

Regional Geopolitics and the Role of BIMSTEC

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INTRODUCTION

Institutions have emerged in the history of human civilisation to bridge gaps existing in socio-political-economic milieus. They are organic responses to meet collective needs that cannot be fulfilled either by individuals or existing institutions. The emergence of institutions can be traced back to two broad drivers, namely, tapping untapped opportunities, and combating potential threats. Seen in this light, all regional political or economic organisations are generally born out of challenges or opportunities posed by economic, security, or socio-cultural-historical factors that emerge in multiple dimensions of human endeavours. BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) – originally, the BIST-EC¹ – is no exception. The force working behind it is primarily economic and also socio-political in nature: to enhance economic growth and empower social development among the member countries “constituting a contiguous regional unity.”² In its attempt to leverage the strengths of individual nations, and the geographic advantages and resources of the member countries, the strength of the coalition was apparently drawn from the mantra of realising connectivity for broader regional development. The grouping came into being in 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration and initially comprised of Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Membership subsequently expanded to include Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan by 2004.

BIMSTEC identifies fourteen sectors of cooperation among member countries, with each sector being spearheaded by any one of the members. These sectors

¹ BIST-EC or Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation.

² About BIMSTEC, https://bimstec.org/?page_id=189.

range from trade and investment, transport, and technology to poverty alleviation and climate change; among others. Of these, India is the lead country in four sectors: Transport and Communication, Environment and Disaster Management, Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime, and Tourism. There are also two centres – BIMSTEC Energy Centre (BEC), agreed to in 2006, and BIMSTEC Centre on Weather and Climate, established in 2014. The grouping comprises about 22% of the world's population, with a combined GDP of 2.7 trillion.³

This article examines the renewed interest in the BIMSTEC as an inter-regional organisation in the context of the immediate driving forces of such an interest, and in the broader context of the complexities of South and Southeast Asian borderlands. In doing so, the potential opportunities and attendant challenges that confront the organisation are also assessed. With the Indo-Pacific having become a theatre of great-power engagement in recent years, the relevance of regional organisations such as the BIMSTEC are the subjects of much deliberation as either prospective allies or key players in the advancement and protection of regional interests.

REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF BORDERLANDS

Despite the promise that accompanied BIMSTEC's arrival, initial progress was hardly tangible. There can be many arguments for this, such as the fact that member countries like India and Thailand have perhaps been engaged more with domestic political and economic developments or the fact that there has been an absence of any imminent threat, whether it be a security risk or serious economic vulnerability, which would have been able to spur deeper and more tangible engagements. There is arguably a shift in this particular aspect as countries in the South and Southeast Asian region become increasingly apprehensive regarding the ambitions and the intent of a resurgent China, which has recently been the prime "mover and shaker" of the regional geopolitics of South and Southeast Asia.

The expansive road and maritime connectivity projects – comprising the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – proposed by China have resulted in both compliance as well as contention. Through the *Silk Road Economic Belt*, linking China to Central and South Asia and onward to Europe, and the *New Maritime Silk Road*, linking China to the nations of Southeast Asia, the Gulf Countries, North Africa, and on to Europe,

³ Ibid.

China has proposed six economic corridors delineating their BRI designs. Many developing and underdeveloped economies like Nepal and Pakistan in South Asia have viewed this as a major opportunity for developing infrastructure, with major capital investment thereby paving the path for economic growth. However, the rise of China and its increasing presence in and across not only the Indian Ocean region but also the Eurasian landmass have resulted in an almost persistent state of tension in the immediate region as well as outside of it. Interestingly, except for India and Bhutan, all other member countries of BIMSTEC are signatories to the BRI. In the BIMSTEC region, China's footprint is most pronounced in Nepal, Myanmar and, to an extent, Bangladesh.

While it is unlikely that participation in the BRI would create any immediate strain within BIMSTEC, the question rather is whether any actions on the part of China may have a spillover effect on the functioning of BIMSTEC. These shifts in geopolitical dynamics have occasioned a mixed and as yet undefined response from countries in the region. Consequently, states have begun to seek out institutional frameworks that may assist in the mitigation of these concerns and to identify ways of coming together through larger geopolitical imaginations such as the Indo-Pacific.

Beijing is involved in infrastructure development in much of the area, with significant levels of financial assistance. In this respect, the role of BIMSTEC assumes significance for countries of the South Asian region such as Sri Lanka who have been caught in the so-called "debt trap" set by China. On its part, Beijing would not desire the strengthening of regional apparatuses as it seeks to advance its influence on many of the smaller states in this region. A reduction in or diversification of the dependency of these countries on China would not be a welcome development for Beijing. It is also in this context that the importance of India is increasingly being acknowledged and indeed New Delhi has begun to devote diplomatic energies to the organisation. The aims of BIMSTEC are complementary to India's "neighbourhood first" and Act East policies.

Borderlands serve as points for commercial and cultural exchanges. South Asia comprises perhaps the most unique nature of borderlands in that it is a region of contrasts marked on the one hand by cultural and social connect and on the other political disconnects.⁴ While delineating territorial sovereignty, borders construct scope for interactions, which if fostered and reinforced would pave the

⁴ Dhananjay Tripathi and Sanjay Chaturvedi, "South Asia: Boundaries, Borders and Beyond", *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Taylor and Francis 2020, 35:2, 173-181.

way for strengthened bilateral and multilateral ties. In this context it is imperative that border areas or borderlands be suitably developed and the local population be encouraged to participate as stakeholders in cross-border economic exchanges. The creation of local stake is vital as it generates employment for sections of the populace and creates involvement of people, who in many cases have remained on the threshold of economic betterment. As borders form the fundamental routes for overland connectivity, it is imperative that security guarantees and development remain concurrent. With the recent emphasis on connectivity and related infrastructure, BIMSTEC can play the role of a facilitator and, as required, that of a regulator in the process of the development of the borderlands.

The other critical factor leading to a renewed interest in BIMSTEC over the last five years from within the member nations as well as from the outside, from a geostrategic perspective, is the failure of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Given the India-Pakistan tension and limited scope for cooperation beyond the achievement of some cultural and educational exchanges and institutional developments (e.g., creation of the South Asian University in Delhi), there hardly remains any further opportunity for the Association to achieve its avowed goals. India's "Act East" vision seems to be a response aimed at looking at an alternate institution that can help foster all those goals that have fallen flat under SAARC. BIMSTEC seems to be a ready answer to that concern.

At the same time, despite the existence of potentially unifying factors such as shared historical, ethnic, linguistic and religious ties, South Asia is one of the world's least integrated regions. Indeed, for South Asia, the shared history has in fact turned into a double-edged sword which is intermittently employed for myopic geopolitical motives. For instance, the heavy historical baggage that burdens bilateral relations between India and Pakistan has been an unnecessary weight on SAARC, which has all but become outmoded as a result. BIMSTEC is, however, not fraught with similar concerns and should be able to leverage cultural links to strengthen the organisation.

LEVERAGING THE POSITIVES AND MITIGATING THE CHALLENGES

There are certain positive aspects of BIMSTEC which should be leveraged upon as we move forward. First, shared regional concerns relating to socio-economic development are primary driving factors that bind the organisation as opposed to the geopolitical drivers overshadowing it. As identified by the sectors of cooperation, the goals of BIMSTEC as an organisation revolve essentially around issues that are

of common interest to all member countries and therefore hold the potential to be of advantage to all of them. Second, it comprises two large economies of the region (India and Thailand) and there is therefore a sense of balance as opposed to any concerns regarding domination, which would have been the case had there been only one dominant economic power. Both these countries are viewed favourably by others within the grouping.

Third, as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia, the organisation holds the prospect of harnessing the strengths of both sub-regions. Indeed, in recent years there have also been discussions regarding a probable BIMSTEC+, which would comprise the membership of other countries in Southeast and East Asia as well. Conversely, BIMSTEC can also be a vital framework for institutional partnership with ASEAN. Fourth, BIMSTEC also lends itself well to the concept of the “Indo-Pacific”, which is steadily gaining currency among the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean and Southern Pacific region as well as external powers such as the US. In this respect also, formalisation of links between BIMSTEC and ASEAN would pave the way for effective and deeper collaboration. By bridging South and Southeast Asia, BIMSTEC stands to underwrite regional dynamics of the larger Indo-Pacific region that seek to offset Beijing’s mounting assertiveness. Better infrastructure connectivity, deeper maritime linkages and enhanced trade would significantly complement the potential of the Indo-Pacific.⁵

The journey for BIMSTEC, should it prepare for a more substantive and tangible role, will not, however, be smooth. The grouping faces a host of challenges⁶ that require the attention of member countries. First, the organisation is in need of internal structural reforms, including the streamlining of administrative and financial matters that would contribute to enhancing its functioning. This in turn would lend much-needed visibility to BIMSTEC, a grouping which often recedes from public and diplomatic memory. Second, the BIMSTEC region is one of the least connected in the world and many planned infrastructure projects have over the years remained confined to paper. If the South and Southeast Asian region is to realise its potential as an inter-dependent whole leveraging on individual strengths then there is an urgent requirement for the up-gradation of both physical as well

⁵ Prabir De, “Navigating the Indo-Pacific Cooperation”, *The Economic Times*, 11 March 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/navigating-the-indo-pacific-cooperation/>.

⁶ Pratinashree Basu and Nilanjan Ghosh, “Breathing New Life into BIMSTEC: Challenges and Imperatives”, *ORF Occasional Paper No. 243*, April 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/breathing-new-life-into-bimstec-challenges-and-imperatives-65229/>.

as communication linkages. Third, there exist significant asymmetries in terms of socio-economic indicators among member countries. Some of these ensue from the region's history while others can be attributed to causes like recurrent political instability. These asymmetries should be factored in by the organisation in the formulation and implementation of its policies and approaches.

RENEWED PROMINENCE

While remaining largely dormant for much of its two-decade existence, there has been an uptick in the activities and engagements of the grouping since the middle of 2018. At the fourth BIMSTEC Summit at Kathmandu, Nepal in August 2018, a Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of a BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection⁷ for facilitating energy cooperation among member states was signed. The Summit was followed shortly after by the first-ever military exercise, MILEX-2018,⁸ held in India, with the militaries of all member countries – except Nepal – participating and exchanging best practices on counter-terrorism. Soon after, at a meeting in Thailand, members discussed the adoption of a BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity⁹ to augment trade and people-to-people contact in the region and also called for the finalisation of the Free Trade Area (FTA) negotiations at the earliest.

Discussions on a BIMSTEC FTA have been in the works since 2004¹⁰ and covered the following areas: (i) tariff concessions on trade in goods; (ii) customs cooperation; (iii) trade in services; (iv) investment cooperation; and (v) dispute settlement; with four draft agreements on: trade in goods; rules of origin; dispute settlement; and customs. Intra-region trade is low primarily because of the low purchasing power among member countries, limited production capacities, dominance of tradable

⁷ "4th BIMSTEC Summit concludes", *The Economic Times*, 31 August 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/4th-bimstec-summit-concludes/articleshow/65621998.cms>.

⁸ "First ever BIMSTEC military exercise begins near Pune", *The Economic Times*, 10 September 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/first-ever-bimstec-military-exercise-begins-near-pune/articleshow/65757101.cms>.

⁹ Elizabeth Roche, "BIMSTEC for better transport connectivity to boost trade", *Livemint*, 31 August 2018, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/gZhu3BfZqJt3FC9HX7RT3H/BIMSTEC-calls-for-early-adoption-of-regional-transport-plan.html>.

¹⁰ Jayshree Sengupta, "BIMSTEC-FTA: A new hope for enhanced regional trade", *ORF Issue Brief no. 198*, 19 September 2017, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/ORF_IssueBrief_198_BIMSTEC-FTA.pdf.

items which are of low-technology, trade being restricted to a few product categories only and the sizeable amount of informal trade which does not get reflected in trade statistics.¹¹ While it is believed that the FTA will result in mixed results with disproportionate benefits for member countries, it is expected to create jobs for unskilled labour and help alleviate poverty in the region.¹²

Figure 1 shows the intra-regional trade intensity index within BIMSTEC. The trade intensity index is the ratio of trade share of a country/region to the share of world trade with a partner; an index of more than one indicates that trade flow between countries/regions is larger than expected given their importance in world trade. Figure 2 shows the trade share of the regional bloc with the world. The numbers indicate that intra-regional trade is higher within the bloc than its global trade share. And commercial exchanges among the other member countries are higher than in the case of India and Thailand. This is because both New Delhi and Bangkok are more exposed to global trade than the other members. The higher degree of intra-regional trade is promising and should be cultivated further. The establishment of multi-modal connectivity combining sea, riverine, road and rail links is imperative, together with streamlining of customs procedures, conformity on quality control and digitisation of operations.

¹¹ Janaka Wijayasiri, "Challenges to a BIMSTEC FTA-A Sri Lankan Perspective", in *BIMSTEC: The Road Ahead*, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, 2016, <http://www.ris.org.in/sites/default/files/BIMSTEC%20Report%20%283%29.pdf>.

¹² Same as note 7.

Figure 1. Trade intensity index of member countries within the regional bloc.

Year	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Myanmar	Nepal	Sri Lanka	Thailand
2004	4.97	35.68	1.67	15.32	26.50	6.70	1.07
2005	4.58	34.78	1.45	16.18	26.08	7.40	1.08
2006	3.96	30.02	1.30	17.40	25.34	6.99	1.12
2007	4.11	30.32	1.25	14.74	24.24	7.43	1.12
2008	4.13	29.60	1.00	14.47	21.63	5.98	1.11
2009	3.38	28.49	0.93	14.09	19.60	4.83	1.17
2010	3.41	23.99	0.89	11.87	19.44	5.05	1.01
2011	3.28	22.00	0.87	9.05	18.68	5.52	1.04
2012	3.01	23.80	0.88	10.03	18.47	4.95	0.98
2013	2.95	24.77	0.96	8.06	18.25	4.11	1.05
2014	3.00	25.04	1.11	6.83	18.40	4.86	1.12
2015	2.74	24.30	1.16	6.35	16.98	6.16	1.12
2016	2.74	25.56	1.20	6.35	18.18	4.77	1.06
2017	3.05	24.18	1.11	5.32	17.32	4.96	1.10

Source: Economic Research and Regional Cooperation Department (ERCD), Asian Development Bank.

Figure 2. Trade share of BIMSTEC with the world.

BIMSTEC trade share with world	
Year	Trade share
2004	4.91
2005	4.77
2006	4.74
2007	4.89
2008	4.66
2009	4.82
2010	4.74
2011	4.74
2012	4.78
2013	4.98
2014	5.56
2015	5.89
2016	6.00
2017	6.00

Source: Economic Research and Regional Cooperation Department (ERCD), Asian Development Bank.

Simultaneously, it must also be noted that FTAs may not always be beneficial in an all-inclusive sense. For instance, in the period 2000-2010, India signed a number of FTAs, following which the country's trade deficit increased further with the FTA partners, with an increase in the demand for imported commodities and a concurrent decline in tariff and non-tariff barriers.¹³ Nevertheless, regional trade agreements facilitate the integration of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) with regional value-add supply chains together with wider choices for consumers.¹⁴

While the FTA may initially increase trade deficits and have a twofold impact – widening choices for consumers and resultant inefficiency loss – eventually, it is expected that there would be a levelling of capacities which would boost output and enhance quality. As such, there is a generic feeling that there may not be much for India to gain from a BIMSTEC FTA, as India is already a major player in the trade domain in the region. The response from India therefore has been a bit lukewarm and slow, though not deterring. This is because from the figures presented above as well as those reported in some other estimates in the media, there remains enough numerical evidence to state that implementation of the FTA can increase intra-regional trade substantially.¹⁵

Several infrastructure connectivity projects span the region, with each connecting countries to different lengths. While many of these projects still await completion despite implementation work being in progress for years, the renewed stress on the need for improved road, rail, and waterway connectivity is likely to provide the necessary impetus for finishing them. Undeniably, physical connectivity acts as the fulcrum for economic connectivity linking production and distribution networks; energy connectivity; digital connectivity and people-to-people connectivity.¹⁶ The region is plagued by poor road and rail links, inadequate last-mile connectivity and inconvenient customs and standardisation procedures, all which

¹³ Nilanjan Ghosh, "Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership: Issues and Concerns for India, (forthcoming), Mimeo, 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Implementation of Free Trade Agreement can help grow intra-BIMSTEC trade: Official", *The Economic Times*, 24 September 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/implementation-of-free-trade-agreement-can-help-grow-intra-bimstec-trade-official/articleshow/65932903.cms?from=mdr>.

¹⁶ K. Yhome, "BIMSTEC: Rediscovering old routes to connectivity", *ORF Issue Brief no. 213*, 4 December 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/bimstec-rediscovering-old-routes-connectivity/>.

have been debilitating with regard to developing seamless and efficient networks of connectivity. Consequently, BIMSTEC has focused on drawing advantages from existing and planned connectivity projects as well as proposing others, such as the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement that is part of its Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS).¹⁷ The BTILS Action Plan (2014-2020) identifies and underscores changes in approach which are required to better cope with the changing regional environment and the strategies required to reform the institutional structure of the organisation so as to strengthen its role.¹⁸

The emphasis and importance accorded in the 4th Summit to these four inter-related areas – connectivity, energy, trade and security cooperation – is indicative of the shared interests among member countries. These interest areas also reflect the general drivers of international politics over the last few years. There has been an upsurge in conversations and policy positions regarding the need to boost connectivity for the enhancement of commercial as well as people-to-people exchanges. Reductions in the costs of transport and logistics, enhancement of multimodal connectivity, and improved implementation strategies are the need of the hour for boosting regional cohesion in terms of connectivity and trade among countries in the BIMSTEC region. Additionally, as most members of the institution have limited resources, it would be imperative to ascertain the broadening of means for better-equipping the organisation. Strengthening the institutional capacities of BIMSTEC with required reforms and restructuring along with enhancing its funding would inject much-needed vigour that would become necessary going forward.

Effective cooperation among BIMSTEC members in the borderlands would be able to boost cross-border economic exchanges while enabling it to become better prepared to monitor and regulate illegal activities. This would also elevate the border towns into thriving centres of cross-border trade and socio-cultural contact from being merely points of transit with no real engagement in the development process.

There is a convergence of interests and aspirations as far as all member countries of the organisation are concerned. Realisation of these interests and aspirations – for India, greater linkages with Southeast Asia and a reinvigoration of its northeastern states; for Bangladesh, a multilateral framework of engagement with both South and Southeast Asia; for Sri Lanka, enhancing its maritime logistics

¹⁷ "Updating and Enhancement of the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study", Asian Development Bank, July 2018.

¹⁸ Ibid.

capabilities; for Nepal and Bhutan, offsetting their landlocked positions by establishing dynamic commercial and political connections; for Myanmar and Thailand, accessing the consumer market offered by India¹⁹ – requires concerted and sustained efforts together with political will.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: OPPORTUNITIES IN A POST-COVID-19 WORLD

From an Indian perspective, BIMSTEC seems to be an extremely potent institution to nurture, especially after its temporary exit from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Being a large force here, India can realise an effective and fair bargain in the course of formalising an FTA with respect to services trade, where its comparative advantage lies. At the same time, the biggest threat for India, as far as RCEP was concerned, was the presence of China, with whom India's trade deficit has been burgeoning! Though India has a trade deficit with Thailand, the geoeconomic threat from Thailand in terms of market capture is not as all-encompassing as that of China (especially with its BRI designs).

The role of China can be perceived of as an external force that has in part contributed to the vigour that the BIMSTEC region has witnessed in recent years. However, this is symptomatic of “reactive regionalism”²⁰ as opposed to “proactive regionalism”, which is spurred by joint endeavours and pooling of strengths. If BIMSTEC is to achieve success in its functioning then it must move beyond reactive regionalism and instead establish modes of cooperation that are not driven by threat perceptions from China.

On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic is slated to bring about changes in the global economic order that one has hardly dreamt of. Given the levels of suspicion with China, it cannot remain a trusted partner anymore. Further, a post-Covid-19 world might be more insulated than what it used to be, with severe restrictions on labour movements. With stricter immigration rules prevailing all across the world, the BIMSTEC region that has boasted of providing “skilled human capital” to the developed world might apparently seem to be a loser.

¹⁹ Constantino Xavier, “Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Toward a Stronger BIMSTEC”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 2018, <https://carnegieindia.org/2018/02/22/bridging-bay-of-bengal-toward-stronger-bimstec-pub-75610>.

²⁰ Nilanjan Ghosh, “Time for BIMSTEC to Realize Potential,” *Mail Today*, 17 February 2020, <https://epaper.mailtoday.in/c/49078245>.

Despite that, the changing global economic order will make many focus on the BIMSTEC nations as preferred destinations for investment. This is primarily because these nations have four factors of enabling businesses in abundance: namely, human capital, social capital, natural capital and an improving physical capital. At the global level, these nations are relatively less explored, and can be the fulcrum of development of the region in the post-Covid-19 world. In this context, it is important that the larger members of BIMSTEC, namely, India and Thailand, take the lead. At the regional level, therefore, a higher level of uniformity in policies with respect to land, labour, and capital movements can make the region a lucrative destination for investment.

Therefore, the BIMSTEC region straddles both South and Southeast Asia, comprising a region that is ripe with opportunities. What has been and continues to be the most vital element for the success of regional groupings and the augmentation of regional socio-economic advancement is political intent. If there is political resolve, then there would be little in the way of difficulties and challenges for the realisation of the goals of BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC also needs to amplify its visibility in order to hold on to public consciousness. The Bay, which was a more connected and integrated region in the pre-independence period, needs to reclaim the inter-connectivity that it enjoyed in the past.²¹ A revamping of existing processes and the establishment of a supplementary mode of physical connectivity by BIMSTEC could become key in the development of borderlands in the region, most of which are remote and prone to illegal and undesirable activities. The establishment of economic corridors, for instance, promises to be beneficial in this regard.

Over time, it remains to be seen how BIMSTEC can emerge as a force in the Indian Ocean region when there is already a call for the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and US) to combat China's geostrategic designs. From an economic and financial perspective, the BIMSTEC FTA is barely the tip of the iceberg in terms of the potential economic benefits. If the institution survives the test of time, it can even go to the extent of creating an economic bloc with a common currency and regional-level stock and commodity exchanges, engendered by free regional movement of financial, fiscal and monetary capital. Of course, this will require political intent, and the achievement of the "convergence criteria" or aspects which bind the aspirations of member states which will be decided over time.

Much of global politics in recent years has and continues to focus on the need for connectivity, spurring various physical connectivity projects that span

²¹ See note 18.

sub-regions and regions and that have in turn impacted the geopolitics of the respective areas. While there are different kinds of connectivity, most of such initiatives have infrastructure connectivity as the key component, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (by China). As the world looks increasingly towards Asia and the Indo-Pacific in particular, in terms of its rising economic and political significance, there is a growing dialogue on enhancing Asia-Europe connectivity. From the perspective of BIMSTEC, the involvement of Europe offers scope for better linkages and the strengthening of a multilateral world order as the coming decades are set to be marked by both contest as well as cooperation. There are two principal areas of convergence that offer scope for the EU and BIMSTEC to work together. First, per its connectivity strategy of 2018, regional cooperation is an important area promoted by the EU, encompassing the construction of transport, energy and digital networks. These are also areas of sectoral priority for BIMSTEC. Second, both organisations can work together on geopolitical issues in the Indo-Pacific given that the latter has been identified as an area of engagement for the EU.²²

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²² Christian Wagner and Siddharth Tripathi, "New Connectivity in the Bay of Bengal: Opportunities and Perspectives of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)", SWP Comment 2018/C 53, December 2018, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/new-connectivity-in-the-bay-of-bengal/>.