

MAYANKOTE KELATH NARAYANAN

Former Governor of West Bengal, India

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I now understand the seating arrangement. We made sure that the Korean, the Japanese and the China would be separate by the Indians and the Russians, so that is the secret meaning of the seating arrangements.

Mayankote Kelath NARAYANAN, Former Governor of West Bengal, India

Thank you Monsieur de Montbrial, for the invitation to this important Conclave and affording me an opportunity to provide a South Asian perspective regarding Security in Asia.

I would, however, like to begin today by paying homage to the victims of the Paris terrorist attacks and my condolences to the people of France.

As we have just realized from recent events in France and Europe, Asia also provides an example that stability is not the natural state as far as the global strategic environment is concerned. Peace, everywhere, tends to be highly elusive.

Nowhere is this more manifest than at the two ends of Asia. In West Asia, radical extremist movements such as the ISIS have significantly altered the strategic and religious landscape. In East Asia, we see all the features of 21st Century geo-politics that found mention in yesterday's discussions. The issue of 'power and legitimacy' is very relevant here. China seeks to expand its 'maritime claims' in the South China and East China Seas, augmented further through 'aggressive island building', ignoring rule based international systems.

Meeting here in the shadow of the deadly ISIS related terrorist attacks in Paris, and hearing the views of Middle East experts on the situation in the course of yesterday's discussions, allow me as someone coming from a country that does face a challenge from the ISIS, to dwell for a few minutes on the nature of this new ISIS threat to the civilized world. The threat goes beyond the Middle East and extends to many regions of Asia and Europe.

Let me try and explain what the ISIS represents to Muslim youth – specially the more educated among them – in countries across the globe, including India.

First, the theology: Possibly much the same as that of the Al-Qaeda – anchored in Saudi Abdul Wahab's doctrinaire teachings but laced with the nihilistic fanaticism of Egyptian Sayed Qutub. At the same time, ISIS propagates a brand of puritanical Islam, which embraces exclusionist puritarianism, combined with liberal doses of Salafism.

Next, the appeal: ISIS fighters are committed to the 'supremacy of the faith' and actions intended 'to redeem the faith'. This enables them to ignore the extent of violence and brutality they practice.

Third, the idea of a new Caliphate: Based on Islamic history, redolent with historical and emotive content, it conjures up visions of the 8th Century Abbasid Caliphate and has a deep emotional appeal to Muslim youth.

Fourth, area of operations: ISIS expects to enlarge its areas of influence through the pursuit of current violent means. The central themes of ISIS philosophy are 'hijra'(migration) and 'bay'ah'(allegiance). Sunni Muslims everywhere are urged to migrate to the Islamic Caliphate, to further strengthen it and prepare for future struggles. After consolidation, they will move afield to countries with sizeable Muslim populations.

The current Islamic State of Khorasan incorporates Syria and Iraq, many areas around the Caspian Sea, some parts of Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Iran and Kuwait, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, North West India including Kashmir, and Bangladesh. The ISIS State of Khorasan is essentially a resource – rich region.

Fifth, the dialectics: The appeal of the ISIS is directly to the minds and hearts of devout Muslim youth. It successfully utilizes modern communications. It is far keener to transform the social and political terrain it holds, than on merely holding on to territory – practices ‘territorial flexibility’ enabling it to rationalize any loss of territory without any loss of legitimacy. Setbacks cannot be measured by usual markers adopted in the case of conventional military campaigns.

Sixth, the dangers: ISIS ‘returnees’ pose a great threat. So also ‘stay at home’ ISIS radicals. They provide back up support, co-ordination, apart from ‘lone wolf’ attacks.

The question, hence, is how do we deal with an idea. That is the problem.

Coming to East Asia, China is perceived as the new regional hegemon today. Issues of ‘freedom of navigation’ and ‘freedom of the seas’ have become critical. As reliance on the ‘Blue Economy’ grows, disputes relating to freedom of access to Sea Lanes, and to Oil and Gas Reserves, are set to gain further momentum.

Three aspects cause deep seated concern. One, is the rise of an ‘aggressive’ China, whose awesome military buildup, specially of its Naval capabilities, is matched by new militaristic tendencies; Two, the determination displayed by Chinese President, Xi Jinping, to pursue his ‘Chinese dream’, which encompasses his ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative alongside a revival of the Maritime Silk Route, dwarfing and curtailing the ambitions of every other Asian nation; and Three, China’s disdain for a viable security structure for Asia, on the lines of that which existed in Europe in the 18th Century. This has already led to a split ASEAN.

A new dimension has been provided by China’s new Integrated National Security concept. This incorporates certain ‘red lines’ in China’s approach viz., China would never compromise its ‘legitimate rights and interests’ or sacrifice its ‘core national interests’; China’s sovereignty, security and developmental interests will not be permitted to be infringed; Building a strong national defence and powerful armed forces is vital to safeguard China’s sovereignty, security and developmental interests. This will not in any event be diluted; and China would prevent, at any cost, attempts to instigate a ‘colour revolution’ in the country.

Nations in East Asia are hard put to suitably deal with Beijing’s swerve. US ‘shifting’ guarantees to Asia are hardly enough. In the aftermath of Washington’s change in emphasis from ‘containment’ to ‘rebalance’ in Asia, grave doubts have arisen about US intentions. The US would need to demonstrate strength, rather than just resolve to employ power, if China is to be restrained.

Countries in the region are, consequently, readjusting their priorities. For instance, Japan believes that its ‘security risk’ has worsened overall. Japan’s recent Defence White Paper blames this on Beijing. It has hence altered its security policies to improve the security environment of the Asia-Pacific Region. It has begun to engage in Naval exercises in the Indian Ocean along with the US and India.

All this comes with its own risks, with China being convinced that an anti-China conspiracy is being hatched by the US, India, Japan and Australia.

Asia is yet to come to terms with the conflicting and competing centers of power in the region. While conflicts have not yet reached a flash point, there are nevertheless certain dangerous possibilities. Adjustments among countries in the region will not be easy. Managing relations between individual Asian powers and outside Powers like US, who have been present in the region for long, are also becoming harder. With China convinced that any attempt by other countries in the region and beyond, to enter into alliances is solely aimed at containing it, rivalry and distrust will dominate the Asian debate for long.