



Looking Beyond the 70 Years of India-Thailand Relations

Dr. Temjenmeren Ao*

Abstract

The paper is a study on the India-Thailand relationship which over the course of the last two decades has been gathering momentum. Since the diplomatic relationship had been established very early on, the paper would briefly lay out the various contours of the relationship. This would help answer the question on the continuity or change in the relationship. Given the changing global environment especially in the new millennium, the scope of engagement has expanded into other areas, which traditionally did not exist. The paper would elaborate on the three major areas of contemporary cooperation between New Delhi and Bangkok; these are security, economic, and connectivity. This has provided a major thrust in pushing the overall level of engagement. Given the changing nature of India-Thailand cooperation today, the paper would attempt to argue that the positive externalities from their cooperation could filter down into the other neighbouring nations as well.

Introduction

Thailand was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with India in 1947, while the economic and cultural relations between the two could be traced back to more than 2000 years and provide the very foundation of the bilateral relationship. The ancient cultural threads that linked Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar have often been so-called the 'Indianised' States in Southeast Asia.ⁱ India and Thailand located in each other's extended neighbourhood share a unique civilizational linkage with the great Indian Emperor Ashoka, sending Buddhists missionaries to Thailand and thus making it one of the major religions in Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia. Further, Indian traders since ancient times have been using the water between the two nations in order to carry out trade.ⁱⁱ Ancient Thailand's contact with India through trade

eventually brought ideas, culture, language and technologies from a region where urban centres had already developed. This led to larger settlements appearing in the lower Mekong basin, and to the west in an area stretching from the lower Chao Phraya basin across the hills on the neck of the peninsula to its western coastⁱⁱⁱ, as indicated on the map in figure one.

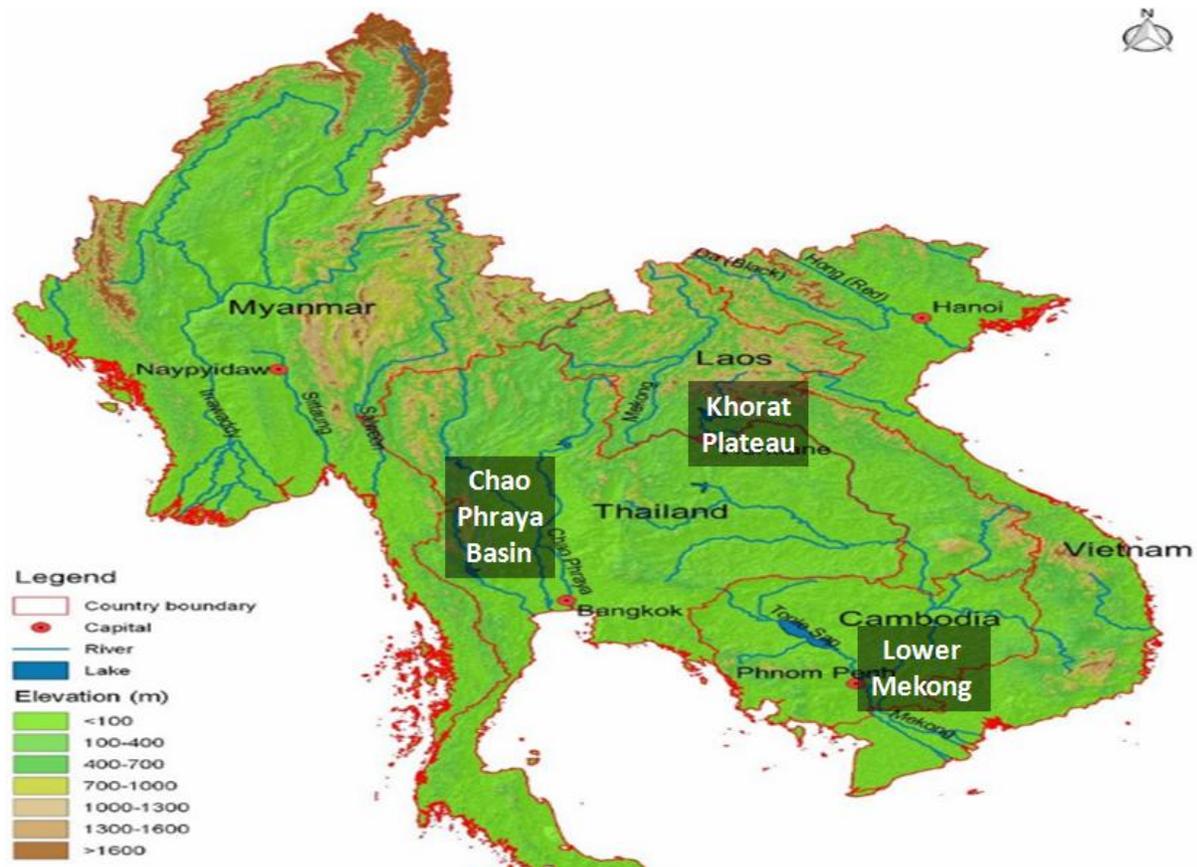


Figure One: Early Large Settlements in Mainland Southeast Asia^{iv}

After completing 70 years of bilateral diplomatic relations in 2017 – marked by continuity despite some level of estrangement during the cold war period – there remains a desire amongst both nations to enhance the relationship by diversifying the scope and add newer dimensions into the partnership. This has been made possible on account of the deep historical ties shared and the need in both the nations to do so in order to overcome the new challenges. Further, with Thailand assuming the role of the Coordinating Country for the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relation in August 2018, it would provide much scope for a closer interaction between New Delhi and Bangkok.

India-Thailand Relations: The Early Years

In the post India independence period, Indo-Thai relations had no doubt remained lukewarm with neither the King nor the Prime Minister of Thailand during 1947-76, paying a State visit to India. The major reason for these limited high-level visits could be political. Since from 1948 to 1973, Thailand remained under the dictatorship of three military strongmen- Field Marshal Phibun Songgram, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, and Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn.^v Until

the early 1970s, the military remained the dominant political force in Thailand. However, towards the end of the 1950s with the permanent return of King Bhumibol Adulyadej from Switzerland in 1951 after completing his education, Thailand began to witness a revival of its monarchy – after it had lost absolute power in 1932. Field Marshal Sarit also believed that the monarchy would serve as a focus of unity, and a force for stability, while remaining susceptible to their control. Thus, Sarit began to encourage expansion of the royal role by allowing the King to undertake tours in all the regions of the country. Through this the Royal institution was able to promote its image while also incorporating the use of modern mass communication. From the late 1960s, the King began to make public comments on political matters, also criticising the army's use of violence against its own people, and urged students to campaign against the corruption that flourished under dictatorship. In 1968 the King nudged the military government to complete the constitution promised a decade earlier and to restore an elective parliament.^{vi} King Bhumibol's intervention helped further elevate the status of the monarchy. Thus, by the 1970s most of the movements and organisations did not see fit to challenge the role of the King as sovereign, but rather chose to frame appeals for civil rights and the restoration of democracy.^{vii} On October 14, 1973, when the demonstrators against the military rule were under attack by police and soldiers, the royal family came out in public to allow them to take refuge in the palace compound. By the evening of the same day, the palace struck a deal forcing the junta to end its rule and thus appointing the President of the Privy Council as the new Prime Minister. King Bhumibol's act created a lasting impression of him as a democratic monarch with the highest moral authority above all political forces.^{viii}

The King appointed a constitutional assembly in order to draft a new charter for the conduct of democratic elections. Thailand got a new democratic constitution by 1974 as a consequent of which a large number of political parties competed for votes in the election of 1975. The consequent of which was the formation of a generally weak and unstable government. Further, to add to this was the sharp increase in oil prices in the early 1970s that caused global economic instability also adding pressure on the newly elected Thai government. The 1970s was also witnessed massive student political activism and radicalism the world over. This impacted Thai politics with students working to organise movements for social justice causing political mobilisation and polarisation.^{ix}

Between 1973 and 1976, Thailand had six Prime Ministers causing major political instability and lack of policy direction and continuity. This was as a consequent of the Prime Ministers either having a close affinity towards communist countries, or opposing, or remaining neutral. As stability is needed in order to ensure the continuity of policy initiative, the Thai government was not able to take steps to strengthen Indo-Thai relations. King Bhumibol himself did not pay any State visit to India which could have been an outreach for strengthening the relationship. This could be attributed to the fact that since 1967 the King stopped undertaking any foreign visits except to Laos in 1994, which was his last foreign visit. King Bhumibol engaged in tireless public services, exemplified by his regular visits all over the country to oversee hundreds of royal projects, which also included bringing projects to the people. This kept the King pre-occupied for most of his reign, and restrained his foreign visits, while also earning him great public reverence and making him a very popular monarch.^x However, all children of his children

including Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, Princesses Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and Chulabhorn have visited India several times for cultural or religious events and also to participate in State functions.^{xi}

The Start of an Approach towards building the Relations

Thailand was part of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954 with its headquarters being located in Bangkok. Since Pakistan was a part of the SEATO, it was natural that Thai diplomats on certain occasions supported Pakistan at international forums. However, in 1971 Thailand gave its support to India by keeping itself neutral in the United Nation when Pakistan and the United States wanted to stop the Indian action in support of the independence of Bangladesh. This action by Thailand signalled a new phase for renewing the bilateral ties. This was followed by the State visit of Indian President V V Giri, who became the first Indian Head of State to visit Thailand in 1972.

On December 21, 1976, a Joint Communiqué issued in Manila by Thai Prime Minister, Thanin Kraivichian, and the Philippine President, Ferdinand Marcos, agreed that a just balance among the Great Powers with legitimate interests in the region would contribute to the stability of Southeast Asia as a whole and that peaceful competition among the Great Powers would rebound to the common benefit of Southeast Asia and the Great Powers. Given India's neutrality by not being part of any of the two power blocks along with the good relations it shared with the ASEAN states, there emerged a trend that encouraged Thailand to also start engaging more with India.^{xii}

But, the 1980s did not witness any major positive trend in the bilateral; rather the relations got strained on account of India's stand during the Kampuchea crisis of 1979. Thailand was the greatest opponent of Vietnam's military intervention in Kampuchea and was determined to compel its withdrawal by pressing Hanoi through the support it garnered from ASEAN, China, and the western states. India's positive posturing with Vietnam during the Kampuchea crisis was seen as unacceptable and inimical.^{xiii}

Then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi attached importance to strengthening India's relations with Southeast Asia. He recognised the importance of Thailand in ASEAN and thus, paid a visit in 1986. While in Thailand the Prime Minister asserted that India could extend suitable proposals to solve the Kampuchean issue by formulating a compromise between the rebels and the government. India believed that the conflict resolution in Cambodia was essential for regional peace and stability. India having a close relationship with Vietnam encouraged Thailand to exchange views with New Delhi in order to find an amicable solution to the crisis. However, the changing course of the Cold War along with Vietnam's worsening economic condition forced it to withdraw from Kampuchea, where reconciliation looked better than confrontation, and thus, putting an end to the entire crisis.^{xiv}

Revival in the Post- Cold War Period and the Realities of the 21st Century

In the post-Cold War period and given the new realities of the 21st century, there has emerged a consensus in both nations that this is a relationship which is important and needs to be

continuously nurtured. This is very much evident, given that high level meetings have continued to take place on a regular basis between both sides. Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao chose Thailand for his first visit outside the subcontinent in 1993. The Prime Minister's visit demonstrates the importance he and India attached to its relations with Thailand, which was seen as a gateway to Southeast Asia. After 1993, India's relations with the nations in Southeast Asia were seen not merely from the prism of the historical and cultural ties but the nature of the engagements has expanded into a multi-dimensional partnership.^{xv}

The announcement of the 'Look East' policy in 1994 which coincided with India's economic reforms provided the very platform Thailand was seeking, in expanding its bilateral trade and commerce with India. The 'Look West' policy announced by the Thai government in 1997 sought the strengthening of the existing bilateral relations with regions beyond Southeast Asia. The enunciation of the policy by Thailand also provided the basis for further expanding the India-Thai bilateral. Relations seemed to move further in the aftermath of 9/11 that brought along the need to expand strategic cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism and other forms of non-traditional threats. Despite these positive trends in the bilateral, the momentum of Indo-Thai relations did slow down. One of the reasons for this could be political instability emerging again in Thailand. On the evening of September 19, 2006, the Thai military staged a coup, overthrowing the elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra.^{xvi}

Despite elections being conducted on December of 2007, political unrest continued in the form of mass Red Shirt demonstration in 2008 calling for fresh elections. Further, events such as the Yellow Shirt demonstration that seized the Bangkok International Airport for four days in November 2008 – which resulted in the shifting of the ASEAN Summit to Jakarta – and the six-week Red Shirt siege of Ratchaprasong – the commercial district of Bangkok – in 2010 had a deep impact not only in term of Thai politics but also on its economy. And despite the three year tenure of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra which provided some hope of political stability, it dissipated rapidly in 2014, when Thailand's polarised politics ultimately resulted in a military coup.^{xvii}

However, unlike in the past, this time around despite Thailand's internal political turbulence there remained continuity in the Indo-Thai cooperation. Ever since the start of the new millennium – the Thai political unrest which may have also slowed down the pace of the India-Thailand engagements – the high-level visits and engagements continued from both sides. This was done so by the governments at both ends in order to ensure continuity of the relationship while also ensuring that years of diplomatic efforts are not undone. Starting from Thai PM Thaksin Shinawatra state visit to India in November 2001 to Deputy PM of India L K Advani visit to Thailand in 2003 to PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's and PM Manmohan Singh's visit in 2003 and 2004 respectively, including Thai interim PM Gen Surayud Chulanont visit to India in 2007.^{xviii} In January 2012 the Prime Minister of Thailand was invited to India, to be the chief guest at the Republic Day celebration, this also coincided with the 65th year of bilateral diplomatic relations. During this visit both sides signed six pacts, areas ranging from defence, security to trade, combating terrorism, and piracy, agreement on Free Trade Area (FTA) in goods, services and investment, FDI, and a legal framework to deal with non-state actors and subversive elements

that pose a common problem to both countries.^{xix} Thus, the move towards establishing a more comprehensive partnership was set in motion.

The current PM of Thailand Mr Chan-o-cha made a State visit to India in June 2016 during which both sides agreed to further enhance security and economic cooperation. PM Chan-o-cha and PM Modi also held a bilateral meeting prior to the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit on January 25, 2018, at New Delhi. Both sides discussed issues that included politics, security, maritime security, trade and investment, digital cooperation, rubber and palm oil trade, regional connectivity, Indo – Pacific Partnership and Thailand's readiness to accept the Coordinatorship for ASEAN - India Dialogue Relations in August 2018. Prime Minister Chan-o-cha at the Summit also made a statement in support of the Indo-Pacific Partnership approach and urged India and ASEAN to find a new balance to ensure regional security and stability that encompasses ASEAN centrality, trust, respect, and mutual interests. He further stressed the importance of maritime and land connectivity and encouraged all parties to enhance economic cooperation. The Prime Minister emphasized the need to utilize the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement, reduce trade barriers, particularly in rubber and palm oil trade, and to conclude the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations.^{xx}

Core Areas of Cooperation in the 21st Century: Beyond the 70 years of Relationship

These regular visits at the Prime Minister level reflect the growing partnership between the two nations. This partnership on the Indian side is based on the understanding that Thailand being an important nation in Southeast Asia is India's gateway into Southeast Asia and beyond. Therefore, it needs to be sustained in order to address the new realities while the past historical linkages provide the basis for the further enhancement of the relationship. The need is push forward the bilateral by finding common ground, while also adapting to the new realities. For instance in the area of connectivity, Thailand would push for a more comprehensive collaboration with interested partners, as it is important towards maintaining its significance as a link between east to west and from north to south. Further, Thailand wants to develop itself as a logistic hub which would provide huge economic gains once the ASEAN Economic Community is established. For India connectivity has become its top priority as it continues to bridge the developmental gap within its regions as well as continues expanding its relations into Southeast Asia and beyond.

The completion of 70 years of the Indo-Thai diplomatic relations in 2017 provided the perfect opportunity in order to rework the old ties by continuously finding new areas of engagements based on mutual benefit. Some of the major areas which have helped renew bilateral cooperation are being discussed under the following sections.

Security Cooperation in the New Environment

In the 21st century and in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in September 2001 in the US homeland, there was a shift in the concept of security. Due to the changing nature of threat including the tactics being adopted; where the adversary being no more restricted to State but rather non-State actors. This not only brought about a change in military tactics and engagements but also changed the nature of relationship amongst States. One of the key outcomes in the post

9/11 era was the changing nature of State to State relationship and, in this, India-Thailand relations was no exception. Some of the major emerging trends in the area of security cooperation between India and Thailand are discussed below:

1. Emerging India-Thailand Maritime Cooperation

The India-Thailand relations have become increasingly focussed on military engagement and in particular in the marine space amongst the nations in Southeast Asian. This was necessary as the event of 9/11 which brought out the vulnerabilities from the seas faced also in the region of Southeast Asia. This brought about a change in the overall understanding of maritime security, since the vast and uncharted waters could pose a challenge to the regional as well as global security. In terms of maritime security the scope expanded to include not only security against seaborne military threats but also non-conventional threats to human beings such as low intensity armed conflicts, narcoterrorism, maritime piracy, safety of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), arms trafficking in the sea, and so on. Further, the development of new technologies and growing interdependence between marine resources and overland life-style have further magnified the scope of maritime security, covering issues which concern mankind in general, such as natural disasters, illegal and excessive fishing, environmental security, preservation of marine resources and ecology. Thus, securing the marine space in the new century expanded to not only protect one's territory but also secure the lines for the free flow of trade and commerce.^{xxi}



Figure Two: India-Thailand Common Marine Space^{xxii}

As seen in the figure, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal are part of India and Thailand's common maritime boundaries and sea-lanes have in the past and continue to provide scope for expanding cooperation. India being a maritime nation is located at the centre of the Indian Ocean with a coastline of over 7500 km and after the declaration of an Exclusive Economic

Zone (EEZ) of 200 nautical miles, has to address the safety and security of its total maritime area of over two million sq km. Its geo-political centrality in the Indian Ocean, and its long standing vulnerability to the sea-borne threats as borne out by history have forced India to maintain surveillance over the area stretching from the Malacca Straits to Madagascar in order to secure its vital strategic interests. Thus, there is the need for India to cooperate with its neighbours for ensuring its economic and strategic well-being. India has developed a strong maritime interest and is advocating the development of a free and open ocean. Emphasis is on the need towards safeguarding the freedom of navigation, as it is critical for the entire region's economic growth and prosperity. Economically, India's maritime interests include security of the sea routes for oil imports as well as its sea trade eastward and westward of goods and commodities.^{xxiii} Thailand on the other hand is an important regional player being geographically located at the centre of Southeast Asia. In order to continuously fuel its economic growth it needs to expand its market for which it requires a stable regional environment. As maritime neighbours, both India and Thailand face common security threats from emerging non-traditional challenges such as terrorism, security of sea lanes of communication, and piracy. Given India and Thailand's geographical location, both nations are in a position to play a key role in shaping the Indo-Pacific strategy.

2. Increasing Bilateral Military Exchanges

In the 21st century there has been close interaction and increasing exchanges between the armed Forces of India and Thailand. At the inaugural bilateral India-Thailand Defence Dialogue which took place in December 2001, both sides agreed to work together in matters relating to defence and security, such as coordinated patrol, combating transnational crimes, terrorism, and maritime piracy. The Indo-Thailand Joint Working Group on security cooperation established in 2003 has provided a useful framework to push forward cooperation in maritime fields including security cooperation to include counter terrorism and military cooperation. In the area of maritime security cooperation, India and Thailand has been cooperating through multilateral naval exercise. Indian Navy's exercise MILAN provided this very opportunity in fostering closer cooperation among navies of countries in the Bay of Bengal and the India Ocean region. In February 1995, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and Sri Lanka participated with their warships in the first MILAN exercise. Since then MILAN exercise has been a biennial naval exercise with the list of participating countries increasing from the original five to include Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Mauritius, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Seychelles. Apart from the biennially held MILAN exercise, both navies also interact in other multilateral fora such as Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS).^{xxiv}

The need to further deepen bilateral security cooperation in the marine domain led to the Indo-Thailand Coordinated Patrolling or Indo-Thai CORPAT initiated and launched in 2006. The 25th edition of the CORPAT was held from January 23 to 31, 2018. The aim of this exercise is to engage in coordinated patrolling, anti-piracy exercise, and search and rescue exercise. India is also an 'Observer Plus' country in the multilateral Cobra Gold exercise held in Thailand. Further, India and Thailand on October 25-26, 2015 in New Delhi held a Joint Task Force on Maritime Security.

During Thai Prime Minister Chan-o-cha's visit to New Delhi in June 2016, both sides expressed a keen interest in enhancing cooperation in maritime domain including anti-piracy cooperation, security of sea lanes of communication including coast guard cooperation to maintain peace and ensure safety and security of navigation in the Indian Ocean. In this connection, during the visit it was agreed to work towards the completion of the negotiation for the signing of the White Shipping Agreement between India and Thailand.^{xxv}

3. India-Thailand Counter Terrorism Cooperation

In the aftermath of the cold war and the emerging security challenges of the 21st century, there is the need for redefining the India-Thailand security relations. Ever since the events of 9/11, Thailand has gained major international attention as a hideout and transit for Muslim based extremist groups. An article in the Asian Wall Street Journal alleged that Al-Qaeda linked Jemaah Islamiah (JI) has used Southern Thailand in January 2002 as a pivotal planning area for the Bali bombing. There was also the incident where two Thais in May 2003, with alleged links to the JI were arrested for trying to sell radioactive material for making 'dirty bomb'. There was also the incident in which a group of 100 insurgents raided an arms depot of the Fourth Army Engineers in Narathiwat. Given its location, porous borders, and a large Muslim minority population, in this age of global terrorism, Thailand becomes a likely target of organisations like Al-Qaeda and JI.^{xxvi}

India's own experience of fighting terrorist element in its homeland makes its cooperation with Thailand desirable. Further, the events of 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai, where the terrorist launched their attack from the sea, exposed India's porous sea border. This marine based terrorist attack made India realise its vulnerabilities. This encouraged intensifying cooperation with nations such as Thailand who were also dealing with similar security issue. Thus, the growing threat from non-state entities along with the changing tactics being adopted by them provided a common platform for India and Thailand to further strengthen security cooperation against terrorism in their marine space.

Defence cooperation between India and Thailand in the area of counter terrorism over the years has increased in scope. During the State visit of the then Prime Minister of Thailand, Yingluck Shinawatra to India from January 24-25, 2012, both sides while unequivocally condemning terrorism in all its forms and manifestations recognised the common threats to national security from transnational crimes, including international terrorism. The 6th meeting of the Joint Working Group on Security Cooperation held in New Delhi on May 25-26, 2011, provided an opportunity to discuss the issue of terrorism in a comprehensive manner. A bilateral MOU on Defence cooperation was signed during the January 2012 Thailand PM's visit. In the area of counter terrorism according to the MOU both sides resolved to significantly enhance bilateral cooperation in combating terrorism, including in restricting transnational movement and unauthorized stay of known terrorists in each other's countries. The two leaders resolved to commit their countries to improve sharing of intelligence, the development of more effective counter-terrorism policies, enhance liaison between law enforcement agencies, provide assistance in the areas of border and immigration control to stem the flow of terrorist related material, money and people and specific measures against transnational crimes, through the already

existing mechanisms between Thailand and India.^{xxvii} During the visit of Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister to India in March 2016, a wide variety of security cooperation were discussed. These included intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism, and cyber security. In the same year when PM Chan-o-cha visited New Delhi, while condemning terrorism, both India and Thailand agreed to enhance substantive cooperation for addressing this increasing threat from non-traditional security; that also included counter terrorism.^{xxviii}

India and Thailand have defence cooperation already in place that includes regular joint exercises, officers training at their respective training institutions, exchange of visits at various levels, regular Joint Working Group meetings and staff talks. With the completion of 70 years of bilateral relations there is however, the need for both nations to redraw their security cooperation priorities. This would be required in order to shape new security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. The need for countering the growing threat of terrorism has provided yet another aspect towards intensifying the bilateral security cooperation. Going forward both India and Thailand need an uninterrupted period of peace and stable environment domestically as well as in their immediate neighbourhood. This becomes a pre-requisite in order for both India and Thailand to realise their individual developmental agenda.

Growing India-Thailand Economic Engagement

1. State of Thailand's Economy in the Pre and Post Crisis Period

The economic growth of Southeast Asia in general when examined over the past four decades reveals relatively long periods of uninterrupted rapid growth. This was one of the reasons that pushed India to intensify its relations with the region in the aftermath of the Cold War. From 1991-1996 the overall growth rate of Southeast Asia stood at 7.6 percent. However, the Asian financial crisis which started in July 1997 with the devaluation of the Thai baht set in motion an economic and financial crisis that not only consumed the Thai economy but also every other important Southeast Asian economy, with impact felt on the global economy.^{xxix} The Thai economy was in disarray in the aftermath of the financial crisis; characterised by a contracting output and investment, rising level of poverty, its exchange rate collapsing, and the government compelled to accept an IMF bailout package as the financial system was bankrupt due to lack of confidence in the country's economic institutions.^{xxx}

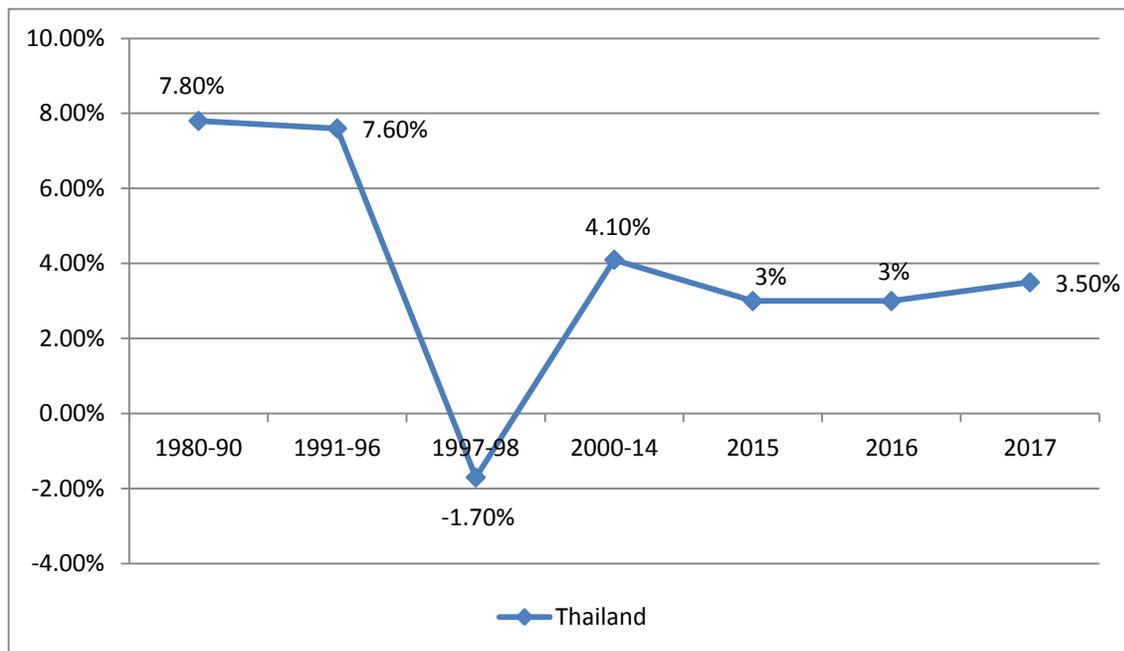


Figure Three: Thailand's GDP Growth^{xxx1}

The data in the graph indicates Thailand's GDP growth over the last four decades. Thailand's GDP growth, from a high of close to eight percent in the 1980s and 1990s went down to -1.7 percent during the financial crisis. Ever since the Asian financial crisis, Thailand has not quite regained its pre-crisis growth rate. One of the major reasons for this is the global economic growth, which has become slower post-2000 than in the first half of the 1980s and 90s. This has inevitably affected the economic performance in Thailand and the region at large. Along with this global slow down there is also the growing anti-globalisation sentiment emerging in the West which is causing concerns and thus, pushing the region including Thailand to forge new free trade agreements in order to push its growth agenda. At the end of 2017, Thailand achieved a GDP growth of 3.5 percent. In the third quarter of 2017 the Thai economy registered its greatest expansion with 4.3 percent growth rate. According to the Thai-India Business Information Centre, Thailand's economy in 2018 is projected to grow at 3.6-4.6 percent.^{xxxii}

2. India-Thailand Economic Re-rapprochement

India's 'Look East' policy along with the August 13, 1991, Government of India's Statement on Trade Policy in the Parliament, wherein reduction in controls, simplified procedures, and creation of a congenial environment for trade ushered in a new era of foreign trade policy in India. The changing role of the Government in India from controlling and regulating trade towards facilitating trade led to the replacement of its Export Import Policy (EXIM Policy) with a National Foreign Trade Policy in 2004. The new policy encompassed Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs), along with EXIM Policy that ushered in an environment free of restrictions and controls. India's Foreign Trade Policy considered the fact that RTAs and FTAs would help supplement and complement the multilateral trading system, while also helping India to expand its markets.^{xxxiii}

In the 21st century there was an emerging Indo-Thai economic relation as a consequence of economic reforms being undertaken in India and in Thailand under its Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The new Thai PM, who was in power from 2001-2006, introduced new sets of economic policies at the very onset of his term. By 2003, Thailand finally emerged from its crisis of 1997 with its national income per person surpassing its pre-crisis (1996) level, and the economy again performing well, with good immediate prospects. The Thaksin government began to aggressively pursue FTA's with Thailand's trading partners, which included China, USA, Australia, and India. Thaksin's electoral success in 2001 was one of the major reasons for the government's ability to implement these economic reforms. The opportunities to implement such lasting reforms were restrained under the previous government, as they were made up of a large number of small political parties. This caused disunity within the fragile coalitions that prevented any long term agenda from being implemented.^{xxxiv}

The two emerging economies undergoing reforms along with India's 'Look East' and Thailand's 'Look West' policy provided a new basis for enhancing bilateral economic cooperation and enhancing interaction between India and Thailand in the new millennium. In October 2003 India and Thailand signed a FTA, which was implemented on March 1, 2004; a delay due to differences in the methodology related to Rules of Origin. The FTA was termed as the 'Early Harvest Scheme' (EHS), through which imports duties on 82 products were brought down by 50 percent. Further, through their participation in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC), it has helped promote bilateral economic cooperation and partnership through trade.^{xxxv} The following diagram indicates the value of India's export to and import from Thailand between 2000 and 2017. It can be seen from the diagram that the bilateral trade has registered a growth over the years with two-way trade valued at over US \$ 9 billion in 2017.

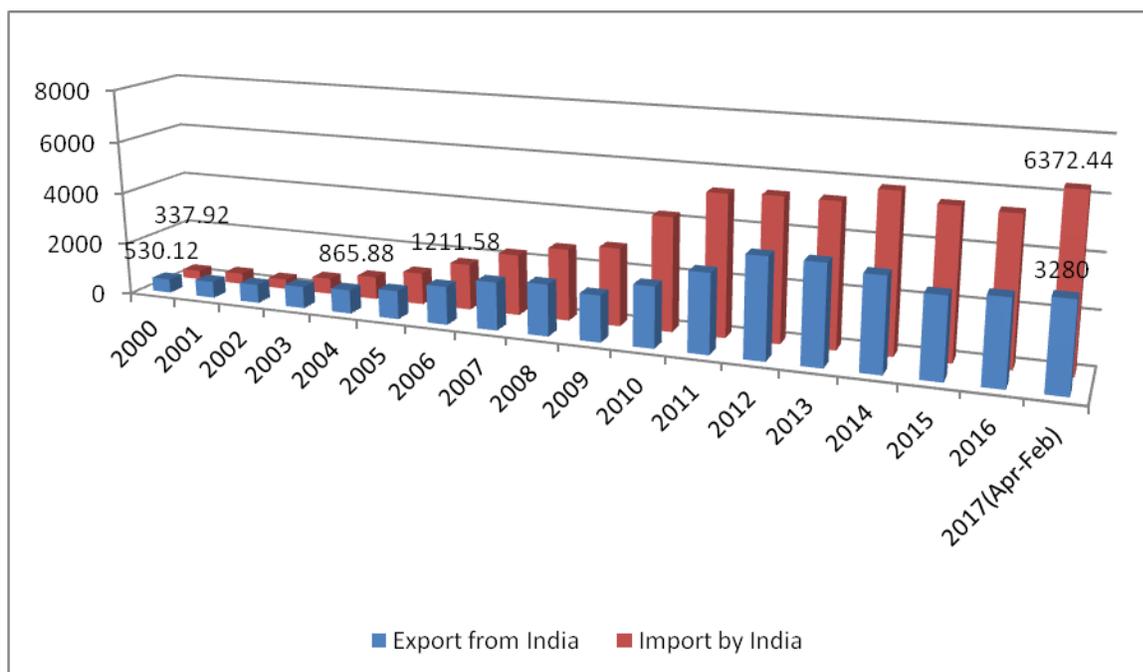


Figure Four: India's Bilateral Trade with Thailand, 2000-2017 (in US \$ Million)^{xxxvi}

The figure indicates that at the start of the new millennium, India had a positive balance of trade with Thailand with its total export valued at US \$ 530.12 million, and import from Thailand valued at US \$ 337.92 million. After the implementation of the Early Harvest Scheme in 2004, covering 82 products (now 83) under the proposed India-Thailand FTA, led to both sides undertaking tariff concessions during 2004-2006 in a phased manner. The implementation of the EHS pushed Thai export to India from US \$ 865.88 million in 2004 to US \$ 1,211.58 million, an increase of 39.93 percent, while India's exports increased from US \$ 901.39 million in 2004 to US \$ 1,075.31 in 2005. Thai goods have further benefited from tax reduction under the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement in Goods, which came into effect from January 1, 2010, and has already resulted in substantial growth in the bilateral trade.^{xxxvii}

Some of the major items exported from India are chemicals, jewellery, machinery and parts, other metal ores, parts and accessories of vehicles, fresh aquatic animals, chilled, frozen, processed and instant, medicinal and pharmaceutical products, vegetables and vegetable products, iron, steel and products, electric machinery and parts. India's major imports from Thailand consist of polymers of ethylene, propylene, etc in primary forms, chemical products, motor cars, parts and accessories, precious stones and jewellery, machinery and parts, radio-broadcast receivers, television receiver and parts, air conditioning machine and parts, iron and steel and their products, cooper and articles, automatic data processing machines and parts.^{xxxviii}

3. Possibility for a Stronger Economic Engagement

Currently, Thailand is going through a new economic developmental model. Termed as 'Thailand 4.0', the new economic development model was launched in 2016 by the Prime Minister Chan-ocha. This developmental model aims to unlock the country from 'a middle income trap', 'an inequality trap', and 'an imbalanced trap', and advance the country toward the 'first world country' that is stable, prosperous, and sustainable within the context of the 4th industrial revolution. Based on the 20 years National Strategic Plan (2017-2036), the goal of the strategy is to set guidelines and benchmarks for development in order to ensure stability in policy formulation and smooth implementation of the next four Social and Economic Development Plans (12th -15th NESDB Plan) through the Pracharat mechanism (public-private-people partnership).^{xxxix} Thailand is projected to grow economically with the launch of its new economic policy model 'Thailand 4.0' which according to the World Bank is contributing to continuing improvements in domestic business sentiment. Further, according to World Bank's Thailand Economic Monitor, 2018, the economy is projected to grow at 4.1% indicating that Thailand's economic recovery is broadening. While rapid export growth continues fuelling the economy, an increase in capacity utilization and acceleration in capital goods imports suggest a nascent domestic demand recovery as well.^{xl} Thus, through Thailand 4.0, the economy would be transformed into a value-based and innovation-driven economy.

This provides an opportunity for India to deepen its economic cooperation with Thailand in the area of IT, pharmaceuticals, auto-components, machinery, and alternative energy. Further, the India-Thailand Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) which is currently under negotiation needs an early conclusion. The negotiation for the Indo-Thai CECA began after signing of a Framework Agreement for establishing an India-Thailand FTA on October 9, 2003.

The Agreement envisages negotiation for establishing an India-Thailand FTA with a view to strengthening and enhancing liberalization of trade through progressive elimination of tariffs, progressive liberalization of trade in services, establishment of an open and competitive investment regime etc.^{xli}

The India-Thai CECA like the other CECAs with Singapore and Malaysia is part of India's larger ASEAN integration strategy. Further, as both India and Thailand are part of the ongoing Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations, the conclusion of the CECA would enable both to provide a stronger basis towards the final RCEP agreement. However, it must also be mentioned that there remains hurdles towards the conclusion of the Indo-Thai CECA. For instance, services which is a key component of the CECA negotiations, continues to remain an area where there is a lack of convergence between the two sides. While both agree that services trade in the area such as IT and banking have major potential, there remains a limited market entry, since both nations have a restrictive FDI regime in services.^{xlii}

During the visit of PM Chan-o-cha to New Delhi on June 16, 2016, the Prime Minister of India stated that the government would take steps to step up the talks for a proposed FTA and commence negotiations for a CEPA with Thailand.^{xliii} This if realised would help further accelerate India-Thai collaboration in other areas such as infrastructure and in particular tourism infrastructure where Thailand has some level of expertise. Further, India-Thailand market access would also provide opportunities for generating economic growth and employment as well as increase mutual investment flows into new areas.

Connectivity Cooperation: A Major Driver

A robust network of infrastructures such as roads, airports, ports, railways, and power grids that would complement seamless connectivity is a pre-requisite for trade and commerce. In the late 1980s, Thailand's booming economy along with the prospects of India opening itself to the international market, made the then Thai Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan revived the national dream of the 'golden peninsula', in which Thailand would function as the economic hub of Southeast Asia. The agenda still continues to remain part of modern day Thai national planning in which connectivity remains at the heart of its economic policy. The ongoing Thailand infrastructure plan (2015-2022) prioritises highway network linkage with neighbouring countries, as well as air transport capacity enhancement, and maritime transport development.^{xliv}

According to a study by the Asian Development Bank Institute in 2015, one of the major driving forces behind Thailand's connectivity agenda is because of its changing economic structure. Thailand like many of the countries in the region is an important production and assembly base for industries such as automobiles and hard-disk drives. This attracts investments from multinational enterprises in Japan, EU and the US. This was also one of the major reasons for the high rate of growth it witnessed in the 1980s and 90s before the financial crisis. Today, however Thailand is facing an increasing shortage of operational workers along with becoming an aging society. Given its increased manufacturing sector there remains shortage of labour, as new generation are pursuing higher education rather than joining the manufacturing sector through engaging in vocational training. Additionally, Thailand faces a sharp increase in the wage rate.

Thailand enacted a national minimum and uniform wage that mandates a daily rate of nearly \$ 10 in 2013. This has impacted the labour-intensive industries such as textiles, garments, electronics, and leather wear. The shortage of operational workers and the higher wage rate have led to a sharp increase in Thailand's outward FDI. Some of the major recipients of Thailand's direct investment are the ASEAN States, China, EU, and Japan.^{xlv}

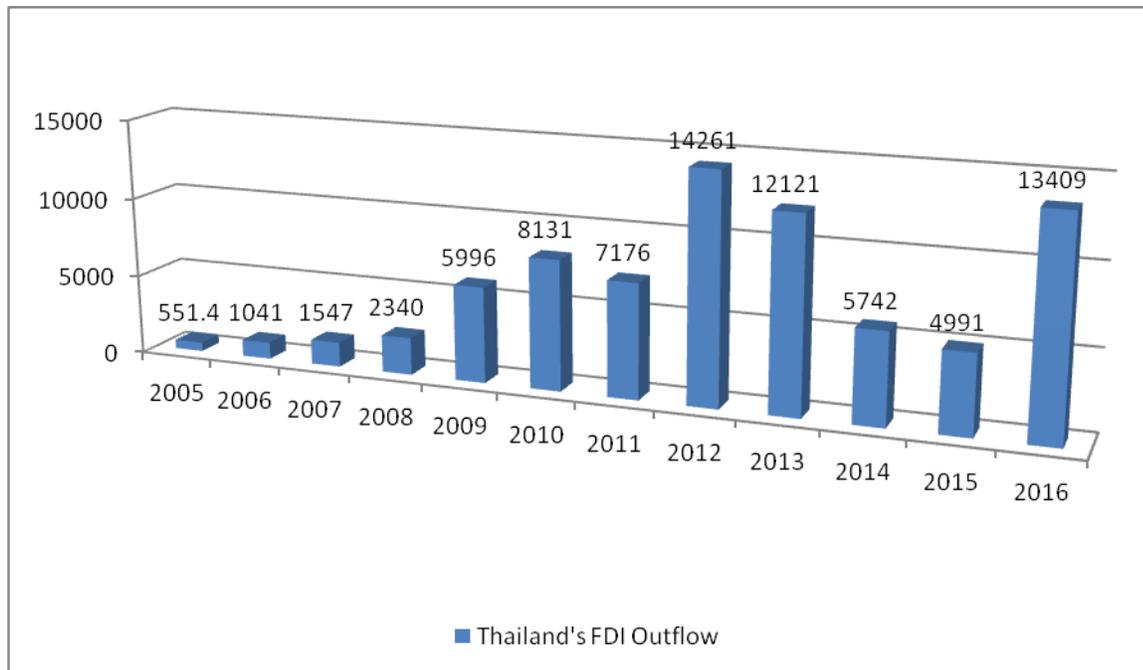


Figure Five: Thailand's FDI Outflow, 2005-2016 (figure in million US \$)^{xlvi}

The figure indicates Thailand's FDI outflow from 2005-2016. From the data it is evident that FDI from Thailand which stood at half a billion in 2005 continued to increase reaching a peak of over 14 billion in 2012. Thus, from being an investment recipient nation for decades, today, due to its changing economic structure, Thailand is also increasing its foreign investment. This transition to an investor country brings about the need for Thailand to promote connectivity within the region and parts of South Asia and Africa as the level of its direct investment expands.

Investment in the form of FDI between India and Thailand has been on an upward trajectory; however there remain scope for further expansion. In terms of FDI from India into Thailand from April 2000 to December 2016; it totalled US \$ 282.56 million which constituted about 0.09 percent of Thailand's total FDI inflows.^{xlvii} Investment from Thailand has also increased in recent years from US \$ 11.55 million in 2012 to US \$ 68.87 million in 2016. Thai investments are mainly in infrastructure, real estate, food processing sectors, chemicals, and hotel and hospitality sector.^{xlviii} In an effort to boost two-way investments, India and Thailand also decided to renegotiate a new Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) during PM Chan-o-cha's visit to New Delhi in June 2016. Two-way investment will benefit from enhanced connectivity between the two countries.

Further, after the conclusion of the multilateral Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, Thailand given its geographical advantages, being located at the centre of the ASEAN

community becomes an important link to China and South Asia. The Thai government has therefore; set the goal for Thailand to become the regional logistics hub. In order to accomplish this goal, it is important for Thailand to improve its connectivity; both in terms of physical infrastructure and trade facilitation. Currently, despite the fact that Thailand relies on trade, it still has a poor logistics system which lacks advanced IT systems in logistics, lack of connection between transport modes, and excessive reliance on land transportation. This means high logistic cost that hinders its competitiveness.^{xlix} India is expecting to witness an increase in its sea traffic in the near future. The launching of the ‘Sagar Mala’ project by the government is intended towards facilitating the future prospective growth by developing and modernising its maritime infrastructure. This would ensure seamless connectivity for the transport of its goods and services while enabling the expansion of its trade and commerce. For India infrastructural connectivity would also in turn help bring development to its Northeast region. The establishment of a soft and hard connectivity from India’s Northeast region into Southeast Asia, received priority under the “Look East’ policy, this has received further impetus under the ‘Act East’ policy.

Today, both nations have placed connectivity as a major policy priority and given the fact that they face an uphill challenge in terms of addressing their connectivity agenda, there exists a common ground for cooperation. Currently, India and Thailand are cooperating closely on improving regional connectivity through initiatives such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMTTH), Asian Highway Network under UNESCAP, BTILS under BIMSTEC framework. For instance the IMTTH is a cross-border transportation network being financed by the government of India, Myanmar, and Thailand. Through the IMTTH, India can be connected to Thailand by road from the Northeast India and through Myanmar, as indicated in the figure six. In terms of air connectivity India and Thailand have a growing network of flights with Bangkok connected by air to nine Indian destinations.^l

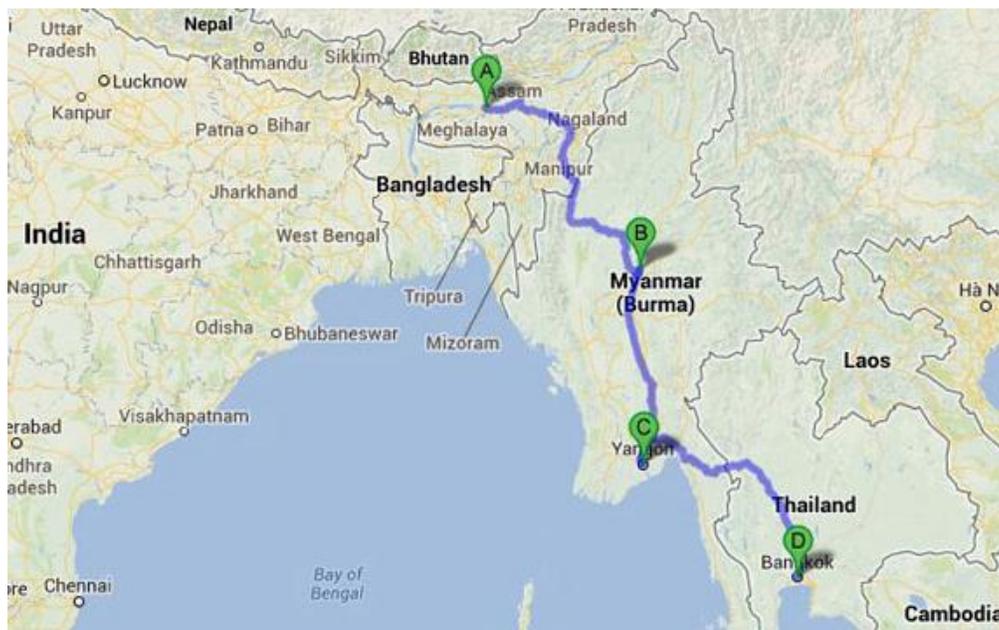


Figure Six: India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway^{li}

At the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, held in December 2012, Thailand expressed to work more closely with India, not only under the framework of ASEAN-India relations but also in the framework of BIMSTEC and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation. Thailand was onboard from the very start on the development of the Mekong-India Economic Corridor to construct a sea route linking Chennai Port with Dawei deep-sea port in Myanmar and Laem Chabang deep-sea port in Thailand, as shown in Figure Seven. The economic corridor would help in facilitating the transportation of various raw materials and parts to the various industries between India and the ASEAN states.^{lii}



Figure Seven: Sea route linking Chennai Port with Dawei deep-sea port in Myanmar and Laem Chabang deep-sea port in Thailand^{liii}

According to Union Minister Mr. Nitin Gadkari in a press statement on January 23, 2018, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is likely to be operational by December 2019. He further stated that, extension of trilateral highway to Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam is being planned and are at different stages of implementation.^{liv} This 1,400 Km long India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway once operationalised would link these three countries with Southeast Asia by land would also help boost trade, commerce, and tourism. India and Thailand given their positive economic growth would continue to engage in a deeper trade while also increasing their direct investments. The conclusion of the India-Thailand CECA in the near future would further push the requirement for a robust line of connectivity. With the Indo-Thai bilateral trade set to expand further connectivity would be a major enabler as it would help in better trade facilitation.

Thus, today cooperation between India and Thailand in the area of connectivity has emerged as a major driver in their bilateral relations.

Conclusion

India is today one of the major political, economic, and military power, whose growth trajectory would depend largely on its domestic market along with the prevalence of a relatively stable internal and external environment. This would require for India to continuously build on the relationship with nations by adding new areas of cooperation. Thailand is one of the key ASEAN states with the second largest economy in Southeast Asia. Even though Thailand's economy has not bounced back to the same level of growth it achieved in the 1980s and the 1990s, the current economic projection looks promising. Further, Thailand's new economic model provides new opportunities for partnership including in the areas of connectivity which would encompass a broad area of cooperation. The basis for the relationship always existed, based on the ancient ties shared between the two nations. The Indo-Thai relation today is not just looked upon from the angle of socio-cultural ties. Since the relation in today's context has become very comprehensive in its scope. This bilateral engagement has the potential to foster growth not only restricted to the two nations but for the entire region. This is very much evident given the fact that cooperation in the areas of security, economic, and connectivity being interconnected, would also have the same level of impact on the neighbouring States and the region as a whole.

The paper was primarily a study on the Indo-Thai relations over the course of the years and the potential for growth after the completion of seventy years of their diplomatic relations. The study showed that despite the changing nature of the relationship due to factors internal as well as external, there existed continuity in the engagement. Further, one trend that emerged from this study indicated that the overall bilateral relationship has been growing. This is evident of the fact that both nations have continuously resorted towards seeking new areas of cooperation in the evolving global security and economic order. The completion of the seventy years of diplomatic relations in 2017 provides the opportunity, where both India and Thailand can reassess their relations by examining their past in order to build on their future road map, by incorporating new areas of cooperation. This is needed in order to devise new rules of engagement and push initiatives that are in line with each of their core principles that govern their contemporary interest.

**Dr. Temjenmeren Ao is a Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*

Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

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