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Smart Powering India-Singapore Ties

By P. S. Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

A new opportunity in India's relationship with Singapore is the high degree of strategic trust that has been achieved so far. The best way forward is to choose a realistic trajectory of smart power for the bilateral engagement.

COMMENTARY

An assumption is that a city state like Singapore can hardly influence the foreign policy of a mega polity like India. Such false punditry was laid to rest by the former Prime Ministers of India and Singapore, Narasimha Rao and Goh Chok Tong respectively, long ago in the 1990s.

Rao had launched India's 'Look East policy' which, over a number of years, elicited proactive responses from both Goh and his successor Lee Hsien Loong. Delhi continues to acknowledge its "debt" of gratitude for the "guidance" of a mentor like Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew.

In *The India Way*, published in 2020, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar hailed Singapore as "the principal hub" and "a vivid example" of India's economic ties with ASEAN. Looking beyond India's current 'Act East policy', new avenues for Singapore-India cooperation seem worth exploring in the emerging global (not just regional) situation.

The Trust Factor

At the inaugural India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable (ISMR) in New Delhi on 17 September 2022, the two sides affirmed their "[deep reservoirs of strategic trust](#)". The ISMR is a new "leaders-led forum to explore opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration".

Such a quest is driven by a shared concern about post-COVID-19 economic recovery amid geopolitical uncertainties. Also facing the context are the “ongoing supply chain disruptions”. The basket of subjects discussed included food security, energy security, digitalisation, green technology, and skills development.

Food security and energy security are crisis-solving imperatives for post-COVID-19 economic recovery. Planet-wide, green technology is a marginally long-term but existential necessity. Skills development and digitalisation are among the tool kits required to address the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution that predates the onset of COVID-19 and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.

These diverse subjects show that India and Singapore are seeking to tap their reservoirs of trust to address issues that could shape a new geo-economic world order. Furthermore, a future global geopolitical order can be built only on the basis of technology-driven economics. For this, smart power is essential.

Nature of Smart Power

Proven or potential expertise in the existing and or emerging niche areas of science and technology (S&T) is smart power, applicable to both national and international affairs. Illustrative is expertise in artificial intelligence, climate protection, cyberspace security, digitalisation, fintech, hypersonic and counter-strike defence, nuclear and renewable energy, outer-space, quantum technologies, and innovative telecom (5G and beyond).

Smart power is *not* the same as the *art* of smart diplomacy practised to influence friendly countries or outwit adversarial governments for desired outcomes. Even if the military capabilities of a country or coalition are created through smart power, their arsenals are seen as only hard or sharp power. In contrast, benign cultural and economic outreach is recognised as soft power.

A nuanced difference is that the *smart power* of any state is characterised by its indigenous skills in the current or conceivable S&T niche areas. Equally important is the practical applicability of such skills.

Culture of Cooperation

Singapore and India have so far developed a culture of mutual collaboration across a spectrum of conventional economic and defence domains. They now appear to recognise the scope for exploring bilateral cooperation in smart-power domains as well.

Singapore recently identified some key areas of its ongoing “[close cooperation](#)” with India. These include “trade and investment, defence, fintech, digital connectivity, skills development, and climate change and sustainability”. At least three of these domains – fintech, digital connectivity, and climate change and sustainability – require smart power now and in the future. India-Singapore defence cooperation, despite being close, is not in the nature of an operational military alliance or ideational partnership.

However, the recent launch of the ISMR is a sign of the two countries coming together

in a comfort zone to discuss multilateral issues, too. Furthermore, [Singapore has been invited](#) to participate in the Group of 20 (G20)'s outreach meetings, including during the summit, which India will host under its rotating presidency in 2022-2023.

Towards a Smart-Power Agenda

Complementary national *interests*, not just potential *skills*, will be needed to cooperate. From artificial intelligence to innovative telecommunications, the range of choice is deep and wide.

India and Singapore will have complementary interests in collaborating on critical and emerging technologies (CET) to advance bilateral and global good. A smart-power agenda is to focus on steps to make the CET supply chains reliable and resilient.

The United States-led Quadrilateral (Quad), whose other members are India as well as Japan and Australia, focuses on the CET supply chains. A stated objective of the Quad is to develop and set standards for the [critical and emerging technologies](#).

It is equally significant that the ISMR has been started to address the “[ongoing supply chain disruptions](#)”, too. Delhi and Singapore could, therefore, seek a bilateral partnership to develop and standardise critical and emerging technologies for mutual as well as multilateral benefit. This could even be attempted as a Quad-Plus partnership if, for this purpose, Singapore addresses the oft-stated Chinese aversion to this group.

An Overarching Advantage

Both India and Singapore are members of the [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework](#) for Prosperity (IPEF) launched under the auspices of the US in Tokyo in May 2022. [An IPEF objective](#), as hinted by Japan then, was to address concerns about the “substance” of China’s “significant economic presence” in the Indo-Pacific.

No such explicit aim was subsequently articulated at the [first IPEF ministerial meeting](#) in September 2022. This may help India and Singapore to cross the barrier of their respective sensitivity concerning China while working together in the IPEF.

The overarching positive reality is that Singapore and Delhi do not see each other as a threat to national security. This could open up their bilateral zone for deep cooperation in sensitive smart-power areas like artificial intelligence, cyber security, outer space, and innovative telecom.

But it might be prudent of both sides to choose only a few smart-power domains for focused collaboration. Above all, extending the benefits of such bilateral cooperation to the multilateral stakeholders may depend on the trend of the times – the evolving but uncertain global geopolitics.

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