

Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 563
JULY 2022

BIMSTEC on the Cusp: Regional Security in Focus

**Sohini Bose, Anasua Basu Ray
Chaudhury and Harsh V. Pant**

Abstract

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is standing on the threshold of a new inning, as it marks its 25th year in 2022. The past months have been momentous for BIMSTEC, as it adopted a charter at the fifth Summit Meeting in March to outline a clearer purpose for the organisation. During the summit, BIMSTEC rationalised its 14 diverse sectors of cooperation into seven core areas of interest, including Security. As competition for resources like energy heightens, BIMSTEC must ramp up efforts to ensure security in the hydrocarbon-rich Bay. It must also deal with the other threats to this maritime space, such as transnational crime and natural disasters that are growing in intensity because of climate change. This brief reimagines BIMSTEC's agenda on regional security and its priorities in the immediate future.

Littorals of the Bay of Bengal face a myriad of security concerns, including those caused by the aggressive behaviour of certain states, illicit activities, and environmental degradation. In recent years, China's expanding presence in the Bay has roused apprehensions amongst the member countries of BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)^a about preserving the autonomy of the shipping routes that are important for trade in resources such as energy. In a future that will likely be characterised by worsening energy scarcity, the hydrocarbon-rich Bay of Bengal will only become more pivotal to international relations.¹

The growing interest of external players such as the United States (US) and China has propelled the Bay to the centre-stage of strategic power play and resource politics in the region. The Bay—whose natural turbulence makes it vulnerable to disasters—is facing aggravated security threats including terrorism and transnational crime. The littoral countries are therefore keen to rejuvenate BIMSTEC and strengthen cooperation in order to deal more effectively with these challenges and promote stability in the region.

Despite constituting close to 22 percent (nearly 1.5 billion people) of the world's population and its member states having a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$ 2.7 trillion,² BIMSTEC has largely been dormant. The increased strategic attention on the Bay of Bengal has rejuvenated BIMSTEC, prompting it to undertake certain structural changes. In its fifth Summit meeting on 30 March 2022, it reorganised its sectors of cooperation and grouped the 14 sectors into seven broad areas of concern: trade, investment, and development (led by Bangladesh); environment and climate change (Bhutan); security^b (India); agriculture and food security (Myanmar); people-to-people contact (Nepal); science, technology, and innovation (Sri Lanka); and connectivity (Thailand).³

The aim of this brief is threefold: to evaluate how BIMSTEC's own mandate of 'Security' corresponds with the security scenario in the Bay; to assess its contributions in the security sub-sectors of counterterrorism and transnational crime, disaster management, and energy; and to identify ways in which it can strengthen regional security more effectively.

a BIMSTEC is a subregional organisation created in 1997. It has seven member countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand.

b The sector on 'Security' under India's lead covers the erstwhile independent sectors of Counterterrorism and Transnational Crimes (CTTC), Disaster Management, and Energy.

Security in the Bay and the BIMSTEC Mandate

The Bay of Bengal is strategically located at the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Challenges abound in this maritime space, as do opportunities, given its important Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and hydrocarbon reserves. The following paragraphs discuss the traditional and non-traditional security challenges facing the littorals of the Bay.

Traditional Security Concerns: Freedom of Navigation

The primary traditional security concern^c in the Bay is protecting freedom of navigation along the SLOCs that are critical for trade in energy and other resources. Many of these routes are straddled by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) chain.^d One of the world's busiest shipping lanes, the East-West shipping route^e passes along just 8 nautical miles below the southern tip of this archipelago before flowing into the Strait of Malacca. The protection of these trade routes is important for the Bay littoral countries and the other regional stakeholders. As China asserts its presence in the region to deal with its so-called 'Malacca Dilemma',^f India is strengthening its naval presence in the ANI and has undertaken joint naval exercises such as Milan,⁴ as well as coordinated patrols with countries like Thailand⁵ and Indonesia.⁶

Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Concerns

The NTS concerns^g in the Bay of Bengal region can be classified into three broad categories, each to be discussed in the following paragraphs in turn.

a. Terrorism and Transnational Crime

Terrorism

All the BIMSTEC member countries are vulnerable to terrorism, either as victims of terror attacks or as "breeding grounds" for terrorists. Most terror networks engage in money laundering and drug trade to finance their activities.⁷

^c Traditional security concerns are challenges to a country's political sovereignty posed by another.

^d These include the Duncan's Passage, the Ten Degree Channel, the Preparis Channel, and the Six Degree Channel pass along the north and south of the ANI, respectively.

^e A trade route that connects Europe and Africa with Asia.

^f 'Malacca dilemma' refers to the predicament China finds itself in if the rival nations decide to block the Strait of Malacca through which nearly 80 percent of its exports pass through.

^g Non-traditional security threats are challenges posed to the security of countries and their people by non-state or non-military sources. These can include environmental threats and terrorism.

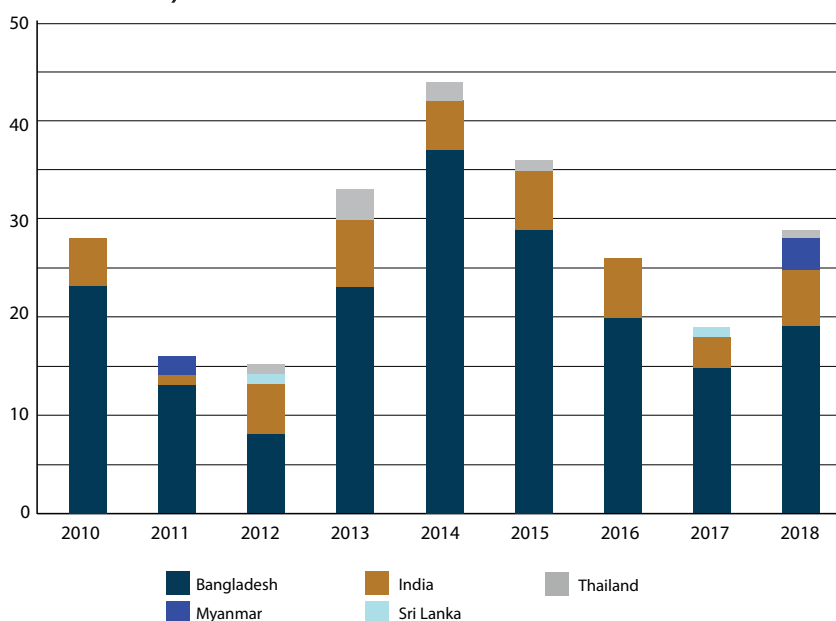
Security in the Bay and the BIMSTEC Mandate

The *Global Terrorism Index 2022* ranks the BIMSTEC member countries as follows: Myanmar holds the 9th rank, closely followed by India (12th), Thailand (22nd), Sri Lanka (25th), Nepal (34th), Bangladesh (40th), and Bhutan (93rd).⁸ Other countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, which rank high on the index, share borders or maritime boundaries with certain BIMSTEC countries.⁹

Piracy

As regards transnational crime, the illegal activities that are most prevalent in the Bay region include trade of narcotic substances, sea piracy, illegal fishing, undocumented migration, and human trafficking. Instances of piracy, armed robbery (see Figure 1),¹⁰ and kidnapping of fishermen for ransom, have been reported in some areas such as the Chittagong anchorages of Bangladesh, and the Sundarban mangroves. Widespread poverty, population density, and lack of livelihood opportunities due to overfishing allow such illegal activities to thrive.

Figure 1:
Sea Piracy in BIMSTEC Countries
(2010-2018)



Source: *Stable Seas*¹¹

Security in the Bay and the BIMSTEC Mandate

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing

As the practise of overfishing depletes fish stocks, fishermen and fishing trawlers are increasingly transgressing maritime boundaries and entering foreign waters in search of bigger catch. This is particularly easy in the Bay as almost 80 percent of it is a contiguous belt of Exclusive Economic Zones belonging to the various littoral countries. Frequent illegal forays into foreign waters act as irritants in bilateral relations, as they compromise the affected country's food and economic security. Violence can lead to loss of fishermen's lives, as was seen between India and Sri Lanka during the latter's civil war years (1991-2009).¹² To be sure, illegal fishing may not always be intentional—many fishermen end up in foreign waters due to lack of awareness about boundaries.¹³ “For 17 countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia, the total annual value of illegal and unreported losses between 1990 and 2013 was found to be between US\$6 billion and US\$20.75 billion. These values represented between 4.5 and 14.4 million tonnes of marine catch.”¹⁴

Illegal migration

The problem of illegal migration has also surfaced in the Bay in recent years, as the Rohingya Muslims flee Myanmar to escape persecution. While some crossed the border to Bangladesh, others undertook journeys across the Bay, in the worst cases falling victim to deadly diseases.¹⁵

Human trafficking

Authorities agree that the routes, methods, and activities of human traffickers have become increasingly organised. Criminal syndicates have a greater degree of penetration, both within and outside the region.¹⁶ However, statistics are limited and being contested, making it difficult to create an accurate account of the current situation.

Security in the Bay and the BIMSTEC Mandate

b. Natural disasters

As the Bay of Bengal lies in the “World Hazard Belt” that is the Indian Ocean, it confronts environment-related security concerns.^h Due to their sheer geography, many BIMSTEC countries experience varying degrees of vulnerability to natural disasters such as cyclones, tsunamis, landslides and earthquakes, where millions lose their lives or are displaced (see Figure 2). The geophysical formation of the Bayⁱ is the primary reason why it is prone to cyclones. It also experiences frequent tsunamis as the Andaman and Sumatra Subduction Zone—a high-risk seismic zone—is in close proximity.¹⁷

Figure 2:
Impact of the 2004 Tsunami and Recent Cyclones on BIMSTEC countries

Year	Disasters	Impact
2004	Indian Ocean Tsunami	Sri Lanka: 30,000 died; loss of US\$1.5 billion. India: 10,273 died, and 22,750 hectares of agricultural land were damaged. Myanmar: 86 died. Thailand: Thousands of deaths; losses of US\$508 million. Bangladesh: two deaths but no massive economic loss.
2017	Cyclone Ockhi	India: 350 people died; coastal fisheries suffered a loss of INR821 crores. Sri Lanka: 414 died; 32,000 houses were damaged.
	Cyclone Mora	Bangladesh: Around 200,000 people had to be evacuated; six people died. Sri Lanka: 150 died; Myanmar: incurred damages

^h Between 1891-2018, this region was hit by 41 severe cyclonic storms and 21 cyclonic storms. From 1996- 2015 alone, the Bay littorals have lost 317,000 lives to disasters, and more than 16 million people have been displaced.

ⁱ It possesses geophysical features such as a triangular shape, the low flat coastal terrain, shallow depth, the presence of easterly waves and the inflow of cyclonic winds from the Pacific Ocean.

Security in the Bay and the BIMSTEC Mandate

Year	Disasters	Impact
2018	Cyclone Titli	India: eight died; 2,000 electric poles were uprooted.
	Cyclone Gaja	India: 45 died; INR3.4 lakh estimated in damages. Sri Lanka: 1,000 homes damaged.
2019	Cyclone Fani	India: 64 people died; over 10 million people were affected. Bangladesh: 12 people died.
	Cyclone Bulbul	India: 12 people died; Bangladesh: 12 people died; evacuated 2.1 million people to cyclone shelters.
2020	Cyclone Amphan	India: 98 people died; thousands of non-permanent houses were destroyed; Economic losses worth US\$13 billion. Bangladesh suffered losses of US\$130 million.
2021	Cyclone Yaas	India: four lives were lost; 1 crore people were affected; 3 lakh houses damaged. Bangladesh: two died.

Source: Authors' own, using various open sources.

Note: This table includes only the most devastating cyclones in the last five years.

c. Energy scarcity

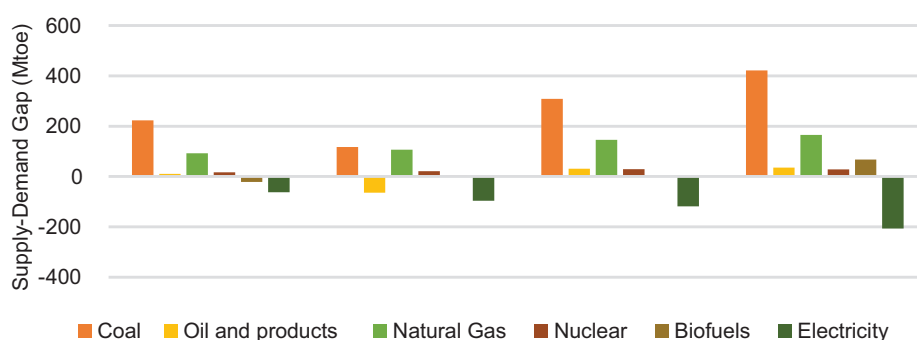
Various factors contribute to the rise in primary energy^j consumption per capita in BIMSTEC countries—among them are rapid economic growth, industrialisation, and increasing demand for goods and services. According to *BIMSTEC Energy Outlook 2030*,¹⁸ the total primary energy supply in the BIMSTEC region in 2008 was 772 million tonnes of oil equivalent (Mtoe), which is estimated to increase to 1,758 Mtoe by 2030. Meanwhile, the total primary energy consumption was 539 Mtoe in 2008 and is projected to increase to 1,210 Mtoe by 2030. Though the share of oil in total primary energy consumption is expected to decline from 33 percent in 2008 to 29 percent by 2030, coal remains the primary source of energy.¹⁹

^j Primary energy supply is defined as energy production, plus imports, minus energy exports, international bunkers and taking account of changes in stocks. These projections have been obtained from the *BIMSTEC Energy Outlook 2030*.

Security in the Bay and the BIMSTEC Mandate

Most of the BIMSTEC countries are dependent on imports to meet their primary energy needs. As Figure 3 shows, the supply-demand gap for electricity in BIMSTEC is expected to increase more than three times by 2030, whereas the supply-demand gap for oil resources is expected to improve in 2030. Figure 4 shows that net imports of energy by the region have increased by almost 2.5 times between 2005 and 2018; self-sufficiency has declined from 80 percent in 2005 to 72 percent in 2018.^k

**Figure 3:
BIMSTEC Primary Energy Supply-Demand Gap**

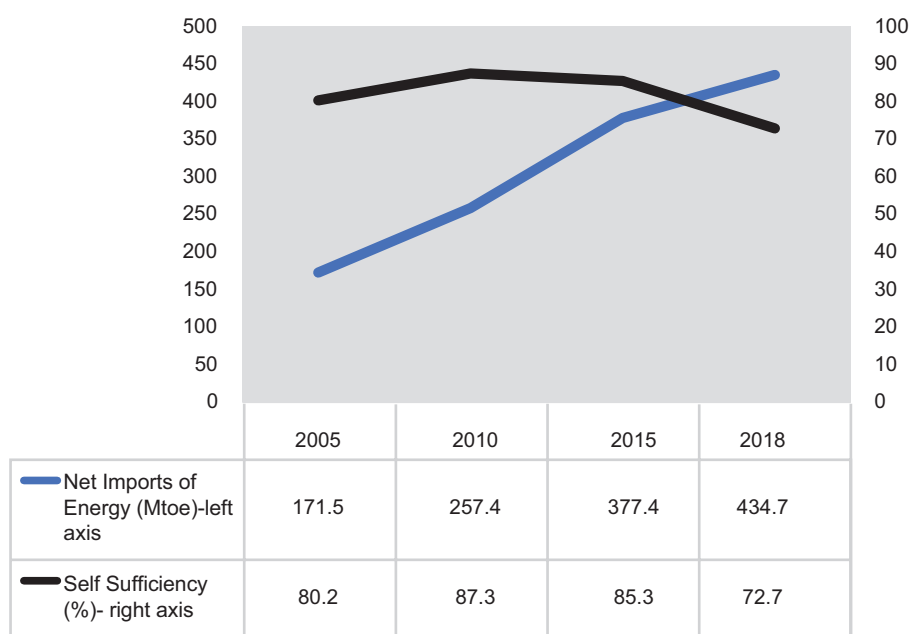


Year	2008	2015	2020	2030
Coal	223.29	117.76	308.72	421.7
Oil and products	10.47	-64.1	30.84	35.86
Natural Gas	92.64	107.02	146.02	165.76
Nuclear	17.12	21.4	29.26	28.54
Biofuels	-21.87	3.67	1.58	67.82
Electricity	-62.35	-96.25	-119	-206.84

Source: *Building a Regional Approach to Energy Security for BIMSTEC* ²⁰

^k 'Self-sufficiency' is defined as the ratio of total energy production to total energy supply. IEA's estimates have been used. These figures represent the average values for India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Self-sufficiency estimate for Bhutan was not available.

**Figure 4:
BIMSTEC Energy Imports and Self-Sufficiency**



Source: *Building a Regional Approach to Energy Security for BIMSTEC*²¹

Note: Based on data from *BIMSTEC Energy Outlook 2030*.

The per capita electricity consumption in the region remains low, though significant improvements in ensuring access to electricity have been made in recent years. Except for Bhutan, all the other BIMSTEC countries' per capita electricity consumption is below the world average²² of 3,501 kWh/capita in 2019.

Security in the Bay and the BIMSTEC Mandate

Though electricity consumption will increase in the near future, the supply will remain inadequate. Increasing cross-border trade in electricity will therefore be an important component for ensuring energy security¹ in the region.

BIMSTEC's Mandate

One of the foundational principles of BIMSTEC is “non-interference in internal affairs.”²³ This stance has been re-endorsed by the BIMSTEC Charter, which does not provide any conflict resolution mechanism but rather leaves it to the member states to settle disputes.²⁴ It may be argued that in today's changing security scenario, this restraint from engaging in efforts to ensure the autonomy of SLOCs is a gap in the organisation's agenda. This nature stems from the fact that most member states are dependent on China for trade and investments, and would not be willing to get involved in overtly political-military activities that could offend Beijing.

Realising how a stable region contributes to economic prosperity, the BIMSTEC member states decided to collaborate in mitigating purely non-traditional security threats. Consequently, the BIMSTEC Charter embodies one of the key aims: “To maintain peace and stability in the Bay of Bengal region through close collaboration in combating international terrorism, transnational organised crimes as well as natural disasters, climate change, and communicable diseases.”²⁵ The organisation's mandate is therefore purely non-traditional security.

¹ The notion of ‘energy security’ can be defined in two ways: as a subset of national security, and also in terms of an economic concept. Energy becomes a national security and foreign policy issue when the increasing scarcity of natural resources for energy consumption affects a country's governing policies, which also are affected by how it uses and imports energy. On the other hand, the economic understanding of energy security tends to be more concerned with the price and supply measures of energy. These two concepts are related.

BIMSTEC's recent addition of the 'Security' sector, combining its previous sectors of 'Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime' (CTTC), 'Environment and Disaster Management', and 'Energy', for the sake of better functionality was a prudent change. The sector falls under the leadership of India. The following paragraphs describe the progress so far in each of these erstwhile independent sectors.

- **CTTC**

For the BIMSTEC leaders, the fight against terrorism and organised crime was key to ensuring peace and sustainable growth in the region. They coordinated efforts through exchange of information and other concrete programmes²⁶ such as the creation of the sector on 'Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime' in 2005 and the BIMSTEC Convention on Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking, set up in 2008. Under this convention, BIMSTEC vowed to combat international terrorism, transnational organised crime, and trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances including their precursor chemicals, through cooperation between their law enforcement agencies, notification of nodal authorities, and a review of implementation of this Convention. However, the period for undertaking this review remained unspecified.

Moreover, although information sharing was the primary means of cooperation, a clause was inserted for "Refusal of Request."^{m,27} For long, the treaty had only been ratified by India and Bangladesh²⁸ and came into force as recently as on 16 March 2021. Other conventions such as the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters of 2014, too, came into force after a protracted period. The BIMSTEC Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, BIMSTEC Convention on Transfer of Sentenced Persons, and BIMSTEC Convention on Extradition are still being negotiated.²⁹

^m If any State Party feels that sharing requested information can affect its national sovereignty, endanger its security or violate its domestic laws and regulation, it can refuse the request.

Many important agencies that could best tackle the emerging threats of the 21st century are yet to be established, such as a BIMSTEC nodal agency for coordinating activities in counterterrorism³⁰ and a primary agency for cyber terrorism.

Figure 5: Sub-Groups Under the BIMSTEC CTTC Sub-Sector

Sub Groups	Shepherd Countries	No. of Meetings held
Prevention of Illicit Trafficking in Narcotics Drugs, Psychotropic Substances, and Precursor Chemical	Myanmar	06
Intelligence Sharing	Sri Lanka	04
Legal and Law Enforcement Issues	India	08
Anti- Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism	Thailand	11
Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism	India	01
Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration	Bangladesh	NIL

Source: BIMSTEC³¹

- **Environment and Disaster Management**

It was not until the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 that BIMSTEC recognised the need for formulating a regional mechanism for disaster management. Within a year, a new area of cooperation, ‘Environment and Disaster Management’, was added to BIMSTEC’s portfolio, with India as the lead. As the memory of the tsunami faded, though, disaster management went into a state of stupor, which would eventually be broken by a series of events.³²

The new government in India that came in 2015, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, prioritised security cooperation with its eastern neighbourhood under its ‘Act East’ policy. Accordingly, BIMSTEC emerged as a natural

platform³³ for promoting disaster diplomacy. The failed SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Summit of 2016 gave further impetus to this sector and the BIMSTEC grouping, convincing all the member states to re-engage with one another for a more collaborative future.³⁴ A number of developments were witnessed in disaster management under BIMSTEC (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6:
Recent Developments in Disaster
Management under BIMSTEC**

Year	Event	Agenda
2016	BIMSTEC Goa Retreat	Closer cooperation through joint exercises, information sharing, capacity building, shared early warning system, relief and rehabilitation.
2017	Senior Officials Meeting	India was tasked to organise the first BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise.
	First Annual Disaster Management Exercise	Table Top Exercise, Field Training Exercises on Earthquake and Flood, After-Action Review.
	15 th Ministerial Meeting	Established Expert Group on Disaster Management.
2018	Inaugural Governing Board and Scientific Advisory Council Meeting of the Centre for Weather and Climate	Hosted a workshop; ‘Severe Weather/ Climate Disaster warning for BIMSTEC Region’.
	16 th Ministerial Meeting	Established Inter-governmental Expert Group for preparedness and coordination in disaster response.
	Fourth Summit Declaration	Areas needing development: adoption of preventive measures, rehabilitation, and capacity building.
	BIMSTEC think tank dialogue on regional security	Activation of inter-governmental mechanisms to utilise regional resources for disaster management.
2020	Second Disaster Management Exercise	Evaluate capabilities, strengthen regional response mechanism and conduct a risk assessment of cultural heritage sites for flood disasters due to cyclones.

Year	Event	Agenda
2021	17 th Ministerial Meeting	Disaster Management was placed under 'Security'. BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate was noted as fully functional to provide early warnings.
	Third Disaster Management Exercise	Enhance planning and preparedness for BIMSTEC member countries for disaster response in the pandemic.
2022	Fifth Summit Meeting	'Disaster Management' split from 'Environment' and inducted as a sub-sector under 'Security' led by India.
	Expert Group Meeting	Agreed to develop the Plan of Action to improve disaster preparedness and coordination for a response.

Source: Authors' own, using various open sources.

Although the sector is named 'Environment and Disaster Management,' work had only been done on the latter. BIMSTEC is focusing more on enhancing disaster preparedness in the region despite multiple obstacles to hosting its joint disaster management exercises. Nonetheless, with 'Disaster Management' now joining the cohort of security concerns under BIMSTEC, its security orientation will be more emphasised and will highlight the need for urgent measures to manage it involving the armed forces. The stress will be on disaster preparedness and response, justifying its separation from 'Environment' which requires collaboration in different dimensions with a more long-term approach.

- **Energy**

The first BIMSTEC Ministerial Conference³⁵ on Energy was held in New Delhi in 2005, where the 'Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation in BIMSTEC' was formulated; BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Master Plan Study (BGIMPS) after the BIMSTEC Energy Ministerial Meeting (BEMM) in Thailand in 2010 was set up; the adoption of the 2011 Memorandum of Association (MoA) for the establishment of the BIMSTEC Energy Centre in Bengaluru, India and the signing of an MoU on BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection by the member countries in 2018. BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection³⁶ aims to expand energy trade amongst member states and accelerate the development of new hydropower projects, interconnection of electricity and natural gas

The Guardian of the Bay

grids, implementation of viable renewable energy projects, and sharing of experiences, knowledge, and information on energy efficiency programmes.

A cross-border electricity network will ensure a quality supply of power at a lower cost and enhance energy efficiency. India's national policy on Cross Border Electricity Trade (CBET) also assumes importance in this initiative due to its geographic centrality in the region. While India's CBET guidelines have incentivised electricity trade in the region, some key elements are yet to be developed. These include establishing a supranational authority to harmonise policies, regulations, and legislations.

Focus areas for the future

In recent years, India has been nurturing the idea of 'Security and Growth for All in the Region,' or SAGAR; to further enhance it, the Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative was announced, with seven pillars to support the building of a rules-based regional architecture. Amongst these, three pillars—maritime security, maritime resources, and disaster risk reduction, resonate well with its role in BIMSTEC as the lead for Security. There is thus a convergence between India's strategic aspirations and the organisation's priorities. Already the lead country for the CTTC and Disaster Management within BIMSTEC, India is poised to holistically address the issue of non-traditional security in the Bay with the 'Energy' sub-sector being added to its responsibilities under the umbrella of 'Security'.

Keeping the facet of freedom of navigation in mind, the BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs have planned future initiatives "to deal with traditional and non-traditional security threats" in the Bay (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: BIMSTEC's Security Plans

- Preparing a comprehensive Plan of Action to enhance Maritime Security Cooperation among the Member States;
- Enhancing space security cooperation among the Member States and to prepare specific proposals in this regard;
- Forming a Core Group for working out collective strategies for common responses;
- Establishing a Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Security Dialogue Forum;
- Establishing a Joint Forum to strengthen cyber security among the BIMSTEC Member States;
- Establish cooperation among respective agencies of BIMSTEC Member States to enhance Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) capability;
- Setting up a BIMSTEC Himalayan Science Council to study the health of the Himalayan ecological system comprehensively;
- Enhancing capacity building in security related sectors;
- Expediting implementation of the BIMSTEC Information Sharing Centre.

Source: BISMTEC³⁷

There are other issues that BIMSTEC must look into, for the sector on 'Security' to become truly meaningful. The following points outline recommendations.

Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime

- Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA): BIMSTEC must engage in developing MDA in the Bay, as a well-functioning network of information-sharing is the bedrock of robust security cooperation.
- Formalisation of conventions: 'Against Trafficking in Persons', 'Transfer of Sentenced Persons,' and on 'Extradition' must be expedited.
- Revision of BIMSTEC sub-groups under CTTC: This must be undertaken to include contemporary concerns, primarily IUU fishing, transgression of maritime boundaries by fishermen, sea piracy, illegal arms trade, and cyber terrorism.

The Guardian of the Bay

- **Form Inter-Governmental Expert Committees:** These will be mandated to work out collective strategies for common responses.
- **A think-tank conclave:** To engage all the stakeholders who will hold a series of Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Security Dialogues on prevalent concerns. This will help enhance capacity-building and strengthen the process of information-sharing.

Disaster Management

- **Workshops and seminars:** There is a need for long-term plans for disaster management based on learnings from each other.
- **Form “BIMSTEC Plus”:** Include Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as Observers as they can offer lessons that could help further develop BIMSTEC’s initiatives.
- **Strengthen scientific research:** This must be undertaken for characterisation of hazards, vulnerability and risk; understanding decision-making in complex and changing risk contexts; reducing risk and curbing losses through knowledge-based actions.
- **Periodic reviews of vulnerabilities:** The functions of the BIMSTEC Centre of Weather and Climate (established in 2014 at Noida, India) can be broadened to provide periodic reviews of vulnerabilities to the member countries, like the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance.
- **Joint disaster management exercises:** Must be regularly held, involving training and capacity-building.
- **A BIMSTEC HADR body:** To ensure that the institution can intervene in crisis situations. This will help boost the credibility of BIMSTEC in the region and facilitate coordination for relief efforts.
- **BIMSTEC could create a regional pool of experts and resources.**
- **Creating an Action Plan:** Much like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Disaster Management must embark on initiatives to devise an evolving Disaster Risk Management Work Plan.

The Guardian of the Bay

- **Community network:** As all the BIMSTEC countries are signatories to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Resilience 2015-2030, understanding community network is an important component of disaster management to allow a more comprehensive bottom-up approach in research and information sharing.


Energy

- **Enhance trust and confidence:** This is required to deal with the issues related to securitisation and resource nationalism.
- **Harmonisation:** For the energy sector to attract private investment, this is critical, i.e. creating certainty regarding transmission line access, revenue flows, and regulatory predictability. This can only be achieved by a regional institute that oversees grid interconnections and an efficient domestic power sector characterised by the unbundling of the electricity boards in the constituent countries. Further, to develop an integrated regional grid, the domestic power markets must be at a similar stage of development.
- **Supranational Body for CEBT governance:** This body should work freely despite political regime changes in the member countries, and ensure open and non-discriminatory access to the transmission grid, creating a competitive electricity market.
- **Linking BIMSTEC with ASEAN Grid Interconnections:** Through Myanmar and Thailand, BIMSTEC countries can access the ASEAN Power Grid (APG) and the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline (TAPG), as well as the grid interconnections amongst the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) countries.
- **Energy market integration:** There is scope for energy market integration if electricity exchange is expanded between India and the ASEAN through BIMSTEC.
- **India's Northeast as a link between South and Southeast Asia:** This can be executed as the region is already poised to be a regional energy hub in the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal sub-region) and BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC's primary imperative is to streamline its security sub-sectors; it also needs institutional reforms. It can play a meaningful role only if its initiatives have strong structural, legal, and financial backing. The BISMTEC Charter has provided it the much-needed structural and legal clarity by laying down the institutional and decision-making system of BIMSTEC and extending the legal identity of an 'inter-governmental organisation'.

In financial terms, however, the Charter makes no mention of establishing the BIMSTEC Developmental Fund with voluntary contributions from member states—a possibility that the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit Meeting had considered worth exploring for planning and financing of projects.³⁸ Without a steady flow of funds, BIMSTEC will not be able to develop its areas of cooperation and strengthen security in the Bay.

The true test of these changes is in whether BIMSTEC can better respond to on-ground situations where the grouping has often been found wanting. This was recently witnessed in BIMSTEC's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its passive response considerably dented its credibility, especially as other regional organisations such as SAARC and ASEAN had undertaken specific initiatives in the wake of the health crisis. The only response came as late as December 2021, when BIMSTEC, through its third disaster management exercise, PANEX-21,ⁿ sought to improve regional cooperation on disaster response.³⁹

The road ahead will not be easy. To begin with, BIMSTEC is characterised by asymmetries in size, resources, and capabilities. These differences are bound to impede collaboration, especially in a domain as sensitive as security. There are also contentious issues that hamper BIMSTEC's realisation of its potential. The Rohingya crisis is one such issue between Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India. It remains to be seen whether BIMSTEC, with its structural changes and a revitalised sense of purpose, can usher in an age of multilateralism in a region where bilateralism prevails, and whether this will pave the way for a more secure future for the Bay of Bengal region. 

Sohini Bose is Junior Fellow, and **Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury** is Senior Fellow at ORF, Kolkata. **Harsh V. Pant** is Vice President for Studies and Foreign Policy at ORF.

ⁿ PANEX-21 consisted of a multi-agency exercise to operate the disaster management structures in handling earthquakes and floods in a pandemic situation.

- 1 Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Pratinashree Basu, Sreeparna Banerjee and Sohini Bose, "India's Maritime Connectivity: Importance of the Bay of Bengal," *Observer Research Foundation*, March 26, 2018, 86-87, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ORF_Maritime_Connectivity.pdf
- 2 "About BIMSTEC", BIMSTEC, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=189#:~:text=Setting,The%20Bay%20of%20Bengal%20Initiative%20for%20Multi%2DSectoral%20Technical%20and,constituting%20a%20contiguous%20regional%20unity.
- 3 "Sectors of Cooperation," BIMSTEC, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=3919
- 4 "Naval exercise MILAN concludes in Visakhapatnam," *The Hindu*, March 05, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/multilateral-naval-exercise-milan-concludes-in-visakhapatnam/article65193406.ece>
- 5 "Indian, Bangladesh navies begin patrol exercises in Bay of Bengal," *Hindustan Times*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indian-bangladesh-navies-begin-patrol-exercises-in-bay-of-bengal-101653224567278.html>
- 6 "38th India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol begins in Andaman Sea and Straits of Malacca," Ministry of Defence, Government of India, June 13, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1833613#:~:text=The%2038th%20India%2DIndonesia%20Coordinated,Sea%20and%20Straits%20of%20Malacca.>
- 7 Harsh V.Pant and Baisali Mohanty, "Building a BIMSTEC Agenda for Counterterrorism," *Observer Research Foundation*, Issue Brief No. 212, November 28, 2017, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ORF_Issue_Brief_212_BIMSTEC-Counter_terrorism.pdf
- 8 "Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of terrorism," Institute for Economics and Peace, March 2022, 8-9, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GTI-2022-web.pdf>
- 9 "Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of terrorism."
- 10 Jay Benson, "Stable Seas: Bay of Bengal," *Stable Seas, One Earth Future*, January 2020, 32, <https://www.stableseas.org/post/stable-seas-bay-of-bengal>
- 11 Jay Benson, "Stable Seas: Bay of Bengal," 34.
- 12 Sohini Bose, "Finding Solutions to Fishermen Transgressions in the India-Bangladesh Maritime Space," *ORF Occasional Paper*, nos. 331, September 10, 2021, 16, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ORF_OccasionalPaper_331_FishingTransgressions.pdf
- 13 "Stable Seas: Bay of Bengal-Executive Summary," *Stable Seas, One Earth Future*, January 2020, <https://www.stableseas.org/post/stable-seas-bay-of-bengal>

- 14 Sohini Bose, Sayanangshu Modak and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, “Threats to the Environment in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Implications,” *Observer Research Foundation Special Report no. 186*, March 11, 2022, 12, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ORF_SpecialReport_186_Environment-Strategic.pdf
- 15 Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Pratinashree Basu, Sreeparna Banerjee and Sohini Bose, “India’s Maritime Connectivity: Importance of the Bay of Bengal,” *Observer Research Foundation*, March 26, 2018, 90, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ORF_Maritime_Connectivity.pdf
- 16 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global report on Trafficking in persons 2018* (Vienna: UNDOC, 2018) 10, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTiP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf
- 17 Sohini Bose, “BIMSTEC and Disaster Management: Future Prospects for Regional Cooperation,” *Observer Research Foundation*, Issue Brief No.383, 2, July, 20, 2020, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ORF_IssueBrief_383_BIMSTEC-Disasters.pdf
- 18 Integrated Research and Action for Development, *BIMSTEC Energy Outlook 2030*, December, 2017, <https://irade.org/SARI-EI-Report-on-BIMSTEC-EnergyOutlook-2030.pdf>
- 19 *BIMSTEC Energy Outlook 2030*, 99.
- 20 Roshan Saha and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, “Building a Regional Approach to Energy Security for BIMSTEC,” *ORF Occasional Paper No. 326*, August 2021, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ORF_OccasionalPaper_326_BIMSTEC-Energy.pdf
- 21 Roshan Saha and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, “Building a Regional Approach to Energy Security for *BIMSTEC*.”
- 22 *Statistical Review of World Energy 2021: 70th edition*, BP, July 2021, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2021-full-report.pdf>
- 23 “BIMSTEC Principle,” *BIMSTEC*, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=4915
- 24 “Charter”, *BIMSTEC*, March 30, 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1imTXMnsLg3ostIkN8E5L6CeRyMWrgHh/view>
- 25 “BIMSTEC Purposes,” *BIMSTEC*, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=4913
- 26 *BIMST-EC Summit Declaration*, July 31, 2004, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=3812
- 27 “BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime And Illicit Drug Trafficking,” December 11, 2009, Media Center, Ministry of external Affairs, Government of India, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5070/BIMSTEC+Convention+on+Cooperation+in+Combating+International+Terrorism+Transnational+Organised+Crime+And+Illicit+Drug+Trafficking>

- 28 Amit Ranjan, “BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit and Bangladesh,” *Indian Council of World Affairs*, November 03, 2016, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=591&lid=533
- 29 “Security,” BIMSTEC, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=6113
- 30 Vijay Sakhuja and Somen Banerjee, *Sea of Collective Destiny: Bay of Bengal and BIMSTEC*, Vivekananda International Foundation: New Delhi, 2020, 38.
- 31 “Security,” BIMSTEC, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=6113
- 32 Sohini Bose, “BIMSTEC and Disaster Management: Future Prospects for Regional Cooperation,” 4-7.
- 33 “Bimstec among fastest growing regions, says PM Narendra Modi,” *The Economic Times*, June 06, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bimstec-among-fastest-growing-regions-says-pm-narendra-modi/articleshow/59018720.cms>
- 34 Sohini Bose, “BIMSTEC and Disaster Management: Future Prospects for Regional Cooperation.”
- 35 “Document: BIMSTEC Summit Declaration, Bangkok, 31 July 2004” *South Asia Economic Journal*, 6 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1177/139156140500600110>
- 36 “Energy Sector,” https://bimstec.org/?page_id=268
- 37 “Security”, BIMSTEC, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=6113
- 38 Authors in conversation with officials from BIMSTEC Secretariat, February 17, 2022
- 39 “Tri-services Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief Exercise: PANEX-21 for BIMSTEC Member States held in Pune,” BIMSTEC, December 2021, <https://bimstec.org/?event=tri-services-humanitarian-aid-and-disaster-relief-exercise-panex-21-for-bimstec-member-states-held-in-pune#:~:text=The%20objective%20of%20this%203,backdrop%20of%20a%20viral%20pandemic>



Ideas . Forums . Leadership . Impact

20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org