

Recalibrating Regionalism: India's Foreign Policy Shift from SAARC to BIMSTEC in the Post-2014 Modi Era

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ABSTRACT

In international politics, **regionalism** refers to the process by which countries within a specific geographic area form alliances, organizations, or agreements to promote cooperation in economic, political, security, or cultural domains. Since the end of World War II, regionalism has been a prominent feature of international relations, enabling neighbouring states to manage their interactions more effectively and pursue shared objectives. For India, regional groupings have served as crucial platforms for advancing national interests both regionally and globally. Indian policymakers have consistently recognized the strategic value of engaging with regional organizations, ensuring active participation in response to shifting geopolitical and economic trends.

By the early 21st century, a combination of domestic developments and changes in the regional environment prompted a recalibration of New Delhi's regional engagement strategy. This marked a broader transition in India's approach—from one largely shaped by political and ideological considerations to a more pragmatic and strategic orientation influenced by globalization and the evolving regional balance of power. Consequently, India's regional engagement, particularly in South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific, has entered a new phase of transformation.

As traditional mechanisms such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) became increasingly dysfunctional—mainly due to persistent India-Pakistan tensions—India began turning toward sub-regional initiatives and extra-regional partnerships. In this context, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic

Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has emerged as a more viable and dynamic platform for pursuing India's regional aspirations. BIMSTEC's rising prominence in India's foreign policy is underpinned by a blend of strategic, economic, and geopolitical considerations. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, this pivot has gained further momentum, reflecting New Delhi's desire to reconfigure regional cooperation frameworks in line with contemporary challenges and opportunities.

This paper analyses how India has shifted from relying on traditional regional organizations like SAARC—which has been hampered by geopolitical tensions—to adopting a more pragmatic, strategic, and diversified regional engagement. The study particularly highlights the growing significance of BIMSTEC in India's foreign policy as a viable alternative for promoting economic, strategic, and political cooperation in the South Asian and Indo-Pacific regions. .

Keywords: *Regionalism, SAARC, BIMSTEC, Neighbourhood First policy, Act East Policy, Indo-Pacific region*

Introduction:

In International politics, regionalism refers to the process through which countries in a specific geographic region form alliances, organizations, or agreements to promote economic, political, security, or cultural cooperation. Examples include the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), ASEAN, and SAARC etc. Regionalism can be defined in the context of international relations, as 'the expression of a shared identity and purpose. It is combined with the creation and implementation of institutions that manifest regional identity and shape activity within that particular region' (Bloor, 2022). Regionalism has become a widely adopted approach to international cooperation, helping neighbouring countries manage their relationships and work together more effectively. Since the end of World War II, regionalism has been a major feature of international relations, evolving through two distinct phases: the Cold War and the post-Cold War periods. During the Cold War, regionalism was largely driven by the bipolar power struggle, leading to the formation of strategic regional blocs. In the post-Cold War era, shifts in the global power structure diminished the political necessity of such blocs, giving rise to more flexible and cooperative regional arrangements (Barbieri, 2019). However, regionalism gained renewed momentum after the end of the Cold War,

especially under the influence of globalization. This new wave of regionalism extended beyond traditional political and security concerns to encompass a wide range of issues, including trade and investment, health and sanitation, education and research, science and technology, environmental protection, and people-to-people exchanges. It also began to address complex global challenges such as terrorism, drug trafficking, human rights, and the promotion of democracy (Paul, 2020).

Theories of Regionalism

Scholarly discourse identifies several key theories —each offering a distinct perspective on how and why regional integration occurs, and how it shapes international relations across political, economic, and security dimensions. Let us look at some major theories to regionalism.

- **Functionalism and Neo-Functionalism:**

These theories, associated with scholars like David Mitrany and Ernst Haas, emphasize the functional benefits of regional integration. Functionalism argues that functional cooperation among countries of the world could begin in non-political, economic, social and other technical areas and this cooperation gradually leads to broader integration (Mitrany, 1948). Neo-functionalism, on the other hand, specifically focuses on regional integration, particularly in the context of the European Union. This theory emphasizes how supranational organizations facilitate regional integration and how cooperation in one policy area can lead to spill over effects, prompting further integration in related areas (Haas, 1964).

- **Constructivism:**

Constructivist theory emphasizes the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping regionalism. It emphasizes that regionalism is not just about material interests but also about shared values and collective identities. States join regional groups because they identify with the values and norms promoted within the region (Jhuswanto, 2024).

- **Neo-realism (Structural Realism):**

Neo-realism, often associated with scholars like Kenneth Waltz, emphasizes the role of power and the distribution of power in the international system. In the context of regionalism, neorealism posits that states form regional organizations to enhance their security and maximize their interests. These regional organizations serve as mechanisms for balancing against external threats. Neorealists argue that regional organizations may help states mitigate

the inherent anarchy of the international system by providing a platform for negotiation and cooperation among states with common security concerns (Waltz, 1979).

- **Liberal Intergovernmentalism**

This theory posits that states remain the primary drivers of regional integration. It argues that cooperation results from intergovernmental bargaining, where states pursue their preferences through negotiations while retaining sovereignty. This framework offers insights into the complex interplay of interests, negotiations, and institutional arrangements shaping processes such as European integration (Kim, 2024).

- **Liberal Institutionalism:**

This theory focuses on international institutions and cooperation. In the context of regionalism, liberal institutionalism suggests that states form regional organizations to achieve common goals, such as economic integration, environmental protection, or the promotion of human rights. These regional institutions provide a structured framework for cooperation and conflict resolution. Liberal institutionalists argue that regional organizations help states overcome collective action problems and enable more effective coordination (Devitt, 2011).

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive toolkit for analyzing the diverse forms and trajectories of regionalism across the world.

India's Evolving Regionalism: Strategic Recalibration

Regional organizations play a critical role in shaping the foreign policy behaviour of member states, while also serving as strategic instruments through which countries pursue their foreign policy objectives. For India, regional groupings have become essential platforms for projecting national interests, both regionally and globally. India's governing elites have consistently recognized the value of engaging with regional organizations, ensuring active participation in line with shifting geopolitical and economic trends (Kumar, 2024).

The contemporary international landscape has experienced profound transformations, marked by events such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, recurrent global economic disruptions, and the assertive rise of emerging powers like China. In response, India has increasingly emphasized regional collaboration as a means to address complex global challenges. This shift signifies a broader transition in India's approach to regional cooperation—from one driven by political

and ideological motivations to a more pragmatic and strategic orientation shaped by globalization and evolving power dynamics (Kim, 2024, p.2).

This transformation began in earnest during the early 1990s, with the launch of the 'Look East' policy (now Act East) and the articulation of the 'Gujral Doctrine'. However, by the turn of the 21st century, both domestic developments and changes in the regional environment necessitated a recalibration of New Delhi's regional engagement strategy. Two key factors have been particularly influential in this regard. First, India's economic liberalization in the 1990s triggered sustained economic growth, necessitating a stable regional environment to maintain this momentum. Second, China's growing influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific heightened India's strategic anxieties, reinforcing the need to preserve and expand its regional influence (Yhome & Maini, 2017, p.153).

However, India's regional engagement, particularly within South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, has entered a new phase of transformation. Traditional multilateral frameworks such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have largely become moribund, primarily due to enduring tensions between India and Pakistan. As a result, India has shifted its focus towards sub-regional initiatives and extra-regional partnerships to advance its strategic and economic interests. The stagnation of SAARC, which Indian strategic analyst C. Raja Mohan once described as a "slow boat to nowhere," has been a major factor prompting India to explore alternative avenues for regional cooperation (Das, 2019).

In contrast to SAARC's stagnation, BIMSTEC has emerged as a more promising platform for India's regional aspirations in 21st century. BIMSTEC's growing importance in India's foreign policy calculus is driven by a combination of strategic, economic, and geopolitical factors. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been instrumental in advancing this shift. In 2016, he hosted a BIMSTEC leaders' retreat on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit, a move widely viewed as a turning point in India's regional strategy (Yhome, 2016). His invitation to BIMSTEC leaders for his 2019 swearing-in ceremony—unlike the SAARC leaders invited in 2014—further underscored India's shift in regional focus (Dutta, 2019). India's Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, has affirmed that BIMSTEC aligns with India's 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies, signalling the strategic value attached to this grouping. India views BIMSTEC not only as a platform for cooperation but also as a means of enhancing its geopolitical standing and economic integration across South and Southeast

Asia (Shishir & Sakib, 2022). This commitment was reiterated during the 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Thailand, where Prime Minister Modi outlined a 21-point agenda for collaboration across multiple sectors (Press Information Bureau. 2025).

Before examining India's shifting focus from SAARC to BIMSTEC, it is essential to first understand the decline of SAARC and the concurrent rise of BIMSTEC as a preferred platform for regional cooperation.

Decline of SAARC:

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka on 8 December 1985. SAARC comprises of eight Member States: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The Secretariat of the Association was set up in Kathmandu on 17 January 1987. The objectives of SAARC, as stated in its Charter, include promoting the welfare and quality of life of South Asians, accelerating regional economic, social, and cultural development, and fostering opportunities for individuals to realize their potential. It also aims to enhance collective self-reliance, build mutual trust and understanding, encourage cooperation in various fields, and strengthen ties with other developing countries and international organizations with shared goals (SAARC, 2020).

Key Factors behind SAARC's Decline

Despite its existence since the 1980s, SAARC has been unable to achieve its objects due to several reasons. SAARC has been plagued by terrorism for decades, but that is not the only issue holding back the regional grouping. Political rivalries, economic disparities, and changing geopolitical dynamics have also played a significant role in undermining SAARC's prospects.

Political Rivalries: SAARC's trajectory has been marred by persistent challenges, primarily stemming from the complex and often antagonistic relationship between India and Pakistan. Deep-seated mistrust and conflicting strategic interests have prevented meaningful cooperation on key issues. The India-Pakistan rivalry, particularly over terrorism and Kashmir, has been the most significant impediment to SAARC's effectiveness. The tensions between the two have caused great damage to SAARC, often stunting its growth and development. Pakistan's support for cross-border terrorism has further strained relations with

India, leading to heightened tensions and a breakdown of dialogue. The 2016 terror attack in Uri and the subsequent cancellation of the SAARC summit in Islamabad epitomize the extent to which the India-Pakistan conflict has paralysed the organization (Bugaliya, 2025). Pakistan's frequent opposition to India-led initiatives, such as the SAARC Satellite and Motor Vehicles Agreement, demonstrates this issue and hamper SAARC's working and many planned projects and initiatives remain in abeyance and Summits unfruitful (Bhattacharjee, 2018). The recent Pahalgam attack in April, during which terrorists linked to Pakistan-based groups killed 26 civilians in the Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, has further deepened regional mistrust and dealt a blow to any hopes of reviving SAARC (Bhowmick, 2025).

Economic Cooperation Remains Limited: Although SAARC was set up nearly four decades ago with a vision to promote economic and social development of South Asian region, the institution has not been able to facilitate economic integration among South Asian states in terms of healthy exports in any significant manner. The SAARC Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was established in 2006 with the hope of acting as a catalyst for SAARC economic integration by promoting trade, facilitating investment, and reducing barriers to regional trade. Despite this, intra-regional trade has not made significant progress. In fact, economic and trade activity among SAARC countries is still very low (Haque, 2025).

Structural and Decision-Making Weaknesses: SAARC's requirement for unanimity in decision-making often leads to deadlocks. SAARC operates on the principle of unanimity, meaning that all decisions require the consent of every member state. This structure allows any country, particularly India or Pakistan, to veto or block initiatives, resulting in deadlock. This inability to bypass political differences or manage regional conflicts has restricted SAARC's effectiveness (Gajjar, 2024). Important agreements, such as the SAARC Motor Vehicles Agreement and Regional Railways Agreement, remain unsigned due to lack of consensus.

External Influence: The geopolitical influence of external powers, such as China and the United States, has added complexity to SAARC's internal dynamics. China's growing presence in South Asia, especially through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has drawn some SAARC members away from a unified approach to regional issues. It is said that this could be an occasion for the breakup of the SAARC alliance. China's aim is not

precisely to build up SAARC, but to create an alternative alliance in the name of development that excludes India (Haque, 2025). Pakistan's alignment with China contrasts sharply with India's cautious approach, adding to the discord.

Failure to Address Regional Security Issues: Differing threat perceptions among member states hinder security cooperation. Example: India's concerns over cross-border terrorism from Pakistan remain unresolved, stalling progress in regional security initiatives. SAARC has not been able to develop a collective security framework. Terrorism remains a divisive issue, with no consensus on addressing cross-border terrorism due to conflicting national interests (Laskar, 2020).

Internal Instability in Member States: Several SAARC countries face internal political instability or conflicts, such as civil wars, military coups, and ethnic insurgencies, which detract from their ability to engage meaningfully in regional cooperation (Ali, 2024). For example, Afghanistan's internal conflicts, Bangladesh's crisis further undermine SAARC's cohesion.

This has contributed to a perception of SAARC, which has come to be seen as an ineffective regional organization, hindered by deep-rooted political rivalries—especially between India and Pakistan and limited economic integration. While terrorism is often cited as a key obstacle, it is only one part of a broader dysfunction that includes economic disparities and shifting geopolitical interests. Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar notably described it as a “jammed vehicle” (The Times of India, 26 October 2017), a characterization that aptly captures the organization's prolonged stagnation, particularly its inability to convene a summit since the 2016 Uri attack.

The Rise of BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional grouping for fostering cooperation between South and Southeast Asian countries across multiple sectors. It was established in 1997 with the signing of the Bangkok Declaration. The organisation comprises seven Member States: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand from the Bay of Bengal region (BIMSTEC, 2025a). The main aim of the regional group was the promotion of economic cooperation between countries bordering the Bay of Bengal. It coordinates sectoral work and

facilitates inter-governmental cooperation among members in priority areas. Initially, key areas of cooperation were limited to six sectors like trade, technology, tourism, transport, fisheries and energy. Later in 2008, new sectors for cooperation were incorporated like agriculture, poverty alleviation, public health, environment, climate change, people-to-people contact and counter-terrorism (BIMSTEC, 2025b).

The following are the key factors driving the rise of BIMSTEC as a significant regional organization.

Avoiding Political Deadlocks: The strategic exclusion of politically sensitive states such as Pakistan makes it possible for BIMSTEC to operate smoothly without the tendency of producing deadlock, which usually stagnates operations of SAARC (Pandey & Pandey, 2024, p 47). This provides the member states with an opportunity to concentrate on areas of mutual concern with the conflict of interest being deemphasized. The very lack of such antagonistic relations helps BIMSTEC to gradually perform more effectively.

Economic Potential: In addition to political stability, BIMSTEC possesses significant economic potential. Unlike SAARC, whose agenda has often been constrained by political tensions and bilateral disputes, BIMSTEC distinguishes itself by maintaining a development-oriented focus. The organization prioritizes trade expansion, investment facilitation, and regional integration, reflecting its pragmatic and goal-driven approach. Key initiatives, such as the proposed Free Trade Area (FTA) and the envisioned maritime trade corridor, underscore BIMSTEC's ambition to emerge as a dynamic economic bloc. Collectively, the member states represent a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) exceeding \$3.5 trillion, with largely untapped potential in sectors such as energy, tourism, and technology. The region's strategic geographic location—serving as a bridge between South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean—further amplifies its economic significance (Pandey & Pandey, 2024, p. 47-48).

Focus on the Blue Economy: Given BIMSTEC's geographical orientation around the Bay of Bengal, the blue economy has emerged as a strategic priority within the organization's agenda. Particular emphasis is placed on the sustainable utilization of marine resources—an imperative for member states that are significantly dependent on sea-borne trade and fisheries. BIMSTEC initiatives in this area include the adoption of sustainable fishing techniques, the protection of the marine environment, and the enhancement of coastal and maritime connectivity (Bhatia, 2022). This focus on maritime cooperation marks a notable

departure from SAARC's predominantly land-based orientation. By capitalizing on the region's geographic and economic potential, BIMSTEC seeks to strengthen logistics and trade networks. Such maritime connectivity not only facilitates accelerated economic development but also supports the broader objective of promoting regional integration between South and Southeast Asia.

Enhanced Connectivity: Connectivity is a central pillar of BIMSTEC's agenda, particularly in the area of transport infrastructure. This focus is reflected in the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS), which identifies priority multimodal transit transport projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project **and the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway** (Pandey & Pandey, 2024, p. 47). These initiatives aim to facilitate greater regional mobility, thereby supporting economic development, trade facilitation, and deeper integration among member states. BIMSTEC's emphasis on economic cooperation, regional connectivity, and technical collaboration is especially relevant in today's interconnected world.

Relevance in Geopolitics: BIMSTEC holds significant geopolitical relevance by strategically linking South Asia and Southeast Asia, positioning itself as a vital actor in regional politics (Pukhrem, 2024). In contrast, SAARC has seen a decline in importance, largely due to its inability to adapt to emerging geopolitical realities and capitalize on new strategic opportunities. Within the evolving Indo-Pacific framework, BIMSTEC presents a more viable alternative by prioritizing economic integration, technical cooperation, and connectivity. Its pragmatic and forward-looking approach aligns well with the strategic interests of its member states, enabling it to play a constructive role in shaping regional architecture and fostering collaboration across a diverse yet interconnected region.

While SAARC has not fulfilled the expectations initially placed upon it, BIMSTEC emerges as a natural and pragmatic alternative for fostering regional cooperation in South Asia. Its stated priorities—economic growth, connectivity, and the pursuit of shared objectives position it as a potentially powerful mechanism for regional integration and development. In the evolving global landscape, particularly with the strategic shift of focus towards Asia, BIMSTEC occupies a crucial position. As a bridge between South and Southeast Asia, it holds considerable promise in shaping the future regional architecture.

India's Shift in Focus: from SAARC to BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC occupies a strategically vital position in the Bay of Bengal, serving as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. This region, integral to the wider Indo-Pacific, is critical for maritime security, connectivity, and economic integration. For India, BIMSTEC offers a platform to deepen maritime cooperation, enhance trade links with South-east Asia and East Asia, and reinforce its geopolitical presence. At the 2017 BIMSTEC summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized its significance, describing it as a “natural platform to fulfil our key foreign policy priorities of Neighbourhood First and Act East,” given its connection not only between South and Southeast Asia but also between the ecologies of the Great Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal (Bugaliya,2025). Following the 2016 Uri attack and the resulting paralysis of SAARC, India redirected its focus toward revitalizing BIMSTEC, viewing it as a more viable and strategic alternative. BIMSTEC thus emerges as a crucial mechanism for advancing India's interests in economic, politico-strategic, and security domains. India's growing preference for BIMSTEC over SAARC reflects both strategic calculations and practical necessities. At its core, the shift is driven by the search for a more functional, obstruction-free platform for regional cooperation—one that aligns with India's broader geopolitical goals and circumvents the chronic dysfunctions of SAARC (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

The following are the major reasons behind India's growing preference for BIMSTEC over SAARC:

1. BIMSTEC Offers a Smoother Platform for Regional Cooperation

The exclusion of Pakistan from BIMSTEC eliminates a major source of friction that has historically plagued SAARC. With fewer political hurdles, BIMSTEC provides a more conducive environment for India to promote connectivity projects, regional integration, and functional cooperation. In contrast, SAARC has often been stalled by the adversarial dynamic between India and Pakistan, particularly when consensus-based decisions were required (Chaudhury, 2017).

2. A Platform Aligned with India's Strategic Aspirations

BIMSTEC aligns seamlessly with India's Act East, Neighbourhood First and Indo-Pacific policies. The organization offers New Delhi an arena where it can assume a leadership role

without the diplomatic friction often associated with SAARC. Through its leadership in sectors such as security, counterterrorism, and disaster management, India bolsters its image as a responsible regional power. Geographically, BIMSTEC bridges the Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal, connecting South and Southeast Asia. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi has highlighted, the organization is well-positioned to operationalise India's dual focus on its immediate neighborhood and its eastern maritime frontiers (Shishir, & Sakib, 2022). This convergence enhances India's ability to shape regional agendas in alignment with its strategic imperatives.

3. Gateway to Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific

India's pivot to BIMSTEC is driven not just by policy alignment, but by geoeconomic and geostrategic logic. The Bay of Bengal, around which BIMSTEC countries are located, provides a vital maritime corridor connecting the Indian Ocean to the Pacific via the Strait of Malacca. This enables India to access booming Southeast and East Asian markets while reinforcing its maritime footprint (Antony, 2025). The emphasis on maritime connectivity reflects a strategic shift from a continental to a maritime-centric worldview—a rediscovery of India's historical engagement with Southeast Asia.

This maritime reorientation enables India to integrate more deeply with the Indo-Pacific region, a concept central to its foreign policy doctrine. By enhancing port connectivity, shipping routes, and blue economy initiatives, India projects itself as a critical node in regional supply chains and a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

4. Countering China's Maritime and Strategic Ambitions

India's growing investment in BIMSTEC is also a strategic response to China's expanding influence in South Asia and the IOR. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has deepened ties with several regional states, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. India views BIMSTEC as a counterweight to this engagement—a means to build regional partnerships that sideline Beijing's strategic encroachments (Bugaliya, 2025).

5. Strategic Utility in Maritime Security and Climate Governance

BIMSTEC's significance extends to maritime security and climate change. The Bay of Bengal is prone to piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, and natural disasters. India has

championed a multilateral security framework within BIMSTEC to address these threats, particularly around strategic chokepoints like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Enhanced security cooperation ensures that economic activities—such as trade and energy transport—can proceed without significant disruption. Simultaneously, the region's vulnerability to climate change—with over one-fifth of the world's population residing along its shores—adds urgency to regional cooperation (Shishir, & Sakib, 2022). India's leadership in coastal management and disaster mitigation strengthens its role as both a humanitarian and strategic actor.

6. Geopolitical Leverage in the Bay of Bengal

BIMSTEC enables India to secure **critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs)** and assert control over natural resources, including offshore hydrocarbons (Shishir, & Sakib, 2022). The Bay of Bengal's proximity to the Strait of Malacca—a vital artery for Chinese trade—adds to its strategic calculus (Xavier, 2018). India's objectives include leveraging cost-effective maritime routes to stimulate development in its underdeveloped northeastern and eastern states, thereby aligning domestic goals with regional ambitions (Upadhyaya, 2018). The Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine further embeds India's maritime vision in its foreign policy, with BIMSTEC serving as a key vehicle for its implementation (Ramachandran, 2019).

7. Economic Imperatives and Regional Integration

Despite economic disparities among member states, BIMSTEC represents a high-growth region, with an average GDP growth rate of 7.5% in recent years (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Approximately 25% of global trade transits through the Bay of Bengal (Dutta, 2019), underlining the region's economic potential. India's strategy is to position itself as the principal driver of this trade corridor, promoting market diversification and investment in its resource-rich eastern states.

BIMSTEC also supports joint development projects, particularly in water sharing, hydroelectric energy, and the Blue Economy, which involves sustainable use of ocean resources. Through these initiatives, India consolidates its regional leadership and promotes long-term sustainable growth.

8. India's Regional Vision: Leadership, Balance, and Influence

BIMSTEC serves as an instrument for India to marginalize Pakistan—a chronic disruptor of SAARC—and simultaneously balance China's rising regional clout. This dual strategic logic underscores India's preference for BIMSTEC as a more manageable and forward-looking regional architecture. While smaller member states do participate in shaping the regional agenda, India's size, economy, and strategic ambitions often place it at the center of decision-making. This dynamic enables New Delhi to steer the organization in ways that reinforce its hegemonic aspirations in the Indo-Pacific (Shishir, & Sakib, 2022).

India's tilt toward BIMSTEC is both a strategic necessity and a policy opportunity. The organization offers a cooperative platform unburdened by the historical tensions of SAARC, while simultaneously advancing India's broader goals of maritime dominance, economic growth, and geopolitical leverage.

Major Challenges Facing India in BIMSTEC

Despite India's renewed diplomatic and strategic focus on BIMSTEC as a key regional platform, two major challenges continue to undermine its leadership and the effectiveness of the grouping.

- 1. China's Expanding Influence:** India's strategic calculus within BIMSTEC is further complicated by China's growing influence in the region, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Though China is not a member of BIMSTEC, it has entrenched itself economically and strategically in several member states through infrastructure investments and high-level political engagements. China is now expanding maritime relations with countries, such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, through infrastructure funding. China is purposefully investing heavily through projects, such as the maritime silk route, anti-piracy, and anti-terrorism operations in the Bay of Bengal, to make its presence felt and to limit India's power and influence (Shishir, & Sakib, 2022). India must therefore tread a fine line: it needs to provide robust economic alternatives and public goods without being perceived as a domineering power, especially by smaller members seeking to balance both India and China.

- 2. Asymmetry and the Trust Deficit:** The significant asymmetry in size, economic capability, and political influence between India and the other BIMSTEC members creates an inherent trust deficit. India's dominant position often leads to perceptions of hegemonic intent, especially when regional initiatives align more closely with New Delhi's strategic priorities than those of smaller states. Addressing this asymmetry requires more than economic leadership—it demands consistent diplomatic sensitivity and inclusive agenda-setting. Confidence-building measures, people-to-people engagement, and transparent negotiations can help mitigate suspicions and foster a more collaborative environment within BIMSTEC (Chatterji & Chaudhury, 2021).

If India seeks to lead BIMSTEC effectively, it must recalibrate its approach—shifting from dominance to partnership, offering credible alternatives to China's influence, and committing to a shared regional agenda that aligns with the priorities of all member states. Only then can BIMSTEC evolve into a genuinely cooperative and action-oriented regional mechanism

Conclusion

South Asia's quest for regional integration continues to confront deep-seated political challenges, with SAARC's potential largely constrained by the enduring India-Pakistan rivalry. Despite India's desire for a strong SAARC, the organization's political deadlock has limited its capacity to foster meaningful cooperation. This has prompted India to increasingly shift its focus towards BIMSTEC, which presents a more pragmatic and less contentious platform for regional engagement. BIMSTEC's emphasis on economic connectivity, infrastructure development, and cross-border trade aligns more closely with India's Neighborhood First policy and strategic goals.

India's pivot from SAARC to BIMSTEC reflects recognition of the need to circumvent political impasses and harness new opportunities for leadership in South Asia. By leveraging BIMSTEC, India aims to strengthen regional integration, counterbalance China's growing influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road, and promote shared prosperity across the Bay of Bengal region. As regionalism gains renewed significance amid shifting global power dynamics, India's ability to lead through BIMSTEC while managing domestic and regional complexities will be decisive in shaping the future of South Asia's economic and strategic landscape. Although this pivot from SAARC to BIMSTEC is driven by both necessity and

opportunity, its long-term success will ultimately depend on New Delhi's political will, policy consistency, and commitment to deeper regional engagement. Effective leadership and sustained delivery will be essential for BIMSTEC to emerge as a credible and enduring platform for regional cooperation.

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