

# ISAS Special Report

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## Singapore-India Relations: Focus on Shaping a Shared Future<sup>1</sup>

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Singapore's President, His Excellency Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, launched a special edition of a book on the city-state's relations with India, at a function in New Delhi on 10 February 2015 – in commemoration of 50 years of diplomatic engagement between these two sovereign states. The function was organised by the Singapore-based Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. Titled '*Singapore and India: Towards a Shared Future*', the ISAS special publication traces the history and organic evolution of the multi-dimensional relationship between the city-state of Singapore and a resurgent India – in the specific context of the current celebration of half-a-century of interactions between these two countries.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a report on the launch of a special publication by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. The book, '*Singapore and India: Towards A Shared Future*' – a volume commemorating 50 years of diplomatic relations between these two countries – was launched by Singapore's President, His Excellency Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, at a function in India's capital, New Delhi, on 10 February 2015.

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After the book was unveiled by Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, a copy of the special edition was presented to the Special Guest, India's Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu. Singapore's President later went round an ISAS exhibition on the theme of the book.

ISAS Chairman Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, in his opening remarks at the book-launch function, emphasised the significance of narrating the well-established Singapore-India relationship as a marker for the future of their dynamic engagement. He said the commemorative volume would be show-cased at the New Delhi Book Fair 2015, where Singapore would be the Guest of Honour. At a symposium that served as a preview for this book launch, Ambassador Gopinath Pillai presented a panoramic perspective of the dynamic and growing relationship between Singapore and India.

The book was conceptualised and produced in about two years' time under the intellectual leadership of ISAS Director, Professor Tan Tai Yong, historian and a Nominated Member of Singapore's Parliament. Former High Commissioner of Singapore to India, Ambassador See Chak Mun, now Senior Research Fellow at ISAS, authored the book. ISAS Consultant for this project, Ms Tan Li Jen, and two Research Assistants at ISAS, Mr Rahul Advani and Ms Rinisha Dutt, functioned as a team to organise the myriad intellectual-logistical aspects of bringing out this topical volume in time.

Speaking at the book-launch function, Professor Tan Tai Yong described the volume as "part history, part current affairs". In an intellectual preview of the book, he noted that the genesis of the long-standing Singapore-India relationship should not be traced to 1965 when the city of Singapore attained full independence as a nation-state. The official interactions could be tracked way back to the early-

19<sup>th</sup> Century when the two territories were linked by and under the auspices of the then East India Company. But the multi-faceted engagement between the peoples of India and Singapore had indeed begun taking shape very much earlier.

“As Singapore developed as a colonial port city, it attracted migrants from India who would go on to literally build much of early Singapore. Their labour and craftsmanship would change the architectural and visual landscape of Singapore for ever”, Professor Tan Tai Yong noted. Skilled and commercial migrants from India made their way to Singapore, blazing a new trail, after the early groups of workers and traders had already played a significant role in fashioning the colonial port city of their times. Descendants of many of those commercial migrants from India had continued to run family businesses in Singapore to this day, he said, drawing attention to how modern diplomatic relations between India and the city-state began flourishing on the foundations of the early historical links between the peoples of these two lands.

Outlining in considerable detail the rising trajectory of diplomatic, political, economic, and defence-related ties between India and Singapore, in the historical context of an organic progression of contacts between the peoples of these two lands, the ISAS Director cited in particular the Nalanda University Project in India, where Singapore is set to play a supportive role, and the emergence of the city-state as “a popular destination for the modern Indian Diaspora” in the current phase of globalisation. Discernible now was a huge “diversity in the kinds of work Indians are doing in Singapore, ranging from banking and IT (information technology) to academia, journalism and entertainment”.

In the context of such a wide satellite-view of the organic evolution of Singapore-India relations, Professor Tan Tai Yong shone the spotlight on the ISAS book in

these words: “This commemorative volume attempts to capture the substance and spirit of this long, enduring and special relationship. We tell this story not only through facts and figures, but also through anecdotes, interviews and personal stories that showcase the richness and depth of the Singapore-India partnership and its effects on people’s individual lives”.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Ananta Aspen Centre in India actively associated themselves with ISAS in the launch of this book at the function attended by parliamentarians, diplomats, media personnel, and others. At the pre-launch symposium – hosted by ISAS, the CII, and the Ananta Aspen Centre – Professor Tan Tai Yong; Professor Emeritus S D Muni of India’s Jawaharlal Nehru University; CII Director-General Chandrajit Banerjee; and Ananta Aspen Centre’s Chairman T N Ninan discussed the current trends and future possibilities in Singapore-India relations.

At this symposium which set the stage for the book-launch, Ambassador Gopinath Pillai said: “The connections between our countries [Singapore and India], as Professor Tan Tai Yong has revealed in his book, *Singapore, A 700 year History*, is dated well before the arrival of the Europeans, when Indian maritime traders were ubiquitous in the Straits of Malacca. ... Indeed, the very founding of modern Singapore in 1819 was premised on the East India Company’s desire to protect its strategic sea-lanes off India’s eastern seaboard, and facilitating the burgeoning India-China trade [of that era]. That pivotal event, in turn set in motion the process, which over time led to the establishment of a viable and varied community of Indians on the island [of Singapore]. The migration of Indians, and with them India’s languages, traditions and customs, are probably the most telling reflection of the deep historical ties between our two countries. ... In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, even as Indian nationalism and its nationalist leaders continued to

inspire Southeast Asian leaders, interactions between Singapore and India became less resplendent [for a variety of reasons]”.

About the bold new renewal of ties between Singapore and India after the dramatic passing of the Cold War into the annals of recent history, Ambassador Gopinath Pillai recalled some aspects of this robust bilateral mood which has been sustained to this day. He said: “The end of the Cold War, along with pressures towards liberalisation in the context of the deepening globalisation, saw India embark on the painstaking process of economic reform. Its declared ‘Look East Policy’ in 1992 marked the beginning of a new chapter in Singapore-India relations. ... In 1994, [Singapore’s] then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who took a keen interest in India’s economic reforms, visited New Delhi. That visit was reciprocated by [India’s] PM Narasimha Rao. Such high level exchanges have continued in the new millennium, the latest being [India’s] PM Manmohan Singh’s visit [to Singapore] in 2011 and [Singapore’s] PM Lee Hsien Loong’s delegation [to India] in 2012. Indeed, Singapore is recognised as a trusted partner in India’s pursuit of its ‘Look East Policy’ ... Concomitantly, people-to-people contacts have intensified ... and contributed significantly to Singapore’s economic success. Cultural interactions from India to Singapore have consequently increased. ... Very soon, an Indian Heritage Centre will be opened in Singapore – an institution that will be a testimony to the historical ties and the remarkable relationship [between the two countries]. ... For many of us [like the ISAS] engaged in facilitating relations between our two countries, there is every expectation that Singapore-India relations will deepen and intensify further in time to come”.

The key message from the launch of this book and the pre-launch symposium is that the future of Singapore-India relationship can be fashioned by sustaining the current focus on diverse sectors and by opening new frontiers of cooperation. In

the opinion of this author, some possible new areas of cooperation in this deeply interactive relationship are: (1) the niche domains of information technology; (2) full-spectrum anti-terror activities, including on issues concerning terror-funding; (3) fine-tuned and customised defence-related engagement; and (4) cyber security in civil and military matters.

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