

## BIMSTEC, A VIABLE OPTION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: BIMSTEC and India

S. Jaishankar's first foreign visit as External Affairs Minister to Bhutan might be indicative of the government's attempt to rekindle India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy that started with Prime Minister Narendra Modi inviting SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony in 2014.

The shift of focus from other regional initiatives such as SAARC to BIMSTEC in the past five years can be attributed to the inability of SAARC to foster regional cooperation and make progress. Regional cooperation under SAARC saw no progress, as indicated by the fact that the group has not met since 2014. Further, the summit stood cancelled in 2016 because it was boycotted by India, along with three other member states, owing to terror attacks in India allegedly sponsored by Pakistan-linked operatives. This prompted the Indian government to shift its focus to BIMSTEC to enhance regional cooperation, as manifested by the BIMSTEC state heads being invited to the oath-taking ceremony of the incumbent Modi government.

The immediate neighbourhood

The Indian government, however, needs to be cautious in its approach toward BIMSTEC, otherwise it may meet a fate akin to previous attempts at cooperation in the region. Indeed, the trajectory of regional cooperation is driven by the nature and success of previous attempts at regional cooperation because there tends to be an acquiescence to the way states interact in a region. This is not to say that states will interact only in that manner. As seen in Europe, the relationship dynamic has changed time and again over the decades.

Regional initiatives in Asia, like SAARC, have been defined along the tangents of strategy and security more than they have been along economic, cultural and social lines. This can be attributed to contemporary geopolitical concerns and the mistrust that exists among the countries that are party to these organisations. Nevertheless, it is likely that looking towards BIMSTEC for regional economic, cultural and social cooperation may prove fruitful. This is because it does not include Pakistan, which has been an impediment to SAARC's success and has kept the group's relational dynamic focused on security and strategy. Further, China's absence in BIMSTEC could mean that there may be fewer obstacles hindering the achievement of the organisation's mandate. This is because bilateral and contentious issues will be excluded from the group's deliberations, especially given that India and China have conflicting world views and sometimes clash on regional goals. As the renegotiation of SAARC remains unattainable, BIMSTEC might be a viable option for India to maintain its foreign policy discourse. However, New Delhi will have to take into account the fact that in Asia, economics and politics have historically been deeply integrated, and not fall into the acquiescence trap.

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