

INDIA'S FOREIGN SECRETARY ON ASEAN-INDIA RELATIONS

The following are excerpts from an article that appeared in the Business Times on 12 February 2011 reporting on an interview by Vikram Khanna with Nirupama Rao, India's Foreign Secretary, about New Delhi's relations with China and the rest of the region:

On India's relations with ASEAN, Ms Rao is positive and even enthusiastic. 'Our relationship with ASEAN is very important to us,' she says, 'and it is really on fast forward'.

'Apart from the trade and economic relationship, there is a civilisational link that India has with South-east Asia. Also, India is contiguous with South-east Asia. If you look at the map, you'll see that some of our eight north-eastern states border Myanmar, which is a member of ASEAN. And in many senses - I have always held this view - Southeast Asia begins in North-east India, given the ethnic composition of our population there and the natural connectivity and communication that exists.

'And we want to build on it. We want to build better connectivity - better transportation links, a freer flow of goods - which we have now with the FTA with ASEAN - and now we're negotiating services. ASEAN is now one of our largest trading partners.'

But the relationship is not just about trade, she continues.

'We also have a very important programme of technical cooperation, which involves ASEAN countries like Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar. We have built frameworks of interaction with the Mekong-Ganga cooperation. There is also of course the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, in which we have been participating. Apart from economic cooperation, there's cooperation on security, on maritime issues and anti-piracy - we learn from what

Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have done in this area. So our relationship with ASEAN is very productive and promises to be even more so.'