

BIMSTEC: INTERNATIONAL RELATION

NEWS: Prime Minister participates in the 6th BIMSTEC Summit, Thailand

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

At the 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Thailand, India proposed a 21-point action plan focused on trade, disaster management, digital cooperation, and youth engagement. The summit reaffirmed BIMSTEC's role as a key platform for regional integration, with India positioning it as a strategic alternative to SAARC.

6th BIMSTEC Summit and India's Active Participation

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi participated in the 6th BIMSTEC Summit hosted by Thailand, the current chair, under the theme “Prosperous, Resilient and Open BIMSTEC.”
- He presented a **21-point action plan** aimed at expanding cooperation across connectivity, trade, digital infrastructure, disaster management, and youth engagement.
- During the visit, PM Modi was also gifted the **World Tipitaka: Sajjhaya Phonetic Edition** by Thailand's Prime Minister, symbolizing Buddhist civilizational links.

India-Led Initiatives at the Summit

- **Business and Trade**
 - Proposed setting up a **BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce** to facilitate cross-border trade and business networking.
 - India to host a **BIMSTEC Business Summit annually**.
 - Called for a **feasibility study** on trade using **local currencies** to enhance financial integration.
- **Digital Cooperation**
 - India to conduct a **pilot study** for digital infrastructure sharing based on India's **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** model.
 - Proposed **UPI connectivity** between BIMSTEC countries for cross-border digital payments.
- **Disaster Management**
 - Announced the establishment of a **BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence for Disaster Management** in India.
 - India to host the **4th joint exercise** between disaster management authorities this year.
- **Security and Institutional Dialogue**

- India to host the **first Home Ministers' Meeting** under the BIMSTEC framework.
- Emphasis on combating transnational crimes and ensuring internal security coordination.
- **Human Resource Development**
 - Launched the **BODHI initiative** (BIMSTEC for Organised Development of Human resource Infrastructure): India will train **300 youth** from member countries annually.
 - Expanded **scholarship offerings** to BIMSTEC students at Nalanda University and Forestry Research Institute.
- **Energy Cooperation**
 - The **BIMSTEC Energy Centre** in Bengaluru is now operational.
 - Push for **cross-border electric grid interconnection** to promote energy trade.
- **Youth and Cultural Engagement**
 - India to host the **BIMSTEC Young Leaders' Summit**.
 - Announced the **BIMSTEC Hackathon** and **Young Professional Visitors Programme**.
 - India to host the **BIMSTEC Athletics Meet (2025)** and the **First BIMSTEC Games in 2027**.
 - India will organize a **Traditional Music Festival** to promote cultural ties.
- **Connectivity and Maritime Infrastructure**
 - India to establish a **Sustainable Maritime Transport Centre** to enhance policy coordination, innovation, and research in maritime transport.

Key Agreements and Documents Adopted

- **Bangkok Declaration (Summit Declaration)**
 - Reaffirms shared commitments under the theme of “Prosperous, Resilient, and Open BIMSTEC.”
 - Sets the tone for future strategic priorities and regional cooperation.
- **BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030**
 - A roadmap aligned with **UN SDGs** and Thailand's **Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy**.
 - Focuses on trade, climate resilience, poverty alleviation, and inclusive tourism.
- **BIMSTEC Maritime Transport Cooperation Agreement**

- Aims to improve maritime connectivity, port cooperation, and document recognition among member countries.
- Provides for a **Joint Shipping Coordination Committee** and structured **dispute resolution**.
- **Rules of Procedure for BIMSTEC Mechanisms**
 - Complements the **BIMSTEC Charter (2022)** by enhancing decision-making, accountability, and institutional functioning.
- **MoUs Signed**
 - With **IORA**: Boosts maritime and blue economy cooperation.
 - With **UNODC**: Strengthens collaboration in counter-narcotics and criminal justice reforms.
- **Approval of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) Report**
 - Offers long-term vision for **institutional reform, prioritization of sectors, and strategic planning**.

About Tipitaka (Gift to PM Modi)

- The **Tripitaka** (or Tipitaka) is the foundational collection of Buddhist scriptures, also known as the **Pali Canon** in Theravada Buddhism.
 - **Vinaya Pitaka**: Rules for monastic life.
 - **Sutta Pitaka**: Buddha's sermons and discourses.
 - **Abhidhamma Pitaka**: Philosophical and psychological interpretation of Buddhist teachings.

About BIMSTEC

- Founded in **1997** (originally as BIST-EC), later renamed **BIMSTEC** when **Nepal and Bhutan** joined in **2004**.
- Members: **Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand**.
- Represents **1.7 billion people** and a GDP of **\$4.5 trillion**.
- **Secretariat**: Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- **Chairmanship**: Rotates alphabetically (currently held by Thailand, to be taken over by Bangladesh).



Why BIMSTEC Matters for India

- **Strategic Relevance**
 - Serves as a **bridge between South and Southeast Asia**, supporting India's **Act East Policy**.
 - Important for India's maritime and security strategy in the **Indo-Pacific**.
- **Alternative to SAARC**
 - **SAARC's stagnation** due to Indo-Pak tensions has shifted India's focus to BIMSTEC.
 - BIMSTEC has successfully adopted a **Charter** and conducted multiple summits.
- **Connectivity Initiatives**
 - **Kaladan Multi-Modal Project, Trilateral Highway, and BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement** enhance physical connectivity.
 - **Master Plan for Transport Connectivity and Maritime Transport Agreement** aim to deepen trade and mobility.
- **Energy & Blue Economy Cooperation**
 - India hosts the **BIMSTEC Energy Centre** and is promoting **electric grid interconnection**.
 - Leads cooperation on **renewables, port logistics, and marine conservation**.

- **Security and Disaster Management**
 - India leads BIMSTEC in **counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, and disaster response.**
 - Hosted the 4th **Disaster Management Exercise** and launched a **Centre of Excellence for Disaster Management.**
- **Trade and Economic Integration**
 - Push for finalizing the **BIMSTEC FTA.**
 - Hosting **Business Summits, Chambers of Commerce,** and promoting **local currency trade.**
- **Cultural Diplomacy and Youth Engagement**
 - Hosting **music festivals, youth summits, and sports events** to promote regional bonding.
 - Launched **BODHI programme** for youth training and expanded **scholarships** at Indian universities.

How BIMSTEC Differs from SAARC

Feature	BIMSTEC	SAARC
Geography	South + Southeast Asia (Bay of Bengal focus)	Only South Asia
Pakistan's Membership	Excluded	Included (source of major deadlock)
Political vs Functional	Primarily functional cooperation	Hampered by political tensions
Summits	4 held since 2016	None since 2014
Sectoral Leadership	Distributed across members	Not formalized
India's Role	Widely accepted	Often contested by Pakistan

Challenges Facing BIMSTEC

- **Slow Implementation** of projects like the **Kaladan Project** and **FTA.**
- **Weak Institutional Capacity:** BIMSTEC Secretariat is underfunded and understaffed.
- **Over-Reliance on Consensus** slows progress on contentious issues.

- **Intra-member Political Tensions:** Myanmar's internal crisis, India–Nepal border issues, and Bangladesh–Myanmar migration tensions.
- **Low Intra-Regional Trade:** Currently under 10%, despite regional economic potential.
- **Lack of Public Engagement and Visibility** in the media or among citizens.
- **Competing Platforms:** ASEAN, BRI initiatives, and IORA offer alternative partnerships.

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

Major BIMSTEC Initiatives

- **Charter and Rules of Procedure:** Legal structure adopted in 2022 and 2025.
- **Master Plan for Transport Connectivity:** Roadmaps for infrastructure and logistics.
- **Maritime Transport Agreement:** Signed in 2025 to improve coastal shipping.
- **BFTAFA:** Signed in 2004 but still pending implementation.

- **Disaster Management SOPs and exercises (DMEx)** institutionalized post-2004 tsunami.
- **Energy Grid Interconnection:** MoU signed in 2018; work ongoing.

Way Forward for BIMSTEC

- **Accelerate Project Implementation:** Set timelines and monitoring frameworks for FTA and transport projects.
- **Strengthen BIMSTEC Secretariat:** Provide resources, autonomy, and create a BIMSTEC Development Fund.
- **Boost Digital and Physical Connectivity:** Complete key infrastructure and promote cross-border fintech and data exchange.
- **Increase Private Sector Participation:** Institutionalize Business Forums, Summits, and incubators.
- **Expand Sectoral Cooperation:** Focus on agriculture, public health, and climate resilience.
- **Enhance Security Cooperation:** Conduct joint trainings, intelligence exchanges, and cybersecurity frameworks.
- **Promote Shared Regional Identity:** Scale up soft diplomacy through sports, music, education, and exchange programs.

Conclusion

The 6th BIMSTEC Summit reflects India's growing influence in shaping a regional architecture centered around prosperity, connectivity, and security in the Bay of Bengal. With its emphasis on actionable cooperation, BIMSTEC is poised to emerge as a dynamic alternative to SAARC and a cornerstone of India's Indo-Pacific vision.

Source: <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/39366/Prime+Minister+participates+in+the+6th+BIMSTEC+Summit+Thailand+April+04+2025>