

Regional Cooperation in South Asia: India's Neighbourhood First Policy and BIMSTEC's Role

Tushar

Doctoral Candidate, Centre for International Politics, Organisation, Diplomacy and Disarmament,
School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Abstract

Regional cooperation is a long-standing pillar of India's foreign policy in South Asia. India's Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP) sets out a vision of trust, connectivity and shared prosperity with its neighbours, building on the consultative and non-reciprocal logic of the earlier Gujral Doctrine (Aryal and Bharti 2023). The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is one of the principal platforms through which India tries to put this vision into practice. This paper argues that BIMSTEC gives India a useful, Pakistan-free space to pursue the goals of the NFP, particularly in connectivity, trade, culture and security. However, the paper also argues that BIMSTEC's weak institutions, slow implementation and heavy reliance on Indian leadership limit how far the organisation can deliver on these goals (Bhardwaj 2025; Konwer and Hazarika 2025). BIMSTEC is therefore presented as a necessary, but not sufficient, instrument of India's neighbourhood diplomacy. The paper is based on a qualitative, document-based method, drawing on government statements, BIMSTEC's own documents, and the wider scholarly literature.

Key words: Neighbourhood First Policy; BIMSTEC; SAARC; regional cooperation; South Asia; India's foreign policy

1. Introduction

Regional cooperation has long been a central part of India's foreign policy in South Asia. India's approach rests on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states (Aryal and Bharti 2023). India wants to build an environment of trust in the region, so that its own growth also brings benefits to its neighbours. One of the main ways in which India tries to do this is through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). BIMSTEC brings together Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and it covers a wide range of issues, including trade, investment, connectivity, energy, culture and security (Nayak 2024).

One unusual feature of BIMSTEC is its sector-driven structure. Each member state leads at least one sector, based on its comparative strengths, while all members are expected to take

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part in every sector. India leads the security sector, which covers areas such as energy security and disaster management. This structure is meant to keep cooperation broad and inclusive while still giving each country a leadership role within the organisation (Nayak 2024).

This paper makes a simple argument. BIMSTEC is a useful but insufficient tool for India's Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP). BIMSTEC provides India with a platform that excludes Pakistan, allowing it to avoid the political deadlock that has weakened the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (Rao 2020). Through BIMSTEC, India can pursue the NFP's goals of connectivity, trade, culture and security with willing partners. However, the paper also shows that BIMSTEC has real limits. Its institutions remain weak, its projects move slowly, and the organisation depends heavily on India's own leadership and funding (Bhardwaj 2025; Konwer and Hazarika 2025). For these reasons, BIMSTEC should be seen as one part of India's neighbourhood toolkit, not the whole toolkit. India's wider strategy of multi-alignment and 'multi-vector' diplomacy, as described by Jaishankar (2020), means that BIMSTEC works alongside, rather than instead of, bilateral diplomacy and other sub-regional groups.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on the NFP and BIMSTEC and identifies a gap in this literature. Section 3 explains the paper's research method. Section 4 sets out the NFP's main goals. Section 5 examines BIMSTEC's institutional structure and its work on connectivity. Sections 6 and 7 look at BIMSTEC's work on culture and security. Section 8 looks at specific India-BIMSTEC projects. Section 9 brings these threads together in an analysis that maps the NFP's goals onto BIMSTEC's record, before the paper concludes in Section 10.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

A large body of literature exists on India's Neighbourhood First Policy. Aryal and Bharti (2023) trace the policy's roots back to the Nehru era and show how it has changed under different prime ministers. They argue that the Gujral Doctrine of the 1990s, which asked India to give more to smaller neighbours than it expects in return, still shapes the NFP today. Das (2016) studies the early years of the NFP under Prime Minister Modi. She finds that India's neighbourhood policy still struggles with the five problems identified by Muni: a lack of a balanced political perspective, power differences between India and its neighbours, India's economic weight, the role of outside powers, and differences in mindset and diplomatic style. Chattopadhyay (2011) looks at the politics behind India's neighbourhood policy and argues that domestic politics often shape how India treats its neighbours. Behuria (2025) offers a more recent view, arguing that the NFP rests on three things that India must manage together: power, trust and rivalry.

On the BIMSTEC side, Rao (2020) argues that India has shifted its attention from SAARC to BIMSTEC because SAARC cannot function while India and Pakistan remain in conflict. Nayak (2024) describes BIMSTEC as a 'sub-regional resuscitation' and explains how it tries to link South Asia with South-East Asia. Ali and Medhekar (2022) focus on the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area and show that, even after twenty years, the 2004 Framework Agreement has not produced a working free trade area. Mohan (2020) places BIMSTEC within the wider Bay of

Bengal and Indo-Pacific picture, arguing that the Bay of Bengal is becoming a central zone for India's maritime strategy. Raju and Ray Chaudhury (2021) bring together a range of essays on BIMSTEC's connectivity, commerce and security dimensions, showing how broad the organisation's agenda has become.

More critical assessments also exist. Bhardwaj (2025) argues that BIMSTEC suffers from what he calls 'dysfunctional regionalism'. He suggests that BIMSTEC's basic design, and not simply a lack of political will, is the real obstacle to progress. Konwer and Hazarika (2025) broadly agree that BIMSTEC has made only modest progress, but they argue that India has few realistic alternatives and so must remain committed to the organisation, even if the returns are limited.

Despite this large literature, a gap remains. Most studies examine either the Neighbourhood First Policy or BIMSTEC on its own. Few studies connect the two directly and ask how far BIMSTEC actually helps India achieve the specific goals set out in the NFP, such as connectivity, trade, cultural exchange and security cooperation. In addition, most studies treat BIMSTEC's institutional weaknesses and India's policy goals as separate topics, rather than asking how the two interact. This paper tries to address this gap. It maps the stated goals of the NFP directly onto BIMSTEC's sectors and projects, and it asks how far BIMSTEC's institutional limits affect India's ability to reach these goals.

3. Research Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, document-based method. It is a desk-based study and does not rely on interviews or surveys.

The paper draws on three types of sources. First, it uses primary government documents, such as statements and speeches from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the President of India. Second, it uses BIMSTEC's own documents, including the BIMSTEC Charter, summit declarations and the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity. Third, it uses secondary academic sources, including journal articles, book papers and policy briefs from research institutions such as the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS).

The analysis follows two simple steps. First, the paper sets out the main goals of India's Neighbourhood First Policy, based on government statements and the academic literature (Aryal and Bharti 2023; Behuria 2025). Second, it maps these goals onto BIMSTEC's sectors and instruments, such as connectivity, trade, culture and security. This mapping, summarised in a table in Section 9, helps to show where BIMSTEC supports the NFP well, and where gaps remain between India's stated objectives and BIMSTEC's actual record.

This method has some limits. It relies on published documents and reports, so it cannot capture private discussions between governments. It also focuses mainly on India's perspective, and so may not fully reflect how smaller BIMSTEC members view the same issues. Even so, the method offers a clear and structured way of comparing India's stated goals with BIMSTEC's actual performance, which is the central purpose of this paper.

4. India's Neighbourhood First Policy

India's recent foreign policy in South Asia is guided by the Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP). The NFP is consultative, non-reciprocal and focused on outcomes (Aryal and Bharti 2023). India works with its neighbours through consensus rather than pressure, and it does not expect anything in return from smaller neighbours. This idea draws on the Gujral Doctrine of the 1990s, which argued that India, as the largest country in the region, should give more than it asks for (Aryal and Bharti 2023; Aryal 2021).

The NFP has existed in some form since 2008, but it gained new momentum in May 2014, when the heads of government of all SAARC countries were invited to the swearing-in ceremony of India's new government. This was a clear signal that India wanted to place its neighbours at the centre of its foreign policy (Das 2016). India's wider ambition to become a leading global power depends on how well it manages its immediate neighbourhood (Saran 2017). South Asia can either help or hold back India's role in the wider Asian region.

South Asia, however, remains a difficult region. Despite shared culture, language, religion and history, the countries of the region remain politically divided, and intra-regional trade and investment remain low. Cooperation on shared problems, such as climate change, water and energy security, is also limited (Chattopadhyay 2011). As the largest economy in the region, India carries much of the responsibility for starting new initiatives under the NFP.

Cultural diplomacy is also part of the NFP. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), which works under the Ministry of External Affairs, runs cultural centres, seminars and exhibitions in neighbouring countries. These activities are intended to build goodwill and to use India's history and culture as a form of soft power.

Shyam Saran's comment on India's approach to China is also useful for understanding India's approach to its neighbours more broadly. He writes:

“There are situations when public opinion is inflamed, and the people demand action by the state without regard to the ‘prudence’ that Kautilya considers a key principle of statecraft... The state should not allow itself to be pressured by public opinion into actions that may lead to consequences worse than the original problem.” (Saran 2017, 13)

In the same way, the NFP seeks to ensure that India is not pushed into hasty reactions driven by public anger, for example, in response to 'India Out'- style campaigns in some neighbouring countries (Saran 2017). The policy tries to show neighbours that India places them at the centre of its foreign policy thinking. Once the Cabinet Secretary issued instructions to all government ministries, the NFP became a guiding principle across the Indian government, not only within the Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs n.d.).

Security remains an important part of the NFP. Since independence, India's main foreign policy goal has been to protect its own security in its immediate neighbourhood, and unresolved border disputes make this harder (Das 2016). India is also concerned that smaller neighbours might use ties with outside powers, especially China, to gain leverage over India (Behuria 2025). China's growing economic and strategic links with South Asian countries add to this

concern, and small states sometimes use closer ties with China to balance their relationship with India.

The NFP is also dynamic in how it uses regional groupings. India invited SAARC leaders to its 2014 inauguration and BIMSTEC leaders to its 2019 inauguration. This shows that India is willing to use different regional platforms depending on which one offers the best prospects for cooperation at a given time (Rao 2020). The NFP also includes a zero-tolerance approach to terrorism, and India has at times responded to cross-border terrorism in a pre-emptive way.

Connectivity, commerce and cultural links, sometimes called the 'three Cs', are central to the NFP's future direction. Myanmar holds a special place in this policy, as it is the only country covered by both the NFP and India's Act East Policy. Where the two policies are difficult to reconcile, India tends to give priority to the NFP (Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.).

One concrete result of the NFP is the South Asia Satellite (SAS). India funded and launched this satellite to support communication, broadcasting and disaster management across the region, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The satellite illustrates how India has tried to extend regional cooperation beyond land and sea into new domains such as space (Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs n.d.).

Having set out the main aims of the NFP, the paper now turns to BIMSTEC and asks how far this organisation can help India achieve these aims.

5. BIMSTEC: Institutional Framework and Connectivity

BIMSTEC was founded in 1997. From the start, its main aim was to promote economic cooperation and development around the Bay of Bengal (Nayak 2024). Over time, BIMSTEC built institutional mechanisms such as ministerial meetings and trade negotiating committees, and it has gradually widened its agenda to cover trade, connectivity, energy, the blue economy, culture, environment and security.

A major step came in 2004, with the signing of the Framework Agreement on the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area. This agreement was meant to liberalise trade and investment among member states, and it led to negotiations on trade in goods, services, investment, customs cooperation, dispute settlement and trade facilitation. However, more than twenty years later, the Free Trade Area is still not fully operational. Ali and Medhekar (2022) show that negotiations on these agreements have continued for many years without a final, working agreement. This gap between ambition and outcome is a recurring theme in BIMSTEC's history, and Bhardwaj (2025) argues that it reflects deeper structural problems rather than simply a lack of political will.

BIMSTEC has also created platforms for the private sector, such as the BIMSTEC Business Forum and the BIMSTEC Economic Forum, which try to link governments with businesses. The organisation has further recognised the blue economy as an area with strong potential, covering fisheries, marine biodiversity, renewable energy and maritime transport.

Environmental cooperation has become a more visible part of BIMSTEC's work. At the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit in 2022, member states agreed that Environment and Climate Change should become a priority sector, with Bhutan in the lead. BIMSTEC has also encouraged the creation of an Intergovernmental Expert Group on the Mountain Economy, recognising the importance of mountain ecosystems for the wider region, and a Joint Working Group on Environment and Climate Change met virtually in December 2022 to take this agenda forward.

Connectivity is one of BIMSTEC's most important sectors for India's NFP. Thailand currently leads this sector, which was formerly known as Transport and Communication. A reliable network of roads, railways, ports and air links is essential if the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area is ever to work in practice, and connectivity is also central to India's own Neighbourhood First Policy (Mohan 2020). BIMSTEC has set up the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group, along with separate working groups to negotiate agreements on Maritime Transport Cooperation and Motor Vehicles. Outcome documents from these groups pass through the BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting, the Ministerial Meeting, and finally the BIMSTEC Summit before adoption.

The most important connectivity document is the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, formally adopted at the Fifth Summit in Colombo in 2022. This is a ten-year plan, covering 2018 to 2028, prepared with the support of the Asian Development Bank (Asian Development Bank 2018). It covers roads, railways, ports, inland waterways, civil aviation, multimodal transport, trade facilitation and human resource development. The plan is ambitious, but its success depends on whether member states can actually deliver these projects on time, and on whether BIMSTEC can overcome the slow pace of implementation that has affected earlier initiatives (Konwer and Hazarika 2025).

6. Cultural Exchange

BIMSTEC also plays a role in cultural exchange among its member states, which fits closely with the cultural dimension of India's NFP. Culture became a formal sector of BIMSTEC cooperation in 2005, and member states have since developed several mechanisms to support this work. The BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission (BCIC) acts as a programme-planning body, while the BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO) acts as a research hub, supporting data collection and policy formulation in the cultural sector.

Through cultural festivals, exhibitions and events, member states aim to highlight their cultural diversity and to build mutual understanding. BIMSTEC has also created the Cultural Ministers' Meeting, the Senior Officials' Meeting on Culture, and the Expert Group Meeting on Cultural Cooperation, which provide regular opportunities for policymakers to discuss cultural cooperation.

People-to-people contact is closely linked to this cultural agenda. The BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT), established during the Second BIMSTEC Summit in 2008, has organised workshops, seminars and exchange programmes that bring together policymakers and researchers from member states. For India, this kind of cultural and academic exchange complements the work of the ICCR under the NFP by building informal links alongside formal diplomacy (Nayak 2024).

7. Security Cooperation

BIMSTEC has also become a platform for cooperation on peace and security, particularly in relation to terrorism and transnational crime. Since its establishment in 1997, the organisation has recognised that security challenges can undermine its broader development goals. At the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit in Kathmandu in 2018, leaders reaffirmed their commitment to closer cooperation among law enforcement, intelligence and security agencies.

Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) was added as a priority sector in 2005, following concerns raised at the First BIMSTEC Summit in 2004. BIMSTEC created the Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (JWG-CTTC) and several sub-groups, covering issues such as intelligence sharing, legal cooperation, illicit trafficking, money laundering, radicalisation and human trafficking. India leads one of these sub-groups, which reflects its broader commitment to regional security cooperation under the NFP.

The Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Security Dialogue Forum brings together officials and independent experts to discuss non-traditional security threats in the Bay of Bengal region. Initiatives of this kind show that BIMSTEC's security agenda is functioning, even if, as Konwer and Hazarika (2025) note, the pace of formal meetings such as the BIMSTEC Home Ministers' Meeting has at times been slow.

8. BIMSTEC and India

India has used BIMSTEC to support several connectivity projects that are central to its Neighbourhood First Policy. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is intended to improve road connectivity between the three countries, supporting trade and people-to-people exchange. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project is another important initiative. It aims to connect eastern Indian ports with Myanmar's Sittwe port, and then on to Mizoram by river and road. If completed on schedule, this project could significantly reduce transport costs between India and Myanmar, and more broadly within the BIMSTEC region (Konwer and Hazarika 2025).

India has also promoted energy connectivity through the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection, which aims to create a regional electricity grid linking member states. This kind of project addresses energy security, one of the areas in which India leads within BIMSTEC's security sector.

Maritime connectivity is another area of cooperation. India has worked with Sri Lanka to upgrade the Colombo Port, which is important for connectivity between India, Sri Lanka and other BIMSTEC members (Attanayake 2019). More broadly, India has supported BIMSTEC initiatives on counter-terrorism and transnational crime, including capacity-building programmes and joint operations against drug and human trafficking.

India's engagement with BIMSTEC also extends to inclusive development. India has supported projects related to poverty alleviation, healthcare, education and skills development within the BIMSTEC region. These projects align with the broader aims of the NFP, which links India's own prosperity to the prosperity of its neighbours (Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs n.d.).

9. Analysis: BIMSTEC as a Vehicle for the Neighbourhood First Policy

This section brings together the discussion so far. It maps the main goals of India's Neighbourhood First Policy onto BIMSTEC's sectors and instruments, and it assesses how far BIMSTEC has helped India to achieve each goal. Table 1 summarises this mapping.

NFP objective	BIMSTEC instrument	Assessment
A platform free from India-Pakistan rivalry	Overall BIMSTEC membership, which excludes Pakistan	Strong fit. BIMSTEC gives India a working alternative to SAARC (Rao 2020), although Bhardwaj (2025) warns this advantage alone cannot fix BIMSTEC's structural weaknesses.
Regional connectivity	BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity; Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project; India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway	Good fit on paper, but implementation has been slow, and many projects remain incomplete after years of planning (Konwer and Hazarika 2025).
Trade and commerce	BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement (2004); BIMSTEC Business and Economic Forums	Weak fit so far. The Free Trade Area remains unfinished after two decades, limiting BIMSTEC's contribution to the NFP's trade goals (Ali and Medhekar 2022).
Cultural diplomacy and people-to-people ties	BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission (BCIC); BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT)	Reasonable fit. These mechanisms complement India's own cultural diplomacy through the ICCR, though their scale remains modest (Nayak 2024).
Security cooperation and counter-terrorism	Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (JWG-CTTC); Track 1.5 Security Dialogue Forum	Functional fit. India leads relevant sub-groups, but formal meetings such as the Home Ministers' Meeting have been infrequent (Konwer and Hazarika 2025).

Energy security and disaster management	BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection; South Asia Satellite (linked to NFP, not formally a BIMSTEC project)	Mixed fit. India leads this sector within BIMSTEC, but the South Asia Satellite shows India often pursues NFP goals through its own initiatives as well.
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Table 1: Mapping India's Neighbourhood First Policy objectives onto BIMSTEC instruments

Table 1 suggests a clear pattern. BIMSTEC fits the NFP best where the fit is structural, that is, where BIMSTEC's basic design already matches what India wants. The clearest example is BIMSTEC's exclusion of Pakistan, which removes the single biggest obstacle to regional cooperation under SAARC (Rao 2020). BIMSTEC also fits reasonably well in areas such as culture and security, where India can lead specific sub-groups and where progress does not depend on a single, large agreement.

BIMSTEC fits the NFP less well, where success depends on sustained implementation over many years. The Free Trade Area Framework Agreement of 2004 is the clearest example. Twenty years on, the agreement has still not produced a working free trade area (Ali and Medhekar 2022). Connectivity projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project show a similar pattern: the project addresses a real NFP priority, but long delays reduce its practical impact (Konwer and Hazarika 2025).

This pattern supports the paper's central argument. BIMSTEC is necessary for India's Neighbourhood First Policy because it offers a workable regional platform that SAARC cannot provide. However, BIMSTEC is not sufficient on its own, because its institutional weaknesses slow down exactly the kind of long-term projects, such as trade liberalisation and transport connectivity, that the NFP needs most. Bhardwaj (2025) argues that these weaknesses are built into BIMSTEC's design, not simply the result of a lack of effort. If this is correct, then India cannot rely on BIMSTEC alone to deliver the NFP's goals.

For this reason, India has continued to use other tools alongside BIMSTEC. These include bilateral agreements, such as the upgrade of Colombo Port with Sri Lanka (Attanayake 2019), sub-regional groups such as BBIN, and India-funded projects such as the South Asia Satellite, which sit outside BIMSTEC's formal structure but support the same NFP goals. Jaishankar (2020) describes this kind of flexible, multi-track approach as part of India's wider strategy of balancing relationships across different platforms. Within this wider strategy, BIMSTEC's role is best understood as one important, but partial, channel for India's neighbourhood diplomacy.

10. Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between India's Neighbourhood First Policy and BIMSTEC. It has been argued that BIMSTEC is a useful platform for India, mainly because it avoids the India-Pakistan deadlock that limits SAARC (Rao 2020). Through BIMSTEC, India has supported initiatives in connectivity, trade, culture and security that connect directly to the NFP's stated goals.

At the same time, the paper has shown that BIMSTEC's record is mixed. The 2004 Free Trade Area Framework Agreement remains unfinished, and major connectivity projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project have taken far longer than originally planned (Ali and Medhekar 2022; Konwer and Hazarika 2025). Critical assessments, such as those by Bhardwaj (2025), suggest that these problems are linked to BIMSTEC's basic institutional design and are unlikely to disappear quickly.

The paper has therefore argued that BIMSTEC should be seen as a necessary, but not sufficient, instrument of India's Neighbourhood First Policy. BIMSTEC gives India a working regional platform, but it cannot, on its own, deliver every goal of the NFP. India continues to combine BIMSTEC with bilateral diplomacy, sub-regional groups and its own funded projects, reflecting the wider, multi-track approach to regional diplomacy described by Jaishankar (2020; 2024). Future research could build on this paper by tracking specific BIMSTEC projects over time, to see whether the gap between ambition and delivery narrows as the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity moves towards its 2028 deadline.

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