

# MAYANKOTE KELATH NARAYANAN

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## Marcus NOLAND

Thank you very much. We thought we had Professor Hosoya until 4.30, but apparently we have him until right now. Thank you very much for your contribution and have a safe journey back to Tokyo. Now we turn to Mr Narayanan, who is the last, but we know, of course, that means he is the first, who is going to further expand our agenda, as though it did not need further expansion.

## M. K. NARAYANAN

It is a privilege to be here at the 10<sup>th</sup> World Policy Conference, and my special thanks to my dear friend, Thierry for his stewardship of the WPC in these very fractured times. The last speaker has some advantages and some disadvantages. Much of what I would like to say has been covered, but I have been assured by Marcus that I can take a couple of minutes extra if it comes to that.

From what we have just heard from the previous speakers, one thing is obvious: the shift in the geopolitical centre of gravity from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, further overshadowed by the rise of China, has led to a significant churn in relationships and events in Asia. Today, most of the rivalries in Asia are being played out in Northeast Asia, the Indo-Pacific, the so-called Af-Pak region, and West Asia. Asia may today be an area of economic growth, but the reality is that many of the old sources of stability in Asia have broken down, earlier ideological divisions have weakened and religious orthodoxy, radical Islamist ideology and the terror imperative have become more marked.

We heard a lot about what is happening in North Korea, so I do not have to dilate on this point, except to say that all of us agree that North Korea poses - more than any other country - one of the gravest threats to peace in the region and beyond.

We also heard a lot about what is happening in East Asia, and, to some extent, Southeast Asia. I only want to say that most of us in Asia are concerned about how China sees itself. It is a great civilisation, but there is an impression that China is anxious to expand its authority; it flaunts its 'exceptionalism' and its 'uniqueness', and hence most nations, particularly in East and Southeast Asia, are concerned as to where China is headed. The 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress did little to assuage such concerns; following China's announcement of its great power ambitions, its projection as a military and economic superpower, and especially the contents of President Xi's "Make China great again" speech has added to existing concerns.

I am here to speak mainly about the problems in South and West Asia. Afghanistan in South Asia, is today, one of the most troubled regions, not only of Asia but of the world. Afghanistan may be in South Asia, but I think it is the heart of Asia. The situation here is extremely fragile. The elected government in Afghanistan has lost control over much of the countryside; almost 40%, perhaps even more. None of the other groups that are present in Afghanistan can claim any real control over these areas. The most distinctive aspect of Afghanistan is the degree of violence that is present. I do not think it has been adequately reflected to the extent that those who live in South Asia are aware of.

Today, the so-called Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, the ISIS – that is the Islamic State – apart from several other terrorist groups indigenous to Afghanistan, such as the Hezb-i-Islami and the Harakat-ul-Islami, dictate the course of Afghan's politics. The elected government is unable to restrict the level of violence that is taking place. On an average, scores of people are killed in Afghanistan each day, and this hardly finds mention elsewhere.

Unless the Afghan Taliban agrees to accept some of the conditions for talks, no peace can exist. Achieving peace in Afghanistan is entirely dependent on getting the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table. This can be achieved only



through the exercise of force. At the same time, you cannot limit it exclusively to the Taliban, because there is also the ISIS factor, or the Islamic State factor, which has to be acknowledged. We have a conflict, hence, of priorities as far as the region is concerned. I assure you that the situation is extremely complex and complicated. An occasional increase or lessening of troops has little impact nor has it lessened the degree of violence.

There are no doubt efforts for peace being made in Afghanistan. There is the Pakistan-led, Quadrilateral Coordination Group, which includes the United States and China, as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan, but it is not making any headway. Only last month, two days after the Quadrilateral meeting was held, two devastating attacks took place in Afghanistan. There is another peace effort, which is being organised by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Contact Group, which is also meeting the same unfortunate fate.

Michael mentioned two other critical areas of conflict in South Asia. One relates to the Pakistan/India imbroglio, that is an ongoing one. I agree that there are tensions between the two countries. The situation has, to some extent, further deteriorated in the past two years. Nevertheless I think there is a great deal of restraint being shown by both sides, and I would like to assure this House that the possibility of a major conflict or confrontation is limited. Tensions exist, which is an ever present reality. I think, however, the leadership on both sides, are well aware of the dangers of an open conflict.

Michael also referred to the China/India conflict. I was the Special Representative for the Border Talks with China, during my years as a National Security Advisor. India and China have many differences. We also have a very long border, and there are many difficulties regarding the border, but I can assure you that an open conflict, other than border incursions, is out of the question. We recently had a standoff at a place called Doklam in Bhutan, near the tri-junction between Bhutan, India and China. I might assure this House that both India and China are quite conscious of the complications that can arise from incidents of this nature. There will be tensions, but the tensions will be contained. I think the China/India border problem is not something that we need to be unduly concerned about at present. In the longer term, there is the clash between the two civilizations, and that will continue.

There has been no mention of West Asia so far. I think it is an area that requires a great deal of attention, because four of the countries in the world with the largest Muslim populations are in Asia; Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. The ideological clash that is taking place between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, creates the possibility of a divide down the middle, which has the potential to create problems for countries with large Muslim populations. Shia/Sunni tensions are something that will remain with us for quite some time, and it has many implications that are not obvious at this time. Its impact will not be confined to West Asia, but will extend far beyond the region. The Qatar stand-off with Saudi Arabia is an instance in point.

There is another aspect of the situation in West Asia. ISIS is facing some set-backs in areas like Syria and Iraq etc., but do realize that as the ISIS faces a setback in this region, their storm-troopers are already spreading across the rest of the world. We need to be aware, and Michael touched on this point, that terrorism will get magnified because of the excessive pressure that is being applied here.

There is also another aspect that as ISIS weakens, other forces are emerging in this area. The Kurds, for instance, are trying to re-draw the boundaries of countries in the region. I believe that the next phase of the struggle in West Asia may well be determined by who controls the territory once held by ISIS. Also remember, that notwithstanding what is happening here the ideology and appeal of radicalised Islamist movements, especially ISIS and Al-Qaeda, will remain unaffected. One last word of caution: if the Iran nuclear deal were to unravel, I think we will have a new area of tension arising in the region. I wish we could have had a special session on the implications of this.

My assessment is that Asian Security today is in a state of flux. There are major centres of violence that have emerged; there is West Asia, which I have briefly touched on, there is Afghanistan, which I dealt with in a little more detail, there are problems across parts of Southeast Asia, where nations are concerned about the rise of China's ambitions, and of course there are the conflicts in East Asia itself, the South China Sea and the East China Sea, etc.