

THE FOCUS ON BIMSTEC WAS LONG OVERDUE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: BIMSTEC and India

Ending suspense on the list of international invitees for Narendra Modi's swearing-in ceremony on May 30, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has revealed that Bimstec, or the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, leaders along with the president of the Kyrgyz Republic and the prime minister of Mauritius have been invited. Mr Modi's swearing-in ceremony in 2014 had leaders from Saarc (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries and Mauritius in attendance. While the inclusion of the Kyrgyz Republic was helped by the fact that the Central Asian country is the current chair of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the pivot from Saarc to Bimstec is pretty much on expected lines.

Bimstec is now increasingly seen as India's attempt at regional multilateralism without Pakistan, which has itself to blame for this exclusion. The latest bout of frustration in New Delhi started with the Kathmandu Saarc summit in 2014. Pakistan vetoed connectivity agreements on the table when all other countries were ready to sign it. Pakistan's intransigence stemmed from its fear of Indian goods overwhelming its markets and a desire to put obstacles in India-Afghanistan trade and connectivity. The next summit was to be hosted by Pakistan in 2016 but that never happened because of the Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack in Uri in September. India pulled out of the summit and as did many other South Asian countries. In the Brics (a grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit that was hosted in Goa the next month, India preferred Bimstec over Saarc for an outreach summit.

There are thus two big problems with Saarc and both have to do with Pakistan. The country drags its feet on connectivity agreements — and what else can Saarc achieve if not trade and connectivity in one of the world's least integrated regions economically? — and has continued to remain the fountainhead of terrorism in the region. This does not mean all is fine with Bimstec. Experts point out that Bimstec suffers from a lack of human and financial resources while, at the same time, spreading itself too thin in trying to address a wide range of issues. The increased focus on this group was overdue but New Delhi has to realise that Pakistan cannot be blamed for Bimstec's underachievements. The credit or blame will entirely be India's and hence it should leave no stone unturned to use the regional group to enhance trade and connectivity in the region.

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