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Q10

Do you think that BIMSTEC is a parallel organisation like the SAARC ? What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the two ? How are Indian foreign policy objectives realized by forming this new organisation ?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS II · 10 marks · Bilateral and Regional Groupings

Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

Core demand of the question

- Do you think that **BIMSTEC** is a parallel organisation like the **SAARC**? Discuss
- Cover similarities, dissimilarities, and how **BIMSTEC** serves Indian foreign policy

Revision summary

SAARC is a South Asian organisation including Pakistan; **BIMSTEC** is a Bay of Bengal grouping including Myanmar and Thailand.

They share five members and a development vocabulary.

They differ in geography, in Pakistan's presence, and in **SAARC**'s summit freeze after 2016.

BIMSTEC is therefore not a duplicate **SAARC**; it is a different regional canvas.

India uses **BIMSTEC** to join Neighbourhood First with Act East without a Pakistan veto.

SAARC still exists on paper; **BIMSTEC** is the platform that currently works.

Introduction

SAARC (1985) is a South Asian political-economic club of eight members, including **Pakistan**. **BIMSTEC (1997)** is a Bay of Bengal grouping of seven members that links South Asia to South-East Asia. They overlap in membership and in development language, but **BIMSTEC** is not a carbon copy of **SAARC**, which is why India has invested in it while **SAARC** summits have stalled.

Body**Similarities**

- Both are regional organisations that talk connectivity, trade, energy, people-to-people contact, and disaster management rather than a NATO-style alliance.
- Both include India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, so several files - transit, power trade, and coastal shipping - appear on both tables.
- Both have suffered from thin secretariats, slow free-trade implementation, and a gap between summit declarations and hard infrastructure.
- Both let smaller members multilateralise what would otherwise be asymmetric bilateral bargains with India.

Dissimilarities

- **SAARC's** membership is the subcontinent plus Afghanistan; Pakistan's presence has repeatedly frozen the **SAARC** summit process after cross-border terror and the 2016 cancellation of the Islamabad summit.
- **BIMSTEC's membership is Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand:** no Pakistan, and two South-East Asian coastal states, which changes the map from the Himalayas-plus-Pakistan to the Bay of Bengal.
- **SAARC** has a longer institutional memory (SAPTA/SAFTA, specialised centres); **BIMSTEC** adopted a Charter at the 2022 Colombo summit, which is a later, tighter legal identity.
- **BIMSTEC's** agenda is physically maritime and multimodal (Kaladan, trilateral highway, coastal shipping); **SAARC's** political centre of gravity was always India-Pakistan.

Not "parallel" in the sense of a duplicate **SAARC**

- A parallel organisation would be the same theatre with a different letterhead. **BIMSTEC** is a different theatre that happens to share five members with **SAARC**.
- India can work **BIMSTEC** without a Pakistan veto; that is the operational difference that makes the "**SAARC minus Pakistan**" shorthand tempting and still slightly wrong, because Myanmar and Thailand are not **SAARC** states.
- **SAARC** is not legally dead; it is politically inert at the summit level. **BIMSTEC** is the working platform, not a formal repeal of **SAARC**.

How **BIMSTEC** serves Indian foreign policy

- **It is an instrument of Neighbourhood First plus Act East:** the north-east's access to the sea and to Thailand runs through **BIMSTEC** geography.
- It offers a forum for energy grids, disaster response, and security dialogue in the Bay without waiting for **SAARC** consensus.
- It balances extra-regional influence in the Bay by thickening India's own regional public goods - shipping, power, and humanitarian assistance - with willing partners.
- It does not replace the Quad or ASEAN-centric diplomacy; it fills the subregional gap that **SAARC** no longer fills.

Flow diagram

SAARC 1985 eight members -> Summit stall India-Pakistan
 BIMSTEC 1997 seven members -> Bay of Bengal plus Thailand Myanmar
 BIMSTEC 1997 seven members -> Act East and Neighbourhood First
 Summit stall India-Pakistan -> India shifts working energy
 India shifts working energy -> BIMSTEC 1997 seven members

Conclusion

BIMSTEC is similar to **SAARC** in development aims and in overlapping membership, but it is not a parallel **SAARC**: different map, no Pakistan veto, and a Bay of Bengal-ASEAN hinge. For India it is the usable regional tool while **SAARC** remains blocked.

Facts & figures

SAARC

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, established 1985; eight members including Afghanistan and Pakistan.

BIMSTEC

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, originating in 1997; seven members.

BIMSTEC members

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

BIMSTEC Charter, 2022

Adopted at the Colombo summit, giving BIMSTEC a formal charter identity later than SAARC's.

SAARC Islamabad summit, 2016

Called off after India and others withdrew following the Uri attack; summit-level SAARC has remained stalled.

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