

Batting for BIMSTEC: The Strategic Imperative Behind India's Choice

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Abstract

It has been more than two decades since Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation was set up. Despite starting off with a huge promise of reintegrating historically interlinked Bay of Bengal community of countries, BIMSTEC has been revived only episodically and that too mostly by India. This article seeks to argue that BIMSTEC's revival and a renewed commitment by India to strengthen the regional organization is a natural compulsion of a rising power. India's multiple strategic goals are served by the BIMSTEC and hence strategic imperatives behind its choice need to be analysed in detail.

Keywords: BIMSTEC, India, China, Pakistan, Geopolitics, Geo-economics, Regional Integration

Introduction

Currently, South Asia is undergoing an interesting phase of economic growth and political dynamism. The region is not only witnessing a trend of bilateral level agreements being negotiated between member countries but regional level agreements as well. The only pan South Asian regional association of SAARC has become dysfunctional after the cancellation of 2016 summit in Islamabad. But the notion of regional identity and regionalism hasn't become redundant. It has only shifted platforms where subregional initiatives such as the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Initiative (BBIN) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral technical and economic cooperation (BIMSTEC) are taking the mettle of integrating the region forward. These regional organizations are not just forums to discuss and implement regional level connectivity and development initiatives, they are also key tools of realpolitik. BIMSTEC particularly has been revived and used by India to further its geopolitical interests in the region and beyond. This paper seeks to analyse how India as a rising power is utilizing the BIMSTEC initiative strategically. It will analyse how the forum was set up for some other purpose in 1997 but it has been now revived to fulfil India's goals. It first traces the background of subregionalism and mega regionalism in the region of which BIMSTEC is an example. This will be followed by an analysis of India's interest in choosing BIMSTEC as the forum for executing its regional policy.

Background

The Bay of Bengal initiative for Multi-Sectoral technical and economic cooperation was set up in 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration with only Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand as its original members. It was envisaged as a forum for economic cooperation between these countries and was known as BIST-EC. Later, Myanmar joined the grouping in the same year and it was rechristened as BIMSTEC. It was only in 2004 when Nepal and Bhutan also joined BIMSTEC that it was finally named as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral technical and economic cooperation. The original aim of the organization was to pool synergies of these countries in tackling globalization-related challenges. It chose a sector-based model of cooperation with six sectors such as trade, energy, transport, technology, tourism and fisheries. Later nine more sectors were identified for cooperation including counter-terrorism and environment. It was in 2008 that people-to-people contact and climate change became a part of BIMSTEC's agenda. Today BIMSTEC represents 22% of global population and a combined GDP of US\$ 2.7 Trillion. It is home to one of the most fastest growing economies in the world such as India and Bangladesh which have shown resilient growth even in the face of a global turmoil.

BIMSTEC was established in 1997 but it didn't get a permanent secretariat until 2014. It was finally housed at Dhaka, Bangladesh in September 2014 with the building being inaugurated by Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Till then, BIMSTEC functioned from Bangkok with activities coordinated by a BIMSTEC Working Group (BWG). It was also planned that the summits of the organization will be held every two years. However, in two decades of its existence, only three summits were organized till 2017 (Hussain, 2018). The fourth summit of BIMSTEC was organized in 2018 at Kathmandu where it was agreed to hold the next summit at Sri Lanka.

According to the BIMSTEC official website, the grouping is seen as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia and also as a platform for interregional cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN. It is in this light that BIMSTEC occupies an interesting position in India's strategic calculations as an organization which is not only subregional but also mega regional in character. Let's discuss each of the kind of the 'regionalisms' in detail:

BIMSTEC- Between Subregionalism and Mega Regionalism

A new trend that is increasingly determining the fate of South Asian regional integration is the trend of subregionalism in the region. There was a notion of 'collective prosperity' that emerged in the speeches of Indian leaders since the 1990s¹ where India was ready to make unilateral efforts to share the fruits of its prosperity with the neighbours on a non-reciprocal basis. However, India's attempts to do this at a regional level were facing political obstructions (as discussed in this paper), as a result India has actively started using sub-regional approach in order to drive greater integration in South Asia (Yhome & Maini, 2017).

There is a provision for subregional cooperation even within the framework of SAARC where there is an option to set up action committees with more than two member states but not all member states for implementation of certain projects (SAARC Charter, 1985). Initially, there was opposition to subregional cooperation in South Asia. Besides Sri Lanka and Pakistan showing reservations on the grounds that it will undermine the spirit of SAARC, the setting up of South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ)² in 1996 also witnessed protests by the ruling party Bangladeshi National Party (BNP) in Bangladesh and the opposition party, United Marxist and Leninist Party in Nepal (Pattanaik, 2016).

The initial opposition finally died down and the BBIN initiative supported by the Asian Development Bank under South Asian Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) framework started making progress. So far, three joint working group meetings have taken place under the aegis of BBIN (Shukla, 2019).

One of the important focus areas of the BBIN initiative is to transform transport corridors into economic corridors such that intraregional trade in South Asia grows by 60% and with the rest of the world by 30% (Pattanaik, 2016). Besides BBIN, another subregional initiative in the South Asian region is the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) which was formed in 1997. It includes countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Thailand from the South and Southeast Asian region. India and Sri Lanka also cooperate sub regionally in the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation as well (IOR-ARC). The region's oldest experiment with subregionalism goes back to the Bangkok Agreement signed in 1975 which was revitalized in 2001 with the entry of China (Batra, 2013). It has Bangladesh, China, India, Republic of Korea, Laos and Sri Lanka as members.

The states in South Asia have finally warmed up to the idea of subregionalism. They are using subregional initiatives to overcome the obstruction of SAARC in order to move towards a more integrated region (Singh, 2018). One can also observe a marked change in India's own approach to subregionalism. Gujral doctrine stressed on cooperative subregionalism where he also envisaged a role carved out for Pakistan with India's own Punjab and Pakistan's Sindh and a part of Rajasthan being treated as an economic entity (IK Gujral's speech 1997). Whereas Modi government's approach towards subregionalism is to isolate Pakistan by cooperating with rest of the countries in South Asia (Kumar, 2015). His idea is to build sub-SAARC networks such that the benefits of integration can be an example to those who have not joined the process yet (Malik, 2016). However, subregionalism is not limited to isolating Pakistan alone. Subregional initiatives such as BIMSTEC is also seen by the member countries as an opportunity to tap on trade and energy routes in East Asia (Wolf & Casaca, 2014).

The growing subregional economic cooperation between BBIN countries is a smaller size of a much bigger pie. The subregional cooperation has been envisaged as a link between the two much larger regions of South and Southeast Asia as the economic weightage of countries in the global east is increasingly

overshadowing the ones in the global west (Mishra 2015). This is evident in the statement of Indian policymakers as well. According to the Indian Prime Minister, "Act East" policy of India starts right from Bangladesh (ANI 2014). The growing connectivity between India and countries to its east can also help these countries in seamless integration with the Association of South East Asian (ASEAN) group of countries. The connectivity initiatives in this subregion are also complementary to pan Asian connectivity initiatives such as the Asian Highway project (ATKearney and FICCI 2016).

The subregional approach to regional integration is ambitious in layout where it seeks to bridge two regions of South and East Asia. BIMSTEC and BBIN are India's opportunity to "tie up the loose ends of its Act East and Neighbourhood First Policy".

The trend of subregionalism in South Asia has an interesting aspect to it. It is overlapping with a trend towards mega regionalism in the region. The states in the region are a part of groupings which have Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and Myanmar (BIMSTEC), Republic of Korea (Bangkok Agreement) and Indonesia and Malaysia (IOR-ARC) as well. This is along with India's greater integration with the East Asian countries as noted previously. Batra (2013, 71) calls this as the trend of "Inter-regional economic integration" in Asia. While this might seem like a case of inter-regional integration but we can also call it as a trend of mega regionalism in Asia where increasing trade and investment flows are leading to an integrated Asia. Since the 1990s, almost all the countries in South Asia are forging look east policies by signing FTAs and building infrastructural links with East Asia (Francois, Rana, & Wigneraja, 2011). Prior to 1990, there was just one trade agreement between the two regions but now six trade agreements including the landmark Southeast Asian Nations-India comprehensive trade agreement has come into effect (ADB, 2016).

East Asia has emerged to be a large regional market for the entire South Asian region. The total value of trade between South and East Asia has increased to US \$ 235.2 Billion in 2013 from a mere US \$ 12.7 Billion in 1990. However, India dominates this share whereas other countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have their trade dominated by imports. Wignaraja (2014) argues that free trade agreements between South and South East Asia are a sign of growing economic dynamism between the two regions. However, if India goes alone in increasing its trade integration with East Asia, its gain will be small and South Asian countries will be at a loss. Also, India can gain more from an FTA with East Asia as against EU or United States. Hence, according to him an optimal policy choice for India is to lead South Asian integration with East Asia which requires it to deepen integration at the South Asian level first.

The same is argued by Raihan and Ashraf (2017), who predict that the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)³ will lead to an increase in India's GDP but real GDP for Nepal and Bangladesh will fall because they will lose advantageous access to Indian market. On the other hand, integration of other South Asian countries in RCEP will lead to larger gains for the new entrants as well as India (Raihan & Ashraf, 2017).

Identifying imperatives behind India's choice

BIMSTEC was formed in 1997 but its revival has been only recent. It got a permanent secretariat only in 2014 and a BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach summit was organized in 2016. It is only recently that India has started recognizing its responsibility in leading integration in the region. It all started with the Gujral Doctrine (1996), where former Prime Minister, I.K. Gujral, for the first time explained India's vision for its immediate neighbourhood (Basu, 2013). Gujral doctrine made a provision of non-reciprocity to the neighbours which was followed by a policy of sharing benefits of economic growth with the neighbours under PM Manmohan Singh. The interest in neighbourhood has assumed an important position under the current PM, Narendra Modi as well. PM, Modi took a 'neighbourhood first' approach in his foreign policy during his first term as the Prime Minister (Bhatnagar & Passi, 2016). He is inclined to follow the same policy in his second term as well as is evident in the BJP manifesto for Lok Sabha elections 2019 (BJP Manifesto Sankalpa Patra, 2019). However, a key difference between India's approach towards its neighbourhood under Modi's first term and the second term is that while during the first term, it was dominated with an emphasis on South Asia as defined by SAARC. Under the second term, the focus has shifted away from SAARC to BIMSTEC. Thus, leaders of all the SAARC countries were invited to swearing-in ceremony after 2014 elections. But after 2019 elections, BIMSTEC leaders were invited to the swearing-in. Ruling party BJP's election manifesto clearly lists BIMSTEC as the forum which will be leveraged to implement the neighbourhood first policy if voted to power. This choice of the current government cannot be understood without analysing India's wider geopolitical ambitions and challenges and how BIMSTEC helps in achieving them.

Isolating Pakistan

It is difficult to understand India's choice for BIMSTEC without understanding the India-Pakistan equation and the policy paralysis that SAARC has faced due to it. Initially both India and Pakistan were apprehensive of a regional level organization back in 1985 when Bangladesh first proposed it (Muhammad, 2017). However, India adopted a policy of giving importance to regionalism as soon as it liberalized its economy. As discussed earlier, Gujral doctrine, Manmohan Singh government and now Modi government has continued to place the neighbourhood as a priority agenda for its foreign policy. This is not only for a geopolitical purpose of ensuring India has strong allies in the neighbourhood but also for a geo-economic purpose of securing India's growth. SAARC, hence, became a natural forum for India to pursue its national interest. However, Pakistan's behaviour within SAARC and outside SAARC has been inimical to Indian interests. First of all, both the countries enjoy a natural trade complementarity and a vast land border. However, Pakistan has refused to delink trade with Kashmir issue leading to which trade between the two countries hasn't realized its true potential. According to a World Bank report, India and Pakistan can undertake trade worth at least US\$ 37 Billion, however current

trade is only a fraction of the actual potential (Kathuria, 2018). As a growing economy, India also sought transit rights to access Afghanistan and Central Asia from Pakistan but the transit rights were not granted citing a number of concerns⁴.

Pakistan also refused to sign the SAARC Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) at the SAARC summit held in 2014 saying it required more time to consult all its provinces which was more of a “dilly dallying” tactic (Gupta, 2015). The MVA was eventually signed at a subregional level between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal as part of the BBIN initiative.

BIMSTEC has assumed an important position in both long and short-term policy goals of the Indian policymakers. In the long term, it helps India use regionalism to secure its rise by isolating a non-cooperative Pakistan and integrating with the willing. In the short-term, it helps in scoring quick diplomatic gains over Pakistan. If we observe the events during PM Modi’s first and second term in power, we can see India’s willingness to use BIMSTEC to do diplomatic one-ups over Pakistan. In the aftermath of Uri attacks in 2016, India decided to boycott the SAARC summit in Islamabad in 2016. The summit was eventually cancelled as other SAARC members also boycotted the summit. Modi government then convened a BIMSTEC outreach summit in Goa during BRICS summit. Here, all the members states of BIMSTEC supported India, leading it to declare it as a “diplomatic victory” (Dutta, 2019). After the 2018 BIMSTEC summit in Nepal, member countries also passed a resolution stating that the countries that “encourage, support or finance terrorism, provide sanctuaries to terrorists and terror groups” should be held accountable for their actions (Desai, 2019). BIMSTEC again gained traction after Narendra Modi government invited BIMSTEC leaders to the swearing-in ceremony after coming back to power for the second time in May 2019. Unlike the previous swearing-in ceremony of his government where all the SAARC leaders were invited, in the aftermath of the hostilities after Pulwama attack, Modi government decided to invite BIMSTEC leaders from the neighbourhood and gave a cold shoulder to Pakistan. Such diplomatic gestures have indeed helped India in isolating Pakistan but this is not the only goal that India has. As a rising economy, it is also interested in the long-term revival of BIMSTEC whose success is dependent on many factors including an adequately staffed secretariat, willingness of India to take on an informal leadership role, its commitment in terms of finances and diplomatic momentum and finally prioritization of economic connectivity over security issues (Xavier, 2018).

Containing China

Besides isolating Pakistan, a major driver for India to engage on a serious basis with the Bay of Bengal community is to also contain China from making any further inroads in what India views as its neighbourhood. India had the ambition of forging greater ties with its immediate neighbourhood in East Asia after independence. But a lack of economic resources and cold war compulsions due to interference of great powers withheld India from strategically leveraging its geographic position with respect to its East Asian neighbourhood. On one hand, China has made strategic inroads in Southeast Asia. At the same time, China is

now an observer state in SAARC and is increasingly threatening India's position in South Asia. BIMSTEC provides India a tool to counter China in Southeast Asia and check its overtures in South Asia.

Bay of Bengal is a strategically positioned region where 1/4th of the entire world trade passes through it. China is keen on preserving its trade routes that pass through the Indian Ocean and India is keen on projecting its new found naval power (Xavier, 2018). Thus, it has become a centre of attention of the two rising powers.

In order to understand India's focus on BIMSTEC, it is important to recognize the fact that India is not a part of the Belt and Road Initiative floated by China. Indian concern emanates from the fact that China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passes through the disputed territory of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. These concerns over India's sovereignty remaining valid, what's worrying is the fact that a number of smaller countries in India's own neighbourhood are dependent on China to fulfil their legitimate developmental needs related to connectivity, trade and investments. India is trying to set a norm to counter the Belt and Road initiative by committing itself more deeply with the Belt and Road initiative (Chaudhury, 2018). The smaller BIMSTEC countries are also interested in BIMSTEC for the strategic reason of balancing China. According to Xavier (2008), BIMSTEC complements Thailand and Myanmar's Look West Policies where they are interested in deeply engaging with India in order to offset the increasing Chinese presence in Southeast Asia.

India's Look East policy which is one of the driving forces behind its interest in BIMSTEC is based on the strategic will to counter China. This Look East policy is based on the historic desire of India to play an important role in Asian and World Affairs. The current forward policy towards Asia heavily draws inspiration from Lord Curzon (former British Viceroy to India)'s vision for India who envisaged a great role for India beyond South Asia (Batabyal, 2006).

In terms of trade, East Asia is crucial for India. Just like it is trying to isolate Pakistan in its South Asian neighbourhood, India is seeking to isolate China in the East Asian neighbourhood. This isolation is however not possible without India setting its own house in order. According to Nayyar (2018), India cannot increase its trade linkages with East Asia without improving its ease of doing business. India must improve its own competitiveness in the economic sphere to benefit from its act east policy minus China which will help it in increasing trade linkages with at least the lesser developed East Asian economies such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam (Nayyar, 2018).

Looking East, Acting East and beyond

India's intent behind reviving BIMSTEC cannot be appreciated without understanding India's own geostrategic ambitions, independent of the China factor. The Indian policy of looking east which has been transformed into the Act East policy is signalling a deeper revisionist intention of India in forging strong linkages with the countries to its East. Before British Colonialism, the

civilizational and trade linkages between India and East Asia were steady. However, after independence India not only withdrew from the world market by adopting an inward-looking model of economy but it also damaged its economic ties with the immediate neighbourhood. This led to locus of Asia shifting away from East Asia and South Asia losing its relevance in the world map (Frost, 2012).

An economically resurgent India is now trying to become relevant as an important Asian actor. It is in this light that the policy of Looking East and Acting East can be truly understood. First of all, Bay of Bengal region is not some new-found region for which India is trying to artificially construct an identity. According to scholar V Suryanarayan (2000), the region of Bay of Bengal has existed historically and its division into South and Southeast Asia is only recent. The distance between India's Indira Point and Indonesian Island of Pu Breush and Thailand island of Phuket is lesser than the distance between Chennai and Tirupati and Chennai and Madurai respectively (Suryanarayan, 2000). Another scholar K. Yhome (2019) warns that India's preference for BIMSTEC should not be viewed from the narrow prism of isolating Pakistan alone. India with a rise in capability is now looking much beyond South Asia. Its regional diplomacy is now centred on the larger region of Indo-Pacific. BIMSTEC as a subregion of Indo-pacific is a dynamic region with existing power play by the great powers of this era (Yhome, Beyond the South Asia-centric notion of neighbourhood, 2019). India as a great power of the future is now willing to leverage BIMSTEC by taking on the role of a leader to ensure the Bay of Bengal region is conducive to securing its economic and political rise.

It is within this context that India's focus on a long-term commitment to BIMSTEC can be understood. In order for India to leverage BIMSTEC towards its goals, it needs to be committed to economic integration and regional connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region.

Connectivity through BIMSTEC under India's Look East policy has a strong domestic rationale as well where development of the North East and its integration with rest of the India is a key priority. Improving connectivity through BIMSTEC is a step towards fulfilment of this goal. For example, the Sittwe Port in Myanmar is closer than Kolkata for the North-Eastern states (Desai, 2019). Connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway, Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project and BIMSTEC motor vehicle agreement are also examples of India's intent to increase connectivity between Northeastern states and countries to its east. BIMSTEC is also crucial to India's energy needs as Rakhine coast in Myanmar is energy-rich and the organization has also set up a regional energy centre in New Delhi to this effect (Desai, 2019).

Similarly, economic integration in BIMSTEC is a matter of great interest for India. Negotiating a Free Trade pact with BIMSTEC members was a priority for the Manmohan Singh government as well. At the Myanmar Summit in 2014, one of his last multilateral major engagement, Singh pushed for the swift negotiation of an FTA between member countries (Panda, 2014). However, the progress of the organization on trade liberalization between member countries has also

been slow. A framework for BIMSTEC free trade area was agreed upon in 2004. Trade negotiations were held between 2004-2011 and it was envisaged that they will be concluded by 2014 but this didn't materialize (RIS, 2016).

Conclusion

An independent India's foreign policy was broadly shaped by Jawaharlal Nehru's strategic vision. JL Nehru didn't see India as a leader in only South Asia. He outlined a Pan Asian role for India where he saw it as the fulcrum of western, southern and South-East Asia where India was the link between Western and Southeast Asia (Nehru, 1961). During the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, Nehru even invoked the neighbourhood by addressing Afghanistan, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Burma and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) (ibid.). However, during the cold war era, entire Asia was divided into warring ideological camps of capitalism and socialism and India along with a number of other Asian countries championed the cause of Non-Alignment. Partly due to cold war era political compulsions and partly due to India's own lack of economic resources, regionalism in Asia couldn't be prioritized on a scale that organizations such as BIMSTEC would have been possible. The end of cold war coincided with India's implementation of economic reforms where it embraced globalization, privatization and liberalization to unshackle its economy. The resultant growth not only gave India a confidence to lead regional initiatives in its neighbourhood but also it became a dire need for a rising power to secure its economic and geopolitical interests. This interest in regionalism shown by India is accelerated by the catalyst of China's rise. BIMSTEC is, hence, an example of a regional organization where India is foreseeing fulfilment of a number of overlapping policy goals such as isolation of Pakistan to ensure regional integration in South Asia with the willing states progresses, containing China's growing inroads in Southeast Asia and checking its overtures in South Asia and finally redefining India's neighbourhood to include a region much larger than South Asia.

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(Footnotes)

¹Traces can be observed in the Gujral Doctrine of Non-reciprocity with regards to neighbors, Manmohan Singh doctrine with regards to India's sharing its prosperity with the neighbors so that their own instability does not affect India's performance adversely and Narendra Modi's neighborhood first policy (Yhome and Maini 2017).

²SAGQ refers to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India which has now assumed the more popular term, "BBIN initiative".

³RCEP is a proposed free trade agreement between ten ASEAN countries and six Asia-Pacific countries such as Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea.

⁴ Pakistan has a number of issues in granting India access to market in Afghanistan- these include concerns over a black-market getting created in Pakistan for Indian products

(Goel 2018). A wheat lobby in Pakistan also opposed transit rights to India fearing that subsidized wheat from India would be in a stronger position in comparison to them (Pattanaik 2019). While rejecting Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani's demand to grant transit facility to Indian products, security-related sensitivities were also cited as an issue (Reddy 2016).

The denial of transit trade facility may also be a strategy to increase dependence of Afghanistan on Pakistani economy for the larger goal of exerting political pressure (Rahim 2018).