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Singapore-India Relations: A Return to History

MING HWA TING[1]

University of Adelaide, Australia

Michael Leifer observes Singapore-India relations to be 'diplomatically distant'. This observation was correct during the Cold War when differing political ideologies made it difficult for these two countries to develop close relations. With the end of the Cold War, bilateral relations improved rapidly, especially on the economic front. Consequently, most literature focuses on the economic interaction between them, at the expense of other significant developments on the political, military as well as social and cultural fronts. In order to better understand Singapore-India relations in the present, a well-rounded approach is necessary. Hence, this article addresses this lacuna in the present scholarship by providing a comprehensive overview that takes into account developments in both the areas of high and low politics. In so doing, this article argues that Singapore-India relations are now no longer 'diplomatically distant', but instead mirror the close relations they had during the colonial period, and so represent a 'return to history' instead.

***Keywords:** International Relations, Cold War, Collaboration, Singapore, India*

Michael Leifer beschreibt die Beziehungen zwischen Singapur und Indien als „diplomatisch distanziert". Diese Beobachtung war während des Kalten Krieges korrekt, als unterschiedliche politische Ideologien eine enge Zusammenarbeit dieser beiden Länder erschwerten. Mit dem Ende des Kalten Krieges verbesserten sich bilaterale Beziehungen – vor allem im wirtschaftlichen Bereich – rapide. Aus diesem Grund konzentrieren sich die meisten Publikationen auf die wirtschaftliche Interaktion der beiden Länder und vernachlässigen gleichzeitig weitere wichtige Entwicklungen in der politischen, militärischen, sozialen und kulturellen Sphäre. Um die Beziehungen zwischen Singapur und Indien besser zu verstehen, ist ein vielseitigerer Ansatz notwendig. Der vorliegende Artikel versucht diese Lücke gegenwärtiger Forschung zu schließen und einen umfassenden Überblick der Entwicklungen in den Bereichen high politics und low politics zu geben. Dabei wird argumentiert, dass die Beziehungen zwischen Singapur und Indien nicht mehr länger „diplomatisch distanziert" seien, sondern – im Gegenteil – die enge Beziehung der beiden Länder während der Kolonialzeit widerspiegelt. Demnach repräsentieren sie eine „Rückkehr zur Geschichte".

***Schlagworte:** Internationale Beziehungen, Kalter Krieg, Zusammenarbeit, Singapur, Indien*

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1 Ming Hwa Ting is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Asian Studies, the University of Adelaide, Australia. He is also the inaugural Bill Cowan-Barr Smith Library Fellow, and a member of the Pacific Forum-CSIS 'Young Leaders' program. Contact: ming.ting@adelaide.edu.au

Introduction

Michael Leifer's authoritative work on Singapore's foreign policy describes Singapore-India relations to be 'diplomatically distant' (Leifer, 2000, p. 129). A survey of works on Singapore's foreign policy also supports Leifer's belief since 'India' only appears sporadically in the indexes (Ganesan, 2005; Latif, 2007; Regnier, 1991; B. Singh, 1999). This lack of scholarly interest was understandable during the Cold War, when differing ideologies prevented the two countries from developing warm bilateral ties even though they were historically very close. However, with the Cold War over, both states are now making up for lost time as demonstrated by the great strides made in their bilateral relations, especially on the economic front. Predictably, most scholarly attention has focused on this issue (Asher & Raja, 1994; Yahya, 2008), at the expense of significant developments in other aspects of their bilateral relations. This article addresses this lacuna in the literature by presenting a comprehensive overview of their bilateral relationship that takes into account not only developments on the economic front, but also developments on the political, defence, as well as social and cultural fronts. Arguably, such rapid improvements are possible because they are congruent with Singapore's objectives of achieving a hospitable regional order through the establishment of a balance of power, and distancing itself against allegations of being a Sinic outpost. Singapore's present engagement of India therefore echoes the previously close links between them, and so represents a return to history.

India-Singapore Relations: A Primer

Singapore's present closer links with India are not unexpected as their ties have 'ancient and deep roots' (Shanmugaratnam, 2007, para. 2). Britain founded Singapore to service the lucrative India-China trade route. As was to be expected, during British rule, Singapore's government, as well as its penal code, were based on the Indian model. Furthermore, due to the presence of economic opportunities, many ethnic Indians sought employment in Singapore. Hence, it is clear that Singapore had close links with India since its founding. Singapore did not forget its 'debt' to India after becoming independent in 1965. On Indira Gandhi's 1966 visit to Singapore,

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew affirmed the important similarities between them. Correspondingly, in 1970, when V. S. Giri visited Singapore, the first by an Indian President, Singapore's President Benjamin Sheares also emphasized their historically close links. However, even though bilateral relations at the official level remained correct, they were neither substantial nor warm during the Cold War due to ideological differences.

Bilateral relations only improved after the Cold War as both states made a conscious commitment to increase their interactions. Hence, George Yeo, in his former capacity as Singapore's Minister for Trade and Industry, was able to emphasize the close historical links between Singapore and India and stated it was logical for them to cooperate in the contemporary context (Yeo, 2004, para. 3). Elaborating on Yeo's observation, Raymond Lim, Singapore's Minister of State for Trade and Foreign Affairs, provides a more detailed explanation as to why Singapore and India are developing closer bilateral relations so rapidly after the Cold War by outlining Singapore's '4C' value proposition – Capital, Connectivity, Capabilities, Comfort – to India.

As a regional financial hub, Singapore's banking and financial markets are well-developed and make it easier for Indian companies to raise capital. Given Singapore's excellent geographical position, it has extensive transport links with many states, making it a good transport hub for Indian exports. Furthermore, Singapore also has a dense network of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that stretches from Asia to Europe and to North America, providing Indian firms in Singapore access to major markets. Without any natural resources except for the human variety, Singapore has invested much attention into improving its human capital, a move that complements India's role as a major actor in a knowledge-based economy.

The above three factors are very important. However, they can also be found or replicated in neighbouring states. Comfort, therefore, holds the most value. Comfort arises due to the long history of contact between Singapore and India during the colonial period. Consequently, Indian culture, values and cuisine have taken root in Singapore and this high level of familiarity is a big pull factor (Lim, 2004, Comfort, para. 1). "Just as India has looked east, Singapore has looked west towards India. Our ties are intertwined through history, language and culture" (Goh, 2004, para. 5). Hence, this new wave of interaction between India and Singapore after the Cold

War can be characterized, in Kagan's parlance (2008), though out of context, as an optimistic 'return to history'.

India's Cold War Foreign Policy

The current close relations between Singapore and India are in sharp contrast to their distant relations during the Cold War. When India became independent in 1947, it regarded non-alignment as a manifestation of its sovereign ability to implement its foreign policy that was formerly under British control. With India's professed commitment towards non-alignment, it had strong reservations against policies that entailed involving foreign powers in Asia. Consequently, India opposed the establishment of multilateral institutions such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). India perceived SEATO, which was modelled after NATO as a continuation of Western presence in Asia and was anathema to what India stood for (Ayoob, 1990, p. 10; Jain, 2008, p. 31). This was because Western states such as Australia, France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States were members of this organization. SEATO's primary objective was to block communist gains by establishing a system of collective defence. With Pakistan as a member, India naturally felt threatened. At the same time, India's Soviet links also meant that inherent antagonism was present. During this period, although Singapore was not a member of SEATO, it identified more closely with Western states such as the United States and Britain, which India did not have good relations with. Due to such differences, it was politically difficult for India to have close diplomatic relations with newly independent South-East Asian states such as Singapore that was pro-West during the Cold War.

Apart from political considerations, India's inward looking economic policy further reduced interaction between India and South-East Asian states. Upon its independence in 1947, India used import substitution to start the industrialization process and be less economically dependent on Western states (Desai, 1972). India's decision to do so resulted from its experience with the British East India Company (EIC) during the colonial period. Then, large-scale importation of British manufactured goods undermined the viability of small-scale Indian enterprises (Clark, 2007, pp. 319-327; Hagerty, 2005, p. 14). In the words of Karl Marx, "England has broken down

the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing" (Marx, 1965, p. 25). Elaborating, Marx notes that the "hand-loom and the spinning wheel … were the pivots of the structure of that society… [and it] was the British intruder who broke up the Indian hand-loom and destroyed the spinning wheel" (Marx, 1965, p. 27). Furthermore, dependency theory, which advocated newly-independent states to decouple their national economies from the world market was en vogue then. Due to the combination of these two factors, it was unsurprising that India developed reservations towards integrating itself with the global economy, one that Western states dominated.

Ironically, India needed external assistance as it lacked the indigenous capacity to develop its heavy industries. Given its wary attitudes towards the West, India sought assistance from the Soviet Union instead, whose help was instrumental in India's establishment of the steel and heavy machines plants in Bhilai and Ranchi. A sign of the closer bilateral relations was that the Soviet Union became a major destination of Indian exports during the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, the percentage of Indian exports to Britain fell drastically, from 26.9 percent in 1960 to 11.1 percent in 1971, while its exports to the Soviet Union increased from 4.5 percent to 13.7 percent within (Nayyar, 1976, p. 29), which was unsurprising since they signed a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation in 1971. The objective of this treaty was to allow the Soviet Union to establish a strong geopolitical presence in South Asia, which checked American and Chinese involvement in the region, most notably during the conflict between India and Pakistan in the same year. These closer links between India and the Soviet Union came about after the United States supplied arms to Pakistan during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war. To counter Pakistan's offensive, India looked towards the Soviet Union for the sale of advanced weaponry. Over time, India developed a 'weapon dependence' on the Soviet Union (Jain, 2008, pp. 110-111).

India's Political Alignment with the Soviet Union

Through aligning with the Soviet Union, India was attempting to minimize British and American influence in the sub-continent. In addition, India also sought to prevent China developing closer ties with the Soviet Union and Pakistan. India's objective of cultivating ties with the Soviet Union was therefore to deny or restrict China's

diplomatic presence in South Asia, which India regards as its traditional sphere of influence (Jain, 2008, p. 21).

However, India's Soviet links were detrimental to its relations with South-East Asian states such as Singapore. During the Cold War, the threat of Communist expansion, as reflected by military situations in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, meant that South-East Asian states considered India, with its Soviet relations, to be politically suspect. In December 1979, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan became another obstacle for the normalization of relations between India and South-East Asian states as Soviet action went against the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) commitment to non-intervention and respect for sovereignty (Koh, 1978).

India's formal recognition in July 1980 of the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime that overthrew the Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia also strained its relations with South-East Asian states (Latif, 2008, pp. 72-73). Although the Khmer Rouge government committed genocide against its own people, Singapore consistently maintained that the lack of effective internal governance standards did not justify Vietnam's military intervention that infringed upon Cambodia's sovereignty (Koh, 1980). India's recognition of the Heng Samrin regime was therefore a serious political faux pas that led to a further deterioration of their ties (Warbrick, 1981, pp. 238-239; Yong & Rao, 1995, pp. 28-29).

Senior Singapore diplomats such as Tommy Koh and Sinnathamby Rajaratnam officially condemned these "aggressive" acts in various multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement. As a miniscule state, Singapore has heightened sensitivity towards any challenge to a state's sovereignty. Given Singapore's stance against external intervention (Rajaratmam, 1979, pp. 637-638; Koh, 1978; 1980), India's association with, and tacit approval and support of Soviet policies minimized any opportunities for constructive engagement between Singapore and India; relations were therefore mutually "uncomfortable and insecure" during this period (Devare, 2006, p. xi).

India's 'Look East' Policy

However, this period of poor bilateral relations, in hindsight, proved to be an interlude. With the Soviet Union's dissolution, the Cold War ended. India was, according to C.

Raja Mohan, "in deep mourning" (Mohan, 2007, p. 102). It lost a valuable and long-time political and economic ally. A stark choice confronted India. It could either "persist with an inward-looking policy that marginalizes the country and slides it inexorably into increasing international irrelevance. Or it can take a good hard look at itself and at other former developing countries that have achieved success essentially by dint of their own efforts" (Thakur, 1992, p. 165). Hence, Manmohan Singh, the then-Finance Minister, introduced economic liberalisation to overcome the problems associated with the previously autarkic policy. One of the most significant new initiatives introduced in the wake of India's changing orientation was the 'Look East' policy that sought to increase India's economic interaction with South-East Asian states through pursuing economic liberalization

The 'Look East' policy was not entirely new. Before the Cold War ended, India had already begun to make overtures to South-East Asian states through its 'Look East Destiny' policy (Shaumian, 1988, p. 1167). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, South-East Asian states such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia were experiencing rapid and sustained economic growth. In contrast, India's economic performance was very poor. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao then launched the 'Look East' policy in 1992 to increase India's engagement with these economically dynamic states, especially Singapore, so as to learn from their economic and development experiences (Mahbubani, 2008). Apart from reaping economic benefits, India also wanted to improve its bilateral relations with them as well so as not to remain diplomatically isolated after the Cold War. China was increasing its presence in South-East Asia after Deng Xiaoping introduced economic reforms in 1978. Having lost a major ally in the Soviet Union, it was not in India's interest to have China dominate the region, especially one that is so geographically close. Furthermore, China also gained significant diplomatic momentum and by the early 1990s, it had established formal relations with economically vibrant Asian states such as South Korea, Indonesia and Singapore. India had to respond to such geopolitical changes.

At the end of the Cold War, apart from membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India was not party to any other economic blocs. By implementing the 'Look East' policy, India planned to leverage on its new ties with South-East Asian states to gain membership in various groupings such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) that

would be economically and politically beneficial for India (Gupta, 1997, p. 307; Institute of Southeast Asian Studies [ISEAS], 2003, p. 42). India's fundamental objective was to first establish an economic presence in the region, a conduit that could then lead to an increased political presence at a later stage (Mohan, 2003, pp. 211-213).

When India first implemented its 'Look East' policy, it focused most attention on Singapore. Apart from Singapore's excellent geographical location and its national role conception as a trading state, it is also the economically most developed state in South-East Asia, and so it was natural for the city-state to be India's focal entry point into the region. Manmohan Singh believed that to "market New India, [we] would have to begin in Singapore" (M. Singh quoted in Goh, 2008, para. 23), India's post-Cold War interaction and engagement with Singapore provided the former with access to the region, and laid the foundations for the later establishment of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and the BIMSTEC Forum, which entrenched India's presence in South-East Asia. With deepening levels of interactions, India is rapidly becoming a major actor in South-East Asia. Hence, Manmohan Singh believes "the 'Look East' policy is more than a slogan, or a foreign policy orientation. It has a strong economic rationale and commercial content. We wish to look east because of the centuries of interactions between us" (M. Singh, 2004b, para. 4).

Economic Developments

Michael Leifer (2000, p. 14) observed that: "Singapore is primarily about the business of business", and for Singapore to carry on with its business, Yusuf Ishak, Singapore's first President, opined that:

> [I]n the long run, our viability depends upon having the widest spread of economic links with the largest number of countries, that is, the world, so that the economic levers will not be in the hands of a few governments (Ishak quoted in B. Singh, 1999, p. 26).

This observation is hardly surprising since Singapore is a trading state. Apart from not wanting a rising China to dominate the region politically, Singapore also does not want China to dominate the region economically. This is because China implemented its economic reforms before India did and so enjoys a substantial advantage. Furthermore, Singapore's attempts at breaking into the Chinese market have not

been very successful. Singapore's experience in cooperating with China to set up the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP) is instructive. Despite having the professed support of the Chinese government as well as perceived cultural affinity between them, the project did not pan out the way Singapore envisioned. Despite receiving endorsement and support from the two governments, Singapore discovered that China's business, as well as its political climates, were very different from Singapore's. Cooperation was difficult due to the diffusion of control over the project from the central government to the local government. The SIP was supposed to receive preferential treatment but the local Suzhou government set up a similar industrial park – Suzhou New District – modelled after the SIP nearby, and competed directly with the SIP for investments and funding, which caused Lee Kuan Yew to admit that this joint project was 'a chastening experience', and at best, 'a partial success' (Lee, 2000, pp. 723-724).
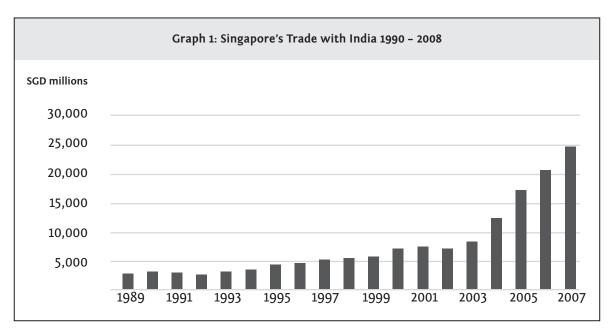
Even though Singapore had close links with China, Singapore was still not as close as either Hong Kong or Taiwan were – their guanxi with Chinese businesses are more developed as compared to Singapore (Kumar, Siddique, & Hedrick-Wong, 2005, pp. 29-63). Consequently, Singapore does face significant barriers in its entry into the lucrative Chinese market. Furthermore, as economic competition increases in major Chinese cities, it becomes increasingly difficult for Singapore to differentiate itself from the competition. At the same time, Singapore is also unable to match the pace and size of investments from Hong Kong and Taiwan into major Chinese markets, and so it is difficult for the city-state to play a prominent role in the rapidly maturing, and therefore increasingly competitive, Chinese economy (Okposin, 1999, p. 177).

Given the problems Singapore faced in China, it has been active in exploring new and emerging markets. During the early 1990s, India was one such market. Apart from gaining economic benefits through closer commercial links with India, these also play a significant geopolitical role in promoting a hospitable regional order for Singapore. It allows Singapore to project a multi-ethnic image rather than a mono-ethnic image, which re-assures neighbouring Muslim states that it is not overly enthusiastic in capitalizing on the Chinese economic bandwagon. India is a good candidate as it has the second largest number of Muslims in the world after Indonesia, which allows Singapore to distance itself from the regional perception that it is a "Third China" (B. Singh, 1994, p. 122) By cultivating closer relations with India, Singapore is thus not only able to re-assure its own Malay minority, it is also able to reduce tension with

Malaysia and Indonesia, making for a win-win situation (Asher & Raja, 1994, p. 1).

With the introduction of India's 'Look East' policy, Singapore recognized and seized the opportunity to increase economic interaction with it. Expectedly then, economic links constitute the foundation of Singapore-India relations, and on May 27, 2003, Prime Ministers Vajpayee and Goh Chok Tong commissioned a joint study group to examine the viability of the two states in signing a Closer Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) to foster greater economic cooperation. After 13 rounds of formal negotiations, it was concluded on June 29, 2005. This agreement was significant as it represented the first time India had entered into such a comprehensive economic agreement with another state; likewise, it was Singapore's first such agreement with a South Asian state.

A sign of the rapidly developing economic integration after signing the CECA is that India became Singapore's eleventh largest trading partner in 2007, and the 2007 bilateral trade figures stood at SGD 23.9 billion, which were almost 20 percent higher than the 2006 trade figures (Singapore Government, 2008, para. 4), and the general upward trend can be seen in Graph 1.

Graph 1: Singapore's Trade with India 1990 – 2008

Source: Own compilation from the Singapore Department of Statistics

The Singapore-India CECA therefore represented the first step in economic integration between South and South-East Asia. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

noted, "CECA is a strong signal that India is committed to continuing economic liberalization and market reforms. It heralds further moves by India to engage the outside world, not just ASEAN, but also with major partners" ("The Inside story," 2005).

Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister of State for Trade and Industry for Singapore, regards the CECA as "a pathfinder for the ASEAN-India FTA" (Balakrishnan, 2003, Singapore-India CECA, para. 2), representing a step in the right direction as India aims to increase and formalize its economic interaction with the region. Signing an India-ASEAN FTA is important. It establishes the framework for future economic activities and allows all states involved greater ease into the respective markets, thereby increasing mutual interaction within a rules-based environment that makes for enhanced regional order and stability in the long-term.

Political Developments

Apart from tapping into economic opportunities present in India's vast domestic market, Singapore's early engagement of India was a reiteration of the city-state's consistent belief of having a balance of power in the region. In order to achieve this objective, all legitimate actors must be present. Given India's territorial size and its geographical proximity to South-East Asia, it is one such actor. Hence, it is imperative for Singapore that India is able to participate meaningfully in regional affairs as China is becoming increasingly influential in South-East Asia through adroit diplomacy and the lure of access to its vast domestic market, as well as that of the Greater China region.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the pre-eminent regional multilateral institution, and India's participation in the regional structures constitutes a concrete step to realize the aim of a stable balance of power. Singapore, as India's former Country Co-ordinator, was to act as a sponsor for India's involvement with the region. Singapore has therefore

played a leading role in ensuring India's inclusion in ASEAN, first as Sectoral Dialogue Partner (at the Singapore Summit in 1992) and then as Full Dialogue Partner (Bangkok Summit, December 1995), which in turn ensured India's membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and in India's inclusion in the East Asia Summit (EAS) [in 2005]. Singapore has also supported India's participation in the APEC Working Groups and India's candidature in other multilateral fora, including UN organizations" (High Commission

of India in Singapore, 2008, para. 5).

Due to Singapore's efforts in involving India with the region, its links with ASEAN have improved considerably. For instance, India proposed holding annual ASEAN-India summits to increase the number of communication channels between them. South-East Asian states welcomed India's initiative and the first such summit was held in Phnom Penh in 2002. As Devare (2002, p. 71) notes, the venue for the first ASEAN-India summit in Cambodia is very significant. After all, it was India's stance on the Cambodian issue that was responsible for the delay in normalizing relations between them. Hence, holding the inaugural session in Cambodia effectively demonstrated that South-East Asian states and India have moved on, which augurs well for their future relations. These annual ASEAN-India Summits have fostered greater interaction and cooperation between ASEAN states and India in a number of diverse areas, and is in sharp contrast to their relations during the Cold War period. Judging from the rapid pace in the improvement of their bilateral ties, the prognosis for future bilateral ties is optimistic. Despite China's head start in engaging the South-East Asian states, India's recent success indicates that it is possible for the latter to close the gap and catch up with China, and serve as a counterweight to the latter.

In a highly symbolic act to demonstrate India's geographical continuity with South-East Asia, "draw dramatic attention to [their] geographical proximity" (Vajpayee quoted in Ong, 2004, para. 3), as well as to "rediscover the essential oneness of our integrated region" (M. Singh, 2004a, para 4), India proposed an ASEAN-India overland rally. This idea was welcomed by the South-East Asian states, and it was held in 2004 to coincide with the third ASEAN-India Summit. The rally started in Guwahati, capital city of Assam, traditionally India's gateway to South-East Asia, and went through Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and concluded in Indonesia, via a ferry ride to Batam. The rally demonstrated the pace and extent of the improvement in bilateral ties since India implemented its 'Look East' policy.

East Asia Summit

As a hedge against possible Chinese domination, Singapore lobbied for India's inclusion in the inaugural East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005. ASEAN states, as the

primary proponents of this new grouping that also included China, Korea and Japan, as well as Australia, New Zealand and India, outlined the three main conditions for inclusion. Firstly, states must have substantive relations with South-East Asian states; secondly, they must have already achieved Full Dialogue Partner status in ASEAN; and lastly, they must have acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Directly supporting India's membership in the EAS, Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo stated that "India obviously qualifies on all three counts and it will be included in the first EAS". Yeo also reiterated that ASEAN states retained the prerogative to decide on the membership of this regional bloc "to ensure that [it] remains in the driver's seat of the EAS process" ("India included," 2005). More importantly, India's inclusion signals to China the ASEAN states' collective commitment to stand firm against domination by any one state within this grouping (Malik, 2006a, p. 208).

The EAS was intended to be a regional institution that fostered interaction and cooperation in Asia-Pacific. However, Mohan Malik argues that given the historic rivalry between states such as Japan, China, and India, this new regional organisation "created more discord than accord" (Malik, 2006b, p. 1), as demonstrated by China's behaviour at the inaugural summit. Then, China attempted to reduce India's potential influence in the EAS by proposing that the existing members of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), of which it was a member, and not the newly-expanded 16-member EAS grouping to "control the formation of any Asian community-building exercise" (Malik, 2005). China's objective was to undermine India's ability to dilute Chinese influence within this fledgling regional organization, and to confine India to an outsider role in East Asia, an area China perceives to be its historical sphere of influence (ISEAS, 2004, p. 37; ISEAS, 2008, p. 52; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005, p. 1).

Just as China wants to consolidate its position, India is also very keen to establish a strong presence in South-East Asia "because of the uncertainties in the future, and especially out of her deep concern towards China's role, the Indian government wants to see a multi-lateral security order in Asia-Pacific region through building partnerships with ASEAN" (Latif, 2004). India therefore attaches much importance to its participation in the EAS, which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh describes as "one of the most ambitious exercises of community building and integration ever attempted in Asia" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2007, para. 4).

From Singapore's perspective, it was important for India to be involved in the EAS

from its inception. For a balance of power to be present, no single state can be the preponderant power. Without a hegemonic power, inter-state interactions are more likely to be regulated in a manner acceptable to all states involved. By insisting on India's participation at the outset despite Chinese opposition, Singapore has sent a clear message that regional states did not wish for China to dominate the grouping. Lee Kuan Yew elaborated:

> *It happened in an unplanned, almost accidental, way. Abdullah Badawi, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, offered to host an East Asia summit: ASEAN plus three – the three being China, Japan and South Korea. China's premier Wen Jiabao, then offered to host the second summit. That would move the center [sic] of gravity away from Southeast to Northeast Asia and make some countries anxious. We agreed that we should also invite India, Australia and New Zealand and keep the center [sic] in ASEAN; also India would be a useful balance to China's heft. This is a getting-together of countries that believe their economic and cultural relations will grow over the years. And this will be a restoration of two ancient civilizations: China and India. With their revival, their influence will again spread into Southeast Asia. It would mean great prosperity for the region, but could also mean a tussle for power. Therefore, we think that it best that from the beginning, we bring all the parties in together ... It's a neater balance (Lee Kuan Yew quoted in Elegant & Elliott, 2005, para. 2).*

Hence, it is clear that bilateral relations improved so rapidly due to the dovetailing of their respective strategic interests, which was also aided by their historically close links during the colonial period.

Defence Developments

Apart from increased economic and political links between Singapore and India, bilateral defence relations have also shown rapid improvements, which also demonstrate the strides made in bilateral ties. They are significant, as high levels of trust are needed prior to their establishment. As early as 1994, Singapore and India have conducted annual naval training operations codenamed Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) as part of the Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX). On the tenth anniversary of the ASW, Singapore Ministry of Defence affirmed the exercise's importance as a "platform for the IN (Indian Navy) and the RSN (Republic of Singapore Navy) to interact professionally" and in the process, has also managed to "foster closer relations, mutual understanding and goodwill between the two navies" (Ministry of Defence, 2003). Given the two nations' mutual interest in maintaining the security of the regional sea lanes, naval cooperation has proved to be

mutually advantageous. The close naval collaboration between them was therefore a confidence-building mechanism that later became a model for cooperation among other branches of their militaries.

In 2003, the conclusion of the Defence Cooperation Agreement again improved bilateral defence ties as it facilitated the ensuing establishment of the annual India-Singapore Defence Policy Dialogue. The dialogue aims to provide a regular forum for both sides to discuss defence cooperation as well as regional and defence issues. The first such meeting was conducted in Singapore in March 2004. Due to the presence of these confidence-building mechanisms, Singapore and India were able to further their defence cooperation. In 2004, SINDEX 04 was held in central India. In 2005, new grounds were broken when both militaries conducted their first joint artillery and armour exercises codenamed 'Ex Bold Kurukshetra' and 'Ex Agni Warrior' that were held at Deolali and Babina respectively.
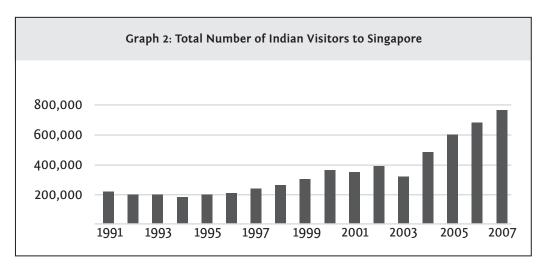
Another sign of the maturing defence ties between them was the signing of the 2007 Joint Military Exercises agreement. It allows the Singapore air force to train at Indian military bases in Kalaikunda, West Bengal, for five years, in return for payment and the understanding that the Singapore air force maintains and upgrades the Indian facilities provided (Shekhar, 2007). This military agreement is significant because it is the first time the Indian government has allowed the stationing of foreign troops on its soil. In November 2008, a three-week long joint air force training exercise was conducted, which Singapore's Ministry of Defence considered as yet another significant milestone in bilateral defence relations (Saad, 2008).

In August 2008, both states entered into another bilateral defence agreement that allowed their infantry forces to undertake joint training exercises in India (Ministry of Defence, 2008). More significantly, India's willingness to allow all three branches of the Singapore military to train there is a strong indicator of this rapidly developing bilateral relationship. In less than 30 years, Singapore-India defence relations have gone from virtually non-existent to being characterized by close and enduring cooperation between all three branches of their military in the present. The establishment of close defence ties indicates the presence of a high level of trust between the two states, and augurs well for even better Singapore-India relations in the future.

Social and Cultural Developments

Improved bilateral ties are not just confined to areas of high politics discussed in previous sections; they are also evident in areas of low politics as there are now more people-to-people contacts between the two states. For instance, there is increased demand for Indian education by Indian expatriates in Singapore, which made it necessary to establish Indian international schools. The establishment of Indian international schools is significant – it not only indicates the sizable presence of Indian nationals in Singapore, but such high demands also indicate that Indian expatriates expect to be based in Singapore for extended periods. As of September 2009, there were three Indian international schools in Singapore. Furthermore, in December 2008, Singapore Press Holdings launched a new weekly newspaper- tabla! - that targets Indian nationals based in Singapore. With the global trend of newspapers companies shutting down due to falling readership, the launch of an Indian weekly therefore provides strong evidence of high levels of people-to-people interaction between Singapore and India in the present context.

Apart from an increasing expatriate population, the number of Indian tourist arrivals to Singapore has also increased as reflected in Graph 2.

Graph 2: Total Number of Indian Visitors to Singapore

Source: Own compilation from the Singapore Department of Statistics

Likewise, just as there are increasing numbers of Indian nationals in Singapore, there are increasing numbers of Singaporean nationals in India as well (Teo, 2008).

In 2005, the Indian High Commission issued 60,000 business and travel visas to Singaporeans, and this figure increased by more than 30 percent in just two years to 80,000 in 2007. These healthy numbers indicate that the people-to-people links between Singapore and India are very strong, and augurs well for the future of their official bilateral ties.

Singapore's Asian Civilisation Museum staging of the 'Nalanda Trail' exhibition in 2007 also supports the above argument that there is increased social and cultural interaction between the two states. The exhibition was a landmark event as it was the first time since 1947 that India had sent such priceless historical artefacts abroad (Ramesh, 2007). This exhibition was possible as the two governments concluded an agreement in 2003 for the loan of such artefacts from the Archaeological Survey of India and the National Museum, New Delhi. Singapore, once again, was the first state to have concluded such a long-term agreement with India (High Commission of India in Singapore, 2003, p.1 ; Ministry of Information, 2003).

As another sign of their rapidly developing bilateral ties on the social front, the Indian government invited Singapore's deputy Prime Minister Jayakumar to be the chief guest of the 2007 Pravasi Bharatiya Divas conference for Indian diasporas and he expressed an interest in hosting the event. Just a year later in 2008, India selected Singapore to be the host – the first time the event had been held in another Asian country. To choose Singapore as the host for this international conference ahead of other Asia-Pacific states provides more evidence that bilateral ties between Singapore and India are rapidly becoming closer (Ramesh, 2008).

Aware of such improvements in their bilateral relations, the Singapore and Indian governments established the India-Singapore Joint Ministerial Committee in order "to take stock of bilateral initiatives, exchange views on regional and international issues, as well as to identify new areas for cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008, Bilateral Relations, para. 2). This joint initiative shows that political elites from both states attach much importance to exploring new ways to consolidate and increase the present levels of cooperation between them. Given the developing diplomatic, economic and people-to-people contacts between Singapore and India, it is more accurate to describe their interactions in the present context as "deep and multifaceted" (Lim, 2004, para. 2), and not as 'diplomatically distant'. In a concrete sign of Singapore's devoting more importance to the Indian sub-continent, the National

University of Singapore set up the Institute of South Asia Studies in July 2004. This new institution "reflects the increasing economic and political importance of South Asia, and the strong historical links between South Asia and Southeast Asia" (Institute of South Asian Studies, 2009, Background, para. 1). In another bid to strengthen ties with the region, this institute set up a new project in November 2009 – South Asia Link –, the brainchild of President Nathan to "make Singapore the focal point for the 30 million members of the South Asian diaspora around the world" ("Project to link South Asians," 2009).

Conclusion

During the Cold War, Singapore and India did not have substantive contact with one another. Therefore it is fair to argue that they were not vital to each other since the more than 40 years of political divergence between them did not affect either state. The sustained period of division indicates that Singapore and India were not inherently pre-disposed to having excellent bilateral relations in the post-colonial context. The current reversal means improvement in their bilateral relations arises from the conscious efforts of both states.

Advancements in the bilateral relations mainly arise from their joint recognition that they share common interests that could be furthered through conscious cooperation. The potentially negative developments arising from China's rise is arguably the fundamental factor that causes the convergence of their national interests. This is because both states are desirous of establishing a stable and durable balance of power to promote order in Asia: Singapore does not want to be dominated by a hegemonic state; India does not want to be marginalized. Concurrently, Singapore's closer engagement of India also allows Singapore to distance itself from the image of being a Sinic outpost that identifies with China. Given the regional ethnic composition, such a policy that distances itself from its ethnic identity is necessary to maintain a hospitable regional environment for Singapore, which is the only South-East Asian state to have an ethnic Chinese majority.

China implemented its economic reforms in 1978, more than a decade before India's 'Look East' policy and so the former had a significant lead over India and has a more prominent economic presence in South-East Asia. Singapore is aware of this

development. Thus, it has consciously worked on improving its bilateral relations with India after the Cold War. Through closer ties with India, Singapore seeks to dilute Chinese influence on itself and in South-East Asia as well. To increase India's presence in the region, Singapore has been keen in not only developing channels to increase its interaction with India, but also to ensure that these channels, once formed, become permanent. Likewise, India has been keen to reciprocate. This is because India benefits from its ability to leverage on its closer ties with Singapore to improve relations with other South-East Asian states, thereby increasing its regional presence.

Both states are aware that collaboration is mutually advantageous. Consequently they have concluded various agreements in diverse areas, ranging from high to low politics, to ensure that their nascent interactions become regular, predictable, and permanent. Through such agreements, they consciously affirm their commitment to conduct their dealings within a rules-based framework, thereby allowing their interaction to become orderly and mirroring the close links they had during the colonial period, which signals a return to history.

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