

## India in BIMSTEC: An Analytical Study

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### Introduction

The contemporary international politics is characterized by the concept of regionalism and sub-regionalism. Since the end of Second World War, various organizations came into existence, due to economic and strategic reasons. The progress and enlargement of these regional organizations are at different stage and it varies from region to region and as an outcome the concept of regionalism came into existence. In view of mounting complementarities, economic cooperation and collaboration, regional economic integration has become a buzz world of today's complex international arena. Most of the countries have recognized the fact that socio-economic and other benefits cannot be achieved only with individual effort. Accordingly, they prefer to be united and work from a common platform which is conducive for them to pave the way for proper sustainable development and economic growth<sup>1</sup>

Regionalism has become an essential reality of present-day world. However, by the start of 21<sup>st</sup> century, if not before, regionalism was well established in the vocabulary of International Relations. For scholars and practitioners, it would be hard to imagine a world without it. Regionalism was previously thought to be monopolized by the most developed Western world which started with the inception of European Economic Community which becomes the European Union. But this is not the only example to draw upon. South American states were early advocates of regionalism following their independence in the nineteenth century; by the latter part of the century South American regionalism was fused with a wider Pan-Americanism; the twentieth century saw the emergence of the flagship regionalisms of the European Community and North Atlantic Treaty Organization-models which were widely limited elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. Later the concept of regionalism spreads to the other regions of the World. After the disintegration of USSR in 1991 a new type of trend is observed where regionalism is perceived as more comprehensive, open, multi-dimensional with the modern interconnected and interdependent world platform, not only including economic affairs, but also taking into consideration the culture, environmental and other trans-national security related factors, thus pushing the countries towards the podium of cooperation. In this the success story of European integration also played an important role in motivation for cooperation. American scholars begin to talk about the victory of liberal world order. Francis Fukuyama describe the moment as End of History, although this is also a fact that this phase was very soon challenged by non-state actors. But as a result of globalization and liberalization new prospects emerges for the developed and

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developing countries to intensify regional cooperation by means of forging sub-regional groupings centred on geographical congruity and intensive synergies.

India under the leadership of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao announced an important foreign policy initiative that is 'Look East policy' with the aim of enhancing economic relations and security cooperation with the association of south-east Asian Nations. The ASEAN member states also responded in a very positive way, owing to the economic reforms that were being undertaken in India. The launching of a 'Look West' Policy by Thailand is the manifestation of ASEAN members' changing perceptions towards India.

As a result, on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1997, Bangladesh, India, Sri-Lanka and Thailand initiated a sub-regional grouping through the 'Bangkok Declaration' in Bangkok at the ministerial level meeting and they name the grouping as BIST-EC, which means Bangladesh, India, Sri-Lanka and Thailand-Economic Cooperation. Myanmar was only observer in this meeting and obtained its full membership on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1997. While acknowledging the additional member the name was changed BIMST-EC that is Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Sri-Lanka, Thailand-Economic Cooperation. Later on Nepal and Bhutan also joined the grouping in 2004 and the name Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation was adopted as full name and BIMSTEC as the acronym. Now BIMSTEC enters the third decades of its existence, very soon in 2022 BIMSTEC is going to celebrate Silver Jubilee means completion of 25 years of journey. This research paper intends to analyse the India's role in it along with future prospects and challenges in front of it.

### ***Regionalism and Sub - Regionalism***

Regional cooperation can be a powerful tool for the inclusive growth of a region. They can be helpful in achieving resilient and sustainable future. The COVID -19 pandemic also reveals that how the humanity throughout the globe is interconnected. In such contemporary scenario regional and sub-regional groupings can promote smooth transposing of sustainable developmental strategies at the ground level. Bruce Russett has given five criteria that determine regionalism. These are social and culture homogeneity; shared political attitude and behavior; political interdependence in the form of shared institutional membership; economic interdependence; and geographical proximity<sup>3</sup>. According to Alagappa (1994) "regionalism is cooperation formal and informal among governments, non-governmental organizations or the private sectors in three and more contiguous countries for mutual gains"<sup>4</sup>.

Sub-regionalism is important outcome new regionalism. It is also a strategy for development of a particular area. The term sub-region refers to geographical-spaces which are sub-sets of a larger regional space. It is difficult to define term sub-region like region. However, Scholars of international relations have used both terms interchangeably. In Manoli's views the term sub-region stands for "formally constructed inter-state cooperation which embedded in a wider region". Sub-region formed in various parts of world since the end of cold war<sup>5</sup>.

Sub-regionalism is a less broad phenomenon instead of regionalism, which focusing upon grassroots level of cooperation. The idea of sub-regional grouping involves a common concern of the countries of

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a sub-region on certain economic issues affecting them. Hence, a sub-regional approach is not only an instrument to promote development, but it may also promote peace and stability in the region. In words of P Murthy, the formation of less formal arrangements, sometimes referred to as growth triangles or quadrangles or more generally as sub- regionalism. The Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) program falls under this category<sup>6</sup>. According to Prof. B C Upreti, at South Asia Studies Centre, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, "Sub-regionalism is a new and innovative phenomenon, gaining prominence particularly in past few decades." Just like regionalism and inter-regional cooperation, sub-regionalism is also considered to be a strategy for development in a particular geographical area. He also identified three pre-requisites for sub-regional cooperation:

- Geographical proximity;
- Economic commonalities in terms of natural resources,
- Problems of development and a sense of unanimity, willingness and urgency in promoting development and prosperity<sup>7</sup>.

Sub-regionalism is an approach towards interdependent development that seeks to replace national development efforts into sub-regional cooperation leading to collective benefits. Form the above-mentioned definitions, the researcher has found that sub-regionalism is defined as a fewer formal arrangement. It can be said that sub-regionalism is a means of economic cooperation and coordination among physically proximate countries.

#### **India-BIMSTEC**

Historically India has always been committed to regional cooperation in socio - economic and culture sphere. India has always maintained strong and cordial relations with its neighbouring countries, specifically the countries of South-East Asia and North-East Asia. This network would facilitate trade and investment along with science and cutting-edge technology, exchange of energy, promotion of tourism increase in communication links. India was largely disengaged with most of the South - East Asian countries during the cold war. The demise Soviet Union, end of Cold War, introduction the concept of globalization and its effects on national economies and Financial Crisis of 1997 are some key factors which derive India to enter into an ecologically conducive environment to enhance ties with South Asian and South-East Asian neighbours. In 1990's when cold war ended, the new government was constituted, under the leadership of Prime Minister P.V Narasimha Rao, at that time, India was ready to liberalize its economy and open it to the world, particularly to the South - East Asian countries. This created the essence of 'Look East Policy' (LEP) of India in the year 1991 with the aim of enhance economic relations with the Association of South -East Asian Nations (ASEAN)<sup>8</sup>. India has tied its knot with countries of ASEAN, where India plays a pivotal role by becoming a full dialogue partner in 1996 and Joining ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the same year thereby increasing the profile of the security forum.

India has been late in recognizing the importance of regional organizations. For India the first attempt at regional organization of any importance was the SAARC formed in December 1985. But

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SAARC was plagued by political problems caused by poor Indo-Pak relations, due to provision according to charter to taking decision unanimously, big-brother syndrome towards India and many more reasons such as water dispute, boundary dispute. I have no doubt; I can say there is huge mistrust among member-states.

This motivates India to opt other steps such as an initiative was taken to establish BIMSTEC in 1997 which provides an array of opportunities to all of the member countries by providing a common platform. India is a founder member-state in BIMSTEC and it is of great significance for India also, as because of this sub-regional grouping India along with Nepal and Bhutan connects with big economic communities around the Bay of Bengal rim. It also provides India an additional platform to ASEAN via Myanmar and Thailand leaving Pakistan behind. The "Act East Policy" is advanced design of "Look East Policy" announced by PM Narendra Modi at 12<sup>th</sup> ASEAN India Summit in November 2014<sup>9</sup>. BIMSTEC is also important for the prosperity of northeast of India along with cooperation in cultural, political and strategic fields. It counters the rising influence of China into the region<sup>10</sup>.

In an inaugural speech at 4<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu, on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2018 Narendra Modi said "For centuries all of our countries have been linked with civilization, history, art, language, food and unbreakable bonds of our shared culture. On the one side there is this Great Himalaya mountain range and on the other side there is the Bay of Bengal situated between the Indian and Pacific oceans. This area of Bay of Bengal has a special significance for our development, security and progress. And, therefore, it is no surprise that the culmination of both India's "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East", happens in this region of the Bay of Bengal."<sup>11</sup> Narendra Modi emphasized five areas of connectivity among BIMSTEC Countries –

- Trade Connectivity,
- Economic Connectivity,
- Transport Connectivity,
- Digital Connectivity And
- People to People Connectivity.

Further he emphasises on the global maritime trade routes, and Blue Economy. Along with that the stress was on the importance of cyber economy which will significantly increase economies in coming digital era.

The strategic importance devoted by India to the BIMSTEC is evident from the invitation to the Heads of States of the BIMSTEC member countries to attend the swearing-in-ceremony of Prime Minister Modi as he assumed his second term in office on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2019. The invitation to the BIMSTEC also sparked speculation over whether, from an Indian strategic perspective, greater engagement with in BIMSTEC meant a commensurate disengagement with SAARC.

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BIMSTEC is a sector-driven organization. There are 14 priority areas: -

1. counter terrorism and transnational crime,
2. Transport and Communication
3. Tourism
4. Environment and Disaster Management
5. Trade and Investment
6. Cultural Cooperation
7. Energy
8. Agriculture
9. Poverty Alleviation
10. Technology
11. Fisheries
12. Public Health
13. People-to-people contact and
14. Climate Change<sup>12</sup>

Each country takes leads in specific areas. Among these fourteen sectors India leads in four Sectors.

#### **Transport and Communication**

In this context first meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group took place in New Delhi on 23<sup>rd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> April 2001. In meeting experts from different BIMSTEC countries discussed all kinds of linkages and varied issues of significance including cross-border facilitation, logistics, infrastructure development, maritime transport, human resource development, communication linkages and networking<sup>13</sup>. At a trilateral meeting between the foreign ministers of India, Myanmar and Thailand in New Delhi on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2003, a decision was taken up on Trilateral India-Myanmar-Thailand highway project, which formed an integral part of larger Trans-Asian Highway Project. Trans-Asian Highway Project, was launched by the Prime Minister, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1999. This project envisages construction of 13,1416 Km. of Highways, including the Golden Quadrilateral connecting Delhi-Mumbai-Chennai-Kolkata-Delhi with a total length of 5846 Km<sup>14</sup>.

It mainly links Istanbul in Turkey with and Tokyo in Japan. The 1,360 km long India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is an initiative pertaining to the three countries. In this regard, India and Myanmar had signed an agreement in 2016 as part of the "Act East Policy" to boost road connectivity in the region. The highway will connect India with Thailand through Myanmar. It run from Manipur's Moreh town to Mae Sot in Thailand through Bagan in Myanmar<sup>15</sup>.

Leelak Ponappa India's Ambassador in Bangkok, described the significance of this project, she told "The project symbolizes what economic cooperation among BIMSTEC countries actually means. Once fully constructed, there will be significant improvement in tourists and pilgrim traffic<sup>16</sup>. One of the

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top priority in BIMSTEC is to enlarge connectivity among member states, regarding this BIMSTEC Conclave of Ports, took place on 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> November 2019 at Vishakhapatnam. In an inaugural ceremony Minister of State for Shipping Shri Mansukh Mandaviya reiterated Prime Minister Modi's vision of SAGAR means Security and Growth for All in the Region, by highlighting the motto of "Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas" which stands for "Collective Efforts Inclusive Growth" ultimately which will provide Peace, Prosperity and Security for whole region. Further he added that India is keen in forging deep relations with BIMSTEC member countries. Three memorandums of understanding (MOUs) have also signed Ranong port, the port of Chennai, Vishakhapatnam during the conclave<sup>17</sup>.

This all reflects strong commitment and nature of cooperation among members of BIMSTEC this also underlines that how this sub-regional grouping can make the region more prosperous and secure.

### **Tourism**

Tourism is perceived as "an engine of growth", BIMSTEC accorded top priority to promotion of tourism and accordingly paid due attention to the development of tourism and its officials and ministerial level meetings. Besides Annual Ministerial Meeting where Tourism also figured prominently, as Tourism Expert Group Meetings. As a result of the discussions and decisions at these fora, the year 2001 is designated as the "Visit BIMSTEC Tourism year" BIMSTEC undertook various projects including a joint marketing plan and information exchange to attract intra-regional as well as foreign tourists, and to promote Buddhist tourism, eco-tourism and sustainable regional tourism. Though originally the responsibility for tourism sector was delegated Sri-Lanka in 1998, India became the lead country of tourism sector since 2002<sup>18</sup>.

Joyeeta Bhattacharje in her article "Energising tourism for a Bay of Bengal community" said that due to unique positioning, this region is lucrative for heritage tourism, cultural tourism, leisure tourism, ecotourism and others. Till date Thailand is one of the leading tourist destinations worldwide. But the region as a whole failed to attain popularity as a top tourism destination. Officials are thinking to promote tourism related to Buddhist and temple circuits<sup>19</sup>. Keeping in view of the potentials of area a major step was taken to promote tourism, the first BIMSTEC Tourism Minister Roundtable workshop took place in Kolkata on 21<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2005. Further, the Kathmandu Declaration on Tourism Cooperation and Plan of Action was adopted in 2008. In August 2017 it was agreed to establish the BIMSTEC Tourism Fund and support the offer of Bangladesh to hold the Third BIMSTEC Tourism Ministers' Roundtable<sup>20</sup>.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of BIMSTEC, India hosted the 'Bodhi Parwa: BIMSTEC Festival of Buddhist Heritage' from 8th-10th December 2017. To further extend relations PM Modi at Kathmandu Summit announced to invite BIMSTEC members for being part of the international Buddhist conclave (IBC) to be held at India in August 2020<sup>21</sup>.

### **Counter -Terrorism and Transnational Crime**

Terrorism is one of the major threats to peace, prosperity and stability of human beings. BIMSTEC member states are also cooperating and coordinating against terrorism and Transnational Crime. It is

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essential for peaceful and progressive growth of the region. Since its inception, BIMSTEC has made considerable progress in various domains but remains hobbled in formulating sustainable approaches to combating terrorism and crime, both domestic and transnational. In October 2016, India hosted the BIMSTEC-BRICS Outreach Summit held in Goa. In this summit different issues were discussed at length by BIMSTEC leaders, the major issue among them was for combating terrorism in the region. India organized the first meeting of BIMSTEC national security chiefs in New Delhi in March 2017, emphasizing cooperative stances to combat terrorism on all fronts. In that meeting BIMSTEC officials acknowledged the dire need to prevent the 'spread of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization'. They pledged for "concrete measures to enhance cooperation and coordination among their law enforcement, intelligence and security organizations and enhance capacity building<sup>22</sup>." In 2004, BIMSTEC adopted the Joint Working Group on counter terrorism and transnational crime (CTTC). Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime is the platform for discussions on counter terrorism related issues between BIMSTEC member countries. There are six sub groups, each working on specific aspects of CTTC cooperation, and they report to the BIMSTEC Joint Working of CTTC. India is lead in two categories: the sub-group on legal and law enforcement issues (SGILEI) and sub-group on the Cooperation on Countering Radicalization and Terrorism<sup>23</sup>.

In this manner BIMSTEC is applying holistic approach to counter traditional and non-traditional security challenges in the region. In the word of Sushma Swaraj, the external affairs minister of India, we worked out collective strategies to counter the scourge of terrorism, violent extremism and transnational crimes, as also to strengthen our maritime and cyber security cooperation<sup>24</sup>. The intensity of cooperation in this arena can be estimated through the "MILEX-2018", which was the joint military exercise of BIMSTEC at Aundh military station in Pune, in September 2018. During this issues related to military point of view are discussed and practiced and nearly 20 agencies participated in the display<sup>25</sup>.

### **Environment and Disaster Management**

In relation to sustainable development Environmental issues are in top priority, keeping it in view on 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> December 2005 in the Ministerial Meeting held at Dhaka, Bangladesh BIMSTEC countries decided to add Environment and Disaster Management in priority areas of cooperation in BIMSTEC. This region is amongst the most disaster-prone regions so it is vibrant issue. The BIMSTEC region, comprises 22% of the world's population and it is exposed to an ever-increasing threat for natural disasters. As we come across the fact that environmental problems acquire international dimensions. United Nations conferences in Stockholm and Rio de Janeiro in 1972 and 1992 made the linkages between the international environmental status and development agendas and focus on sharing scientific knowledge for environmental protection. So it is also perceived in BIMSTEC also as an important common agenda. As a result, in 1<sup>st</sup> BIMSTEC Summit which was in Bangkok in 2004, India put forward the proposal for sharing information sharing on Remote Sensing for the purpose of agriculture, environmental, catastrophe management and a plan to establish the BIMSTEC center for weather and climate in India, New Delhi. This results in functioning of National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF), at Noida in Delhi NCR. BIMSTEC leaders when meet in Goa in

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2016 talked about cooperation in disaster management, regarding this first joint exercise took place in Delhi from 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> October 2017. It comprises three components-

- Table Top Exercise (TTX),
- Field Training Exercises (FTXs) on Earthquake and Flood and
- an After Action Review (AAR).

Further they add-on participation of women in Disaster Response Mechanism, emphasis on psycho-social-trauma care, replication of ICS, gender consideration during evacuation and rehabilitation, utility of Civil Military Coordination Centre, religious aid to motivate the affected people, importance of maintaining Law & Order in the affected area to avoid human trafficking and other post-disaster crimes<sup>26</sup>. Indian role in BIMSTEC's multilateral cooperation has not been confined to the factor priority sectors assigned, but embraced on other hands various other areas of cooperation.

### Conclusion

The focus on Regional grouping started late in Asian continent. The trend of regionalism started with SAARC and ASEAN. Failure of SAARC due to political reasons pushed India towards the formation of sub-regional grouping-BIMSTEC. India and Thailand played key role in the formation of this vibrant group. Basically this sub-regional grouping is the convergence of India's Look East Policy and Thailand's Look West Policy. This helped India to overcome the failure of SAARC and expedite new avenues of cooperation and coordination for the peace, prosperity and security of the region. This brings together the countries of South Asia and South East Asia to chart out the new pathways of geo-economics and geo-strategic cooperation. It helps the countries to counter the effects of China as the revisionist power. Although BIMSTEC made its humble beginnings in 1997, it was low profile regional bloc. In spite of solid foundation of geographical contiguity and shared history and cultural ties, BIMSTEC is yet to make visible progress in advancing concrete cooperation among the member states. The present age is of uncertainty due to Covid-19 pandemic. Scholars are thinking about the post pandemic world order. Haruhiko Kuroda, Governor of the Bank of Japan speaking on the theme "A Perspective on the Future of Asia" at the Asia Pacific Initiative Forum in Yokohama on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2019 said that strengthening the bond within Asia will enable the region to contribute to solving global issues.

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