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Critical Reasoning

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A new push in the Bay of Bengal

India hosted the 2nd BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) Foreign Ministers' Retreat in New Delhi earlier this month with a focus on providing an "informal platform to discuss ways and means of cooperating and accelerating action in security, connectivity, trade, and investment within the Bay of Bengal." The retreat was held in preparation for the sixth summit meeting, scheduled for September, in which the BIMSTEC leaders will meet in person for the first time in the post-pandemic era. They are also expected to sign the BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation to improve regional connectivity – a foundational aim of this grouping.

Strengthening ties with eastern neighbours
BIMSTEC is the regional organisation devoted to the Bay of Bengal, with a membership of five South Asian and two Southeast Asian countries, cooperating across seven diverse sectors. It allows New Delhi to engage multilaterally with the other countries of the Bay of Bengal region, which are its eastern neighbours and therefore vital for its economic development, security, and foreign policy imperatives. India also remains intent on solidifying relations with its eastern neighbours as China's growing presence in the Bay of Bengal poses a potential threat to regional stability and New Delhi's position as a preferred security partner in these waters.

Strengthening ties with Bangladesh and Myanmar accords India the advantage of providing its landlocked north-eastern region with access to the sea. Improved ties with Myanmar and Thailand will also lend India the opportunity to have a more profound presence in the Indo-Pacific, as it holds the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), in which these two countries are members, to be of



Harsh V. Pant

Professor at King's College London and is Vice President for Studies and Foreign Policy at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi



Sohini Bose

Associate Fellow, Neighbourhood Studies at ORF

The intent of BIMSTEC member states to push forth with a bold vision for the region was evident at the 2nd Foreign Ministers' Retreat

central importance in its vision of the Indo-Pacific. Thailand reinforced this idea at the retreat by identifying itself as a bridge between BIMSTEC and ASEAN. These priorities were reflected in the opening address by the Minister for External Affairs, S. Jaishankar, when he stated that BIMSTEC represents the intersection of India's 'Neighbourhood First' outlook, the 'Act East Policy', and the SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) vision.

Two parts of the retreat

The retreat was divided into two parts. In the first segment, participants assessed the current state of regional cooperation within BIMSTEC, building on a presentation by India on the implementation of key outcomes of the 1st Retreat. Multiple ideas were shared by the member states including the establishment of Centers of Excellence in member states, focusing on Agriculture, Disaster Management, and Maritime Transport. India announced support for cancer research, treatment, and issuance of e-visas for patients of all BIMSTEC states, while Sri Lanka proposed the inclusion of kidney disease. The need for involving the private sector in trade and promoting young entrepreneurs was also highlighted, as was the importance of connectivity, cyber-security, and countering the trafficking of narcotics and illegal arms.

In the second session, the expectations of each country from the forthcoming summit were discussed. Sri Lanka underscored the need to map mineral resources found in abundance in the BIMSTEC countries and create opportunities for the vertical integration of stages of production within specific sectors in the economies of the countries, enabling them to diversify their production structure. Bangladesh highlighted the need for cooperation in the Blue Economy and urged member states to ban fishing during the

breeding season to address the problem of depleting catch in the Bay. Bhutan expounded on the need for collaboration in tourism and cultural exchanges, while Nepal highlighted its 'whole of the region' approach to leverage synergies among member states and transform BIMSTEC into a results-oriented regional forum. Thailand underscored the need for cooperation in non-traditional security domains, and Myanmar added the need to combat online scamming to the list. These proposals will be presented to the heads of state before the September summit.

Bilateral merits

While the retreat was a multilateral milestone for India, it had its bilateral merits too. Mr. Jaishankar met several of his counterparts on the sidelines. He shared with Myanmar India's concerns over the flow of displaced persons, narcotics, and arms across the border and urged for the return of unlawfully detained Indians. He also held a meeting with the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, who requested him to ensure the smooth supply of daily essentials and send a technical team for the Teesta project, signifying another step towards easing this long-pending concern. At the end of the retreat, the Foreign Ministers called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

This year marks a decade of India's Act East and Neighbourhood First policies, and the thrust on BIMSTEC is a manifestation of New Delhi's efforts to continue nurturing collaborative growth for national and regional well-being. Thus, Mr. Jaishankar encouraged future collaborations through new energies, resources, and a renewed commitment to cooperation.

It remains to be seen how many of these proposals find culmination at the forthcoming Summit but the intent of the member states to push forth with a bold vision for the region was clearly evident at the retreat.

Question -1) What is the primary purpose of the 2nd BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers' Retreat held in New Delhi?

- A) To sign the BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation.
- B) To discuss ways and means of cooperating and accelerating action in security, connectivity, trade, and investment within the Bay of Bengal.
- C) To address bilateral issues between India and Myanmar.
- D) To finalize the date for the sixth summit meeting.

Question -2) Which of the following is NOT a focus area discussed during the retreat?

- A) Agriculture
- B) Cyber-security
- C) Nuclear disarmament
- D) Maritime Transport

Question -3) Why does India consider strengthening ties with Bangladesh and Myanmar advantageous?

- A) To counter China's growing presence in the Bay of Bengal.
- B) To gain access to the sea for its landlocked north-eastern region.
- C) To reinforce its 'Neighbourhood First' outlook.
- D) To increase its influence within ASEAN.

Question -4) Which country's proposal included mapping mineral resources within the BIMSTEC countries?

- A) Sri Lanka
- B) Bangladesh
- C) Nepal
- D) Bhutan

Question -5) What was Thailand's position regarding BIMSTEC and ASEAN during the retreat?

- A) Thailand did not make any specific statement about ASEAN.
- B) Thailand identified itself as a bridge between BIMSTEC and ASEAN.
- C) Thailand proposed the inclusion of kidney disease in the collaborative health efforts.
- D) Thailand suggested banning fishing during the breeding season.

Question -6) Which country's concerns included the need for a 'whole of the region' approach?

- A) Nepal
- B) Myanmar
- C) Bhutan
- D) India

Question -7) What specific request did the Bangladesh Foreign Minister make to Mr. Jaishankar?

- A) Ensure the smooth supply of daily essentials and send a technical team for the Teesta project.
- B) Address the flow of displaced persons and narcotics across the border.
- C) Combat online scamming and illegal arms trafficking.
- D) Include kidney disease in the collaborative health efforts.

Question -8) What is the significance of the upcoming sixth summit meeting?

- A) It is the first in-person meeting of BIMSTEC leaders post-pandemic.
- B) It will finalize the BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation.
- C) It will resolve long-pending bilateral concerns.
- D) It will establish a new regional security framework.



Question -9) Which country proposed the involvement of the private sector in trade and promoting young entrepreneurs?

- A) India
- B) Sri Lanka
- C) Bangladesh
- D) Nepal

Question -10) What approach did the participants of the retreat take in the first segment?

- A) Discussing bilateral issues
- B) Assessing the current state of regional cooperation within BIMSTEC
- C) Signing the BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation
- D) Finalizing the agenda for the upcoming summit

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