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## **Shifting Thai-Indian Relations: From Differing Perceptions to Bridging Roles?**

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*Thailand and India are rediscovering each other. Building on their common cultural traditions, both are poised to expand their relationship on the economic and political fronts. If the two countries can rebuild their ties in such a way that they can bridge their two regions – Southeast Asia and South Asia – the fruit can be more than peace and regional stability.*

THAILAND and India, two countries with long historical and cultural ties, have rediscovered each other. They are now working closer for mutual benefits as well as for peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia and in South Asia. Thai Prime Minister, Surayuth Chulanond's visit to India in June 2007 confirmed that Thai-Indian relations were back in the mainstream. India was the third major country in Asia that the Thai Prime Minister had visited after Japan and China, in addition to neighbouring ASEAN, since his appointment in October 2006.

### **The Cultural bond**

Although diplomatic relations began after the end of the Second World War, Thai-Indian cultural and trade relations have dated back many centuries. The Thais generally believed that the Indian king, Ashoka the Great, had dispatched a Buddhist mission led by the Venerables Sona and Uttara to Chao Phya River Basin, then known as Suwannaphumi or Golden Land. Buddhism was firmly established before the Thais settled in the area. Thai communities and kingdoms, Sukhothai (1237-1350) and Ayudhya (1350-1767) were influenced by both Buddhism and Hinduism. Indeed, India's cultural influence is pervasive in Thai society.

Thailand established diplomatic relations with India on August 1, 1947, even before India gained independence on August 15, 1947. Since then, diplomatic relations have generally been cordial, although there have been mood swings between closeness and warmth on the one hand, and coolness and distance on the other, depending on the international environment and domestic politics.

### **Three Phases of Relations**

The 60-year diplomatic relations could be divided into three periods.

In the first period between 1947 to 1957, relations were cordial and correct. Thailand was one of the first Asian countries to recognise and establish diplomatic relations with India, which saw Thailand as a friend and supporter of Indian independence. However, the Cold War tension slowly spread to Asia. The Communist victory in mainland China in 1949 and the spread of communism affected the

perceptions of Thai and Indian leaders.

Thailand, a small state, felt uncertain about its security and Thai leaders perceived the expansion of communist influence as a potential source of regional instability. Thailand decided to rely on an external regional power, the United States, and joined the multilateral collective defence with the US and western allies in the form of the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954. India, on the other hand, seeking to manage the Cold War tension, co-organised the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. The Thai foreign minister Prince Wan Waithayakorn was invited to participate where, on the urging of Indian Prime Minister Nehru, he had dinner with Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Premier, to clear away suspicion.

In the second period between 1958 to 1986, relations turned cold and distant. Thai military leaders, pursuing an anti-communist policy, allied Thailand with the US and opted for a bilateral collective defence through the Thanad-Rusk Joint Communique in 1962. This allowed the US to reaffirm its security commitment and obligation to Thailand. India went ahead with its non-aligned policy by helping to set up the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961.

Differing foreign policies caused Thailand and India to drift apart. India opposed the US in the Vietnam War in the 1960s but Thailand supported and assisted it. Thailand opposed the Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia after Vietnam invaded and occupied that country in the 1980s but India supported and recognized it. Differing perceptions on international issues also caused a cooling of relations during this period.

In the third period from 1987 to the present, Thai-Indian diplomatic relations became warmer, closer and friendlier. The rapprochement began with the visit by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1986, the first-ever by an Indian prime minister. This paved the way for a historic visit by Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan in March 1989, the first Thai prime minister to do so. In April 1993 Prime Minister Narasimha Rao came to Thailand. These visits were important milestones in bilateral relations. Three factors can be cited for propelling Thailand and India for a re-engagement.

### **Factors behind Re-engagement**

First, the global strategic changes especially the demise of communism in Eastern Europe and the fragmentation of Soviet Union, had a great impact on Thai and Indian foreign policies. India realized that it could no longer rely upon its old friends from the Soviet bloc and needed to look for new ones. Thailand also saw the potential of India for political and economic partnership and as a gateway to South Asia.

The second factor was the changing Indian perception of the world and of Asia. The “Look East” policy initiated by Prime Minister Rao reoriented India toward Southeast Asia and Thailand whose economies were growing and expanding rapidly.

The third factor was India’s economic liberalisation and reforms which were started in 1991 and had contributed to the GDP growth rate of the 1990s averaging six per cent. The expanding economy prompted India to look for economic partners in South East Asia including Thailand.

By the turn of the century, relations gathered pace with more frequent exchanges of high-ranking official visits. Then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra visited India three times in 2001, 2002 and 2005. Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee came to Thailand in 2003 and Manmohan Singh in 2004. In the five-year period from 2001-2005, Thailand and India signed ten agreements of cooperation, including one in 2003 to establish a Thai-Indian Free Trade Area (FTA).

Thai-Indian relations have matured over the years. The renewed relationship since the end of the Cold

War has laid the ground work for closer bilateral and multilateral partnerships. As maritime neighbours, it is natural for their bilateral security cooperation to focus on maritime security, including naval exercises and naval joint patrols at the northern waters off the Malacca Strait. Thailand, along with other regional navies also participated in the bi-annual MILAN exercises conducted off the Andaman & Nicobar islands.

#### Booming trade

Bilateral economic relations have also expanded over the years. In 1992 bilateral trade was only US\$ 400 million but crossed the US\$ 1 billion mark in 2000. In 2006, trade increased to US\$ 3.4 billion. There were many reasons, economic as well as political, for this boom in trade. India was experiencing economic expansion and needed to import more goods and raw materials. Thailand was also experiencing an economic recovery and wanted to expand the economy through trade with old and new partners. The decision in 2003 to negotiate an FTA with India was the political factor contributing to the trade increase.

#### **Conclusion: Bridging two regions**

Diplomatic relations between Thailand and India have weathered many uncertainties and difficulties since 1947. Differing perceptions during the Cold War cooled relations but common interests post-Cold War brought them back together. Their cultural bonds and historical ties have acted as a foundation for bilateral cooperation. In other words, relations proved resilient despite the obstacles and are now poised to advance forward.

The prospects for the future look bright as bilateral relations become more comprehensive. Trade and investment are expected to increase as the bilateral FTA is likely to be concluded by the end of 2007. Frequent consultation and close cooperation will deepen the relationship. Thailand and India are destined to play important roles in their respective regions. They may even cooperate to bridge the two regions of South and Southeast Asia. If they succeed in this, they could bring about economic development, enduring peace and regional stability.

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