

INDIA MUST BE PREPARED FOR THE LONG HAUL ON THE BIMSTEC FRONT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: BIMSTEC

Several recent developments suggest the Bimstec grouping is moving forward with a newfound sense of purpose. A little more than a fortnight after the summit of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) in Kathmandu on August 30-31, top officials of its seven members are meeting in Bangkok to frame an ambitious rail, road, sea and air connectivity master plan. This meeting follows the first military exercise in India by five members of the grouping that focused on counter-terror operations and hostage rescue. Such a flurry of activities is a clear reflection of India's strategic move to throw its weight behind Bimstec as the preferred forum for regional cooperation that bolsters its "Act East" policy. Some have even uncharitably described Bimstec as "Saarc minus Pakistan", a reference to the way in which tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad have often resulted in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) running aground.

However, one mustn't lose sight of the fact that Bimstec — which groups together Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand — is a body whose members have diverse interests and stakes in other regional groupings. Thailand, for instance, is a key player of Asean, though that grouping is seen as complementary to Bimstec. And despite the fresh momentum imparted by the recent summit in Kathmandu — only the fourth since Bimstec was formed in 1997 — Nepal's decision to pull out of the war game in Pune after committing to it struck a discordant note. The connectivity master plan was finalised after more than a decade of discussions — an indication of how slowly things can move within Bimstec. However, it provides the framework for seamless linkages between the member states that can foster more inclusive growth. For India, the connectivity master plan dovetails with its "Act East" and "Neighbourhood First" policies and could lead to great benefits for its under-developed northeastern states. It also allows India to conveniently sidestep the difficulty of engaging with Pakistan for trade, especially when the bilateral relationship is bedevilled by problems such as terrorism that appear insurmountable for now.

The Bimstec region, which has a population of 1.5 billion and a combined GDP of \$2.7 trillion, has witnessed sluggish growth of intra-region trade. While the countries around the Bay of Bengal are part of one of the fastest growing economic regions, trade among them accounts for only 5% of all trade in the region. Even the implementation of the connectivity master plan will take a long time. India, and the other members of the Bimstec, must be prepared for the long haul.

First Published: Sep 17, 2018 19:42 IST

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