

India, Australia sign pact on e-commerce

By Our Legal Correspondent

NEW DELHI, AUG. 5. The Institutes of Chartered Accountants of India and Australia have signed an agreement for collaboration in the areas of e-commerce, environmental accounting and reporting, opportunities arising out of the WTO regime and re-engineering of small and medium practices.

The preliminary terms of agreement between the ICAI and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) focus on the establishment of a Centre of Excellence between the ICAI and QUT.

It will focus on short-term courses to prove necessary inputs in Australian corporate and taxation laws to chartered accountants from India so as to enable them to enrol as members of the Australian Accounting institutes.

The examinations will be conducted by the QUT.

The Centre of Excellence will also provide the facility to Indian chartered accountants to enrol in the Ph.D programme of the QUT Business School.

The Brisbane Centre of Excellence will have its mirror in India where the same courses will be offered to members of ICAI who are unable to travel to Australia for a residential programme.

As a first step, the ICAI has also started entering into collaboration agreements with other leading institutions in India including the Administrative Staff College of Hyderabad and IIM, Lucknow to set up the centres of excellence in India.

The agreements with Sydney Chamber of Commerce and Queensland Commerce envisage collaborations in areas such as e-business and webseal application to Indo-Australian joint ventures, an official release said.

THE HINDU

- 6 AUG 2001

THURSDAY, JUNE 28, 2001

INDIA'S DIPLOMATIC OUTREACH

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28/6

THE NEW VIGOUR in India's ties with Australia and New Zealand is a testimony to pragmatism. In a sense, the common denominator of democracy, which binds India and Australia as also New Zealand together, is a factor that enhances the comfort level of New Delhi's differential engagement with Canberra, on one side, and Wellington on the other. Yet, it is New Delhi's unconventional diplomatic outreach that seems to have been in greater evidence during the latest visit to Australia and New Zealand by the External Affairs and Defence Minister, Mr. Jaswant Singh. Much credit for India's new exploration of this geopolitical sub-region should go to Australia's Prime Minister, Mr. John Howard, and Foreign Minister, Mr. Alexander Downer, who rediscovered a nuclear-armed India in an altogether new light last year. By now, it is an old story that Australia, which played a pivotal role in fast-forwarding the global agenda in regard to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in the mid-1990s, could only frown upon India when it conducted a significant series of nuclear-weaponisation tests in 1998. Thereafter, and almost entirely coincidentally, Australia began a high-level re-engagement with New Delhi at about the same time last year when the then U.S. President, Mr. Bill Clinton, visited India on a phenomenal note of diplomatic vibrance. One of the several factors that influenced Australia in such a decisive re-engagement with New Delhi was a recognition of the restraint that India demonstrated during the Kargil crisis in 1999. On the whole, however, Australia's India-oriented initiatives in 2000 were guided by a sense of democratic fellowship with New Delhi, which had already embarked upon far-reaching policies of economic liberalisation at home.

In a very subtle sense now, the question of democracy within the Commonwealth, a forum of common interest to India as also Australia and New Zealand, may come into a sharp focus in their triangular interactions. Canberra has expressed concern over Gen. Pervez Mushar-

raf's latest act of usurping more powers through personal decrees in Pakistan, while the Vajpayee administration, which plans to hold talks with him in Agra next month, is more circumspect about Islamabad's internal matter of this magnitude. Soon, Fiji in Australia's geopolitical neighbourhood may also induce New Delhi and Canberra to explore the meaning of democracy within the Commonwealth context. It remains to be seen whether India and Australia will find themselves cruising together in assessing Fiji's political will to renew its rendezvous with democratic pluralism later this year.

There is much scope for an intensified engagement between India and Australia as also New Zealand over several multilateral issues pertaining to world trade and international security. Australia and the U.S. do not often tune to the same wavelength over global trade issues. Mr. Singh seems to have exchanged ideas with Aussie and Kiwi leaders over the current plans of the U.S. to fashion a missile defence system with a global impact. Yet, the future contours of the U.S.' plans in this sphere might be determined mainly by Washington's own separate consultations with several key interlocutors including the unenthusiastic powers such as Russia and China. To this extent, India's talks with Australia and New Zealand on the U.S.' plans for a new security framework may not be of direct consequence to Washington's immediate calculations. To say this is not to discount the likely American interest in the collective and separate views of India and Australia on the missile defence issue in the actual run-up to a possible system of this kind. However, security issues pertaining to the Indian Ocean rim and the Asiatic side of the Asia-Pacific zone will serve as a more definitive framework for a prospective Indo-Australian strategic dialogue. Global issues concerning weapons of mass destruction and systems to deliver them, besides economic concerns such as energy security, cannot of course be left out of such a dialogue.

THE HINDU

2001

Jaswant discusses steps to boost trade with Australia

By Amit Baruah

CANBERRA, JUNE 20. The Minister for External Affairs and Defence, Mr. Jaswant Singh, has discussed ways to increase bilateral trade with Australia during a meeting with the Trade Minister, Mr. Mark Vaile.

Mr. Singh, who arrived in this picturesque capital city from Sydney this afternoon, stressed the importance of energy security and inquired about the possibility of Australia exporting LNG to India.

The focus on the bilateral trade is timely since there has been some reduction in overall trade — from a high of nearly \$2 billion in 1997-98 the figure fell to \$1.3 billion in 2000-01. Australia is a massive economy, but imports from India are still minuscule. Trade with India, as can be expected, is loaded in Australia's favour.

Mr. Singh also met the Australian Foreign Minister, Mr. Alexander Downer, with whom he will hold formal talks in Adelaide on Friday. The Foreign Minister-level bilateral talks are to be given an institutional shape.

Tomorrow, he is scheduled to hold discussions with the Defence Minister, Mr. Peter Reith. He will also call on the Prime Minister, Mr. John Howard.

The Australian side is clearly aware that Mr. Singh, who holds two crucial portfolios, commands considerable influence and respect in the Indian Government. His visit and the defence contacts are expected to bury the negative currents which crept into the relationship as reflected by Australia's sharp response to the May 1998 nuclear tests.

Normalisation of ties

There is little doubt that the visits by Mr. Downer and Mr. Howard, to India in March and July 2000, set the stage for normalisation of the bilateral relationship.

To questions from Australian

reporters during his New Delhi visit in March, Mr. Downer stressed the "context" in which Canberra took measures against India for the nuclear tests. Asked whether Australia could have done things differently, Mr. Downer said: "Look, I don't think so, to put it in context, you always operate in a particular moment in time when we took the measures, roughly three years after the measures were taken by Australia and the international community, particularly Australia, against France, there was a real sense that we had to have some symmetry in the measures against India and subsequently Pakistan with the measures we took against France.

"It would not have made much sense if that wasn't the case and I think there was a strong sense in the Australian community that it was appropriate to do that and so I don't have any regrets about it, but you know I work in the real world. I have been for a very long time... committed to building a relationship with India and I want to get on with that and I think we now have the opportunity to move forward."

An issue on which India and Australia have been coordinating their positions is that of Fiji. This time, too, Fiji is likely to be on the agenda. The former Fijian Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry, met Mr. Singh in Sydney on Tuesday. Mr. Chaudhry, who has urged India to play a role in Fiji, said there should be no immediate re-entry for Fiji into the Commonwealth after general elections are held there at the end of August this year. Clearly, he feels the international community must wait and watch the outcome of the Fiji elections and the kind of Government that takes power there.

The Commonwealth is an important institution for Fiji and authorities there are keen on Fiji returning to the fold as quickly as possible.

THE HINDU

21 JUN 2001

Jaswant in Australia, to discuss NMD

By Amit Baruah

SYDNEY, JUNE 19. The External Affairs Minister, Mr. Jaswant Singh, arrived here today on an official visit to Australia, the first ever by an Indian External Affairs Minister. The two Indian Ocean democracies were once separated by the Cold War divide.

Among other things, in his talks with his Australian counterpart, Mr. Alexander Downer, Mr. Singh is scheduled to discuss the U.S. National Missile Defence concept to which India has extended its qualified support. Senior defence officials are part of the visiting Minister's team.

With Australia being a long-time ally of the U.S., and India a recent friend of Washington, the two countries, may have a lot to talk about the issue.

New Delhi's position on the National Missile Defence and its gradual gravitation towards the U.S. under the Vajpayee Government has been noted in the Asia-Pacific region. There is little doubt that India's new positions have evoked interest, and in some quarters, some concern as well.

Despite the qualifications and explanations that were added to the original Indian statement on National Missile Defence, it is evident that New Delhi's view is being seen as an "endorsement" of the American proposal.

Australia's own position on the National Missile Defence was articulated in a recent response given to Parliament. "Australia understands the rationale for the U.S.' plans to develop a limited national missile defence system to defend against potential threats from rogue states. We have stressed to the U.S. the importance of managing the issue of the NMD carefully, especially with countries which regard such

systems as undermining their strategic position. We have indicated to the U.S. our hope that it will be able to reach understandings with Russia through the START process which preserve strategic stability and facilitate balanced reductions in both countries' nuclear arsenals. We have suggested this would preferably involve a re-negotiated ABM Treaty more relevant to changed strategic circumstances, rather than U.S. abrogation of the Treaty."

Given the fact that both Australia and India regard themselves as "players" in the Asia-Pacific region, a possible common perspective on strategic issues will be of interest to other countries in their neighbourhood.

Mr. Singh, who moves on to Canberra tomorrow for official talks, has a series of meetings planned during his two-day stay in Canberra from where he will travel to Adelaide for meeting Mr. Downer. From Adelaide, he will go to New Zealand.

Mr. Singh will call on the Australian Prime Minister, Mr. John Howard, besides holding meetings with the Defence Minister, the Trade Minister, and the Environment Minister who is also the leader of the House in the Senate (Mr. Singh's Rajya Sabha counterpart).

After the visit by the then Vice-President, Mr. K.R. Narayanan, in 1994, and then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1986, Mr. Singh will become the highest-ranking Indian political leader to travel to Australia.

From the Australian side, there has been a focus on India as an economy and a market. The Australian Prime Minister visited India in July 2000 and Mr. Downer was in New Delhi in March 2000.