

Inaugural Address

by



Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia

Director General, ICWA

at

Asian Relations Conference (ARC) IV

‘Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: Asian Perspectives’

at

**New Delhi
March 21, 2013**

I rise to extend a warm welcome to this highly distinguished audience of scholars and academics, diplomats and officials, business and media representatives and all others interested in the study of a transforming Asia. Those who have travelled long distances from abroad in order to participate in this international conference, merit our special welcome.

Let me take you back, dear friends, to our shared past for a very short while, because a glance backwards is essential to assess where we stand today and where we are heading tomorrow.

When the historic Asian Relations Conference opened formally on 24th March 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, the head of the Interim Government and soon to be independent India's first prime minister, began his address dramatically: “What has brought you here, men and women of Asia? Why have you come...?” Then he answered the question himself, saying it was not merely the organizers’ invitation but ‘some deeper urge that has brought you here.’ He depicted the 1947 conference as ‘an expression of that deeper urge to the mind and spirit of Asia which has persisted in spite of the isolationism which grew up during the years of European domination.’

It is to commemorate, celebrate and strengthen that ‘deeper urge’ about Asia that we gather here today. We do so, once again, under the auspices of the new series of Asian Relations Conference which began in 2009. This is the fourth conference of this series. The specific theme we chose this year is a vivid indicator of how the concept of Asia has evolved in past 66 years, changing in some ways and remaining unchanged in others. We are sure to benefit immensely from listening to and interacting with 25 panelists from 12 countries on the innovative theme: ‘Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: Asian Perspectives.’

Having analysed specific segments of Asia - China, the Gulf region and South Asia – at previous three conferences, we - your host institutions – faced the question last July: what next? Fairly quickly, our idea that the time was ripe for a holistic appraisal of geo-strategic trends in the Indo-Pacific Region gained acceptance, even though this concept was still in its infancy. Now, it has become much more acceptable in strategic discourse. Our view is that this trend is likely to pick up momentum in the coming years.

As we know, there are many claimants to the fatherhood of this concept. The term 'Indo-Pacific' has been used for long in reference to a precise bio-geographic region in marine science. One of our young researchers has discovered that the term first appeared in 1948 when the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) set up the 'Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council' in Baguio in the Philippines. Some experts believe that 'Indo-Pacific Asia' is 'a more credible and contemporary name than the older term 'Asia-Pacific.' We will hear many more interpretations from participants present here. Perhaps we may even be able to develop a definitive verdict on this score.

Some like to use the term 'Indo-Pacific.' Others feel that this is not adequate and argue that it then becomes an adjective perennially in search of a noun. Hence, our preference is for the term 'Indo-Pacific Region.'

Moving beyond the debate about names, the more fundamental question is: what does the concept mean? Let me try to define its essence briefly. To us, it simply means that multi-faceted globalization has by now ensured, more than ever before, that security and development, defined in the widest sense, in the region stretching from the Suez to the Sea of Japan or from African shores of the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific, are strongly inter-related and mutually dependent. Hence using this relatively new spatial concept, a tool in understanding the geopolitics of the 21st century, would be instructive. This is especially so because stakes are very high. We are talking here of developments affecting the destinies of approximately 77% of the world population residing in the defined area.

This conference underlines the intrinsic significance of the region, at least from three different angles. Firstly, it highlights the maritime dimension in inter-state relations. Secondly, it provides a platform to examine competing political priorities, converging and diverging economic interests, and changing security perspectives. In this context, we will no doubt appraise a variety of issues such as identification of 21st century as 'the Asian Century', the shift of power from the west to the east, the rise of China, the US 'pivot', re-balancing or even a newer edition of the policy approach, and strategic responses from ASEAN, Japan, Australia and others. Thirdly, this conference helps us to move away from the previously nurtured and narrow

cartographic imaginations of Indian and Pacific Oceans; this is an endeavour to bridge the two oceans and encourage the idea of ‘confluence of the seas.’

Viewing these questions from the perspective of India – not so much its government but its strategic community, one should assert that oceanic linkages moulded India through the millennia. Its commercial, cultural and civilizational exchanges with the regions east, south and west of India, flourished through the sea routes. This experience and tradition became prominent in India's strategy, particularly during the past two decades. Three of striking strands of this policy should be pinpointed here.

The commitment to the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) has been deepened. Together with other like-minded countries, India is now in the forefront to reinvigorate the Association. Inclusion of ‘maritime security’ in its list of priorities speaks for itself.

Then, the Look East Policy, now in its third decade, has acquired considerable substance and momentum, even as it awaits realization of its optimal potential. This policy places much emphasis on the primacy and centrality of ASEAN as well as its march towards building the ASEAN Community by 2015. Addressing the Commemorative Summit in December 2012, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stressed that India-ASEAN engagement, which began with ‘a strong economic emphasis’, had also become ‘increasingly strategic in its content.’ He articulated his conviction that ‘our future is inter-linked and a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our progress and prosperity.’

Finally, India's commitment to an open, balanced, inclusive and transparent regionalism, as embodied in the East Asia Summit (EAS), remains strong and unshaken.

Evidently these and other reinforcing strands will drive India's policy makers to keep according a high priority to what happens in the Indo-Pacific Region. Your presence is testimony to this belief.

I am particularly happy to note that our Minister for External Affairs will be here to share his thoughts with you at 1800 hrs today.

In the end, let me welcome you all to what promises to be an enriching intellectual fiesta. Together with the Association of Asia Studies (AAS), we in the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) are confident that our deliberations over the next two days would help in deepening our mutual understanding, knowledge, and, therefore, cooperation. The driving vision is to advance the shared cause of security and stability as well as peace and



Session in Progress

prosperity in our region. We aim to develop the Indo-Pacific Region into a zone of healthy competition and cooperation rather than of domination and conflict.

Thank you very much for your attention.
