

THAI RELATIONS WITH INDIA



Thom Thong
(Gold Nielloware), a favourite gift for foreign dignitaries, is a reminder that Thailand's carefully crafted diplomacy, while traditional, still holds up well in the modern age.

* Work of Thai traditional art by the SUPPORT Training Center at Chitralada Villa of Dusit Palace



It is only natural that two countries that have long histories and rich cultural heritages would have established linkages dating back centuries; this is certainly the case with India and Thailand. More importantly, our two countries have not only maintained these age-old links but also translated them into a strong and prolific partnership on the global stage across a wide variety of policy matters.

Ancient Connections

The links between India and Thailand can be traced back to almost 2,000 years, when under the orders of King Asoka of India, Buddhist pilgrims travelled to Suvarnabhumi, the golden land, of which Thailand was a part, to disseminate the

teachings of the Buddha. Since then Thailand and India have developed a deep and abiding connection, which reflects – even after all these years – in their cultural, religious and linguistic similarities.

One of the strongest links between the two countries is that forged by Buddhism. Nearly 95% of Thailand's population aligns itself with the teachings of Theravada Buddhism. Even though the number of Buddhists in India is significantly lower, as the land where he achieved enlightenment, India shares an indelible link with Thailand and its people. This ancient religious association has influenced Thai culture in a number of ways. The kings of the Chakri dynasty, the current ruling house of Thailand, take on



aspects of 'high' Pali have trickled down into the vernacular, and today a number of words in Thai can be identified as having a Sanskrit or Pali root, thereby creating linguistic links between our two great cultures.

Relationship in Modern Times

Given the strong cultural, religious and linguistic links between India and

Thailand, it is only natural that Thailand was one of the first countries to establish an official diplomatic relationship with India on 1 August 1947, 15 days before India was recognised as an independent country. However, long before the diplomatic relations were established, Thailand had already designated a Thai Honorary Consulate General in Bombay as early as 1872 followed by Calcutta in 1879. In spite of this strong start, bilateral relations were largely limited between India and Thailand until the end of the Cold War.



the regnal name of 'Rama', the Hindu god and incarnation of Vishnu. In fact, our primary literary epic, which has had a great impact on Thai art and culture, is the 'Ramakien', the Thai version of the Sanskrit epic 'Ramayana'. Compiled, and in part written, by the first king of the Chakri dynasty, King Rama I, the Ramakien has influenced the development of Thai drama, music and art in immutable ways.

Since the language associated with Theravada Buddhism is Pali – a Middle Indo-Aryan language, derived from dialects of Vedic Sanskrit, also a Prakrit – by tradition, it is the language of religion in Thailand. Scriptures are recorded in Pali, and despite the fact that most Thai's do not understand Pali; it is also used in religious liturgy. Justifiably, over the years,



End of the Cold War and the Onset of Globalisation

During the past twenty years or so, India and Thailand have seen their relationship blossoming. The interactions between the two countries have expanded from a cultural and economic relationship to significant interactions on security, defence as well as a movement towards free trade.

The 1990s can be seen as the 'golden age' of intensified Indo-Thai relations. In 1996 Thailand initiated the 'Look West' Policy aimed at exploring new markets, sources of energy and new investments flows. Given Thailand's central location in Southeast Asia and its position as a regional hub,

this policy serves to strengthen the region's partnership with South Asia and beyond. Thailand's 'Look West' policy is the perfect complement to India's 'Look East' policy which has been instrumental in promoting bilateral relations between the two countries as well as in strengthening India's relationship with the region in general.

India is considered to be one of the most important and influential actors in Asian as well as global interactions. It therefore plays a key role in regional and sub-regional organisational structures along with Thailand. India was welcomed as an ASEAN sectoral dialogue partner in 1993, and the status was later upgraded to full dialogue partner in 1995. Subsequently, India joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Thailand and India also have a strong relationship of cooperation in the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Mekong – Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD).

Exchanges of Visits

Exchanges of visits at the high level were an important factor contributing to the strengthening and consolidation of bilateral relations over the years. The Thai Royal family has a long history of official visits to India. Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn visited India in 1992 and 1998 – More recently, HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn paid an official visit to India in February of 2009. The Princess has visited India numerous times and has built a strong



The Dhamek Stupa marks the location where Gautam Buddha gave his first sermon in Sarnath, India.

relationship with the country and its people. Notable among her visits were the ones taken to Andaman and Nicobar in 1996 – as she was the first foreign visitor to be invited to the islands – and to New Delhi in November of 2005 to receive the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament

and Development. HRH Princess Chulabhorn also visited India a number of times – in 1996, 2004, 2005, 2006 and most recently in 2008.

Thailand and India have shared numerous exchanges of visit at the governmental level as well. Mr. Rajeev Gandhi was the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Thailand in 1982. Since the turn of the 21st century, exchanges of Prime Ministerial



The Bodhi tree under which Lord Buddha achieved enlightenment, Bodh Gaya, India

level visits have taken place almost annually in both bilateral and regional contexts. Visits are more frequent at the ministerial level.

One of the most recent visits was in August 2009, when Mr. Anand Sharma, Indian Union Commerce and Industry Minister was in Bangkok to sign the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and ASEAN, thus opening new doors for the continued cooperation between the two countries.



Contemporary Thai-India Relationship

The key idea behind the current relationship between India and Thailand is that of an enhanced partnership. The core policies governing our relations remain Thailand's 'Look West' policy complementing India's 'Look East' policy. An important factor of our 'Look West' policy is, among other things, India's vast market of 1.1 billion. Thailand also recognised India's geo-political and economic weight in the region, as well as the extension of that weight in global affairs. The phenomenal rise of India has to be embraced and factored in the conduct of our foreign policy towards India.

Our bilateral diplomatic relations, cultivated over more than half a century, signify the efforts from both sides to maintain friendly relations and to enhance our cooperation in the context of globalisation and a rapidly changing world. Cooperation between the two countries is multifaceted, taking into account the common interests and common challenges India and Thailand have. The long standing friendship and history of cooperation between the two countries is of great value to Thailand. This – we are committed to further strengthening.



Political and Security Cooperation

In working together to enhance security bilaterally and regionally, the two countries conduct annual dialogues to find ways and means to cope with security challenges, be they money laundering, international economic crimes, cyber crimes, military, narcotics, terrorism, arms smuggling and illegal migratory flows. The annual dialogue enables us to achieve tangible progress, as is exemplified in the joint patrol of the Andaman Sea undertaken twice annually. Furthermore, combined exercises between our two armies and air forces are also carried out on a regular basis. Exchange of intelligence also greatly contributes to the strengthening of security cooperation for both sides.



Economic Cooperation

Thailand's foreign trade accounts for a major portion of its GNP. In 2008, total trade was USD 356 billion. India has been an important trade partner through the years. Since 2000, bilateral trade has grown over five times from USD 1.15 billion in 2000 to USD 6.04 billion in 2008.

With regard to investment, Thai companies have invested in India in areas such as aquaculture (Charoen Pokphand - India), auto parts (Thai Summit), infrastructure (Italian-Thai), coal mining (Banpu Public Company Ltd.), electronic parts (Delta Electronics), and banking (Krungthai Bank). Investment flow from India to Thailand is focused on manufacturing and services, as exemplified in the pharmaceutical sector by Indorama, in the iron and steel sector when Tata Steel took over Millennium Steel Pcl. Ltd., a Thailand-based manufacturing company engaged in the production and distribution of steel product and finally in the automotive sector by the joint venture between Tata Motors and the Thonburi Automotive Assembly Plant to manufacture pick-up vehicles for domestic consumption in Thailand and for export to ASEAN and China.

The afore-mentioned are simply a few examples of the vast and wide-ranging trade relationship flourishing between the two countries. Furthermore, the recent signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and ASEAN is sure to continuously increase trade volume and afford numerous benefits to their respective economies.

Cultural Relations and People-to-People Contact

Based upon the already strong cultural ties between the two countries, a Cultural Agreement was signed in 1997. A Cultural Exchange Programme 2007-09 was also initiated, increasing the existing frequent cultural exchanges. Indian music and dance based upon the Ramayana are popular in Thailand. Bollywood serves as an incredible force of cultural association, as it has increased its presence in Thailand over the last few years. Thailand is a favourite destination for the filming of Bollywood movies. New Delhi and Kolkata played host to a month long Festival of Thailand in 1997. Bangkok, in turn, is home to an Indian Cultural Centre since September 2009.

Currently, there are approximately 200,000 people of Indian origin residing in Thailand, 80 percent of whom hold Thai citizenship. Most of them have made Thailand their home for many generations. They constitute a dynamic factor in broadening the friendship between our two countries and deepening the understanding between our two peoples. Indian businessmen also play an active role in promoting trade and investment activities in Thailand.

Thailand is an extremely popular holiday destination for Indian tourists. India is one of Thailand's fastest growing markets and the biggest source-market for visitors from South Asia. In 2007, Indian visitor arrivals were upwards of 500,000, up 17.8 percent over 2006,





crossing the half-million mark for the first time. Since then the number of visitors has consistently been in the 500,000 range. For a number of Indian tourists, Thailand serves as a family vacation or even as their first outbound destination. Thanks to its close geographical proximity to India, Thailand fits in well with its value-for-money quality making it the perfect destination.

An increase in air traffic between the two countries facilitates travel and makes holidays more accessible. Currently, there are daily flights operating on a number of direct routes: Bangkok-New Delhi, Bangkok-Mumbai, Bangkok-Kolkata, Bangkok-Chennai and Bangkok-Bangalore. Other popular Indian destinations include Varanasi and Bodhgaya.

Indian tourists also regard Thailand as a hospitable, peaceful country and a year-round tourism destination with high-quality, value-for-money products and services. Furthermore, improved visa processes and the option to apply for visa on arrival for Indians have added to the increase of tourists.

Future Potential of Thai-India Partnership

The strong partnership between Thailand and India has made remarkable progress in the past decades and it has continued to flourish in all areas and at all levels. Thailand is committed to maintaining the momentum in terms of strengthening and deepening cooperation with India, especially as regards security and economic affairs.

At the same time, both partners should make the most out of the full potential of Thailand-India partnership, in particular with regard to trade and investment. With the signing of the FTA, bilateral trade will increase significantly, present turbulence in world financial markets notwithstanding.

New areas of cooperation in the fields of energy, in particular, renewable energy, science and technology, transport and logistics will also be further expanded. Energy diplomacy is an important channel that must be explored in the current day and age. With regard to road connectivity, Thailand has been working within several regional frameworks such as BIMSTEC and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong (ACMECs) to connect South Asia with ASEAN and East Asia. Road link will soon connect India, Myanmar and Thailand to China, Laos and Vietnam.

The future of our relationship remains positive and bright.

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008*
No. of visitors from India arriving in Thailand	203,790	300,634	352,965	429,748	506,237	489,794

* Number of India tourists visiting Thailand from Jan-Nov 2008.

Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand and Ministry of Tourism and Sports

