



India-Brunei Darussalam Bilateral Relations Gaining A “New Beginning” In The 21st Century

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Abstract: This paper provides a comprehensive overview of political, economic, cultural, and defence relations between the two Asian countries India and Brunei Darussalam. Diplomatic ties between two nations were established in the 1984. Brunei is an important partner in India’s “Act East Policy” and “Indo-Pacific Vision”. Both nations have centuries-old historical and cultural relations . They have also strong defence cooperation by the way of regular official level defence exchanges. The recent two-day official Visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Brunei in September, 2024 gained a “new beginning ” in the contemporary relations between the two nations, coinciding the celebration of 40th anniversary of both “Brunei’s independence” as well as the establishment of their “ formal diplomatic ties” this year. The paper concludes by analyzing the “recent developments” in India-Brunei bilateral relationship.

Keywords: India-Brunei relations, Modi’s visit to Brunei, Recent Developments, Act East Policy

I.INTRODUCTION

Brunei, officially known as Brunei Darussalam is an equatorial state situated on the northern coast of the islands of Borneo in the South-East Asia. It is a small country with a total size of 5,765 km (2,226 sq mi). Apart from the South China Sea to the north, it is completely bordered by the East Malaysian State of Sarawak, which also divides the state into two disconnected segments of unequal size. According to the early historical records, Brunei was discovered by a group of 14 brothers, when they travelled in search of a new place to reside. Brunei is predominantly made of Malays (65.8 %), with significant Chinese (10.2 %), Indian and Indigenous populations (23.9%). Brunei was under the British rule for a long time since 1888. Although Brunei became a “self-governing state” in 1959, but notably the nation attained its “full independence” from “British colonialism” on January 1, 1984.

Since its independence, Brunei has continued to move forward, becoming one of member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and United Nations (the UN). India and Brunei are two “friendly Asian nations”. India’s “formal diplomatic relations” With Brunei was established in 1984. In 2009, the Brunei India Friendship Association (BIFA) was established. Brunei has been India’s coordinator in the ASEAN from 2012 to 2015. It has played an important role in India’s engagements with ASEAN countries. It has a constitutional absolute monarchy ruled by the Sultan (both head of the state and the head of the government). Both India and Brunei are members of the “Non-Aligned Movement” and the Commonwealth of Nations. Both are important partners in “Act East Policy” and “Indo-Pacific Vision”.

India and Brunei have close relations marked by cooperation in various existing areas including trade and investment, defence cooperation, energy, space technology, health cooperation, capacity building, cultural exchanges and people to people exchanges. The recent two-day official visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bandar Seri Begawan, at the invitation of His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah , in September, 2024 was a “land mark” in India- Brunei contemporary relations , coinciding the 40th anniversary of “Brunei’s independence” as well as the establishment of their “formal diplomatic relations” this year.

II.EXCHANGE OF VISITS BY HIGH-LEVEL DIGNITARIES

Since the establishment of their formal diplomatic relations, the Republic of India and Brunei have had exchanges of visits by the high-level dignitaries. The visits of leaders of both sides have heightened and strengthened the bilateral relations in multiple sectors. From 1984 to 2024, it has been found that two Prime Ministers of India had two time visits to Brunei Darussalam and during the same period, His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei Darussalam had 4 time visits to India. The Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh visited to Brunei Darussalam to participate the 11th ASEAN-India Summit and the 8th East Asia Summit (EAS) from 9th to 10th October, 2013. It was the first-ever visit to Brunei by a Prime Minister of India. Before this the PM Dr. Singh had earlier met the Sultan of Brunei on the side lines of 10th India-ASEAN Summit held in Phnom Penh , Cambodia on 18th to 20th November , 2012 . After the PM Dr. Manmohan Singh, it was the PM Narendra Modi who recently visited to Brunei Darussalam from 3rd to 4th September, 2024. Modi became the second Prime Minister of India to Visit to Brunei after a gap of 11 years. Prior to this visit the PM Modi had met his Majesty Sultan twice on the side lines of 25th ASEAN Summit at Nay Pyi Taw on 12th November, 2014 and on the side lines of the East Asia Summit on 14th November , 2017 in Manila respectively . Brunei Counterpart His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah had visited to India for four times from 5th to 18th September , 1992 , from 20th to 23rd May , 2008 , 20th to 21st , December , 2012 and from 24th to 26th , January , 2018 respectively .In fact , His Majesty Sultan visited to India for the time in September 1992 in response to the invitation of the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi . Notably the PM Rajiv Gandhi and His Majesty Sultan upgraded the bilateral relations between the two nations since 1992. On his last visit to India in 2018, His Majesty Sultan witnessed the Republic Day Parade on 26th January along with the Heads of States and Governments of the other ASEAN Member States. Moreover, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi , in his recent visit to Brunei Darussalam in September , 2024 extended an invitation to His Majesty Sultan to undertake a visit to Republic of India in the near future .

III.DIFFERENT FACETS OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

The India –Brunei bilateral relations are discussed below ranging from political to defence .

- **Political Relations:**

As hinted under the point ‘exchange of visits ...’ the relationship at the political level between the two countries India and Brunei Darussalam is regular and cordial. The political relations between the two countries started with the diplomatic relations. The diplomatic relations between two countries were established on May 10, 1984. Indian Mission was established in Brunei on May 18, 1993. Brunei’s resident High Commission was established in India on August 12, 1992. Both India and Brunei have close political relations. The Sultan and Yang di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam, Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah have been the strongest votary of such close relationship with the Republic of India. Most importantly, the government of Brunei Darussalam has been the strong supportive of India’s ‘Look East Policy’ and ‘Act East Policy’ for expanding and deepening of cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Brunei Darussalam has been supportive of the claim of India for the permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

- **Economic Relations :**

India and Brunei have economic cooperation in multiple sectors like ; energy , trade and investment and so on .Their economic relations have been growing steadily over the years .In the year 2008 , five MoUs were signed between India and Brunei Darussalam on the issues like ; Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreements , Information and Communication Technology (ICT) , culture ,trade and space . The main exports of India to Brunei Darussalam consist of automobiles, transport equipment, textiles, rice, spices and pharmaceuticals. Indian participation in the trade fairs of Brunei Darussalam has been sporadic. In December 2019, the businessmen of India from the Textile and Handicrafts Sectors participated in the Brunei International Trade Expo. Notably, India is one of the largest importers of crude oil from Brunei and has been importing crude oil worth about USD 500 to 600 million each year. Moreover, for the enhancement of trade between the two countries, the first meeting of the bilateral Joint Trade Committee was held in Brunei Darussalam in September, 2018 and its second meeting was organized in March 2022.

- **Cultural Relations**

India and Brunei have centuries old cultural relations. The Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) sponsored cultural troupes have frequent visits from India to Brunei. In the 2019, the ICCR-sponsored 8-member “Panjabi Sabhyachar Kender” troupe visited Brunei and gave five performances on the occasion of Indian Independence Day. Under the Government of India’s initiative of “Promotion of Cultural Ties with the Indian Diaspora”, a cultural event called “Utsav .. the Celebration” was organized by the High Commission the on January 23 , 2021 in the capital city. The second cultural programme was held in Kuala Belait on January 30 of the same year. The High Commission organized the “the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav” India@ 75 celebrations.

- **Defence Relations**

The defence relations of India and Brunei have been expanding. They have cooperation in defence by the way of regular official level exchanges, visit of naval and coast guard ships, training and joint exercises and participation in each other’s defence exhibitions and so on .Both nations have signed MoU on Defence

Cooperation that was renewed for a period of five years in 2021 .The officers from both Armed Forces also participate in each other's defence courses.

IV.RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The first-ever visit to Brunei Darussalam by an Indian Prime was by Dr. Manmohan Singh to participate the 11th ASEAN-India Summit and the 8th East Asia Summit (EAS) from 9th to 10th October, 2013. Notably, after Manmohan Singh, it was the Prime Minister Narendra Modi , at the beginning of his 3.0 paid a two-day official visit to Brunei Darussalam from September 3rd to 4th , 2024 at the invitation of His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah . The historic visit of Modi coincided with the 40th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations between India and Brunei this year.

The major developments of the current visit of the Prime Minister Modi to Brunei Darussalam are discussed under the following headings.

- Acknowledgement of Deep-rooted Relationship :**

The leaders of the both nations the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah acknowledged that the deep-rooted relationship between India and Brunei Darussalam has strengthened in multiple sectors over the last 40 years. Both countries share historical ties that trace back to centuries marked by cultural relations and trade. In fact, the establishment of formal diplomatic relationship between the two nations in 1984 marked the beginning of an enduring friendship.

- Commitment to Strengthening Bilateral Relationship :**

Both Leaders reaffirmed their commitments to strengthen, deepen and enhance the bilateral relations between two nations in all the sectors of mutual interests. They had discussions for cooperation on a wide range of issues like ; defence , connectivity , trade and investment , energy including renewable , space , ICT , health , pharmaceuticals , education and capacity building , culture , tourism , youth and people-people- exchanges .

- Expanding Bilateral Trade and Economic Relationship :**

They agreed to enhance the bilateral trade and economic ties in the sectors of mutual interests. Further they underlined the significance of regular exchanges through the platforms like; the Joint Trade Committee (JTC) and other regional and multilateral platforms.

- Food Security :**

The importance of food security was recognized by both leaders. In this context, they agreed to strengthen cooperation in agriculture and food supply chain through the sharing of knowledge, best practices and experience.

- Defence and Maritime Cooperation :**

Both leaders acknowledged the significance of defence and maritime cooperation through regular exchanges of visits, training programmes , joint exercises and visits of naval and coast guard ships between the two nations .

- **Youth Exchanges Programmes :**

They identified the importance of role of youth towards national developments. In this regard, both agreed to promote greater youth exchanges between India and Brunei.

- **Commitment to Maintaining Peace :**

Both leaders reaffirmed their commitments to maintain peace, stability, security, prosperity and resilience of the region. They underscored the significance of adhering to the UN principles outlined in the UN Charter, upholding the rules-based international system.

- **Strengthening Cooperation through Regional and Multilateral Fora :**

They agreed to strengthen the bilateral cooperation between the two nations at various regional and multilateral fora like ; ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations , East Asia Summit (EAS) , ASEAN Regional Forum , Asia-Europe Meeting , and United Nations (UN) .

- **Condemning Terrorism :**

Both leaders condemned terrorism in all its forms and called upon the states to repudiate it .In this regard, they agreed to work together at the UN and other multilateral platforms to combat terrorism.

- **Climate Change :**

They agreed to address climate change on urgent basis and stressed to enhance efforts in order to mitigate the adverse impacts from its emerging challenge in accordance with international climate objectives like; the Paris Agreement .

VI.SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

The analysis of India-Brunei Darussalam relationship in the 21st Century illuminates a multifaceted picture encompassing the political, economic, and cultural and defence relations that started over the last four decades from 1984 to 2024. India and Brunei Darussalam have been sharing close relations that are based on their deep historical and cultural linkages. They have been also sharing common membership of UN, NAM, Commonwealth, and ASEAN etc. Both Asian nations are important partners in “Act East Policy” and “Indo-Pacific Vision”. Brunei has been an important supportive of India in all regional and international fora . Moreover, this paper finds that the recent visit of the Prime Minister Modi to Bandar Seri Begawan in September , 2024 has strengthened the bilateral relations between the two countries including a wide range of issues like ; defence , connectivity , trade and investment , energy , space , ICT and so on . Above all, this historic visit of Modi gained a new beginning in the contemporary relations between India and Brunei Darussalam coinciding with the 40th anniversary of their formal diplomatic relations this year.

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