

India, China can lead Asia to development: President Kalam

In an effort to impart further impetus to India's "Look East" policy, President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam embarked on a 10-day, three-nation East Asia tour from January 31 to February 9 that took him to Singapore, the Philippines and South Korea.

And one of the themes he often touched upon during the tour was the need for India and China — the world's two fastest-growing economies and most populous countries — to join hands to lead Asia's development.

"The economic differences we (India and China) have must go so that there can be growth in Asia," President Kalam told reporters on board Air India One as he headed back to New Delhi after the trip.

The President said the political leadership in the countries he visited — Singapore, the Philippines and South Korea — was of the view that the two Asian giants should overcome their differences and take the lead for the development of the continent.

Noting that India's "Look East" policy had the potential to transform the region in the coming years, President Kalam said: "Developing the world knowledge platform, establishing youth satellites and setting up e-business will lead to immense growth."

"Economic and physical connectivity is the key to growth in the region. The literacy rate in all three countries is 97 percent."

On the highlights of his trip, Kalam said the decision by India and South Korea to set up a panel to develop a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) covering trade in goods and services as well as investment flow was a major plus.



President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam with Singapore President S.R. Nathan, who is of Indian origin, in Singapore on February 1.

The setting up of the joint task force with a six-point charter assumes significance as this is the first time India has decided to forge such a pact with a member of the 30-nation Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Detailing the India-Philippines economic

cooperation roadmap, Kalam said trade between the two countries was expected to rise from the current \$577 million to \$2 billion in three years.

During his visit, India and the Philippines signed four accords, including their first on defence cooperation, visualising an exchange of air force planes, training and military personnel.

As for Singapore, with whom trade and investment flows are already on an upswing, the signing of CECA, Kalam said, will give a further impetus to trade and common linkages and enhance trade to \$20 billion before 2010.

In all three countries, the President went out of his way to interact with students, educationists, academics and scientists. He visited several schools and had extensive interactive sessions with students, patiently answering their questions on subjects ranging from the personal to the universal.

The President also addressed a joint session of the Philippines Congress during the visit, as also the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea.

Rural Development Minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, who accompanied the President, described the trip as a "success" and said India would reap benefits following the many bilateral agreements signed.

Sachin Pilot, Sumitra Mahajan and Vanlalzawma, the three parliamentarians who were also part of the delegation accompanying the President, echoed the sentiment. They emphasised that India's geopolitical significance had been truly established following the 10-day visit. ■

■ In South Korea



■ In the Philippines



PHOTO LEFT, President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam raises a toast with South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun during a banquet hosted in his honour in Seoul on February 7. PHOTO RIGHT, President Kalam addressing a joint session of the Philippines Congress on February 6.