

Pranab visit: Australia, India want more of each other

India and Australia will sign two important treaties - on extradition and mutual legal assistance - Monday during External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee's maiden visit Down Under as the two countries hope to take bilateral ties to a new high.

Mukherjee begins his three-day trip Sunday night.

'This century Australia and India can cooperate on a scale and 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 Mukherjee covering key bilateral, regional and international issues,' said Smith.

Mukherjee is to attend the fifth Australia-India Foreign Ministers Framework Dialogue, the first since 2005, Monday. It will be followed by a joint press conference by both the foreign ministers.

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

Smith will 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,' Sujatha Singh, the Indian high commissioner in Canberra, 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.

On Friday, he 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.

He admitted that 'governments in Canberra have frankly both under-appreciated and neglected our relationship with India for a long period'.

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

However, High Commissioner Singh told IANS: 'There is so much going on 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 a 32 percent increase in trade in five years. It shows that both countries are determined to take this relationship to a new level.'

Neena Bhandari (© IANS / India eNews)