

BROOKINGS INDIA

KAMALNAYAN BAJAJ CONFERENCE ROOM

INDIA-SINGAPORE SECURITY RELATIONS IN AN EVOLVING ASIA:

ADDRESS BY SINGAPORE DEFENCE MINISTER

New Delhi  
Thursday, November 16, 2017  
Brookings India  
Second Floor, No. 6, Dr Jose Rizal Marg  
Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021  
India  
Ph: 011 2415 7600

PARTICIPANTS

*Introduction:*

DHRUVA JAI SHANKAR  
Fellow, Foreign Policy  
Brookings India

*Address:*

NG ENG HEN  
Defence Minister  
Republic of Singapore

\*\*\*\*\*

PROCEEDINGS

Mr Jai shankar: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome. I am Dhruva Jai shankar, Fellow for Foreign Policy here at Brookings India, and it's my privilege and pleasure to introduce Dr. Ng Eng Hen, the Defence Minister of Singapore this evening for a special lecture.

I want to especially acknowledge a few people in the audience, Lim Thuan Kuan, Singapore's High Commissioner to India and his counterpart Javed Ashraf, who I believe will be joining us as well, India's High Commission, Singapore.

Additionally, we're privileged to have with us a few other ambassadors in this room, including Sridharto Suryodipuro, who is Indonesia's envoy to India. Thank you, your Excellencies, for joining us this evening.

Singaporean diplomats in all of their humility often describe their country as the little red dot but their country has long played an outsized and disproportionate role in India's transformation, modernization and external engagements.

In 1992, it was in Singapore that India started the ASEAN India dialogue partnership, in many ways the birthplace of its Look East policy.

The role of Singapore's successive prime ministers, the late Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong in engaging India cannot be underappreciated.

Singapore is the country with which India signed its first comprehensive economic cooperation agreement in 2005.

Today, Singapore is home to 6,000 Indian companies connected directly by air to 15 Indian cities and last year was the fourth largest source of FDI. It has in many ways been our gateway to Southeast Asia and, in many respects, to the world at large.

Even in terms of security, this is a special relationship and there's really no one better placed to discuss that relationship in the context of a fast evolving and dynamic international system than I guess this evening.

I first had the privilege of meeting Dr. Ng in 2014 at the Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore. He is a medical doctor by background, a surgeon in fact. He entered politics in 2001 and after serving as Minister for Manpower and subsequently also, a second Minister for Defence, he has been Singapore's Defence Minister and Leader of the House since 2011.

On his current visit to India, Dr. Ng took a flight this morning in an indigenous Indian light combat aircraft at Aegi, being one of the first foreign leaders to do so. So, on behalf of Brookings India, I look forward to hearing a speech that I expect will combine the view from 30,000 feet with the precision of a surgeon. Mr. Minister the floor is yours.

Mr Ng: Thank you. Thank you again Mr. Dhruva Jai Shankar. Let me thank the Brookings Institute and the government of Singapore,

especially my counterpart Minister Sitaraman whom I'm meeting tomorrow, I bring you greetings from Singapore. At this time of the year it's warmer in Singapore and it's a very good weather here and my delegation is here as the chairman said, the High Commissioner as well as Chief of Navy and other staff.

You're quite right, I had a good morning, I flew in your Tejas. I was told after the fact that I was the first foreign and foreign dignitary, that I was the first was certainly a privilege and it was a good flight.

Let me begin this lecture tonight by saying that the Singapore Armed Forces has a unique relationship with its counterpart in India. It is the only military whose Air Force and army trains to the Indian Armed Forces in India and with bilateral agreements for all its service arms.

Minister Sitaraman and I will witness the exchange of the bilateral agreements for our Navies tomorrow and this Navy agreement is significant; it will result in mutual logistics support and more joint multilateral and live firing exercises, particularly in the Andaman Sea. This will be timely as we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Singapore-India Maritime bilateral exercise next year.

Our Air Forces and Army signed their bilateral agreements in 2007 and 2008 respectively after many years of discussion, in fact, it was actually one of the longest discussions to conclude for the Singapore Armed Forces, the SAF. But as your former Indian

Minister of Defence, who subsequently became President, Pranab Mukherjee once quipped to me, "it takes a longer time to get agreements with us but once you are in our system, it's almost impossible to get out", he was right. The Air Force agreement has been renewed twice in 2012 and this year.

This morning I witnessed our joint military training in Kalai kunda and flew here via the courtesy of the Indian Air Force and of course, took a ride on the Tejas. For a while, the pilot was intrepid enough to give me the control of the plane, I decided to make a few turns and he took the control back.

We continue our joint artillery and armoured training in Deolali, in Bambina and the trinity of bilateral agreements among all services is now complete and an abiding testament to the strong and comprehensive defence ties between our armed forces. I'm told that this is the most unique relationship that the Indian Armed Forces has with any country and in fact, we're the only country that has three bilateral agreements for all its services.

What explains this unique relationship between India and Singapore which exists not only in a Defence arena but beyond. India was among the very first to recognise Singapore's independence and it did so on 11th August, 1965 a mere two days after our declaration.

In 2015, we celebrated 50th anniversary of the Singapore-Indian diplomatic relations, this special bond has been reflected

through successive governments in Singapore since our independence.

Singapore's founding Prime Minister Mr. Lee Kuan Yew openly admired Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who guided India to independence. Their lives and deeds influenced Mr. Lee's thinking deeply on Singapore's own path to independence. To quote from Mr. Lee's speech at the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture in New Delhi and this was in 2005, I quote, "when I was a young student in Cambridge, I remember vividly the moving and unforgettable opening of Nehru's broadcast on the eve of Independence..." and he quoted, "Long years ago, we made a tryst to this destiny and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge not wholly in full measure but very substantially." Mr. Lee continued "I shared intellectual and emotional root with Nehru because I had also experienced discrimination and subjugation under the British Raj and admired Nehru for his vision of a secular multi-racial India. When I was Prime minister of Singapore, Nehru encouraged and supported my ideas".

Singapore's second Prime Minister Mr. Goh Chok Tong, who succeeded Mr. Lee sparked off an India fever in Singapore in 1992 in tandem with India's economic reforms then. Mr. Goh had firm faith in India's enormous economic potential. Mr. Goh used the following analogy in 2005, "I like to think of a new Asia as a mega jumbo jet that is being constructed. Northeast Asia comprising China, Japan and South Korea forms one wing with a

powerful engine. India, the second wing, will also have a powerful engine..." I'm not sure that the listeners how they will respond to India being described as China, Japan and South Korea combined but nonetheless, that was his analogy. "...The Southeast Asian countries will be lifted by two wings".

Our current Prime ministers, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Prime Minister Modi, signed the India-Singapore strategic partnership in November 2015. This milestone agreement elevated Singapore-India relations to the highest level, it also laid out a roadmap for enhanced bilateral cooperation for decades to come in all encompassing areas such as Defence, finance, urban solutions, smart cities and skills development.

These expressions, these agreements by successive leaders of government in Singapore underscore the deep historical roots and empathy that exists between India and Singapore.

Many of you would know that the Stamford Raffles was based in Kolkata as an emissary of the British East India Company when he travelled and established Singapore as a trading port in 1819. In 2019, we will commemorate the bicentennial of Singapore's founding.

When Singapore gained independence, many Indians who worked under British rule stayed, sank routes and contributed to its diverse racial melting pot. Long before this, Indian traders carried both religious and cultural influences to Southeast Asia,

Singapore included, multi racial and multicultural Singapore today incorporates that ancestry and that of subsequent migrants.

These links to the Indian subcontinent explain the varied manifestations both in our past and in the daily lives of Singaporeans today.

A plaque stands at our Esplanade Park - this is a park which borders the harbour the Indian ships once sailed into and it marks the former Indian National Army monument. The INS co-founder, Subash Chandra Bose himself, resided in Singapore in 1944 and laid the foundation stone on 8th July 1945 to remember India's nationalistic heroes.

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, made two visits to Singapore in 1937 and 1946 when he was still a freedom fighter for India's independence. On his second visit in 1947, Nehru visited this former INA monument and also succeeded in persuading Lord Mountbatten, then Supreme Allied Commander of Southeast Asia, to repatriate any members under British internment back to India.

Singaporeans Indians today, as with the progeny of other migrant forebears from China, the Malay Archipelago and other distant lands, form an essential part of the leadership and the workforce that together have made Singapore successful. It is no coincidence that many of our top lawyers and media chiefs are Indians, including our Law and Home Affairs ministers, former Deputy Prime Minister Professor Jaya Kumar, whom some of you will

know and [indi stinct]. In Singapore and elsewhere, Singaporean Indians are known for their prodigious verbal and literary skills... it's a recognised fact.

On a more personal note, I was a cancer surgeon prior to politics. For two decades, I studied and worked at Singapore's oldest Hospital, the Singapore General Hospital but the Singapore General Hospital wasn't known as the Singapore General Hospital. If you told a taxi driver "bring me to Singapore General Hospital", he'll say "where is that". You had to tell him use the vernacular, "bring me to Si pai-po". Si pai-po was a Hokkien word, a dialect of Mandarin. Its derivation, Si pai-po, was Sepoy because this was an area used to house Sepoy soldiers and Sepoy planes.

Indeed, many of Singapore's iconic buildings today were built with the hands of Indian laborers, including the Istana which is our official residence and the office of our president, which also has a plaque acknowledging their contributions.

Many of my Professors were of Indian descent, including a much-respected father of pathology, Professor Shanmuga, a Sri Lankan Tamil, father of Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Tharman. My surgical mentor was Professor Raj Nambiar who facilitated my postgraduate training in the US at a New York hospital and the MD Anderson Cancer Centre. The MD Anderson Cancer Centre is assessed to be the top cancer centre in US and the world, and there were only two international fellows each year and in that year that I

went, myself from small Singapore and a Dutchman. I would not have been accepted without my surgical mentor's help and contacts.

Different races live cheek-by-jowl in tiny Singapore, barely 700 square kilometres in size but we treasure and guard zealously our multi racial harmony and meritocracy.

Founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew's poignant words on 9th August 1965, our independence were, and I quote, "This is not a Malay Nation. This is not a Chinese nation. This is not an Indian nation. Everyone will have its place, equal, language, culture, religion". These words that Mr. Lee articulated on our Independence Day were not only of a vision but a steely determination to set the new nation on that path. Of the eight presidents since, two have been Indian, two Malays, one Eurasian and three Chinese.

The strategic partnership which India and Singapore share is therefore a natural evolution of our shared past and we are mutually invested in each other's future. The comprehensive economic cooperation agreement which we concluded in June of 2005, remains the bedrock of our economic partnership.

Again, not coincidentally, this was the first comprehensive trade agreement ever signed with India with any trading partner.

Annual bilateral trade has since doubled from about 11 billion to 22 billion in 2016. Singapore was the second largest foreign direct investor in India after Mauritius, so actually we

ought to be the first, in 2016. Between 2000 and 2015, the total value of India's investment stock in Singapore grew nearly a hundredfold from 264 million to 26 billion now.

Today, I need to correct Mr. Dhruva, there are more than 7,000 Indian companies registered in Singapore, the largest foreign corporate contingent here.

But our strategic partnership goes beyond the finance and the economy. Fundamentally, Singapore believes in India's pivotal place and role in Asia. Accordingly, we have been India's steadfast advocate, actively promoting and facilitating India's participation in regional multilateral mechanisms. In the 1994 ASEAN summit, Singapore's then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong proposed granting India full dialogue partner which you received the year following. India's then foreign secretary, Krishnan Sriivasan, acknowledged Singapore's role noting that "Singapore was the first and at that time the only ASEAN country to take India seriously".

Similarly, India's membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996 was a product of concerted lobbying by Singapore. Singapore likewise supported India's inclusion as a founding member of the East Asia Summit in 2005 as then Indian defence minister, Pranab Mukherjee commented, "Singapore had become the hub of India's political, economic and security strategy in the whole of East Asia".

Singapore's Ministry of Defence then helmed by the present Deputy Prime Minister, Teo Chee Hean, was a strong advocate for India's eventual membership in the ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting Plus, the highest-level defence forum in ASEAN.

This year, I am proud to say that ASEAN and India celebrate 25 years of dialogue relations, 15 years of summit-level interactions and five years of strategic partnership.

Singapore believes that India's inclusion strengthens the regional security architecture. As a stabilising force within the region, India adds a wider perspective and more robust balance beyond the US-China strategic rivalry at play.

India's history shapes its own worldview in international affairs as a pioneering member of the Non-Aligned Movement. India is also culturally distinct from the other ADMM Plus countries. India is neither dominantly Western nor Eastern oriented, India is India. Its past as well as its future, inextricably linked to the fortunes of Asia. It crafts its own trajectory for its interests and 1.3 billion people.

With its extensive linkages both past and present, India is also a natural partner to other ASEAN and Australasian countries. Many of the motifs on the walls of Southeast Asia's greatest cultural treasures, such as the Borobudur in Indonesia and Angkor Wat in Cambodia, were credited to Indian artisans who travelled to our region during the 6th-14th century.

Major religions in Southeast Asia today originated from or through India, including Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam.

India will become the world's most populous country within a decade and by some projections, among the world's top three economies by the middle of this century. India was the fifth-largest military spender last year, today, and it not only has the fifth largest Navy in the world but also the second-largest standing army in the world.

Prime Minister Modi's Act East policy is taking effect; ASEAN is now India's fourth largest trading partner with two-way trade standing about US\$76 billion. ASEAN also accounts for approximately 12.45 of investment flows into India since 2000. The regional comprehensive economic partnership which India is working to conclude with ASEAN countries and other regional partners, will account for about 45 per cent of the world's population and over US\$21 trillion in GDP.

Singapore and India share similar and strategic perspectives and interests for a peaceful and progressive future. We are both maritime nations that sit astride key trade and energy routes that link Europe to Asia. India has the Indian Ocean and we have the Malacca and Singapore Straits. For trade to flourish not only is guarantee of freedom of navigation and overflight essential, but the absence of conflicts and tensions which can potentially disrupt trade, this is why both countries strongly advocate

adherence to international law and norms and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

India wants to do more to promote regional security. During the Defence Minister's dialogue tomorrow, we'll be discussing key security challenges including counterterrorism and maritime security, issues which Singapore as chair of ASEAN will push through the fall. We will flesh out the details of Minister Sitaraman's proposal for increased multilateral interactions between India and other Southeast Asian Nations in the Andaman Sea. Singapore strongly welcomes this proposal and we will facilitate it as ASEAN chair.

Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew ended his 2005 Nehru Lecture thus, he borrowed from Nehru's famous clarion cry at India's independence which he quoted and Mr. Lee said this, "The time has come for India's next tryst with destiny". Indeed, the time is now. Both militarily and economically, India has risen to become a more leading regional power in the Indo-Pacific and is expected to play an increasing role in the decades to come to maintain stability in Asia. I am also heartened that Prime Minister Modi has accepted the invitation to deliver the keynote address in next year's Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore – this is another strong affirmation of Mr. Prime Minister Modi's Act East Initiative and I look forward to hearing his vision for India's role in our region then.

Let me retreat my thanks to Brookings India and I look very much forward to hearing your views and to an exchange of perspectives and I'm sure that we will both add wisdom and clarity to the challenges that confront us in this age.

Thank you very much.

\*\*\*\*\*