

the possibility of the election of a more conservative candidate for the Iranian Presidency. The current President Mr. Rouhani who is considered a moderate is more likely to agree to a negotiated revival of the nuclear agreement.

External dangers:

- Iran-backed Shia militias in Iraq continue to target U.S. forces and bases in Iraq.
- The Israel-Iran shadow conflict is now being fought inside Syria and on the seas.
- If security tensions rise in the region involving Iran and its proxies, it could derail the diplomatic efforts.

Conclusion:

- The U.S.'s best chance to address Iran's nuclear programme is through the revival of the JCPOA.
- The U.S. and Iran should exercise restraint, stay focused on talks and rebuild the lost trust.

BIMSTEC needs to reinvent itself

The foreign ministers of BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and

Economic Cooperation) met virtually on April 1, 2021.

- The last ministerial meeting was held in August 2018.
- Their major task was to pave the way for the next summit (the grouping's fifth) due to be held in Sri Lanka.

BIMSTEC:

- BIMSTEC was established as a grouping of four nations – India, Thailand, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka through the Bangkok Declaration of 1997 to promote rapid economic development.
- BIMSTEC was expanded later to include three more countries – Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan.
- It moved at a leisurely pace during its first 20 years with only three summits held and a record of modest achievements.

Unfolding rejuvenation:

- The grouping suddenly received special attention as India chose to treat it as a more practical instrument for regional cooperation over a faltering SAARC.

- The BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat, followed by their Outreach Summit with the BRICS leaders in Goa in October 2016, drew considerable international limelight to the low-profile regional grouping. This also opened up the path for its rejuvenation.

- The fourth leaders' summit, held in Kathmandu in 2018, devised an ambitious plan for institutional reform and renewal that would encompass economic and security cooperation.

 - It took the important decision to craft a charter to provide BIMSTEC with a more formal and stronger foundation.

 - The shared goal now is to head towards "a Peaceful, Prosperous and Sustainable Bay of Bengal Region".

- India's External Affairs Minister observed that India saw a mix of "energy, mindset and possibility" in BIMSTEC.

Recent decisions:

- The foreign ministers cleared the draft for the BIMSTEC charter, recommending its early adoption.

- They endorsed the rationalisation of sectors and sub-sectors of activity, with each member-state serving as a lead for the assigned areas of special interest.
- The ministers also conveyed their support for the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity.
 - This will be adopted at the next summit.
- Preparations have been completed for the signing of three agreements relating to:
 - Mutual legal assistance in criminal matters
 - Cooperation between diplomatic academies
 - Establishment of a technology transfer facility in Colombo.

Issue:

- On certain fronts, BIMSTEC remains a work in progress.
- A January 2018 study by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry had suggested that BIMSTEC urgently needed a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement to be a real game-changer. Ideally, it should:
 - Cover trade in goods, services and investment.

- Promote regulatory harmonisation.
- Adopt policies that develop regional value chains.
- Eliminate non-tariff barriers.
- An effort to enthuse and engage the vibrant business communities of these seven countries, and expand their dialogue, interactions and transactions is lacking.
- Over 20 rounds of negotiations to operationalise the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement, signed in 2004, are yet to bear fruit.
- Uncertainties over SAARC hovers, complicating matters.
 - Both Kathmandu and Colombo want the SAARC summit revived, even as they cooperate within BIMSTEC, with diluted zeal.
- China's decisive intrusion in the South-Southeast Asian space has cast dark shadows.
- The military coup in Myanmar, brutal crackdown of protesters and continuation of popular resistance resulting in a protracted impasse have produced a new set of challenges.

Achievements:

- Much has been achieved in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief and security, including counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and coastal security cooperation.

- India has led through constant focus and follow-up – to the extent that some member-states have complained about the over-securitisation of BIMSTEC.

- While national business chambers are yet to be optimally engaged with the BIMSTEC project, the academic and strategic community has shown ample enthusiasm through the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks and other fora.

Way Forward:

- The trick to ensuring balance is not to go slow on security but to accelerate the pace of forging solid arrangements for economic cooperation.

- The goal now should be to overcome the obstacles leading to BIMSTEC's success.

- The trajectory of India-Nepal, India-Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh-Myanmar ties in recent years is an impediment to the grouping. A strong BIMSTEC needs cordial and tension-free bilateral relations among all its member-states.

UNFPA's population report launched


BIMSTEC working on joint disaster relief plans

PANEX-21: Disaster management exercise of the multilateral grouping (BIMSTEC) was held recently in Pune

PANEX 21, is aimed to undertake a review the HADR mechanism.


BIMSTEC

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW



Stands for **The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation**

7 MEMBER COUNTRIES



First summit held in Thailand

Sri Lanka is the current Chair

Founded in 1997 through **Bangkok Declaration**

Importance of BIMSTEC

- Accounts for **22%** of the world's population
- Combined GDP of **\$2.7 trillion**
- One-fourth of the world's traded goods cross the Bay every year
- Six focus areas—trade, technology, energy, transport, tourism and fisheries

A subregional grouping that must get back on course

Sri Lanka is set to hold a Virtual summit meeting of the leaders of the BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC:

- The seven-member regional org. consisting of India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan, BIMSTEC was founded in 1997.
- BIMSTEC has identified the following 14 areas for cooperation and collaboration.
 - Trade and investment
 - Transport and communication
 - Energy
 - Tourism
 - Technology
 - Fisheries
 - Agriculture
 - Public health
 - Poverty alleviation
 - Counter terrorism and transnational crime

- Environment and disaster management
- People-to-people contact
- Cultural cooperation
- Climate change

Significance of the Bay of Bengal region:

1. Ecological:

- Bay of Bengal region is home to a large network of estuaries, mangrove forests, coral reefs, sea grass meadows and mass nesting sites of sea turtles.
- This makes the region ecologically critical.

2. Social:

- The region supports a coastal population of approximately 185 million people.
- The fishermen population alone is estimated to be around 3.7 million.

3. Economic:

- The blue economy potential of the Bay of Bengal is huge.

- There are many opportunities to develop maritime trade, shipping, aquaculture and tourism.
- The annual fish catch in the region is around six million tonnes.
- This constitutes around 7% of the world's annual fish catch and is valued at around \$4 billion USD.

Concerns/challenges:

1. Ecological degradation:

- The rich marine ecosystem of the Bay of Bengal region remains extremely fragile and vulnerable to degradation and damage.
- The annual loss of mangrove areas and coral reefs remains substantial.
- The destruction of such natural protection against floods and sea erosion threatens the submergence of coastal areas.
- This becomes all the more concerning given that the sea levels are predicted to increase by 0.5 metres in the next 50 years.
- The growing population pressure and industrial growth in the coastal areas have resulted in huge

quantities of untreated waste flowing into the waters of the region.

- This is leading to the emergence of dead zones in the region.
- Dead zones are areas of water bodies where aquatic life cannot survive because of low oxygen levels.
- Dead zones are generally caused by significant nutrient pollution, and are primarily a problem for bays, lakes and coastal waters since they receive excess nutrients from upstream sources.
- The leaching of plastic from rivers into the waters of the region is contributing to plastic pollution and the consequent adverse effects on the marine ecosystem.

2. Unsustainable fishing practices:

- Around 4,15,000 fishing boats operate in the Bay of Bengal region and it is estimated that 33% of fish stocks are fished unsustainably.

- According to UN-FAO, the Bay of Bengal is one of the **illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU)** fishing hotspots in the Asia-Pacific.

3. Vulnerability to disasters:

- The region is prone to natural disasters.
- There have been **13 cyclonic storms** in the last five years alone.
- Given that the region houses a long coastline, it is prone to disasters such as **tsunamis** as well.
- Also given that the region has high-density shipping lanes, it is also prone to **man-made disasters like oil spills** as is observed in Sri Lankan waters.

4. Security threats:

- **Terrorism, piracy** and tensions between countries caused by the **arrests of fishermen** who cross maritime boundaries into the territorial waters of other countries are the major challenges.
- The problem of fishermen affects India's relationship with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Recommendations:

- BIMSTEC must come up with a new regional mechanism for coordinated activities on maritime issues of a transboundary nature.
- Initiatives to tackle illegal and unsustainable fishing as well as prevent the further environmental degradation of the Bay of Bengal region.
- Setting up an international vessel tracking system and making it mandatory for vessels to be equipped with automatic identification system (AIS) trackers;
- Establishing a regional fishing vessel registry system and publishing vessel licence lists to help identify illegal vessels;
- Increasing monitoring, control and surveillance in IUU (Illegal, unreported and unregulated) fishing hotspots.
- Improving the implementation of joint regional patrols, and outreach programmes targeted at fishermen can help in tackling illegal and unsustainable fishing.

- Establishing protected areas and developing frameworks to prevent and manage pollution as well as oil spills.
- The upcoming BIMSTEC summit must express support for initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP) and the Bay Of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) project.
- The Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP) is an inter-governmental organisation based in Chennai.
- It is mandated to enhance cooperation among countries in the region and provide technical and management advisory services for sustainable coastal fisheries development and management.
- The Bay Of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME) project is being launched by the FAO with funding from the Global Enviro Facility (GEF), etc
- Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, S.Lanka, and Thailand are collaborating through (BOBLME) Project to better the lives of their coastal populations by improving regional management of the Bay of Bengal environment and its fisheries.

Modi moots free trade agreement for BIMSTEC

Fifth summit of the BIMSTEC, hosted by Sri Lanka.

1. The signing of the Charter of the organization

- Charter has given the BIMSTEC a new shape and well-defined goals.
- The signing of the Charter has got BIMSTEC international recognition.
- BIMSTEC now has its own emblem, a flag and listed objectives and principles that it is going to adhere to.



Emblem



Flag

- The declaration of the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity was also announced
- This would now provide a framework for regional and domestic connectivity.

- With a view to develop a formal structure of the organisation, the member nations agreed to divide the working of the grouping into 7 pillars.
- India will take the leadership of the security pillar.

Bangladesh	: Trade, Investment and Development
Bhutan	: Environment & Climate Change
India	: Security Sub-sectors: Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime, Disaster Management, Energy
Myanmar	: Agriculture and Food Security Sub-sectors: Agriculture, Fisheries & Livestock
Nepal	: People-to-People Contact Sub-sectors: Culture, Tourism, People-to-People Contact (forums of think tanks, media etc.)
Sri Lanka	: Science, Technology & Innovation (Sri Lanka) Sub-sectors: Technology, Health, Human Resource Development
Thailand	: Connectivity

Way forward

- PM Modi recommended a FTA among the member countries for strengthening the BIMSTEC.
- There also exists a need for developing a coastal shipping ecosystem and electricity grid interconnectivity between the nations.

A silver moment to propel a Bay of Bengal dream



Background:

- **BIST-EC** (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand - Economic Cooperation) **formed**: Jun 1997, Bangkok.
- Myanmar admitted: Dec 1997, organization renamed BIMST-EC.
- Nepal and Bhutan admitted: Feb 2004.
- Organisation renamed **BIMSTEC** (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and

Economic Cooperation) :1st Summit Meeting (Jul 2004), Bangkok.

Overview:

- BIMSTEC is viewed as the instrument of regional cooperation and integration.
- Aims to achieve its stated goals and decisions, shaped during the Kathmandu Summit.

Achievements so far:

Charter:

- Created a charter for itself that defines the visions, and functions of the grouping and also secure a legal personality.

Areas of cooperation:

- The grouping has seven sectors of priority and each country serves as the lead for the assigned sector.

Summits:

- Post-2014, succeeded in holding five summits successfully so far. At present, it holds regular summits once in two years.

Progress in focus areas:

- Combating terrorism, forging security cooperation, and creating mechanisms and practices for the better management of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Institutions:

- Energy Center and the Center on Weather and Climate Change. They push regional cooperation forward.

Crises:

- Witnessed many crises such as the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh due to the result of oppression by the Myanmar military.
- The military coup by Myanmar led to the boycott of Myanmar by several institutions.
- Recently, also witnessed a severe economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

Issues with BIMSTEC:

Inability to produce FTA:

- Seven agreements are needed to operationalize the FTA but only two are prepared yet.

Connectivity issue:

- Due to infrastructure energy, the digital and financial domain, and institutions that bring people closer together for trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges.
- Very limited progress, made so far despite the Master Plan for Connectivity support provided by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).
- All the connectivity established so far is credited to the initiatives taken by India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal.

Financial resources:

- Needed to expand regional connectivity to a greater extent.

Some pending projects:

- BIMSTEC development fund.
- Blue Economy.

Way Forward:

- The grouping works in the direction of achieving the visions of the Bay of Bengal Community (BOBC) which has the potential to play a vital role in

deepening the linkages between Southeast Asia and South Asia.

- Synergy should be established between the newly created Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for prosperity and BIMSTEC to accelerate the growth and development of the region.
- Three members of BIMSTEC have greater responsibility.
 - **Bangladesh** as the host of the BIMSTEC Secretariat.
 - **Thailand** as the representative of Southeast Asia.
 - **India** as the largest state in South Asia should work towards speeding up the progress of BIMSTEC.