

India and Thailand seek better relations

by Ramtanu Maitra

Indian Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao's April 7-9 visit to Thailand reflects India's new efforts to seek stronger economic and bilateral relations with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). What had begun with the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's efforts in the mid-1980s is now being consolidated, and India is in the process of mending the gaping holes in its foreign policy created during the Cold War days.

During those 40-plus years, the ASEAN member-nations had close security arrangements with the United States. When President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, in the early 1970s, surreptitiously opened relations with Beijing, ostensibly to isolate the Soviet Union, without consulting ASEAN, ASEAN received no sympathy from Delhi. The presence of U.S. bases in the Philippines and the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the region kept U.S.-ASEAN relations on an even keel.

Rao's visit to Thailand marks a decisive shift from Delhi's "Cold War" regional foreign policy. Content with being a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the mandarins of Delhi's Foreign Ministry had pompously considered the ASEAN members as "stooges" of America, and hence, untouchables.

The late Mrs. Indira Gandhi's decision to endorse the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979 and to recognize the Vietnam-backed Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia shortly thereafter virtually cut off Delhi from relations with the ASEAN countries. Mrs. Gandhi was revolted by Pol Pot's barbaric acts and Washington's cavalier reaction to the genocide. However, Mrs. Gandhi's endorsement of the invasion of a country which has extensive borders with ASEAN nation Thailand, raised questions about India's interests. Second, India's image as a Non-Aligned leader took a beating among the ASEAN nations, which considered New Delhi as a benefactor of Vietnam, a junior partner in the Soviet bloc.

In the mid-80s, when Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister and when Moscow was reeling under economic shortfalls and pressure from Washington through the unleashing of a limited Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in 1983, Indian policy began to shift. During his 22-hour stay in October 1986, Rajiv Gandhi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Thailand, and brought into focus the potential for economic relations between the two countries.

This month, Rao also focused his visit on economic is-

sues. Earlier, a meeting of the two foreign secretaries took place in Bangkok, during which India offered an array of know-how to Thailand, ranging from fiber optics to nuclear power. Recognizing that Thailand is the hub of economic activity which may engulf Indochina, India is eager to introduce its expertise in various technological areas which include computer hardware and software, laser devices, and electronics. The trip is the first time India has offered technology to set up nuclear power plants to any country in the region. While Thailand has not yet formally responded, it has been made known that the Thai government is "keenly exploring" the option.

Since Rajiv Gandhi's visit, Indo-Thai trade has seen a spurt from a meager \$100 million trade turnover in 1986, to past the \$1 billion mark in 1992. Moreover, Malaysia and Singapore are centers of Indian interest. India developed strong trade ties with Malaysia during Rajiv Gandhi's premiership and is now seeking Malaysian investment in India. The two countries have set up a Joint Commission at the foreign minister level and have identified 10 areas to enhance cooperation. The areas include trade and investment, human resource development, health, science and technology, agriculture, tourism, culture, transportation, power generation and transmission, petroleum, and petrochemicals.

In addition, since the Rao government came to power in 1991, India has been seeking strategic relations with South-east Asian nations. India has been admitted for sectoral dialogue with ASEAN, although limited to socio-economic matters. Full-fledged membership, which India will attain in 1995, will enable it to discuss security matters in the region.

Security concerns

Already, India has signed a bilateral defense agreement with Malaysia which may include a wide area of defense cooperation. The Royal Malaysian Navy has shown interest in purchasing Indian fast patrol boats, and Malaysian Defense Minister Najib Tun Razak, during his visit to India last February, had shown interest in purchasing the Indian-manufactured Dornier-228 aircraft and Alouette III helicopters. There are also indications that the Indian Army will cooperate with its Malaysian counterpart in training for special operations, jungle warfare, and counterinsurgency techniques. There are expectations in India's defense industry that Malaysia may ask India to provide training and spare parts if Malaysia chooses to buy MiG-29s from Russia.

Just after the Malaysian defense minister's visit, the Indian Navy carried out a four-day exercise with the Royal Singapore Navy off the Andaman Islands. In fact, a series of bilateral naval exercises have been scheduled with several ASEAN nations this year, indicating India's concern about the security of the Pacific Rim, and it is expected that this fall India will participate in naval exercises with Thailand and Malaysia. A second naval exercise with Indonesia has also been scheduled for this year.