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India and Southeast Asia: Strategic Engagement and Trade Enhancement

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Amit Sengupta highlights India's increasing economic and strategic engagement with Southeast Asian countries

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India seems poised to take on Southeast Asian powers in its march towards a new strategic partnership following it up with enhanced trade. The Indian Navy seems to be taking India's 'Look East Policy' one-step further by engaging in strategic bilateral and multilateral exercises with South East Asian countries. Incidentally, the largest number of India's naval exercises has been taking place in the Bay of Bengal under the Andaman & Nicobar Command. These bilateral exercises lay great stress on enhancing and sustaining bilateral ties, as also on improving mutual understanding with regional navies. They not only provide immense training value to our sea-going personnel but also help in fostering mutual trust and friendship.

India conducts Joint Co-ordination Patrol (CORPAT) series of exercises with Indonesia and Thailand. The CORPAT (India-Indonesia) was signed in 2002 and the exercises began in March 2003. It is held twice a year in March and September and the focus areas are Coordinated Patrolling, Anti Piracy exercise and Search and Rescue (SAR) exercise. The purpose of the India-Indonesia CORPAT is to prevent acts of smuggling, illegal fishing, piracy and illegal entries into each other's waters. The CORPAT is carried around the international maritime boundary line between the two nations, which falls south of Indira point. Similarly CORPAT (India-Thailand) occurs twice a year in April and October. This was signed in 2005 and became operational in 2006. Both the naval forces seek coordinated patrolling, anti piracy and search and rescue exercises.

The Indian Navy's operational interaction with the Navy of the Republic of Singapore (RSN), which commenced with anti-submarine training exercises in 1994, has grown steadily and impressively over the past 14 years. India and Singapore agreed in March 2006 to conduct joint naval exercise, called as 'Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercises' (SIMBEX). The first SIMBEX exercise was held in March 2007. The operating area in India is Kochi, Port Blair, and Vizag. In Singapore it is held in the South China Sea. The 'SIMBEX 2008' (16-30 February) was held on India's Eastern seaboard. The SIMBEX initially began as Anti Submarine Warfare (ASW) exercise and has evolved to include three dimensional war face and maritime security exercises (Surface, Sub Surface and Air). Both the naval forces engage in coordinated ASW exercise, Aircraft tracking exercise, anti aircraft firing exercise, surface target tracking and firing exercise and maritime exercise.

Early this year, the Andaman & Nicobar Command conducted the sixth multilateral naval extravaganza, MILAN in Port Blair (January 18-23, 2008). Started in 1995, the biennial MILAN brought in some crucial powers of the Asia Pacific region. It seeks regional maritime security, mutual trust, cooperation and understanding. Ships of littoral navies of Australia, New Zealand, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Brunei participated in the five-day affair. The

MILAN aims at fostering bonds of 'Friendship Across The Seas' and sharing views on common maritime issues. They not only engage in maritime issues, but actively promote India's tourism as well.

Indian navy seeks to leverage strategic partnership as it engages with Southeast Asian nations. It is effectively following it up with trade with the ASEAN members. India signed an agreement with Thailand for a Free Trade Area (FTA) and quickly succeeded by a similar agreement with Singapore in a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA). Meanwhile, sub-regional cooperation has accelerated too. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and the BIMST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation) are other noteworthy initiatives. Incidentally, India's trade with ASEAN rose from US\$9.7 thousand million in 2002-2003 to over US\$30.64 billion in 2006-07.

Almost 10 per cent of India's exports go to the ASEAN nations. According to the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics (DGCIS), India's exports to ASEAN countries increased from US\$10.41 billion in 2005-06 to US\$12.56 billion in 2006-07, registering a growth of 20.67 per cent. During the first six months of 2007-08, India exported to the tune of US\$6445.4 million, accounting for 8.96 per cent of the total Indian exports.

These are indications of India's increasing intimacy with its Southeast Asian counterparts. India has proposed a US\$1 million fund for an India-ASEAN Science and Technology Fund which would be used for collaborative research and development. Besides, a joint network on climate change has also been proposed for which India has made an initial contribution of US\$5 million to set up India-ASEAN Green Fund. India may benefit immensely from the rising economic power of Southeast Asia if it continues its policies of strategic and prudent trade and commerce partnerships.

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