



ESCAPING SAARC'S PARALYSIS: INDIA'S STRATEGIC PIVOT TO BIMSTEC AND THE MAKING OF BAY OF BENGAL REGIONALISM

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Abstract

This paper explains India's growing prioritisation of BIMSTEC over the moribund South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. Combining Hettne and Söderbaum's New Regionalism Approach with Gideon Rose's neoclassical realism, it argues that BIMSTEC's rise reflects a deliberate recalibration of Indian regional strategy, in which domestic perceptions of relative power translate systemic incentives into a preference for narrower, less veto-prone institutions. It traces BIMSTEC's evolution to the 2022 Charter and outlines policy measures to consolidate this shift.

Keywords: *BIMSTEC, SAARC, New Regionalism, Neoclassical Realism, India's Strategic Pivot, Bay of Bengal Cooperation.*

1. Introduction

For almost three decades the regionalism in South Asia had been synonymous with SAARC. The association has been on hold since its last full summit in 2014 in Islamabad, and India's boycott of the 2016 Kathmandu summit after the Uri attack. Rather, Indian policy makers are now focused on BIMSTEC, a forum started in 1997 to link India with the Southeast Asian region. This was formalised during the Fifth Summit in Colombo on 30 March 2022 with the adoption of a Charter which was signed by members, thereby establishing the organisation as a treaty-based body. This raises a puzzle South Asia scholarship has not addressed: why has India invested renewed energy in a grouping excluding Pakistan and including only two SAARC members? The answer lies neither purely in systemic power distribution nor purely in normative convergence, but in their interaction. New Regionalism explains why BIMSTEC could deepen 'regionness' where SAARC could not; neoclassical realism explains why India acted on that possibility when it did.

2. Theoretical Framework

Hettne and Söderbaum's New Regionalism Approach treats regional integration not as a fixed outcome but as a variable process of 'regionness' — movement from a bare regional space toward a region-state. The approach is multidimensional: economic, security, and cultural drivers interact, and non-state actors matter alongside governments. Applied here, it suggests the Bay of Bengal littoral possesses latent regionness rooted in maritime geography and connectivity that SAARC's partition-scarred geography lacked. Neoclassical realism, per Gideon Rose, holds that a state's foreign policy ambitions are set by relative material capabilities, filtered through unit-level variables — elite perceptions and domestic calculation — before producing observable policy. For India, the relevant systemic fact is eroding the advantage in Pakistan-centric SAARC diplomacy alongside rising Chinese infrastructure financing in the subcontinent. This pressure was refracted through a domestic preference, consolidated after 2014, for formats where India cannot be structurally outvoted or held hostage to bilateral hostility with one neighbour. The frameworks produce a combined hypothesis:



India's pivot to BIMSTEC transforms the 'latent regionalness' into the 'institutionalized regionalness' and the institutional form of 'institutionalization of regionalness' takes place through a vehicle whose membership fulfils the domestic logic of the avoidance of 'veto-prone multilateralism'.

3. Institutional Evolution: From Bangkok to Colombo

BIMSTEC began with the Bangkok Declaration of 6 June 1997, which was signed by Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, before being expanded to include Myanmar in 2000 and Bhutan and Nepal in 2004. The first 10 years it was a casual technical forum. In 2014, the establishment of a permanent secretariat was agreed and at the Kathmandu summit in 2018, there was a declaration on counter-terrorism and connectivity, and a Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, comprising more than 260 projects supported by the Asian Development Bank. The game-changer was the signing of the BIMSTEC Charter that was done during the Colombo Summit in 2022, creating legal personality for BIMSTEC, bringing together the fourteen sectors under seven pillars and establishing a biennial cycle of summits. It came into effect on 20 May 2024. This evidences the incremental regionness New Regionalism theorises, even as intra-BIMSTEC trade, still below ten percent, remains modest.

4. India's Strategic Recalibration

India's embrace of BIMSTEC reflects a positive institutional preference, not merely a reaction to SAARC's dysfunction. Officials frame it as the bridge between the Neighbourhood First and Act East policies, linking South Asian connectivity with India's Indo-Pacific posture. Carnegie India's 2018 assessment argued the Bay of Bengal remained among the world's least integrated regions because member states had not prioritised the grouping — a gap the 2022 Charter aims to close. The neoclassical realist variable is the domestic premium placed, since 2014, on formats that cannot be structurally vetoed by Pakistan. Unlike SAARC's consensus charter, BIMSTEC excludes Pakistan by design, letting India pursue cooperation without recurring bilateral vetoes. This reflects a perception that regional leadership is best exercised where India's material weight — economic size, naval reach, financing capacity — translates directly into agenda-setting power.

5. Structural Constraints

Since Myanmar's coup in 2021, the country's conflict has eroded one of its two anchors in Southeast Asia. Myanmar's conflict since the coup in 2021 has taken a toll on one of the country's two Southeast Asian anchors. There is still a heavy reliance on external funding, such as Chinese-backed roads in Myanmar and Bangladesh, which gives rise to a competitive instead of cooperative environment. The trade pillar remains least developed: a Free Trade Area framework was signed in 2004, but only two of seven constituent agreements were in place by the Colombo summit.

6. Policy Implications

Three measures follow. First, India should use its sectoral lead responsibilities to fast-track outstanding BIMSTEC FTA instruments rather than treat the framework agreement as symbolically sufficient. Second, New Delhi should expand co-financing of the Master Plan beyond flagship road and rail projects to the maritime and riverine links underpinning the grouping's identity. Third, India should institutionalise a standing crisis-consultation mechanism that functions even amid a member's internal instability.

7. Conclusion

BIMSTEC's transformation from a loose forum into a chartered organisation offers a revealing counterpoint to SAARC's paralysis. New Regionalism explains why the Bay of Bengal possessed



latent integrative potential that partition-defined South Asia did not; neoclassical realism explains why India converted that potential into sustained investment after 2014. Regional order in the subcontinent is thus less a function of structural power alone than of how domestic perceptions of that power select among available institutional vehicles. Its success will depend on whether this preference is matched by investment in the FTA and connectivity commitments that still lag the Charter's ambitions.

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