

## Speaking Of Asia Such a long journey: Merlion on the Ganges

**The back story of how Singapore's ties with India grew over the decades is something to note and celebrate as New Delhi steps up its engagement with Asean**

Watching Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emerge swiftly from the official Mercedes-Benz limousine to an extended hand-clasp with Mr Narendra Modi, as the Indian leader waited for his guests at his nation's 69th Republic Day parade, it was impossible to escape a sense of wonderment at the long road Singapore and India have travelled to reach where they are today.

Mr Lee led the Asean delegation to New Delhi last week when India, in an unprecedented gesture, invited all 10 Asean heads of government to be guests of honour at its annual celebration to mark its creation as a republic in 1950, three years after winning independence from Britain.

While it was fortuitous that Singapore should be in the chair when New Delhi made this strong signal to South-east Asia, it was perhaps fitting that it should have been so. For no nation has been so enthusiastic a cheerleader of India's contemporary national story, or its deepening alliance with Asean, as the smallest nation in the grouping – Singapore.

A quarter century ago when then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong began showing interest in the Indian growth story, following India's economic liberalisation of 1991, there were plenty of doubters on this island. The world, then in the thrall of the Asian Tigers, had little time for India. Neither did the Asian Tigers, themselves.

India's problems were legion. Periodic cycles of social strife, an inward-looking establishment and a reflexive distaste for free-market principles came to count for a near stagnation that was often dismissed derisively as the "Hindu rate of growth". Indian ministers visiting Singapore were often fobbed off with a cursory meeting with an obliging minister of state.



### SINGAPORE SPRINGBOARD

Then, Mr Narasimha Rao, who unexpectedly rose to power in 1991 after the assassination of once-and-future PM Rajiv Gandhi, began to speak of a Look East Policy. Looking around, his gaze fell upon Singapore as the springboard for that effort. Unsurprisingly, given its track record of often being first to spot opportunity, it was tiny, Chinese-majority Singapore that was first off the mark.

In early 1993, then Minister George Yeo would lead a large Singapore delegation for a tour of India, and turn in a positive report to Cabinet.

Later that year, a bunch of Indian industrialists, gathered under the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) banner, arrived in Singapore to pitch the Indian growth story. Granted an appointment with then PM Goh, they found a keen-eared leader who, ending the meeting, asked what their evening plans were.

Finding the delegation was at a loose end, he gathered a bunch of his ministers to share a meal with them. The rest is history.

Four months later, Mr Goh himself would be the chief guest at the 1994 Republic Day. As he departed for New Delhi, Mr Goh's comment that he hoped to "spark a mild India fever" would be heard around the world. It was the first significant endorsement of the India story from a respected global figure and Indians were delirious over it. Years later, Mr Goh would muse that he would not know at the time that his words would set off a Singapore fever in India.

Today, that "fever" has manifested itself in no less than 8,000 Indian companies locating themselves on the island, the largest foreign representation here. Indian tourists last year edged out Malaysians to take No. 3 spot on the island and more than 230 flights depart Singapore weekly for Indian cities, and the list grows by every half-year.

## **STRATEGIC BALANCE**

Strategically, the two have a tight relationship. In 1988, when Mr George Yeo was director of joint operations and planning at the Ministry of Defence, he led a delegation to study India's tri-service National Defence Academy in Pune before settling on the design for a new Singapore Armed Forces Safti Military Institute. Six years later, the two would conduct their first anti-submarine warfare exercise, leading to a defence relationship so close that today, the SAF is the only foreign force allowed to train its artillery, infantry and air force in India on a semi-permanent basis.

It is perhaps a measure of India's consideration to Singapore as both Asean chair and the coordinating country for Asean-China ties that New Delhi conspicuously avoided rolling out a float on Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state claimed in its entirety by China, at this year's parade. Instead, there were floats from other north-eastern Indian states, some whose boundaries touch Myanmar. The broader message India sought to convey was of its peaceful rise, of tolerance, celebration of diversity and historic cultural and religious links with the region.

Years ago, Mr Lee Kuan Yew said that without India, there would be no South-east Asia, only a Greater China and that while India, or Asean, may not count for too much on the global stage, together they could be a counterweight to China. Perhaps that is the reason that Singapore began pushing for a larger Indian role in the region carrying Asean, always happy to see a balance of forces, along with it.

That hand-holding saw Mr Goh Chok Tong proposing full Dialogue Partner status for India during an informal meeting of the 1994 Asean Summit, and New Delhi becoming Asean's fifth Dialogue Partner the following year. When Asean planned the first East Asia Summit in 2005, it was Singapore that midwived Indian participation at the inaugural, prevailing over the views of some who thought it was premature for India to be at the table. Typically for Singapore, it conveyed that happy news to New Delhi without fanfare - a mere two-line e-mailed message of confirmation handed to the relevant desk in New Delhi by an embassy official.

Over the years, India's ties with Asean have expanded to as many as 30 platforms for cooperation, including an annual leaders summit and seven ministerial dialogues. In addition, India participates actively in Asean-led platforms, such as the Asean Regional Forum and the Asean Defence Ministers Meeting Plus. A significant bend in the road is expected in the relationship when PM Modi delivers the keynote address at this year's Shangri-La Dialogue, the first time an Indian leader has got the privilege.

India's strategic engagement with Asean is set to tighten; it is building up its half of the Andaman chain of islands as a significant defence outpost, something that will make it virtually a South-east Asian power. And there is reason to expect that its ties with two significant Asean militaries - Vietnam and Indonesia - are poised to intensify.

For the first three years of his rule, Mr Modi's advice to his foreign office was to not show its hand overmuch. Last week in New Delhi, I got the distinct impression that India was ready for a bigger profile in East Asia and more importantly, sensed that the sentiment was reciprocated.

## **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

Thus, the Asean-India Commemorative Summit held last week in New Delhi was based on the theme of "shared values, common destiny". The Delhi Declaration issued at the summit's end encompasses a vision that stretches from cooperation in maritime affairs and tackling natural disasters to preserving the common heritage and ensuring the rule of law in matters of navigation and overflight.

That said, there is much unfinished business between India and Asean. For one thing, while India's ties with peninsular Asean are strengthening by the day, there is significant work to be done by New Delhi to build similar linkages to both maritime, and continental Asean, particularly the CLMV states (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam).

The elephantine issue is trade. At its current pace of growth, there is simply no chance of Asean-India bilateral trade touching the targeted US\$200 billion (\$263 billion) by 2022. But, for trade to get a push, Asean may need to pay some heed to India's plaint that there must also be give on Asean's side when it comes to services, an area where India enjoys some competitive advantages, before it can sign on to a "comprehensive" economic partnership agreement.

Notably, the Delhi Declaration does speak of a "comprehensive" accord. In the interests of pushing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) through, it may be well worth seeing if at least a part of the Indian demands could be met. Likewise, it is in India's interest to drop its reservations over RCEP and view it from the prism of the larger strategic picture.

It is important to keep India onside for another reason. Some sections of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are talking of extending the quadrilateral security talks - which group the US, Japan, Australia and India - to trade and investment. That effectively, would shut out China - and Asean - while offering the US and Japan unfettered access to the vast Indian market.

While this is mere talk for now, it would fly in the face of New Delhi's commitment to honour Asean centrality in the evolving regional architecture.

A decade and a half ago, when Singapore was in the throes of the tortuously negotiated Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement with India, then Trade Minister Yeo's advice to his team was to stay patient - "Like the Ganges, India will ultimately find its way to the sea".

But the times are changing and the strategic sands of Asia shift by the minute. Both India, and Asean, must realise they cannot afford to move to cosmic rhythms any more. And it perhaps falls to the Merlion to nudge the process along.

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