service coverage stuck near 52 percent (12). India's trajectory lies between these poles: significant expansion of insurance under the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, recently extended to citizens over 70 years of age, and a decline in out-of-pocket spending, while its digital health stack aims to improve purchasing, quality, and continuity of care (13). These differences are complementary assets for a cooperative agenda on benefits design, strategic purchasing, and pooled procurement for essential drugs and vaccines.

Outcomes and Burdens

Maternal and child mortality rates continue to fall. India's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) is on a downward path alongside rising institutional births (89 percent) (14); Bhutan reports an MMR of 53 per 100,000, with very high skilled attendance (98.5 percent) (15); Sri Lanka sustains low infant and U5MR (16); and Thailand reports an MMR under 30 and U5MR near eight per 1,000 (17). Yet, neonatal mortality plateaus in places, adolescent fertility is rising in Bangladesh, and Nepal's U5MR and neonatal targets remain off-track (18, 19).

Communicable disease control is a bright spot, with cautions. Bhutan reached zero malaria cases and seeks World Health Organization malaria-free certification (20); Sri Lanka remains malaria-free but contends with emerging infections such as dengue (21); and Bangladesh shows small tuberculosis gains, but also a recent uptick in malaria (22). These patterns make the case for a connected surveillance grid: shared case definitions, vector-surveillance data exchange, and mutual surge support for diagnostics and outbreak response.

Health Priorities Across the Life-Course

Nutrition and social protection cut across health and non-traditional security. Bangladesh has reduced undernourishment to around 11.9 percent (pre-pandemic levels) and stunting to 26.4 percent, yet wasting and anaemia persist, and food-price volatility, despite lower export subsidies, threatens food security (23). Nepal's multisector nutrition plans (now in their third phase through

2030), mid-day meal expansion, and improved cookstoves address diet diversity and indoor air pollution; however, provincial gaps in stunting and wasting remain stark (24). India's POSHAN 2.0 has scaled behaviour change and real-time tracking, with state case studies on millet-based nutrition showing promising local pathways (25).

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), mental health, alcohol and tobacco use, and ageing are the region's shared headwinds. Bhutan attributes over 73 percent of deaths to NCDs, has scaled adult screening to 74 percent coverage, is now pushing a life-course 'RMNCAH+ Healthy Ageing' strategy, and proposes fiscal tools on unhealthy products (26). Sri Lanka also recognises the need to reorganise primary curative care around an essential NCD package, while also rolling out a National Mental Health Policy (27). Nearly a third of Thailand's population will be above the age of 60 by 2030, and the country is already mobilising primary healthcare (PHC) and community networks, but is concerned about workforce and pension pressures, as well as gaps in youth mental health access (28).

A regional playbook could thus include fiscal measures on tobacco/alcohol, and ultra-processed foods; jointly benchmarking dietary diversity, shared clinical guidelines, and tele-mentoring for hypertension, diabetes, and cancer; and a BIMSTEC geriatric-care agreement to train, deploy, and recognise skills across borders in response to population ageing. Equally critical is health communication, where inconsistent messaging on nutrition, lifestyle risks, and preventive screening across BIMSTEC can weaken collective impact, while coordinated evidence-based strategies could amplify behaviour change.

Concrete oncology cooperation is already underway through Indian initiatives: in July 2025, India's external affairs ministry and Tata Memorial Hospital conducted a specialised training programme for BIMSTEC countries (29), and in August 2025, its National Cancer Grid hosted a BIMSTEC delegation to align referral pathways (30).

Data and Workforce

Workforce, financing, and data systems are where health as connectivity can become a tangible reality. Bangladesh's health-worker density has risen to about 12.78 per 10,000 population but remains far below its 2030 target of 44.5 (31); Nepal highlights chronic rural vacancies (32); Sri Lanka reports fragmented information systems that it is now integrating (33); and Thailand acknowledges digital-literacy gaps and data disaggregation issues even amid strong service coverage (34). India's digital public infrastructure, including its Aadhaar-linked consent frameworks, the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission for longitudinal records, and U-WIN for immunisation, offers modular building blocks that neighbouring countries could adapt without importing an entire model (35).

Health Resilience and Pandemic Preparedness

Pandemic preparedness illustrates how VNR aspirations can translate into regional security. Bangladesh's international health regulations score improved to about 69 percent in 2024 (from 58 percent in 2019) (36); Bhutan updated emergency plans, secured Pandemic Fund financing

(~US$4.9 million), ran multi-hazard simulations, and strengthened labs under Fleming-Fund support (37); Sri Lanka is integrating early-warning with its health information system (38); and India is investing in the Pradhan Mantri-Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission and the National One Health Mission, while demonstrating last-mile delivery with drones and a globally shared vaccination platform (39). These capacities can be merged through joint simulation exercises, a BIMSTEC-wide zoonotic events registry, interoperable traveller screening protocols at ports, and mutual recognition of emergency lab results.

If evaluated rigorously, Sri Lanka's traditional medicine (Ayurveda) integration in elder care (especially, curative care) could also inform culturally grounded, low-cost chronic-care pathways across the Bay (40). Even investment flows matter for resilience: Bangladesh has recently seen an increase in foreign investment in hospital infrastructure and a dependence on external financial flows. Transparent, quality-assured foreign direct investment, whether Chinese-backed hospitals in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh or vaccine production in India, can be aligned with regional surge capacity and pooled stockpiles for essential medicines (41, 42).

Healing Corridors: Patient Mobility as Connectivity

India and Thailand have emerged as the primary healthcare destinations for their BIMSTEC neighbours (43, 44), while the smaller member states are the primary sources of outbound medical tourists. India alone hosted nearly 700,000 foreign medical travellers in 2019, a figure that rebounded close to pre-pandemic levels by 2023 (45). Thailand is also a global medical tourism hub, with millions of annual foreign patients (46).

Bangladesh is by far the largest source of outbound medical tourists in the BIMSTEC bloc (47). Every year, over 450,000 Bangladeshi patients travel abroad for treatment, spending roughly US$5 billion (48). This reflects a chronic lack of specialised healthcare in Bangladesh. India is the top recipient due to its proximity and cultural/linguistic affinities. Direct air connectivity has expanded accordingly, with airlines multiplying flights on India–Bangladesh routes to meet the demand (49). In 2022, Bangladeshis comprised about 69 percent of India's foreign medical patients, numbering over 300,000 that year (50). This grew even further post-pandemic: India saw a 48 percent increase in arrivals for medical purposes from Bangladesh, from 304,000 in 2022 to 449,570 in 2023 (51). Thailand is the second preferred destination for Bangladeshis (52).

Other South Asian BIMSTEC members also rely heavily on India's health services. Nepal and Bhutan routinely send patients to India, aided by open-border or visa-free arrangements. Notably, nationals of Nepal and Bhutan do not require visas for India, so their visits for medical purposes may not be fully captured in India's official tourist statistics (53).

These intra-regional flows have shown strong growth trends over the past decade, interrupted only by the pandemic. However, these flows are also sensitive to political, diplomatic, and economic factors. For instance, as Bangladesh grappled with a foreign exchange crisis and India briefly tightened visa issuance ahead of Bangladeshi elections, some hospitals in Kolkata saw a drop of up to 75 percent in Bangladeshi patients in late 2024 (54). More recently, in August 2025, Kolkata

hospitals noted that Bangladeshi patient numbers had declined to just 10 percent of their levels from the previous year, as visa delays and political unrest suppressed cross-border treatment (55). Such disruptions have prompted Indian providers to diversify towards other regions (Africa and West Asia) (56). Nonetheless, the long-term trajectory within BIMSTEC remains one of growing cross-border patient mobility.

Key Sectors

Health tourism between BIMSTEC countries can be considered as largely needs-driven, with most medical tourists seeking tertiary care facilities. For example, Bangladeshi and Nepali patients commonly travel to India for cardiac surgeries, oncology treatment, neurosurgery, orthopaedic procedures, and organ transplants (57).

Additionally, fertility treatment has emerged as another niche driver of medical tourism. India and Thailand both host reputable fertility clinics that attract couples from the region facing fertility challenges. Traditional medicine is another niche. India and Sri Lanka (to some extent) leverage their traditional heritage to attract wellness tourists (58). The 'Heal in India' campaign markets the country's holistic healing traditions, alongside modern medicine (59). Cosmetic and dental treatments are also notable sectors, particularly in Thailand (60).

Policy Frameworks

National policies across the BIMSTEC are increasingly recognising medical travel as a significant industry, and governments have attempted to facilitate free movement across borders for healthcare. A cornerstone is the liberalisation of medical visa regimes.

India has introduced an online e-medical visa facility (alongside attendant visas), simplifying the previously bureaucratic process (61). In mid-2023, India introduced a stand-alone e-medical visa service for Bangladeshi nationals in response to disproportionate demand (62).

Insurance portability and financing are also emerging policy areas for BIMSTEC to consider. In most BIMSTEC nations, national health insurance programmes have not covered foreign treatment, requiring patients to pay themselves or rely on government benefits for foreign referrals. At a 2023 BIMSTEC health ministers' conference, ministers suggested partnering to introduce elements of West Bengal's 'Swastha Sathi' scheme in other countries and to reconcile a "progressive plan in medical insurance" for cross-border medical coverage (63).

In 2022, the state of Maharashtra in India signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Bangladesh's health authorities to boost healthcare tourism, and also signed similar MoUs with Oman and the United Arab Emirates (64). These agreements typically establish referral pathways, marketing tie-ups, and even price concessions for patients from the partner countries. Such inter-governmental partnerships indicate a growing institutional backing for medical tourism within the region. While global medical travel is much broader, the intra-BIMSTEC context is primarily driven by essential healthcare needs, and fosters regional integration in health, gradually building a framework that facilitates more seamless cross-border patient mobility.

Conclusion

BIMSTEC can approach health connectivity as a practical operating condition for resilient systems. Member states have already articulated the core elements: UHC with a PHC focus; interoperable information and documentation that enable the safe movement of patients and data; and preparedness capacities that can be exercised jointly, rather than only during emergencies. Aligned and implemented together, these elements will make clinical information legible across borders, standardise referral and pricing practices, and ensure that surveillance signals are comparable. These steps can turn proximity around the Bay into a shared buffer against shocks.

The task is also institutional and social. It requires that access and protection be experienced by households as timely care, predictable costs, and reduced administrative friction. It requires providers and purchasers to operate within clear rules, and regulators to ensure that quality and safety are verifiable and portable. In practice, progress will be most visible along existing pathways of care, namely oncology, cardiac services, and maternal–newborn care, where predictable documentation, clear public health communication, recognised facilities, and transparent prices can be established and monitored.

A measured approach is feasible within current mandates. A concise, comparable public dashboard can track a small set of outcomes and continuity indicators. Selected cross-border corridors can adopt standard documentation and pricing practices and establish accessible grievance-redress mechanisms. Regular joint exercises can address operational bottlenecks in logistics and information exchange. Taken together, these steps will convert diverse national efforts into regionally coherent resilience while allowing for different institutional arrangements across member states.

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