

Convergence of SAGAR and BIMSTEC: Enhancing Maritime Security and Trade in the Bay of Bengal

Radhika Das¹

Abstract

The Bay of Bengal is emerging as a strategic maritime corridor central to Indo-Pacific trade, security, and geopolitical interests, accounting for approximately four percent of global maritime transit. With the rising significance of the Blue Economy, India launched SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) in 2015 as a strategic vision to ensure a free, open, and secure maritime environment across the wider Indian Ocean Region, one that operates without a formal institutional structure and depends on bilateral initiatives and naval deployments. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), by contrast, is a structured intergovernmental organisation with a permanent secretariat, working groups, and legally binding agreements, whose seven-member mandate is narrower in geographic scope, spanning both littoral and landlocked states of the Bay of Bengal. This asymmetry between SAGAR's broad, non-institutionalised maritime vision and BIMSTEC's bounded, institutionally structured mandate is often glossed over in existing scholarship, which tends to treat the two frameworks as straightforwardly complementary without critically interrogating where their scope and capacities diverge. This paper takes up that gap directly: how far can SAGAR's strategic priorities actually be operationalised through BIMSTEC's institutional architecture, and at what point does the two frameworks' differing character start to limit that convergence? The analysis is qualitative and document-based, drawing on official policy statements, summit declarations, and institutional records, and reading them through Spykman's Rimland theory and Shultz's non-traditional security paradigm. Read this way, SAGAR and BIMSTEC line up on several fronts — joint maritime ventures, naval cooperation, counter-piracy work, action against illegal trafficking of marine resources, and efforts to address maritime terrorism. The two frameworks also reinforce each other on the trade and connectivity side, through infrastructure projects, regional trade links, and blue economy initiatives such as the Sagarmala programme, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Project, and the ongoing BIMSTEC Free Trade Area negotiations. That said, the

¹ Radhika Das is a Ph.D. Research Scholar at Department of Politics and International Studies, Pondicherry University, India.

convergence has real limits: geopolitical rivalry, China's expanding footprint through the BRI, infrastructural gaps, and policy divergence among member states all still stand in the way.

Keywords: *BIMSTEC, SAGAR, Maritime security, Blue Economy, Bay of Bengal, Geopolitical Rivalry*

Introduction

The global oceans are at the centre of a growing set of interactions between nations on trade, international law, naval strategy, environmental issues, and emerging technologies. With over 80% of global commerce being carried out via maritime trade, maritime security is significant for those considering trade routes or energy supplies (UNCTAD, 2025). India has an obvious stake in this. India is at the centre of the Indian Ocean, bordering crucial sea lines of communication. It is well placed to influence the maritime security of the entire region, especially the Bay of Bengal, which has emerged as a key hub for international maritime cooperation (Singh, 2024). Current international relations debates on maritime trade focus on ensuring the safety of sea routes, encouraging collaboration, and safeguarding naval resources. India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) is consistent with this framework: a multilateral initiative to promote a free, open, and secure maritime environment while strengthening regional security and economic ties among the neighbouring countries. "BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) is an intergovernmental organization dedicated to economic and technical cooperation among member states, thus improving maritime connectivity and security".

Both SAGAR and BIMSTEC are committed to a Bay of Bengal free of trafficking, piracy and territorial conflicts but characterized by peace, connectivity and prosperity. The combination of the two frameworks presents a great opportunity, not only for traditional security threats, but also in fostering development, optimizing trade routes and enhancing economic integration between countries.

In contemporary international relations, ensuring a more prosperous and safer maritime environment in the Bay of Bengal involves analyzing the collaborations and strategic efforts among states. This article examines the convergence of SAGAR and BIMSTEC, arguing that their integration provides a robust framework for addressing both conventional and non-conventional security challenges, enhancing maritime infrastructure, and fostering regional

economic development. Much of the existing scholarship treats SAGAR and BIMSTEC as broadly complementary without closely interrogating the structural asymmetry between SAGAR's non-institutionalized vision and BIMSTEC's bounded institutional mandate; this paper addresses that gap. The methodology underpinning this analysis is set out in the following section.

Literature Review

The scholarship on BIMSTEC has evolved in numerous directions – regional economic integration, India's evolving regional strategy, institutional development and marine cooperation. Yet, the link between India's vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and BIMSTEC's institutional architecture remains under-explored. Existing studies tend to regard the two as complementary without probing how a broad strategic goal like SAGAR actually gets converted into institutionalized cooperation through an organization like BIMSTEC.

One view sees BIMSTEC primarily as an instrument of regional economic integration. One of the early assessments of the organization, Kelegama (2001) located it within the broader evolution of Asian regional arrangements and argued that its effectiveness would depend on political commitment, institutional development and the harmonization of economic policy across member states. Banik (2006) adopted a narrower perspective, evaluating the prospects of BIMSTEC's proposed Free Trade Agreement and its potential role in economic integration. These studies together present the economic case for BIMSTEC and also highlight a recurring gap in the literature: desire always outstrips implementation.

A second strand looks at BIMSTEC's strategic relevance to India specifically. Shrivastava (2005) placed the organisation within India's Look East Policy, arguing it could connect India to Myanmar and Thailand, improve linkages with Southeast Asia, and support development in India's northeast. Later work ties BIMSTEC's rise more directly to SAARC's decline, though the three accounts differ in what they treat as the real driver. Mohan (2016) reads the shift as opportunity-driven -the 2016 BRICS-BIMSTEC summit and the resulting push toward a free trade agreement made BIMSTEC's economic case newly credible, with SAARC's stagnation supplying context rather than the primary cause. Rao (2020) instead locates the turn in security and diplomacy: BIMSTEC had sat low on Modi's agenda for almost two decades until the September 2016 Uri attack, after which BIMSTEC members backed India's boycott of the Islamabad SAARC summit, and Rao reads Modi's 2019 swearing-in invite list - BIMSTEC

leaders only, with Pakistan and Afghanistan excluded, against a 2014 list that had included them — as India signalling the shift deliberately rather than incidentally. Bhattacharjee (2018) takes the most circumspect position of the three, questioning how much of BIMSTEC's rise is earned rather than assumed: in twenty years the organisation had convened only three summits, and her interviews with foreign-policy analysts in India and Bangladesh pointed to a further gap - the absence of any dispute-resolution mechanism, exposed directly when the Rohingya crisis strained relations between Bangladesh and Myanmar, both member states.

The institutional limitations of BIMSTEC have drawn their own attention. Kundu (2014) evaluated the first seventeen years of the organization and found a huge disparity between the mission and the real capabilities and delivery record. Similar conclusion is drawn by Ginwal et al. (2022) noting BIMSTEC's capacity to impact the Indian foreign policy notwithstanding institutional inadequacies. Overall, this body of work provides a consistent story: the operational performance of BIMSTEC has been well below its goals due to limited financial and human resources, unequal political attention and slow implementation of agreements. This research is less effective in analyzing how BIMSTEC's institutional trajectory interacts with India's broader maritime strategy, it mainly evaluates the organization on its own terms.

A third strand relates to India's maritime outlook and the growth of SAGAR in the larger Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific environment. SAGAR, launched by Prime Minister Modi in 2015, integrates security, economic growth, capacity building, humanitarian assistance and regional collaboration. India's maritime policy is described by Bisht (2020) as a "networked strategy" - involvement based on connected regional relationships rather than naval force in the conventional sense. This puts cooperative institutions at the center of the analysis rather than at its fringes. Other study places SAGAR within the framework of India's broader efforts to play a larger regional and maritime role. Pant and Bose (2022) suggest that BIMSTEC offers India a platform to pursue goals in security, connectivity, and development, especially in the Bay of Bengal. Padmaja (2017) views BIMSTEC as the confluence of India's Neighborhood First and Act East policies, and connects it with maritime initiatives like SAGAR, Sagarmala and Project Mausam, with connectivity, disaster management, security cooperation and the Blue Economy as the areas of overlap between these frameworks.

There has been an increasing focus on the Bay of Bengal's growing importance in India's Indo-Pacific vision. Bose and Chaudhury (2024) argue that the Bay of Bengal's maritime security

problems – transnational crime, trafficking, piracy and humanitarian emergencies – require greater cooperation among littoral states. They see the Bay of Bengal as an increasingly important component of India's Indo-Pacific strategy and argue the case for institutionalized rather than ad hoc responses.

The gap is not empirical but analytical. While much of the literature sees SAGAR and BIMSTEC as broadly complementary, there is no systematic examination of the boundaries of that complementarity. SAGAR is a comprehensive and flexible strategic outlook for India's maritime engagement in the Indian Ocean Region, while BIMSTEC is a geographically restricted treaty-based entity operating through multilateral consensus and institutional process. This distinction – vision vs mechanism – poses a concern that the literature has not addressed. How much of SAGAR's objectives can truly be operationalized through BIMSTEC, and where do geography, membership, institutional capacity, and political agendas determine the limits?

Theoretical Framework

This paper has utilized two theoretical lenses for analysis. The first is geopolitical and accounts for why the Bay of Bengal is consequential to India's maritime posture. Spykman's (1942) Rimland theory inverted Mackinder's heartland thesis, contending that control of the coastal periphery extending from Europe through the Middle East and South Asia to China – the Rimland – determines the balance of power across Eurasia, rather than control of the continental interior. Read through this framework, India's position along the northern rim of the Indian Ocean is not incidental to its maritime strategy; it constitutes the strategic asset that SAGAR is designed to secure, and one that BIMSTEC's membership footprint covers only partially. Spykman's (1942) theory is deployed here not as a general orientating device but as an explanatory mechanism for why India would articulate a maritime vision with the geographic reach of SAGAR – extending across the wider Indian Ocean Region – even though BIMSTEC, its principal institutional partner in the Bay of Bengal, cannot extend that vision beyond its own seven-member mandate.

The second lens is Richard Schultz's non-traditional security paradigm, which categorises the threats facing weak-governance maritime spaces as a mix of domestic, regional, and transregional dangers generated by state and non-state actors alike — piracy, trafficking,

irregular migration, and environmental hazard, alongside more conventional security concerns (Pfaltzgraff & H.Schultz, 2013). This paradigm supplies the coding frame used in the main discussion to organize the empirical material on SAGAR-BIMSTEC security convergence: rather than listing cooperative activities as an undifferentiated set, the analysis sorts them into the categories Schultz identifies, which makes it possible to see where the two frameworks' cooperative activity clusters overlap and where they are thin. Together, the two lenses perform distinct analytical functions: Spykman (1942) accounts for the geographic and strategic stakes that render Bay of Bengal cooperation consequential, while Schultz (as elaborated in (Pfaltzgraff & H.Schultz, 2013)) supplies the analytical categories through which that cooperation is subsequently assessed.

Methodology

This is a qualitative, document-based study rather than a quantitative or field-based one. The object of analysis is not a measurable behavioural outcome but the degree of fit between a stated policy vision (SAGAR) and an existing institutional structure (BIMSTEC), which makes a document-based comparative approach the appropriate method: the fit or misfit between vision and institution is visible in how each body's own official record describes its activities and mandate, not in a metric that would require survey or field data to capture

The primary source base consists of official Indian government material — prime ministerial and ministerial speeches, Ministry of External Affairs press releases and briefs — alongside BIMSTEC's own charter, summit declarations, ministerial joint statements, and secretariat communications. This is supplemented by secondary academic literature on SAGAR, BIMSTEC, and Bay of Bengal regionalism, as well as contemporaneous reporting on developments that fall outside the academic literature's coverage window, including the 2025 BIMSTEC Summit and the 2024 political transition in Bangladesh.

SAGAR and BIMSTEC were selected as a paired case because they are the two dominant Indian-linked frameworks operating in the same maritime space but differ sharply in institutional form - an unstructured strategic vision on one side, a treaty-based organisation on the other - which makes them a useful pair for examining how a policy vision maps onto, and outruns, the institutional structure meant to carry it. The analysis proceeds thematically. It first

establishes the institutional character of each framework, then examines their substantive overlap across security, trade, and connectivity using Schultz's non-traditional security categories as a coding framework, before assessing the structural, political, and geopolitical constraints on that convergence. As this study relies on official statements and secondary sources, the analysis is limited by the availability and framing of public documents and does not include primary interviews or fieldwork; this is acknowledged as a boundary of the present study rather than a limitation of the argument advanced.

Indian vision for maritime security and growth: implications of SAGAR

Nicholas Spykman's Rimland theory offers one way of situating this. Where Mackinder had located the key to world domination in control of the Eurasian Heartland, Spykman inverted the claim: it is the Rimland — the coastal periphery running from Europe through the Middle East and South Asia to China — whose control decides the balance of power across Eurasia and, by extension, the world. India's maritime security is crucial for maintaining stability and the balance of power on the Indian Ocean. This stability is essential for ensuring safe sea trade, energy imports, and curbing illicit activity, all of which promote a blue economy. The Implication of SAGAR — “Security and Growth for All in the Region” is an Indian policy, adopted in 2015, aimed at enhancing maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean. Articulated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to ensure India's vision of substantial economic growth and security in the territory. Multiple aspects of the strategic goal of this initiative are to safeguard the significant sea lanes, curbing piracy, protect the maritime environment, and promote inclusive growth through trade and cooperation (Tongli & Chandan, 2024). India plays a crucial role in regional cooperation under the SAGAR initiative within a multilateral framework. This forum enables the collaborative discussion on the contemporary issues related to economics and disaster management. Pivotal frameworks for this cooperation include the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

India's role under SAGAR focuses on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, demonstrating India's commitment to humanitarian diplomacy. This method aims to foster goodwill and strengthen leadership among neighbouring countries. The region is evident enough that India has provided frequent relief during natural calamities, utilising both its naval and air forces. For example, operations like SAGAR IX, which involved providing medical aid to Sri Lanka, and “Operation Kaveri” showcased its commitment. Moreover, India extended

its Line of Credit (LoC) from about \$500 million to \$1 billion to support its regional allies (MEA, 2022). Likewise, the Indo-Maldives joint military exercise “Ekuverin” aims to counter terrorism operations and facilitate humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations (PIB, 2025). Also, India launched “Operation Insaniyat” in 2017 for Bangladesh to assist due to the influx of refugees (MEA, 2017). Undoubtedly, the implication of SAGAR India has played an important role in shaping security dynamics in the regional landscape to stabilise the Bay of Bengal region. Subsequently, India has decisively promised in Blue Diplomacy to capitalise on the benefits of marine development for a prosperous (BoB) region. The Modi SAGAR vision reflects an extension of a more assertive and decisive foreign policy, aimed at achieving the national interests concerning India’s maritime boundaries. The main objective of this initiative is to form a secure environment that fosters a trend of collaboration and collective action. Enhancing maritime security is essential in addressing contemporary threats, and this can be achieved by participatory and cooperative measures among the neighbouring countries. The implication of SAGAR means strengthening India’s bilateral relationships with the IOR littoral states, which is a significant step in the aim to establish maritime peace and cooperation. Meanwhile, China has been enlarging its influence in the Indian Ocean through various commercial and military tactics, especially through the maritime silk route.

The SAGAR has been addressing impediments by recognizing them. In their statement, Prime Minister Modi, through the vision of SAGAR, articulated the “Act East strategy” to emphasize India’s stand to propose benefits for everyone without any cost to the nation’s interest. “In the Shangri-la Dialogue, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the program by saying that our vision for the Indian Ocean Area is to promote regional cooperation and enhance our strengths to benefit all in our shared marine home.” With this critical assessment of maritime issues, India’s foreign policy has propelled SAGAR through contemporary challenges, for instance, sustaining optimistic long-term bilateral relations with Indian Ocean littorals, and moving toward a realistic role of political leadership is a boon for the crucial momentum of cooperation. India has a strong naval force, which could be used to implement the SAGAR in defensive measures against contemporary challenges like dubious or illicit activity and to curb the domination of China.

It must be underlined and admitted that this contemporary nature of the maritime medium has been possible not just through cooperation and collaboration with the other littorals but

also the need to have a strong navy that can effectively carry out its duties, as Spykman theorizes the postulations of Rimland. Undoubtedly, India has always stood with its commitment to sustaining its interest in assisting others, as the holistic growth of littoral states resolves the difficult relations with the Maldives, while political power has changed. India's stand with Myanmar has been focused on the Kaladan multimodal transit transport corridor with SAGAR for strong regional connectivity and strengthened bonds, as shown through the recent humanitarian aid for bringing Myanmar out of natural disasters. The initiative SAGAR stands as a silver line sustaining positive bilateral relations in the long term with the Indian Ocean littorals. In the multipolar world, Indian political leadership has become crucial to inducing cooperation among nations.

India's Vision of BIMSTEC: Its Implications

Achieving national interests and goals is the primary ambition of every state. In this dynamic, multipolar world, nations have sought to develop foreign policies that foster cordial relations through multilateral partnerships. Similarly, India's foreign policy is built on the same foundation that secures India's national interests and aspirations. India's strategic outlook toward BIMSTEC reflects a concerted effort to foster regional integration, reinforce maritime security, and promote economic collaboration. As a regional organization, SAARC has faced functional paralysis, and BIMSTEC has emerged as a pivotal platform aligning with India's foreign policy doctrines such as "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East." BIMSTEC emerged as a sub-regional organization on June 6, 1997, through the Bangkok Declaration and holds significant strategic relevance due to its multiple prospective geopolitical landscapes in the Bay of Bengal, regional connectivity, trade, and maritime security aspects. It consists of seven members, five from South Asian and two from Southeast Asian countries. This organisation serves as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. It encompasses around 1.8 billion people, which is 22% of the world population, and a combined GDP of US\$ 3.6 trillion (BIMSTEC Secretariat, n.d.). India's vision for BIMSTEC is comprehensive, aiming to revitalize regionalism through pragmatic multilateralism. The Bay of Bengal (BoB) littorals represent the first neighbourhood to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity through foreign policy alignment. "As noted by Richard H. Schultz, non-traditional security encompasses a complex of internal, regional, and transregional threats. Many actors have been involved in this, and non-governmental violence can be generated not only by conventional physical force but also by economic, environmental, and social factors, alongside his categorization of non-

conventional security threats including natural calamities, drought, catastrophic flooding, and pollution” (Pfaltzgraff & H.Schultz, 2013).

Richard H. Shultz defines non-traditional security as a combination of domestic, regional and trans-regional dangers. There have been many actors involved in the government. Non-governmental violence can be generated not by conventional physical force but by economic, environmental and social force. But his, categorisation includes non-conventional security threats like natural calamities, drought, catastrophic flooding, and pollution (Pfaltzgraff & Schultz, 2013). Theorising security challenges of state, irregular warfare, non-state threats, and state fragility connects to relevant theoretical lenses through which BIMSTEC's maritime and regional security challenges could be understood. Shultz's proposition emphasises that the emerging nature of threats in weak governance becomes an impediment to national growth, porous borders, and an underdeveloped security framework are exceedingly relevant in the Bay of Bengal region in the post-Cold War world. Shultz posits that modern conflicts are categorised in regional security architecture, terrorism, insurgency, piracy, illicit trafficking, migration, and organised crime, and BIMSTEC nations face similar irregular threats. Primarily on the Border of the Bay of Bengal (BoB), it mainly denotes Maritime piracy and armed robbery at sea, human trafficking, and drug smuggling. The emergence of transnational extremist groups exploiting maritime routes and coastal vulnerabilities. With this understanding, especially the underlying non-traditional security threat, Prime Minister Modi has reoriented BIMSTEC through the requirement for a flexible, coordinated, and cooperative response among littorals. Further, his vision extends to capacity sharing, joint operations and institution-building, aligning with best global practice in the region.

As regarded by Richard H. Shultz, non-traditional security can be aligned with Modi's action towards BIMSTEC, both emphasising unconventional, non-state security threats such as irregular warfare preparedness, reform intelligence, and special operation local partnership, as emphasised by Shultz. Likewise, Modi's actions share information in BIMSTEC and include leading joint coastal patrols or disaster readiness, and a BIMSTEC security grid. Both stand with contemporary relevance by regarding Modi's support, integrated intelligence, and flexible rapid response in capacity building, as well as strong allegiance with regional alliances for combating the non-traditional security concerns. The Modis have vision via BIMSTEC to resolve this impediment by multi-domain military diplomacy through the training mission, joint exercise, and naval patrols. As well as practical actions like MILEX-18, BIMSTEC

Coastal Security Exercise, Maritime and coastal surveillance collaboration, BIMSTEC Grid and Disaster Management Centre.

This regional entity links nations surrounding the Bay of Bengal, intending to foster economic development, trade, and collaboration in transportation, energy, and counter-terrorism. It has expanded the connections and enhanced economic progress among its member nations, which include Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan. BIMSTEC is a strategic initiative for regional cooperation, aiming to achieve swift economic advancement and social development via collaborative efforts among its member nations. It upholds the ideals of equality and collaboration, emphasizing similar problems and leveraging shared possibilities among seven key members. Furthermore, emphasizes collaboration with international and regional entities while harmonizing its objectives with worldwide development initiatives to enhance beneficial impact. This regional organization is dedicated to mutual support, collaborative initiatives, and skill enhancement, aiming to convert them into cooperative actions that provide tangible advantages, elevate living conditions, and foster comprehensive development across the Bay of Bengal area.

Convergence of SAGAR and BIMSTEC

India's evolving regional and maritime strategy finds coherence in the complementary roles of BIMSTEC and SAGAR, which together form the foundation of its integrated outreach in the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean Region. While BIMSTEC is a multilateral platform for ensuring regional cooperation in connectivity, trade, security, and the blue economy among South and Southeast Asian nations, SAGAR articulates India's maritime vision of sustainable development, environmental stewardship, and security. The uniqueness of BIMSTEC is its sector-driven approach; there were fourteen diverse areas of cooperation; however, at its 17th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, regrouped into seven broad areas of cooperation. Each sector is headed by a particular member state as the leading country. India led the Security sector (BIMSTEC, 2021). And it links with its SAGAR vision, this policy is in complete consonance with India's core foreign policy doctrines such as the "Act East Policy", aimed at strengthening relations with ASEAN, Indo-Pacific Vision, which calls for a free and open maritime order, the Blue Economy agenda, which emphasizes sustainable utilization of marine resources, and the Neighbourhood First Policy, which emphasizes inclusive regional development. While BIMSTEC institutionalizes India's regional

engagement, SAGAR operationalizes its maritime capabilities, enabling India to emerge as a “Net Security Provider” and a trusted partner in times of need (Pant & Bose, 2022).

Technical and Economic Cooperation entities have common interests in maritime security, connectivity and sustainable development, but they operate differently. India launched SAGAR in 2015, and it is a strategic framework guiding India's maritime engagement in the Indian Ocean Region is not underpinned by a formal institutional mechanism, but rather by bilateral initiatives and naval deployments. BIMSTEC is a formal intergovernmental organization with a permanent secretariat, working groups, and legally binding agreements like BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement. SAGAR is India's vision as a maritime power, and BIMSTEC provides the institutional architecture for effective multilateral cooperation. Pointing out these differences implies that they can effectively complement each other in improving regional security and development.

This compatibility not only intercepts the strategic influences from external dimensions like China's BRI Initiative but also consolidates India's stand as a proactive player in shaping a firm, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. India's strategic outreach in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is increasingly shaped by two complementary frameworks: the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, abbreviated as BIMSTEC, and Security and Growth for All in the Region, known as SAGAR. BIMSTEC, a multilateral regional grouping involving South and Southeast Asian countries, bridges SAARC and ASEAN by promoting cooperation across 14 key sectors, including trade, connectivity, energy, counter-terrorism, and the blue economy. Although SAGAR, introduced in 2015 as a strategic apparatus, initiated efforts to strategically recalibrate the maritime doctrine by emphasizing India's commitment to ensuring sustainable growth, regional security, ecological stewardship, regional capacity-building, and more. These frameworks are not standalone but deeply interwoven with India's larger foreign policy goals.

The Act East Policy gains strategic importance from BIMSTEC's terrestrial and maritime links with Southeast Asia and SAGAR's naval engagement with ASEAN countries. The Indo-Pacific Strategy aims to establish a free, open and inclusive maritime order, with operational support from SAGAR's naval deployments and BIMSTEC's regional alignment in the Eastern Indian Ocean.

India's vision of a Blue Economy—focused on the sustainable use of marine resources—is realised through BIMSTEC's collaborative initiatives on fisheries, coastal tourism, and marine conservation. At the same time, SAGAR ensures maritime domain awareness and ecological security. The Neighbourhood First Policy also finds expression through BIMSTEC's economic integration with South Asian neighbours and SAGAR's humanitarian and naval assistance to IOR countries like the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius. Subsequently, the BIMSTEC's emphasis on counter-terrorism and marine piracy and SAGAR's emerging real-time naval presence, disaster response operations, and maritime diplomacy strengthen India's aspiration to be a Net Security Provider in the region. The synthesis between BIMSTEC and SAGAR enhances India's credibility as a reliable partner and leader. It serves as a counterbalance to the emergence of Chinese influence through the BRI Initiative and the Maritime Silk Road. Therefore, BIMSTEC provides the institutional structure and regional consensus. At the same time, SAGAR supplies the strategic vision and execution capacity to forge a coherent, multidimensional framework that aids India's national interests and contributes to peace and security, or prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.

A Comparative Chart: SAGAR vs BIMSTEC

Table 1: Comparative Overview of SAGAR and BIMSTEC

	SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)	BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)
Nature	Strategic Vision/Policy doctrine	Intergovernmental regional organization
establishment	2015	1997
membership	India-centric (open-ended)	7 members (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand)
Focus Areas	Maritime Security, Blue Economy, Connectivity, Disaster Management	14 Priority Sectoral Areas
Role of India	Leading country and vision initiator	India is a key member state

Source: Compiled by the author based on official documents of SAGAR and BIMSTEC

Addressing the Challenges and Prospects

Although the growing alliances of SAGAR and BIMSTEC have potential corroboration for enhancing maritime security, dynamics still prevail over the structural, political, and strategic challenges. In the global era, the requirement is to address the problems and prospects of maintaining regional maritime stability.

Security Challenges

Primarily address the diverse security perceptions related to maritime resources and human security issues, which include illicit fishing, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and armed robbery, as well as natural disasters such as cyclones, flooding, soil erosion, and water insecurity. These challenges make the littoral states in the Bay of Bengal more vulnerable and indicate the need for effective coastal management in the region. Decisive intervention is necessary for illegal migration within the framework of regional and human security. New figures show a large increase in the number of Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar and taking shelter on the beaches of the Bay of Bengal. “The UN High Commissioner for Refugees said around 4,500 Rohingya made perilous journeys across the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal in 2023, either in search of refuge in overcrowded camps in Bangladesh or fleeing persecution in their homeland. The highest number ever recorded indicates that about 569 individuals who faced mistreatment vanished at sea” (UNHCR, 2024).

The inquiry has been posed on how India's security initiatives have directed attention towards maritime governance and crisis management. Nevertheless, advancements in numerous sectors have stagnated, especially in combating illegal fishing, with reports indicating that insufficient regulations and weak law enforcement abilities have obstructed the establishment of adequate security. The ensuing reports highlighting rising concerns are exacerbated by insufficient data gathering and inter-border conflicts among adjacent coastguards and coastal guards, necessitating upgraded armament (Gopalganj, 2024).

Political Instability

The issues of Political instability and miniaturisation present considerable challenges for smaller states, hindering collaborative efforts. Sheikh Hasina's departure from the Prime Minister's office on August 5, 2024, followed by the prolonged anti-national protests, marked

a significant shift in the political landscape in the history of Bangladesh (Hassaan, Bloch, & Rashid, 2024). In the case of the Myanmar military coup being unstable, the entire political situation poses and threat to the socioeconomic aspects of their country. Thailand also experiences political instability, with the army having just handed over power to an elected government following an election held in 2023 (rkbhonsle, 2024). All these aspects need to be reconciled to their strategy to overcome these challenges and achieve long-term sustainability. Another multilateral effort required to prevent crucial challenges is drug smuggling in the region, fuelled from the Golden Crescent region to South Asia, an initiative of the Bay of Bengal to address decisively for prosperous and healthy states. “Drug trafficking through sea routes in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal is a major challenge for law enforcement agencies with an estimated 70% of the total illegal drugs smuggled into India through this route, says the latest annual report of NC”. Subsequently, geopolitical sensitivity is most concerned with balancing relationships between major power forces and competitors.

Geographic Rivalry

India’s attempts to counterbalance Chinese influence in Sri Lanka are based on a strategic logic: ensuring supply channels and creating the sort of connectivity that can propel the Make-in-India initiative with energy corridors. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Sri Lanka in April 2025 is an example of this approach in practice. During the visit, “Modi announced a capacity-building program in India to train 700 Sri Lankans annually; Indian financial support for restoration work at the Thirukoneswaram temple in Trincomalee, the Sita Eliya temple in Nuwara Eliya, and the Sacred City Complex project in Anuradhapura; display of Lord Buddha's relics in Sri Lanka to mark International Vesak Day 2025; and conclusion of Bilateral Amendatory Agreements on debt restructuring. The visit also coincided with the inauguration of the Anuradhapura railway station and commissioning of a solar power plant in Sri Lanka” (PIB, 2025).

Here, cultural diplomacy acts as a more incremental, relationship-based instrument, rooted in person-to-person bonds rather than immediate transactional benefits. Modi’s visit to the Mahabodhi Temple and his participation in religious ceremonies there is an indication of this dimension of India’s regional soft power — using shared Buddhist heritage as a basis for goodwill. This is a cultural background that is likely to affect business and political negotiations over time, even if it does not have an immediate measurable benefit.

Despite its establishment in 1997 and the adoption of a formal Charter in 2022, BIMSTEC continues to receive comparatively less international visibility and scholarly attention than many other regional organizations. While the organization has developed an institutional architecture comprising regular Summits, Ministerial Meetings, Senior Officials' Meetings, Working and Expert Groups, and Regional Centres, its public profile and institutional effectiveness remain limited compared to its strategic potential. This observation was also acknowledged by the Secretary General of BIMSTEC during the 7th Indian Ocean Conference (Perth, Australia, 9–10 February 2024), who noted that despite existing for 27 years—roughly the same period as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)—BIMSTEC remains relatively (BIMSTEC, 2024) To underline the factors for its widespread issues and lack of recognition, likely the process of key initiatives and the overlap of positions with their regional organisations like SAARC and ASEAN, political instability, lack of human and financial resources portray the lack of achievement, and portrays a low profile (Rao S. , 2020; Kundu, 2014). Understanding the consequences and challenges would be essential to foster dialogue among member states. It can assist in building trust among the member states in strengthening the institutional supply mechanism to establish a coordination body for maritime security along with trade initiatives, therefore enhancing the efficiency and accountability among states. The present requirements are to ensure that all member states participate in decision-making to lead the ownership to fill out the subsequent gap.

Conclusion

The convergence of SAGAR and BIMSTEC in the Bay of Bengal has emerged as an effective instrument for the simultaneous growth of trade and enhanced maritime security. These initiatives are aligned with the promise of economic growth and regional stability. By identifying the key areas where cooperation among member states is essential, these synergistic efforts help combat piracy and terrorism, address all dimensions of trafficking, reduce maritime threats, and align with regional progress. Furthermore, its importance can be further expanded through its strategic location, which offers a multifaceted opportunity for regional connectivity and energy security. Both these frameworks, as a joint venture, facilitate and foster holistic environments for improving infrastructure and enhancing trade routes through the peaceful and meaningful utilization of natural resources. They also promote the blue economy among member states facing conventional and non-conventional security concerns. This strategy aims

to strengthen the economies among the member states while promoting sustainable maritime practices and regional prosperity.

References

- BIMSTEC (n.d.). Retrieved from BIMSTEC Secretariat: <https://bimstec.org/secretariat>
- BANIK, N. (2006). Nilanjan Banik. (2006). How Promising Is BIMSTEC? . *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(51), 5264–5268. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4419057>
- Bhattacharjee, J. (2018). SAARC vs BIMSTEC: The search for the ideal platform for regional cooperation. *Observer Issue Brief*, 226, 1-12. Retrieved from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/saarc-vs-bimstec-the-search-for-the-ideal-platform-for-regional-cooperation>
- BIMSTEC. (2021, April 1). *Joint Statement of the Seventeenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting*. Retrieved from bimstec.org: <https://bimstec.org/ministerial-meeting-joint-statements-reports>
- BIMSTEC. (2024, February 9). *Secretary General of BIMSTEC Ambassador Indra Mani Pandey was interviewed by Sidhant Sibal of WION during the 7th Indian Ocean Conference in Perth, Australia on 09 February 2024*. Retrieved from bimstec.org: <https://bimstec.org/event/175/secretary-general-of-bimstec-ambassador-indra-mani-pandey-was-interviewed-by-sidhant-sibal-of-wion-during-the-7th-indian-ocean-conference-in-perth-australia-on-09-february-2024>
- Bisht, M. (2020). Towards a networked strategy: framework for Maritime South Asia. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 16(2), 182-201. doi:10.1080/19480881.2020.1770950
- Bose, S., & Chaudhury, A. B. (2024, March 27). India and a stable Indo-Pacific: managing maritime security challenges in the Bay of Bengal. Retrieved from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-and-a-stable-indo-pacific-managing-maritime-security-challenges-in-the-bay-of-bengal>
- Ginwal, R., Kumar, D., & Verma, S. (2022). BIMSTEC: Future Potential in Shaping India's Foreign Policy. *Zeichen Journal*, 8(11), 70-76. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Richa-Ginwal/publication/372570352_BIMSTEC_Future_Potential_in_Shaping_India's_Foreign_Policy/links/64bec400c41fb852dd98c2f1/BIMSTEC-Future-Potential-in-Shaping-Indias-Foreign-Policy.pdf
- Gopalganj, M. K. (2024). *Coast Guard: Bangladesh remains vigilant along Myanmar border*. Bangladesh: Dhaka Tribute.
- Hassaan, H. M., Bloch, F., & Rashid, M. (2024, October 28). Analyzing the Institutional and Socio-Political Impacts of Sheikh Hasina's Departure on Bangladesh's Democracy. *Bulletin of Business and Economics (BBE)*, 13(3), 171-177. doi: <https://doi.org/10.61506/01.00459>

- Kelegama, S. (2001). Bangkok agreement and BIMSTEC: Crawling regional economic groupings in Asia. *Journal of Asian Economics*, 12(1), 105-121. doi:10.1016/S1049-0078(01)00075-6
- Kundu, S. (2014, September). BIMSTEC at 17: An Assessment of its Potential. *India Quarterly*, 70(3), 207-224. doi:10.1177/0974928414535291
- MEA. (2017, September 14). *Operation Insaniyat - Humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh on account of influx of refugees*. Retrieved from MEA: <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?>
- MEA. (2022). *QUESTION NO.96 LOAN TO SRI LANKA*. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.
- Mohan, N. C. (2016, November). BIMSTEC: an idea whose time has come. *ORF*, 164. Retrieved from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/bimstec-an-idea-whose-time-has-come>
- Padmaja, G. (2017). BIMSTEC: Where India's 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' meet. *National Maritime Foundation*, 4, 1-9. Retrieved from <https://maritimeindia.org/>
- Pant, H. V., & Bose, S. (2022). *Let's BIMSTEC Together*. Observer Research Foundation.
- Pfaltzgraff, R. L., & H.Schultz, R. (2013). International Security Studies: Looking Back and Moving Ahead. 37(3), 95-109.
- PIB. (2025, Dec 2). *Joint Military Exercise Ekuverin Commences in Kerala*, PIB. Retrieved from Ministry of Defence, India.
- PIB. (2025, April 5). *Prime Minister holds bilateral talks with President of Sri Lanka*. Retrieved from [pib.gov.in](https://www.pib.gov.in/): <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2119278®=48&lang=2>
- Rao, S. S. (2020). India's paradigm shift from SAARC to BIMSTEC. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 24(1), 90-99. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48622909>
- rkbhonsle. (2024, August 15). *BIMSTEC: Political Instabilities Mar Integration*. Retrieved from Security Risks: <https://www.security-risks.com/>
- Shrivastava, S. (2005). BIMSTEC: Political implications for India. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 66(4), 973-988. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856178>
- Singh, A. (2024, May 14). *Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal: Obstacles and Opportunities*. Retrieved from ORF.
- Spykman, N. J. (1942). *America's strategy in world politics: the United States and the balance of power*. Routledge.
- Tongli, D., & Chandan, K. (2024). *SAGAR POLICY India's Doctrine of Maritime Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region*. doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.11812.49280
- UNCTAD. (2025, April 23). *Shipping data: UNCTAD releases new seaborne trade statistics*. Retrieved from [unctad.org](https://unctad.org/news/shipping-data-unctad-releases-new-seaborne-trade-statistics): <https://unctad.org/news/shipping-data-unctad-releases-new-seaborne-trade-statistics>

UNHCR. (2024). *UNHCR: Urgent action needed to address dramatic rise in Rohingya deaths at sea*. Retrieved from [unhcr.org](https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-urgent-action-needed-address-dramatic-rise-rohingya-deaths-sea): <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-urgent-action-needed-address-dramatic-rise-rohingya-deaths-sea>

Declarations: I hereby confirm that the manuscript "Convergence of SAGAR and BIMSTEC: Enhancing Maritime Security and Trade in the Bay of Bengal" is my original work and has not been previously published or submitted for publication elsewhere, in whole or in part. I hereby assert that the research, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the findings in this manuscript was not influenced by any financial, personal, institutional, or other conflict of interest. This investigation did not receive any specific financial support or grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. I hereby grant my consent for the publication of this manuscript in the Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies (EJSSS) and affirm that I am accountable for the content, accuracy, and interpretation of the manuscript.