

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.*

## Delhi-Bangkok Partnership: A New Strategic Calculus?

*By Prem SINGH GILL*

### SYNOPSIS

*China's assertiveness elevates India's partnership with Thailand to strategic significance. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought to leverage BIMSTEC to convert a friendly relationship into a potential regional counterweight against China. Is this partnership meaningful or merely symbolic? While challenging India's "Act East" policy capabilities, it raises the question: Can it effectively counter Chinese hegemony, or will economic realities prevail?*

### COMMENTARY

The recent meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra in Bangkok marks a significant diplomatic milestone that warrants deeper examination. While the formal upgrading of bilateral ties to a "Strategic Partnership" suggests a transformation in the relationship, the substance behind it requires critical assessment.

The elevation of India-Thailand relations occurs against an increasingly complex Indo-Pacific region characterised by Chinese assertiveness and American strategic recalibration. Thailand has historically been careful not to align overtly with any particular strategic bloc. As for India, its "Act East" policy represents a concerted effort to strengthen its presence in Southeast Asia as part of a broader strategy to counterbalance China's growing influence. The timing of this partnership upgrade thus assumes particular significance as both nations navigate the intricate geopolitics of the region.

A critical examination of the diplomatic language used during the Modi-Shinawatra meeting reveals noteworthy rhetorical positioning. Modi's emphasis on *vikaasvaad*,

not *vistaarvaad* ("development-ism", not expansionism), appears to be a thinly veiled reference to China's territorial ambitions in the South China Sea and beyond.

By articulating support for a "free, open, inclusive, and rules-based order" in the Indo-Pacific, both leaders were signalling their alignment with the broader strategic framework advocated by the United States and its partners. However, the absence of explicit criticism directed at China suggests a diplomatic balancing act, particularly for Thailand, which maintains substantial economic ties with Beijing.

The proposed establishment of a "Strategic Dialogue" between their security agencies points to a potential deepening of defence and intelligence cooperation. This institutionalisation of security engagement represents the most concrete outcome of the partnership upgrade. Nevertheless, critical questions remain regarding the scope, authority, and operational parameters of such a dialogue. Previous instances of strategic dialogues between Asian powers have sometimes failed to translate into substantive security cooperation, often remaining symbolic gestures rather than functional mechanisms for policy coordination.

### **Are Moves Against Beijing's Economic Clout Symbolic?**

Economically, the partnership appears centred on enhancing connectivity between India's northeastern states and Thailand. This focus on developing physical and economic linkages could transform a historically underdeveloped region. The northeastern states of India form a critical geographic junction connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia, and their development has been a long-standing challenge for successive Indian governments. Previous initiatives to enhance cross-border connectivity had frequently encountered implementation hurdles, including infrastructure deficits, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and security concerns.

Hitherto, diplomatic interactions have emphasised the cultural dimension of the India-Thailand relationship. The performance of *Ramakien* (the Thai version of *Ramayana*), the special postage stamp featuring Ramayana murals, and Modi's reference to Buddhist connections all underscore the deployment of cultural diplomacy as a tool for relationship-building.

While these cultural linkages provide a foundation of shared heritage and values, their translation into tangible policy outcomes remains uncertain. While valuable for fostering people-to-people connections, cultural diplomacy must complement substantive cooperation in strategic and economic domains to constitute a meaningful partnership.

The regional context of this bilateral development is equally significant. The Sixth Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit held on April 4, 2025, provided the setting for the Strategic Partnership, highlighting India's strategy of leveraging regional forums to advance its diplomatic objectives.

However, BIMSTEC's historical record as an effective regional organisation has been mixed, with limited concrete achievements since its establishment. Whether this proposed maritime agreement represents a breakthrough in regional cooperation or

merely adds to the architecture of underutilised institutional frameworks remains to be seen.

### **The Moral Paradox of Modi's Eastern Pivot**

Modi's meetings with leaders from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar during the same visit to Bangkok reflect India's multifaceted regional engagement strategy. Particularly noteworthy was his meeting with Myanmar's military leader, Min Aung Hlaing, which raised questions about India's commitment to democratic principles in its foreign policy.

While pragmatic engagement with Myanmar's military regime might serve India's security and connectivity interests, it potentially complicates the normative dimension of India's regional leadership claims. This tension between values and interests represents a persistent challenge in India's foreign policy, particularly as it seeks to position itself as a responsible stakeholder in the international order.

The geopolitical implications of the India-Thailand strategic partnership extend beyond bilateral relations. For India, it represents another step in constructing a network of partnerships across the Indo-Pacific to strengthen its strategic position vis-à-vis China. For Thailand, closer ties with India offer a potential counterbalance to overdependence on China, particularly as concerns about Beijing's economic leverage grow among Southeast Asian nations. The partnership also reinforces the emerging pattern of middle-power coalitions in the Indo-Pacific, as countries seek to navigate great power competition through diversified alignments rather than exclusive alliances.

### **The Challenges to India's Regional Ambitions**

Developing this strategic partnership's full potential faces several challenges. Historical experience suggests that India's diplomatic initiatives often suffer from implementation deficits, with ambitious policy announcements not always matched by sustained follow-through.

Thailand's complex domestic politics and traditional foreign policy of balancing between major powers may also limit the depth of its strategic convergence with India. Additionally, economic complementarities between the two economies remain underdeveloped, potentially hampering the economic foundation necessary for a robust strategic partnership.

The elevation of India-Thailand relations must also be evaluated against the backdrop of India's broader regional strategy. As India pursues strategic partnerships with multiple Southeast Asian nations, questions arise about its capacity to sustain these relationships with meaningful resources and policy attention.

The risk of diplomatic overextension is real, particularly given India's limited economic and military capabilities compared to China. Furthermore, the effectiveness of India's regional strategy ultimately depends on its ability to offer compelling economic opportunities to partners, an area where China currently maintains significant advantages.

## Conclusion

While the elevation of India-Thailand relations to a strategic partnership is a notable diplomatic achievement, its long-term significance will depend on translating the diplomatic rhetoric into concrete cooperation. Beyond the symbolism of cultural connections and shared historical heritage, the partnership's value will be determined by progress in economic integration, defence collaboration, and coordination on regional issues.

As both countries navigate the evolving Indo-Pacific order, the depth and substance of their strategic alignment will be tested against the practical challenges of implementation and the complex geopolitical forces reshaping the region. The true measure of this partnership's success will lie not in diplomatic declarations but in tangible outcomes that advance the strategic interests of both nations while contributing to regional stability and prosperity.

---

*Prem Singh Gill is a visiting scholar at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He is a member of the Indian diaspora community in Thailand, representing the third generation of his family in the country.*

---