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India-Thai Relations: Look East, Look West

By Rahul Mishra and Sana Hashmi

Synopsis

India marked two decades of its Look East Policy by inviting Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra as the chief guest at this Year's Republic Day celebrations. While India is keen to widen and deepen its strategic footprint in East Asia, Thailand regards India as its gateway to South Asia.

Commentary

THAI PRIME Minister Yingluck Shinawatra was the Guest of Honour at India's 63rd Republic Day celebrations on 26 January 2012. The visit marked the completion of 65 years of India-Thai relations. Significantly she is the third leader from the East Asian region consecutively to be the chief guest at India's Republic Day parade after Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak.

The visit also marked 20 years of the Thai dimension of India's Look East policy, which was initiated by Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao during his trip to Thailand in 1993. For its part, Thailand regards India as a traditional partner with cultural, linguistic and religious bonds. The Thai government reciprocated India's eastward-looking policy with its own Look West policy in 1996, signing a trade pact with India under an Early Harvest Scheme in 2004.

Strategic cooperation

Thailand views India as the gateway to South Asia and beyond. Bilateral trade has increased six-fold since 2000 and crossed the US\$6 billion mark in 2010. The two countries aim to reach the \$14 billion level by 2014. PM Yingluck, who brought along a 100-strong delegation, discussed greater cooperation with her Indian counterpart, including on the Chennai-Dawei Corridor, energy and a free trade area.

Besides economic ties, Thailand and India share a common prism on strategic matters such as defence and maritime security across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, manifested through cooperation at various levels. They conduct joint maritime patrol exercises, disaster management operations, and regular exchange of officials for defence training purposes. The Thai and Indian navies work together on naval patrols and transnational crime prevention exercises. The two countries signed a defence cooperation agreement during Yingluck's visit, which will further increase defence ties.

The two countries also share several regional platforms, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). India is also an integral member of

the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) initiated by Thailand. Likewise, Thailand is a core member of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Mekong Ganga Project (MGC) respectively. Incidentally, BIMSTEC was conceptualised to synergise the Look East and Look West policies of India and Thailand respectively.

Road Ahead

Cultural bonds underlie the long-standing relationship between the two countries. More than 90% of Thais follow Buddhism, introduced in Thailand by the Indian king Ashoka. Earlier known as Siam, Thailand finds a mention in Indian classical literature. Almost all aspects of Thai life -- art, architecture, dance, drama, literature and language depict the richness of cultural ties. This is perhaps the reason that Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Phuket have become sought-after destinations for Indian tourists, and Thai cuisine a common feature in Indian restaurants. For Thai Buddhists, Bodhi Gaya and Sarnath have been places of religious importance.

The growing partnership with Thailand exemplifies India's recent policy shift to accord priority to its extended neighbourhood. However, many challenges demand their attention. Preemptive measures are needed to prevent humanitarian crises along the Myanmar borders. Both are facing daunting challenges of drug trafficking, armed insurgency and separatism. In Northeastern India and Southern Thailand, these problems are compounded by Myanmar providing a safe haven for those involved in such activities.

An increasingly assertive China poses a challenge to the countries of the East Asian region. While a 'hedging strategy' defines both Indian and Thai policy vis-à-vis China to a great extent, Thailand, as a non-NATO ally of the United States, might side with the US in any regional conflict and India's growing partnership with the US would help them stick together in such a scenario. The US' increasing presence in East Asia is being welcomed by the two as a measure to ensure a multi-polar region.

Shared stake in regional stability

Though it demands substantive bilateral interactions and nurturing at the policy making levels, the overall state of India-Thai relations is moving in the right direction. No doubt India's Look East Policy has boosted its relations with Thailand. However, the two countries can step up ties by dealing with pressing mutual concerns in the Bay of Bengal sub-region, such as refugee issues; actions of non-state actors; arms, drugs and human trafficking; and natural disasters.

India and Thailand are important stakeholders and have to assume greater responsibility to help ensure peace, stability and prosperity in the trans-Indian-Pacific oceans region of East Asia.

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