

Presentation

by

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at

Regional Conference

on

“The Future of Security in the Asia-Pacific”

at

Bangkok

25-26 August 2014

The Preliminaries

Greetings from the Indian Council of World Affairs, India's premier foreign policy think tank! On the basis of our study, research and extensive dialogues in the past two years with diverse interlocutors in China, Russia, EU, US as well as Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Australia, I am privileged to share some reflections on the assigned theme.

This significant intellectual event promises to contribute meaningfully to the current debate, both in Track I and Track II fora, on the future of regional security in the Asia-Pacific.



Ambassador Rajiv K Bhatia, DG, ICWA delivering his presentation at the conference.

I endorse the Conference's basic assumption: there is indeed a serious 'dichotomy' between 'positive geo-economic trends' centred around growth and prosperity on the one hand and 'deteriorating geo-political trends' reflected in intensified competition and rising tensions among the region's several players on the other. If this paradox is left unaddressed, it has the potential to jeopardise the gains secured in recent decades. Therefore, a serious and collective endeavour such as this is both desirable and timely.

I shall focus specifically on the three questions posed for our session, which pertain to a) key security challenges, b) new security concepts or approaches, and c) possible ways to ‘adapt’ the evolving regional security architecture so that it deals with current and future challenges effectively.

The Essentials

A few points of fundamental nature need to be made at the outset.

Firstly, security and development are inextricably linked today; one is not possible without the other. Governments need to take a holistic view to ensure both security and development because in the absence of security, development would suffer, and without continuing and inclusive development, security would remain illusory. The real goal of governance is sustainable development; it should take care not only of environmental security but also of other kinds of security relating to the realm of food, water, energy, employment etc. The short point is that authorities cannot merely focus on arms build-up, internal security and defence preparations; they must address, through dialogue and diplomacy, the causes of inter-state tensions so that more resources are diverted to economic development. Ensuring peace and security is a pre-requisite for development.

Secondly, it is good of our leaders to talk about their national dreams. However, one nation’s dream should not become a nightmare for another nation. It may be prudent to articulate the region’s dream of which all our national dreams should form part. The aim has to be collective security and development embodied in the ‘Asian Dream’ and portrayal of the present century as the ‘Asian Century.’

Thirdly, the diversity of our part of Asia needs to be recognized and respected. What is ‘our part of Asia?’ Here we move from geography to geopolitics. Several concepts are in vogue such as ‘Asia-Pacific’, ‘East Asia’, ‘Pacific-Asia’, and ‘Indo-Pacific.’ The last-mentioned and the newest idea has generated considerable discussion within the region’s strategic community. Many voices favouring this concept have been heard in Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan and US. But there are few signs of consensus about the definition, rationale or implications of the

‘Indo-Pacific.’ While this debate continues, we could contribute to clarity if we consider an alternative, namely the East Asia Summit Region (EASR), comprising ten ASEAN countries, their six dialogue partners, and US and Russia, which may be defined as ‘our part of Asia.’

The Key Challenges

EASR faces multiple security challenges emanating from political, economic, social and other conditions. The legacy of relationships in the region, divergence and convergence of national interests of various role players, asymmetry of power, blend of economic interdependence and strategic insecurity, disconnect between self-perceptions and perceptions of others, and gap between rhetoric and reality: all this needs to be factored in, as we try to decipher the complex issue.

The first challenge is not about China’s rise, US policy on ‘pivot/re-balancing’, and reactions to the strategic competition between the two. It is about balancing inter-state equations among seven top players: ASEAN, US, China, India, Japan, Russia and Australia. How to ensure that their relations are cooperative and friendly and how to eliminate simmering tensions and prevent possibility of conflict (by accident, if not by design) among some of them are among the principal questions facing us. Incidentally placing ASEAN on top of the list is not accidental; it is to underline our faith in ASEAN’s centrality.

The second challenge or threat to regional security is the massive arms build-up/race. The fact that military arsenals are being expanded reflects both mutual insecurity and an incipient desire to dominate others. The nature of regional politics, however, makes such domination difficult, if not impossible. The way out is to contemplate the imperative need for collective rather than an individual nation’s security or core interests. This will induce nations to reduce their military expenditures and increase their development budgets.

Let me stress: it is not about a choice between guns and butter. The plea is for more creative and accommodative diplomacy which paves the way for fewer guns and more butter. Every tax dollar that goes to buy a tank is a dollar less for building a school or a health clinic. On

a lighter note, perhaps your countries should consider taking a leaf out of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's book: his finance and defence minister is the same person, and it works.

The third issue no doubt relates to maritime and territorial claims and the impulse to push for a one-sided solution through coercive measures. Recent developments in South China Sea and East China Sea as well as on the India-China border seem to confirm this perception. On South China Sea specifically, we fully support endeavours for speedy finalization and implementation of the Code of Conduct.

The region faces two pressing questions: do our leaders have the wisdom and courage to resolve contentious issues through dialogue and resist the temptation to use arms. Do they wish to ensure that the rule of law prevails over the rule of jungle?

Another vexed issue relates to the economic domain which is marked by an expanding web of positive relationships to promote trade, investment, skills and technology flows within and outside the region. However, in recent years a schism has been developing between the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) camp comprising China and India among others and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) led by the US. Four of ASEAN states are part of TPP, while the other six are not. All ten members of ASEAN are, of course, part of RCEP. There has been some speculation about China and even India exploring possibilities of joining TPP at some point in the future. Political security and cooperation stand jeopardized by polarization in the economic domain. Attention, therefore, needs to be paid on how to manage or eliminate the intensifying competition between RCEP and TPP.

Non-traditional security threats represent another category of challenges to regional security. This subject will no doubt be taken up in detail in the subsequent sessions.

The final challenge concerns the character of existing regional security architecture for dialogue and cooperation. The architecture is diverse, diffused, somewhat chaotic, overlapping and inefficient. It is not able to address optimally the challenges of the present and the future. The present system, therefore, needs 'adaptation', perhaps even reform which is bold yet

practical. The outcome of recent Track-I workshops hosted by Brunei Darussalam and Russia and the proposals put forward by China and Indonesia should be disseminated and debated widely. This conference is a useful step in the desired direction.



Delegate of the conference from different countries.

Our Prescription

As regards the means to address security challenges, it will be helpful to identify the main principles and elements of a reformed architecture.

Principles on everyone's list should include a focus on promoting peace, prosperity, well-being and social inclusiveness of people in all Asian countries. Re-committing, both in theory and practice, by the nations to the Principles of Mutually Beneficial Relations, enshrined in the 2011 Declaration of the EAS and known as the 'Bali Principles', would help. These refer, inter

alia, to renunciation of the threat of use of force or use of force against another state, consistent with the UN Charter, and the settlement of differences and disputes by peaceful means.

In its character, security architecture should be open, transparent, inclusive and evolutionary. It should safeguard diversity of political systems and security perspectives in the region. It should be confined to EASR i.e. to the geographical boundaries of the member-states of East Asia Summit. Another key guiding principle will be peaceful settlement of territorial and maritime disputes, while respecting sovereignty and the primacy of bilateral negotiations. A stable maritime environment, marked by maritime security, freedom of navigation and safety of sea lanes of communication, would be an essential requirement.

So far as main elements of the proposed architecture are concerned, I would recommend a marked strengthening of EAS. This institution should be enabled to emerge as a cross between the UN Security Council and G-20 Summit. Its jurisdiction may include all major political, security, defence, economic and development-related issues affecting the region. It cannot, however, play its role as the 'Leaders-led forum' unless it is backed by a new Ministerial Council comprising the foreign, economic and defence ministers of each member-state. The Ministerial Council should process proposals and recommendations from the other existing bodies such as ARF, ADMM Plus, and EAS Foreign Ministers' Meeting and assist the East Asia Summit to take decisions.

Secondly, the centrality of ASEAN can be promoted if its member-states strengthen their solidarity and credibility, and reduce the perception prevalent in some quarters that they are becoming a talk shop and a divided house. Besides, ASEAN Secretariat may serve as the Secretariat for EAS, with such additional assistance as it may need from the non-ASEAN member-states of EAS.

Thirdly, EASR should envision itself as a Political and Economic Union of the future. For this to be realized, a convergence between (and eventual merger of) RCEP and TPP may be desirable. This possibility needs to be studied further.

Fourthly, concrete and practical cooperation in combating security challenges (such as terrorism, cybercrime, illicit trafficking of arms, and piracy), exchange of intelligence, and coordinating of responses should be attempted. Greater cooperation among defence and security services including joint exercises, naval visits, common training programmes and strategic dialogues should be facilitated.

Finally, strategic community should be encouraged to play its due role in bridging gaps in thinking and understanding as well as removing distrust among nations. A Heads of Think Tanks (HOTT) Forum, consisting of one leading figure from each EAS country, should be established as the fountain of new ideas for the consideration of governments and people at large. Greater use of Track 1.5 consultations will be particularly worthwhile.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the Bangkok Regional Conference will succeed in crafting a consensus view. A document containing the agreed summary of conclusions will be of considerable interest to our governments as well as academic-strategic institutions which are not represented here. It should be disseminated widely. Our institution, ICWA, is willing to work with the host country and other interested institutions regarding follow-up work for this Conference.

Our real work will begin when this conference ends!
