

INDIA MUST SEE BIMSTEC AS A STEP TOWARDS GLOBAL PROMINENCE

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By both word and deed, the new Narendra Modi government has signalled its determination to double down on its neighbourhood policy. The prime minister invited the heads of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) for his inauguration along with the president of Mauritius. Modi has kicked off his second-term foreign policy with visits to the Maldives and Sri Lanka while External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has gone to Bhutan. The foreign minister also outlined a regional policy that would operate on several layers. New Delhi would seek to promote Bimstec as the primary multilateral body for South Asia, escaping the Pakistan bottleneck that has crippled the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc). With his trip to the Maldives, the prime minister will have made a full state visit to all of India's smaller neighbours. More practically, India must build connectivity among these neighbours to put flesh on the bones of its regional cooperation.

A stable neighbourhood has been at the top of India's foreign policy goals since independence. But it is a policy that has struggled. The Pakistan problem has repeatedly sucked the oxygen out of the policy, with minimal rewards. New Delhi has been perceived with suspicion by many of the other countries, fuelled in part by its occasionally short-sighted interventions in their affairs. India has since become more generous in its attitudes to its eastern and maritime neighbours. It will move away from petty demands for reciprocity. It has carried out a historical turnaround in bilateral relations with Bangladesh. Thanks to China's inroads, New Delhi has recognised the dangers of a poorly interlinked region. Just as useful, India has been increasingly able to persuade these neighbours that they are losing out economically by this lack of connectivity. Among the lessons learnt in the past five years, as the foreign minister pointed out recently, is how to finance and complete infrastructure projects, which is traditionally not an Indian strength.

Bimstec is an important overlay to the neighbourhood policy. India has practised a protectionist trade policy for decades, ensuring that its Bay of Bengal neighbours have tended to look elsewhere for their external economic relations. Bimstec's policy past has been as awkward and unmemorable as its name implies. Over the coming years, it must be transformed into a genuine free trade and investment agreement. It should be seen as a test of India's ambitions to be a leading power. If India cannot harness the Bay of Bengal region firmly to its own trajectory, it can hardly aspire to have a lasting influence on any other part of the world.

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