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**BRIDGING THE BAY
OF BENGAL**
Towards a Stronger BIMSTEC

Constantino Xavier

Contents

About the Author	v
Summary	1
Introduction	5
BIMSTEC to the Rescue?	7
How to Institutionally Strengthen BIMSTEC	15
Deepening Sector-Specific Cooperation	24
Conclusion	31
Notes	33
Carnegie India	41

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The author is grateful to George Perkovich for his inputs on a draft of this paper. The author would also like to thank Aarushi Aggarwal, Nikita Coutinho, Saksham Khosla, Arushi Kumar, Sreeja Kundu, Rakshit Mohan, Charvee Puri, and Ayan Tandon for their excellent research and editorial assistance.

Summary

The Bay of Bengal is one of the world's least integrated regions, with abysmal levels of trade, connectivity, and cooperation. The deep divide between India and other countries around the bay hinders their efforts to increase their economic and strategic interdependence.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a regional multilateral organization founded in 1997, offers a well-positioned platform to help address these challenges. But BIMSTEC's mission to deepen regionalism will stand a better chance of succeeding if its members (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) make the organization a priority, endow it with adequate resources, and enact reforms to strength its capabilities.

New Momentum for Multilateralism

As BIMSTEC marks its twentieth anniversary, a confluence of factors has created an opportunity for the organization to help make the bay region more integrated.

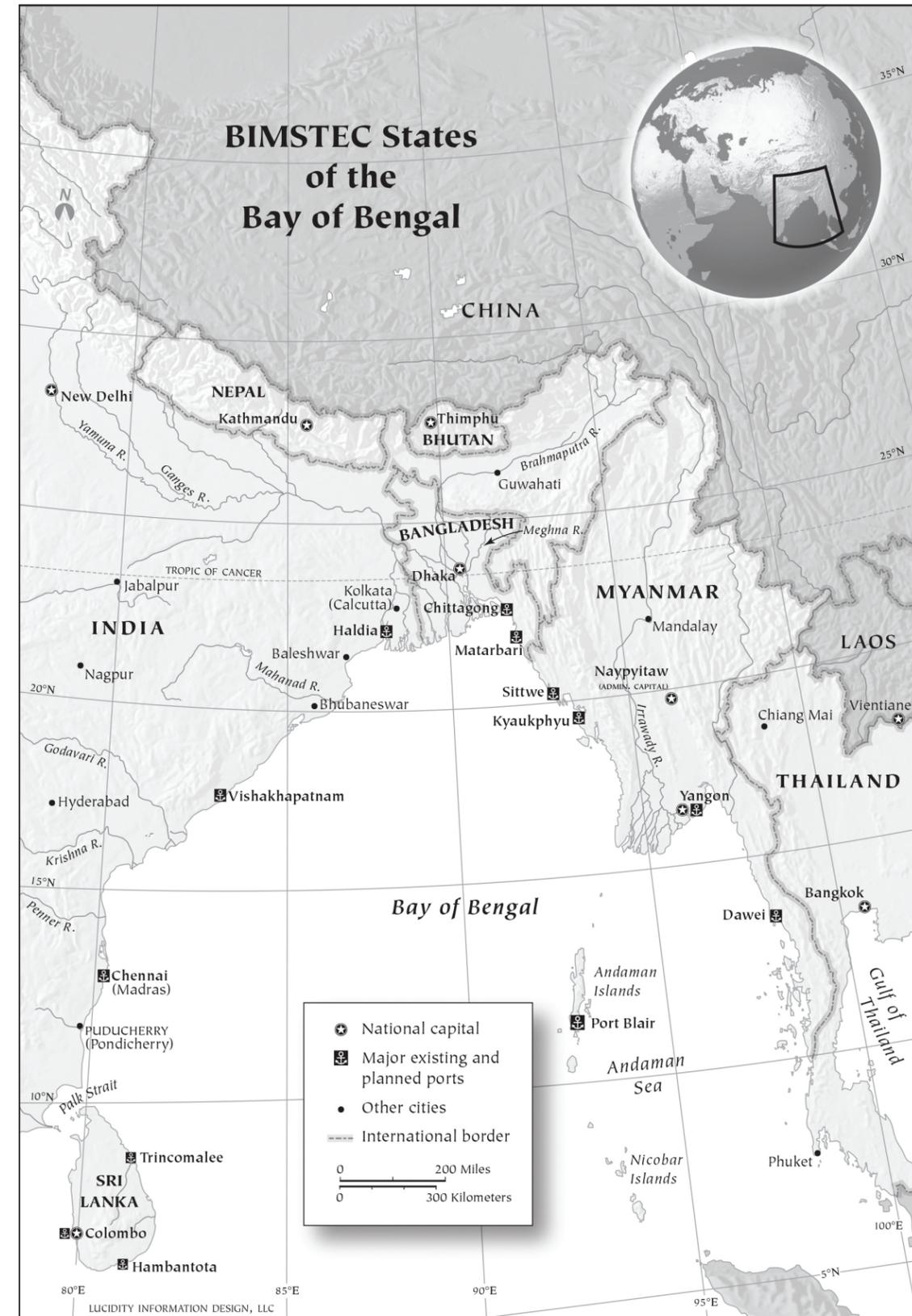
- In a more interdependent world, states around the Bay of Bengal are realizing that their national economic and security interests are increasingly tied to the ability to cooperate across borders through regional institutions.
- Responding to the inroads China has made in the region, India is placing an unprecedented emphasis on strengthening regional connectivity and links with Southeast Asia.
- Small BIMSTEC countries see regional multilateralism as a potential check on the rising capabilities of China, India, and major external powers.

Strengthening BIMSTEC to Advance Regional Integration

India and other BIMSTEC member states should:

- Instill in the organization a normative vision for a cooperative, multilateral regional order that is based on existing rules and principles of liberalism, not on unilateralism.

- Empower the BIMSTEC secretariat with greater human and financial resources to proactively drive the organization's agenda. The organization and its staff cannot do so unless members agree to grant greater autonomy and delegate responsibilities.
- Continue to prioritize sustained physical connectivity and high-quality infrastructure, so as to help facilitate greater regional flows of goods, services, and people. Particular attention must be paid to multi-modal projects that link coastal ports to the hinterland, including landlocked Bhutan, northeastern India, and Nepal.
- Expand India's role as an informal leader. New Delhi must back up its words by bolstering its investment in the organization without affecting the interests of other members.
- Open BIMSTEC to cooperation with extraregional powers committed to inclusive regionalism, including Australia, the European Union, Japan, and the United States, as well as multilateral institutions like the Asian Development Bank.



Introduction

As the largest bay in the world, the Bay of Bengal is of pivotal importance to the countries bordering it. More broadly, demographic, economic, and security developments in the region have crucial implications for Asia and the global order. While exact definitions vary, the bay's scope is generally defined as a "triangular basin" stretching west to east between Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. One fourth of the world's populations live in the seven countries around it, and half a billion people live directly on its coastal rim.¹

The highly populated Bay of Bengal carries a lot of economic promise. With a combined gross domestic product (GDP) close to \$2.7 trillion and despite an adverse global financial environment, all seven countries were able to sustain average annual rates of economic growth between 3.4 and 7.5 percent from 2012 to 2016.² The bay is also rich in untapped natural resources, with some of the world's largest reserves of gas and other seabed minerals, as well as, it is increasingly believed, oil.³ The nutrient input from the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers ensures that the bay's waters contain extraordinarily large fishing stocks.⁴

Linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Bay of Bengal occupies a central position in relation to global economic flows in a way that few other regions do. One fourth of the world's traded goods cross the Bay of Bengal every year.⁵ As a strategic funnel to the Malacca Straits, the region has grown in strategic importance. For China, the bay is critical to preserving its access route to the Indian Ocean, and for India, it is a crucial avenue for projecting its new naval capabilities.

Yet, despite its status as a key maritime hub in global terms and all its economic promise, the Bay of Bengal's potential is hamstrung by a lack of close internal economic integration among the countries that call the region home. In terms of economics, connectivity, mobility, and geostrategy, countries adjacent to the Bay of Bengal are less integrated today than they were fifty years ago. Despite its rising economic potential and geostrategic centrality, the region therefore remains largely on the sidelines of key global developments. As historian Sunil Amrith has noted, "the absence of BIMSTEC from the public consciousness is a problem." This reflects a "challenge of the imagination," given that, at least until the mid-twentieth century, the bay used to be highly integrated.⁶ The Bay of Bengal region would benefit greatly from efforts to recapture the interconnectivity of the past.

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Beginning in the 1950s, as the Bay of Bengal's newly independent countries embraced divergent alliance systems, used political borders to erect barriers, and pursued different political and socioeconomic models, the region's sense of community almost completely eroded. The different paths pursued by India and Thailand since then, for example, resulted in the parallel emergence of South and Southeast Asia as distinct regions, splitting and replacing the Bay of Bengal. In economic terms, India focused on autarky and protectionism, rejecting the logic of interdependence in and around the subcontinent, while Thailand embraced liberal market reforms and regional integration with its neighbors to the south and east. More importantly, while New Delhi chose a nonaligned path and insulated its immediate periphery from Cold War competition, Bangkok chose to ally with the United States and develop under the protective umbrella of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), instituted in 1955.

BIMSTEC is well positioned to make sizable contributions toward advancing regional connectivity, though a series of organizational and substantive reforms would help increase its effectiveness.

This process of economic and geostrategic disintegration is all the more surprising given that such divergence accelerated just as most other regions of the world were becoming more interdependent and connected. The Sri Lankan state minister for foreign affairs, Vasantha Senanayake, alluded to this process when he remarked in 2017 that “we have been somewhat slow and complacent to keep pace with the trend of regionalism.”⁷ Few people today think of the Bay of Bengal as a region compared to South or Southeast Asia. As scholar V. Suryanarayan has noted, many Indians and people from other countries in the region have instead adopted a geographically introverted outlook that segments the Bay of Bengal into South and Southeast Asia:

Few people in India are conscious of the fact that the [Indonesian] island of Pu Breush, located in the North West of Sumatra, is only 92 nautical miles away from [India's] Indira Point, which is less than the distance between Chennai and Tirupati. Similarly, Phuket in Thailand is only 273 nautical miles away from Indira Point, which is less than the distance between Chennai and Madurai.⁸

A variety of transnational threats that disrupt regional stability compound the challenge of making the Bay of Bengal integrated again—these problems could conceivably worsen as the region integrates more. The bay region hosts a diverse range of complex nontraditional security threats, including the trafficking of narcotics, weapons, and people; the illegal exploitation of natural resources; refugee flows; rebel insurgencies and terrorist groups; or natural disasters. Any attempt to foster greater connectivity in the bay must take these problems into account.

To reintegrate the bay and leverage its potential, India and the six other aforementioned Bay of Bengal states ought to focus on joint action through

common institutions to address these interconnected opportunities and challenges. Thankfully, a growing regional consensus among these countries on the potential collective rewards of such connectivity appears to be generating positive momentum in this direction. One particular institution that will play an outsized role in advancing regional integration is the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). As a venue that boasts all seven Bay of Bengal countries as members, BIMSTEC is well positioned to make sizable contributions toward advancing regional connectivity, though a series of organizational and substantive reforms would help increase its effectiveness.

BIMSTEC to the Rescue?

The organization originally known as BIST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation) was founded over twenty years ago in June 1997.⁹ At that time, its four members signed a framework agreement that expressed a desire to “establish a firm foundation for common action to promote subregional cooperation in the areas of trade, investment, technological exchange and other interrelated areas in a spirit of equality and partnership and thereby contribute towards peace, progress and prosperity in their common region.”¹⁰ Later that year, Myanmar joined as well. In 2004, the organization was renamed BIMSTEC when two more states joined (Bhutan and Nepal) for a total of seven members. (See table 1 for a timeline of major events in BIMSTEC's history.)

Table 1. Development and GDP Indicators for BIMSTEC Members

	GDP Per Capita (PPP in 2016)	Average Annual GDP Growth (2012-2016)	2016 UNDP Human Development Index Rank (Out of 188)	2017 World Bank Ease of Doing Business Rank (Out of 190)	Trade as a Percent of GDP (2016)	2016 World Bank Logistics Performance Index Rank (Out of 160)
Bangladesh	\$3,587	6.5%	139	177	38.0%	87
Bhutan	\$8,918	5.5%	132	75	82.8%	135
India	\$6,583	6.9%	131	100	39.8%	35
Myanmar	\$5,732	7.3%	145	171	45.5%	113
Nepal	\$2,483	3.7%	144	105	48.9%	124
Sri Lanka	\$12,337	5.3%	73	111	50.5%	N/A
Thailand	\$16,946	3.4%	87	26	123.1%	45

Source: UN Development Program, World Bank

BIMSTEC emerged as a major advocate for regional cooperation around the Bay of Bengal, seeking to overcome the long-standing divide between South and Southeast Asia. At its heart, the organization seeks to promote economic and other forms of connectivity to revive the bay's past levels of integration and mutual interdependence. Former BIMSTEC secretary general Sumith Nakandala has emphasized that “we are not reinventing the wheel” but just “rediscovering the common heritage around the Bay of Bengal.”¹¹ (See table 2 for basic economic and political profiles of BIMSTEC's member states.)

Table 2. BIMSTEC's Major Milestones

June 1997	Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand-Economic Cooperation (BIST-EC) founded in Bangkok.
December 1997	Organization renamed BIMST-EC after Myanmar admitted as full member.
July 2004	First summit held in Bangkok. Bhutan and Nepal became members, for a total of seven. BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (FTA) framework agreement adopted. First meeting of the Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC) held.
November 2008	Second summit took place in New Delhi.
December 2009	Twelfth Ministerial Meeting endorsed BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study, prepared by the Asian Development Bank to promote regional connectivity. Climate change adopted as fourteenth area of cooperation.
February 2010	RIS hosted first meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Think Tanks in New Delhi.
January 2011	Memorandum of association passed for the establishment of a BIMSTEC energy center.
March 2014	Third summit held in Naypyitaw. Sri Lankan Ambassador Sumith Nakandala appointed first secretary general.
September 2014	Secretariat officially inaugurated in Dhaka.
September 2015	Twentieth TNC meeting, after four-year gap, held in Thailand. Negotiations on an FTA faced obstacles and remained stalled.
October 2016	First BIMSTEC leaders' retreat took place in Goa, followed by a BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach summit, the first of its kind.
March 2017	First meeting of BIMSTEC national security chiefs held in New Delhi.
Early 2018	Fourth summit to be held in Kathmandu after several delays.

Source: BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC can be credited with some achievements, though its ambitions have sometimes outpaced its accomplishments. Only three summits have been held so far. In 2014, the organization was finally endowed with a permanent secretariat, located in Dhaka. Some of the most significant challenges BIMSTEC faces are how to expand its fiscal and staffing capacities and how to

strategically advance regional connectivity in the vast number of areas (fourteen working groups) it has been mandated to address with its current limited financial and human resources.

As it seeks to address these challenges, BIMSTEC now faces a critical opportunity to overcome a period of relative stagnation and revive the initial enthusiasm that drove it in the early 2000s. As Indian analyst C. Raja Mohan has noted, “the moment for turning the Bay of Bengal into a zone of regional cooperation may finally be with us.”¹² It was an encouraging sign that BIMSTEC enjoyed a great deal of visibility in 2017 and was more active than it had been in the recent past.

With new leadership in place, BIMSTEC member states—particularly India—have voiced a renewed commitment to holding the regular, high-level meetings that are a necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, condition for making BIMSTEC an effective institution. In 2017, the organization's ministerial and senior officials' meetings were held for the first time since 2014. A new secretary general was appointed in August 2017. After being postponed several times, BIMSTEC's fourth summit is scheduled to take place in February 2018.

This renewed momentum can be traced back to the BIMSTEC leaders' retreat, convened by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Goa in late 2016. One former Indian official characterized this as “a de facto summit meeting.”¹³ In the outcome document, the seven member states pledged “to work collectively towards making BIMSTEC stronger, more effective, and result oriented,” and emphasized that their “geographical contiguity, abundant natural and human resources, rich historical linkages and shared cultural heritage provide BIMSTEC the ideal platform to promote peace, stability and prosperity in our region.”¹⁴ Then secretary general Sumith Nakandala underlined the pivotal role of this retreat in reviving the organization, arguing that it “gave BIMSTEC a clear mandate” in the run up to its twentieth anniversary in 2017.¹⁵ Judging by the summit and ministerial statements, the organization's mandate does not seem to have significantly changed since its foundation, with a continued focus on economic cooperation and connectivity.

A Case of Converging Interests

These signs of support for regional connectivity seem to reflect a growing sense among member states that a stronger BIMSTEC that is better able to promote integration would advance their respective national interests. This political momentum is driven by each government's conviction—in one form or another—that a more connected region will help their respective countries prosper and fulfill other important national goals. For instance, the

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organization offers Bangladesh an ideal platform to position itself as more than just a small state in the Bay of Bengal. In 2014, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed her belief that BIMSTEC “was a step to our journey to becoming ‘‘Sonar Bangla’’ or ‘‘Golden Bangladesh.’’¹⁶ Dhaka has been pushing New Delhi to move beyond bilateralism and to ‘‘work closely in furthering relevant regional/sub-regional cooperation processes;’’ empowering BIMSTEC would appear to be a step in this direction.¹⁷

Other BIMSTEC members have also conveyed their interest in greater regional integration. For Sri Lanka, BIMSTEC represents an opportunity to realize its long-held ambition to connect with Southeast Asia and serve as the subcontinent’s hub for the wider Indian Ocean and Pacific regions. As former Sri Lankan finance minister Ravi Karunanayake has expressed, ‘‘we [Sri Lanka] want to be to India what Hong Kong is to China.’’ Colombo continues to look to Singapore as a model hub for interregional connectivity.¹⁸

For Nepal and Bhutan, in turn, BIMSTEC stands to further their respective aspirations to reconnect with the Bay of Bengal region in order to escape their landlocked geographic positions. Sandwiched between India and China, Kathmandu and Thimphu realize that their prospects for economic growth would likely increase dramatically if they prove able to create a stronger maritime link between their Himalayan hinterlands and what Nepalese entrepreneur Sujeev Shakya calls ‘‘East South Asia.’’¹⁹ It is ‘‘natural for Nepal to aspire to grow together with the region,’’ as the country’s Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba emphasized in 2017.²⁰ Finally, for Myanmar and Thailand, BIMSTEC complements their respective Look West policies, as they seek to leverage their geographic proximity to South Asia. Connecting more deeply with India across the Bay of Bengal also would allow them to access a rising consumer market and, at the same time, balance Beijing and develop an alternative to China’s massive inroads into Southeast Asia.

As the region’s largest economy by far, India’s interest in BIMSTEC is particularly notable. By taking the initiative to revive BIMSTEC in 2016, India signaled its commitment to move the locus of regional cooperation eastward, toward the Bay of Bengal. In his statement on the organization’s twentieth anniversary, in June 2017, Modi underlined this geostrategic shift:

BIMSTEC not only connects South and South-East Asia, but also the ecologies of the Great Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal. With shared values, histories, ways of life, and destinies that are interlinked, BIMSTEC represents a common space for peace and development. For India, it is a natural platform to fulfill our key foreign policy priorities of ‘‘Neighborhood First’’ and ‘‘Act East.’’²¹

It is worth asking what has driven such sudden Indian interest in BIMSTEC as a ‘‘natural platform’’ for its external priorities, when the organization has been in existence for twenty years already?

After all, India’s interest in BIMSTEC has not always been evident. Former Indian ambassador Rajiv Bhatia once suggested that BIMSTEC was at risk of being little more than a ‘‘rebound relationship’’ whenever New Delhi fails to pursue regional integration via the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the default body for subcontinental cooperation since the mid-1980s.²² As recently as 2015, Indian experts were skeptical about this eastern shift in favor of BIMSTEC. Former foreign secretary Krishnan Srinivasan predicted that ‘‘it is unlikely for BIMSTEC to move forward.’’²³

But efforts to pursue integration in ways that include Pakistan through SAARC have largely flopped. In recent years, Islamabad has not demonstrated a willingness to cooperate on connectivity projects, leading New Delhi to announce in January 2018 that important SAARC initiatives are being ‘‘held back due to [a] lack of response and/or [the] obstructionist approach of Pakistan.’’²⁴ While India-Pakistan tensions had stalled the organization’s endeavors before, this was the first time that an Indian government has developed an alternative vision for regional cooperation and integration that bypasses SAARC in favor of alternative institutions. This reflects India’s new economic interests and geostrategic ambition to break out of its periphery and connect with neighboring regions that previously had been neglected, especially the Bay of Bengal as a link to Southeast Asia.²⁵ As noted by analyst K. Yhome, BIMSTEC plays an important role in this new neighborhood policy because, unlike SAARC’s subcontinental focus and except for the difficult western front, it is ‘‘the only forum that brings together India’s strategic peripheries (South, East and North) under one single grouping.’’²⁶

While the jury is still out on whether India will be able to translate its vocal interest into tangible political and material investments in BIMSTEC, there is now a clear realization in New Delhi that the ‘‘lack of importance given to BIMSTEC has seriously affected our economic and strategic agenda,’’ in the words of former ambassador Seshadri Chari.²⁷ Modi’s expansive understanding of BIMSTEC as a ‘‘natural platform’’ for India’s foreign policy indicates that, unlike in the past, New Delhi appears to be clearly committed to the organization over the long term.

This commitment is driven by two key factors. The first is the potential economic rewards of greater regional connectivity. Almost 300 million people, or roughly one quarter of India’s total population, now live in the four coastal states adjacent to the Bay of Bengal (Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal). In turn, for the approximately 45 million people living in India’s landlocked northeastern states, reestablishing the long-lost connectivity with the Bay of Bengal would critically enhance their region’s development and welfare prospects.²⁸

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For both India's eastern coastal states and the northeastern region in particular, and for the Indian economy in general, growth and development are seen to hinge on the degree of connectivity with Southeast Asian markets. By fostering transnational connectivity around the region—in particular with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Thailand—Indian policymakers expect that the country's exports will pick up, that more investments will flow in, and that regional integration will serve as a positive springboard for greater global economic interdependence. In the words of two former Indian officials, BIMSTEC therefore represents “the only real bridge” or a “unique link” between South and Southeast Asia.²⁹

The second driver relates to Asia's rapidly changing geostrategic context and India's need to look at the Bay of Bengal as a key theater in which to contain an increasingly capable and assertive China.³⁰ Beijing is currently making a massive push to fund infrastructure projects and foster connectivity throughout South, Central, and Southeast Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to increase China's north-to-south access routes to the Indian Ocean, especially via Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. In response, New Delhi now seeks to develop alternative east-to-west connectivity plans between South and Southeast Asia across the Bay of Bengal.³¹ Prior initiatives to connect South Asia to China, such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor, have been put on hold. Consequently, BIMSTEC has assumed an even greater importance as a central vehicle for projecting India's intent and capabilities in the Bay of Bengal region.

Other geopolitical developments have reinforced the necessity of this strategic choice for India. New Delhi's geopolitical focus has naturally moved eastward, given that Pakistan is blocking any regional connectivity plans to India's western flank, Europe remains plagued by continued economic stagnation, and the Middle East faces chronic turmoil. As a result, India is prioritizing integration with the Indo-Pacific region and stronger partnerships with a variety of Asian powers, including Australia, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam.

Parallel Paths to Regional Connectivity

While these dual economic and geostrategic drivers are indicative of a continued Indian commitment to BIMSTEC, the organization represents only one of several parallel features of India's new approach to the Bay of Bengal region. While India's commitment to BIMSTEC is not merely a rebound relationship after the SAARC failure, it will not be an exclusive relationship. In the words of a senior Indian official dealing with regional cooperation initiatives, Delhi's focus on BIMSTEC is part of a “three-in-one strategy.” The organization allows India to pursue three core policies: Neighborhood First, which gives primacy to the country's immediate periphery; Act East, which aims to connect India with Southeast Asia; and an economic development policy for

India's northeastern states designed to link them to the Bay of Bengal region via Bangladesh and Myanmar.³²

This reflects a deeper shift in India's strategy for regional integration, which emphasizes flexibility and the willingness to move simultaneously on various fronts rather than an exclusive dependence on SAARC. New Delhi's decision, in 2016, to cancel its participation in the nineteenth SAARC summit—scheduled to be held in Islamabad and postponed since then—was not a one-time, off-the-cuff decision. Two years earlier, barely six months after being elected to office, Modi signaled his intent to depart from India's traditional approach to regional cooperation. Speaking at the eighteenth SAARC summit in Kathmandu in November 2014, he emphasized that “there is a new awakening in South Asia; a new recognition of inter-linked destinies; and a new belief in shared opportunities.” He stated that these opportunities must be realized “through SAARC or outside it” and “among us all or some of us.”³³ Such clear warnings, directed both at SAARC and Pakistan, reflected a risk-embracing willingness to pursue new paths toward the same goal of regional connectivity.³⁴

India's current interest in BIMSTEC as an avenue to greater integration in the Bay of Bengal is taking place on at least five policy levels. First, domestically, India's focus on the Bay of Bengal region overlaps with its specific aforementioned developmental goals for its eastern and northeastern states. These goals have inspired ambitious projects like Sagarmala and Bharatmala, which seek to develop port and road infrastructure, respectively, to internationalize India's hinterland economy via maritime and cross-border hubs on the eastern coast and with Bangladesh and Myanmar. India's support for the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) East Coast Economic Corridor and its multimodal regional corridor from Kolkata to Kanyakumari reflects the domestic dimension of this new Bay of Bengal strategy.³⁵

Second, New Delhi's emphasis on the Bay of Bengal is also being pursued through reinvigorated bilateral relationships with the neighbors. With Bangladesh, this included historic agreements in 2015 to finalize the land boundary and establish direct shipping routes, both of which pave the way to reinstitute connectivity levels from more than fifty years ago. Modi also became the first Indian prime minister to pay exclusive bilateral visits to Nepal (since 1997) and to Sri Lanka (since 1987). Moreover, by choosing Bhutan as his first foreign destination, in 2014, he emphasized the eastern front of India's regional periphery. Three years after coming to power, Modi completed his bilateral outreach to all BIMSTEC countries with his visit to Myanmar in September 2017. No Indian Prime Minister has dedicated so much attention to the immediate neighborhood since at least Rajiv Gandhi back in the 1980s.

Third, India's reorientation toward the Bay of Bengal has also been pursued through regional organizations. But even at this level, BIMSTEC is only one of many tracks. SAARC is in suspension but may be called back

into service if Islamabad is willing to promote regionalism. New Delhi has also been pushing for a wider mandate of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to strengthen maritime governance in the Bay of Bengal.³⁶ Besides the partnership between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2017, India has also fostered interregional links with Southeast Asia through initiatives like Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and the Cambodia-Myanmar-Laos-Vietnam grouping (CMLV).

Fourth, India's path toward regional connectivity now also goes through subregional and mini-lateral initiatives with other BIMSTEC members, including the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) formalized in 2013 as a quadrilateral joint working group. Far from being a new creation focused merely on isolating Pakistan, this *a la carte* policy of regionalism dates back to 1997, when Delhi, Dhaka, Kathmandu, and Thimphu created the South Asia Growth Quadrangle initiative to spur economic development in the subcontinent.

The idea of flexible and sector-oriented partnerships was revived after 2010 by India and Bangladesh. They committed to “harness advantages of regional and sub-regional cooperation in power, water resources, transport and other forms of connectivity.”³⁷ This subregional parallel track to SAARC has flourished since then into the embryonic intergovernmental BBIN initiative, together with Nepal and Bhutan. A series of joint working groups then occurred, focusing on how to cooperatively manage and leverage cross-border transport, energy, and water resources.³⁸ In 2014, as Indian attempts to boost connectivity through SAARC faltered due to Pakistan, this track naturally gained a new impulse.³⁹

New Delhi's interest in BIMSTEC will overlap with and complement similar efforts to bridge the Bay of Bengal.

Fifth, India's new impetus on the Bay of Bengal is also channeled through a new posture toward external actors, seeking partnerships with countries and organizations from outside the region. Unlike in the past, New Delhi is now willing to join hands with extraregional actors to stem Chinese influence in the Bay of Bengal.

This includes a variety of joint naval exercises held in the region, including with the United States, and also a new interest in cooperating with Australia.⁴⁰ On this front, Japan has been perhaps the most prominent player, based on Modi and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's “Vision 2025” plan to “seek synergy ... by closely coordinating, bilaterally and with other partners, for better regional integration and improved connectivity,” especially in the Bay of Bengal region.⁴¹ India has also enthusiastically endorsed the ADB's South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) operational program for 2016–2025, focused on improving connectivity between the subcontinent and Southeast Asia.⁴²

As these various initiatives make clear, India has voiced a firm commitment to promoting regional integration with its neighbors, and its support for BIMSTEC must be understood in that context. Rather than an exclusive avenue, New Delhi's interest in BIMSTEC will overlap with and complement similar efforts to bridge the Bay of Bengal. At the same time, India's aspirations for BIMSTEC will require significant investments in the organization, particularly in efforts to strengthen its financial and organizational capabilities and to focus on areas where BIMSTEC has a comparative advantage over other organizations and initiatives with limited mandates.

How to Institutionally Strengthen BIMSTEC

The confluence of BIMSTEC members' respective national interests in support of connectivity and their willingness to invest more in BIMSTEC has created an opportunity to empower the organization to help revitalize the Bay of Bengal as a region and as a community. Commenting on BIMSTEC's track record and “missed opportunities” since its founding in 1997, the foreign minister of Bangladesh, Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, recently noted that “it is time to look back, reflect and review our past performances; renew our commitment and reframe our strategy for the journey ahead.”⁴³ In the words of former Indian ambassador Rajiv Bhatia, this is crucial because BIMSTEC has been “innovative but under-performing.”⁴⁴ Meanwhile, for former ambassador Preeti Saran, one of India's top senior officials dealing with the Bay of Bengal region, BIMSTEC's twentieth anniversary highlights the “need for fresh ideas” to achieve the common objective of “rejuvenating” the organization.⁴⁵

To maximize BIMSTEC's effectiveness, one area of focus should be taking steps to address its lingering organizational weaknesses, including a weak consensus about how to pursue its institutional connectivity mandate; an over-taxed and underfunded bureaucratic arm; an inconsistent joint commitment among members to holding frequent, high-level meetings; and uncertainty about how to engage with other institutional actors that support the cause of connectivity.

Advance and Expand on Institutional Norms

The postcolonial fixation with sovereignty that once prevailed among the now-independent states that border the Bay of Bengal now lies buried beneath the bay. Relinquishing a past of isolationism and autarky, these states are increasingly seeking to pursue their national interests through greater regional cooperation, connectivity, and interdependence. Commenting on the need to “decode, evaluate and address the [regional] challenges and seize the opportunities that are being unleashed,” the foreign minister of Bangladesh emphasized at a 2017

BIMSTEC ministerial meeting that “we cannot do this alone,” and that “there is no alternative to the imperative of regional cooperation.”⁴⁶

However, while no alternative to regional coordination may exist, there may be many competing views among BIMSTEC members about how to pursue it, and these diverse views reflect varying levels of commitment to multilateralism. BIMSTEC will not succeed unless it holds a normative conversation about what substantive type of regional architecture is most appropriate for the Bay of Bengal. Samir Saran, vice president of the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi, has outlined one compelling potential normative vision for BIMSTEC:

Can we create a normative framework both on the economic realm, security realm and political realm together? Can all of us agree to this that anyone who wants to participate in the Bay of Bengal community must agree to the principles of deliberative dispute resolution mechanisms? . . . Can we create such norms to safeguard this Bay of Bengal community?⁴⁷

Due to its multilateral nature, BIMSTEC is a natural platform through which to press its member states to develop the best practices and institutions required to ensure that the Bay of Bengal is governed cooperatively under the rule of law. BIMSTEC should focus on articulating how such liberal and inclusive normative standards inform its organizational mandate in four particular domains.

BIMSTEC will not succeed unless it holds a normative conversation about what substantive type of regional architecture is most appropriate for the Bay of Bengal.

First, BIMSTEC should concentrate on advancing a constructive approach to connectivity. In contrast to criticisms leveled at the China-led infrastructure investments underwritten by the BRI, New Delhi has stated its intention to take the lead in defining alternative standards for implementing connectivity projects “based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality.”⁴⁸ Sri Lanka, for one, has expressed concerns about the BRI.⁴⁹ BIMSTEC must help to translate a commitment to high standards into cooperative action by developing common criteria that emphasize socioeconomic inclusiveness, financial responsibility, and environmental sustainability.

Second, BIMSTEC should strive to help keep the waters of the Bay of Bengal open, free, and peaceful, by seeking to show how to manage them as a regional commons. The Sri Lankan prime minister’s proposal for an “Indian Ocean Order” with “accepted rules and agreements” should be implemented in the bay.⁵⁰ To do so, BIMSTEC must encourage its member states to embrace maritime multilateralism. It could contribute to regional mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes, for example on borders and fisheries, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). It could develop codes of conduct that preserve freedom of navigation and apply existing

law of the seas regionally. In addition, BIMSTEC could stem the region’s creeping militarization by instituting, for instance, a Bay of Bengal Zone of Peace that seeks to limit any bellicose behavior of extraregional powers.

BIMSTEC also should be prepared to weigh in on political matters. While BIMSTEC’s formal emphasis may be on technical and economic cooperation, every regional organization is fundamentally political in nature, as the experience with SAARC and Indo-Pakistani conflicts shows over the last few decades. The Bay of Bengal region is affected by a variety of cross-border disputes. As the Rohingya refugee crisis between Myanmar and Bangladesh showed in 2017, bilateral issues can quickly escalate to stall cooperation through regional institutions.⁵¹ Accordingly, BIMSTEC must be prepared to help address bilateral tensions, for example, by serving as a forum for informal discussions or by investing in the development of formal mediation and resolution mechanisms tailored to the region’s specific needs and problems. This would also potentially decrease dependence on external and global organizations, including the United Nations, whose involvement has often been resisted by the governments of India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.⁵²

Finally, BIMSTEC should aim to develop an internal dialogue on the role of democracy in promoting economic development, security, and stability among its member states. If Thailand holds elections in 2018 as planned, all members may then be run by democratically elected governments, which would transform BIMSTEC into one of Asia’s rare clubs of democratic countries. Such a regional dialogue could center on upholding the rule of law and strengthening electoral, parliamentary, and other pluralist institutions.

Strengthen the Secretariat

In addition to unity of purpose, international organizations require strong functional leadership. An international organization does not necessarily need a secretariat, but a strong secretariat can make an organization. It took seventeen years for BIMSTEC’s secretariat to finally be established in 2014 in Dhaka, but its role has never been specifically defined.⁵³ For more than ten years before it was established, officials would meet in Bangkok, at gatherings hosted by the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁵⁴

Since its creation, the secretariat has faced a variety of obstacles that hinder its effectiveness, including budgetary and staffing limitations. Saman Kelegama, one of Sri Lanka’s most ardent supporters of the organization, called for a “strong Secretariat . . . empowered to play a more proactive role in driving the BIMSTEC agenda.”⁵⁵ Former Bangladeshi diplomat Tariq Karim, in turn, refers to the secretariat as a “fundamental weakness” with a mandate that is “unclear” and inadequately “cloned” from the SAARC model.⁵⁶ From the viewpoint of a senior Bhutanese official, the coordinating body has limited relevance because it remains “purely member-driven.”⁵⁷

BIMSTEC member states can pursue five ways to overcome these obstacles and strengthen the secretariat's capabilities so it can take on a greater role in driving the organization's agenda. First, member states should allocate greater autonomy to the secretariat. As Prabir De, a researcher at a think tank in New Delhi, has noted, for the secretariat to become the organization's "driver, captain and pilot," member states' bureaucracies must be willing to accord sufficient agency and expertise for it to implement new initiatives. For example, to implement any significant policy initiative, the secretariat must first obtain consensual support from the joint secretaries or director generals overseeing BIMSTEC affairs in all seven member states, which in some cases can take several months.⁵⁸ On the procedural front, both the choice of the secretary general and chairman should rotate alphabetically as currently stipulated at regular intervals without interruptions, so as to increase predictability and continuity while reducing the uncertainty of transitions. To date, the length of the rotating chairmanship has been extraordinary irregular, ranging between one and five years.

BIMSTEC member states can pursue five ways to overcome these obstacles and strengthen the secretariat's capabilities so it can take on a greater role in driving the organization's agenda.

Second, BIMSTEC members should also further empower the secretary general. Reputation and status are key characteristics that allow a secretary general to push the organization forward through direct and personal links with leaders across the region. According to the position a higher diplomatic stature—for example, by granting the position in the future to individuals with a cabinet or secretary rank—would help ensure future secretary generals have more "gravitas" to engage member states' bureaucracies at a higher level.⁵⁹ A political alternative would be to choose a former high-level leader (head of government or state), who could be assisted by a deputy with a bureaucratic background.

Third, BIMSTEC members should boost the funding they provide for the secretariat's budget. Currently estimated at around \$200,000, the secretariat's annual budget is inadequate when compared to the organization's vast mandate and the fourteen different sectors under its purview in one of the world's most populated regions.⁶⁰ Being "severely underfunded" in the words of one BIMSTEC official, the secretariat uses its funds almost exclusively for salaries and other institutional costs, leaving hardly any resources to invest in outreach and agenda-setting initiatives.⁶¹ Increasing staff compensation, in particular, would be a critical means of attracting more officers from member states to join the organization on deputation. Even after a recent pay scale revision, the salaries of BIMSTEC's secretary general and directors are still less than two-thirds of those of their SAARC counterparts, even though Dhaka's cost of living is much higher than that of Kathmandu.⁶² If member states are serious about strengthening the secretariat, they must endow it with greater financial assets by increasing the size of their respective contributions.

Fourth, the staff size of the BIMSTEC secretariat should be increased. However prominent and hard-working the secretary general may be, the secretariat cannot be a one-person show. It must be urgently expanded. Since 2014, BIMSTEC has been run by a staff of fewer than ten people, including two directors (until a third director joined in 2017).⁶³ In comparison, the SAARC secretariat's staff is approximately fifty-strong, including eight directors, and the ASEAN secretariat has around 100 staff members, including four deputies and eighteen directors and coordinators.⁶⁴ Without adequate human resources, the secretariat will not be able to take on any significant initiatives and will continue struggling to complete even the most basic administrative and financial tasks.

Fifth, the secretariat should be empowered to recruit research and policy experts and should be given the authority and resources to hire consultants from various technical domains, including energy, trade, and transportation. Depending on their seniority and possible roles as directors or advisers, such policy experts could also serve as ambassadors and champions for various regional integration causes. One way to consolidate their contributions could be to form an internal think tank, similar to the expert research institutes attached to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the ADB.

BIMSTEC's internal processes can be streamlined to give new life to the organization.

Optimize Organizational Functioning

Beyond strengthening the secretariat's human and financial resources, there are ways that BIMSTEC's internal processes can be streamlined to give new life to the organization. While the idea has been floated regularly to establish a formal BIMSTEC charter—as a blueprint to articulate an organizational vision and define its mandate—there are other more immediate steps that can be taken.

First, BIMSTEC should hold meetings more frequently. Reflecting an early naivety, BIMSTEC planned to hold summits every two years, ministerial meetings every year, and meetings for senior officials twice a year.⁶⁵ In reality, however, only three summits have taken place in twenty years, and this included a six-year interregnum from 2008 to 2014. Similarly, no ministerial meeting was held between 2014 and 2017. Rather than meeting twice annually, the senior officials' meeting was postponed seven times between 2014 and 2017, when it finally took place again. To avoid a scheduling backlog and prevent the secretariat from becoming a "glorified scheduler" tasked chiefly with convening meetings, member states must prioritize holding meetings more regularly.⁶⁶

Second, BIMSTEC members should commit to consistently sending representatives of an appropriate rank to the meetings that are held, which they have not always done. Senior official meetings, for example, have often included

joint secretaries or director generals, who lack the autonomy to make relevant decisions. Meetings involving senior officials should, in principle, only be held if all member states are willing to send secretary-level officers.

Third, BIMSTEC ought to diversify the designated locations of its meetings. Until early 2017, India, Myanmar, and Thailand had hosted twelve senior official meetings (four each), whereas Nepal and Sri Lanka had held just one each, and Bhutan had not held any.⁶⁷ Furthermore, rather than being hosted exclusively by member states, ministerial, senior official, and other working group meetings could also take place at the secretariat headquarters in Dhaka.

Fourth, each BIMSTEC member should clearly designate appropriate government counterparts to liaise with BIMSTEC officials. To facilitate communication and speed up initiatives, member states should direct their foreign ministries to create specific BIMSTEC cells or empower existing ones with more human and financial resources. In many cases, BIMSTEC affairs are managed by a director general or joint secretary, but such duties are often neglected because they fall under divisions or departments focused more broadly on regional cooperation, with portfolios that include SAARC (in the cases of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) or multilateral and economic affairs (in the cases of Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand). As the first BIMSTEC secretary general noted, such “national [BIMSTEC] focal points must be more than mere letter boxes.”⁶⁸

Fifth, beyond its periodic foreign minister meetings, BIMSTEC would benefit from reviving the sectorial ministerial conferences it used to hold in the 2000s on matters like energy (Delhi 2005, Bangkok 2010), tourism (Kolkata 2005), culture (Paro 2006), and poverty alleviation (Dhaka 2008). Such special meetings allow for focused discussions with high-level political representatives that tend to lead to a top-down approach, rather than the slower bureaucratic bottom-up route.

Define and Expand India’s Informal Leadership Role

Aside from efforts to sharpen BIMSTEC’s institutional mission and capabilities, there are some who think that India could play a more prominent role in the organization, even informally. Even multilateral organizations need a measure of state-led leadership, whether internal or external. The European Union would not likely have developed without the Franco-German initiative, nor would ASEAN have progressed without the United States’ external security guarantees toward the Philippines and Thailand. For BIMSTEC to flourish, India (as the region’s most powerful country) will have to step up, invest resources, and sustain interest in the Bay of Bengal’s leading institution. In the candid words of former BIMSTEC secretary general Sumith Nakandala, “BIMSTEC needs a leader.”⁶⁹

New Delhi has not shied away from embracing such responsibility and has often taken the driver’s seat already in some ways—for example, by hosting the 2016 BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach summit. India also served as a key facilitator during the backstage negotiations about the location of the new secretariat (Bangladesh) and the nationality of the first secretary general (Sri Lanka), which were announced in 2011.⁷⁰

However, India’s actions often have fallen short of the expectations of policymakers and analysts. For example, for three long years between 2014 and 2017, New Delhi failed to appoint a representative director to the secretariat, leaving the position vacant and hindering the organization’s effectiveness until Pankaj Hazarika assumed the position in June 2017. To assume and deliver on an informal leadership position within BIMSTEC, India will have to focus on four fronts.

First, India must respect the sensitivities of small states—leading should not be confused with dominating. To strengthen BIMSTEC’s multilateral and cooperative nature, New Delhi will have to walk a thin line between control and passivity. Playing a driving role will require diplomatic skill and the willingness to delegate by letting smaller states, especially Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, take the lead on both symbolic and substantive issues. Former Indian ambassador Rajiv Bhatia thus cautions that India’s leadership must be “exerted with a mix of sensitivity, generosity, astuteness and determination.”⁷¹

Second, as the region’s predominant actor, India should accord smaller member states asymmetric advantages, especially on trade issues, even if doing so hurts the interests of certain domestic constituencies. For smaller countries like Bangladesh or Bhutan, BIMSTEC and other multilateral initiatives in the Bay of Bengal region are attractive because they increase their bargaining power and mitigate India’s overbearing capabilities in a bilateral setting. Modi seems to have embraced this strategic altruism.⁷² As senior Indian official Preeti Saran has emphasized, “India is aware of the fact that it is the largest country in the region and it is prepared to take on asymmetric commitments in BIMSTEC.”⁷³

Third, on a related note, India must be prepared to invest more resources in BIMSTEC. The effectiveness of New Delhi’s leadership will hinge on its ability to match words with deeds and, more importantly, inject hard capital into the organization. India already finances the largest share of the secretariat’s budget (approximately 32 percent).⁷⁴ Its budgetary allocation for the organization and related activities has expanded exponentially from 1.2 million rupees (roughly \$18,000) in 2015–2016 to 60 million rupees in 2017–2018 (roughly \$938,000), but this is still far less than what New Delhi allocated to the Commonwealth (100 million rupees or \$1.5 million) or to SAARC (120 million rupees or \$1.9 million).⁷⁵ Speedier disbursement of these funds would also help enhance the organization’s functioning and visibility.

For BIMSTEC to flourish, India (as the region’s most powerful country) will have to step up, invest resources, and sustain interest in the Bay of Bengal’s leading institution.

Fourth, New Delhi ought to take the initiative when appropriate. India's greatest contribution to BIMSTEC will come from its ability to lead by example. It can do so by advancing cooperation in the four working groups it chairs: Transport and Communication, Tourism, Environment and Disaster Management, and Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime. In 2017, for example, New Delhi took the lead by drafting and circulating texts for agreements on motor vehicle and coastal shipping connectivity.⁷⁶ Such diplomatic initiative is a vital means of signaling commitment, sustaining the organization's positive momentum, and driving cooperation.

Reach Beyond the Region

As BIMSTEC returns to the global limelight, it may face increasing pressures to expand its membership and external partnerships. To prevent members and other potential outside partners from working at cross-purposes, BIMSTEC will have to devise flexible ways to interact with other organizations and actors operating across the Bay of Bengal region.

The first challenge is defining the scope of the Bay of Bengal region and BIMSTEC's membership. The organization currently delineates the bay region rather narrowly based on its current membership. But geographically speaking, the bay should be conceived of in broader terms because, as historian Sunil Amrith underlines, "from the perspective of political and cultural history, to write of the Bay of Bengal without considering the Malay Peninsula would be meaningless."⁷⁷ Accordingly, Sri Lanka's prime minister refers to Indonesia and Malaysia as "Bay of Bengal nations."⁷⁸

The issue becomes even more complex given the rising informal interest of extraregional states in joining or working more closely with BIMSTEC, including Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, and even the European Union.⁷⁹ For the time being, however, expansion of BIMSTEC membership or any other type of affiliation has actually remained frozen since Nepal and Bhutan joined in 2004, and BIMSTEC has indicated no plans to change this. Explaining this stance, an Indian official notes that it is important to "first focus on [internal] consolidation before expansion."⁸⁰

The second challenge pertains to how BIMSTEC can interact more effectively with other multilateral organizations, especially those already active in and around the Bay of Bengal region. Prashant Agrawal, India's joint secretary who deals with the organization, has noted that while "BIMSTEC stands on its own," at the same time "we should synergize and not work at cross-purposes" with SAARC or any other regional organization.⁸¹

Initially, BIMSTEC was enthusiastic about reaching out to other international institutions.⁸² The ADB, in particular, repeatedly tried to engage BIMSTEC, forwarding a collaboration project in 2005.⁸³ However, after these efforts finally led to the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics

Study (BTILS), one official familiar with the process recalls that India was not willing to support the ADB's follow-up proposal to set up an implementation and monitoring unit embedded within the BIMSTEC secretariat.⁸⁴ Such reluctance about external involvement seems to have been overcome, as demonstrated by New Delhi's recent offer to host a "regional hub" for the ADB's operations in South Asia.⁸⁵

On the challenges of both expansion and coordination with other organizations, BIMSTEC should consider revisiting some aspects of its current stance on expansion in four specific ways. First, BIMSTEC should consider offering an observer status. This possibility was discussed in 1998, and the second senior officials meeting forwarded this very recommendation, along with draft criteria, to the subsequent ministerial meeting.⁸⁶ In 2002, before joining as a full member, Nepal attended a senior officials meeting as an observer.⁸⁷ Based on this precedent, BIMSTEC should develop clear criteria for an observer status for other countries and international organizations. In the words of two former Indian diplomats, this would make it easier to "get other countries or other institutions involved in specific projects" and allow BIMSTEC to connect with "natural partners" beyond the region, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.⁸⁸

Second, BIMSTEC should seek to involve other regional institutions in some of its key initiatives, especially relating to connectivity. Building on the 2017 BRICS outreach summit, BIMSTEC must develop more regular channels of communication with various counterparts active in the Bay of Bengal region. This includes leveraging strategic partnerships with ASEAN and similar connectivity efforts by the ADB (particularly the SASEC), the World Bank and its regional country offices, the United Nations' Bangkok-based Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and the MGC and CMLV initiatives. On the maritime front, BIMSTEC would benefit from consultations, coordination, and cooperation with the IORA. While, in principle, BIMSTEC should also consider engaging with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the BCIM, and even the BRI, India's increasing reluctance to work through such China-driven initiatives are likely to stall any such efforts by other member states.

Third, BIMSTEC should seek to revive subregional mechanisms. It must avoid the risk of requiring unanimity among all member states to make any significant decisions—an approach that has undermined SAARC repeatedly. Instead, members should develop mechanisms that allow for tailored and clustered trilateral and quadrilateral cooperation among a few member states in certain instances. In 1997, BIMSTEC was clearly targeted at fostering subregional cooperation, with a founding declaration that emphasized its mandate as "an additionality to and not [meant to] be a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation."⁸⁹ Twenty years later, while the organization has at least partially succeeded in carving out a distinct regional character, its subregional

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

Fourth, BIMSTEC would do well to keep China out. Beijing poses a particular challenge, as it has informally expressed interest in obtaining observer status within BIMSTEC and in rendering specific project support.⁹⁰ While bringing China into BIMSTEC could lead to immediate financial dividends,

Connectivity will emerge as BIMSTEC's key challenge for the next few years, and all member states should make this area their utmost priority.

it would also likely weaken the organization in the long term, given Beijing's history of adopting divide-and-rule practices toward other regional organizations like ASEAN and the EU.⁹¹ According to one Indian official, in 2017, China tried to pressure Nepal to "go slow" on BIMSTEC and, instead, push for a revival of SAARC, which includes Pakistan and to which China is an observer.⁹² Given these concerns, at least in the short run, it would be advisable

to insulate BIMSTEC from any geopolitical competition and protect its multilateral corridors from Chinese diplomatic interference. This could be achieved by establishing clear criteria for membership, including geographic continuity to the Bay of Bengal. If the organization decides to institute an observer status, Beijing could then be invited along with other extraregional powers and multilateral institutions to develop a more formal, albeit limited, relationship.

Deepening Sector-Specific Cooperation

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

Enhance Physical Connectivity

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

The appalling current state of affairs is apparent in two areas especially. First, in continental terms, the India-Myanmar border remains one of Asia's

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

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

First, BIMSTEC should push members to implement existing infrastructure projects that it has already designated as priorities. BIMSTEC launched the seeds of connectivity in the region after it endorsed the BTILS in 2009. It must now revive its recommendations and ensure member states implement them. Out of the 166 infrastructure projects the BTILS identified, sixty-five were given priority—more than half (thirty-three) of which are either in Bangladesh or India. This includes thirty-five projects for road connectivity, twelve projects for railways, and nine each for air and maritime connectivity.⁹⁷ The inaugural meeting of the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group, held in Thailand in 2016 with the ADB's support, must be urgently followed up on.⁹⁸

Second, BIMSTEC should seek other ways to facilitate the free flow of vehicles, vessels, energy, and information throughout the region, so as to deepen integration beyond hard infrastructure projects. As promised in the 2017 ministerial meeting, BIMSTEC must expedite the adoption of the Framework Agreement on Transit, Transshipment and Movement of Vehicular Traffic and the Coastal Shipping Agreement.⁹⁹ In addition, after the establishment of a BIMSTEC Energy Center, the organization must sign and build on the memorandum of understanding for the establishment of a BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection, which would be an important confidence-building measure for electricity-deficient states such as Bangladesh and Myanmar. Finally, building on the new JIPMER-BIMSTEC Telemedicine Network and the experience of the South Asia Satellite launched earlier this year by India, the organization should also develop resources for a BIMSTEC satellite to share medical, educational, and climate information.

Third, BIMSTEC should devote particular attention to an oft-neglected aspect of regional connectivity: linking the mountain and maritime economies adjacent to the Bay of Bengal. The organization's members should focus on

multimodal connectivity projects that link the Himalayan regions in Bhutan, India, and Nepal to the coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal. Besides geostrategic advantages, such ties would give export-intensive industries in the landlocked highlands a maritime outlet. The development of inland waterways, especially through Bangladesh, will be essential for increasing such alternative transportation connectivity. India's attempts to offer Nepal privileged coastal access through Visakhapatnam, in Andhra Pradesh, marks a positive step in this direction.¹⁰⁰

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

Encourage Trade

Another way BIMSTEC can help further regional integration is to take a leading role in facilitating smoother trade flows of goods and services, as well as investments, across some of the world's most formidable geographic and protectionist barriers. Such efforts will start from a low baseline. Between 2002 and 2014, the share of intraregional trade among BIMSTEC member states rose from 3.6 to just 4.3 percent.¹⁰¹ This remains significantly lower than comparable figures in any other regional trade bloc, including 7 percent among SAARC members, 16 percent among South American Common Market (Mercosur) countries, and 29 percent among ASEAN states.¹⁰² Similarly, BIMSTEC's 3.4 percent share in the world's total foreign direct investment stock is less than half of ASEAN's.¹⁰³ For India, in particular, the BIMSTEC economies continue to represent a negligible fraction of its total trade balance, worth 7 percent of its total exports (\$22 billion) and 2 percent of its imports (\$9 billion).¹⁰⁴

Though driven from the outset by an economic agenda, BIMSTEC has struggled for twenty years to advance integration. Beginning with a 2004 framework agreement for a BIMSTEC FTA, enthusiastic attempts to liberalize trade across the region have failed to make any significant impact. Twenty rounds of talks by BIMSTEC's Trade Negotiation Committee have been held since then; the last one, in late 2015, ended in stark disagreement and the process stalled.¹⁰⁵

In 2016, as part of its renewed focus on BIMSTEC, the Indian government voiced support for reviving negotiations on the FTA among BIMSTEC members. There seems to be little hope for any major breakthrough in the short term.¹⁰⁶ It is worth considering, then, what other dimensions of economic cooperation can be pursued instead of, or in parallel to, trade talks. In that spirit, Sri Lankan analyst Saman Kelegama has noted:

BIMSTEC should not have high hopes on an FTA coming into operation. Indications are that it will drag on for a long time. In this situation, more emphasis should be given to trade facilitation via liberal transit, business-friendly customs, transport corridors, etc. Such a process will partly address some of the non-tariff barriers in the region and catalyze trade.¹⁰⁷

While the issue of physical connectivity has taken center stage instead of trade, there are parallel ways for BIMSTEC to push the trade and economic agendas forward in the meantime. First, BIMSTEC members can consider settling for a limited FTA. Given a variety of obstacles facing trade talks, a limited trade deal is currently better than no deal at all. As Sri Lanka's state minister for foreign affairs, Vasantha Senanayake, has pointed out, "the relevance of BIMSTEC may truly be envisioned only after the proposed FTA comes to fruition."¹⁰⁸ Former BIMSTEC secretary general Sumith Nakandala concurs: "Let's do the bad deal [and] then revisit it later [because the] FTA is a necessary first step."¹⁰⁹ More than a face-saving exercise, a curtailed FTA would in all likelihood bring at least some benefits to the organization's least-developed economies, especially Bangladesh and Nepal.¹¹⁰ As Prabir De has noted, such an agreement could help maintain BIMSTEC's institutional "momentum" and keep the "engine" of integration running for another few years.¹¹¹

Second, BIMSTEC can seek to target nontariff trade barriers. However bold it may be, a BIMSTEC FTA will only prove beneficial if nontariff barriers are brought down among the organization's member states as well. Prabir De has emphasized that these less tangible obstacles are the "actual culprits" impeding integration. He has urged that in parallel to tariff negotiations, BIMSTEC should sequentially focus on facilitating the (1) mutual recognition of national standards, (2) harmonization and development of common standards, and (3) identification and targeted exploration of existing value chains across the region.¹¹²

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

Fourth, BIMSTEC should consider declaring the bay a blue economic zone. The general idea is that a blue economy seeks to "promote economic growth,

BIMSTEC can help further regional integration is to take a leading role in facilitating smoother trade flows of goods and services, as well as investments, across some of the world's most formidable geographic and protectionist barriers.

social inclusion, and the preservation or improvement of livelihoods while at the same time ensuring environmental sustainability of the oceans and coastal areas.¹¹³ Accordingly, BIMSTEC should build on Bangladesh's initiative to develop a Bay of Bengal blue economy partnership.¹¹⁴ A first step could be to develop a variety of codes of conduct for resource exploration that could eventually become binding on all private actors operating in member states. The UN's Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project, set up in 2008 with several regional partners, offers an interesting model that could be replicated.

Identify Secondary Priority Areas

To increase the effectiveness of cooperation, BIMSTEC will have to resist the temptation to do too much at the same time and instead focus on consolidating its limited resources on a few priority sectors. Such progress is contingent on many of aforementioned organizational reforms. After being founded with just six working groups, BIMSTEC added seven new areas for cooperation in 2005 and another one in 2008. Its fourteen current sectors include issues ranging from climate change to tourism, with different lead countries and further subgroups.¹¹⁵ Officials from different countries have pointed to BIMSTEC's broad portfolio as one of the organization's principle weaknesses, hindering efforts to deepen focused cooperation in key areas. At the 2014 summit, India's External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid suggested that BIMSTEC focus on just five areas: connectivity, economic cooperation, energy, security, and people-to-people exchanges.¹¹⁶

Beyond just reducing the number of sectors, BIMSTEC should employ the right criteria to identify what specific areas are ripe for further collaborative efforts. The most important condition in this regard is a realistic assessment of how feasible it is to ensure the participation and involvement of member states, rather than letting ambitious agendas divert the organization's limited resources. Tangible success in one area, however small, tends to reduce reluctance and increase incentives for member states to collaborate again in other areas. By focusing on a few priority areas and sequencing them, cooperative behavior could progressively spill over into new areas, deepening regional integration. For former Bangladeshi diplomat Tariq Karim, BIMSTEC should therefore "focus on can-do sectors first" and "leave others for later."¹¹⁷ There are various ways to achieve this. Each member's rotating chairmanship could, for example, focus on one specific area that each country could then continue to lead after its chairmanship ends, or the organization could revive attempts to have dedicated annual themes.¹¹⁸ Beyond such formal initiatives, four specific areas have potential to serve as priorities for cooperation.

First, BIMSTEC offers the ideal platform for member states to devise an internal code of conduct and best practices to regulate fisheries and protect the Bay of Bengal from overfishing, given that this significant challenge to the bay's

ecosystem is chiefly a problem among BIMSTEC members.¹¹⁹ In recent years, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar have adopted domestic protective measures, including seasonal bans, to protect their marine resources.¹²⁰ However, foreign fishing trawlers regularly violate these regulations, leading to detention and complex repatriation processes that often escalate and affect bilateral relationships.¹²¹ BIMSTEC should facilitate a dialogue aimed at implementing multi-lateral mechanisms that regulate sustainable fishing in the Bay of Bengal and, in case of conflict, offer mediation and support efforts aimed at resolution.

Second, BIMSTEC should help its members coordinate their national efforts to monitor the environment. Faced with the disruptive impact of climate change and natural disasters, the Bay of Bengal countries would benefit from pooling their scientific and technological resources to mitigate the effects of climate change. According to one 2015 study, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar in particular were profoundly affected by extreme weather events between 1994 and 2013.¹²² These environmental challenges are not restricted to coastal states but also affect the wider Himalayan region, connected through the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) River Basin. Stretching across 1.7 million square kilometers, the GBM is the third largest freshwater outlet into the world's oceans and is home to 630 million people in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal.¹²³ BIMSTEC should prioritize efforts to set up regional mechanisms that allow member states to coordinate, cooperate, and share their national resources to monitor and forecast a variety of natural phenomena, including monsoons, winds, tides, riverine flows, and pollution levels.

Third, BIMSTEC should promote the Bay of Bengal region as an integrated tourism area. Speaking at the Colombo International Maritime Conference, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe noted that "the Bay of Bengal has the potential to be the [world's] biggest [tourist] destination, even rivalling the Caribbean."¹²⁴ Following ASEAN's example in Southeast Asia, BIMSTEC members should launch joint campaigns to promote the entire region, emphasizing its shared heritage and many man-made and natural wonders. By facilitating a dialogue on best practices and strategic plans to develop tourism across borders, BIMSTEC could indirectly create the conditions for greater regional connectivity and mobility. Given the Bay of Bengal's cultural and religious links, there is particular potential to increase intraregional tourist flows by facilitating visa-free travel. For example, defying the logic of geographic proximity, currently the number of Indians visiting the United States (1.2 million) is almost as many as the number of those visiting the other six BIMSTEC countries combined (1.6 million).¹²⁵ The 2017 announcement of a BIMSTEC Tourism Fund and Network of Tour Operators is a step in the right direction.

Rekindle People-to-People Ties

Given the Bay of Bengal's abysmal levels of intraregional connectivity in recent decades, it is essential for BIMSTEC to foster people-to-people links that can help revive a sense of common belonging in the Bay of Bengal. Former BIMSTEC secretary general Sumith Nakandala has thus stated that the organization's main mission is "to re-enable the environment of cooperation and community in the Bay of Bengal."¹²⁶ This requires an investment into less tangible forms of connectivity that increase flows of knowledge among scholars, experts, and various other key audiences in different BIMSTEC countries. High-quality research and mutual exposure to counterparts in other member states can accelerate the rediscovery of a common narrative in which the Bay of Bengal is a distinct community with its own historical, cultural, and geo-strategic character. Former Thai ambassador Kobsak Chutikul underlines that "when we imagine a bridge spanning the Bay of Bengal it is not only physical infrastructure—a two-lane highway for trucks—but also a bridge of the mind, a bridge for imagination."¹²⁷ To foster such exchanges through expanded people-to-people ties, BIMSTEC must focus on three fronts:

It is essential for BIMSTEC to foster people-to-people links that can help revive a sense of common belonging in the Bay of Bengal.

First, BIMSTEC ought to aim to bolster its brand. Despite celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 2017, the organization remains largely unknown to most people in BIMSTEC states beyond government officials. To change this, member states must shore up their budgets for promotional campaigns and activities, following India's lead this year, as New Delhi announced that it would dedicate new funds to "enhance the visibility of 'Brand BIMSTEC.'"¹²⁸ The organization's annual foundation day, marked on June 6, could be renamed Bay of Bengal Day with a wider set of celebratory initiatives across the region. Finally, the name BIMSTEC is one of the longest and most complex names among regional organizations, a fact that has prompted many experts to suggest a change. The Bay of Bengal Community would be one option.

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

Third, BIMSTEC ought to strive to foster community through academic exchanges. No new Bay of Bengal narrative will emerge unless scholars are incentivized to dig into the past and recover the rich sense of community that animated the region until the twentieth century. As historian Sunil Amrith has pointed out, the "hope for a new regionalism lies in recognizing that the bay's history, as much as its ecology, transcends national frontiers."¹²⁹ In coordination with BIMSTEC, member states should commit dedicated resources for cross-country scholarship that identifies both past and present flows of people, capital, and ideas across the region. This should also include specific BIMSTEC scholarships and grants for educational exchanges and collaborative research programs, visiting chairs, and a network of universities focusing on the Bay of Bengal region. Following the Thai government's announcement of a new BIMSTEC Center, other member states should also be encouraged to designate nodal research institutions for Track 2 and other people-to-people initiatives.

Conclusion

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

Such differences, however, will remain on paper as long as BIMSTEC is not backed politically. This is the single most important—and only necessary—factor for the organization to increase its capacity to implement all the above recommendations and, in so doing, contribute to reviving regionalism in and around the Bay of Bengal. It is, therefore, imperative for governments of BIMSTEC's seven member states, and of India in particular, to commit financial and political resources beyond mere expressions of intention and support. Repeated delays and the consequent inability to hold the fourth BIMSTEC summit on the organization's twentieth anniversary in 2017 does not demonstrate such commitment.

The organization now faces an opportunity to realize the vision of an integrated economic space and a bridge between South and Southeast Asia that drove its founding members. Whether it is India's Act East policy, Thailand's Look West strategy, Nepal's search for a coastal connection, or Bangladesh's

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commitment to take a leading role in promoting a new brand of regionalism, the interests of BIMSTEC's seven member states are finally aligned. The key word will be connectivity—be it maritime hubs, riverine links from the Himalayas and hinterland regions to the coast, economic topics like free trade and investments, or the cultural foundations of people-to-people exchanges. Such cross-border linkages in and around the Bay of Bengal are crucial for establishing the region as a distinct economic space and cultural community.

On the other hand, while the organization is pivotally important for fostering economic integration around the Bay of Bengal, this should not preclude its member states from pursuing parallel paths to increase connectivity between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. As the only multilateral organization focused on the Bay of Bengal, BIMSTEC's priority areas, in fact, overlap with and complement many other initiatives that seek to bridge what remains one of the world's least integrated regions.

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

Notes

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