

BIMSTEC CAN FILL SAARC'S SPACE

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India has made a strong pitch for enhanced connectivity between the seven member states of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) at the grouping's summit in Kathmandu. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said this should include connectivity in trade, economics, transport, digital networks and people-to-people. This fits in well with two key policies of the dispensation in New Delhi — “neighbourhood first” and “Act East” — considering that Bimstec member states account for 22% of the world's population and have a combined Gross Domestic Product of nearly \$2.7 trillion. For the other members, Bimstec holds the potential of gaining access to India's vast market, while New Delhi sees the grouping as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia.

It is clear that India is looking to the two-decade-old Bimstec to get around the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), which has become dysfunctional because of differences between New Delhi and Islamabad, and to counter China's creeping influence in countries around the Bay of Bengal due to the spread of its Belt and Road Initiative. Most of the members of Bimstec have either formally signed on for President Xi Jinping's ambitious plan to build a modern Silk Road or closely aligned their developmental plans and programmes with those of China's, thanks to investment lavished on infrastructure projects.

India, as the solitary holdout, realises the need to offer its neighbours a viable alternative to the One Belt, One Road project. In this, it is better placed as the neighbours and even outside powers such as the United States and Japan are expected to have no concerns about connectivity projects mooted by India, as these will come without hidden costs.

India's renewed push for Bimstec, which has held only four summits since it was founded in 1997, has coincided with a sharp downslide in relations with Pakistan. This is largely because policy makers in New Delhi believe it will be easier for India to work through a grouping not affected by the continuous tensions with Pakistan. But India must keep in mind that key players in Bimstec, such as Nepal, have pointed out they see the grouping and Saarc as complementary to each other.

However, the grand connectivity plans mooted by India will require sound planning and considerable funding, an area in which India cannot match the largesse shown by China. India's ability to fashion more equitable solutions and build a framework that works without violating international norms should go some way in overcoming this handicap.

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