Relook at BIMSTEC's Functioning

What is the issue?

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- The fourth BIMSTEC summit recently concluded in Kathmandu, Nepal. Click here to know more.
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- It made notable progress in reforming the structural and procedural framework of the grouping, but concerns remain.
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What are the administrative initiatives?

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- BIMSTEC has so far functioned on the basis of
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i. the Bangkok Declaration of 1997
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ii. outcomes of the past three summits
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iii. the Leaders' Retreat in 2016
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- So the need for a firm institutional foundation for the BIMSTEC was a long felt one.
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- In this context, work has now begun on drafting a charter for BIMSTEC.
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- Also, a Permanent Working Committee will be set up.
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- This is to provide direction during the period between two summits.

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- It will also prepare the Rules of Procedure for the BIMSTEC summits.
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- Besides, the Secretariat has been promised additional financial and human resources.
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- Efforts at enhancing its role to coordinate, monitor and facilitate the grouping’s activities will also be taken up.
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- Moreover, the institution has been handicapped due to lack of sound financial back up.
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- The leaders thus took the decision to establish the BIMSTEC Development Fund.
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- It was agreed to make a push to increase BIMSTEC's visibility and stature in the international fora.
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- Currently, there are 16 areas of cooperation between the member states, making it too wide a spectrum.
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- To address this, BIMSTEC governments will make efforts to review, restructure and rationalise various sectors.
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- They will embark on identifying a few core areas for effective cooperation.
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- In this exercise, Thailand has proposed a new strategy of five pillars:
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1. connectivity
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2. trade and investment
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3. people-to-people contacts
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4. security
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5. science and technology
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- This will be considered, keeping in mind the individual member states'

preferences to certain specific sectors.
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What are the concerns in the outcomes?

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- There are at least six legal instruments awaiting finalisation in the BIMSTEC.
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- Of this, only one, the Memorandum of Understanding on Grid Interconnection, could be inked in Kathmandu.
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- It has been fourteen years since signing the framework agreement on Free Trade Area (FTA).
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- However, the leaders could only renew their "commitment to an early conclusion" of FTA negotiations.
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- The Thai PM urged participants to accept making BIMSTEC a Free Trade Zone by 2021 as "our common goal".
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- But this did not find a place in the summit declaration.
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- The grouping had established its Energy Centre in 2009, but it was still struggling for the "early operationalisation".
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- The Kathmandu Declaration has spelt out a number of measures to secure the objective of 'connectivity'.
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- However, the Motor Vehicle and Coastal Shipping Agreements are delayed and needed more time for finalisation.
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- There was a call for making the BIMSTEC summit an annual affair.
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- But leaders chose a "timely holding of Summit".
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- The next summit's timing will only be determined by the degree of progress ministers and officials achieve in the course of time.
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What are the ongoing developments?

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- There are plans to revitalise the Business Forum and the Economic Forum.
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- This is welcome, if they help in fully engaging business and industry.
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- Cooperation in the security domain has been progressing satisfactorily.
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- A new initiative is the arrangement for meeting of home ministers.
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- This will be in addition to annual meetings of national security advisers.
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- Besides, the first meeting of army chiefs is due to take place in Pune, India soon.
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- There are also plans to establish forums for parliamentarians, universities, cultural organisations and the media community.
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- With all these in place, BIMSTEC can become a dynamic, effective and result-oriented organisation.
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- But the progress and efforts in the coming period will be crucial in its further development.
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Source: The Hindu

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