

A Report on the 2nd International Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region, Beijing : 27-28 May 2014

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I represented the United Service Institution of India (USI) at the "2nd International Conference on the Security and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region", organised by China Institute of International Strategic Studies (CISS) at Beijing from 27 to 28 May 2014. First session of the conference was devoted to security challenges, causes, trends and implications; whereas, the second session focused on measures for achieving security cooperation in the region. Top-level strategic thinkers from China and about 50 other countries, including the US, Japan, Vietnam and South Korea, attended the event. The galaxy of distinguished participants included : HE Bob Hawke, former Prime Minister of Australia; Admiral Sun Jianguo, Deputy Chief of General Staff, PLA; HE Madam Fu Ying, Chairperson NPC Foreign Affairs Committee, China; HE Yu Hongjun, Vice Minister of CPC Central Committee, China; General Ray Henault (Retd), former Chairman of Military Committee, NATO; Admiral William J Fallon (Retd); Mr Evan Revere, member National Committee on American Foreign Policy...to name a few. From South Asia, besides this writer, Dr Maria Sultan, Director General of South Asian Strategic Stability Institute, Islamabad (Pakistan), presented papers and formed part of the select panel.

During the Inaugural Session, the Deputy Chief of General Staff and other Chinese speakers seized the opportunity to pointedly criticise the US for displaying a 'Zero Sum Game' and 'Cold War Mentality' and termed its 'Asia Pivot Strategy' as a danger to the regional peace and security. They blamed the US for instigating regional countries against China, supplying arms to Taiwan and entertaining the Dalai Lama. Chinese hierarchy and strategic analysts reiterated their sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea as their core interests which China would protect at all costs. They referred to McMahon Line as an ironical colonial legacy but at the same time maintained that the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement with India had ushered sustainable peace and tranquility along the Indo-Sino borders. Chinese speakers were vocal in their criticism of Japan to the extent that they demanded that Japan ought to apologise for their war crimes and dismantle Yasukuni shrine - which had become a major bone of contention.

With regard to the ongoing oil rig crisis with Vietnam, the Vietnamese and Chinese participants stuck to their stated positions but showed inclination to resolve the crisis through bilateral negotiations. Vietnamese representative hinted at seeking international arbitration. The Chinese side reaffirmed their resolve to maintain peace and shun hegemony, no matter how powerful China becomes in the future. Bob Hawke, the former prime minister of Australia, whom Chinese consider as a great friend - aka another Henry Kissinger - in his articulation argued that in view of China's rise the balance of power had to change and that the US must recognise the strategic imperative of accommodating China in the new world order. Balance of power between US-Japan-China in his view was the key to redefining the new 'Asian Order'. He also endorsed Chinese affirmation of harmonious world by stating that hegemony was alien to China's DNA and that the world need not be unnecessarily paranoid about China. Chinese participants repeatedly spoke about Asian values, Asian Century and the need for creating an Asian Security architecture sans the USA, as enunciated by the president Xi Jinping during the recently concluded Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) at Shanghai.

The US participants were at pains to explain that the US Rebalancing in Asia was not aimed at containing China but to maintain a strategic balance in the region so that the smaller countries did not feel intimidated by China's military modernisation and assertive behaviour. They urged China to use persuasive diplomacy to amicably resolve the disputes with other contenders, rather than changing the status quo of sovereign space by the use of force. In regard to position of other ASEAN participants, it was one of studied neutrality; maintaining a balance between China and the US. During the discussion it clearly emerged that North Korea was a wild card that can seriously undermine strategic security in the region and embroil major powers in the crisis. The US side was strident in its stand that the six-party talks could not begin unless North Korea rescinded on further nuclear testing. North Korea was blamed for going back on the understanding reached during the Sep 2005 and Feb 2007 parleys on no further nuclear weapon testing. Chinese side pressed for resumption of six-party talks without laying any pre-conditions.

The Russian speaker emphatically articulated Russia's abiding strategic interests in the region and legitimised the need for pursuing Russia's pivot to Asia-Pacific, as alluded by president Putin during the APEC conference. He also emphasised the growing salience of Northern Sea Route as an alternate to the conflict ridden western sea lanes of communication (SLOC), passing through the Malacca trait and the South China Sea. Russian and Chinese scholars were skeptical about the concept of Indo-Pacific promoted by Australia, India, the US and some ASEAN members and argued that such a geostrategic conception lacked viability in the absence of any supporting politico-diplomatic and security framework, unlike the concept of Asia-Pacific, which was supported by a host of structures and mechanisms.

In my presentation, I highlighted geostrategic salience of Asia -Pacific Region, flagged contemporary and emerging security challenges, dilated on strategic security trends, identified potential flash points, assessed security implications and proposed measures for prevention of conflict. Pakistani scholar in her exposition inter alia adopted a hostile position towards India. She devoted much of her time to portray India as a "wild card" that could destabilise South Asia and even trigger a conflict with China. She showed pictures of Muslims allegedly killed during 2002 riots in Gujarat, spoke about India's "Cold Start" doctrine, military exercises and weapon systems targeted against Pakistan. She argued that the rise of Modi and so-called Hindu nationalism did not augur well for peace in South Asia. However, her anti-India rhetoric had no takers and her India bashing was deemed as an unnecessary oddity in her discourse at such a forum. On the contrary, most participants considered Pakistan as a fountainhead of global terrorism. However, some scholars commented on the uncertainty as to how Indo-Pak hostility and threat of terrorism could pan out in the region? Apropos India, there was a lot of enthusiasm about Indian elections and hope that the new regime in India would re-boot India's economic dynamism. The Chinese in their informal interaction showed regard for India's civilisation and its potential to emerge as a major economic power in Asia. They were particularly curious about the

policy guidelines to be declared by the new Government of India.

During the conference, leaving aside the oft-repeated national rhetoric, there was a genuine concern that the security scenario in the region was fragile, with attendant risks for hurting regional and global economy. The predominant sentiment was, "peace is not an option but a necessity". There was a consensus on need for continued parleys at the levels of Track -I and Track-II, to build strategic trust and formulate measures to strengthen existing frameworks and instrumentalities than creating new architectures. Measures such as implementation of Declaration of Parties, Code of Conduct, Confidence Building Measures, Joint Survey and Development of maritime resources and collaborative security arrangements to mitigate non-traditional security threats (cyber- terrorism, narco-terrorism, migrations, disasters, pandemics, piracy, militarization of space etc.) were deliberated upon.

The foreign delegates called on General Chang Wanquan, the minister of National Defence of PRC. He personally received each member of the visiting delegations at the Ministry of Defence. During introduction to this writer, he showed warmth and referred to India as a close neighbour. In his speech he was conciliatory and restrained vis-à-vis other Chinese participants who were rather overbearing and assertive towards Japan and the US during the main seminar proceedings. He portrayed China as a sober-civilisational state and projected a benign view of rising China. He articulated China's military modernisation goals till 2050 and spoke about doctrine of "Active Defence" to win local wars under conditions of informationalisation, in keeping with China's legitimate defence needs. The main focus of military modernisation was the transformation of PLA on the basis of Revolution in Military Affairs with the Chinese characteristics. He said among other things, integration, synergy and jointness within the military and with civil sectors as also human resource development were the key objectives of the ongoing modernisation endeavour. He reiterated the need to establish "Asian Security Architecture" as suggested by the president Xi Jinping during the CICA conference. In response to the Defence Minister's speech, Bob Hawke, inter alia, referred to Pakistan as a major security risk in the region. He cautioned China about growing instability of Pakistan, its nexus with Jihadi elements and urged China to exercise their influence to moderate the behaviour of Pakistan or be ready to bear unintended consequences.

During my visit to public places in Beijing and Shanghai, and interaction with a cross-section of people, it appeared that the society looked generally content but aspired to become richer. The socio-economic stratification of society is growing and so is relative sense of deprivation. There is a sense of grudge against the elite who enjoy access to higher education and lavish life styles. Communist ideology since long has been substituted by capitalism and Chinese nationalism. The young generation strives to seek a balance between modernity, lure of wealth and freedom on one hand, and Chinese traditions on the other. There is mistrust about the US, anger towards Japan and some curiosity towards India as an old civilisation. There is a passion for developing ultra-modern infrastructure and at the same time preserve civilisational heritage. Despite heavy volume of traffic there is good traffic discipline and public order at tourist and market places. Their main security concerns stem from rising spectre of Uighur terrorism in the country. There is intense patrolling and security presence around Tiananmen Square. Use of internet is restricted; there being stringent restrictions on access to Internet sites, Facebook and Twitter. The foreign tourists are very small in numbers and knowledge of English language in the country is highly limited.

@Major General BK Sharma, AVSM, SM (Retd)**, Deputy Director (Research) at USI, attended the above conference on behalf of USI and presented a paper on 'Security Challenges, Strategic Trends, Flash Points and Opportunities in the Asia-Pacific Region'.

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