

Narendra Modi in Bangkok: Reinforcing India's 'Act East' Policy

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Summary

In elevating India's bilateral ties with Thailand to a strategic level and giving a fresh impetus to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation forum, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangkok, Thailand, in early April 2025 has helped reinforce India's 'Act East' policy. The visit also saw India engage with the leaders of two important eastern neighbours of India – Myanmar and Bangladesh – that are critical for the success of the 'Act East' policy.

Although Southeast Asia has been a major priority for Indian foreign policy in the last three decades, New Delhi's strategic attention has not been focused equally on all key countries in the region. Thailand is right next door to India and the two countries are bound by deep, historic and civilisational ties. Yet, Bangkok never acquired the strategic prominence it deserves in New Delhi's foreign policy map.

Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and, more recently, the Philippines have dominated India's mind space on Southeast Asia. Thailand is the second largest economy in Southeast Asia but is only the fourth largest trading partner for India. That has begun to change, though. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's brief sojourn in Bangkok in early April 2025 to attend the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit also had a bilateral element.

Modi's bilateral talks with Thailand Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra are the first bilateral engagement between the two leaders in more than a decade and has helped consolidate the efforts in the last few years in advancing bilateral ties between New Delhi and Bangkok. Addressing the media after the talks with Shinawatra, [Modi said](#) "Thailand holds a special place in India's 'Act East' policy and the Indo-Pacific vision. Today, we have decided to strengthen our ties into a strategic partnership. Also, we discussed establishing a 'Strategic Dialogue' between our security agencies."

The [joint declaration](#) on strategic partnership puts special emphasis on expanding defence cooperation, particularly in the areas of "defence technology, defence industry, research, training, exchanges, exercises and capacity building". It also highlights the establishment of a dialogue between the national security councils of the two countries to "address both traditional and non-traditional security issues such as defence, maritime security, cybersecurity, counter terrorism, law enforcement issues and combating transnational organised crime."

India's deepening bilateral cooperation with Thailand also augurs well for revitalising the BIMSTEC forum that brings together five countries in South Asia (Bhutan, Bangladesh, India,

Nepal and Sri Lanka) and two in the Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand). Launched in 1997, the [performance of the forum](#) had long been underwhelming.

The Modi government had begun to invest new energies into rebooting BIMSTEC after it was clear at the 2014 Kathmandu summit of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) that [Pakistan was not ready](#) for South Asian regional economic integration. While progress at BIMSTEC has been slow, the organisation is not in a stall like the SAARC. There has been a [definitive movement](#) towards greater regional cooperation in the last few years.

India's efforts paved the way for greater institutionalisation of BIMSTEC in the form of a charter and more specific cooperation in a broad range of areas. India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar called for a more [“ambitious perspective”](#) amidst the unfolding churn in global order. The Bangkok summit saw the conclusion of a maritime transport cooperation agreement and the adoption of a vision document for the forum. At the summit, [Modi proposed](#) several new initiatives, including the formation of a BIMSTEC business summit, deeper cooperation on disaster management and a mechanism to convene regular meetings of home ministers.

On the margins of the BIMSTEC summit, Modi met with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing of Myanmar, who thanked India for the assistance under [Operation Brahma](#) in coping with the massive earthquake that has killed thousands and shaken the country already in a deep multi-faceted crisis. Growing instability in Myanmar, marked by an intensifying civil war, threatens to undo the very conception of BIMSTEC as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. Myanmar's increasing international isolation only makes matters worse.

Modi sought to nudge Senior General Min to take steps towards peace and reconciliation. The [Indian prime minister underlined](#) “the importance of early restoration of a democratic process through inclusive and credible elections” and reiterated India's support for a “Myanmar-owned and Myanmar-led” transition towards a peaceful, stable and democratic future. Alluding to the human cost of the ongoing ethnic violence in Myanmar, Modi underlined that there was no military solution to the conflict.

Modi's meeting with Muhammad Yunus, Chief Adviser of the interim government in Bangladesh, is a welcome first step in [defusing the tensions](#) between New Delhi and Dhaka that had escalated since the ouster of then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from power last August. While expressing India's concerns on the violence against the Hindu minority in Bangladesh and the hostile rhetoric emanating from the new government, [Modi emphasised](#) India's desire “to forge a positive and constructive relationship with Bangladesh based on pragmatism”.

Modi also congratulated Bangladesh on assuming the Chair of BIMSTEC and looked forward to “further advancing regional cooperation” under Dhaka's leadership”. Officials accompanying Yunus [told the media](#) that “all issues of mutual interest” were discussed during the talks with Modi and that the long anticipated meeting was “very constructive, productive and fruitful”. New Delhi has a strong incentive to sustain the progress in bilateral

ties built during the Hasina years. It is also aware that without normal ties with Dhaka, there is no way of building BIMSTEC as a credible regional forum.

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