

Session on
South East Asia, ASEAN and India
with
Minister George Yeo
Foreign Minister of Singapore
20th December 2010, Kolkata

The economy and life in global world today has become trans-national. Singapore being a “city-nation” has an equity interest in strong Sino-Indian relations. At the same time the promotional of any sort of international relations cannot be based on illusion but facts. This was expressed by the Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo at a session on **South Asia, Asean and India in Kolkata on 20th December organized by the Kolkata chapter of Aspen Institute of India** in collaboration with CII. The opening remarks for this session was made by Sanjiv Goenka, Vice Chairman of RPG who has recently joined the Board of Trustees of the Aspen Institute India. Also present at the meet was Tarun Das, President Aspen Institute India and Former Chief Mentor of CII.

India needs to develop and dispatch more human resources to the South Asian and East Asian region in order to bolster its “Look East” policy and increase its engagement with a neighbourhood that has significant Chinese influence, stated George Yeo during the session. “ I wish India had more diplomats and trade officials to cultivate each Asean country assiduously, the way China does.....when it comes to India, I find that you are bit short staffed when it comes to external diplomacy” said the Foreign Minister of Singapore.

George Yeo speaking at the event organized by Aspen Institute India in Kolkata recalled that the beginning of India’s proactive engagement with the Asean region which began last decade was initially met with some scepticism from member nations. However it was largely a part of his efforts and conviction “..look India will be important, India is growing and let’s prepare for a long term position ..” that led to India dispelling such doubts. The imminent completion of the proposed India-Japan Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (CEPA) is representative of the county’s progress towards forging closer ties with the East.

The Singapore Foreign Minister also emphasized that good relations between India and China would benefit Asia and the world.“ If these two countries have the wisdom to cooperate and resolve disputes in a peaceful way, Asia will be completely transformed, and with it the rest of the world”. While stating the border between India and China remains a dispute, and the media on both sides tend to ‘sensationalize” matters, Minister Yeo asserted that leaders in both countries were mindful of the necessity of good bilateral relations for each other to develop. He also urged the media to play a role in strengthening these bilateral relations and to build trust over time.

Speaking on trade and some significant business developments which Singapore has engaged in South India in particular, Minister Yeo stated that this country was open to exploring the Eastern region of India provided they would get some positive response and opportunities conducive to their business prospects.”Singapore always waits for opportunities, studies and analyses market before taking any steps. We are waiting for the opportunity”. However he stated that long term foreign investments will elude Bengal till next year’s Assembly elections were complete.

Finally the Foreign Minister opined that India should engage in developing and analysing its knowledge base of each Asean county to further ties with these nations.

The session was skilfully moderated by Tarun Das, President Aspen Institute India and Former Chief Mentor of CII. A lively discussion and Open House of questions and answers following the talk made this an “interactive” session in the true sense of the word. The audience was a diverse group of Consulate members, Corporates, Academicians and Social Sector.

December 20th, 2010
Kolkata