

ravage the weak, independent nations. The region in question, is bounded by Russia and China, and not too distant from India. By developing the manpower, through technical and basic education, and rendering the population with skills while helping them to extract oil, gas, and other natural reserves, Russia, China, and India will stabilize a highly volatile region and improve the security situation immensely.

These are a handful of areas where the two great countries, which have finally shown an interest in taking responsibility for a vast region, can make effective contributions for decades to come. To paraphrase what Li Peng told an Indian audience at a New Delhi seminar, one hopes the statesmen of these two countries will demonstrate the courage and the will to change things.

India Prepares To Broaden Its Role In Southeast Asia

by Ramtanu Maitra

A nine-day trip by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to Vietnam and Indonesia on Jan. 7-15, for official state visits, has opened up prospects of a new level of partnership between India and the Southeast Asian nations. Looking forward to the strengthening of ties between India and the region, Vajpayee said that India recognizes “the challenges to the security of Asia stemming from terrorism, religious extremism, and subversion.”

Vajpayee’s trip took place against the backdrop of high-level meetings in India between Chinese and Indian leaders, and came less than two months following the visit of Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh to Laos. During his visit, Singh established the six-nation Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) group. The MGC will involve the member-countries in developing transport networks—in particular the “East-West Corridor” and the “Trans-Asian Highway”—under the rubric of transport and communication.

The MGC declaration also spelled out promotion of air services and rail links, as well as greater cooperation in science, technology, and human resource development. A section was also devoted to strengthening “cooperation in the development of information technology infrastructure and networks.”

New Initiatives

While the MGC declaration centered on broader regional developmental cooperation, Prime Minister Vajpayee set

about to establish strong trade and security ties with both Vietnam and Indonesia.

In Vietnam, the Indian Prime Minister, during his stay of three days, signed three agreements with his counterpart, Phan Van Khai, on cooperation in the nuclear field. Vajpayee said, “Science and technology, including frontier sciences, are the backbone of a modernizing society, and India is pleased to assist Vietnam in this direction. I am glad cooperation in the area of peaceful uses of nuclear energy is progressing well.”

The agreement reviewed visits of a number of Vietnamese scientists to India’s atomic energy facilities, and said that “the Indian scientists would continue to cooperate with the Vietnamese Atomic Energy Commission on the technical and functional aspects of the Dalat Nuclear Research Institute” in Vietnam.

It was evident from the outset of Prime Minister Vajpayee’s visit that India is eager to develop strong economic and security ties with Vietnam. Last March, during Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes’s visit to Vietnam, India had signed an agreement to repair and overhaul Russian-made MiG-21 and MiG-29 fighters of the Vietnamese Air Force, and provide necessary training to the Vietnamese pilots. India has also agreed to set up Vietnam’s defense industry, and to work out a joint defense production agreement.

Naval cooperation between the two countries has advanced significantly. Last year, an Indian naval squadron visited Ho Chi Minh City and an agreement was signed to facilitate repair, upgrading, and building of vessels for the Vietnamese Navy. Vietnam is keen to purchase Indian-made fast patrol boats to meet its extensive maritime interests.

At the same time, India’s state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Commission-Videsh (ONGC-Videsh), which is already present in Vietnam as a part of consortium with British Petroleum and Norway’s Statoil, signed a \$238 million joint venture with Vietnam’s Petroleum Investment and Development Company. India’s naval cooperation with Vietnam has been cited by an Indian authority as a necessary step to protect India’s oil exploration operations and transportation of oil back to India.

It was also revealed during the Indian Prime Minister’s stay in Vietnam, that Hanoi is training Indian soldiers in “jungle warfare.” Vajpayee said that it is an ongoing program, designed as part of fighting the security threats that India faces in its northeast.

In Jakarta, where the founder-members of the Non-Aligned Movement met to strengthen their ties in the post-Cold War period, five agreements were signed. Again, as it became apparent in the agreements signed in Vietnam, the security and naval cooperation between the two countries took precedence over other defense matters. The two sides agreed to share their experiences in defense management and policy, exchange military instructors, assist with the mainte-

nance of each other's equipment, and conduct joint naval maneuvers. The two countries also agreed to cooperate in the fields of oceanography and hydrography. According to the defense cooperation agreement, India envisages supplying defense equipment and materials, training, and technical assistance to the Indonesian Army.

Wider Interest

While the media highlighted the defense agreements, New Delhi was equally eager to enhance bilateral trade relations with both Vietnam and Indonesia. Calling for a massive expansion in bilateral trade with Vietnam, Prime Minister Vajpayee said that India would be ready to assist with "requisite capital," the development of transportation, telecommunications, railways, power generation plants, and water supply facilities in Vietnam. He said that Vietnam is a "critical element" in India's plan to forge stronger ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in India's "Look East" policy more generally.

Prime Minister Vajpayee's trip, and the earlier trips by India's External Affairs Minister and Defense Minister, stem from a number of other Indian objectives. Following its 1998 nuclear tests—widely known as the Pokhran II—India was castigated by the Group of Seven and all Southeast Asian nations. While India continued to claim that its nuclear weapons development is not targeted against any nation in particular, India's failure to undertake economic and secur-

ity initiatives in Southeast Asia made such claims seem hollow.

Cornered by world opinion, New Delhi finally chose to work out a strategy to come out of its shell and assert itself as a responsible nation. To begin with, it became evident to the Indian policymakers that India must work out bilateral ties with petroleum-producing nations and reduce its dependency on OPEC. Since then, India has signed bilateral oil purchase agreements with Nigeria, Iraq, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and has gotten involved in oil exploration work in Iraq and Vietnam.

Reports indicate that India is also in the process of working out a bilateral oil-purchase agreement with Venezuela. India has signed a number of agreements with the Persian Gulf nations for purchase of liquefied natural gas, and is negotiating with Iran on an Iran-India gas pipeline to bring in Iranian gas to India.

A safe and assured supply of oil and gas, New Delhi believes, will be possible only if India can provide adequate security to the vessels and pipelines. It is in this context that New Delhi is actively expanding its naval capabilities. It is also expected that in the coming decade, the Indian Navy will be showing its flag not only in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, but also along the western coastal lines of the South China Sea.

In order to ensure this facility, India has unleashed the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation project. This would provide in-

China Builds on Strong Ties to Southeast Asia

China, with long-standing ties to Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, has been building relations to the newer members of ASEAN, particularly Vietnam. During the past decade, China has been not only developing the upper Mekong River to open a transport gateway for its isolated southwestern region, but also taking serious measures to curb opium growing in the area and replace it with productive agriculture—both measures essential for the development of the Mekong Valley. Regional rail and energy projects are being planned.

China-Southeast Asian diplomacy is expanding rapidly. Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong visited China on Dec. 25-29. He and Chinese President Jiang Zemin signed agreements on border demarcation for Beibu Bay, the large bay off the Vietnamese and Chinese coasts, and for all-round cooperation. The two sides some years ago opened their two rail links—the only ones existing between China and Southeast Asia—and have begun remov-

ing mines along their border, left from their 1979 clash. President Luong stated that the sea border agreement shows that Vietnam and China "are capable of resolving any problem through friendly consultation."

In November 2000, President Jiang became the first Chinese President to visit Laos, and the first Chinese head of state to go to Cambodia since 1963, an essential move of reconciliation after the Khmer Rouge holocaust. The visits promoted the idea of creating "quadrilateral" economic cooperation among China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, and in the Mekong subregion, which would also include Cambodia and Vietnam.

Later, Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji participated in the expanded fourth ASEAN informal summit in Singapore, on Nov. 22-27, where he proposed that China and ASEAN expand Mekong Basin infrastructure and eventually establish a free-trade relationship. He also discussed with Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, linking the Trans-Asia Railroad—with vital links still being planned—with China's famous Euro-Asian Continental Bridge. Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid recently called for strengthening relations with China.—*Mary Burdman*

FIGURE 1

Participating Nations in 'ASEAN-Plus-3'



infrastructure to the nations south of China and north of Thailand. India's cultural and historic relations in the area facilitate New Delhi's strengthening its ties with these nations. There is also an indication that the Mekong Basin nations, particularly Thailand, persuaded India to start the cooperative agreement. There exists now a general consensus, which did not exist at all in the post-Pokhran II days, that India has a greater role to play in Southeast Asia. A Thai official told local reporters recently that "as an emerging power in the region, India cannot be ignored by ASEAN." He said that Thailand believes that "India can play a very important role in the international community."

The ASEAN Angle

In Vietnam, as well in Indonesia, Prime Minister Vajpayee emphasized two other items: support for India to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and to develop stronger ties with ASEAN. In Viet-

nam, the response was wholly supportive. Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, speaking at a banquet in honor of the Indian Premier, said that India "deserves membership on all important economic and political forums in the Southeast Asian region." In an interview endorsing the same view, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai pointed out that India's economic and trade relations with ASEAN remain modest—accounting for "less than 1% of ASEAN's total trade value." The Prime Minister said that India needed to increase its economic linkages, to increase interaction with ASEAN.

Indonesian President Abdurahman Wahid, who had visited India last year, told the Indian news daily *The Hindu*, that if India wants to eventually have a separate summit with ASEAN, its economic relations with the regional grouping must create the groundwork for such an interaction. He said, "It has to be understood that no decision in ASEAN can be taken by one side. Although I am very preferable to the idea of putting India there, but India is a part of the SAARC [South Asian Association of Regional Countries]. And the relationship between India and the SAARC should be considered. That's the point of Malaysia."

If history is any indicator, India's relations with ASEAN have improved whenever the region is at peace, and

external interference in the region was minimal. Following the Cold War, India's relations with ASEAN improved rapidly. Dialog partnership with ASEAN, membership in the Asian Regional Forum, and a number of defense-related bilateral agreements have helped to bring India under the focus of the Southeast Asian nations. But, the economic linkages have not strengthened significantly. Moreover, as President Wahid pointed out, if India wants to be a partner with ASEAN, it must vitalize the SAARC. That means, resolving India's relations with Pakistan, the second-most powerful nation in the grouping.

Prime Minister Vajpayee, nonetheless, is keen to revitalize India-Southeast Asia relations. He is scheduled to visit Kuala Lumpur on Feb. 7-10. It is evident from President Wahid's remarks that New Delhi will have to lay the foundation for a strong infrastructure and economic relationship with Southeast Asia, and Malaysia is a key element to that.