

India sees dialogue as way to ease regional tensions

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Dialogue might be the best answer for Asean member countries to ease their tensions and to promote stronger relationship in the region, India has suggested.

Although the region is heading toward integration with the formation of the Asean Economic Community (AEC) in late 2015, various tensions and disputes persist.

The most troublesome issue in the region involves the South China Sea where six countries — China, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam — all claim territorial rights.

Salman Khurshid, minister of External Affairs of India, recently expressed his belief that the countries concerned should take part in dialogue to resolve the issue.

"There is really no alternative but dialogue, particularly for countries that have such great stature and high profiles, not only in this region but also in the world," he said, in a reference to China.

He stressed, however, that India would observe developments but should not interfere.

He continued that all countries — including India — would take a responsible and objective view to find a solution, and he also believed that China would do the same.

"I do not think this is a problem that should be allowed to distract us from the larger purpose in which India and China, along with the countries like the Philippines, have a total commitment," said Mr Khurshid.

"[We] can overcome little differences that may arise between us and look at the larger picture. Dialogue is an answer."

Mr Khurshid expressed his view to a group of 18 journalists from 10 Asean countries who participated in a familiarisation visit organised by India's Ministry of External Affairs.

Besides suggesting the use of dialogue to ease regional disputes, India is interested in increasing engagement and strengthening partnerships with Asean. The recent annual international conference, the India-Asean Delhi Dialogue V, was another step toward achieving those goals.

India is increasingly attracting the attention of Asean countries because of its rapid economic growth.

Apart from this India has been focusing on its "Look East" policy since the beginning of the 1990s aimed at establishing international economic cooperation in Asean nations and beyond.

Under the theme "India-Asean: Vision for Partnership and Prosperity", political and economic leaders, officials, academics and opinion-makers from all Asean countries were invited to discuss how to broaden interaction in terms of politics, economy and civil society between the two regions.

This was the fifth round of the dialogue, and Mr Khurshid believes that while concrete solutions will not be seen overnight, the exercise has helped to promote steady progress.

"You may not be able to get anything immediately. The dialogue was an opportunity to bring us together to exchange views and opinions which is the idea of democracy," he said.

At the dialogue this year, one key focus was Asean-India connectivity, a significant factor to help increase trade.

"Connectivity with Asean — geographical, institutional, or people-to-people — is a strategic priority for India," Mr Khurshid said.

In addition, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project is progressing well while route alignments to extend the highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam need to be pursued further, he added.

Last year, Asean-India trade exceeded \$70 billion and Asean and Indian leaders are now striving for a target of \$100 billion by 2015.

India's gross domestic product of \$4.8 trillion places it third largest in the world by purchasing power parity, just behind the United States and China.

The challenge now, said Mr Khurshid, is to harness the country's huge economic potential for the good of the greatest number of people.

"As we look to the future, we must empower our youth across the spectrum of higher education, practical skills and vocational training oriented to trade and technological advancement," he said.
