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"India needs to deepen its engagement with Myanmar"

Special Correspondent

Veena Sikri lays stress on irreversibility of change



Exchanging ideas: Veena Sikri, former diplomat and Ford Foundation Chair, Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi, and Aswini Ray, former Professor of International Studies and Comparative Policies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, at a conference in Chennai on Friday.— Photo: S.R. Raghunathan

India needs to heed the signs of changing political climate emerging from Myanmar and deepen its political and economic engagement with its eastern neighbour with which it shares extensive land and maritime borders, Veena Sikri, former diplomat and Ford Foundation Chair, Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi, said on Friday.

In her address on 'The geopolitics of Myanmar: emerging trends', hosted by the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Madras, Centre for Asia Studies and Athena Infonomics, Ms. Sikri said that the willingness of the Generals in Yangon in the wake of the 2010 elections to facilitate the transition to a federal democratic structure, as envisaged in the new Constitution, and the recent resignation by the last of the hardline vice-presidents, were important signals of the irreversibility of change in Myanmar.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Myanmar and the charting out of areas for economic cooperation, especially border land development, along with President Thein Sein could mark a new beginning in bilateral ties as it was the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister in nearly 25 years.

India sees an important stake in the natural gas and hydro-electric sectors where it competes with Chinese interests in Myanmar, she said.

According to Ms. Sikri, India's north-eastern States could well serve the bridge to Myanmar, which, in turn, could be India's gateway to the ASEAN bloc.

Aswini Ray, former professor of International Studies and Comparative Policies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, rued the fact that closer ties with Myanmar did not occupy the attention it deserved in India.

Noting the irony in the fact that India's relations with its eastern neighbour had improved when the Myanmarese people's relationship with their regime had soured, Prof. Ray felt that India had not been adequately sensitive to the democratic aspirations of the people of Myanmar.

Prof. Ray was of the view that India's interests would be best served by supporting the push towards greater democratisation in Myanmar.