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## **India in BIMSTEC**

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a grouping of seven Member States lying in the littoral and adjacent areas of the Bay of Bengal. It is a unique link connecting South Asia with South-East Asia – five Members from South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two from South-East Asia (Myanmar and Thailand). The BIMSTEC region brings together 1.7 billion people – 22% of world population with a combined GDP of more than US\$ 5 trillion.

India attaches high importance to BIMSTEC as it is the converging point of India's 'Neighbourhood First', 'Act East' and MAHASAGAR policies. India's focus is on institution and capacity building in BIMSTEC. Strengthened security (especially maritime and cyber, and disaster preparedness) and increased connectivity (trade, energy, transport and people to people) are priority areas. In line with India's commitment towards strengthening BIMSTEC, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced several initiatives regularly at the BIMSTEC Summits. These include hosting BIMSTEC Ports Conclaves, BIMSTEC Conferences, BIMSTEC Scholarships in Agriculture, Forestry and AYUSH, BIMSTEC Aquatic Championship, BIMSTEC Business Summits, BIMSTEC Youth Summits, BIMSTEC Young Professionals' Exchanges, BIMSTEC Cultural Festivals, BIMSTEC Pavilion in Bali Jatra and Surajkund Mela, among several others.

The organization came into existence on 6 June 1997 through the 'Bangkok Declaration'. Decisions in BIMSTEC are based on consensus. BIMSTEC

organizes inter-governmental interactions through Summits, Ministerials, Senior Officials Meetings, Permanent Working Committee Meetings and Joint Working Groups & Experts Groups Meetings. Bangladesh is the current Chair of BIMSTEC. Six BIMSTEC Summits have been held so far – 2004 (Bangkok), 2008 (New Delhi), 2014 (Nay Pyi Taw), 2018 (Kathmandu), 2022 (Colombo) and 2025 (Bangkok). India hosted BIMSTEC Outreach Summit (Leaders Retreat) in Goa in October 2016. The last BIMSTEC Ministerial was held on 3 April 2025. The last Senior Officials Meeting was held on 2 April 2025. The last meeting of the BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) represented by respective National Focal Points (NFPs) from Member States was held in Dhaka on 7-8 April 2026. A Permanent Secretariat of the organization was setup in Dhaka in 2014. Amb. Indramani Pandey (from India for the first time) is the 4th BIMSTEC Secretary General.

As a major initiative to strengthen BIMSTEC India hosted an Outreach Summit of BIMSTEC in Goa in October 2016 on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit. It resulted into major and concrete action plans, including establishment of National Security Chiefs' mechanism, regular disaster management exercises, developing a master plan on connectivity, evolving a vision document and putting together an Eminent Persons Group. Many of these initiatives have been institutionalized. The BIMSTEC Summit in Kathmandu in August 2018 gave further fillip to the BIMSTEC process by emphasizing on finalization of the Charter and the priority areas of cooperation.

Due to the Covid there was loss of momentum but the efforts were reinvigorated with the Colombo Summit in March 2022 which was held virtually. The Leaders adopted the BIMSTEC Charter, a milestone in the transition of BIMSTEC from a grouping into a regional organization, and endorsed

reorganization of priority areas into 7 pillars, with each led by one member country. India is the Lead Country for Security pillar under which there are three sub-sectors – Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC), Disaster Management and Energy Security. The others are – Trade & Investment and Development (Bangladesh); Environment and Climate Change (Bhutan); People-to-People Contacts (Nepal); Agriculture and Food Security (Myanmar); Science, Technology and Innovation (Sri Lanka) and Connectivity (Thailand). Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, MoU on Cooperation between Diplomatic Academies, and MoA on Establishment of Technology Transfer facility in Colombo was signed. As part of new announcements to strengthen the institution building in BIMSTEC, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced US\$1 mn Grant to the Secretariat, Capacity building program by ICRIER on Trade Facilitation, Study by RIS on creating regional value chains for value added agricultural products in the BIMSTEC region, establishment of BIMSTEC Marine Research Network (BIMReN), and expansion of the scope of the existing BIMSTEC Nalanda Scholarship Scheme. The BIMSTEC Charter came into force on 20 May 2024.

The last, i.e. 6<sup>th</sup>, BIMSTEC Summit was held on 4 April 2025 in Bangkok. The main outcomes of the Summit were signing of the BIMSTEC Maritime Transport Agreement, adoption of the BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030 document, adoption of the Report of the BIMSTEC Eminent Persons Group, and adoption of the Summit Declaration. The Rules of Procedures for various mechanisms of the BIMSTEC and new sub-sectors namely blue economy, mountain economy and poverty alleviation to be included in the main pillars were also adopted. MoUs on cooperation with external partners including IORA and UN agencies were also signed. Towards institution and capacity building in BIMSTEC, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced several India-led initiatives including setting up in India

of BIMSTEC Centres of Excellence in Disaster Management, Sustainable Maritime Transport, Agriculture and Traditional Medicine, scholarships and skill-upgradation programs including BODHI (BIMSTEC for Organised Development of Human Infrastructure), undertaking a pilot study to assess regional needs in Digital Public Infrastructure, hosting assistance programme in cancer care, organizing Youth exchange programmes and BIMSTEC Games, etc.

There have been Ministerial Retreat Meetings of BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers. Thailand, as the BIMSTEC Chair, hosted the first Ministerial Retreat in July 2023 in Bangkok. India hosted the 2<sup>nd</sup> FMs' Retreat in Delhi on 11-12 July 2024. The Ministers discussed and asked for concerted efforts for food security, energy security and human security of BIMSTEC, expanding connectivity, building centres of excellence, developing resource awareness, more exchanges, sharing of experiences and people-oriented concrete actions. During the Retreat India put forth several new initiatives towards institution building and capacity building in BIMSTEC which were welcomed by others. There have also been informal meetings of BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers on the sidelines of UNGA. The first such meeting was hosted by India in September 2024 in New York.

## **AREAS OF COOPERATION**

**Agreements/ MoUs:** Several agreements/ MoUs have been signed including Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Drug Trafficking (came into force in 2021), Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters (signed in 2022), MoU on Cooperation between Diplomatic Academies (signed in 2022), and Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation (signed in 2025).

**Centres of Excellence:** India hosts the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC) at Noida to provide weather data for the region for its collective effort in disaster management and BIMSTEC Energy Centre in Bengaluru for energy cooperation. BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility and BIMSTEC Cultural Facilities are being established in Colombo in Thimphu respectively.

**Security:** At the Goa Retreat, the Leaders, recognizing the need to enhance cooperation in the security sector, institutionalized BIMSTEC NSA-level talks. Four rounds of NSA-level Meeting have been held since then, the last hosted by Myanmar in July 2024. Furthermore, BIMSTEC Home Ministers' Meeting mechanism has also been established. In addition to the signed agreements in the area of security convention, MoU on human trafficking (draft agreed), convention on transfer of sentenced persons, and convention on extradition are under discussion. India is leading the discussion on cooperation in the areas of maritime security, cyber security and space, and establishment of Himalayan Science Council.

**Disaster Management:** As the 'First Responder' to the disasters in the region and beyond, India conducts regular BIMSTEC Disaster management exercises which have been held four times till date (in 2017, 2020, 2021, and 2025 virtual). India is also establishing BIMSTEC Disaster Management Centre in Gandhinagar for capacity building in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

**Energy Security:** India leads efforts to establish BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection in line with India's vision of 'One Sun, One World, One Grid'. An MoU has been signed in 2018 and a coordination committee has been formed which is discussing the Master Plan prepared by ADB and the technical and commercial

aspects of the interconnection. BIMSTEC Energy Centre established in Bengaluru also strengthens the effort of energy cooperation.

**Transport Connectivity:** At the 5<sup>th</sup> Summit, the Leaders endorsed the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity. The draft prepared by ADB is under consideration for implementation. With India's efforts and initiatives a Maritime Transport Agreement has been signed and discussion on Motor Vehicle Agreement is on.

**Trade Connectivity:** Establishment of BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (BFTA) is under negotiation with discussion on its six agreements (on trade in goods, trade in services, investments, customs cooperation, dispute settlement, and trade facilitation). For increased business engagement a BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce is being established.

**Other areas:** Several mechanisms including Ministerial meetings, JWG's, expert groups etc. are discussing BIMSTEC cooperation in agriculture & food security, environment & climate change, technology, education & health (including traditional medicine), and people to people connect. The effort is to finalise plans of action (PoAs) and its early implementation. To push the process further India has taken initiatives in providing draft PoAs and hosting meetings/ workshops/ events. Track 1.5 dialogues in form of BIMSTEC Security Dialogue and BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks are organised.

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**As on 30th June, 2026**