Asean and India set to enhance ICT cooperation

During visit to Singapore this week, India's Modi likely to raise issue of digital connectivity, by Chan Jia Hao

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is visiting Singapore this week, primarily to participate in the Shangri-La Dialogue. While he is set to focus on security and maritime issues, Mr Modi is also likely to push his economic agenda during his trip. He is particularly keen on transforming India by enhancing cooperation in digital connectivity with Singapore and the other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states. This probably also explains his visits to Indonesia and Malaysia en route to Singapore.

During the Asean-India Senior Officials Meeting in Hanoi on April 5 and 6, Mr Modi proposed to launch digital villages in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, to exchange technology and telecommunication insights. Following suit, India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology announced plans in May to establish 700 local digital villages in order to link these remote villages to various e-services under a nationwide Digital India programme.

The Asean member states have similarly expressed interest in India's digital developments. During an address at an international conference organised by the NUS Institute of South Asian Studies in April, Singapore's Minister for Education, Ong Ye Kung, highlighted technological developments in India, such as the Aadhaar initiative — a nation-wide biometric identification system that aims to centralise validation and verification of the citizens' data. Such a development at a larger scale, he said, served as a golden opportunity for Singapore and South Asia.

Domestically, Mr Modi has achieved some degree of success in this area through the Digital India initiative. Launched in 2015, Digital India aims to boost digital infrastructure, such as a broadband highway, universal access to mobile connectivity and a nationwide e-government plan. This serves as a basis for India's Smart Cities Mission, which aims to develop 100 citizen-friendly and sustainable cities.

As at 2017, more than 20 cities have been selected for the Smart Road Initiative, 18 cities for integrated command and control for traffic projects, while another 46 cities are earmarked for smart water and green energy projects. It is now also expected that, by the end of 2018, 700 more digital villages will enjoy similar technological implementations that the Smart Cities enjoy under a larger Digital India programme.

Meanwhile, Asean has also moved in the same direction as India as 26 pilot Asean cities have recently come together to establish the Asean Smart Cities Network.

One of the first moves towards creating this Smart Cities Network appears to be the establishment of a cross-border digital payment framework for standard practices. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) for cross-border digital payments was signed among leading payment transaction firms across Asean in September 2017, namely, the Asian Payment Network, National Payment Corporation of Vietnam, Network for Electronic Transfers (Singapore) Pte Ltd (Nets), Payments Network Malaysia Sdn Bhd and PT Bank Jatim Bank Indonesia.

This intra-Asean development has, in turn, also benefitted India through its expansion beyond Asean. One prominent example is Singapore's Nets joining forces with India's National Payments Corporation in November 2017 to enable cross-border electronic payment between both countries. Thereafter, an MoU between the Monetary Authority of Singapore and the government of Maharashtra was also signed in February this year.

Singapore has also been active in India's Smart Cities initiative. In December 2014, the Singapore-India Innovation Hub witnessed the first cross-border deal with the Indian Pharmaceutical Industry, forming an Innovative Citizen as a platform to discover innovative urban solutions and tap expertise from the private sector.

Long-term and sustained Asean-India ICT collaborations have the potential of facilitating global trade and investment linkages. Also, given that Asean continues to form closer ICT collaborations with its existing free trade agreement partners, as witnessed in the AseanAustralia Smart Cities Initiative, it therefore remains crucial to boost India-Asean ICT exchanges at both the government and business ends. This is important in order for India to boost its competitiveness and benefit from being one of Asean's most important trading and investment partners.

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