



India's Foreign Policy towards BIMSTEC Connectivity: Strategic challenges and Regional Prospects in the Indo – Pacific in the Modi era

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ABSTRACT

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi - sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has become an important regional group linking South Asia and Southeast Asia. It focuses on cooperation in economics, strategy, and connectivity. Since 2014, India has made BIMSTEC a key part of its foreign policy through the “Neighbourhood First” and “Act East” approaches. This paper looks at India’s foreign policy regarding BIMSTEC Connectivity from 2014 to 2024. It explores the strategic aspects, geopolitical challenges, and regional opportunities related to connectivity projects in the Bay of Bengal area. The study uses a qualitative and analytical method, drawing on secondary sources such as government documents, policy papers, academic articles, and strategic reports. The paper argues that India's efforts in BIMSTEC Connectivity show a shift from traditional South Asia Regionalism to a wider Indo - Pacific geopolitical context. Projects like the Kaladan Multi - Modal Transit Transport project, the India - Myanmar - Thailand Trilateral Highway, coastal shipping initiatives, and regional energy connections highlight India's aim to boost regional unity and influence. However, challenges such as competition with China, political instability in Myanmar, weak institutions, poor infrastructure, and security issues hinder effective implementation. The study concludes that despite several structural challenges, BIMSTEC has significant potential to



become an essential regional platform for Connectivity, maritime cooperation, economic integration, and strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Introduction: The twenty - first century has seen a greater focus on regional connectivity as a key part of international relations and foreign policy. Connectivity involving transport infrastructure, maritime networks, energy cooperation, and digital integration has become increasingly important in shaping geopolitical and economic relationships between countries. In Asia, regional organisations are increasingly using connectivity diplomacy to enhance economic integration and strategic cooperation. Against the backdrop, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi - sectoral Technical and Economic cooperation (BIMSTEC) has emerged as a vital regional platform linking South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Established in 1997, BIMSTEC includes seven member states: India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. The organisation connects the Himalayan region with the Bay of Bengal while also linking South Asia with Southeast Asia. BIMSTEC has gradually become significant as a framework for economic cooperation, maritime security, connectivity, and diplomatic strategy.

For India, BIMSTEC gained considerable strategic importance after 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The country's foreign policy started to emphasise regional engagement through the "Neighbourhood First Policy" and the "Act East policy". The stagnation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation due to ongoing tension with Pakistan pushed India to focus on alternative Pakistan, allowing better connectivity with Southeast Asia.

Connectivity diplomacy became central to India's BIMSTEC policy. India launched several major Connectivity projects, including the Kaladan Multi - Modal Transit Transport project, the India - Myanmar -Thailand Trilateral Highway, BIMSTEC coastal shipping initiatives, and regional energy connectivity efforts. These projects aimed not only to boost economic integration but also to enhance India's strategic influence in the Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific regions. However, India's BIMSTEC strategy faces several challenges. Geopolitical competition with China, lack of infrastructure, financial issues, and weak opportunities continue to hinder the implementation of regional connectivity projects. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has intensified strategic competition in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, pushing India to reinforce its own regional connectivity efforts.

This paper looks at India's foreign policy regarding BIMSTEC Connectivity from 2014 to 2024. It analyses India's strategic goals, major Connectivity initiatives, geopolitical challenges, and future



regional opportunities within the larger Indo-Pacific context. The paper argues that India's BIMSTEC policy marks a strategic shift from traditional south Asian Regionalism to a border Indo-pacific geopolitical strategy focused on connectivity diplomacy.

Objective of the Study

1. To analyse India's foreign policy towards BIMSTEC Connectivity from 2014 to 2024.
2. To examine the strategic importance of connectivity diplomacy in the Bay of Bengal region.
3. To identify geopolitical and institutional challenges affecting BIMSTEC.
4. To evaluate the future regional prospect of BIMSTEC in the Indo-pacific context.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and analytical approach based mainly on secondary sources. The research relies on government reports, BIMSTEC summit declaration, publications from the Ministry of External Affairs, academic journal articles, books, and strategic policy reports from institutions like the Observer Research Foundation and the Institute for Defence Studies and analyses. The study employs thematic and interpretative analysis to assess India's connectivity diplomacy and its geopolitical effects.

Literature Review: Existing literature on BIMSTEC mainly focuses on regional cooperation, economic integration, and India's strategic involvement in the Bay of Bengal region. Scholars increasingly highlight the role of BIMSTEC in India's Act East policy and Indo-Pacific strategy.

S.D Muni points out that BIMSTEC has become a key regional mechanism. It connects south Asia and Southeast Asia through strategic and economic cooperation. Muni (2003, 2016) states that India's Act East policy has turned BIMSTEC into a significant geopolitical tool for enhancing regional connectivity and maritime engagement.

Research at the Observer Research Foundation stresses the importance of BIMSTEC within India's Indo-Pacific policy. They argue that BIMSTEC helps India strengthen maritime diplomacy, boost regional trade, and increase its strategic influence in the Bay of Bengal. Several scholars note that the decline of SAARC is a key reason for BIMSTEC's rising importance; ongoing tension between India and Pakistan has limited SAARC'S effectiveness promoting India to focus on subregional frameworks that exclude Pakistan.



Research on connectivity diplomacy underlines the strategic importance of infrastructure projects like the Kaladan Multi - Modal Transit Transport project and the India- Myanmar -Thailand Trilateral Highway. These efforts are seen as critical for connecting India's northeastern region to Southeast Asia.

At the same time, some critical studies point out various limitations affecting BIMSTEC regionalism. Common challenges include institutional weaknesses, slow implementation, inadequate infrastructure, financial issues, and political Instability in Myanmar. Pal (2021) argues that despite its strategic potential, BIMSTEC still faces significant implementation gaps and inefficiencies.

The literature also notes China's rising influence through the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese investment in South Asia and the Indian Ocean have intensified geopolitical competition and raised BIMSTEC strategic value for India.

While current studies extensively discuss BIMSTEC and regional cooperation, there are few comprehensive analyses of India's connectivity diplomacy from 2014 to 2024 within the larger Indo-Pacific geopolitical context.

Theoretical Framework: This study examines connectivity diplomacy and regional strategy. Connectivity diplomacy refers to using transport corridors, infrastructure networks , maritime routes, and economic integration as tools for foreign policy and geopolitical influence. Today, connectivity units often serve as methods for strategic competition and projecting regional power.

Strategic regionalism shows how regional organisations promote economic cooperation, security coordination , and balancing power in geopolitical contexts. BIMSTEC exemplifies the idea by addressing both development and strategic goals in the Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific regions.

This paper also employs a neo-realist analysis to explain India's competition with China. From this perspective, countries pursue regional influence and balance strategies in response to shifting power dynamics. India's focus on BIMSTEC Connectivity can be seen as part of a broader effort to maintain strategic influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

India's Foreign Policy Towards BIMSTEC Connectivity:

Neighbourhood First policy: After the group was formed in 2014, Narendra Modi introduced the “Neighbourhood First Policy” to improve relations with neighbouring countries through economic cooperation, strategic engagement, and regional connectivity. BIMSTEC became a key part of this policy



because it allowed India to connect with South Asia and Southeast Asian nations India's growing focus on BIMSTEC showed a straight Move away from the SAARC-centred regional platform.

Act East policy and Connectivity Diplomacy:

India changed its earlier “ Look East policy” to the more active “Act East policy” Connectivity became a main feature of this policy since India recognized how essential transport integration and infrastructure diplomacy are for promoting economic growth and strategic engagement.

Kaladan Multi - Modal Transit Transport project:-

The Kaladan Multi - Modal Transit Transport project is one of India's most important regional connectivity initiatives. This project connects Kolkata port with Myanmar's Sittwe port through maritime transport and links India's northeastern states via inland waterways and road corridors. The project' strategic significance lies in reducing India's reliance on the Siliguri Corridor and enhancing connectivity between northeastern India and Southeast Asia. It also boosts India's strategic position in the Bay of Bengal region.

India -Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway:

The India -Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway seeks to connect India with Southeast Asia through road networks stretching from Manipur to Thailand via Myanmar. This Highway is expected to support trade, tourism, and strategic movement. The project highlights India's effort to integrate its northeastern region with ASEAN economics and improve connectivity within the Indo- pacific framework.

Maritime Connectivity and coastal shipping:

India has placed greater focus on maritime diplomacy through BIMSTEC coastal shipping agreements, port connectivity, and maritime security cooperation. The Bay of Bengal is strategically important as it links key sea routes in the Indo- pacific region. India's maritime strategy under BIMSTEC aligns with the SAGAR doctrine, which focuses on security and growth for all in the region and emphasises maritime security and regional cooperation.

BIMSTEC and India's Indo-Pacific strategy: The Indo-Pacific has become an important framework that shapes regional politics today. India increasingly views the Bay of Bengal as linked to the larger Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, BIMSTEC has become important for India's maritime and strategic diplomacy. India's Indo-Pacific strategy focuses on maritime security, economic integration, strategic



connectivity, Regional stability, and geopolitical balance. BIMSTEC supports these goals by promoting collaboration among the coastal states of the Bay of Bengal. Maritime cooperation is crucial due to the increasing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, China's Belt and Road Initiative has significantly expanded its infrastructure and strategic influence in South Asia. Chinese investments have poured into ports, highways, and other areas of competitive interest in the region. As a result, India views BIMSTEC as a key platform for enhancing its regional influence and countering China's growing presence.

Strategic Challenges to BIMSTEC Connectivity: China's Belt and Road Initiative

One of the biggest challenges for India's BIMSTEC policy is the chain's growing influence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has invested heavily in infrastructure, ports, highways, and energy projects across South Asia. India views these developments as strategic theatres because Chinese connectivity projects could boost Beijing's power in the Indian Ocean area. India's BIMSTEC Connectivity efforts operate within a large context of geopolitical competition.

Political Instability in Myanmar: Myanmar is a crucial geographical link in BIMSTEC Connectivity networks. Most key transport routes connecting India with Southeast Asia pass through Myanmar. However, political unrest and armed conflict following the 2021 military coup have significantly disrupted infrastructure projects and cooperation in the region.

Security issues and administrative problems have delayed the India -Myanmar -Thailand Highway and other connectivity initiatives.

Infrastructure Deficits and Financial Constraints: Many BIMSTEC member countries still face underdeveloped infrastructure and financial difficulties. Weak transport systems, limited ports, poor road networks, and low technological capacity hinder regional integration. India has also experienced delays in major Connectivity projects due to bureaucratic inefficiency and funding issues.

Institutional weakness of BIMSTEC: Compared to organisations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, BIMSTEC lacks a strong institutional mechanism. Limited financial resources, the absence of an effective dispute resolution system, and weak administrative coordination reduce the organisation's operational effectiveness. The slow pace of decision-making often affects project implementation and policy coordination among member states.

Regional Prospect of BIMSTEC Connectivity:



Improved connectivity can include regional trade, investment, and economic cooperation among BIMSTEC member states. The Bay of Bengal region has a large population and growing markets, which create significant economic potential. Better transport infrastructure may strengthen regional supply chains and cross-border commerce. Connectivity projects under BIMSTEC are very important in India's northeastern region. Better infrastructure and transport networks could turn the region into a key gateway connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia. Economic Integration might boost industry growth, tourism, and job creation. BIMSTEC has strong potential for maritime security and blue economy efforts involving fisheries marine resources , coastal tourism, and environmental sustainability. India sees maritime diplomacy as a vital part of its regional leadership in the Bay of Bengal region. As geographical competition grows in the Indo- pacific region, BIMSTEC could become a key platform for strategic coordination and regional stability. Connectivity diplomacy is expected to continue shaping India's regional engagement and foreign policy goals.

Critical Analysis: India's BIMSTEC Connectivity policy shows a shift in Indian foreign policy from traditional regionalism to strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Connectivity initiatives serve not just as development projects but also as tools for geopolitical influence and regional balance. However, contradictions exist within India's strategy. While India aims to be a leader in regional connectivity, delays in implementation and weak infrastructure often undermine its credibility with neighbouring countries. China's Belt and Road Initiative projects are often completed faster and with more financial resources. Moreover, BIMSTEC faces institutional challenges that limit effective regional integration. Unlike ASEAN, BIMSTEC does not have strong administrative structures of the financial system needed for managing large -scale connectivity. Still, BIMSTEC is strategically important because it allows India to pressure regional cooperation without the limitations seen in SAARC. The organisation also enhances India's maritime and geopolitical presence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion: India's foreign policy towards BIMSTEC Connectivity from 2014 to 2024 highlights the growing importance of regional connections in today's international relations and Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Through initiatives like the Act East policy, Kaladan project, India -Myanmar-Thailand Highway, and maritime cooperation frameworks, India has tried to boost economic integration, strategic influence, and regional collaboration in the Bay of Bengal region.

Despite its strategic potential, BIMSTEC Connectivity faces several challenges, including geopolitical competition with China, political instability in Myanmar, infrastructure issues, institutional weaknesses,



and security risks. Nonetheless, BIMSTEC is still a significant regional platform for enhancing connectivity, maritime cooperation, and economic integration.

The future success of BIMSTEC will rely on improved coordination, financial investment, political commitment, and effective execution of connectivity projects. For India, BIMSTEC is both a strategic necessity and a geopolitical opportunity in the changing Indo-Pacific landscape.

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