

Australia-India want more of each other as Pranab arrives

As India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee arrives here Sunday night on a three-day maiden visit to Australia, both countries have expressed their absolute commitment to taking this bilateral relationship to a new high.

'This century Australia and India can cooperate on a scale and a partnership not seen before between our two nations. Both governments are committed to taking the Australia-India relationship to a new, higher level', Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said here Sunday.

'I am very much looking forward to holding wide-ranging talks with Mr Mukherjee covering key bilateral, regional and international issues,' Smith added.

Mukherjee will arrive in Sydney and fly straight to the national capital, Canberra, where he will Monday attend the fifth Australia-India Foreign Ministers' Framework Dialogue, the first since 2005. It will be followed by a joint press conference to be addressed by both the foreign ministers.

Mukherjee will then meet important opinion makers in India House, before going to the parliament for Question Hour. He will be meeting the new Labour Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in the evening, when two important treaties are likely to be signed to further strengthen the growing bilateral ties.

Smith will then be host a dinner in Mukherjee's honour. 'The fact that our External Affairs Minister is arriving here Sunday night and leaving Tuesday morning on a stand alone visit reflects the kind of importance we give to our bilateral relationship with Australia,' Indian High Commissioner Sujatha Singh told IANS.

Mukherjee's visit follows significant high-level contact with India this year. As many as seven Indian ministers have travelled to Australia this year: the ministers for science and technology, civil aviation, commerce and industry, youth affairs and sport, steel, and food processing industries.

'This underlines the growing depth and breadth of the relationship and the potential for an historic uplift in the relationship' said Smith, who on Friday had delivered a speech on 'India: A new partnership for a new century' in his hometown Perth, highlighting the importance Australia places on a much stronger partnership with India after 'governments in Canberra have frankly both underappreciated and neglected our relationship with India for a long period'.

The Labour government's decision to reverse the former John Howard-led Liberal government's decision to export uranium to India to meet its growing energy demands, has been a thorn in this otherwise progressing relationship.

However, Singh told IANS, 'There is so much going between the two countries with substantial outcomes in the entire gamut of areas - economic, defence, science and technology, education, tourism and every other aspect possible. There has been 32 per cent increase in trade in the last five years. It shows that both countries are determined to take this relationship to a new level.'

Neena Bhandari (© IANS / India eNews)