

LOOKING AHEAD



INDIA & SINGAPORE *in the* NEW MILLENNIUM

CELEBRATING *50 years*
OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

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A TO Z OF INDIA–SINGAPORE RELATIONS

Where Do We Go From Here?

—*Tarun Das*

THE 50 YEARS OF HISTORY OF SINGAPORE as an independent nation is just a little more than the 50 years of diplomatic relations between India and Singapore. The relationship and engagement has been transformed. And, the question is: Have the two nations reached a plateau or is there more to come? A study of each country's capabilities and needs shows that the future potential is even more than the past achievements and present status. In fact, the answer to the question on "India and Singapore": Where do we go from here?" is to look at all the letters of the English alphabet and, in some cases, more than once. That is the comprehensive nature of the engagement for the future between these two countries - the A to Z of the bilateral relations. The challenge will be to answer the question "How" these ideas could be implemented. Many of these ideas are not new. Several are ongoing. But, in almost every area there is scope to scale up, speed up and step up.

This paper attempts an overview of the bilateral relations for the next ten years. And, as the future comes closer, newer ideas will surely emerge because there is near perfect complementarity between Singapore and India.

Starting with the letter 'A', there are at least five areas of deepening future cooperation: Archives, Art museums, Arbitration services, Air Force collaboration and ASEAN-India partnership. In each of these five areas, there is an agenda to be framed, followed and implemented.

Singapore and India both have archives but the maintenance, digitisation and collaboration process can make the archives an area of growing together, learning from each other and ensuring that high quality archives are maintained.

Art museums are both varied and rich in both countries. Singapore museums have been beautifully maintained and designed. The National Museum in New Delhi has recently been modernised but there are museums across the country, in India, which need attention, resources and expertise to be upgraded. This is an area of long-term bilateral partnership. Art museums are treasures and a nation's assets to be preserved.

Moving into the commercial area of disputes, Arbitration services provided in Singapore have the potential to replace other countries as India's first choice. The legal profession in Singapore is very well developed and India has started using Singaporean expertise in preference to Europe, which is also perceived to be of higher cost. This 'A' can only rise with increased trade.

Another 'A' is Accreditation services to assess standards and quality of operations and service. Singapore has emulated the systems of Europe and North America and has evolved them to global standards of accreditation. India, too, has set up bodies for accreditation and, therefore, there is scope for exchanges, mutual learning and a process to be established for constant improvement. India and Singapore could develop into global standard-

setters in accreditation systems.

A fifth 'A' would relate to the Air Force of the two countries. Singapore is the only country in the world which is permitted to use Indian air space for training by the Singapore Air Force. A high level of trust therefore exists and can be the basis for enhanced cooperation between the two Air Forces.

A final 'A' would be the engagement of India with the ASEAN in which Singapore has been, and continues to be, the "best friend" of India in the ASEAN. Singapore has been consistently supporting India's steadily growing participation in the ASEAN, occasionally with disappointment because of a lack of movement by India. The new Government of India has shown a greater willingness to not only "Look East" but, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said "Act East". This will lead to greater activity by India with ASEAN and, as always, the role of Singapore will be crucial. Physical and virtual connectivity are the focus areas including freer trade and investment flows.

Moving to 'B', a most important initiative of the Modi Government is to improve the "Ease of Doing Business" in India because of the universal view that the hurdles and complications are many. Singapore, on the other hand, tops the world ranking as the country where it is easiest to do business. Necessarily, the best learning on transparency and simplification is from Singapore. The process is on. Merging of application forms, use of information technology, etc are happening in India which aims to reach the Top 50. Clearly, partnership here, going forward, will be important and has to continue on an ongoing basis because India's aspiration is to first reach the Top 50 and, then, even higher.

The 'C' series must start with the Clean India (Swachh Bharat) campaign and the movement launched by PM Modi. Singapore's reputation, globally, as a Clean City-State is never questioned and every city and town of India can learn from the Singapore example and its achievements. This is a significant area for future cooperation. Much of this partnership can happen between the local

level in India's administrative structure and expert firms in Singapore which can provide advice and consultancy. The onus here is particularly on the States and Municipal Corporations of India to reach out to Singapore.

A connected 'C' would be Culture in which India is full of wealth and diversity. And, in Singapore, there is a deep interest in Indian culture especially since nearly 10 percent of Singapore's population is of Indian origin. There are currently ongoing exchanges but there is much potential for raising the profile, covering the full diversity of Indian culture and planning the cultural exchanges to a greater degree. This 'Soft Power' exchange is a deeply binding force between the two countries, which will grow and grow.

A third 'C' is for Community whose involvement in civic affairs, and doing constructive work, is a hallmark of Singapore. And, this has been achieved through a carefully worked out strategy and plan by the Singapore government. Structures have been established for implementation. India has challenges in the area because of large population pressures and the management and development of the community is clearly a very important societal area for collaboration and mutual learning. India has to work "bottom up" and the involvement of the local community needs to be taken far beyond what it is today. Transforming Indian governance is not just a top down/Government-led activity. It needs to be bottom-up, from the community. Singapore is a logical partner.

A related area to Community is "Crime" and, following from this, the training, capability, attitude, integrity, empathy with society, etc of the police force which deals with crime on a day-to-day basis and has to ensure that law and order is maintained, that justice is fulfilled and people are secure. In Singapore, this challenge has been met. In India, that challenge is far from being met. Clearly, this is an area for cooperation especially in the sphere of training of the police force in India and in changing mindsets.

The next 'C' is for Consultation. Singapore has developed a process and

system of National Consultations. In India, it could be national or state or local. But, the entire issue of consultations is very important to get to a point where decisions taken by leaders have gone through a methodical consultation process with concerned citizens and/or opinion builders. This helps to build shared understanding and consensus and minimises divisions and alienation.

The final 'C' is CECA, which was a path-breaking joint agreement of the two countries to promote and push bilateral trade and investment. It was a four-word description for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and more, which has brought major benefits to both economies through rising trade and investment. But, CECA, as signed and concluded has seen only the first phase. A review of CECA had been agreed with the intention of extending its coverage and ambit. Sadly, this has never been completed and the review remains incomplete. The sticking points include banking standards and immigration policy. The joint economic future of India and Singapore far outweigh these two issues and the Governments need to reflect on the vision and potential, not the commas and semi-colons. CECA was a great achievement and needs to be carried forward strongly and firmly.

The most important 'D' for mutual collaboration is Discipline. This is an issue, which poses huge challenges in India and, perhaps, now emerging in Singapore as the younger people see things differently. Without discipline in a democracy, the nation and the people lose out. How to build a culture of discipline, not based on fear, is a very big challenges but one which has to be debated, discussed and dealt with. This is an area of important consultation and cooperation between the two countries.

The second 'D' is for Defence cooperation which exists, is reasonably satisfactory but has greater potential for the future. There are ongoing Government to Government discussions on expanding defence cooperation and the purpose of including this here is to flag the subject since the Region of South and South-east Asia faces multiple security challenges. The Trust already

established between India and Singapore in the foundation for enhanced defence cooperation.

The 'E' for Economy has been largely covered under 'CECA' but economic relations do go beyond just trade and investment. This broader agenda has to be kept in view.

An aside is the "Economic Corridor between the North East of India and Singapore". The North-East has been isolated, subjected to backwardness and disconnected from South-east Asia. This has to be corrected and will benefit the people and economies of the eight North-Eastern States of India. It is on the pending agenda tray but has received some recognition recently.

The 'Education' sector is a massive-area for cooperation. Both countries are rich in universities, colleges and schools but there is need, and scope, for partnership, learning from each other to raise performance, profile and achievement. Future generations will benefit from this important sectoral collaboration at every level of education. Meanwhile, there is a flood of Indian students heading towards Singapore and a few in the reverse direction.

The 'E' for Energy, especially clean energy is an area of focus especially since a fairly crowded city-state is free of pollution. It calls for adhering to the highest standards in terms of emissions. India has raised its targets for solar power and clean energy, generally, and partnerships will be important to realise its new vision. Singapore is an ideal partner.

There is one significant focus under 'F' Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Foreign Institutional Investment (FII). Singapore is the favourite Regional/Asian HQ of many corporates, from Asia, Europe and North America. It is the conduit for investment, be it FDI or FII. Singapore is also the route Indian companies often adopt to channel their investments overseas. As India seeks to multiply FDI and FII because of its large developmental needs, Singapore is where India's "Base Camp" has to be.

It is undoubtedly the place to focus on. India needs \$1 Trillion of FDI over the next ten years and it can access this large, ambitious amount to transform the country into a near-developed nation. Singapore will play a principal part in this process. There is a big agenda here, mutually.

'G' stands clearly for Green in the current times when the environment is receiving maximum attention and climate change challenges are enormous. Singapore is a green country. India needs to be a green country. Hence, there is tremendous scope for partnership to make it all happen, sooner rather than later.

'H' for Health care is a vital underpinning for a good society and, whilst, India's private sector health care industry is growing rapidly, its public health system is a long distance from attaining efficiency and high standards. Singapore's public hospitals are rated highly. The upgrading of India's public health system is well beyond Singapore's "capacity" but, selectively, in some priority states of India, building cooperative arrangements and accessing Singapore as Consultant and Adviser would be worthwhile.

Another 'H' would be for low-cost Housing in which Singapore has excelled for many years. Its public housing is renowned. And, India needs to learn, adapt and implement a massive low-cost public housing programme, which will ensure that every Indian has a home. There is synergy here to be taken forward.

The 'I' for Innovation receives a great deal of attention and media coverage in both countries. Building an Innovative eco-system is the pre-requisite for an Innovative culture to be established. Fortunately, in India, the young want to be self-employed, entrepreneurial and develop low-cost products and services – what is often called frugal innovation. The innovative societies of Singapore and India can connect increasingly to mutual benefit.

The "Integration" of a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious people is a

huge achievement of Singapore. There is no ghetto. All communities live side by side. It used to be like that in India. It still is in many areas but ghettos have also evolved. The integration strategy in Singapore was led by the Government. A key learning here for India will be to adapt and implement to do away with divisions and separation. It will be a challenging process but one which needs to be followed.

Another vital part of good societies is the framework of "Institutions". Strong institutions help build healthy societies. Weak institutions lead to weak societies. India built many institutions and had the right approach and policy post-Independence in 1947. Somewhere down the line, there has been a decline and weakening, though some institutions remain strong and vibrant. India's civil society institutions reflect some of this strength. Singapore has built excellent institutions and these are supported by government in a variety of ways. For mutual advantage, institution building and sustenance need to be on the India-Singapore agenda.

'L' for Libraries is an important area of cooperation because public libraries, in particular, are a part and parcel of healthy, educated, literate societies. Both countries have libraries but many, in India, need modernisation, digitisation and stronger direction and management. This could be an unglamorous but important area of partnership.

'M' for Mindset is a curious one but it relates to the training and systems for development of people, especially public officials. Each country is different but the training of the mindset to be positive and efficient is very important. By and large, Singapore has achieved this. India needs to follow suit. This is where Singapore can help and assist India.

'M' is also for Maritime cooperation between the Navies of the two countries. With the Indian Ocean's vast waters and concerns about the South China Sea, India and Singapore need to work hand-in-hand on the naval front to ensure peace and stability in the region.

'M' is also for Maintenance and Repairs, an area in which Singapore has built a global reputation and credibility. This is a huge service and capability in which bilateral cooperation would be mutually advantageous. The geographical location of Singapore and its competence level have made it a special place for repair and maintenance work, especially in defence sector. India needs to engage Singapore and work out a mutually beneficial cooperative arrangement.

The Nalanda International University has become a major, collaborative project for India, together with South-east and East Asian countries. Singapore has been at the forefront in this effort, which is ongoing and long term in nature. This is work in progress, to be continued and enhanced.

Skipping a couple of letters of the alphabet because 'O' for 'One People' and 'P' for 'Police' have been covered earlier, the next agenda would be 'S' for the Services Sector. Both countries have enormous strengths in this area and a great deal of complementarity. This can be limitless opportunity for future collaboration.

Similarly, there is 'S' for 'Science' in which India and Singapore have invested significantly. Scientist exchanges, joint projects and co-investment in specific programmes could be areas to consider.

Singapore is known universally for Safety and Security of people, especially women and children. This is one 'S' which represents an area of very important learning for India as a country and its states and towns across the country. It, of course, connects with laws, the judiciary, the penalties for wrongdoing, etc. India must become safe for all citizens and visitors. Collaboration here is crucial. An area which has been explored to a limited extent is skills. A skills centre is working in Delhi with Singapore collaboration. But, it is limited in reach and coverage as of now. The ITE in Singapore is an amazing Skills Development Institute which needs to be replicated in every State of India with a focus on different Skills in

different states, depending on the needs and talent of local people. India can emerge as the Human Resources hub of the world – skilled people – but its vision and strategy need to be raised. Singapore has done it. Cooperation is the way to go.

When Indian corporates ventured out of India to list their companies, to give confidence to investors, to take on higher standards of corporate governance, they looked to USA and Europe. Today, the Singapore Stock Exchange has established an international reputation and is worth looking at seriously. The capital markets of the world are now both in the West and the East.

The 'S' for Smart Cities is a logical follow through on Prime Minister Modi's vision for 100 Smart Cities to be developed in India. Singapore is a city-state model, unique in the world. The Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu, has wisely tied up with Singapore to help develop the State's new capital city, Amravati. This policy needs to be emulated by all States of India, not necessarily to help design and build state capitals but to help design and develop new towns and re-design old towns and cities. For Andhra Pradesh, Singapore appointed a Special Envoy- Gopinath Pillai. This could be a worthwhile precedent to follow for other states.

The 'T' for Trade has been covered but the 'T' for Tourism needs mention. Singapore is already a favourite destination for Indian tourists. But, this tourism flow can rise even more. The trickle of Singapore tourists needs to be significantly increased by giving them confidence in safety, security, cleanliness, infrastructure and health issues. Singaporeans do travel but very few to India. Confidence building is a pending agenda.

Another "new" "T" is for cooperation with regard to 'Terrorism' and to frame joint action on intelligence-gathering and anti-terrorism. A start has been made and details can never be available. But, it is an area of mutuality, going forward.

Technology has become the byword for development, especially to leap-frog and to bypass the incremental process. And, technology is no longer easily available or cheaply sourced. India and Singapore can work together in a few, select priority areas to develop new technologies which would be jointly owned, used and marketed.

Another significant vehicle in a modern society is a Think tank. Starting recently, Singapore has developed a first-class infrastructure of think tanks such as the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) and the Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) School of Public Policy. India has a network of think tanks but the quality, coverage and reach vary. Several have major constraints of resources. The building and sustainability of think tanks is an area of conversation, discussion and exchange. To develop independent think tanks and, yet, receive government support, where need be.

The cities of India are becoming increasingly congested, especially the roads. Traffic management and connected systems are a huge challenge as the growing number of aspirational Indians acquires one or more motor cars for personal use. This is a 'T' which lends itself to intense consultation and exchange.

Water is an ideal area of partnership. Cooperation has been initiated but needs to be extended because Singapore, which had no fresh water, has resolved its challenges and India, increasingly, is facing water challenges. The problem will only grow for India and, whilst the issue is receiving attention, there is a very large pending agenda for action. Singapore can be one country to work with.

The second last area of focus has to be "Youth" - the future generation of leaders of the two countries with new ideas, new aspirations, new impatience and, sometimes, new values. Connecting the young will need a special effort otherwise they may well look elsewhere for friendship, partnership and cooperation.

Finally, the Z for Zoo. Stranger as this may seem, the Zoo in Singapore is a role model for all. The attraction of zoos for children (and adults) is universal. And, India needs to upgrade its zoos for the people of the country and tourists to enjoy especially since India is so rich in wildlife, birds etc.

This list concludes the A to Z of India-Singapore agendas for the future. Deliberately, the diaspora does not figure because a great deal is happening and Prime Minister Modi will no doubt take it to a higher level when he visits Singapore.

'How' is all this to happen even if consensus on the agenda emerges through discussion?

A lot of it is B to B – Business to Business and P to P, People to People – but G to G – is also very important through Government to Government dialogue, joint groups, structures, etc. And, the national leadership needs to set the priorities. So, if they buy into the idea of an A to Z of partnership, then an annual summit between the two PMs would be an important and key driver to push the agenda forward, to set the tone and motivate government and non-government bodies to get on with the job of building a truly unique friendship and collaboration between 1.2 billion people and 5.47 million people, between India and Singapore, between a Goliath and a David. The need is there. The scope is there. What is now required is the "will" and the imagination. All this is very much within reach.

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