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Speech by Gen (Dr.) V.K. Singh (Retd.), Minister of State for External Affairs at the Panel Discussion on Waters of Asia: Cultural, Social and Political Ties under Delhi Dialogue IX

July 04, 2017

H.E. Dato Erywan Pehin Yusof, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Negara Brunei Darussalam,
H.E Dr Sok Siphana, Advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia,
H.E. Sengphet Houngboun Nuang, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lao Peoples Democratic Republic,
H.E. Dr, Maliki Osman, Senior Minister of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs,
Republic of Singapore,
H.E. Virasakdi Futrakul, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand,
H.E. Hirubalan VP, Deputy Secretary General ASEAN,
Heads of Delegations of ASEAN Countries,
Heads of Missions of ASEAN Countries in New Delhi,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It is my proud privilege to be here with you for the 9th edition of Delhi Dialogue IX and for this opportunity to speak on this esteemed panel on the Waters of Asia. I thank Shri Sanjeev Sanyal for the wonderful insight that he has given us on the myriad hues of this very interesting, contemporary and relevant topic.
2. Geography has endowed India and ASEAN with strong terrestrial and maritime linkages. India's two thousand year old links with South East Asia were forged via maritime voyages undertaken by adventurers, kings, merchants, savants, religious men, royal emissaries and others. These connections facilitated the cross-pollination of ideas and art, religion, language and statecraft. Apart from ferrying commodities along the spice, silk and tea routes, cultural, religious and political influences also travelled across the waves.
3. Subsequent maritime links with colonial India resulted in the movement of Indian workforce who later became settlers and now constitute a sizeable and vibrant Indian diaspora in Malaysia, Singapore, etc. The maritime interconnections between India and South East Asia have thus become a cherished shared heritage.
4. The oceans today hold the key to the fortunes of the fast evolving global order. Covering 72% of the Earth's surface and constituting over 95% of the biosphere, oceans provide a substantial portion of the world's

population with food and livelihood. 80% of the global goods trade travels via sea, and the marine and coastal environment is a big tourist attraction as well. The seabed currently provides 32% of the global supply of hydrocarbons, and oceans hold massive potential for production of renewable energy.

5. In both the Asia-Pacific as well as the wider Indo-Pacific regions, emerging maritime issues and trends are driving geo-strategic transformation. These include the need for a rules based maritime order; increasing cooperation amongst littoral states to develop maritime infrastructure to enhance their ability to exercise greater control over their Exclusive Economic Zones; and efforts to explore the feasibility of development of a seamless chain of maritime security coalitions spanning the region, while simultaneously enhancing bilateral cooperation among states in the maritime domain. These trends merit sustained discussion amongst stakeholders and this panel as part of the Delhi Dialogue IX is therefore most opportune.
6. While the existing maritime architecture in the Asia-Pacific was in the past able to deal with most non-traditional security issues, it is evident today that it needs buttressing to deal with newer 21st century challenges. Similarly, while the UNCLOS establishes the international legal order of the seas and oceans and a reasonable framework for resolving historical maritime issues and enabling the sustainable exploitation of marine resources and development of a code of conduct for the Blue Economy, we may need to examine ways and means to further strengthen it.
7. For India, maritime safety and security is a core issue due to our geo-strategic compulsions as a peninsular country, surrounded by two seas and an ocean. While we have a proud maritime history and identity, which continues to date. Yet all is not rosy on this front. Terror visited India from sea. The tragedy of tsunamis and cyclones has left an indelible impression on our minds as well as our coastline. The rising impact of climate change on our coasts and islands presents a formidable challenge which we need to address.
8. The oceans play a unique role in the 2030 development agenda. Goal 14 of the unanimously adopted Sustainable Development Goals 2030 relates to 'conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas and marine resources'. While the importance of Oceans for sustainable development had been recognised by the UN at Rio+ 20 held in 2012, however, the ongoing trends of exploitation and degradation of the marine ecosystem demand intensified efforts to ensure the sustainability of ocean resources.
9. India is seeking a more cooperative and integrated future for the region through overall development of the ocean-based blue economy. A distinct feature of the Blue Economy lies in harnessing of marine resources for economic and social development and environmental sustainability without undermining the conservation and restocking aspects of these finite natural resources. To take this forward, India would be organising, in partnership with Viet Nam, an ASEAN-India Workshop on the Blue Economy in Hanoi in September 2017.
10. A critical but often neglected aspect of the current maritime discourse is the need for enhancing maritime connectivity. At the 14th ASEAN India Summit held in September 2016, Leaders were seized of this issue and underlined the need to provide lower logistics costs for increasing trade. Keeping in view the vast untapped potential of trade with ASEAN, India is taking steps to augment infrastructure and capacity at all major ports on the eastern sea board. New container and multi cargo terminals are under construction at ports in Kamarajar, Ennore (near Chennai), Visakhapatnam, V.O. Chidambaranar, Tuticorin, Paradip and Kolkata.
11. Partnership with ports located in Myanmar, including Dawei, can make Indian ports important gateways to ASEAN countries. The ongoing Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport project aims at providing connectivity between Indian ports on the eastern sea board and Sittwe Port in Myanmar. The 'Mekong-India Economic

Corridor' is conceptualised as a corridor linking our eastern seaboard with Dawei in Myanmar, and via it all the way up to Vietnam.

12. India has also proposed an ASEAN-India Maritime Transport Cooperation Agreement which is under negotiation. A Task Force on Maritime Connectivity is also being constituted to provide an institutional basis to our cooperation in this field.
13. In an effort to map our shared civilizational connect across the waters, the Government of India has commissioned two projects. The first, called "Sailing to Swarna Bhumi," will chart and research all our maritime encounters and their mostly happy outcomes, as reflected in the syncretic cultures of India and South East Asia. The second will document inscriptions left by Indian nobles, traders and others along the Mekong river, which was the main artery of cultural interaction between India and mainland South East Asia for many centuries.
14. In fact in 2012, one of the commemorative activities undertaken to mark 20 years of ASEAN India relations was a sailing expedition led by the Indian Navy in which INS Sudarshini retraced the sea routes developed during the 10th to 12th centuries, linking India with South East Asia.
15. To conclude, I am confident that the ensuing discourse will contribute to fostering, among India and ASEAN, a sense of creation of a maritime community, with common interests and purpose, to respond effectively to the shared maritime challenges of the region, while encouraging greater maritime cooperation for the peace, progress and prosperity of our countries.
16. I would like to express my gratitude to all the delegations from ASEAN countries and eminent speakers who have travelled across the seas to be with us today, and join us in our quest to take this relationship and bonds of friendship forward to a new level. I look forward to listening keenly to all the eminent speakers we have on this morning's panel.



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