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# India's Approach to Regional Integration: A Comparative Analysis between SAARC and BIMSTEC

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**ABSTRACT:** The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is the regional intergovernmental organization and geopolitical union of states in South Asia. Its member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. SAARC comprises 3% of the world's land area, 21% of the world's population and 5.21% (US\$4.47 trillion)[3] of the global economy, as of 2021. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is an international organisation of seven South Asian and Southeast Asian nations, housing 1.73 billion people and having a combined gross domestic product of US\$5.2 trillion (2023).[6][7] The BIMSTEC member states – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand[8] – are among the countries dependent on the Bay of Bengal.

Fourteen priority sectors of cooperation have been identified and several BIMSTEC centres have been established to focus on those sectors.<sup>[6][9]</sup> A BIMSTEC free trade agreement is under negotiation (c. 2018), referred to as similar to SAARC.

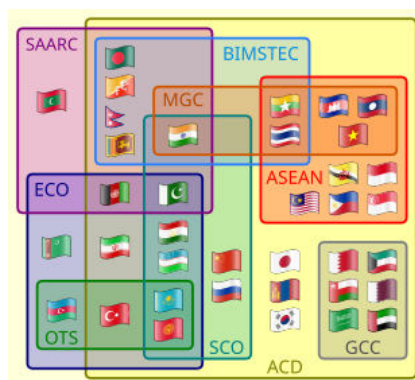
Leadership is rotated in alphabetical order of country names. The permanent secretariat is in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

**KEYWORDS:** SAARC, BIMSTEC, India, regional integration, comparison

## I. INTRODUCTION

SAARC was founded in Dhaka on 8 December 1985.<sup>[4]</sup> Its secretariat is based in Kathmandu, Nepal. The organization promotes economic development and regional integration.<sup>[5]</sup> It launched the South Asian Free Trade Area in 2006.<sup>[6]</sup> SAARC maintains permanent diplomatic relations at the United Nations as an observer and has developed links with multilateral entities, including the European Union. However, due to the geopolitical conflict between India and Pakistan and the situation in Afghanistan, the organization has been suspended for a long time, and India currently cooperates with its eastern neighbors through BIMSTEC.<sup>[7][8]</sup>

The idea of co-operation among South Asian Countries was discussed in three conferences: the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in April 1947; the Baguio Conference in the Philippines in May 1950; and the Colombo Powers Conference held in Sri Lanka in April 1954.<sup>[9]</sup>



A clickable Euler diagram showing the relationships between various Asian regional organisations • d • e

In the ending years of the 1970s, the seven inner South Asian nations that included Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, agreed upon the creation of a trade bloc and to provide a platform for the people of South Asia to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust, and understanding. President Ziaur Rahman later addressed official letters to the leaders of the countries of South Asia, presenting his vision for the future of the region and compelling arguments for co-operation.<sup>[10]</sup> During his visit to India in December 1977, Rahman discussed the issue of regional cooperation with the Indian Prime Minister, Morarji Desai. In the inaugural speech to the Colombo Plan Consultative Committee which met in Kathmandu also in 1977, King Birendra of Nepal gave a call for close regional cooperation among South Asian countries in sharing river waters.<sup>[11]</sup>

After the USSR's intervention in Afghanistan, efforts to establish the union were accelerated in 1979 amid the resulting rapid deterioration of the South Asian security situation.<sup>[11]</sup> Responding to Rahman and Birendra's convention, officials of the foreign ministries of the seven countries met for the first time in Colombo in April 1981.<sup>[11]</sup> The Bangladeshi proposal<sup>[1,2,3]</sup> was promptly endorsed by Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Maldives, however India and Pakistan were sceptical initially.<sup>[11]</sup> The Indian concern was the proposal's reference to the security matters in South Asia and feared that Rahman's proposal for a regional organisation might provide an opportunity for new smaller neighbours to re-internationalize all bilateral issues and to join with each other to form an opposition against India. Pakistan assumed that it might be an Indian strategy to organize the other South Asian countries against Pakistan and ensure a regional market for Indian products, thereby consolidating and further strengthening India's economic dominance in the region.<sup>[11]</sup>

However, after a series of diplomatic consultations headed by Bangladesh between South Asian UN representatives at the UN headquarters in New York, from September 1979 to 1980, it was agreed that Bangladesh would prepare the draft of a working paper for discussion among the foreign secretaries of South Asian countries.<sup>[11]</sup> The foreign secretaries of the inner seven countries again delegated a Committee of the Whole in Colombo in September 1981, which identified five broad areas for regional cooperation. New areas of co-operation were added in the following years.<sup>[12]</sup>

In 1983, at the international conference held in Dhaka by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the foreign ministers of the inner seven countries adopted the Declaration on South Asian Association Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and formally launched the Integrated Programme of Action (IPA) initially in five agreed areas of cooperation, namely, Agriculture; Rural Development; Telecommunications; Meteorology; and Health and Population Activities.<sup>[13][14]</sup> Officially, the union was established in Dhaka with Kathmandu being the union's secretariat-general.<sup>[15]</sup> The first SAARC summit was held in Dhaka on 7–8 December 1985 and hosted by the President of Bangladesh Hussain Ershad.<sup>[16]</sup> The declaration was signed by, namely, King of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuk; President of Pakistan Zia-ul-Haq; Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi; King of Nepal Birendra Shah; President of Sri Lanka JR Jayewardene; and President of Maldives Maumoon Gayoom.<sup>[16]</sup>

#### Members and observers

Economic data is sourced from the International Monetary Fund, current as of December 2019, and is given in US dollars.<sup>[17]</sup>

The member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.<sup>[25]</sup>

SAARC was founded by seven states in 1985. In 2005, Afghanistan began negotiating their accession to SAARC and formally applied for membership in the same year.<sup>[26][27]</sup> The issue of Afghanistan joining SAARC generated a great deal of debate in each member state, including concerns about the definition of South Asian identity<sup>[28]</sup> because Afghanistan is considered a Central Asian country, while it is neither accepted as a Middle Eastern country, nor as a Central Asian country, or as part of the Indian subcontinent, other than being only in part of South Asia.<sup>[29]</sup>

SAARC member states imposed a stipulation for Afghanistan to hold a general election; the non-partisan elections were held in late 2005.<sup>[28]</sup> Despite initial reluctance and internal debates, Afghanistan joined SAARC as its eighth member state in April 2007.<sup>[28][30]</sup>

Despite the Takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021, Afghanistan is still a member of SAARC, despite calls for their suspension and none of the other SAARC members recognizing the Taliban government.<sup>[31]</sup> The issue was further exasperated as it was Afghanistan's turn to select a Secretary General for SAARC in 2023. All other members decided to skip Afghanistan and award the selection to Bangladesh, with Nepali foreign secretary, Bharat Raj Paudyal, stating that "When the term of the Bangladeshi secretary general ends, if the problems in Afghanistan are resolved, the new secretary general will be from Afghanistan, not from Bhutan."<sup>[32][33]</sup>

Observer countries<sup>[4,5,6]</sup>

States with observer status include<sup>[34]</sup> Australia,<sup>[35]</sup> China, the European Union, Iran, Japan,<sup>[36]</sup> Mauritius,<sup>[37]</sup> Myanmar, South Korea, and the United States.<sup>[38][39]</sup>

China's 2007 application for observer status received strong support from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, and Pakistan.<sup>[40]</sup> Other South Asian members of SAARC agreed to support China's observer status, but were not as strongly in favor.<sup>[40]</sup>

On 2 August 2006, the foreign ministers of SAARC countries agreed in principle to grant observer status to three applicants;<sup>[41]</sup> the US and South Korea (both made requests in April 2006),<sup>[41]</sup> as well as the European Union (requested in July 2006).<sup>[42]</sup> On 4 March 2007, Iran requested observer status,<sup>[43]</sup> followed shortly by Mauritius.

Potential future members

Myanmar has expressed interest in upgrading its status from an observer to a full member of SAARC.<sup>[44]</sup> China has requested joining SAARC.<sup>[45]</sup> Russia has applied for observer status membership of SAARC.<sup>[46][47][48]</sup> Turkey applied for observer status membership of SAARC in 2012.<sup>[46][47][48]</sup> South Africa has participated in meetings.<sup>[49]</sup> Indonesia, Jordan, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and Yemen have expressed interest.

On 6 June 1997, a new sub-regional grouping was formed in Bangkok under the name BIST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation).<sup>[10][11]</sup> Following the inclusion of Myanmar on 22 December 1997 during a special Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok, the Group was renamed 'BIMST-EC' (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation). In 1998, Nepal became an observer. In February 2004, Nepal and Bhutan became full members.

On 31 July 2004, in the first Summit the grouping was renamed as BIMSTEC or the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.<sup>[12]</sup>

Objective in BIMSTEC

There are 14 main sectors of BIMSTEC along technological and economic cooperation among South Asian and Southeast Asian countries along the coast of the Bay of Bengal.

1. Trade & Investment
2. Transport & Communication
3. Energy
4. Tourism
5. Technology
6. Fisheries
7. Agriculture
8. Public Health
9. Poverty Alleviation
10. Counter-Terrorism & Transnational Crime
11. Environment & Disaster Management
12. People-to-People Contact
13. Cultural Cooperation
14. Climate Change

Sectors 7 to 13 were added at the 8th Ministerial Meeting in Dhaka in 2005 while the 14th sector was added in 11th Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi in 2008.

Member nations are denoted as Lead Countries for each sector.

- Provides cooperation to one another for the provision of training and research facilities in educational vocational and technical fields
- Promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in economic, social, technical and scientific fields of common interest
- Provides help to increase the socio-economic growth of the member countries

Permanent Secretariat BIMSTEC<sup>[7,8,9]</sup>

The BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat at Dhaka was opened in 2014 and India contributes 32% of its expenditure.<sup>[6][13]</sup> The current Secretary General of the BIMSTEC is Ambassador Indra Mani Pandey from India.

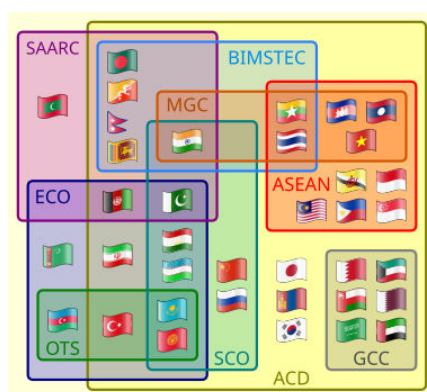


No.	Date	Country	Secretary General of the BIMSTEC
1	2014–2017	 Sri Lanka	Sumith Nakandala
2	2017–2020	 Bangladesh	M Shahidul Islam
3	2020–2023	 Bhutan	Tenzin Lekphell
4	2023–present	 India	Shri Indra Mani Pandey








### Chairmanship

The BIMSTEC uses the alphabetical order for the Chairmanship. The Chairmanship of the BIMSTEC has been taken in rotation commencing with Bangladesh (1997–1999,2005–2006),India(2000,2006–2008),Myanmar(2001–2002,2009–14),Sri Lanka(2002–2003,2018–2022),Thailand(2004–2005,2022–),Nepal(2015–18).<sup>[14]</sup>

### Member nations



A clickable Euler diagram showing the relationships between various Asian regional organisations

Countries	Head of state	Head of government	Population	Nominal GDP / US\$ billion <sup>[15]</sup>
 Bangladesh	Mohammed Shahabuddin, President of Bangladesh	Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh,(Chief executive)	169,356,251	419.237
 Bhutan	Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, King of Bhutan	Tshering Tobgay, Prime Minister of Bhutan,(Chief executive)	777,486	2.653
 India	Droupadi Murmu, President of India	Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India,(Chief executive)	1,407,563,842	3,534.743
 Myanmar	Myint Swe, Acting President of Myanmar	Min Aung Hlaing, Prime Minister of Myanmar,(Chief executive) <sup>[a]</sup>	53,798,084	69.262
 Nepal	Ram Chandra Poudel, President of Nepal	Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Prime Minister of Nepal,(Chief executive)	29,164,578	36.315
 Sri Lanka	Ranil Wickremesinghe, President of Sri Lanka,(Chief executive)	Dinesh Gunawardena, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka	21,773,441	81.934
 Thailand	Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), King of Thailand	Srettha Thavisin, Prime Minister of Thailand,(Chief executive)	71,601,103	522.012

Countries	Head of state	Head of government executive)	Population	Nominal GDP / US\$billion <sup>[15]</sup>
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Heads of the member nations

Leaders are either heads of state or heads of government, depending on which is constitutionally the chief executive of the nation's government.

## II. DISCUSSION

Secretariat SAARC



Secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in Kathmandu, Nepal

The SAARC Secretariat was established in Kathmandu on 16 January 1987 and was inaugurated by the late King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah of Nepal.<sup>[50]</sup>

Specialized bodies

SAARC member states have created the following specialized bodies of SAARC in the member states which have special mandates and structures different from the regional centers. These bodies are managed by their respective governing boards composed of representatives from all the member states, the representative of H.E. secretary-general of SAARC and the ministry of foreign/external affairs of the host government. The heads of these bodies act as member secretary to the governing board which reports to the programming committee of SAARC.

Specialized Body	Location	Country	Website
SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO)	Islamabad	Pakistan	<a href="http://www.sarco-sec.org">www.sarco-sec.org</a>
SAARC Development Fund (SDF)	Thimphu	Bhutan	<a href="http://www.sdfsec.org">www.sdfsec.org</a>
South Asian University (SAU)	New Delhi	India	<a href="http://www.sau.int">www.sau.int</a>
South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO)	Dhaka	Bangladesh	<a href="http://www.sarso.org.bd">www.sarso.org.bd</a>

Regional Centres

The SAARC Secretariat is supported by following Regional Centres established in the Member States to promote regional co-operation. These Centres are managed by Governing Boards comprising representatives from all the Member States, SAARC Secretary-General and the Ministry of Foreign/External Affairs of the Host Government. The Director of the Centre acts as Member Secretary to the Governing Board which reports to the Programming Committee. After 31 December 2015, there 6 regional centers were stopped by unanimous decision. These are SMRC, SFC, SDC, SCZMC, SIC, SHRDC.<sup>[51]</sup>

Regional Centre	Location	Country	Website
SAARC Agriculture Centre (SAC)	Dhaka	Bangladesh	Official website
SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (SMRC)	Dhaka	Bangladesh	
SAARC Forestry Centre (SFC)	Thimphu	Bhutan	

SAARC Documentation Centre (SDC)	New Delhi	India	
SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC)	Gandhinagar	India	Official website
SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (SCZMC)	Malé	Maldives	
SAARC Information Centre (SIC)	Kathmandu	Nepal	
SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre (STAC)	Kathmandu	Nepal	Official website
SAARC Human Resources Development Centre (SHRDC)	Islamabad	Pakistan	
SAARC Energy Centre (SEC)	Islamabad	Pakistan	Official website
SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC)	Colombo	Sri Lanka	Official website

#### Anthem

SAARC does not have an official anthem like some other regional organizations (e.g. ASEAN).<sup>[52]</sup>

#### Apex and Recognized Bodies

SAARC has six Apex Bodies,<sup>[53]</sup> they are:

- SAARC Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SCCI),
- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in Law (SAARCLAW),<sup>[54]</sup>
- South Asian Federation of Accountants (SAFA),
- South Asia Foundation (SAF),<sup>[10,11,12]</sup>
- South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC),
- Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL)

SAARC also has about 18 recognized bodies.<sup>[55]</sup>

#### SAARC Disaster Management Centre

The South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Disaster Management Centre (SDMC-IU) has been set up at Gujarat Institute of Disaster Management (GIDM) Campus, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India. Eight Member States, i.e., Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are expected to be served by the SDMC (IU). It is entrusted with the responsibility of serving Member States by providing policy advice, technical support on system development, capacity building services and training for holistic management of disaster risk in the SAARC region. The centre also facilitates exchange of information and expertise for effective and efficient management of disaster risk.

#### Political issues

Lasting peace and prosperity in South Asia has been elusive because of the various ongoing conflicts in the region. Political dialogue is often conducted on the margins of SAARC meetings which have refrained from interfering in the internal matters of its member states.<sup>[56]</sup> During the 12th and 13th SAARC summits, extreme emphasis was laid upon greater cooperation between SAARC members to fight terrorism.<sup>[57][58]</sup>

The 19th SAARC summit scheduled to be held in Pakistan was called off as India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Afghanistan decided to boycott it due to a terrorist attack on an army camp in Uri.<sup>[59][60]</sup> It was the first time that four countries boycotted a SAARC summit, leading to its cancellation.<sup>[61][62]</sup>

SAARC has generally been ineffective at achieving enhanced regionalism.<sup>[63]</sup>

#### South Asian Free Trade Area



Countries under the South Asian Free Trade Area

The SAFTA was envisaged primarily as the first step towards the transition to a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) leading subsequently towards a Customs Union, Common Market and the Economic Union. In 1995, Sixteenth session of the Council of Ministers (New Delhi, 18–19 December 1995) agreed on the need to strive for the realization of SAFTA and to this end, an Inter-Governmental Expert Group (IGEG) was set up in 1996 to identify the necessary steps for progressing to a free trade area. The Tenth SAARC Summit (Colombo, 29–31 July 1998) decided to set up a Committee of Experts (COE) to draft a comprehensive treaty framework for creating a free trade area within the region, taking into consideration the asymmetries in development within the region and bearing in mind the need to fix realistic and achievable targets.

The SAFTA Agreement was signed on 6 January 2004 during Twelfth SAARC Summit held in Islamabad, Pakistan.<sup>[64]</sup> The Agreement entered into force on 1 January 2006, and the Trade Liberalization Programme commenced from 1 July 2006.<sup>[65]</sup> Under this agreement, SAARC members will bring their duties down to 20 percent by 2009. Following the Agreement coming into force the SAFTA Ministerial Council (SMC) has been established comprising the Commerce Ministers of the Member States.<sup>[66]</sup> In 2012 SAARC exports increased substantially to \$354.6 billion from \$206.7 billion in 2009.<sup>[67]</sup> Imports too increased from \$330 billion to \$602 billion over the same period. But the intra-SAARC trade amounts to just a little over 1% of SAARC's GDP. In contrast to SAARC, in ASEAN (which is actually smaller than SAARC in terms of the size of the economy) the intra-bloc trade stands at 10% of its GDP.

The SAFTA was envisaged to gradually move towards the South Asian Economic Union, but the current intra-regional trade and investment relation are not encouraging and it may be difficult to achieve this target. SAARC intra-regional trade stands at just five percent on the share of intra-regional trade in overall trade in South Asia. Similarly, foreign direct investment is also dismal. The intra-regional FDI flow stands at around four percent of the total foreign investment.<sup>[68]</sup>

The Asian Development Bank has estimated that inter-regional trade in SAARC region possessed the potential of shooting up agricultural exports by \$14 billion per year from existing level of \$8 billion to \$22 billion. The study by Asian Development Bank states that against the potential average SAARC intra-regional trade of \$22 billion per year, the actual trade in South Asia has been only around \$8 billion. The uncaptured potential for intra-regional trade is therefore \$14 billion per year, i.e., 68%<sup>[13,14,15]</sup>

#### SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme


The SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme was launched in 1992. The leaders at the Fourth Summit (Islamabad, 29–31 December 1988), realizing the importance of people-to-people contact among SAARC countries, decided that certain categories of dignitaries should be entitled to a Special Travel document. The document would exempt them from visas within the region. As directed by the Summit, the Council of Ministers regularly kept under review the list of entitled categories.

Currently, the list included 24 categories of entitled persons, which include dignitaries, judges of higher courts, parliamentarians, senior officials, entrepreneurs, journalists, and athletes.

The Visa Stickers are issued by the respective Member States to the entitled categories of that particular country. The validity of the Visa Sticker is generally for one year. The implementation is reviewed regularly by the Immigration Authorities of SAARC Member States.

#### BIMSTEC priority sectors

14 priority areas have been identified with the lead nations appointed to lead the effort:<sup>[6][9][16]</sup> The organisation has 15 priority areas for cooperation, including Trade & Investment, Transport & Communication, Energy, Tourism, Technology, Fisheries, Agriculture, Public Health, Poverty Alleviation, Counter-Terrorism & Transnational Crime, Environment & Disaster Management, People-to-People Contact, Cultural Cooperation, Climate Change and Blue Economy.

Priority Area	Lead Country	Centre			Comments
Transport and communication					
Tourism	 India	BIMSTEC Centre, Delhi	Tourism	Information	
Counterterrorism and					Four subgroups: Intelligence





Priority Area	Lead Country	Centre	Comments
transnational crime			sharing – Sri Lanka (lead), Terror financing – Thailand, Legal – Myanmar, Law enforcement and narcotics – Myanmar
Environment and disaster management		BIMSTEC Weather and Climate Centre, Noida	
Energy	Myanmar	BIMSTEC Energy Centre, Bengaluru	BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection MoU signed in 2014 <sup>[17][18]</sup>
Public Health	Thailand	BIMSTEC Network of National Centres on Coordination in Traditional Medicine	
Agriculture	Myanmar		
Trade & Investment	Bangladesh		
Technology	Sri Lanka		
Fisheries	Thailand		
People-to-People Contact	Thailand		
Poverty Alleviation	Nepal		
Climate Change	Bangladesh		
Cultural Cooperation	Bhutan		1200 ITEC scholarships by India

In a virtual BIMSTEC Colombo summit which took place on March 30, 2022, decision was taken to reduce, re-constitute and reconstruct the number of sectors of co-operation from the unwieldy 14 to a more manageable 7.

1. Trade, Investment and Development - Bangladesh
2. Environment and Climate Change - Bhutan
3. Security and Energy - India
4. Agriculture and Food Security - Myanmar
5. People-to-people Contact - Nepal
6. Science, Technology and Innovation - Sri Lanka
7. Connectivity - Thailand

#### BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement

The BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework Agreement (BFTAFA) has been signed by all member nations to stimulate trade and investment in the parties, and attract outsiders to trade with and invest in the BIMSTEC countries at a higher level. Subsequently, the "Trade Negotiating Committee" (TNC) was set up, with Thailand as the permanent chair, to negotiate in areas of trade in goods and services, investment, economic co-operation, trade facilitations and technical assistance n. for LDCs. Once negotiation on trade in goods is completed, the TNC would then proceed with negotiation on trade in services and investment.<sup>[19]</sup>

The BIMSTEC<sup>[16,17,18]</sup> Coastal Shipping Agreement draft was discussed on 1 December 2017 in New Delhi, to facilitate coastal shipping within 20 nautical miles of the coastline in the region to boost trade between the member countries. Compared to the deep sea shipping, coastal ship require smaller vessels with lesser draft and involve lower costs. Once the agreement becomes operational after it is ratified, a lot of cargo movement between the member countries can be done through the cost effective, environment friendly and faster coastal shipping routes.<sup>[20]</sup> The necessity for coastal shipping ecosystem and electricity grid interconnectivity, as two of the necessary components of the evolving shape of BIMSTEC.

On 7 and 8 November 2019, the first ever BIMSTEC Conclave of Ports summit was held in Visakhapatnam, India.<sup>[21]</sup> The main aims of this summit is providing a platform to strengthen maritime interaction, port-led connectivity initiatives and sharing best practices among member countries.

In 2022 summit saw the declaration of the Master Plan for Transport Connectivity that would provide a framework for regional and domestic connectivity,

Cooperation with Asian Development Bank (ADB)

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) becomes a partner in 2005, to undertake the "BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistic Study" (BTILS), which was completed in 2014.<sup>[22]</sup>

BIMSTEC Summits

Second Summit at New Delhi, India Third Summit at Naypyidaw, Myanmar

No.	Date	Host country	Host city
1st	31 July 2004	 Thailand	Bangkok
2nd	13 November 2008	 India	New Delhi
3rd	4 March 2014	 Myanmar	Naypyidaw <sup>[23]</sup>
4th	30–31 August 2018	 Nepal	Kathmandu <sup>[24][25]</sup>
5th	30 March 2022	 Sri Lanka	Colombo (Virtual meeting) <sup>[26]</sup>

### III. RESULTS

SAARC Awards

The Twelfth (12th) Summit approved the SAARC Award to support individuals and organizations within the region. The main aims of the SAARC Award are:

- To encourage individuals and organizations based in South Asia to undertake programmes and activities that complement the efforts of SAARC.
- To encourage individuals and organizations in South Asia contributing to bettering the conditions of women and children.
- To honour outstanding contributions and achievements of individuals and organizations within the region in the fields of peace, development, poverty alleviation, environmental protection, and regional cooperation.
- To honour any other contributions and achievement not covered above of individuals and organizations in the region.

The SAARC Award consists of a gold medal, a letter of citation, and cash prize of \$25,000. Since the institution of the SAARC Award in 2004, it has been awarded only once and the Award was posthumously conferred upon the late President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh.<sup>[72]</sup>

SAARC Literary Award



Recipients of SAARC Literary Award 2013

The SAARC Literary Award is an annual award conferred by the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL) since 2001<sup>[73][74]</sup> which is an apex SAARC body.<sup>[75]</sup> Some of the prominent recipients of this

award include Shamshur Rahman, Mahasweta Devi, Jayanta Mahapatra, Abhi Subedi, Mark Tully, Sitakant Mahapatra, Uday Prakash, Suman Pokhrel, and Abhay K.<sup>[76]</sup>

Nepali poet, lyricist, and translator Suman Pokhrel is the only poet/writer to be awarded twice.<sup>[77]</sup>

#### Secretaries-General of SAARC

#	Name	Country	Took office	Left office
1	Abul Ahsan	Bangladesh	16 January 1985	15 October 1989
2	Kant Kishore Bhargava	India	17 October 1989	31 December 1991
3	Ibrahim Hussein Zaki	Maldives	1 January 1992	31 December 1993
4	Yadav Kant Silwal	Nepal	1 January 1994	31 December 1995
5	Naeem U. Hasan	Pakistan	1 January 1996	31 December 1998
6	Nihal Rodrigo	Sri Lanka	1 January 1999	10 January 2002
7	Q. A. M. A. Rahim	Bangladesh	11 January 2002	28 February 2005
8	Chenkyab Dorji	Bhutan	1 March 2005	29 February 2008
9	Sheel Kant Sharma	India	1 March 2008	28 February 2011
10	Fathimath Dhiyana Saeed	Maldives	1 March 2011	11 March 2012
11	Ahmed Saleem	Maldives	12 March 2012	28 February 2014
12	Arjun Bahadur Thapa	Nepal	1 March 2014	28 February 2017
13	Amjad Hussain B. Sial	Pakistan	1 March 2017	29 February 2020
14	Esala Ruwan Weerakoon	Sri Lanka	1 March 2020	3 March 2023
15	Golam Sarwar	Bangladesh	4 March 2023	Incumbent

#### SAARC summits

No	Date	Country	Host	Host leader
1st	7–8 December 1985	Bangladesh	Dhaka	Ataur Rahman Khan
2nd	16–17 November 1986	India	Bengaluru	Rajiv Gandhi
3rd	2–4 November 1987	Nepal	Kathmandu	King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah
4th	29–31 December 1988	Pakistan	Islamabad	Benazir Bhutto
5th	21–23 November 1990	Maldives	Malé	Maumoon Abdul Gayoom
6th	21 December 1991	Sri Lanka	Colombo	Ranasinghe Premadasa
7th	10–11 April 1993	Bangladesh	Dhaka	Khaleda Zia
8th	2–4 May 1995	India	New Delhi	P V Narasimha Rao
9th	12–14 May 1997	Maldives	Malé	Maumoon Abdul Gayoom
10th	29–31 July 1998	Sri Lanka	Colombo	Chandrika Kumaratunga
11th	4–6 January 2002	Nepal	Kathmandu	Sher Bahadur Deuba
12th	2–6 January 2004	Pakistan	Islamabad	Zafarullah Khan Jamali
13th	12–13 November 2005	Bangladesh	Dhaka	Khaleda Zia
14th	3–4 April 2007	India	New Delhi	Manmohan Singh
15th	1–3 August 2008	Sri Lanka	Colombo	Mahinda Rajapaksa
16th	28–29 April 2010	Bhutan	Thimphu	Jigme Thinley
17th	10–11 November 2011	Maldives	Addu	Mohammed Nasheed



18th	26–27 November 2014 <sup>[80]</sup>	Nepal	Kathmandu	Sushil Koirala
19th	15–16 November 2016	Pakistan	Islamabad	Cancelled
20th	Planned for 2023 or 2024	Pakistan	Islamabad	N/A

#### IV. CONCLUSION

##### SAARC Youth Award

The SAARC Youth Award is awarded to outstanding individuals from the SAARC region. The award is notable because of the recognition it gives to the Award winner in the SAARC region. The award is based on specific themes which apply to each year. The award recognizes and promotes the commitment and talent of the youth who give back to the world at large through various initiatives such as Inventions, Protection of the Environment and Disaster relief. The recipients who receive this award are ones who have dedicated their lives to their individual causes to improve situations in their own countries as well as paving a path for the SAARC region to follow. The Committee for the SAARC Youth Award selects the best candidate based on his/her merits and their decision is final<sup>[19,20]</sup>

##### Previous Winners:

- 1992: World Population Issue and Welfare - Painting; - Devang Soparkar (India)
- 1997: Outstanding Social Service in Community Welfare – Sukur Salek (Bangladesh)
- 1998: New Inventions and Shanu — Najmul Hasnain Shah (Pakistan)
- 2001: Creative Photography: South Asian Diversity – Mushfiqul Alam (Bangladesh)
- 2002: Outstanding contribution to protect the Environment – Masil Khan (Pakistan)
- 2003: Invention in the Field of Traditional Medicine – Hassan Sher (Pakistan)
- 2004: Outstanding contribution to raising awareness of TB and/or HIV/AIDS – Ajij Prasad Poudyal (Nepal)
- 2006: Promotion of Tourism in South Asia – Syed Zafar Abbas Naqvi (Pakistan)
- 2008: Protecting the Environment in South Asia – Deepani Jayantha (Sri Lanka)
- 2009: Outstanding contribution to humanitarian works in the aftermath of Natural Disasters – Ravikant Singh (India)
- 2010: Outstanding contribution for the Protection of Environment and mitigation of Climate Change – Anoka Primrose Abeyrathne (Sri Lanka)
- 2011: Youth leadership in the fight against social ills - Mr. Mohamed Faseen Rafiu (The Maldives)<sup>[79]</sup>

##### Projects BIMSTEC

- Coast shipping
- Power grid interconnection
- Regional disaster monitoring and warning system
- Road and rail Look-East connectivity projects
- MILEX-18: The first-ever BIMSTEC Multinational Military Field Training Exercise (MILEX-18) was held in Pune, India from September 10-16, 2018. The exercise was attended by all seven BIMSTEC member countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

The theme of the exercise was counter-terrorism in semi-urban terrain. The participating troops conducted a series of exercises, including search-and-cordon operations, search and destroy, and handling and neutralisation of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). They also participated in a validation exercise on the final day of the exercise.

The MILEX-18 was a major success and was hailed as a significant step towards increased military cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region. The exercise helped to improve interoperability between the participating forces and to share best practices in the field of counter-terrorism. It also helped to build trust and confidence among the BIMSTEC member countries.

The MILEX-18 was a major boost to the BIMSTEC security cooperation agenda. It is expected to pave the way for more such exercises in the future, which will help to further enhance the security cooperation between the BIMSTEC member countries.

In addition to the military exercises, the MILEX-18 also included a number of other activities, such as an Army Chiefs' Conclave and a seminar on counter-terrorism. The Army Chiefs' Conclave was an opportunity for the participating countries to discuss and share their views on regional security issues. The seminar on counter-terrorism provided a forum for the participants to learn about the latest trends in terrorism and to discuss ways to counter it.





The MILEX-18 was a landmark event in the history of BIMSTEC. It was a major step towards increased military cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region and it is expected to have a positive impact on regional security.

The following are some of the key outcomes of the MILEX-18:

Improved interoperability between the participating forces. Sharing of best practices in the field of counter-terrorism. Building of trust and confidence among the BIMSTEC member countries. Paving the way for more such exercises in the future. Boost to the BIMSTEC security cooperation agenda. The MILEX-18 was a major success and it is a positive sign for the future of BIMSTEC security cooperation. The exercise helped to build trust and confidence among the member countries and it is expected to further enhance their cooperation in the field of security.[20]

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