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

**News:** First ever ‘BIMSTEC Ports’ Conclave will be held at Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh.

**Prelims and Mains focus:** BIMSTEC- members, objectives, significance and need for reforms.

**Significance:**

- The Conclave will explore the possibility of increasing economic cooperation by furthering EXIM trade and coastal shipping.
- It will also discuss various investment opportunities, best practices adopted for productivity and safety at Ports.

**About BIMSTEC**

In an effort to integrate the region, the grouping was formed in 1997, originally with Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and later included Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan.

BIMSTEC, which now includes five countries from South Asia and two from ASEAN, is a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. It includes all the major countries of South Asia, except Maldives, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

**Importance of the region**

1. The Bay of Bengal is the largest bay in the world. Over one-fifth (22%) of the world’s population live in the seven countries around it, and they have a combined GDP close to $2.7 trillion.
2. Despite economic challenges, all the countries in the region have been able to sustain average annual rates of economic growth between 3.4% and 7.5% from 2012 to 2016.
3. The Bay also has vast untapped natural resources. One-fourth of the world’s traded goods cross the Bay every year.

**India’s stakes:**

1. As the region’s largest economy, India has a lot at stake. **BIMSTEC connects not only South and Southeast Asia, but also the ecologies of the Great Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal.**
2. For India, it is a natural platform to fulfil our key foreign policy priorities of ‘Neighborhood First’ and ‘Act East’.

3. For New Delhi, one key reason for engagement is in the vast potential that is unlocked with stronger connectivity. Roughly one-quarter of India’s population, live in the four coastal states adjacent to the Bay of Bengal (Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal). And, about 45 million people, who live in landlocked Northeastern states, will have the opportunity to connect via the Bay of Bengal to Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand, opening up possibilities in terms of development.

4. From the strategic perspective, the Bay of Bengal, a funnel to the Malacca straits, has emerged as a key theatre for an increasingly assertive China in maintaining its access route to the Indian Ocean.

5. Besides, as China mounts assertive activities in the Bay of Bengal region, with increased submarine movement and ship visits in the Indian Ocean, it is in India’s interest to consolidate its internal engagement among the BIMSTEC countries.