

MAYANKOTE KELATH NARAYANAN

Governor of West Bengal, India

It is a privilege to address this distinguished gathering, on Asia's Strengths and Weaknesses. This Conference has, over the years, attracted many eminent experts and scholars from across the world, and its outcomes have proved to be of global significance.

There exist two Asias today – both competing for space and attention. Economically, we have a dynamic, and to an extent, integrated Asia. In security terms, there is another Asia that appears dysfunctional, buffeted by powerful nationalisms and prone to irredentism.

Asia's strength lies in its burgeoning economy. The Asian Development Bank anticipates that by 2050, or even earlier, Asia will nearly double its share of global GDP to 52%. 53% of Asia's trade is now conducted within the region itself. The over USD 19 Trillion economy has, today, become an engine of global growth.

Among the current rising Asian economic powers are, apart from China and India, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia, in addition to Japan. China's economic performance has been extraordinary - during the decade 1990 to 2010, growth was around 9% and the projected growth for the decade 2011 to 2020 is a little over 7%. India's growth rate is lower, averaging around 7% during the past decade. Both China and India have reduced poverty levels very significantly; measured in terms of inclusive growth, India's efforts seem to compare more favourably than that of China.

With Asian economies poised for growth, there are intense pressures on them to integrate. This has resulted in a network of regional and pluralist groupings such as ASEAN, SAARC, Gulf Cooperation Council, BIMSTEC, etc. At the recent November meeting of ASEAN leaders in Brunei, the thrust was on still further integration and a strengthening of trade and related aspects.

In marked contrast is the other Asia, where multiple strands of thought, multiple perspectives and multiple courses of action, alongside the intersection of fragile States and internal conflicts, pose a grave challenge to Asia's progress. **Asia-Security seems anachronistic compared to Asia-Economic**, as even regions that share commonalities of history, geography and cultures, are often seen to be in conflict.

There are many reasons – perceived or real –responsible for this situation.



> For one, Asia has several territorial disputes. The longstanding border dispute between India and China is one.

> For another, there are many undetermined and contested claims regarding the sea. The most serious of these at present are those spurred by China's ever widening maritime claims in the South China and East China sea – extending more than 1000 kms off its Southern Coast. The latest is China's designation of its Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea, indicating that **China wants to change the status quo in the region to its advantage.**

> For a third, China's assertion of its right to its 'historic waters' (confined within the nine dash lines of the Chinese claim line); China's insistence that its self-defined "core interests" be acknowledged by other powers in the region and outside it; and also their implicit acceptance of China's position as the pre-eminent power in this part of the world, all reflect China's determination to substantially expand its strategic space.

Additionally, Asia today confronts other difficult strategic and security issues:

> **Fundamentalist, extremist and radical ideas and beliefs** are gaining ground faster in Asia than anywhere else. Across Asia, there has been a resurgence of new radical outfits leading to religious extremism. This is the cause of a great deal of turmoil in West, South and South East Asia.

> **The risk of an arms race in the Middle East has gone up exponentially of late**, following an intensification of sectarian conflicts among disparate Islamist forces. Saudi Arabia today feels threatened and vulnerable, following the latest turn of events in Egypt, Syria, Iran and Iraq.

> Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, apart from West Asian nations like Egypt, Syria and Tunisia and the Gulf kingdoms, **are all wrestling with the problem of containing hard line Islamist groups.** Opposing forces are seeking asymmetrical support from Hizbullah or Al-Quaeda, depending on their predilections.

> Syria is perhaps an extreme case, with an alphabetic soup of elements – from the crumbling 'Free Syrian Army' and Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shams to Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham, to Zehran Alloush's Army of Islam – all battling for control. **The spectre of Iran and a violent Sunni-Shia conflict hovers in the background.**

> **Asymmetric warfare and terrorism constitute a grave threat across all of Asia.** In both Afghanistan and Pakistan, a combination of State weakness and the presence of myriad terrorist groups make the situation highly problematical – further compounded by Pakistan's employment of terror groups as a strategic instrumentality to keep India off balance. Also unsettling is Pakistan's newly revealed Army Doctrine which stipulates "disproportionate



responses” in future wars with India – **a euphemism for resorting to nuclear weapons to insulate the country from the consequences of pursuing high risk strategies like backing jihadist elements.**

> This apart, **highly unsettled conditions prevail in many parts of South, South East Asia and East Asia.** New patterns of conflict are also emerging. Myanmar, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, are caught in a new cycle of strife involving religion, ethnicity and politics, often featuring a growing conflict between Buddhism and Islam. The colour of Thailand’s revolution is unclear, but the degree of turmoil is evident. The Maldives faces an uncertain future with strong possibilities of consolidation of Islamist forces there. Nepal faces a Constitutional gridlock, apart from other problems. Sri Lanka confronts both a political as well as an ethnic crisis. **China-Japan differences have exacerbated and a more determined Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seems unlikely to give in to China’s aggressive postures.**

India is among the more stable nations in the Asian region. It does not face any existential threat, and is able to manage its internal problems. Apart from the conflict with Pakistan and the border dispute with China, India has no serious issues with any of the countries in Asia.

Asian security is also impacted by two other aspects – the Maritime and Nuclear. Sea lanes of communication are critically important for Asian nations today, since as much as 80-90% of all goods transported to and from Asia are by sea. Deep sea bed mining has recently emerged as a strategic issue, and mining of sulphide deposits has become a new point of conflict. While there is a degree of cooperation among Asian countries in dealing with threats to sea lanes of communication, including piracy, **Asian nations have become conscious of the strategic potential of the Oceans,** and are suitably positioning themselves by building their Blue Water capabilities. India and China, in particular, are intent on expanding their Navies, and both are in a race to enlarge the size of their surface and submarine fleets. The risk of unintended consequences is, hence, considerable.

In the contested geopolitics of Asia, marked by enduring rivalries, politically unstable regimes, and concerns of conventional military inferiority, **the presence of many nuclear States adds another dimension to prevailing securing concerns. Some States do not have a well defined nuclear doctrine or effective safety procedures; some like Pakistan are enlarging the scope for use of nuclear weapons and experimenting with tactical nuclear missiles** (Pakistan announced not too long ago about the existence of its Hatf-9 Nasr, short range surface to surface missile with an Operational range of 60 kms, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead) **signifying a shift in strategy and raising the possibility of predelegation of nuclear weapons to Battle Field Commanders in case of a conflict.** N. Korea cannot be underestimated having tested its third nuclear device in February this year. **The latest turn to nuclear events is the possibility of Saudi Arabia intensifying its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons in the wake of the recent Iran nuclear deal.**

In sum, the level of the threat in the so-called 'Second Nuclear Age' in Asia, has substantially increased.

Conclusion:

In the opinion of many strategic analysts it is the simultaneous rise of India and China – and talk of rivalry between them in geopolitical and strategic matters (though both countries discount such rivalry) – that has serious potential to test the established order in Asia.

> **In China's case, nationalism is often seen as the main driver of Chinese foreign and defence policies.** Chinese policymakers and academics often make out a case for Chinese exceptionalism, and it so happens that this is one such period. **Apart from China's rapidly growing military capabilities, it is the constant refrain of 'continued competition' in the military domain that gives cause for worry.**

> **India eschews a policy based solely on power-relations.** India's concerns are that the reasons adduced for many of China's actions on its periphery – such as a resurgence of interest in areas on its Southern and South Western flanks, as also the steps taken by China to augment its strength in the provinces of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Yunan which border India – tend to be opaque. **Given that the Chinese mind leans toward the contextual and relational, China's true intent remains unclear.**

In conclusion, I would hazard that:

> **Asia's economic growth and expansion are clearly on an upward curve, enhancing its geoeconomic importance.** Economic cooperation, in all likelihood, will become more streamlined as the Century progresses.

> Many of the old sources of stability in Asia have broken down. In place of earlier ideological divisions, **religious orthodoxy has become a major factor and radical Islamist ideology is gaining ground. Nuclear threats have significantly increased.**

> None of the major powers in Asia appear willing to concede leadership to one or the other of the Asian giants. This situation is likely to continue for a long time to come. For the foreseeable future, the region's power dynamics will continue to be highly complex.

> **Given the absence of a well-anchored regional security structure or a concert of nations in Asia on the lines of the concert of Europe in the 19th Century, the possibility of geopolitical upheavals in the region cannot be ruled out.**