

NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE BBIN* REGION

*BANGLADESH, BHUTAN, INDIA, NEPAL

VIEWS OF INDIAN EXPERTS

**SURVEY REPORT
2022**

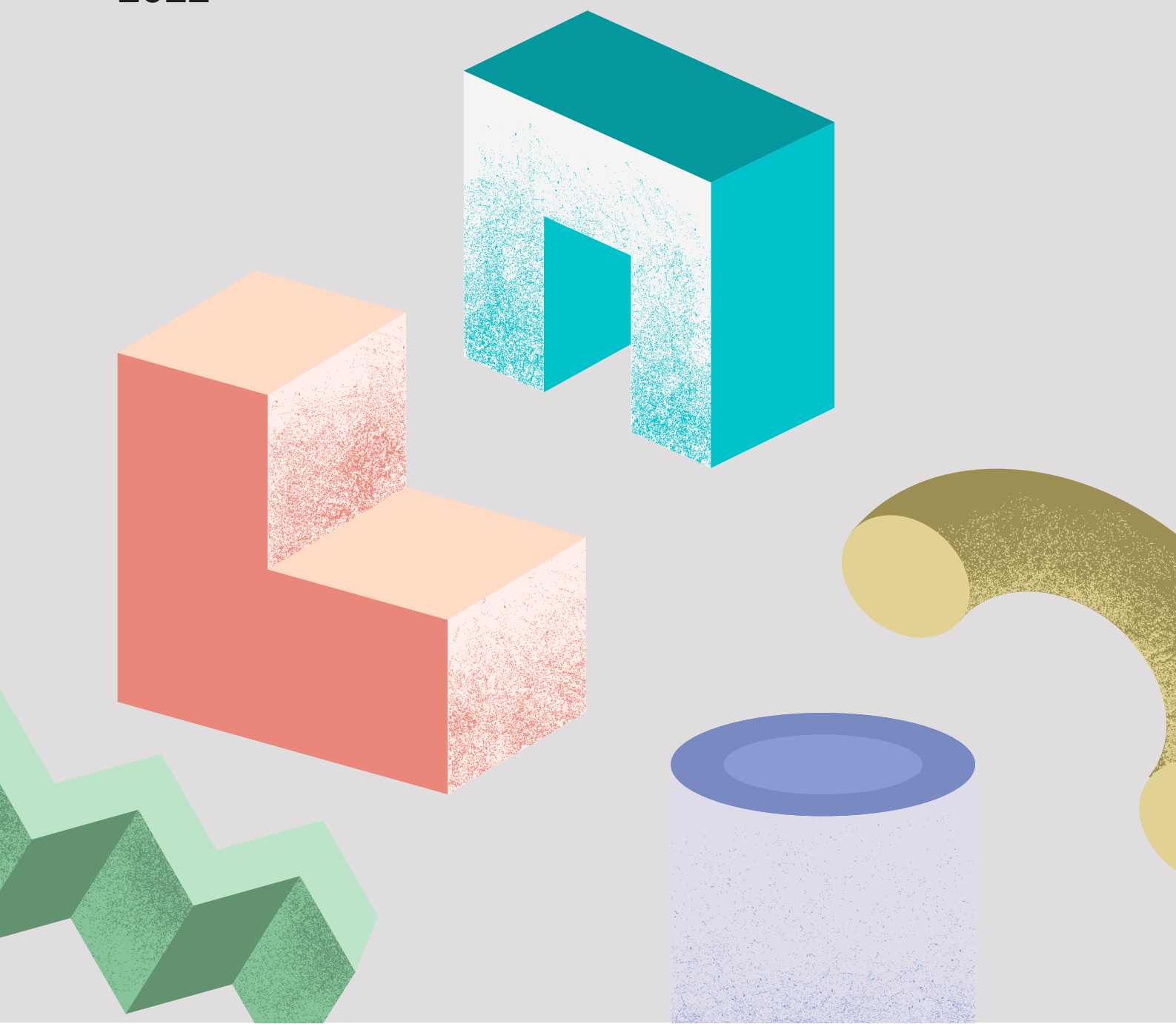
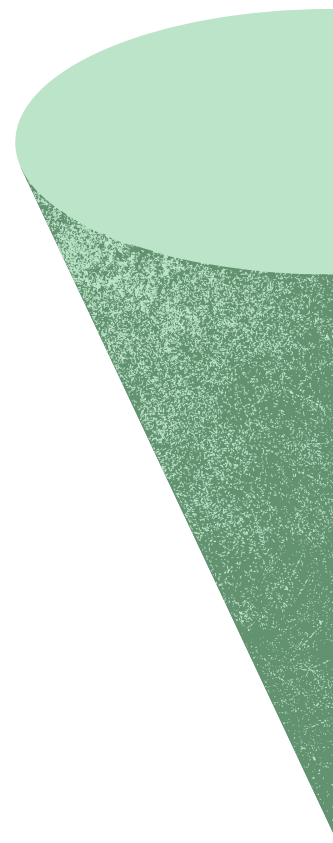
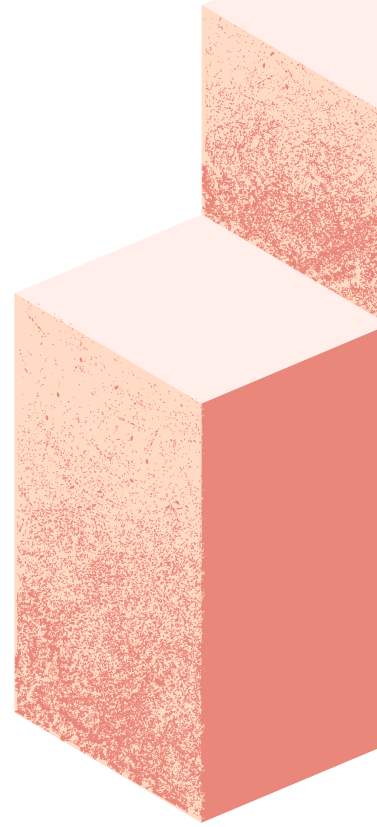


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ABOUT THE SURVEY

CSDR in partnership with FES, India conducted a Regional Experts Survey to study perceptions and attitudes among experts from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN Countries) on regional cooperation in various non-traditional security areas. The survey aims to draw up a picture of India's cooperation efforts in the region according to what experts perceive as its strong points and those that need more sustained work. Together, these non-traditional security issues depict areas of cooperation which hold the potential to further enhance regional integration in the BBIN sub-region.

The rationale for organising the survey around India is twofold. First, geographically, India is the link between BBIN countries. India forms the land bridges that connect the three countries. Second, India's degree of bilateral cooperation with the three countries is high and there are existing mechanisms of cooperation in place which can support further regional cooperation in the BBIN sub-region.

Experts were asked questions on India's past, present and future role in the BBIN sub-region, sector-specific cooperation, and their expectations regarding future cooperation. Perceptions on cooperation on the following non-traditional security issue areas were measured: Climate resilience, trade and connectivity, electricity connectivity, transboundary resource management, internet governance, public health cooperation, food security, regional knowledge networks, economic migration and gender inclusive development cooperation.

This survey received 55 responses from experts based in India. This included experts from academia, government, think-tanks and NGOs. The findings of the survey and the desk-based research is further supplemented by interviews of sector specific experts.

The survey report is organised into three sections. The first section highlights the Key Findings of the survey. It covers expert perceptions on India's role in the region and bilateral cooperation across various non-traditional security issues. These are presented country-wise in the following order: Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The next discusses cross-cutting themes that emerged from the survey and the final section discusses the emerging regional outlook.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The survey found that Indian experts perceive the present level of cooperation on non-traditional security issues with other BBIN countries *as less than adequate*, indicating that there exists significant potential to increase bilateral cooperation which will enhance regional integration in the BBIN sub-region.

Experts from India recognize India's positive influence and value in the region. Among BBIN countries, India's relations with Bhutan and Bangladesh are observed to be positive. Experts identify *relations with Nepal as most in need of work*. Additionally, experts assess India as a reliable partner during regional crises, while acknowledging that Indian response during bilateral and regional challenges holds scope for improvement and could contribute to increasing goodwill towards India in the region. The surveyed experts believe India is critical for the future stability of the BBIN sub-region and can lead regional integration efforts.

Most of the experts rated bilateral trade with all three eastern neighbours' countries as falling below its potential. In addition, there is nearly unanimous agreement among experts that *good connectivity between India and other BBIN countries is key to enhancing regional integration in the subcontinent*. Despite the high priority assigned to it, most experts acknowledge that it remains an insufficiently developed sector.

Electricity connectivity and cross border transmission among BBIN countries is perceived as an important area of

cooperation, with well aligned comparative advantages. *However, experts believe that more efforts are needed to align legislative and regulatory frameworks to enhance electricity trade and connectivity, particularly with Nepal and Bangladesh.*

Two important domains of cooperation that remain significantly *under-explored, but are ranked as highly relevant to the region by Indian experts, are public health cooperation and developing research networks for regional collaboration on shared issues.*

Two cross-cutting themes have been identified as significantly important by Indian experts for future cooperation with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. First, majority of experts believe that, developing sustained regional knowledge networks on shared issues will have positive implications on regional integration. Second, majority of experts support mainstreaming gender in bilateral and regional cooperation to ensure that our development cooperation policies are inclusive.

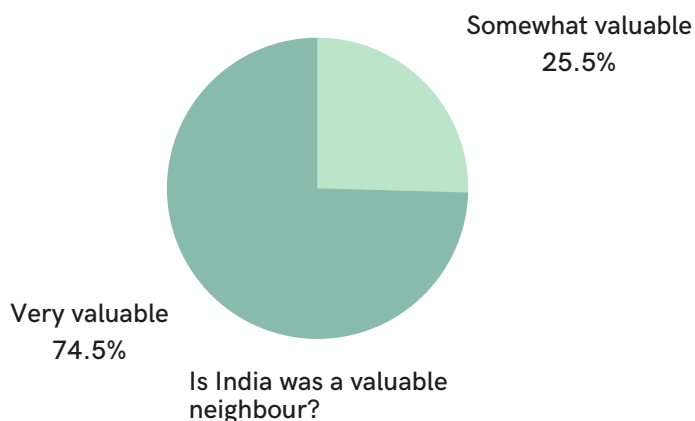
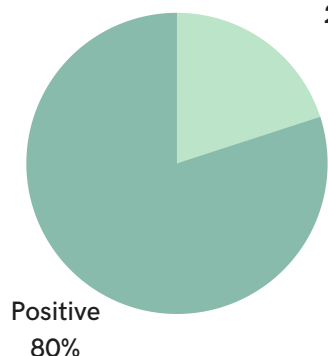
KEY FINDINGS

PERCEPTION OF INDIA'S ROLE IN THE REGION

India seen as a valuable neighbour with positive influence in the region

Experts in India look at India’s overall influence in the region in a positive light, with 80 percent reporting it as such. Indian experts were also asked if they thought India was a valuable neighbour in the region and 74.55 percent of the respondents consider it to be so.

India's overall influence in the BBIN sub-region.



India doing well with Bangladesh and Bhutan; India-Nepal relations need work

At the moment the following BBIN countries have a _____ relationship with India.					
	Very bad	Bad	Neither good nor bad	Good	Very good
Nepal	0.00%	14.55%	40.00%	43.64%	1.82%
Bangladesh	0.00%	3.64%	18.18%	61.82%	16.36%
Bhutan	0.00%	0.00%	14.55%	50.91%	34.55%

India-Bhutan relationship

According to Indian experts, of all its eastern neighbours, India shares the best relations with Bhutan. 50.9 percent of Indian respondents rated the Indo-Bhutan relationship as good, and 34.55 percent rated it as very good. India and Bhutan share a strong development partnership and security ties.

Four Indian states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim and West Bengal) share a boundary with Bhutan and provide transit to Bhutan's trade with India and other trading partners. India continues to be Bhutan's largest trading partner both as a source and a market for its goods. In addition, most of Bhutan's third-country exports transit through India. India is also an important development partner for Bhutan, investing in transport and critical hydropower infrastructure. The Government of India has committed approx. USD 700 Million for the implementation of development projects and approx. USD 60 Million for the transitional Trade Support Facility during Bhutan's 12th Five Year Plan (2018 - 2023). 77 large and intermediate projects and 524 Small Development Projects (SDPs)/ High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) are at various stages of implementation under this plan.

India and Bhutan also share a vibrant cooperative relationship in education and culture sectors. This adds to the overall positive perception of India in Bhutan.

India-Bangladesh relationship

On the Indo-Bangladesh relationship, 78.18 percent of the Indian experts consider this relationship to be either good or very good.

India-Bangladesh relations have improved considerably in the past decade. There has been significant progress in ties on security, trade and development cooperation, energy security and connectivity. During Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to India in September 2022, the two sides signed an MoU for water-sharing from the Kushiyara River. The agreement is important to increase bilateral cooperation on transboundary river management and flood mitigation. Such cooperation is becoming a growing necessity to manage climate change impacts. In addition, MoUs were also signed to expand cooperation and collaboration in IT, space technology, railways, judicial capacity augmentation, communications and scientific research.

In September 2022, the Indian and Bangladeshi Prime Ministers also inaugurated several key finished projects, including the first unit of the Maitree power plant. The 1330MW power plant will help meet Bangladesh's rising demand for cheap and reliable electricity. The two leaders also unveiled the Rushpa Bridge, a critical plug in the Khulna-Mongla rail link, and other rail projects that aim to enhance connectivity within Bangladesh and between the two countries.

India Bangladesh trade has risen rapidly in the last five years, reaching USD 18 billion in 2021-22. Trade could still expand by another USD 17 billion if the proposed

Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) is signed. While India was once the biggest foreign investor in Bangladesh, it has now been displaced by China by a hefty margin. Between 2014 and 2021, China accounted for one-tenth of Bangladesh's foreign direct investments (FDI). India's share for the same had dropped to just 3.92 per cent during this period.

Energy cooperation has quickly emerged as a critical tenet in this bilateral relationship. The 'India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline' is in the advanced stages and will cater to Bangladesh's growing energy requirements once finished. India also exports electricity to Bangladesh from the state of Tripura. While this is currently being done on a contract basis, negotiations are ongoing to formalise this energy trade, allowing Bangladesh to purchase Indian power at the Indian Energy Exchange (IEX). India's Adani Group is expected to complete a power project in Jharkhand and establish a transmission line to sell power to Bangladesh by the end of this year. In addition, the first unit of a jointly funded power project in Bangladesh was recently inaugurated by the two countries' leaders. India's Coal India Limited has already started supplying fuel for the plant.

The two sides have signed important agreements like the protocol on using Bangladesh's inland waterways and the use of Mongla and Chattogram ports, allowing India better access to its North-eastern region(NER). Similarly, a rail link between India and Bangladesh has substantially improved India's transboundary links with its NER. This is expected to foster

economic cooperation between India and Bangladesh and stimulate NER's economic growth. India's connectivity outlook is not limited to Bangladesh or its own NER but looks beyond to establish better links with Southeast Asia.

India-Nepal relationship

Finally, on the India-Nepal bilateral, less than half the respondents believed the relationship was either good or very good.

India's relationship with Nepal, defined by the close people to people connections and social, cultural and historic ties, has in recent years witnessed a downward trend. Marked by the unofficial blockade by India which prevented entry of crucial supplies in 2015, and the unresolved territorial dispute over Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani, the downward trend has overshadowed progress in other areas of cooperation.

The unresolved territorial dispute has generated political rhetoric on both sides and is inflamed by the release of maps by India in 2019[i] and by Nepal in 2020.[ii] This being a political issue, both countries need to devise mechanisms for a sustainable and equitable mechanism to resolve it so that much needed trust can be re-established in this relationship.

Despite this, India has continued to be Nepal's foremost development partner. India has financed projects across sectors – power, education, health, and road and rail connectivity. This has ensured that India's assistance has not only improved cross-border connectivity but also served to make its engagement people-centric.

Prominent examples in the health sector include the Nepal Bharat Maitri Emergency & Trauma Centre in Kathmandu and a new college block of B.P Koirala Institute of Health Science. In the hydropower and energy sector, India has supported the construction of the Trishuli Hydropower Project and the recently commissioned Motihari-Amlekhgunj Petroleum Pipeline. In the connectivity sector, India is assisting Nepal's Terai roads project that consists of ten roads connecting Nepal's East-West Highway to the Indian border. In addition, trade connectivity has been enhanced by construction of Integrated Check Posts at Birgunj and Biratnagar. Construction of two other Integrated check-posts is currently underway.

India's assistance to Nepal has also focused on High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs). These short gestation projects are intended to address challenges at the grassroots by capacity building and construction of people centric infrastructure. Over 523 HICDPs, at a total cost of USD 86.2 million (INR 706 Cr), have been taken up by India since 2003. 467 of these have already been completed. In addition, under the Line of Credit route, a total of USD 1.65 billion has been extended to Nepal by India. These funds have been used to finance several projects in the connectivity and energy sectors.[iii]

In 2018, India and Nepal signed three new agreements on agriculture, connectivity and railways. In January 2021, the two sides discussed various bilateral issues such as Covid-19 vaccines, boundary and border management, trade and connectivity, among others. India provided Nepal with one million doses of Covishield vaccines during the pandemic and

maintained its tradition of being the first responder to regional challenges. Similarly, India had committed USD 1 billion as Line of Credit for post-earthquake reconstruction in 2015, apart from providing Nepal with relief assistance worth USD 67 million.[iv]

The downward turn in bilateral relations between India and Nepal has witnessed increased cooperation between Nepal and China. Following the unofficial blockade by India in 2016, the then Nepali Prime Minister Mr. K P Sharma Oli visited Beijing to negotiate the Agreement on Transit Transportation. This has resulted in a protocol which provided Nepal access to four sea ports and three land ports for trade connectivity, which allows it to reduce its complete dependence on India for third-country trade. China has also overtaken India as Nepal's largest source of FDI with the annual development assistance of USD 120 million. In the year 2021, the year-on-year investment from India dropped by 81 percent, following caution exercised by investors in an India impacted by the pandemic.[v] In addition, China is engaged in multiple infrastructure projects related to transport and hydroelectricity. Therefore, India's ability to improve relations with Nepal are now not just a function of outstanding bilateral issues, but are influenced by Nepal-China relations as well.

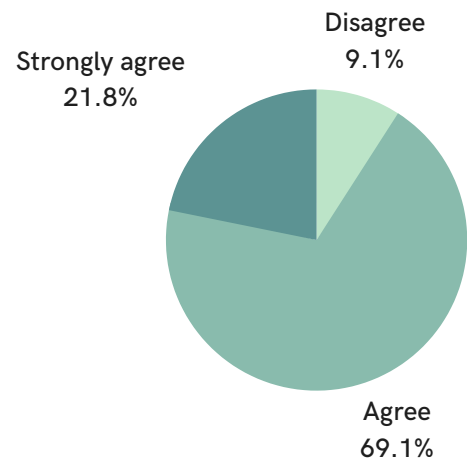
India seen as a reliable partner in times of crisis but scope for improvement in response

Most Indian experts (90.9 percent) agree that India would be the natural choice to be a reliable partner during a crisis in the region. At the same time, their assessment of India's past responses to regional and bilateral challenges is mixed with most respondents (45.45 percent) assessing it as good, some respondents (29.09 percent) giving a mixed report, and other respondents (20 percent) negatively assessing India's past responses.

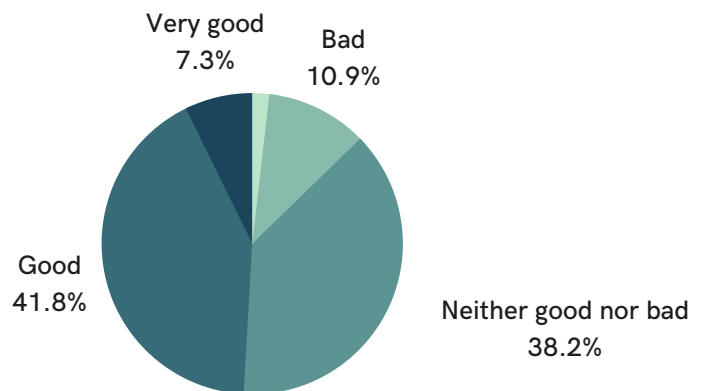
India has been an important first responder in times of crisis in the region. This has been most visible in India's regional response to humanitarian disasters such as the 2004 tsunami, the 2005 India-Pakistan earthquake, cyclones Mora in 2017 and Nargis in 2008, the water crisis in Maldives in 2014, the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2018, and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic.[vi] According to estimates, India's neighbouring countries received two-thirds of its humanitarian aid contributions between 2001-2012.[vii]

India's efforts of being the first responder in the region has not been without its shortfalls and some degree of reputational damage. During the Covid-19 crisis, India began the Vaccine Maitri campaign to supply doses of vaccines to countries in its neighbourhood and beyond. However, this did not reap the full extent of intended goodwill as the campaign ran into serious issues when India experienced its second wave of the pandemic and stopped the export of vaccines. Similarly, India's response to a major earthquake in Nepal in 2015 through Operation Maitri was met with criticisms of hindering other

India is a reliable partner in a crisis.



India's response to regional and bilateral challenges in the past.



international aid efforts, inefficient coordination between Indian and Nepali agencies, and insensitive reporting in the Indian media.[viii] Although *Operation Maitri* was appreciated by the Nepalese government as a unique effort, India is likely to have missed out on harvesting the full extent of its goodwill efforts due to some of the above-mentioned issues.

Experts believe that there is a need to evaluate India's approach to being a first responder in the region. Increasingly, internal politics and China's interactions with states in the region have put India's approach under enhanced scrutiny. Going forward, cooperation on non-traditional

issues that is able to manage perceptions and expectations resulting from a new geopolitical reality, and internal capacity challenges, will continue to frame India's first responder status in the region.

India critical to future regional stability

There is widespread agreement among Indian expert respondents that India will play an important role in the future stability of the region. 87.27 percent of the respondents look at India's role as very important, while 12.73 percent look at it as somewhat important. There were no experts who held neutral or negative expectations regarding India's future role.

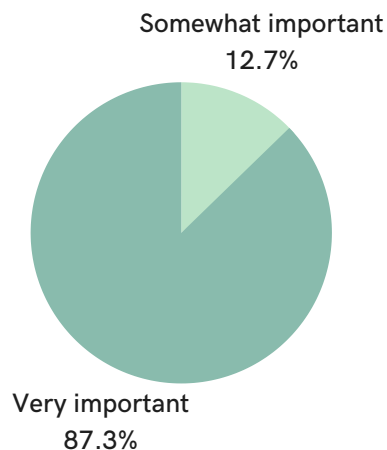
Further, India's ability to lead integration efforts in the region over the next five years is seen largely positive by experts in India. Most respondents (78.18 percent) either agree or strongly agree that India possesses the influence and resources to lead regional integration in South Asia over the next five years while other respondents (21.82 percent) disagree or strongly disagree.

Through its ability to respond to social, political, economic or humanitarian crises in the region, India has established itself as a stabilising actor in the region. This was displayed in India's response to the recent economic crisis in Sri Lanka. India provided food, health and energy security packages and foreign reserves support amounting to more than USD 3.5 billion including a concessional loan of USD 1 billion to Sri Lanka.[ix]

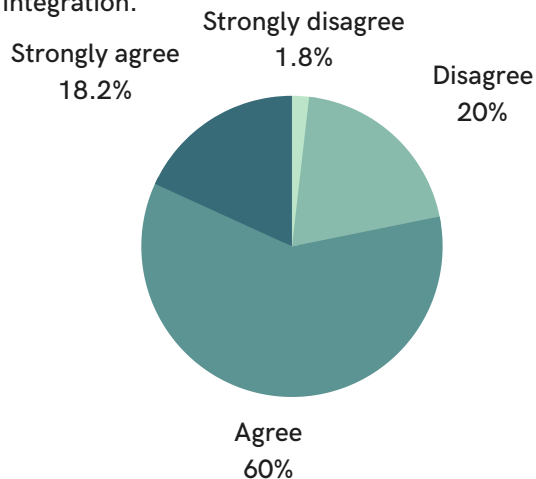
India's role in maintaining regional stability has been acknowledged by extra-regional

states such as the U.S., as well. In the current context with growing Chinese influence in the South Asian region, experts believe that India's regional policies are attuned to the complexities of the region. In general, India has maintained its relationships through respecting state sovereignty and making

India's role in the future stability of the region.



India has the influence and resources to lead regional integration.



efforts to resolve conflicts through diplomatic means. In addition to this, experts also feel that India's centrality to the region, based on the size of its growing economy and military capabilities, will continue to translate into regional stability. However, India will have to proactively play a leadership role to prevent any backsliding in goodwill vis-à-vis China.

PERCEPTIONS ON ISSUES OF NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY

Bilateral and regional trade remains below its potential

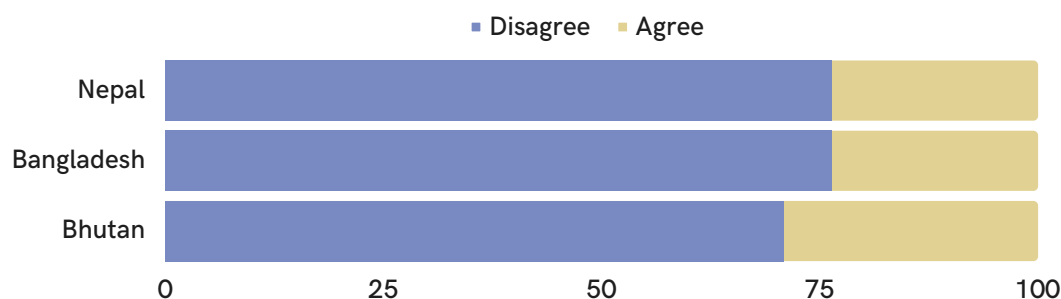
Most Indian experts rate bilateral trade with all three eastern neighbours as below its potential. Most experts in Nepal and Bangladesh (76.36 percent each) look at their bilateral trade with India to be below its potential. A similar, yet smaller, proportion (70.91 percent) of experts feel the same for Bhutan.

goods across borders, increasing transport connectivity initiatives, and extension of lines of credit (LoC) to Bangladesh and Nepal for construction of trade-related infrastructure like Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and road and railway networks, respectively.

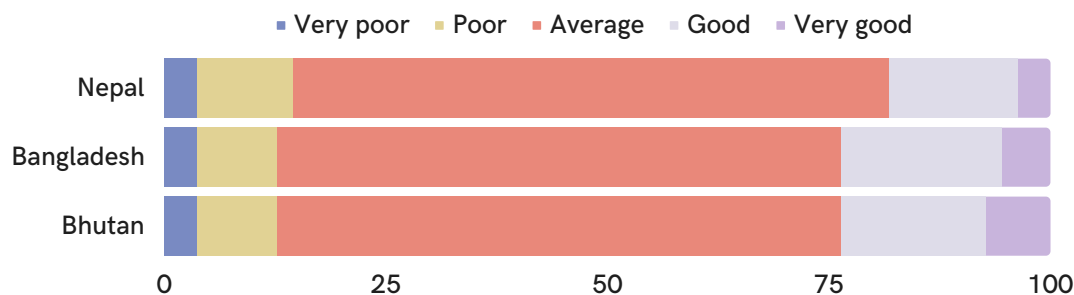
Experts also gave an average rating to the Indian efforts being made to remove tariff and non-tariff barriers to bilateral trade with all three eastern neighbours. India has made efforts to enhance trade with its eastern neighbours including the establishment of Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) for more streamlined movement of

At the time of conducting this survey, Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, made a significant visit to India and held important discussions surrounding trade. The two countries also decided to commence negotiations on a bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement.[x]

Bilateral trade between India and the following countries meets its potential.



India and the following countries are making efforts to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers to bilateral trade.



Connectivity is key to regional integration yet potential under-developed

There is nearly unanimous agreement among experts that good connectivity between India and other BBIN countries is key to enhancing regional integration in the subcontinent. Despite the high priority assigned to it by most experts, most acknowledge that it remains an insufficiently developed sector.

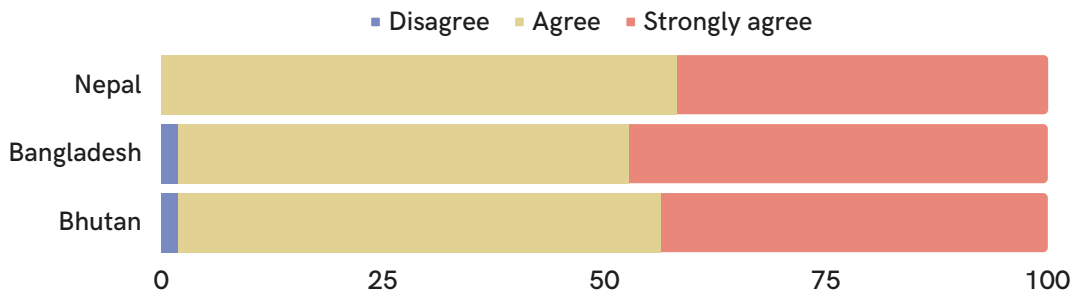
The respondents rank land, rail and air connectivity with Bangladesh (50.91 percent) as the poorest when compared with Bhutan (49.09 percent) and Nepal (40 percent). These assessments are in-line with the World Bank’s 2021 Connecting to Thrive: Integrating Transport in South Asia report which found that it is 15-20% cheaper for Indian companies to trade with Brazil or Germany than neighbouring Bangladesh.[xi]

In acknowledgement of the opportunities that exist on this front, the governments of India and Bangladesh have stepped up

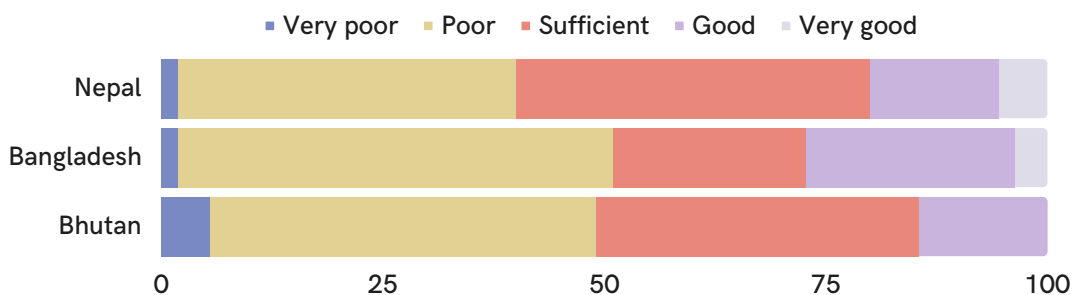
efforts to enhance connectivity. Recently, the Maitri Setu[xii] - a bridge connecting India’s north-eastern state of Tripura with Bangladesh, was inaugurated by PM Narendra Modi via videoconference on March 9, 2021.[xiii]

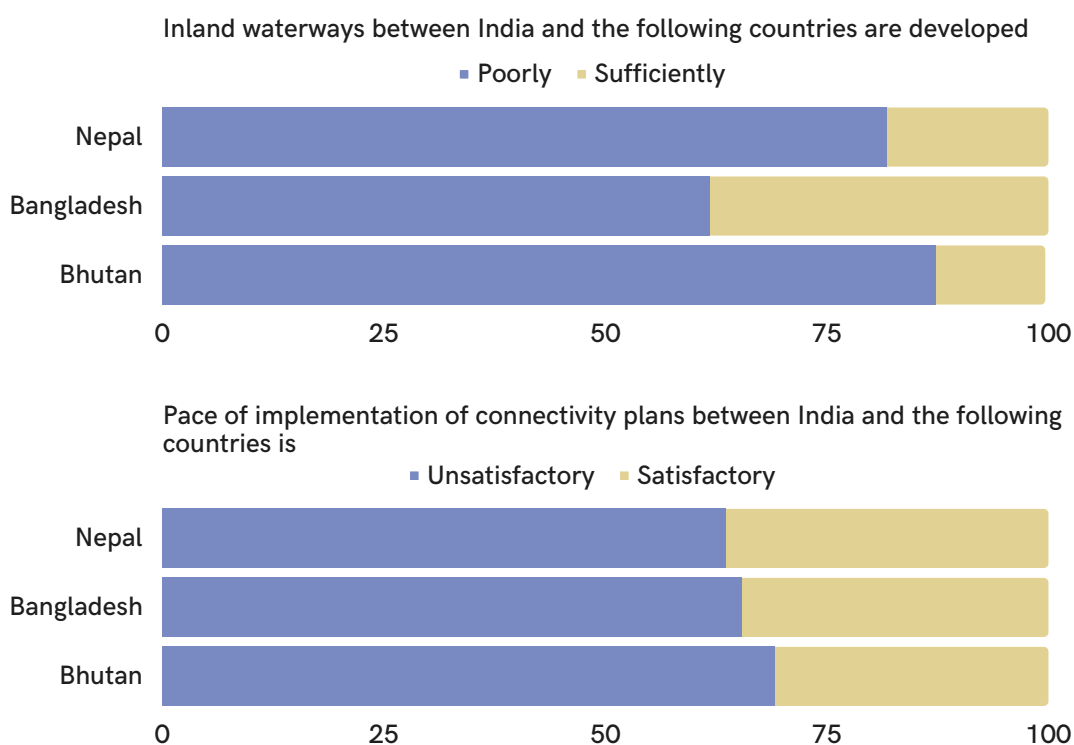
Beyond land, air and rail connectivity, when asked if inland waterways are sufficiently developed between India and other BBIN countries, most experts believe them to be poorly developed. India’s connectivity to Bangladesh through inland waterways is relatively better than other surveyed countries and in 2019, India exported cargoes of up to 3 million metric ton to Bangladesh through inland waterways. This is reflected in the survey as experts assess inland water connectivity between India and Bangladesh (61.82 percent), marginally less worse off than with Nepal (81.82 percent) and Bhutan (87.27 percent). Like other modes of connectivity, inland waterways connectivity

Better connectivity between India and following countries is key to enhancing regional integration.



Land, rail and air connectivity between India and the following countries is





in the BBIN sub-region has also received a renewed push in recent years due to its as yet underdeveloped status.

Despite these recent efforts across land and inland waterways connectivity, the pace of implementation of connectivity plans between India and the rest of the BBIN countries is largely rated as unsatisfactory by Indian experts. This is most unsatisfactory in Bhutan (69.09 percent), followed by Bangladesh (65.45 percent) and Nepal (63.64 percent).

Post-Covid immediate need for public health cooperation

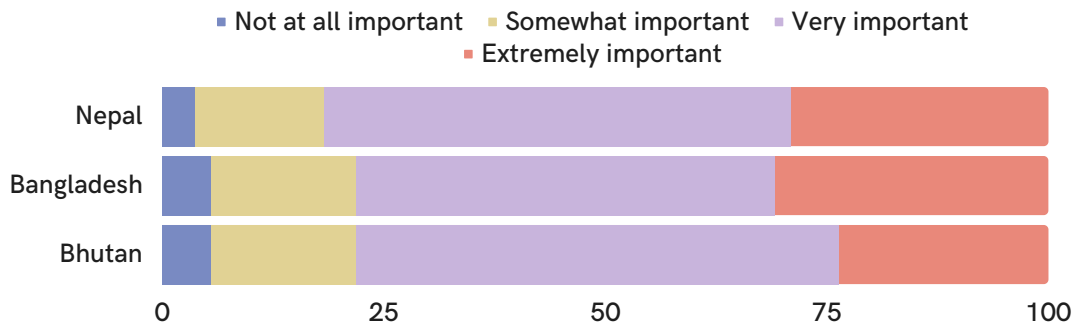
There is widespread agreement among experts in India that public health is an important area of cooperation between BBIN countries. The importance of regional public health cooperation was brought to the fore during the recent Covid-19 pandemic which severely impacted public health systems in all South Asian countries. This experience has underscored the need

to invest in a regional approach to public health care systems.

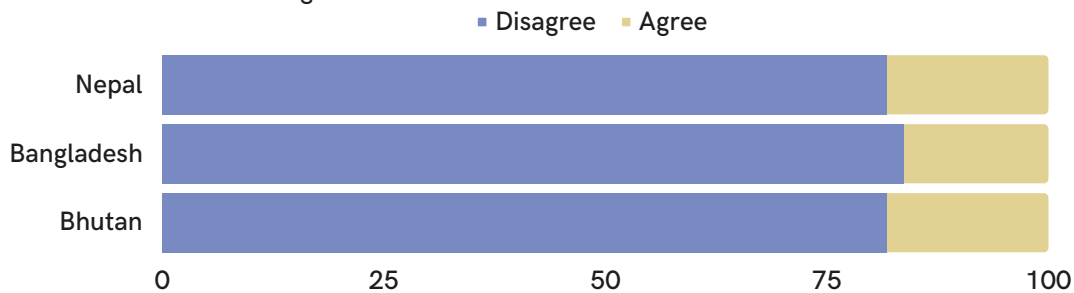
Over 80 percent experts see the level of investment in public health cooperation between India and Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal as low. When asked if collaboration between scientific and academic communities on medicine and health was adequate between India and its eastern neighbours, most experts disagreed with 78.19 percent Indian experts disagree or strongly disagreeing in the case of Nepal, 74.55 percent in the case of Bangladesh, and 70.91 percent in the case of Bhutan.

The Indian medical industry has taken a leading role in researching communicable and non-communicable diseases that are commonly found in the region. The Indian pharmaceutical sector is equally adept in manufacturing the necessary drugs needed to support populations in the region. Other issues such as access to medical facilities, community approaches to public health,

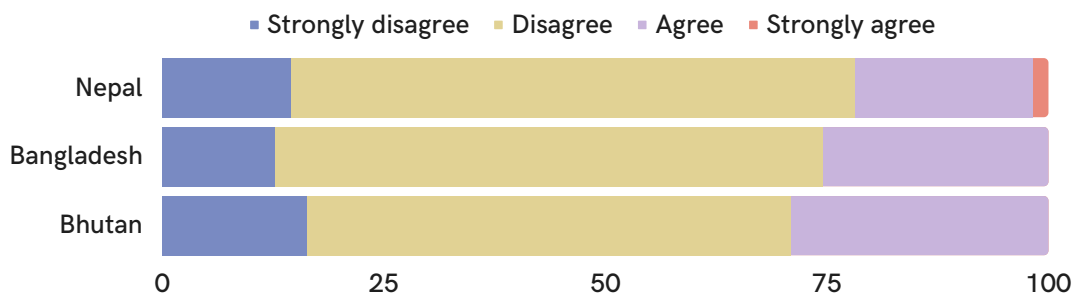
Public health as an area of future cooperation between India and the following countries.



There is sufficient investment in public health cooperation between India and the following countries.



There is sufficient collaboration between scientific and academic communities in India and the following countries.



and mass immunization programmes are areas in which India has provided assistance to countries in the region.

However, for a regional approach there is a need to go beyond these interactions. Liberalization of the medical visa regime, training of doctors from BBN countries, and establishment of research institutions and speciality hospitals in these countries will further India’s role in this sector. In addition, preventing and preparing for future pandemics has now become necessary at the global, regional and sub-regional levels. Multisectoral coordination

across animal health, human health, border control protocols, and other related security sectors to mitigate biological threats, and promoting legitimate use and innovation of life sciences and biotechnology, are other areas that need to be addressed at the regional level.

Need to connect universities and wider academia for developing a regional outlook

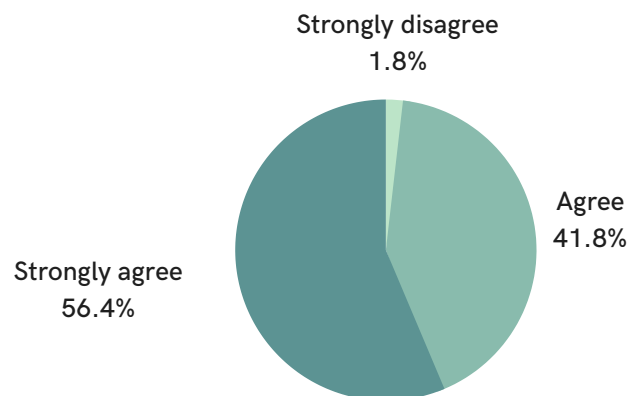
Experts in India overwhelmingly acknowledge the importance of an interconnected network of universities in South Asia to support development of technical skills and a regional outlook among students. Over 97.28 percent respondents either strongly agree or agree with the need for this network.

Furthermore, there is unanimous agreement among respondents that enhancing knowledge networks between India and other BBIN countries will lead to a better understanding of each other's perspectives and promotion of shared values that will have positive implications on regional integration.

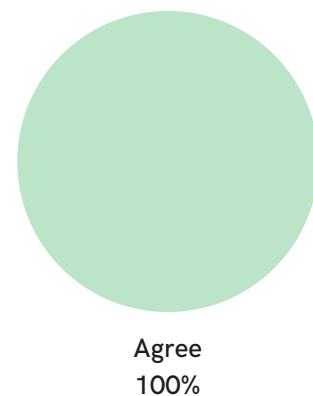
The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established the ASEAN University Network which helped in developing a platform for collaboration between the region's leading universities.[xiv] This network has enabled student mobility across universities in the region and enhanced regional collaborations.[xv]

Within the BBIN region there are inadequate student and academic exchange initiatives which can help in promoting scientific and research collaboration. The South Asian University (SAU), established by SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation) member states and hosting students from all South Asian countries, is a unique example of building regional academic linkages.[xvi] However, this university continues to face issues such as easy access to student visas and fund constraints thereby reflecting a lack of policy coherence.

An interconnected network of universities is necessary to develop a regional outlook.



Enhancing knowledge networks between India and other BBIN countries will help promote shared values and better understanding of each other's perspectives.



Other initiatives like the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), an intergovernmental research centre set-up by Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan working to improve livelihood and preserving cultures and the environment have helped create much needed knowledge networks on regional issues. [xvii] More such focused initiatives are needed in the sub-region. Another area in which Indian institutions and universities can take the lead is that of curriculum development. Curriculum on common regional challenges such as water-sharing,

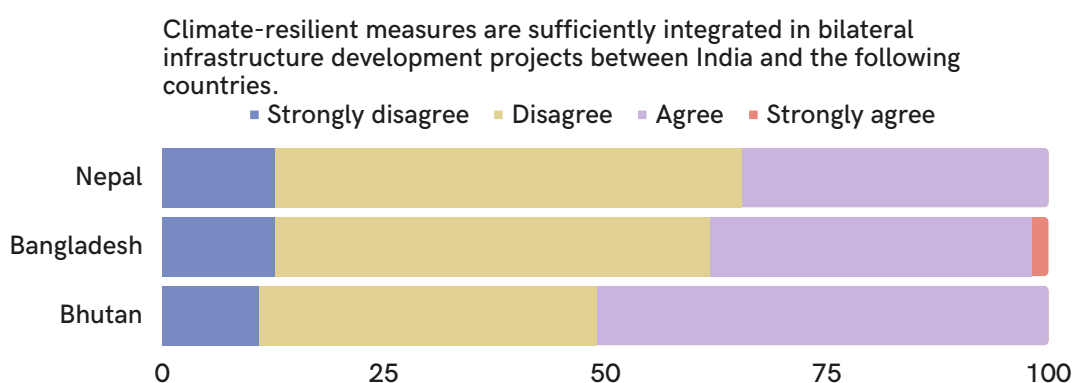
management of common resources such as glaciers, etc. can be developed jointly among institutions from the BBIN sub-region. This would help create greater understanding of these issues, as common challenges.

Immediate need to integrate climate resilience in development partnerships

Climate resilient infrastructure is an increasingly important aspect of development partnerships around the world. Since the BBIN region is considered highly vulnerable to climate change impact, it is important to locate climate resilience in its development cooperation. On whether climate-resilient measures are being sufficiently incorporated in bilateral infrastructure development projects between India and the three countries, respondents are fairly consistent in their outlook on Nepal and Bangladesh where they feel such measures are not sufficiently incorporated. Incorporation of climate resilient measures is greater in Bhutan, with more experts (50.91 percent) agreeing with sufficient integration, followed by Bangladesh (38.18 percent) and Nepal (34.55 percent). India and Bhutan’s cooperation on climate change related

issues extends from hydropower production to the recently signed MoU aimed at developing partnership on issues such as air pollution, waste management and climate change.[xviii] India needs to mainstream this approach in its development partnerships with Bangladesh and Nepal as well.

The IPCC Working Group II’s report on climate impacts, adaptation measures and vulnerabilities in South Asia has warned of extreme weather events leading to economic damages, decline in agricultural productivity and food security, and disaster linked displacement, among other challenges. Therefore climate change is a serious risk multiplier that hinders sustainable and inclusive development across the South Asian region. At the regional level, as well as the BBIN sub-regional level, investing in climate resilience is a foremost priority. The World Bank’s Country Climate Development Reports (CCDR) on Bangladesh and Nepal stress on the need to increase international investments in resilience across crucial infrastructure such as roads and hydropower dams, agriculture and human settlements.[xix]



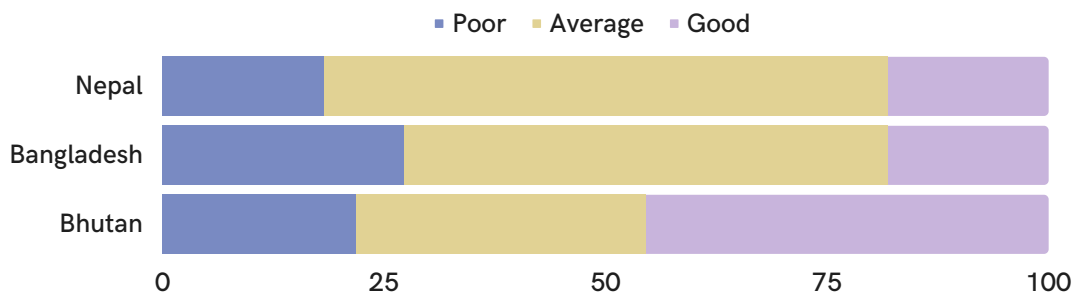
Towards an integrated South Asian energy grid

Electricity connectivity and cross border transmission among BBIN countries is an important area of cooperation, with potentially well aligned comparative advantages. In South Asia, countries have substantially increased cross-border transmission from 2.1 gigawatts (GW) to 6.4 GW — mainly driven by projects connecting India with Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh.[xx]

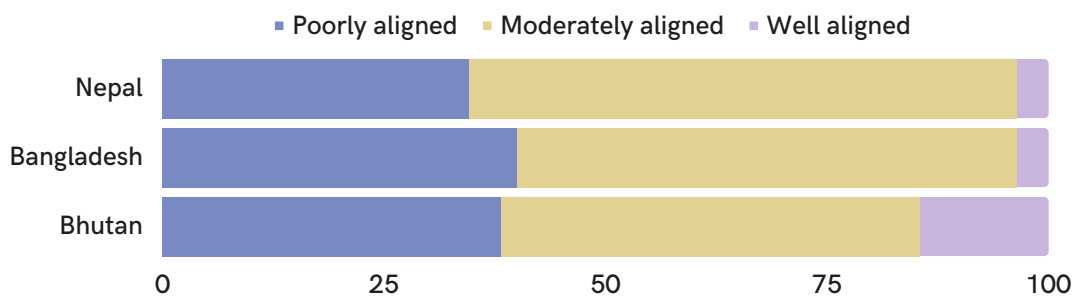
emergency power bought in on a priority basis was used to electrify the Delhi Metro, the prime minister’s residence, as well as a leading hospital in the national capital and restore the Eastern grid.

With other sub-regional countries, experts largely rate this connectivity as average. Legislative and regulatory frameworks between India and the rest of the BBIN countries are largely seen as moderately

Inter-country electricity connectivity and cross border power transmission between India and the following countries is



Legislative and regulatory frameworks that enable greater electricity trade between India and the following countries are

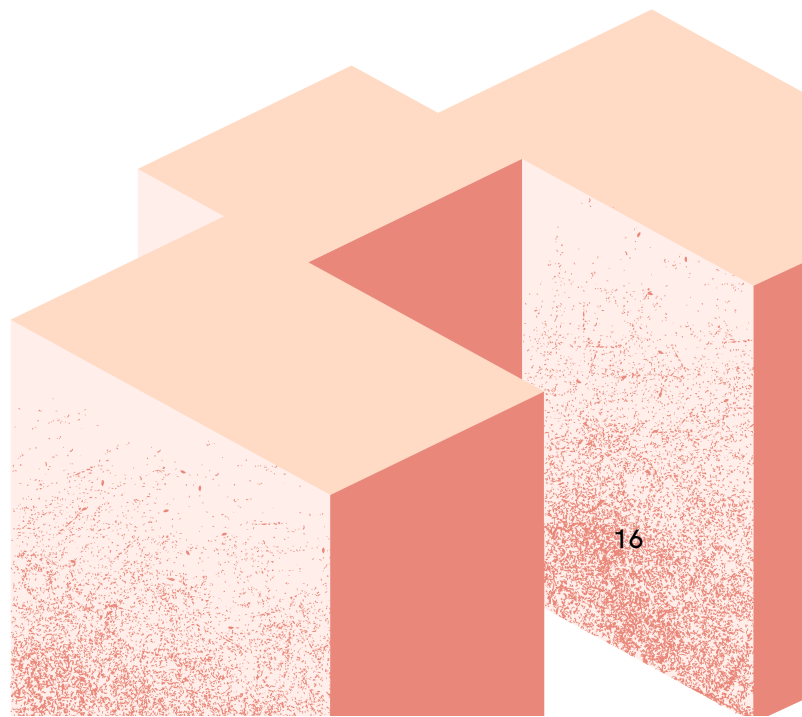


One of Bhutan’s main exports is hydropower electricity, and this is reflected in the responses as most experts (45.45 percent) rate India and Bhutan electricity connectivity to be good. The trust between the two states on hydropower trade can be gauged by the fact that during the 2012 blackout in northern India, the Indian government approached Bhutan for assistance to meet its power deficit. The

aligned by respondents. Nepal has recently started exporting 364 MW of electricity to the Indian market. Nepal and Bangladesh have also approached India to discuss a trilateral power trade agreement to enable export of 40 to 50 MW of power generated in Nepal to Bangladesh. Such an agreement seems likely as it was raised during Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s recent visit to New Delhi. By

facilitating such an agreement, India stands to benefit since Bangladesh has indicated its interest in buying 500 MW from the 900 MW Upper Karnali Hydropower Project being developed by India's GMR Group in Nepal.[xxi]

A better integrated energy grid in the sub-region could act as a driver for socioeconomic benefits. Currently focused on electricity trade, this regional grid could further prioritize diversification of energy sources and transition to renewable energy. Therefore, a regional vision to develop power trade and transmission projects, designing domestic frameworks that enable cross-border power exchanges, and widening the energy basket are future areas of focus.



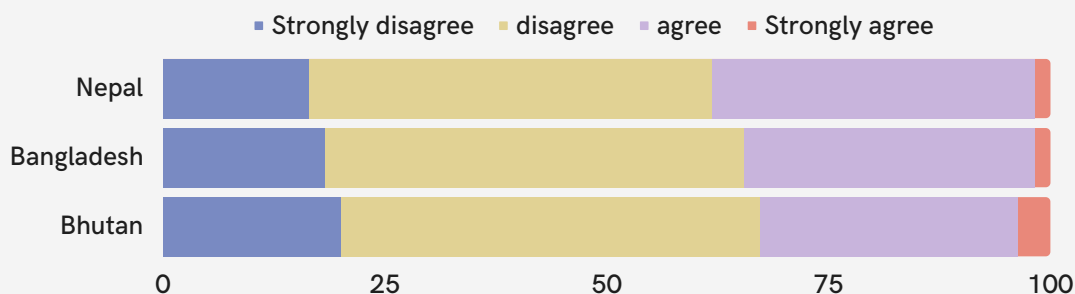
CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Regional knowledge networks

Regional knowledge networks, or cooperation in academia, research and scientific communities, is a domain that cuts across various themes. It is important

This includes research collaboration in transboundary resource management, especially transboundary river systems and public health.

There is enough student and academic exchange initiatives between India and the following countries to boost scientific and research collaborations.



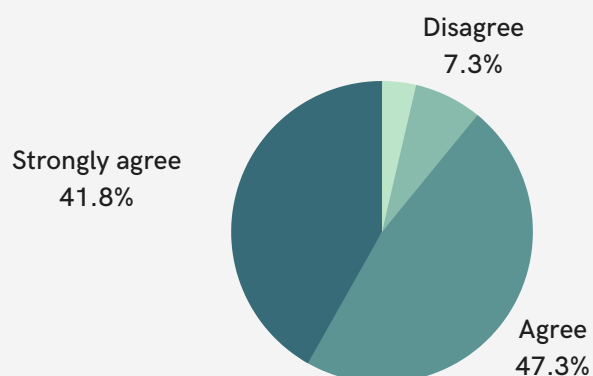
for encouraging a regional outlook among students in higher education. The survey found that there is inadequate collaboration in scientific research in medicine, health, climate and hydrology. Currently, the level of collaboration and exchanges among students and other academic exchange initiatives in the BBIN region are limited. In order to facilitate the understanding of each other's perspective and provide a regional outlook, there is a need to increase collaboration and enhance the knowledge networks among the BBIN countries.

Currently, bilateral relations between India and other BBIN countries do not have adequate student and academic exchange initiatives which can help in promoting scientific and research collaboration. Research collaboration and development of knowledge networks for improved policy making in bilateral and multilateral architectures have been explored across various domains, even within the survey.

Gender and Development

Incorporating a gender lens in policymaking is an important consideration in the region. The survey points towards the inadequate gender inclusivity and the lack of gender mainstreaming in bilateral cooperation between India and the other BBIN countries. A gender lens in policymaking can result in better, more sustainable outcomes for cooperation.

Using a gender inclusive lens in policy decision will result in better, more sustainable outcomes for bilateral development cooperation between India and BBIN countries.



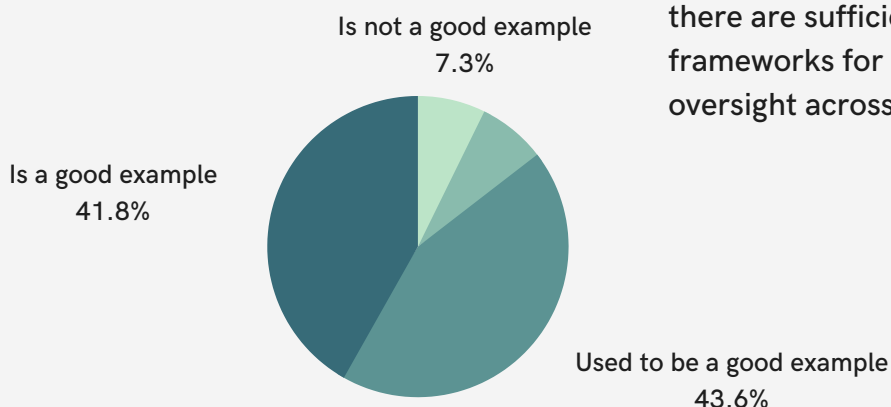
REGIONAL INTEGRATION: THE VIEW FROM INDIA

The survey provides an important assessment of the BBIN region and themes of non-traditional security operating in bilateral and multilateral relations. Issues of non-traditional security provide avenues for regional cooperation. This final section highlights some findings from the survey, and discusses avenues for regional cooperation.

Experts in India accord a high degree of importance to democratic political systems for regional integration. Over half the respondents (52.73 percent) are of the view that democratic political systems are somewhat important and other respondents (41.82 percent) believe that such systems are very important for regional integration.

These important democratic political systems exist in various forms and degrees domestically in South Asian countries. For instance, Indian democracy elicits mixed views from experts. 43.64 percent identified it as a democracy which used to be a good example for the region. A similar proportion of respondents (41.82 percent) are of the opinion that it is still a good example for the region.

Indian democracy _____ for the region.



Despite being multifaceted, India's engagement with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal has consistent outlook across several domains explored in this survey. Some of the themes of non-traditional security can be explored to further the bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the BBIN region and South Asia.

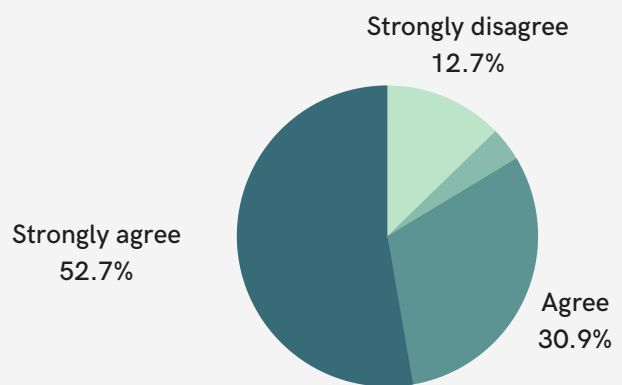
An important domain for cooperation is public health. The need for a regional strategy for public health cooperation and pandemic preparedness in South Asia elicits widespread agreement from experts in India. Most experts (52.73 percent) strongly agree, while 30.91 percent experts agree with the need for such a strategy.

With increasing adoption of digital technologies in South Asia, it is important to discuss issues relating to flow of data and internet governance for the region. Experts surveyed in India predominantly agree that promoting regional free-flow of information and limiting data localization can address shared issues faced by India and other BBIN countries, like enforcing security measures and promoting business development. At the same time, most respondents disagree (65.45 percent) or strongly disagree (18.18 percent) that there are sufficient legal and regulatory frameworks for internet governance and oversight across the South Asian region.

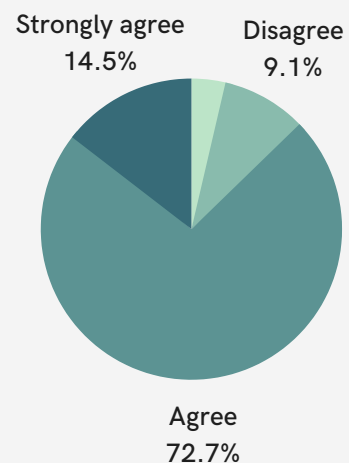
Both these issues areas, i.e., public health, and cross border data flows and internet governance, speak to contemporary policy anxieties of all BBIN countries. The multifaceted and long-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the region are being felt in social and economic domains. Therefore, preventing and preparing for future pandemics has now become necessary at the global, regional and sub-regional levels. Multisectoral coordination across animal health, human health, border control protocols, and other related security sectors to mitigate biological threats and promoting legitimate use and innovation of life sciences and biotechnology, are other areas that need to be addressed at the regional level.

Similarly, cross-border data flows are crucial for all other areas where regional cooperation is being encouraged. From cross border trade to establishing early warning systems for disaster preparedness, access to crucial data can be a game changer for a regional approach. Additionally, regulation of the internet is an emerging challenge for all BBIN countries. The challenge of creating policy frameworks that balance privacy, access to internet-based services, and internal security, needs exchange of knowledge on what works in the region. In addition, social media is emerging as a site where inter-states conflict plays up, thereby impacting people to people contacts and perceptions of each other. Given these cumulative challenges, these issue areas need to factor in new imaginations of enabling cooperation at the regional and sub-regional level.

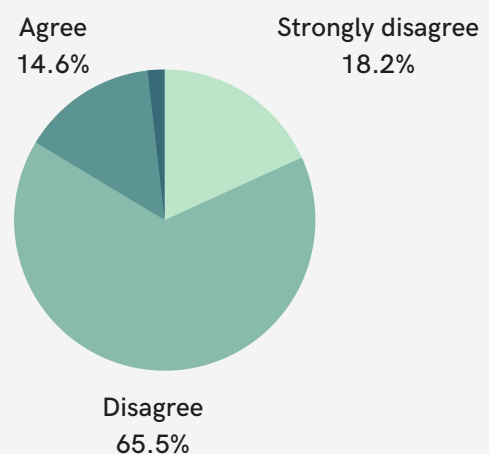
South Asia needs a regional strategy for public health cooperation and pandemic preparedness.



Promoting regional free-flow of information and limiting data localization can address several shared issues faced by India and other BBIN countries, like enforcing security measures and promoting business development.



There are sufficient legal and regulatory frameworks for internet governance and oversight across the South Asian region.



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