



A Comparative Analysis Between SAARC and BIMSTEC as Effective Regional Organisations: How South Asian Countries Like Bangladesh May Derive Benefits

Md. Farhan Intisher Khaled¹ & Mostakim Bin Motaher²

¹*Research Assistant, Bangladesh Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs (BCIPA), Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh.*

²*Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh*

Corresponding Author: Md. Farhan Intisher Khaled, **Email:** dintisher@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1156-1740>

Received: 12th December 2025

Accepted: 15th February 2026

Published: 8th April 2026

ABSTRACT

As a region, South Asia is poised for significant growth and development, which can be substantially enhanced by strengthening regional cooperation among its members (Kathuria & Mathur, 2018). However, the reality of South Asia has not lived up to its potential. To facilitate regional integration, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established exclusively for the growth of South Asia; however, its performance has been lacklustre. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), comprising several South Asian countries, was created around the Bay of Bengal region with similar goals; however, like SAARC, it failed to realise its potential. The study includes discussions on the creation, successes, and shortcomings of both SAARC and BIMSTEC, engages in a comprehensive comparative analysis of the two organisations, and explores concessions for South Asian countries, with a spotlight specifically on Bangladesh. The findings advocate that South Asian countries, especially Bangladesh, seek concessions from both organisations, given that they are complementary entities, rather than choosing between the two. The research concludes by advocating that South Asian member countries pursue both organisations to enhance growth and development.

Keywords: South Asia; Regionalism; South Asian Regionalism; SAARC; BIMSTEC; Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of regionalism stems from the idea of economic and social cooperation between contiguous countries pursuing mutual interests. The official definition of regionalism also alludes to transnational economic linkages. Glannia and Matthes (2005; p 4) define regionalism in the international system as the economic integration of countries within a region through formal agreements. Regional cooperation requires the "coming together" of multiple states within a regional space and their consent to collaborate on one or more areas. This collaboration in question exclusively revolves around mutual gains.

South Asia as a region is brimming with potential for economic growth and development, with intraregional trade poised to reach USD 67 billion (Kathuria & Mathur, 2018, p. 35). However, the reality is far from reaching that potential, with the latest estimates peaking at USD 39.55 billion in 2022, a mere 6% of total South Asian trade (Kibria, 2023b).

To address the need for more resilient regional cohesion and integration, organisations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) have been established. The sole intent behind the creation of the two organisations was to facilitate the overall regionalist ambitions of their respective member countries, including robust intraregional trade and investment. Despite the two organisations catering to different regions, namely SAARC to South Asia, and BIMSTEC to the Bay of Bengal region, the two share some common members who themselves differentiate between the yields by the two organisations (Bhattacharjee, 2023).

To validate this line of thought, this research aims to provide a comprehensive discussion and contrast between SAARC and BIMSTEC to determine which organisation is more active and efficient, and to detail which yields the greatest benefits to Bangladesh. This work aims to differentiate between the two organisations' efficacy and to discuss their complementary nature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Focusing on the significance of South Asian regional integration, Kathuria and Mathur (2018) find that increased economic engagement within South Asia results in stronger cross-country relations and fosters growth, development, and enhanced security apparatus. The authors discuss high trading costs, trade and non-trade barriers, lack of standard border infrastructure, governmental reluctance, among others, as hurdles to regional integration. Their work

highlights the benefits of air travel liberalisation and specifically cites the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement and other air travel liberalisation agreements. The paper discusses the welfare implications of trade liberalisation and transit allowances in South Asia to improve welfare in landlocked countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan. The paper also advocates improving energy infrastructure, given its apparent inadequacy. The authors do not provide specific end-all-be-all solutions, nor do they advocate for exclusively pursuing regional trade, and abandoning existing intra-regional engagements.

The author recommends cross-border regional trade either through SAARC or sub-regional trade arrangements, and emphasises alternative trade options for low-income businesses, such as the India-Bangladesh border farmers' market.

Muzaffar et al. (2017) explore the prospects of SAARC as a regional entity for fostering economic engagement and growth in South Asia. The authors examine the historical developments that facilitated the creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and assess both its successes and shortcomings as an institution. Their findings suggest that SAARC's successes include creating a unified South Asian identity, establishing the South Asian Free Trade Agreement, founding the South Asian University, and establishing the SAARC Development Fund. However, according to their work, what stymies SAARC's growth is the organisation's inability to implement the envisioned goals and ratified agreements. The author lists general reluctance among members, especially the India-Pakistan regional rivalry, which affects South Asian regionalism.

Bhattacharjee (2023) provides a highly impactful comparative analysis of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Her work does not necessarily focus on South Asian regionalism; rather, she delves into the debate over SAARC vs BIMSTEC from the perspective of which organisation might benefit India comparatively more. Her research finds that BIMSTEC's supremacy over SAARC in achieving stronger regional trade, and that the former does not suffer from regional politics as the latter does. The author's survey of key stakeholders yielded stronger support for BIMSTEC and an admission of SAARC's inadequacies as a regional entity. The research concludes with the sentiment that, despite the lacklustre performance of SAARC as an entity, both SAARC and BIMSTEC can function as complementary to one another's ambitions. However, Bhattacharjee's work was restricted to India's stakeholders only and does not reflect the perceptions and opinions of South Asia as a whole.

The literature by Shishir and Sakib (2023) focuses on India's role as a dominant actor in South Asia and in both SAARC and BIMSTEC. The authors explore how the interests of the dominant actor within any regional cooperation mechanism influence its progress.

Their exploration led them to understand that India preferred BIMSTEC over SAARC for regional cooperation, due to Pakistan's absence from SAARC. Moreover, their cited data also suggests overwhelming support for BIMSTEC over SAARC in the Indian bureaucratic and academic circles. Their research highlights how the India-Pakistan bilateral grievances are affecting South Asian regionalism and creating divisions among the smaller countries. This is despite the study describing India as a unifying factor and the most relevant member to engender South Asian regionalism. The authors highlight India's ambitions of being the dominant actor in both organisations.

Their findings suggest that intra-regional trust among SAARC member states is less than ideal, with India being the least interested in proceeding along SAARC's charted path. Furthermore, it describes how India categorises Bangladesh on the same level of non-cooperation as Pakistan, despite the Bangladesh-India relationship being a paragon in the region.

While perusing literature, a very small number of published works and information that differentiated between the SAARC and BIMSTEC were found. And the specific one produced by Bhattacharjee (2023), only contained the perspective of India. While supportive literature such as the one by Shishir and Sakib (2023) and Kathuria and Mathur (2018) did mention stymies in the path to regional cohesion, such as high trade and non-trade barriers, as well as highlight the potential for growth through regional organisations, they did not elaborate on comparing between the two aforementioned organisations. This research gap provided impetus for this study.

1.2 Research Questions:

The research aims to ask the following question

1. Which regional organisation between SAARC and BIMSTEC may yield better results for South Asian countries, and specifically, Bangladesh?

1.3 Research Objectives:

The research aims to explore the following objectives

1. To explore the genesis, achievements and shortcomings of SAARC.
2. To explore the genesis, achievements and shortcomings of BIMSTEC.

3. To comparatively analyse both SAARC and BIMSTEC.
4. To determine which regional cooperation mechanism may yield better results for South Asian countries.
5. To determine which organisation or setting may yield more tangible outcomes for Bangladesh between SAARC and BIMSTEC.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining primary and secondary data. The primary data has been collected through conducting Key Informant Interviews (KII), where experts in the field of International Relations, Political Science and similar backgrounds are interviewed to extract relevant information. The study also includes a structured general survey with both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Through the general survey, disseminated online via Google Forms, the study aimed to incorporate the perspectives of students and graduates of political science, international relations, and related disciplines to extract information from participants with varying levels of understanding (basic to excellent) of the subject matter. While the sample survey was set at 100, it collected 150 responses.

Before commencing their answers, the respondents were asked whether they had received education in Political Science/International Relations/Developmental Studies or similar disciplines.

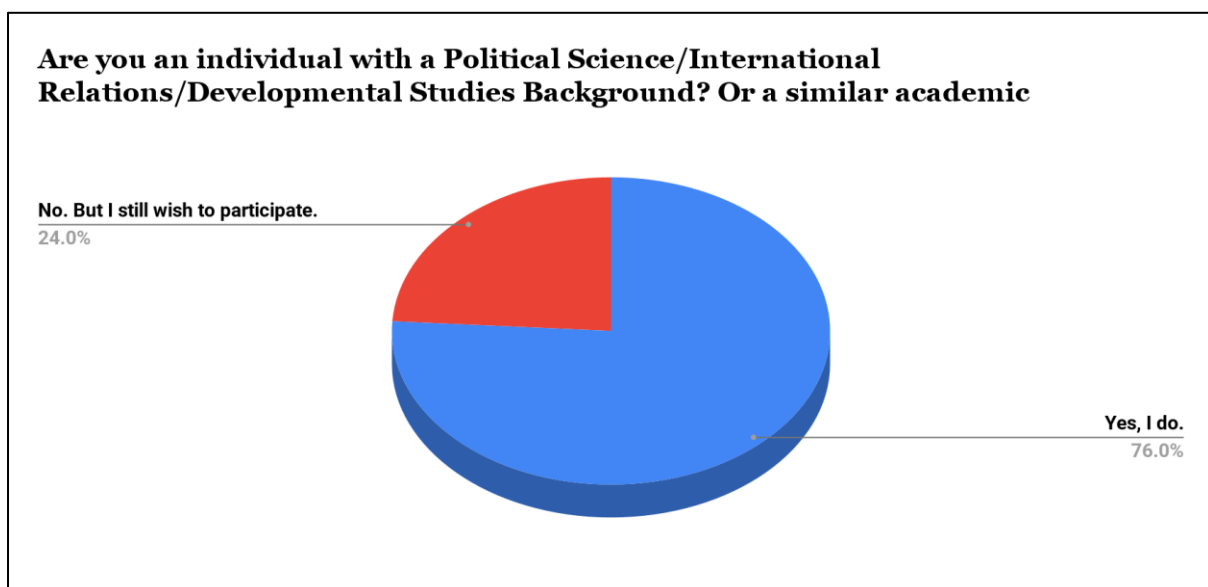


Figure 1: Survey Responses to the question

"Are you an individual with a Political Science/International Relations/Developmental Studies Background? Or a similar academic background?"

114 (76%) of the respondents reported having an academic background in the aforementioned disciplines, while 36 (24%) reported not having a background in these disciplines. However, they were eager to participate and contribute to the research.

The respondents were then asked whether they had knowledge of regional organisations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC.

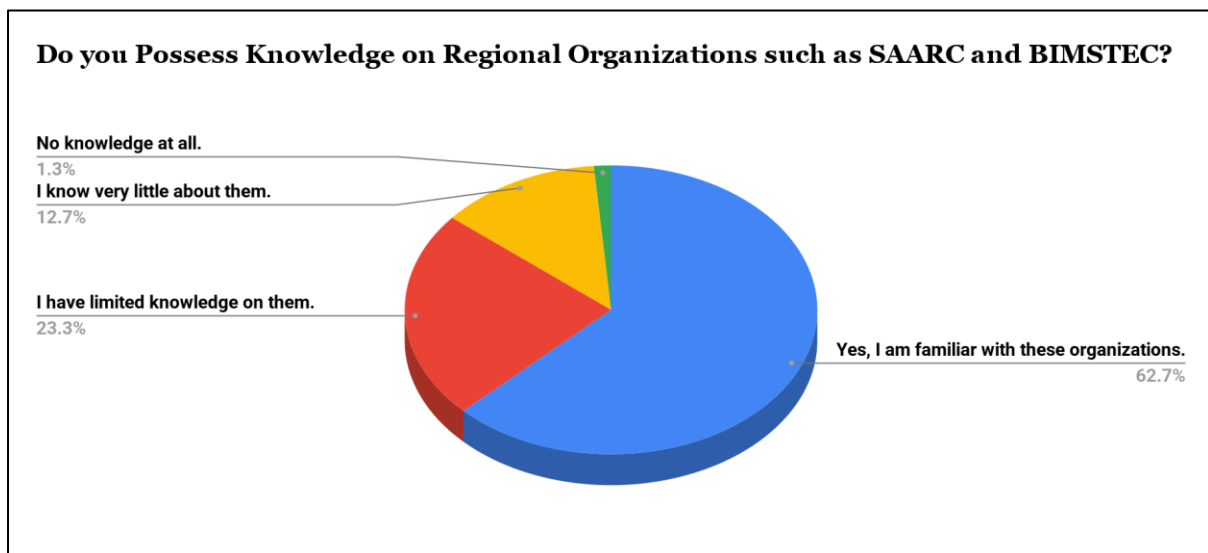


Figure 2: Survey Responses to the question

“Do you Possess Knowledge on Regional Organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC?”

94 (62.7%) answered that they were familiar, 35 (23.3%) had limited knowledge, 19 (12.7%) said that they had very little knowledge about these organisations, and 2 (1.3%) had no knowledge at all. These numbers represented the masses appropriately, with participation from people with very different levels of knowledge of the subject matter.

For secondary data collection, the research implements the Abductive Method under the Desk Study approach. The Abductive Method peruses through relevant literature and analyses information and concepts to derive novel interpretations through “re-contextualisation”. This approach aims to produce novel interpretations of existing phenomena. Secondly, through incorporating the Desk Study Method, the research comprehensively peruses secondary data in the form of books, journal articles, opinion editorials, newspaper articles, governmental and nongovernmental data repositories and other available sources of relevant information.

SAARC: Its Achievements, Shortcomings, and The Way Forward:

One of the most notable manifestations of regionalism in South Asia was the successful materialisation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. The intent behind its creation was to significantly integrate South Asia and enhance country-to-country cooperation, while strictly adhering to a South Asian identity (Chowdhury, 2024). The section discusses SAARC as an organisation, dissecting its achievements, shortcomings, and a pragmatic way forward.

The genesis of SAARC

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was envisioned to establish a comprehensive framework to facilitate South Asian cooperation across multiple sectors. The blueprint for SAARC was envisioned by President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh in the early 1980s (Javaid, 2013). The idea led to multiple meetings to materialise SAARC as an entity, beginning with the first in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in April 1981. This meeting had laid the pipes for further in-depth discussions to draw up an action plan for regional cooperation. Going forward, multiple follow-up meetings would also take place, leading up to the creation of SAARC. These meetings were held in Kathmandu in November 1981, in Islamabad in August 1982, in Dhaka in March 1983, and in Delhi in July 1983 (Muzaffar et al., 2017, p. 36). At the August 1983 meeting among the soon-to-be SAARC nations, the 'Integrated Programme of Action' (IPA) was introduced to specify the areas of cooperation within the organisation (Kibria, 2023b).

It was President Ziaur Rahman who cradled a vision to create a South Asian Regional entity, something akin to ASEAN, to remain neutral on the world stage (i.e., avoid aligning with either the US or the Soviet Union during the Cold War) while championing democratic principles (Chowdhury, 2024).

The successes and shortcomings of SAARC:

As a regional entity, SAARC has established a collective regional identity through a solid institutional framework. SAARC was an outcome of the liberalist ideas of the 1980s, where, as aforementioned, the dominant idea was to foster a South Asian collective identity, much along the lines of the European Union (EU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Even if not on the same scale as the aforementioned two organisations, SAARC as an institution has achieved a few notable successes. However, despite being such an ambitious

entity, SAARC has not been able to deliver, let alone meet, the most notable visions it was created to achieve.

The following table lists the achievements and shortcomings of SAARC as a regional entity.

Table 1: *The Achievements and Shortcomings of SAARC as a Regional Entity (As compiled by the authors).*

SI No.	SAARC's Achievements	SAARC's Shortcomings
1.	Created a sartorial regional identity for South Asia. The countries were able to form a unified voice (Muzaffar et al., 2017; p 39).	The India-Pakistan bilateral tensions have been dubbed as the biggest hurdle in SAARC's path to prosperity. Their bilateral contentions consist of the Jammu and Kashmir issue, as well as Indian concerns regarding Pakistan's home-grown terrorism (Rahim et al., 2023; p 920; Money Control, 2024).
2.	Took measures to ensure food security through the creation of bodies such as the Technical Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development and the SAARC Regional Food Bank (Hosain and Karim, 2023).	The irregularity in holding regular summits has been holding SAARC back from reaching its full potential (EEAS, 2021).
3.	Promoted cultural and people-to-people exchange between SAARC countries through initiatives such as the "SAARC Agenda for Culture" (Muzaffar et al., 2017; p 40; SAARC Agenda for Culture, n.d.).	As the dominant country in South Asia, as well as the most dominant member of SAARC, India tends to exert hegemonic tendencies against other countries in the region (Shishir and Sakib, 2023; Rahim et al., 2023; p 920).
4.	One of SAARC's dominant achievements is the creation of the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) in 1993, and the subsequent upgrade to the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). The mechanisms were created to facilitate intraregional trade and investments. Increased intraregional trade from \$256 million in 1993, and USD 16.32 billion in 2010, to \$39.55 billion in 2022 (Kibria, 2023a).	Neither SAPTA and SAFTA has been able to match the ambitions they were modelled after. Moreover, SAFTA has not experienced any progress since 2015 (Kibria, 2023b).
5.	Promoted and prioritised Environmental and Climate Change Initiatives through actions such as the SAARC Environment Action Plan (1997) and the Dhaka Declaration & SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change (2008). Other initiatives include the SAARC Convention on Environment (2010), Statement on Climate Change (2010), and SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (2011) (Hosain and Karim, 2023).	SAARC's intraregional trade has been bogged down by high cost of trade due to tariff and nontariff measures, inadequate border infrastructure and lack of connectivity being the most conspicuous reasons Sattar, Basu and Ghosh, 2020; p 14). Trade between country pairs in South Asia is 20% more expensive than for pairs in East Asia (Kathuria & Mathur, 2018; p 12). Furthermore, informal trade between South Asian countries is approximately 50% of their formal intra-regional trade, which is affecting the latter (Kathuria & Mathur, 2018; p 11).

6.	SAARC has prioritised education as an Area of Cooperation since 1988. A South Asian University under SAARC has been established (Muzaffar et al, 2017; 39; Areas of Cooperation, 2020).	
7.	Promoted poverty alleviation projects such as the South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA), a Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation, and the SAARC Decade of Poverty Alleviation (2006-2015). SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) (Hosain and Karim, 2023).	
8.	<p>One of SAARC's most brilliant achievements was the establishment of the SAARC Energy Centre through the Dhaka Declaration in 2005. This regional centre under SAARC aims to create an Energy Ring in South Asia and facilitate trade in energy between the SAARC countries (SAARC Energy Centre, n.d.).</p> <p>South Asia has been able to muster impressive intra-regional energy trade with the support of the USAID's energy initiative titled the "South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy Integration (SARI/EI)". This initiative, which began in 2000 as "South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy (SARI/E), with the intent to ensure energy security in South Asia, is the longest-running USAID initiative in history (United States Energy Association (UNEA), n.d.).</p>	
9.	One of SAARC's most recent successes was the creation of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund and its subsequent disbursement. Through the implementation of the fund, SAARC was able to disburse \$22 million during the height of the pandemic (EEAS, 2021).	

10.	<p>The SAARC Arbitration Council, with a distinct interest in solving South Asia's intra-regional disputes, is also one of SAARC's salient achievements. The Council is a specialised body under SAARC which oversees the commercial, industrial, trade and investment, banking and other similar sector-based disputes either lodged by a member country or their people (Muzaffar et al., 2017; p 39).</p> <p>Another SAARC Specialised body is the South Asian Regional Standards Organisation (SARSO), which was created to establish effective regional trade standards for SAARC members (Muzaffar et al., 2017; p 39- 40).</p>	
11.	<p>SAARC has prioritised Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and networks since the Ninth SAARC Summit in 1997. The efforts resulted in the materialisation of agreements such as the Plan of Action on Telecommunications (1998) and the Revised Plan of Action (2004) (Hosain and Karim, 2023).</p>	

Why the revitalisation of SAARC is necessary for South Asian cooperation

SAARC was a sartorial vision for South Asia to engage more intently for mutual growth and development. The words “regional cooperation” were enshrined in its name for that very same reason; to replicate the EU and ASEAN model of regionalism, and bespoke it to South Asia's needs. However, recent literature is less than optimistic about SAARC's progress going forward.

The SAARC formula was engendered after comprehensive political dialogue between members, and emphasising avoiding bilateral contentions on the platform (Muzaffar 2017; p 42). The organisation was a gateway for South Asian countries to become relatively more entangled with each other in the region. Collaboration in trade and economic growth, climate change, education, energy, environment, trade, tourism, and even going as far as to include the postal service/infrastructure development collaboration between member countries, was portending a future of shared growth.

However, the indefinite postponement of SAARC's 19th summit, previously scheduled for 2016, is indicative of obstacles on SAARC's path to success. The ambitions behind regional cooperation organisations necessitate mutual understanding, desire for growth, social and cultural cohesion, political understanding and cooperation. When understanding flourishes among regional members, intra-regional cohesion is emboldened, leading to better cooperation on fronts such as economic growth and social development.

SAARC is still a beacon of hope for South Asian countries. Experts fear that unless cohesion can be reorganised, this region may fall into future conflicts. According to Dr. Mohammad Atiq Rahman, Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, the future of South Asian conflict will be around water given that Bangladesh and India has not been able to resolve their transboundary water dispute with the Ganges (Ganga), with the ongoing river dispute between India and Pakistan regarding the Indus Water Treaty (M. A. Rahman, personal communication, 19 February 2025). This statement has been academically validated by Muzaffar (2017, p. 43), whose work predicts future regional disputes over water in South Asia, a prediction that has manifested between the two countries after the Pahalgam incident, with the Indus Water Treaty now in abeyance (Ahmed, 2025). So, not only is the revival of SAARC necessary to bolster economic growth and development, but it is also essential to prevent future conflicts within the region. The most recent manifestation of a bellicose situation, germinating from cross-border terrorist activities from Pakistan, resulting in the death of 26 tourists in Pahalgam, India, has given impetus to a renewed diplomatic, economic, and military contention between the two countries. This renewed tension has not only severely impacted the Indo-Pak bilateral relations, leading to a suspension of the historic Indus Water Treaty and diplomatic skirmishes, but has also overall deteriorated regional stability in South Asia (Ahmed, 2025). The incidents of reciprocal adversity between the two do not bode well for SAARC's future.

The Probability of SAARC's Revival for South Asian Regionalism

Over the years, members of the organisation have proposed and attempted to revive SAARC. None of the members believes that the organisation as a whole should be bogged down by intergovernmental adversity, alluding to the India-Pakistan scenario.

Track two diplomatic efforts by the intelligentsia, the academic circles, and Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs) of member states towards the revival of SAARC have been evident. The efforts were seemingly evident in forums such as the South Asian Economic Summits (SAES),

where representatives from member nations engage in confidence-building conversations and reiterate the potential for regional cooperation (Kibria, 2023b). According to A.S.M. Tareq Hassan Semul, Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), SAARC can be revitalised, however, according to the scholar, the key for any regional organisations to succeed is to prioritise not only what the political elites envision, but more importantly, to prioritise the desire of the people of the region for economic, social and political upliftment, development and growth (A. S. M. T. H. Semul, personal communication, 26 January 2025). Professor Dr. Delwar Hossain, Professor in the Department of International Relations at Dhaka University and Executive Director of the Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA), shares the same positive view of institutions such as SAARC for South Asian regionalism. According to the Academic, there is no alternative to SAARC in fostering regional cohesion and cooperation for South Asia. Professor Hossain adds that most people are unaware of the intricacies of organisations such as SAARC, and that SAARC still holds regular meetings; however, the inconsistent scheduling of summits is of concern. The expert sees a hopeful future for SAARC, and recommends pouring efforts behind the organisation to make it as efficient as possible (D. Hossain, personal communication, 29 January 2025).

To reinvigorate SAARC from its sedentary state, all member states, especially India and Pakistan, should encourage engagement between themselves and rejuvenate their social, cultural, political, and economic ties. Hashim and Razzaque (2016, p. 23) suggest that conflict between contiguous countries can be mitigated by strong trade. The region may be diverse; however, the cultural ties among countries and the dispersal of people of the same ethnic descent (for instance, the Kukis and Mizos in both India and Myanmar, or the Santals in both Bangladesh and India) should allow the region to be more integrated in theory. Despite concerns and genuine pessimism about SAARC's resurrection, seasoned experts hold out hope for its revival. More robust economic, social, cultural, and political engagements are expected with SAARC's revival.

BIMSTEC: A Discussion On Its Success, Failures and The Way Forward

The other initiative to bolster cohesion between most South Asian countries, while not exclusive to South Asia, is the creation of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which aims to promote regional trade, investment, and connectivity. This section discusses BIMSTEC, its achievements, shortcomings, and the way forward.

BIMSTEC: Definition and origin

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), formed on 6 June 1997, is a regional organisation comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand (BIMSTEC, n.d.b). BIMSTEC comprises 22% of the world's population, or 1.8 billion people. This number exceeds the combined populations of ASEAN (679.69 million) and the EU (448.4 million) (Rahaman, 2024a). According to Basu and Ghosh (2020, p. 7), BIMSTEC was envisioned as a gateway or bridge between South and Southeast Asia.

Upon analysis, it was evident that BIMSTEC focuses on regional cooperation by bridging the gap between South and Southeast Asia, with an exclusive focus on the Bay of Bengal region. While its counterpart, SAARC, focuses on regional cohesion in South Asia. According to the BIMSTEC Charter signed on 30 March 2022, BIMSTEC is a "dynamic, effective and result-oriented regional organization for promoting a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable Bay of Bengal Region through collective efforts, meaningful cooperation and deeper integration" USD (The Charter of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, 2022, p 1).

The region holds immense economic potential for cross-border trade among its members. The members of this organisation account for roughly 4.5% of global GDP, at 4.5 trillion USD (Rahaman, 2024a). South Asia, in general, perceives BIMSTEC as an alternative to SAARC (Rahaman, 2024b), given that progress within SAARC has reached an impasse and there is no assurance of a revival in the foreseeable future.

The aim of creating BIMSTEC was to enhance trade and investment, building on shared cultural and historical ties among its member states. BIMSTEC was preceded by both ASEAN and SAARC, both regional organisations with very similar goals and ambitions, predominantly driven by greater economic aspirations, anti-narcotics/human trafficking, and anti-terrorism objectives, as well as greater cultural exchanges. BIMSTEC's novelty lies in its focus on improving regional connectivity through the establishment of connectivity infrastructure and doubling down on technical knowledge sharing.

The Principles of BIMSTEC have been founded on the cornerstone of equality and cooperation, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states, non-interference, peaceful settlement of disputes, and peaceful coexistence. The other principle, as given on the "Charter of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation",

stipulates that the grouping is not a substitute for regional bilateral engagements, rather a supplement to other transnational intra-regional relations (The Charter of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, 2022; p 4).

The achievements and shortcomings of BIMSTEC: A comparison

BIMSTEC, as an organisation, has experienced significant successes as well as salient shortcomings. The following contains a side-by-side comparison of BIMSTEC's successes and shortcomings.

Table 2: *The Achievements and Shortcomings of BIMSTEC as a Regional Entity (As compiled by the authors).*

SI No.	BIMSTEC's Achievements	BIMSTEC's Shortcomings
1.	The creation and coming into force of the BIMSTEC Charter, giving legitimacy to BIMSTEC itself, as well as its secretariat (The Charter of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, 2022; p 1, 2).	
2.	The signing of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was a significant step to foster greater trade and investment engagements, as well as to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers between member countries. The implementation and ratification of the Framework Agreement was on 8 February 2004 (BIMSTEC, n.d.d).	The BIMSTEC FTA, which was supposed to foster greater trade arrangements, has not seen or experienced substantial results and adequate implementation (Rahaman, 2024b). Additionally, the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) and Coastal Shipping Agreement (CSA), both to facilitate seamless movement of cargo via land or sea, have not materialised yet (Basu and Ghosh, 2020; 18).
3.	BIMSTEC has shown interest and the ability to commit to regional energy interconnection and energy infrastructure development through signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the Establishment of the 'BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection' on 31, August 2018, at the 4th BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu, Nepal (Ahmed, 2018). The	BIMSTEC countries have not yet been able to realize advanced physical connectivity. Projects such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project have not been fully materialised due to the inability to reach a consensus among the members (Basu and Ghosh, 2020; 18).

	MoU had established by default the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Coordination Committee (BGICC) to coordinate the implementation of the MOU (Grid Interconnection Coordination Committee, n.d.).	
4.	One of the most germane success stories provided by BIMSTEC is the introduction of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, which was formally adopted at the 5th BIMSTEC Summit held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on 30 March 2022. The master plan includes a comprehensive and elaborate 10-year strategy to be fulfilled between 2018-2028 (BIMSTEC, n.d.a).	According to Article 18 of the BIMSTEC Charter, the decision-making process by the organisation is strictly based on consensus (The Charter of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, 2022; p 14). This understanding, while it sounds very efficacious on paper, does not bode well in reality. For instance, despite relying on a principle of consensus, BIMSTEC has not been able to fare well in addressing and formulating a "peace roadmap" to end the Myanmar Civil War.
5.	BIMSTEC had successfully initiated a security collaboration apparatus through the initiation of the First BIMSTEC Multinational Military Field Training Exercise (BIMSTEC MILEX-18) in "semi-urban terrains" held between 10-16 September, 2018 (BIMSTEC, n.d.c).	Despite being empowered with the ability and resolution to counter transnational crimes, radicalism and acts of terrorism, a continuation of such endeavours was not maintained by BIMSTEC, with another MILEX military exercise not having taken place since its inaugural session.
6.		There is an evident lack of unity between BIMSTEC member states, which in turn is decelerating progress. For instance, despite having active members in the contentions, BIMSTEC has not been able to address the Rohingya refugee crisis, even though the concerned parties are member states and have minimal autonomy to foster dialogue (Hazra, 2024).
7.		BIMSTEC has been deemed overly ambitious, taking on a heap of notable responsibilities and failing to efficiently fulfil its goals (A. S. M. T. H. Semul, personal communication, 26 January 2025).

Potential for BIMSTEC going forward:

For any regional organisation to move forward, the ideal would be to guarantee unanimity among its members to proceed and sustain functionality. BIMSTEC, like SAARC, can only move forward if its members are willing to do so, with more nuanced support being necessary given its dominant actor, India, as suggested by Shishir and Sakib (2023).

With the evolving nature of growth in the service sectors of the Bay of Bengal countries, regional connectivity may boost these sectors' growth rates. The service sector in the Bay of Bengal grew by 6%-8% during the 2010s, with larger and more robust economies such as India and Malaysia achieving growth of 8%-10% (Basu & Ghosh, 2020; p. 25). BIMSTEC may empower countries to improve their service sectors by facilitating bilateral, multilateral, and plurilateral cooperation.

One of the bigger concerns for BIMSTEC countries is the impact of natural disasters and climate change. The idea of empowering regional mitigation and adaptation strategies to tackle climate change and its adverse effects is a key part of BIMSTEC's core principles (Sectors of Cooperation, n.d.). Given that most countries in the Bay of Bengal face natural disasters linked to climate change, BIMSTEC must revitalise and work collectively to address climate change in the region. According to Roy (2017), BIMSTEC countries should i) individually maintain goals to reduce carbon emissions and establish climate-friendly industries, ii) regionally create a climate change action plan, and iii) globally act as a unified voice in dialogue with other countries/groupings to express their concerns. If it followed suit, not only would BIMSTEC be able to engender regional cohesion, but it would also be able to address highly relevant climate change challenges and concerns. Moreover, the BIMSTEC countries may focus on tackling overfishing in the Bay of Bengal, as advocated by Xavier (2018, p. 28).

Additionally, the technological aspects of BIMSTEC must be prioritised. Bhowmick and Basu (2023) report that lukewarm technological progress within BIMSTEC has increased the emphasis on technological imports.

The BIMSTEC FTA was established and ratified with very significant and crisp goals in mind. If the hurdles to its full implementation are adequately addressed and subsequently removed, the FTA could lead to substantial trade benefits for the BIMSTEC member countries. Both the Coastal Shipping Agreement (CSA) and the Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) need to be fully implemented to facilitate seamless regional trade.

Given that the BIMSTEC countries maintain detailed lists of priority sectors, the organisation may facilitate sector-based interaction and dialogue among key industry stakeholders. The BIMSTEC Charter already provides for Sectoral Ministerial Meetings under Article 10 (The Charter of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, 2022; pp. 9-10). Under the people-to-people exchange framework, the organisation may facilitate sectoral stakeholder meetings to deepen regional ties, innovation, trade and investment. This recommendation has been validated by the work of Xavier (2018; p 30), who shared a similar strategy. Xavier suggests dividing the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think-tanks into subsectors to facilitate meetings among industry technical experts.

To conclude this section, BIMSTEC does have the potential to be a boon for the Bay of Bengal Region. If the provided recommendations are followed through and the insufficiencies are actively addressed, the organisation can yield significant results for its member states.

SAARC vs BIMSTEC: Their Nuances And Implications For South Asian Countries

This section provides a qualitative analysis of the nuances and significant differences between SAARC and BIMSTEC as a whole. The researchers not only compare the two organisations on efficacy but also explore their complementarity.

Bhattacharjee (2023; p. 2) highlights India's apprehension regarding SAARC during its inception, given that the SAARC's founder, Major Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh, was seen as a West-leaning figure who sought to curb Soviet influence in the region. However, the rationale behind SAARC has always been to create a regional organisation to cater to the economic and developmental needs of South Asian countries (Chowdhury, 2024). When Professor Delwar Hossain was asked how important SAARC is for South Asia, the Professor emphasised its relevance by saying that for South Asia exclusively, SAARC is the most relevant organisation out there (D. Hossain, personal communication, 29 January 2025). The Professor emphasised that both BIMSTEC and SAARC are highly relevant to Bangladesh; however, SAARC, by itself, serves the South Asian region, while BIMSTEC is an intersectional, interregional entity that serves as a platform to facilitate technical and economic cooperation among member countries of both South and Southeast Asia.

When Mohammad Aynul Islam, Professor, Department of Political Science, Dhaka University, was asked about the nuances of SAARC and BIMSTEC, the Professor explained that SAARC is dedicated to cater to economic, social and cultural needs of South Asia, BIMSTEC is also similar focusing on the economic cooperation between members, and improving upon trade,

connectivity and energy infrastructure of its members (M. A. Islam, personal communication, 16 February 2025).

So, these two organisations are similar in fostering regional cooperation, with SAARC emphasising the social aspects of its members and BIMSTEC focusing more intently on regional connectivity. However, both organisations promote intra-regional trade and investment among their member countries to foster regional economic growth and development.

SAARC vs BIMSTEC: The Debate

When comparing these two regional entities, one must keep in mind that these are not antithetical concepts. Both the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) pride themselves on being regional saviours for South Asia and the Bay of Bengal, respectively. However, as stated earlier in the introductory section, most countries in South Asia are members of both organisations. However, their efficacy can be measured based on several comparative factors.

Experts have claimed that BIMSTEC was created as a more effective alternative to address SAARC's supposed shortcomings and as a potential successor to SAARC (Rahaman, 2024a). And according to the findings of Bhowmik and Basu (2020), BIMSTEC prioritises the inclusion of smaller nations through their incorporation into the areas of cooperation such as technology, agriculture, trade and investments, climate change, and food security. This finding has been validated by Shishir and Sakib (2023; p 625). BIMSTEC offers more opportunities to smaller countries than its South Asian counterpart, SAARC, by assigning greater responsibilities. So, when the comparison is based on which regional organisation gives more importance to the significantly less dominant members, BIMSTEC stands taller.

The preference of India as the region's dominant power:

The Indian question is highly relevant to the SAARC vs BIMSTEC debate, given that South Asia is indeed undeniably an India-dominant region, especially given its sheer size (Kibria, 2023a). The research by Shishir and Sakib (2023) emphasises India's role as the dominant actor in both SAARC and BIMSTEC, where the country pursues its national interests rather than fostering regional cooperation. And given India's geopolitical rivalry with Pakistan, the country prefers pursuing regional cooperation through BIMSTEC rather than strengthening South Asian regionalism through SAARC.

Professor Delwar Hossain asserts that there are no alternatives to SAARC in the context of South Asian regionalism (D. Hossain, personal communication, 29 January 2025). However, given SAARC's glaring ineptitude, the region's countries must pursue other avenues. ASM Tareq Hassan Semul explained that in the modern era of geopolitics, countries are eager to join as many bilateral, plurilateral, and multilateral organisations as they can, especially India, which pursues an Act East Policy for proliferating its foreign relations (A. S. M. T. H. Semul, personal communication, 26 January 2025). So it only makes sense that India would prioritise BIMSTEC, as it includes members of Southeast Asian countries.

Syed Raiyan Amir, Research Associate at the Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA), described how India is balancing its relationship with both the Tatmadaw in Myanmar and political representatives of the Arakan Army in Rakhine, who are mavericks for Rakhine's autonomy. This showcases Indian prudence in the face of geopolitical challenges. Mr. Amir also mentions that India is more cordial to South Asian countries that favour BIMSTEC over SAARC (S. R. Amir, personal communication, 4 February 2025). This statement aligns with the findings of Shishir and Sakib (2023), who posit India's obvious bias toward Southeast Asia, as well as with the literature by Mukherjee (2023), which describes the importance India is placing on BIMSTEC.

Mohammad Aynul Islam explains how India's pursuit of regional dominance is hampering SAARC's growth. He factors in the India-Pakistan rivalry, India's hegemonic ambitions, and India's blatant disregard for South Asian regionalism as crucial factors driving the SAARC vs BIMSTEC debate. According to this academic, India's preference for BIMSTEC over SAARC is hindering regional integration (M. A. Islam, personal communication, 16 February 2025).

Dr. Nurul Huda Sakib, Professor, Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, reverberates Professor Islam's claim of Indian hegemonic tendencies in the South Asia/Bay of Bengal equation. According to him, what India wants is to reduce Chinese influence in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and even Afghanistan. India naturally gravitates towards BIMSTEC, given that the platform does not include Pakistan. Moreover, India is gradually aiming to attract a stronger market in Southeast Asia. Both the government and the Indian academic arena prefer BIMSTEC over SAARC solely because it better serves the country's political interests (N. H. Sakib, personal communication, 23 February 2025).

As expert opinion suggests, the India factor is crucial in the roadmap to regional cohesion. Choosing BIMSTEC over SAARC is redundant for South Asia, given that two critical and relevant South Asian members are absent from the Bay of Bengal grouping: Afghanistan and Pakistan. Dr. Nurul Huda Sakib explains that Pakistan will not sit idly while India excludes it, rather isolates it from regional cooperation frameworks (N. H. Sakib, personal communication, 23 February 2025). Dr. Sakib recommends inclusiveness for all members in SAARC.

What Might be the Better Framework for South Asian Regional Cohesion: SAARC or BIMSTEC?

We begin this section by sharing the bar chart version of the expert opinion. The chart has been generated based on an interpretation of their opinions.

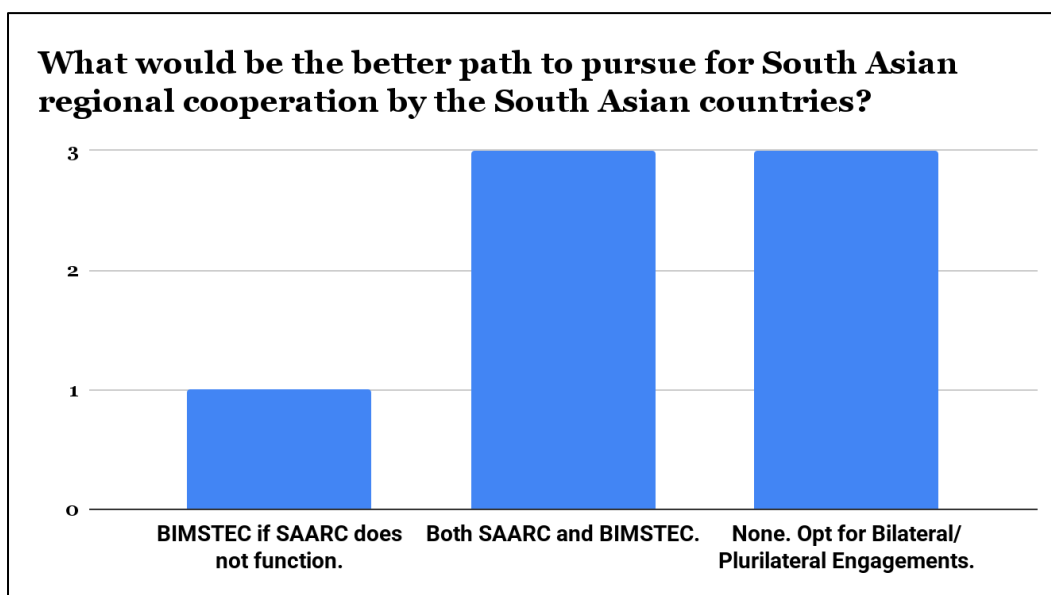


Figure 3: Interviewee Responses to the question “What would be the better path to pursue for South Asian regional cooperation by the South Asian countries?”

7 individuals were interviewed to provide their views on the SAARC vs BIMSTEC debate. 3 (42.9%) preferred pursuing both organisations for South Asian growth and integration, 3 (42.9%) preferred pursuing none, focusing on bilateral/plurilateral engagements, and only 1 preferred BIMSTEC if SAARC could not be revitalised. This is discussed in detail below.

As mentioned previously, both SAARC and BIMSTEC hold immense potential to foster growth and development for their members. However, according to certain literature, BIMSTEC might have greater potential to contribute to the regional cooperation aspirations of the South Asian members of that organisation (Shishir & Sakib, 2023, p. 625). Professor Dr. Delwar Hossain, who has dubbed SAARC as non-comparable and irreplaceable to facilitate

South Asian regionalism, is, however, cognizant of SAARC's stagnation. Professor Hossain advocates pursuing both regional cooperation mechanisms, as both organisations deliver crucial outcomes for their respective members (D. Hossain, personal communication, 29 January 2025).

ASM Tarek Hassan Semul follows the same logical direction as Professor Hossain and suggests that the countries of South Asia pursue both organisations, given that both SAARC and BIMSTEC have the potential to complement each other's functions. This, as a result, will maximise the corporeal growth for South Asia.

Mohammad Aynul Islam also advocates pursuing both organisations for South Asian countries with common membership. Both organisations have the potential to provide tangible benefits to their members, with SAARC able to address the needs of South Asian countries (M. A. Islam, personal communication, 16 February 2025).

Dr. Nurul Huda Sakib pragmatically advocated hedging between the two organisations. Dr. Sakib recommends the findings of his paper (Shishir & Sakib, 2023), which suggest that BIMSTEC has greater opportunities to offer to smaller nations such as Bangladesh.

However, for Dr. Sakib, this choice is more nuanced than a mere binary response. The academic suggests that countries pursue whatever tangible benefits they receive, be it from SAARC or BIMSTEC (N. H. Sakib, personal communication, 23 February 2025).

When Alimul Razib, a political analyst and freelance writer, was asked which organisation had better functions and outcomes between SAARC and BIMSTEC, he referred exclusively to the economies of India and Bangladesh, whose revenue generation for growth and development comes from countries outside. Mr. Razib's focus was on the tangible economic benefits provided by the two platforms. He harkens back to the time when these platforms were created to foster economic growth and development in both South Asia and the Bay of Bengal region. However, their present realities are far different from their initial visions. And given that countries such as India and Bangladesh have better markets for growth outside their region, he would prefer none of these platforms and asked the countries to prefer bilateral engagements instead (A. Razib, personal communication, 02 February 2025).

Farhan Sarwar, a young graduate from the Department of International Relations at Jahangirnagar University, did not have a specific preference when asked. Mr. Sarwar referred to the platforms as exclusive to "talking shop" rather than producing anything tangible. The

young scholar advises the countries of South Asia to opt for more pronounced bilateral engagements, similar to Mr. Razib (F. Sarwar, personal communication, 12 February 2025).

On a similar note, Syed Raiyan Amir advocates for a separate economic cooperation framework for South Asian countries to materialise and sustain economic growth and integration. The scholar does not see potential in either SAARC or BIMSTEC, given their current state of inertness (S. R. Amir, personal communication, 4 February 2025).

There is hope amongst the majority of experts for a future where both SAARC and BIMSTEC may be functioning well. However, some of the interviewees were less than optimistic about both SAARC and BIMSTEC, recommending either bilateral or multilateral agreements, or an exclusive economic framework devoid of all other political and social factors, between South Asian countries.

BIMSTEC vs SAARC: Its Implications For Bangladesh

The idea of SAARC originated in Bangladesh, where the need for South Asian cooperation was widely recognized. According to Bhattacharjee (2023), SAARC is a Cold War relic that may not be able to fulfil the promises it once made.

However, Bangladesh is quite hopeful of SAARC revitalisation, as it is the mother country of this regional organisation, seeking to foster cooperation and cohesion. Despite the organisation being a fruit of the then-Zia-led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), SAARC, as an entity, enjoys unanimous support from all political parties in Bangladesh.

The purpose of this section is to identify which organisation yields significantly more tangible results for countries that are members of both entities, specifically Bangladesh. For instance, according to an earlier study by Kaul (2006), SAARC, as a regional organisation, does succeed in representing South Asian nations as a collective voice; however, its success has been less than ideal. In comparison, BIMSTEC, comprising only five South Asian and two Southeast Asian countries, has been more successful than SAARC in fostering regional cooperation and integration, despite being a relatively newer organisation.

According to Basu and Ghosh (2020, p. 11), instead of selecting between SAARC and BIMSTEC, the two organisations may complement each other's progress and foster inter-organisational cooperation. This sentiment was shared by Professor Dr. Delawar Hossain, Professor Mohammad Aynul Islam, and ASM Tarek Hassan Semul in the previous section. Their rhetoric explained how choosing one organisation between the two is critically redundant.

When asked about a hypothetical scenario in which Bangladesh would have to choose between SAARC and BIMSTEC to further its national interests in economic growth, development, trade, and investment, Professor Dr. Delwar Hossain explained that both SAARC and BIMSTEC have their own validity, merits, and successes. The scholar had spoken highly of BIMSTEC's efforts to address a range of sectors, including energy, infrastructure, natural disasters, and climate change. However, Professor Hossain emphasised SAARC's ability to deliver collective success for South Asia as a region, stressing that BIMSTEC, as successful as it may have been, is not a South Asian intra-regional entity; it is a "sub-regional/interregional one". (D. Hossain, personal communication, 29 January 2025).

Dr. Nurul Huda Sakib was asked whether Bangladesh should proceed with reviving SAARC, or if it should go forward with BIMSTEC, given that its process has not been hindered or halted by the India-Pakistan contentions. Dr. Huda suggests going forward with whatever brings tangible benefits for Bangladesh. Be it SAARC or BIMSTEC, Bangladesh should pursue whatever assists the country's economic development and growth (N. H. Sakib, personal communication, 23 February 2025).

Farhan Sarwar suggests that, for growth and development, Bangladesh should pursue and focus more on its bilateral relations, which drive most of Bangladesh's growth, especially through the receipt of foreign reserves (F. Sarwar, personal communication, 12 February 2025).

The sentiment was echoed by Anowarul Azim, a fellow International Relations Graduate from Jahangirnagar University, who emphasised the need to focus on bilateral engagements rather than regional organisational platforms (A. Azim, personal communication, 12 February 2025).

The government's position on the SAARC vs BIMSTEC debate aligns with that of Academia. The Bangladesh government had emphasised the need for both SAARC and BIMSTEC to foster regional cooperation. Ambassador Md. Jashim Uddin, Foreign Secretary of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, stated that both SAARC and BIMSTEC are equally important for engendering cooperation among their respective member states (Uddin, 2025, "ASEAN-Bangladesh Relationship: A Way Forward," Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Dhaka). Given Bangladesh's membership in both organisations, the government's position is to prioritise Bangladesh's participation in both organisations equally to ensure the country reaps the full benefits of any multilateral institution it is part of. Even the BIMSTEC Secretary General, Indra Mani Pandey (at the time of this

research), stated that SAARC and BIMSTEC are not contradictory but rather complementary to each other's vision and goals (BSS, 2025).

The choice of Bangladesh's people: Choosing between SAARC and BIMSTEC

The research incorporated a structured general survey to highlight the opinions of the people of Bangladesh in political and international affairs.

In the general survey, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement: "SAARC would be a better regional cooperation organisation for South Asian countries (especially Bangladesh) than BIMSTEC."

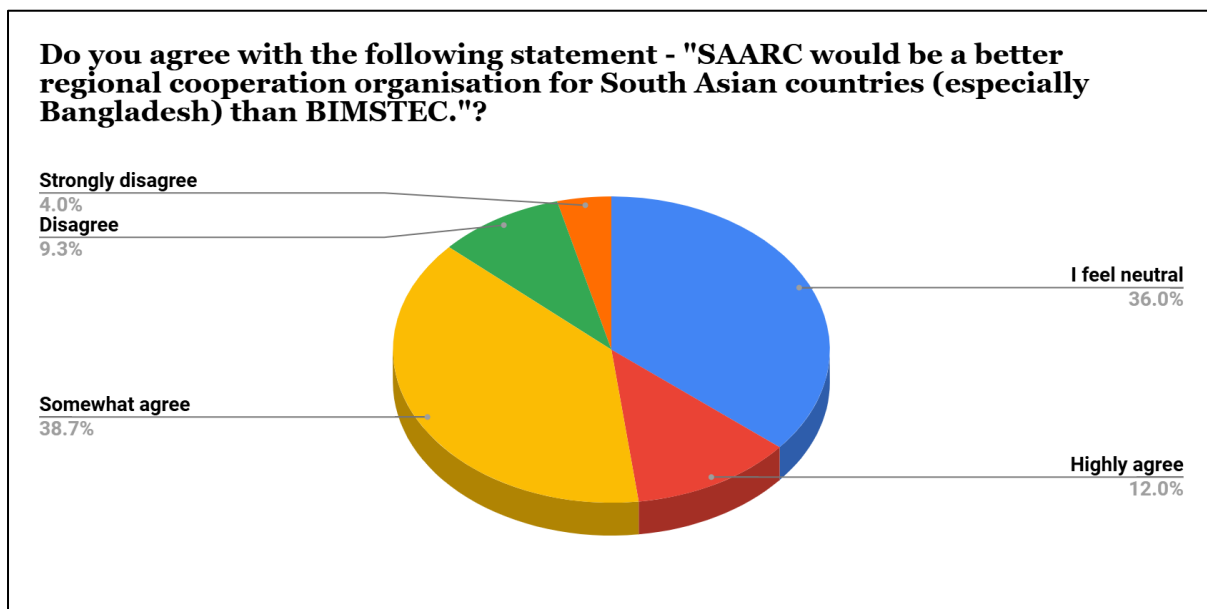


Figure 4: Survey Responses to the question "Do you agree with the following statement - "SAARC would be a better regional cooperation organization for South Asian countries (especially Bangladesh) than BIMSTEC."?"

Out of the 150, 58 (38.7%) responded that they somewhat agreed with the statement. 54 (36%) responded that they felt neutral about the statement, 18 (12%) strongly agreed, 14 (9.3%) disagreed, and 6 (4%) strongly disagreed. The findings suggest that the majority opinion is mildly in favor of SAARC over BIMSTEC for Bangladesh, while the second-largest group is neutral in choosing between the two organisations.

For the second question, the respondents were asked if they agreed with the following statement: "BIMSTEC would be a better regional cooperation organisation for South Asian Countries (Especially Bangladesh), as an alternative to SAARC."?

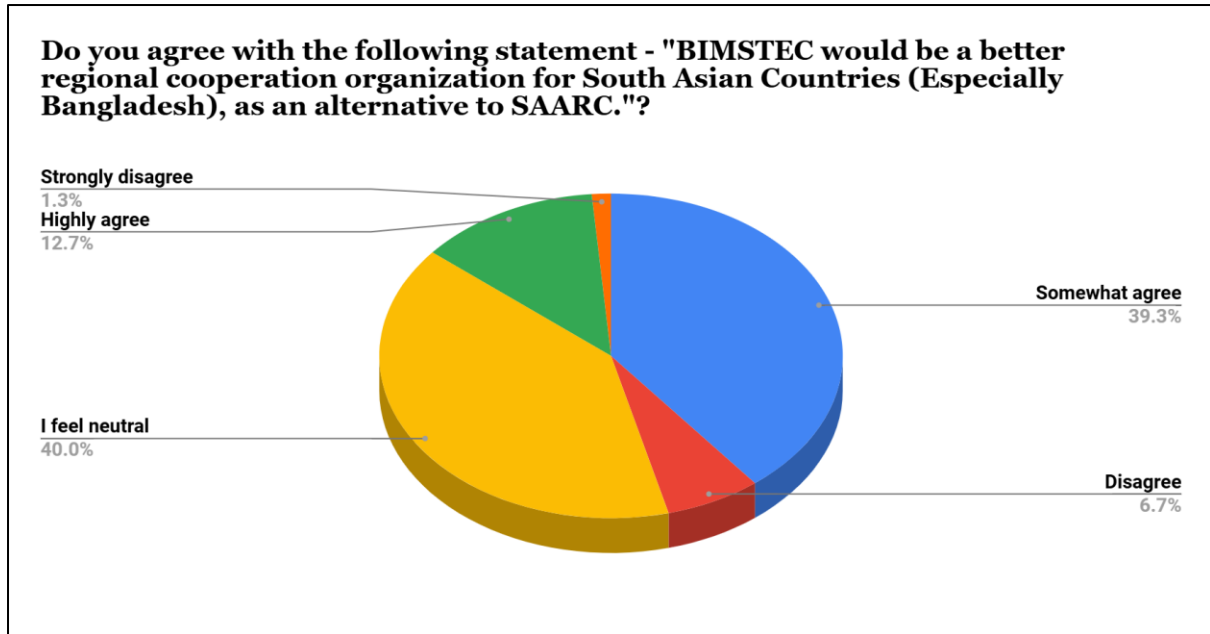


Figure 5: Survey Responses to the question “Do you agree with the following statement - "BIMSTEC would be a better regional cooperation organization for Bangladesh, as an alternative to SAARC."?”

When asked the alternate question of whether BIMSTEC would be a more efficient regional cooperation vehicle for South Asia in comparison to SAARC, out of the same 150 respondents, 60 (40%) expressed that they felt neutral, 59 (39.3%) said that they somewhat agreed, 19 (12.7%) expressed that they highly agreed, 10 (6.7%) disagreed, and a sliver of 2 (1.3%) strongly disagreed. The survey reveals that most Bangladeshis felt neutral about BIMSTEC as an alternative to SAARC for Bangladesh, while the second-largest group agreed mildly.

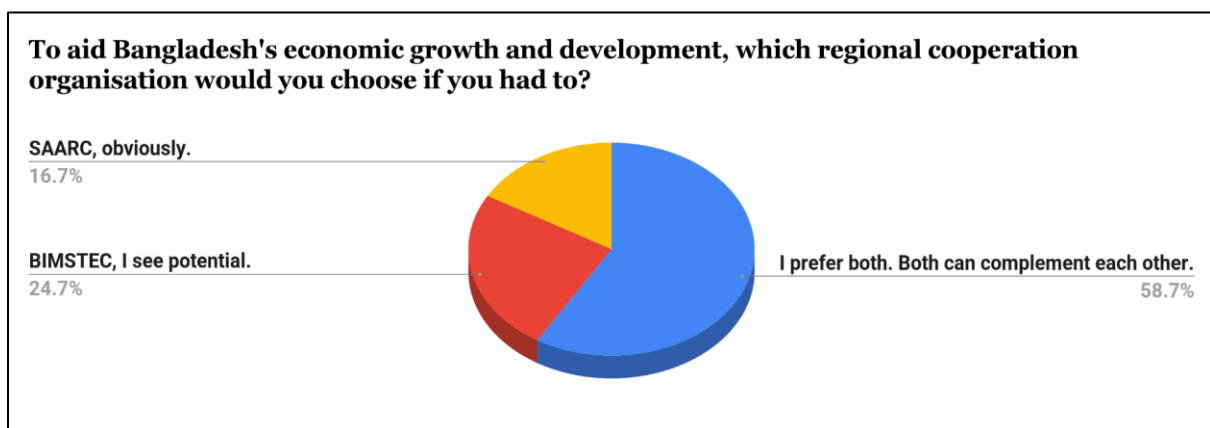


Figure 6: Survey Responses to the question “To aid Bangladesh's economic growth and development, which regional cooperation organisation would you choose if you had to?”

When asked to choose between SAARC and BIMSTEC to determine which regional organisation would deliver significantly more tangible growth and development results for Bangladesh, 88 (58.7%) preferred pursuing both organisations. 37 (24.7%) saw more potential in BIMSTEC, and 25 (16.7%) saw potential in SAARC, despite its evident stagnation.

The findings suggest that, despite being given a choice between SAARC and BIMSTEC, the respondents recommend that Bangladesh pursue both organisations rather than choose between the two. Given that there is much to gain for the country from both institutions, it would be wise to derive tangible benefits from them.

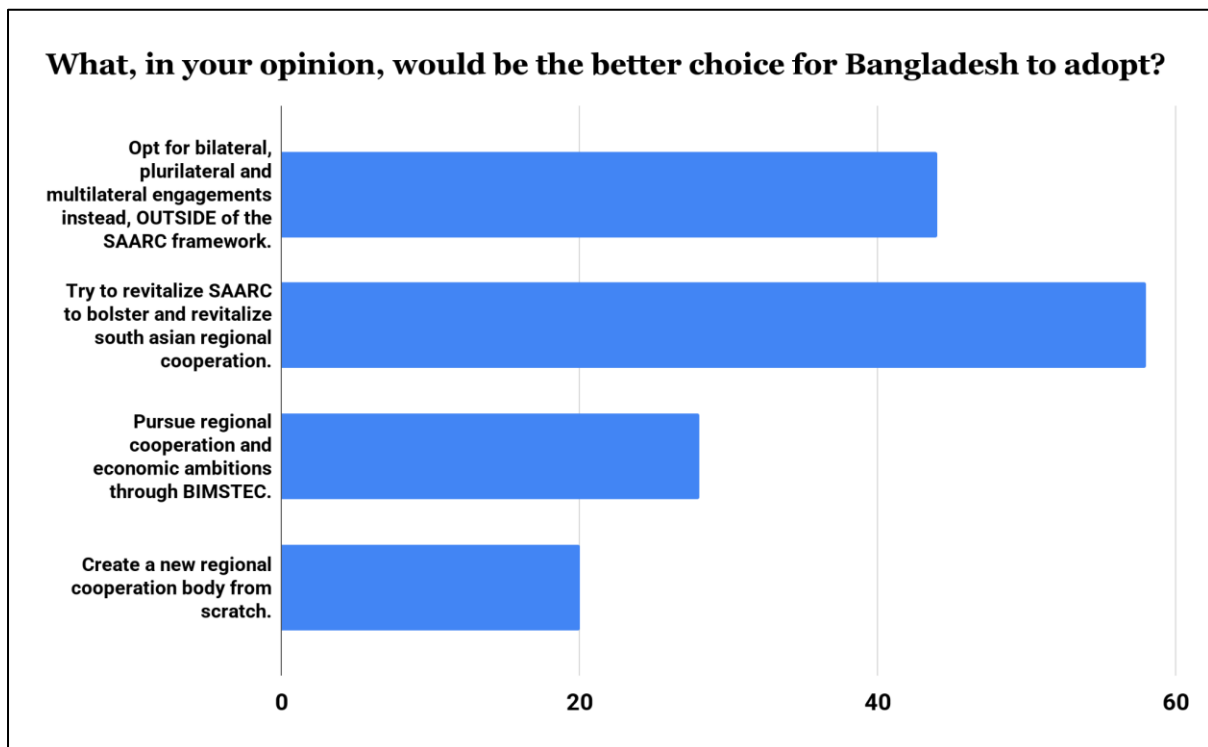


Figure 7: Survey Responses to the question “What, in your opinion, would be the better choice for Bangladesh to adopt?”

Lastly, the respondents were asked to choose among different alternatives regarding what, in their opinion, would be the better choice for Bangladesh to adopt to promote regional economic and developmental cohesion. 58 (38.7%) advocated revitalising SAARC to rejuvenate South Asian regional cooperation, while 44 (27.3%) suggested that Bangladesh pursue alternative bilateral, plurilateral, and multilateral engagements outside the SAARC framework. 28 (18.7%) advocated that Bangladesh pursue regional cooperation and economic ambitions through BIMSTEC, and 20 (13.3%) suggested that Bangladesh advocate for an entirely new regional organisation catering to South Asia.

To sum up, the general survey yielded very lukewarm results in favour of either SAARC or BIMSTEC as the organisation that would deliver greater development and tangible results for Bangladesh. The respondents, however, were predominantly in favour of reviving SAARC as the sole regional entity dedicated to South Asian development, while safeguarding and evolving bilateral engagements ranked a close second. Additionally, when asked to choose between SAARC and BIMSTEC, the respondents advocated pursuing Bangladesh's development goals through both organisations.

Based on assessments from available secondary literature and expert opinions from interviews, it is safe to assume that the academic arena in Bangladesh, as well as the governmental sphere, sees merit in both SAARC and BIMSTEC. The findings suggest that SAARC, as an intergovernmental institution exclusive to South Asia, is of equal importance to the region, while BIMSTEC, as a sub-regional organisation, is both important to the region and specific to Bangladesh. The two organisations are being prioritised equally, without preference for one over the other. South Asian social and economic integration is pursued through SAARC, while connectivity infrastructure is pursued through BIMSTEC. Additionally, both organisations have plans and ambitions to facilitate energy trade and to create a regional energy framework, which is of critical importance to Bangladesh. As with any sagacious foreign policy approach, as prescribed by ASM Tarek Hassan Semul, a nation must be willing to maintain affiliation with any and every regional and interregional association as long as it provides tangible benefits. So, in conclusion, instead of adding to the debate over SAARC vs BIMSTEC, we must advocate pursuing both for nations as dynamic as Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

This study takes on the responsibility to discuss the genesis, success, and evident shortcomings of both SAARC and BIMSTEC as regional organisations in South and Southeast Asia, respectively. The discussion of their successes and failures eventually led to a comparative analysis of the two organisations based on their achievements and potential for real-world efficacy, while also discussing the way forward for both. To validate the discussion, the study incorporates expert opinions from primary key informants, which are further validated using existing literature and information, including a general survey of what the public, especially participants with academic pedigrees in political science, international relations, and other related disciplines, expect from such regional entities. The aim was to explore whether there was overt support for one organisation over another, or if the respondents had faith in the complementarity aspect of the two entities.

It should be clarified that for South Asian regionalism, there are no alternatives to SAARC. While BIMSTEC follows similar principles and values to SAARC and has been attempting to fill the regional void left by SAARC, its core region of focus is the Bay of Bengal. The discussion engages in an objective comparative analysis based on the successes and shortcomings of the two regional institutions. The study concludes that both organisations are equally important and influential within the regions they encompass. The findings of the study advocate not to choose one organisation over another, for instance, to choose SAARC over BIMSTEC, given that the former caters exclusively to South Asia, but to explore the nature of complementarity between the two organisations, and to participate on both platforms equally to extract adequate concessions. In the modern era of geopolitics, countries should join as many regional organisations as possible, as these platforms provide them with opportunities to engage, interact, and gain benefits. This is a philosophy that South Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh, must pursue with utmost vigor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The researchers express their gratitude to the experts who contributed to the research by providing valuable insights about the study's subject. The researchers also express gratitude to those who have participated in the study's survey.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

FUNDING STATEMENT

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

An ethics approval was not required for the conduct of this study.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Participants provided verbal consent to participate in the study for both the interviews and the survey.

CONSENT TO PUBLISH

Participants provided verbal consent for their responses to be published as part of an academic study for the interviews and the survey.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The survey data collected for the research have not been included in the manuscript, as they contain vital information about the respondents, including names and affiliated institutions. However, if necessary, we will provide the data we collected.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, A. (2025). *Regional reverberations: The Pahalgam attack and its impact on South Asia's security landscape*. Australian Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/regional-reverberations-the-pahalgam-attack-and-its-impact-on-south-asias-security-landscape/> (Accessed February 13, 2025).
- Ahmed, K. U. (2018, September 7). BIMSTEC summit silent on Rohingya crisis. *The Financial Express*. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/bimstec-summit-silent-on-rohingya-crisis-1535814947> (Accessed March 15, 2025).
- Basu, P., & Ghosh, N. (2020). *Breathing new life into BIMSTEC: Challenges and imperatives* (ORF Occasional Paper No. 243). Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/breathing-new-life-into-bimstec-challenges-and-imperatives> (Accessed April 20, 2025).
- BIMSTEC. (n.d.a). *Connectivity*. <https://bimstec.org/connectivity> (Accessed May 10, 2025).
- BIMSTEC. (n.d.b). *History*. <https://bimstec.org/history> (Accessed June 5, 2025).
- BIMSTEC. (n.d.c). *Sub-Group on the Cooperation on Countering Radicalization and Terrorism*. <https://bimstec.org/sub-group-on-the-cooperation-on-countering-radicalization-and-terrorism> (Accessed July 22, 2025).
- BIMSTEC. (n.d.d). *Trade, investment and development*. <https://bimstec.org/trade-investment-and-development> (Accessed August 18, 2025).
- BIMSTEC. (2022, March 30). *The charter of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation*. <https://bimstec.org/charter> (Accessed September 12, 2025).
- BSS (2025, February 11). BIMSTEC & SAARC have no conflicting interests: Secretary General. *BSS News*. <https://www.bssnews.net/news/245587> (Accessed October 7, 2025).
- Charter of the SAARC Development Fund (SDF). (2010). <http://www.saarc-sec.org/index.php/resources/agreements-conventions/38-charter-of-the-saarc-development-fund-sdf/file> (Accessed November 3, 2025).
- Chowdhury, U. (2024, July 29). Bangladesh and the creation of SAARC. *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/361267/bangladesh-and-the-creation-of-saarc> (Accessed December 28, 2025).
- EEAS (2021). South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). *European External Action Service*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/south-asian-association-regional-cooperation-saarc_en (Accessed February 13, 2025).
- Glania, G., & Matthes, J. (2005). *Multilateralism or regionalism? Trade policy options for the European Union*. Centre for European Policy Studies.

- https://aei.pitt.edu/32590/1/29_Multilateralism_or_Regionalism.pdf (Accessed May 13, 2025).
- Grid Interconnection Coordination Committee. (n.d.). *The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation*. <https://bimstec.org/grid-interconnection-coordination-committee> (Accessed March 15, 2025).
- Hashim, D. A., & Razzaque, M. A. (2016). *Revisiting South Asian integration: Trade flows and implied distances between members* (International Trade Working Paper 2016/11). Commonwealth Secretariat. <https://www.thecommonwealth-library.org/index.php/comsec/catalog/download/193/190/1511?inline=1> (Accessed June 20, 2025).
- Hazra, A. (2024). Could BIMSTEC be the answer to the Myanmar question? *Lowy Institute*. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/could-bimstec-be-answer-myanmar-question> (Accessed May 10, 2025).
- Hosain, M. M., & Karim, M. E. (2023). A research guide on the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). *GlobaLex*. <https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/saarc1.html> (Accessed May 5, 2025).
- Kathuria, S., & Mathur, P. (2018). South Asia: A work in progress. In S. Kathuria (Ed.), *A glass half full: The promise of regional trade in South Asia* (pp. 27–86). World Bank.
- Kibria, A. (2023a). Making SAARC functional. *The Financial Express*. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/columns/making-saarc-functional> (Accessed July 22, 2025).
- Kibria, A. (2023b). Can SAFTA impasse be ended? *The Financial Express*. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/columns/can-safta-impasse-be-ended> (Accessed August 18, 2025).
- Money Control. (2024, October 14). “SAARC stalled due to cross-border terrorism ...”: Jaishankar's veiled dig ahead of Pakistan visit. *Money Control*. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/saarc-stalled-due-to-cross-border-terrorism-jaishankars-veiled-dig-ahead-of-pakistan-visit-12836552.html> (Accessed September 12, 2025).
- Muzaffar, M., Jathol, I., & Yaseen, Z. (2017). SAARC: An evaluation of its achievements, failures, and compulsion for cooperation. *Global Political Review*, 2(1), 36–45. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2017\(II-I\).04](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2017(II-I).04)
- Rahaman, M. M. (2024a). BIMSTEC and regional prosperity. *The Financial Express*. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/opinions/bimstec-and-regional-prosperity> (Accessed October 7, 2025).
- Rahaman, M. M. (2024b). Is BIMSTEC failing? *The Financial Express*. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/opinions/is-bimstec-failing> (Accessed November 3, 2025).
- Rahim, A et al. (2023). Role of SAARC during COVID-19 pandemic, its success and failure: A critical analysis. *Russian Law Journal*, 6(6).

<https://www.russianlawjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/download/3514/2224/4117> (Accessed November 28, 2025).

Roy, A. (2017). *BIMSTEC and climate change: Setting a common agenda* (Issue Brief No. 203). Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/bimstec-climate-change-setting-common-agenda/> (Accessed February 13, 2025).

SAARC. (n.d.). *SAARC agenda for culture*. <https://saarcculture.org/saarc-agenda-for-culture/> (Accessed March 15, 2025).

Shishir, M., & Sakib, N. H. (2023). How interests and ideas of a dominant actor make a big difference: Analyzing India's role in SAARC and BIMSTEC. *The Chinese Political Science Review*, 8, 618–640. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-022-00230-8>.

The Charter of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. (2022, March 30). <https://bimstec.org/charter> (Accessed March 13, 2025).

United States Energy Association. (n.d.). *South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy Integration (SARI/EI)*. <https://usea.org/regional-partnerships/south-asia-regional-initiative-energy-integration-sariei> (Accessed June 20, 2025).

Xavier, C. (2018). *Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Toward a stronger BIMSTEC*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_325_Xavier_Bay_of_Bengal_INLINE.pdf (Accessed May 10, 2025).