

Door will always be open for India to rejoin RCEP trade pact: PM Lee

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AHEAD of starting its term as coordinator of Asean-India dialogue relations in 2021, Singapore looks forward to deepening the partnership between the two sides, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at an event on Monday.

He added that while there was a broad agenda for the partnership ahead, one step that Singapore hopes to see India take “at some time in the future” is to revisit the merits of joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade agreement.

India was originally one of the 16 countries involved in the negotiations for the world’s largest free trade pact.

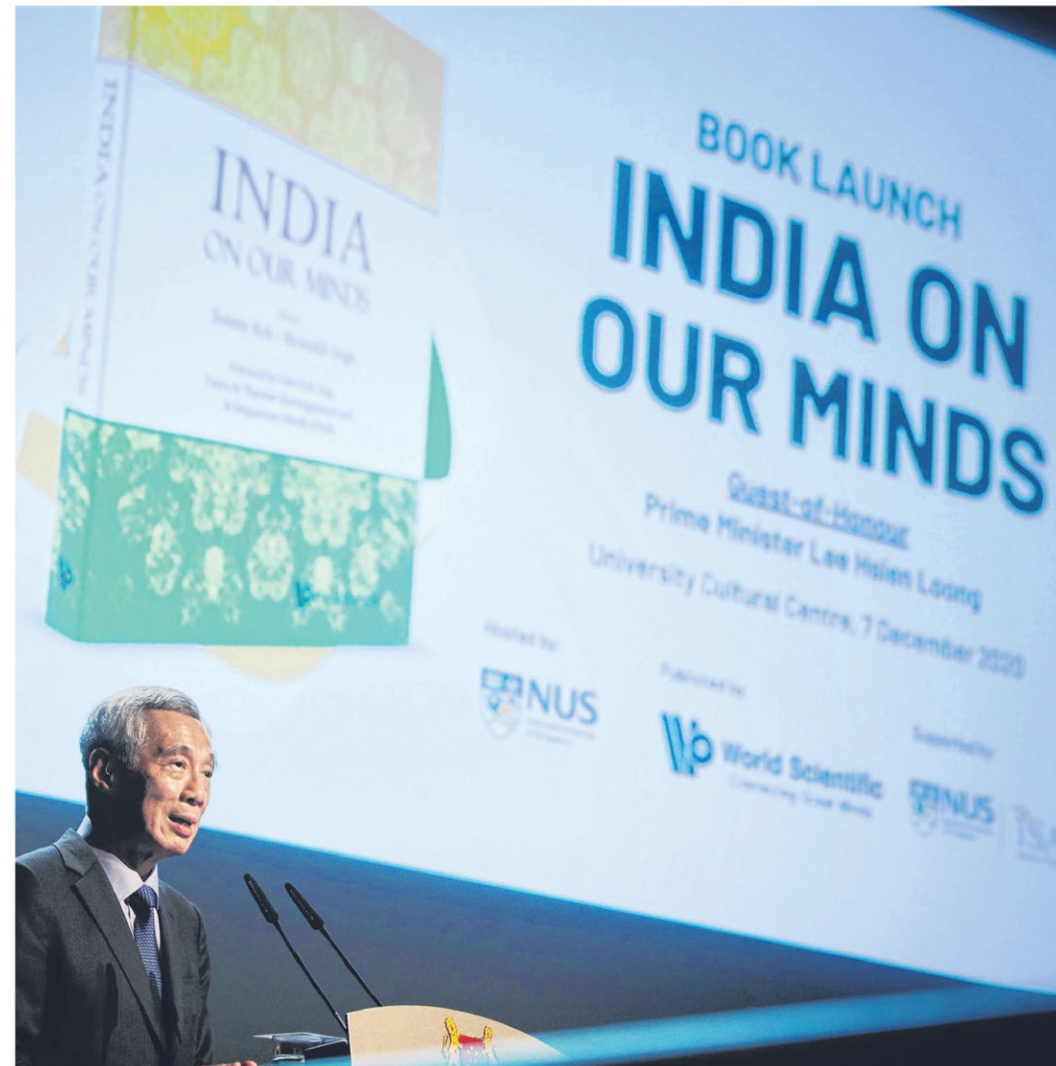
In November 2019, it withdrew from the talks. The remaining nations then went ahead to sign the RCEP at the Asean Summit last month.

“India was on the minds of all the negotiators throughout the RCEP process, right till its very completion,” said Mr Lee. “The door will always be open to India.”

He was speaking at the launch of a new book on India and India-Singapore relations, titled *India on our Minds*.

The book’s editors are ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh and Hernaikh Singh, a senior associate director at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

In his speech, Mr Lee described India as a major player on the global stage, with significant influence at international fora.



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong speaking at the launch of the book *India on Our Minds*. He describes India as a major player on the global stage, with significant influence at international fora. BT PHOTO: JASON QUAH

He also referred to Singapore as an “early believer in India’s immense potential”, crediting Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong for sparking a significant deepening of economic ties between Singapore and India in the 1990s.

In a foreword written for the book, Mr Goh elaborated on the aforemen-

tioned renaissance in Singapore-India ties, which he championed during his tenure as prime minister.

“After independence, India was instrumental in helping Singapore gain entry into the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM),” wrote Mr Goh.

“Our strategic priorities diverged during the Cold War but began to con-

verge once again with Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao’s ‘Look East’ policy of economic reform and liberalisation in the early 1990s.”

Mr Goh added that he went on to build a “close relationship” with then-finance minister Manmohan Singh, who went on to become prime minister.

The two nations would go on to sign the India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (Ceca) in 2005, which continues to anchor economic relations between the two nations today.

In 2015, the India-Singapore Strategic Partnership was signed to mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations.

In his foreword, Mr Goh affirmed his continued belief in India’s “immense economic potential”, with a deep pool of intellectuals and entrepreneurs.

He also called on India to “play a more active role in making this the Asian century”, including to “exercise a moderating influence” on the US-China strategic rivalry.

The book is an anthology of essays penned by officials, academics and other thought leaders from the private and public sectors. Its contributors include Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam and DBS chief executive officer Piyush Gupta.

The essays span topics like Nalanda University, the Amaravati project, the India-Singapore Ceca and the RCEP.

India on Our Minds retails for S\$28 in paperback and S\$39 in hardcover (before GST) at major bookstores, distributors and online.