

Vibrant Gujarat puts India back on the world stage

A regional 'Davos' emerges

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Last week's Vibrant Gujarat Summit removed any lingering doubts regarding India's position on the world stage. Cheered on by an audience of world leaders, global business executives and policy makers, the event clearly demonstrated that Gujarat – and, by extension, India – is taking a leading role in defining the emerging world agenda.

If you didn't attend this year's Vibrant Gujarat Summit, you may have missed a massive opportunity. Far from the regional investment fair that characterized the first Summit in 2003, the event has quickly become the definitive venue for the discussion and development of industrial and investment policy in the East. In fact, many now view the event as 'Asia's Davos'.

Davos of the East

The comparison to WEF Davos is not unwarranted. The event drew a wide global audience; more than 25,000 people attended, representing more than 110 different countries. Many sent their highest ranking officials – John Kerry led the US delegation, Secretary General Ban Ki Moon led the UN delegation, while the delegations from countries such as Bhutan and Macedonia were led by their respective Prime Ministers – clearly reflecting the importance of India on the international agenda.

Equally impressive was the list of global CEOs, Board Members and executives who came to not only make deals, but also to learn more about Gujarat, India and the wider sub-continent. Many used the event to launch country-wide tours or make significant investment announcements (organizers estimate that more than 1,200 strategic partnerships were signed and

more than 21,000 investment 'intentions' were struck during the course of the event).

Those who were seeking to rub shoulders with India's political and business decision-makers were not disappointed. Virtually the entire Federal cabinet was in attendance, led by Prime Minister Modi (who, as Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, was widely viewed as the architect of that State's impressive economic growth) and many key Indian portfolios (such as finance, home affairs, defense, power, coal and renewables, and health) were also actively represented by ministerial delegations.

A leadership platform

What makes the Vibrant Gujarat Summit unique, however, is that it has risen above simply focusing on investment. This year's Summit brought attention to a range of issues of vital importance to the State, the country and the region. Key social issues such as healthcare and Corporate Social Responsibility were front and center. "It was great to see business and policy leaders from around the world come together in this forum to start to solve some of the region's bigger social and economic challenges," noted Richard Rekhy, CEO of KPMG in India and a panelist for the CSR session.

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Not surprisingly, infrastructure also took center stage. “Developing ‘smarter cities’ is a key objective for countries and municipalities right around the world and India’s plan to build 100 Smart Cities will place the country at the center of this movement,” noted Stephen Beatty, KPMG’s Global Head of Cities and a presenter at the Smart Cities seminar. “The exchange of ideas during just this one session likely moved the Smart City initiative forward tremendously.”

For his part, India’s new Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, saw the event as an opportunity to not only clarify his government’s policy reforms, but also to engage CEOs from India and around the world in an interactive discussion on how his government can help improve the investment climate further. Flanked by John Kerry, Ban Ki Moon and Jim Yong Kim (President of the World Bank), Prime Minister Modi outlined plans to make India a hub of sustainable development practices.

A wider benefit

Beyond the announcements and debates, the Summit was important for a number of other reasons. First, it provided political, economic and business leaders with an opportunity to meet people and make connections that would not have been possible otherwise. Given India’s projected growth trajectory (the World Bank recently forecasted that India would be the fastest growing economy within the next 5 years), many of the connections made at Vibrant Gujarat will likely form the foundation of strong future business relationships.

The event was also notable as a platform for wider regional goals. Bhutan, for example, used the event as an opportunity to showcase their leadership in clean energy and as a regional tourism destination, while Japan’s investments into India’s manufacturing and infrastructure sectors were widely celebrated. As Asia’s economies grow and become more interconnected, these types of regional events will become increasingly important.

Start planning for 2017

Possibly the only complaint one may have about Vibrant Gujarat is that it is held only once every 2 years. Much will change in Asia between now and 2017 and India will likely be a key catalyst (particularly if Modi’s reform agenda continues as planned). For those who attended, the next Vibrant Gujarat could not come soon enough. As Vibrant Gujarat evolves into Vibrant India organizers may need to consider making this an annual event, possibly even moving to other investment destinations within India.

For those who did not attend, however, our advice is simple: put Vibrant Gujarat on your calendar for 2017 and start thinking today about how you will use the event – and others like it – to truly engage with key emerging markets to tap into the ‘next level’ of growth.

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