

HOW BIMSTEC CAN DELIVER A REGIONAL HADR FRAMEWORK BY LEARNING FROM SAARC'S FAILURES

by

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In March 2025, Myanmar was struck by a 7.7 magnitude earthquake, the effects of which were felt even in neighboring Thailand, altogether affecting over [17 million](#) individuals. Notably, while countries like [India](#) and collective disaster management mechanisms under the aegis of [Quad](#) and [ASEAN](#) mobilized aid, [BIMSTEC](#) had no boots on ground. Given that BIMSTEC has spent the past several years focusing on disaster management, the disjunction between its expressed intent and action underscored the absence of its HADR framework in a region that is among the world's most disaster-prone.

The Bay of Bengal (BoB) region is among the most [vulnerable](#) geographies in the world, with BIMSTEC member-states, Myanmar and India, featuring among the top ten countries [most affected](#) by climate risks in the world. BIMSTEC, the premier multilateral organization catering to the spatial imagination of the BoB, is an ideal platform to take on the mantle of developing a concerted regional HADR architecture.

For years, BIMSTEC has deliberated upon developing a regional HADR mechanism, with counterparts of member-states having come together to discuss it at various settings. It has convened HADR exercises in [2017](#), [2020](#) and [2021](#), and most recently, a virtual one in July [2025](#). Earlier this year, the BIMSTEC Guidelines for Maritime Component of HADR was [finalized](#). Furthermore, in the sixth BIMSTEC summit, held in Thailand in April 2025, a BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence for Disaster Management was [proposed](#), which would dedicate itself to fortifying the region from disasters. Nevertheless, more is needed to ensure that BIMSTEC's HADR framework does not merely remain confined to workshops and table-top exercises, but actually translates into constructive presence during crises.

SAARC: A Cautionary Tale for BIMSTEC

To build a robust HADR architecture, BIMSTEC would do well to draw lessons from similar regional frameworks. Here it is imperative to note that regional disaster cooperation in the region, particularly in South Asia, has always been reactionary. For instance, following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) developed a [Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management](#) (SDM) in 2006. Then, the [2010](#) Pakistan floods acted as the stimulus for the 2011 [SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters](#). A reactionary approach has also meant that, in the absence of natural calamities, SAARC's frameworks have been afflicted by a lack of momentum, best evidenced by the lapse of the SDM, which had outlined priorities from [2006 to 2015](#), but has not been renewed since.

To be sure, SAARC did take some steps in the right direction. Previously, disaster management efforts used to be [coordinated](#) between four centers spread across New Delhi, Dhaka, Thimphu, and Male. Recognizing that such a fragmented structure was hindering cooperation and would prove especially onerous during emergencies, the centers were consolidated into a single entity under the good offices of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC), but [relocated](#) to the Indian state of Gujarat in 2016. While this overhaul bestowed a modicum of structure and the re-established SDMC went on to host a few [capacity-building](#) exercises, these have not translated into substantial real-time wins. This is principally due to a dearth of vision, leadership, and political will among member-states, arguably stemming from inter-state rivalries and the broader failures of South Asia's regional integration process—shortcomings that BIMSTEC should guard against.

In addition to these familiar impediments, the SDMC, as a [Brookings report](#) identifies, has been “negatively influenced by the hyperactivity of ASEAN to the East”. Indeed, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) is an exemplary regional framework, but the SDMC borrowed many elements from Southeast Asia's



disaster risk management playbook instead of configuring a structure for its own regional context.

Since AADMER's adoption in 2005 and enforcement in 2009, it has been mobilized time and again during crises, including the recent [Myanmar](#) earthquake. Crucially, then, BIMSTEC should adopt best practices from the 'One ASEAN, One Response' model, while also tailoring them for the BoB region to avoid mimicking SAARC. AADMER's operationalization through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance ([AHA Centre](#)) and the Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN ([DELSA](#)) can guide BIMSTEC's own HADR architecture.

India Should Champion the BIMSTEC HADR Cause

As the Indian economy grew, HADR assumed a central position in its foreign policy outreach, with India emerging as the '[First Responder](#)' after nearly every major crisis in both its immediate and extended neighborhood. Most recently, India launched [Operation Brahma](#), mobilizing ships and aircrafts to dispatch essential supplies along with Search and Rescue specialists.

India's efforts, however, have been at a bilateral level. As the region's biggest political and economic power, New Delhi has both the heft and responsibility to push BIMSTEC towards institutionalizing a disaster relief mechanism. This is especially as no SAARC or BIMSTEC contingent has ever been [deployed](#) in South Asia—a fact that stood out glaringly during the 2015 Nepal earthquake, when India's large-scale relief [operation](#) (codenamed Operation Maitri) ironically spotlighted the absence of any effective regional mechanisms. BIMSTEC, unlike SAARC, has two major powers (India and Thailand) capable of steering this institutionalization. This is an advantageous element, considering no single country alone has the expertise to lead a regional project of this scale.

Contrary to SAARC, BIMSTEC carries no India-Pakistan baggage and is today entrenched in the political consciousness of New Delhi's leadership. The oft-cited evidence of this is Indian Prime Minister Modi inviting BIMSTEC leaders to his [2019](#)

swearing-in, diverging from his [2014](#) inauguration when SAARC nations had been invited. An equally revealing aspect is the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) manifestos. Only SAARC and ASEAN were mentioned in the BJP's [2014](#) manifesto, but as India-Pakistan relations deteriorated, its [2019](#) manifesto touted BIMSTEC as a vehicle for deepening multilateral cooperation. Its [2024](#) manifesto, however, makes no reference to either, but instead highlights the 'Neighbourhood First Policy' and promotes the image of 'First Responder Bharat' through HADR operations.

Therefore, while all BIMSTEC members stand to lose should the grouping fail to take off—especially since most of them are also part of the now-dormant SAARC—India arguably has more at stake because of the political pressure to make the organization a resounding success. HADR, in this case, is a low-hanging fruit waiting to be plucked. For India, leveraging regional disaster management frameworks serves two purposes.

First, multilateral efforts would complement its bilateral assistance, and dilute the risk of criticisms that may accompany India's bilateral operations. The latter was seen during Op Maitri, when India's swift response, albeit appreciated by Nepal, was [undermined](#) by its media's insensitive reporting and came to be viewed as a public relations exercise by the Indian government. Responding through a collective mechanism would shield New Delhi from being cast as the 'big brother' by its smaller neighbors and make its aid more palatable to countries it has fraught relations with. Second, championing HADR within BIMSTEC could buttress India's regional and global leadership credentials.

Symbolically, India is best placed to take the lead, given it already heads BIMSTEC's [security vertical](#) under which disaster management is a sub-sector. True to its role, India has hosted the four aforementioned HADR exercises, but organizing these more frequently could build rapport between the National Disaster Management Authorities of BIMSTEC members, serving as a confidence-building measure. Additionally, besides proposing the Centre

of Excellence for Disaster Management, India already [hosts](#) the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate.

However, more needs to be done. So far, HADR efforts in the region have primarily been reactionary but [pre-crisis preparedness](#) will go a long way in mitigating the adverse impacts of a disaster. Disaster preparedness in the BoB region ought to be hinged on the fact that since disasters do not adhere to the concept of borders, response to them should also be transboundary in nature.

Beyond being the need of the hour, streamlining HADR is crucial for BIMSTEC to remain relevant and avoid sharing SAARC's fate. Given the pressing nature of climate change in the Bay, HADR remains a convenient, politically-safe vertical for cooperation, offering even countries with divergences a reliable channel of communication. Last but not least, as BIMSTEC wrestles to throw off the yoke of inertia, a credible HADR architecture could provide the means to chart a more hopeful trajectory for itself.

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