

India will boost ties with Vietnam and Japan, says top diplomat

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India will deepen its strategic ties with Vietnam and Japan as it continues to build on its Act East policy and sheds its status quo instincts for a more activist line that has already seen it come to the humanitarian aid of countries far beyond its shores.

That is the message from New Delhi to South-east Asia.

Speaking on the theme of India, Asean and changing geopolitics, Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar said yesterday: "Vietnam is a well-established strategic partner and our cooperation across a broad range of economic, developmental and security issues will deepen ever further.

"Asean also has a natural interest in the growing ties between India and Japan," he said. "Gradually and steadily, Japan has emerged as a special strategic partner with whom India increasingly shares a global agenda."

India's top diplomat, on a brief visit to Singapore, was delivering the S.T. Lee Distinguished Lecture of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

His speech came amid India's renewed border tension with China, and in the wake of a summit in Washington between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and United States President Donald Trump that sought to maintain momentum on the developing strategic ties between the two democracies.

The latest spat between the Asian giants was triggered by India going



Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar (left) and Professor Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, in a forum discussion at the National University of Singapore yesterday. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

to the aid of the Bhutanese army to prevent Chinese troops from building a service road in an area claimed by Bhutan that is close to a narrow stretch of territory linking India's north-eastern states to the heartland. Beijing has set a unilateral Indian withdrawal as a precondition for talks on the issue.

While defending the Indian action as something borne out of its "legitimate concerns and interests", Dr Jaishankar painted a picture of broad stability in ties between India and China. "When such situations arise, how we handle it is a test of our maturity. There is no reason why, having handled so many situa-

tions in the past, we will not be able to handle it in the future," he said.

Ties between India and Asean were formally established in 1992 when the South Asian giant was accepted as a sectoral dialogue partner. Four years later, it was upgraded to full dialogue partnership status, and in 2012, to a strategic partnership. Currently, there are 30 dialogue mechanisms between India and Asean, including an annual summit and seven ministerial dialogues.

South-east Asia took notice of India's ability to project power when New Delhi organised a prompt and massive rendering of humanitarian

aid to Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the wake of the 2004 tsunami.

Dr Jaishankar, a former envoy to Singapore, China and the US, said in India's perception Asean occupied a central place in the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, its expanding cooperation with South-east Asia had opened up to India the world beyond it when it also sought to engage Japan, South Korea and China more seriously.

"There is no question that Asean was a bridge – psychologically, politically and perhaps even physically," he said. "Indeed, without Asean, the transformation of the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific would have never happened."

Leadership-level exchanges and contacts with all Asean states had visibly deepened in the last three years, he said.

While not formal allies, the US calls India a "major defence partner" and Mr Trump has often said he would be India's "best friend".

This week, the US, India and Japan are conducting their largest-ever war games in the Bay of Bengal, involving two US aircraft carriers, a Indian carrier and a Japanese helicopter carrier, among other front-line weaponry.

Still, many Indians share the worry of South-east Asians that the US, under Mr Trump, may disengage from the region.

Dr Jaishankar, who assisted Mr Modi at the recent summit with Mr Trump, said it was important to not jump to conclusions about the US.

"In some arenas, there may be a redefinition of its objectives. In others, we may be looking at a redrawing of its posture," he said.

"At the same time, let us be clear what is not happening: the US is not withdrawing from the world. On the contrary, it is seeking to get what it hopes to be a better deal from the rest of the world."

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