BIMSTEC

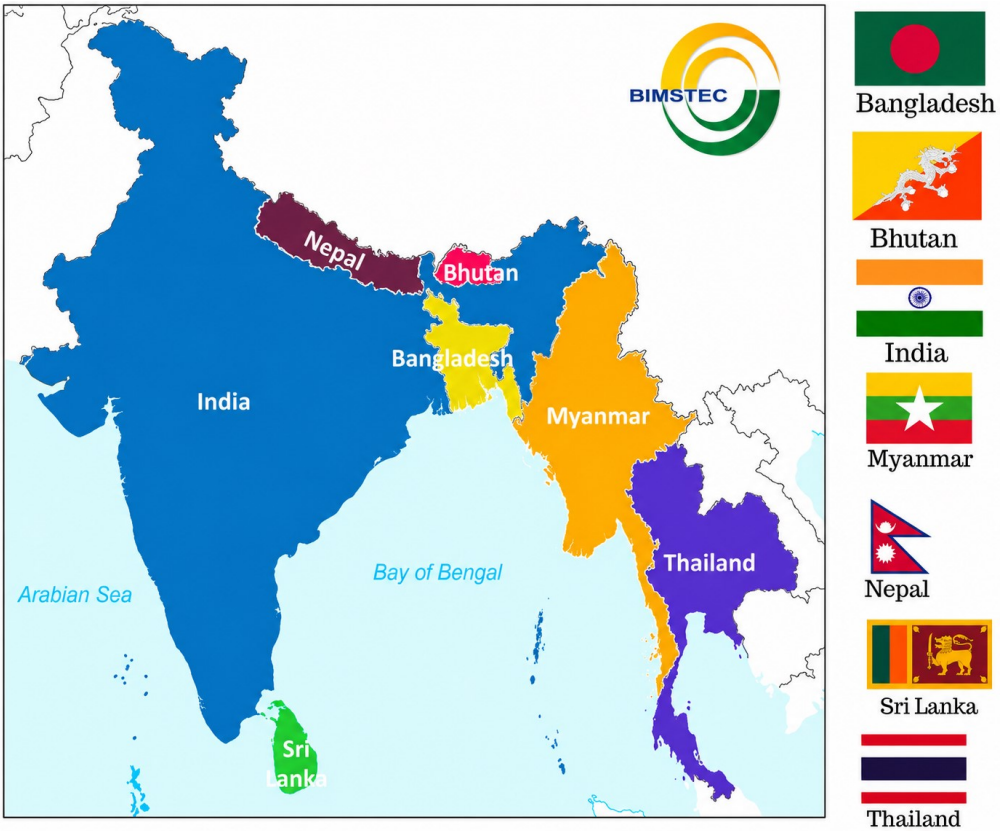
Mains: *GS II – International relations*

Why in News?

Recently, at a meeting in New Delhi on Thursday, the national security chiefs of BIMSTEC member countries endorsed a set of guiding principles for maritime law enforcement and disaster relief operations, highlighting the grouping's growing focus on regional security.

What is BIMSTEC?

- **BIMSTEC** – Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.
- It is a regional multilateral organization uniting seven South and Southeast Asian countries.
- **Formation** – Formed in 1997 via the **Bangkok Declaration**, it fosters rapid economic growth, technical collaboration, and trade.
- Representing about 22% of the global population, BIMSTEC is headquartered in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- **Member States –** BIMSTEC acts as a natural bridge connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia.
- Its seven members depend on the Bay of Bengal and share contiguous ecological and economic interests:
    - **Five South Asian nations –** Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka
    - **Two Southeast Asian nations –**Myanmar and Thailand



- **Core Objectives and Focus –** The grouping aims to harness shared regional growth through active collaboration and mutual assistance. Historically, it has identified 14 priority sectors of cooperation, including:
- Trade and Investment
- Energy and Technology
- Transportation and Connectivity
- Agriculture and Fisheries
- Tourism and Public Health

What is the significance of BIMSTEC?

- **Viable Alternative to SAARC –** With SAARC largely paralyzed by political disputes, BIMSTEC has become the preferred platform for regional cooperation.
- It offers a constructive, obstruction-free environment for countries to collaborate on trade and infrastructure.
- **Alignment with Indian Foreign Policy –** For India, BIMSTEC is central to the "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East" policies.
- It provides a vital route to integrate India's landlocked northeastern states with the Bay of Bengal, primarily through connectivity projects in Bangladesh and Myanmar
- **Countering Chinese Influence –** The grouping allows littoral states (like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) to partner with democratic powers, acting as a crucial diplomatic counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and "cheque book diplomacy" in the Indo-Pacific.
- **Trade and Investment –** BIMSTEC aims to boost intra-regional trade through frameworks like the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, reducing tariffs and strengthening regional supply chains.
- **Connectivity and Infrastructure –** The grouping is prioritizing multidimensional

transport links, including maritime shipping, energy grids, digital networks, and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.
- **Security and Disaster Management –** Members collaborate on counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, maritime security, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).
- It operates specialized bodies like the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate in Noida, India.

***BIMSTEC** is crucial because it bridges South and Southeast Asia, uniting 22% of the global population (1.7 billion people) and a $3.8 trillion combined GDP.*

What are the challenges associated with BIMSTEC?

- **Trade Delays –** The BIMSTEC Free Trade Area framework was proposed in 2004, but after two decades of negotiations, many of its constituent agreements remain unimplemented.
- **Connectivity Stagnation –**Flagship transport initiatives, such as the Motor Vehicles Agreement and the Coastal Shipping Agreement, have faced severe delays due to regulatory mismatches and security concerns.
- **Underfunded Secretariat –** The permanent secretariat in Dhaka was only established in 2014 and continues to suffer from staffing shortages, a limited mandate, and inadequate funding.
- **No Dispute Mechanism –** Unlike ASEAN, the bloc lacks a formal dispute resolution mechanism, leading to policy paralysis.
- **Regional Imbalance –** As the largest member by far, India dominates the organization.
- Smaller nations (such as Nepal and Bhutan) sometimes fear asymmetrical benefits and worry about India's unilateral actions.
- **Competing Interests –** Member states often balance competing regional influences.
- Myanmar and Thailand, for example, have strong ties to ASEAN, while countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal frequently navigate geopolitical competition between India and China.
- **Domestic Turmoil –** The internal civil conflict in Myanmar and recent regime transitions in Bangladesh have severely disrupted regional planning and the execution of transnational connectivity projects (e.g., the **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway**).
- **Transnational Threats –** The grouping deals with complex, evolving threats including cybercrime, terrorism, and maritime law enforcement that require intense cooperation between National Security Advisors.
- **Climate Vulnerability –** The Bay of Bengal is heavily susceptible to natural disasters, yet the grouping still lacks a cohesive, fully proactive disaster management mechanism

What could be done to make BIMSTEC more effective?

- **Finalizing the FTA –** The **BIMSTEC Free Trade Area** framework has been in negotiation for two decades.

- Concluding negotiations on trade in goods, services, and investments will provide a major boost to regional commerce.
- **Empowering the Secretariat –** The organization requires greater financial independence.
- Expanding the Secretariat's operational budget and mandate allows it to effectively monitor and execute regional projects rather than relying entirely on voluntary national contributions.
- **Enhancing Connectivity –** Accelerating multi-modal transport agreements, simplifying customs procedures, and pushing forward digital public infrastructure initiatives will streamline supply chains across the Bay of Bengal.
- **Prioritizing Regular Leadership –** Hosting consistent, annual summits alongside active business forums helps translate policy goals into tangible economic and strategic outcomes.

References

The Indian Express| BIMSTEC

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