

S'pore, India aim to strengthen ties

Plans include cooperation in third countries and finding ways to battle financial crisis

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NEW DELHI: With a landmark economic cooperation deal in the bag, widening defence ties and fast-rising investment and tourism exchanges, Singapore and India are figuring out the next level of their relationship.

"One idea talked about is to cooperate to work in third countries like the CLMV nations of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam where there is much growth potential," said Professor Tommy Koh yesterday, at the end of the second India-Singapore Strategic Dialogue.

"The question of how to respond to the global financial crisis should also find a place on the agenda in the next 12 months."

Prof Koh was addressing reporters along with Mr Satinder Lambah, the Indian Prime Minister's special envoy on Pakistan and Singapore issues.

Prof Koh said the two-day meetings, co-hosted by the Institute of South Asian Studies and the Confederation of Indian Industry, were a "tremendous success - both in the content and quality of discussions".

The strategic dialogue is part of what is known as a Track II process of diplomacy, set in place in June 2007 by Foreign Minister George Yeo and Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee.

It facilitates a higher level of candour than in normal diplomatic exchanges, and comes against a backdrop of the global economic meltdown, a government change in the United States, and the murder in Mumbai last November of a Singapore woman at the hands of terrorists who struck at India's financial capital.

Singapore, probably the earliest nation in the world to endorse India's reform process that was started in 1991, is one of its largest foreign investors. Bilateral trade rose more than 25 per cent

last year, despite the downturn in the final quarter.

While the two countries' navies have been conducting joint exercises for more than a decade, the Republic of Singapore Air Force, as well as the Singapore Armed Forces artillery and infantry, have recently won long-term training rights in India.

In turn, Indian companies have significant investments in Singapore's steel and power sectors, and more than 3,600 of them use the island as their regional hub. That is an increase of 20 per cent since the first strategic dialogue was held in Singapore last May.

Singapore also gets about 800,000 Indian tourists, the fourth largest block of visitors to the island. Despite the downturn, which has caused several airlines to cut flights, more than 150 weekly flights connect Singapore and India, said India's envoy to Singapore S. Jaishankar.

India's Strategic Interests In South-east Asia And Singapore, a study done by veteran Singapore diplomat See Chak Mun on the sidelines of the dialogue, sketches out the relationship from its early beginnings.

Mr See, who is highly popular in New Delhi from his 4½ year stint as High Commissioner there, also talked of the Look East policy initiated by the late prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, which used Singapore as India's launch pad into the region. That policy was given added impetus by India's former premier Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

"Yet, oddly enough, no Indian policy document I saw during my research specifically talks of a Look East policy," Mr See quipped.

Singapore, under then prime minister Goh Chok Tong, was instrumental in facilitating India's closer engagement with Asean, beginning with sectoral dialogue partnership and full dialogue partnership. It also eventually won membership in the East Asia Summit process.

Soon, Asean and India will sign a free trade agreement that will facilitate greater trade exchanges between the regions.

"We have been India's champion in South-east Asia to bring about this vision," Prof Koh noted. "India's place in the region is secure."

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