

A Report on the Fifth Xiangshan Forum held at Beijing from 20 - 22 Nov 2014
Major General BK Sharma, AVSM, SM and Bar (Retd)@

Introduction

I recently had an opportunity to participate in the 5th Xiangshan Forum at Beijing organised by the China Association of Military Science (CAMS). I presented a perspective on, 'Post 2014 Afghanistan: Challenges and Prospects' and participated in a panel discussion organised by the CCTV international English news channel. The CAMS is the leading think tank of China, closely associated with the Central Military Commission (CMC) and administrated by the PLA Academy of Military Science. Air Force General Liu Chengjun, a member of the CMC, is the President of the CAMS. It deals with high-level policy research and has academic relations with 60 think tanks and research agencies in more than 20 countries. The Xiangshan Forum, being organised by the CAMS since 2006, is an important platform for dialogues on Asia-Pacific security and defence. It is held biennially at Beijing and attended by hundreds of strategic experts from all over the world.

This year, the 5th Xiangshan Forum was upgraded to a top-level 'track one and a half' security and defence forum. This event was attended by Mr Kevin Rudd, former Prime Minister of Australia, General Chang Wanquan, the defence minister of China, Mr Lui Zhemin, Vice Foreign Minister of China, defence ministers from Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, Singapore, Tajikistan, Myanmar, Maldives, Deputy Defence Minister of Iran and some service chiefs and high ranking military officers from other countries. Besides, there was participation by some former defence ministers, foreign ministers, national security advisers and many heads of think tanks and eminent academicians from across the globe. Lieutenant General Anwar Hussain, the Quartermaster General, represented Bangladesh, whereas Lieutenant General Mohd Asif, Director General Joint Staff Headquarters and Ambassador Ayub Arif, President Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad, represented Pakistan. From India, P Rajeshwari, senior fellow from the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi participated as observer. There were no presentations by the delegates from other South Asian countries at the main forum. China seeks to upgrade this Forum to the level of Shangri-La Dialogue, organised annually by the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) at Singapore. China views Shangri-La Dialogue as a West driven initiative, with focus on reiteration of stated government positions and less of a platform for the cross-fertilisation of ideas.

Theme and Structure of 5th Xiangshan Forum

The 5th Xiangshan Forum was themed on 'Win-Win through Cooperation: Building an Asia Community of Shared Destiny' addressing the topics of regional security architecture, maritime security and counterterrorism operations, in light of the changes in the current Asia-Pacific security situation. The sessions were organised as under:-

- (a) **Session 1.** Chinese Armed Forces and Security in Asia-Pacific Region.
- (b) **Session 2.** Regional Security Architecture: Current Status and Prospects.
- (c) **Session 3.** Regional Perspectives on Asia-Pacific Security.

The participants were divided into three panels as under :-

- (a) **Panel 1.** Regional Security Architecture: Current Status and Prospects.
 - (i) **Session 1.** Regional Perspectives on Asia-Pacific Security.
 - (ii) **Session 2.** Challenges in the Current Regional Security Architecture.
 - (iii) **Session 3.** Approaches to a Better Regional Security Architecture.
- (b) **Panel 2.** Regional Maritime Security: Cooperation and Challenges.
 - (i) **Session 1.** Managing Maritime Disputes in the Asia-Pacific.
 - (ii) **Session 2.** Enhancing Maritime Confidence-Building Measures.
 - (iii) **Session 3.** Strengthening Non-Traditional Maritime Security Cooperation.
- (c) **Panel 3.** Regional Terrorism: Trends and Counter-Measures.
 - (i) **Session 1.** New Challenges of Terrorism in Asia.
 - (ii) **Session 2.** Afghanistan after 2014.
 - (iii) **Session 3.** Cooperation on Counterterrorism in the Central Asia and the Middle East.

Impressions and Observations

The Defence Minister of China, in his keynote speech, emphasised the need to simultaneously develop economic and military power as two key determinants of comprehensive national power. He alluded to five reasons to accelerate building of strong national defence and armed forces as under :-

- (a) China has been a victim of colonial aggression in the past. Present day China believes in the adage, "we should not rely on the likelihood of the enemy's not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him". Therefore, military modernisation of China should continue unabated.

- (b) The historical mission of China's national reunification, securing of borders and stability in the Asian-Pacific region demand strong military capability.
- (c) China needs to bridge the capability gap in the military modernisation vis-à-vis other major powers by undertaking revolution in military affairs (RMA) with the Chinese characteristics, based on mechanisation and informationalisation.
- (d) A strong military is necessary for China's reform, development, sustained economic growth and expanding overseas interests.
- (e) Enhanced military capability is an imperative to participate in international efforts to combat non-traditional military threats, protect Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), fight terrorism and render humanitarian assistance inside and outside China.

He further dwelt upon the 'New Asian Security Concept', enunciated by President Xi Jinping, during the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), held in May 2014 at Shanghai. The so-called 'New Security' concept envisages a combined security based on shared destiny, shared interests and shared benefits. The PLA together with other Asian militaries will be the main custodian of Asia's security in a 'win-win' paradigm. The Defence Minister mentioned the following initiatives undertaken by China to promote security in Asia:-

- (a) China has exercised restraint in dealing with border disputes and has strengthened mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution, viz. setting up 64 border defence force meeting points, 2000 meetings with neighbouring countries and implementation of Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) with India. In terms of naval cooperation, China has conducted 16 joint patrols in the Beibu Gulf, is exploring the possibility of opening a defence hotline with the ASEAN countries and has signed two Memoranda of Understanding with the US Department of Defence on notification of major military activities, air and maritime safety measures and other confidence-building measures.
- (b) In order to promote Asia-Pacific defence and security cooperation, China has established consultative dialogue mechanisms with 26 countries and conducted more than 80 joint military exercises or training sessions with more than 50 countries. China's defence authorities play active role in multilateral security mechanisms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the ASEAN Regional Forum, Xiangshan Forum and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus.
- (c) Since 2002, the Chinese military has undertaken 39 international emergency humanitarian assistance operations, dispatched 18 naval task forces to the Gulf of Aden and the waters off Somalia, escorted 6,000 Chinese and foreign ships and contributed 27,000 peacekeeping troops for UNPK, sent 300 doctors to cope with the Ebola outbreak in West-Asia. China has built Ebola holding-centre in Sierra Leone and a 100-bed Ebola treatment centre in Liberia.
- (d) China's military has helped the armed forces of developing countries in capacity building for national security. Since 2003, China has trained more than 30,000 military personnel for over 130 countries with no political strings attached. The defence minister highlighted the need to strengthen dispute-management mechanisms to improve ability to cope with crises in Asia-Pacific. He proposed strengthening of defence exchanges and cooperation to bolster strategic mutual trust by way of promoting military-to-military contacts and multi-tiered cooperation. The new Asian security architecture should transcend Cold War mentality and foster an inclusive security framework in sync with new geopolitical realities and the spirit of 'win-win' paradigm.

The Vice Foreign Minister of China elucidated a wide range of initiatives and proposals for regional cooperation such as the Silk Road Economic Belt, 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, the Asian Security Concept and a community of shared destiny in Asia-Pacific. He enunciated the need for building these pillars on the following lines:-

- (a) To develop a community of shared interests. The spirit of cooperation should be strengthened by good use of the ASEAN Plus Three (10+3) frameworks to shape an East Asian Economic Community.
- (b) Community of shared responsibility should be developed by fostering mutual understanding, trust and jointness in promoting regional peace and stability.
- (c) Create a community of culture and people. He described security and economy as two wheels of the Asian community connected by the spokes of people-to-people exchanges.
- (d) The concept of 'New Asian Security' should be based on common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, encompassing traditional and non-traditional fields. The new regional security outlook should uphold the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', good neighbourly relations, respect for historical facts, international law and spirit of joint development in disputed areas. He quoted Sino-Indian BDCA as a good example of conflict avoidance. He stated that negotiation to settle maritime dispute with the Republic of Korea (ROK) in South China Sea would commence in 2015. China is discussing implementation of Declaration of Conduct (DOC) and Code of Conduct (COC) and related confidence-building measures with other stakeholders. He did not favour involvement of outside powers (the USA) in regional disputes. He hoped that China and the US would sincerely strive to build a 'New Model of Great Power Relations' that would entail no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and 'win-win' cooperation. Other initiatives to foster trust should include adoption of Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), notification of major military activities, drafting of rules for air and maritime safety and cyberspace and outer space. In regard to China - Japan relations, he hoped that progress would be made on the basis of recently concluded 'Four-Point Principle Agreement'. He underscored the need for resumption of talks on the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. On Afghanistan, he stated that China was committed to implementation of the Beijing declaration, made at the 4th Foreign Ministerial

Conference, hosted in Oct 2014.

(e) He highlighted the importance of the SCO, ARF, ADMM-Plus and proposed that inter-linkages between these organisations ought to be developed.

Notably, the speakers from most of the participating countries supported China's concept on the New Asian Security Architecture. Speakers from ASEAN countries were veiled in their criticism of 'nine-dashes line' claim and China's assertiveness in dealing with the issue. Although the speaker from Japan asserted his country's claim over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, but he favoured a negotiated settlement of the dispute. The representative from the Philippines echoed similar views. The only exception to this trend of kowtowing was the US Admiral Gary Roughead (Retd), the former Chief of Naval Operations, and commander of the Atlantic and Pacific Fleets, who strongly argued in favour of formation of alliances in Asia-Pacific to balance China.

Jehadi terrorism, rise of ISIS and resurgence of Taliban-Al Qaeda were perceived by all as serious threats to humanitarian security. However, there was no clarity on how to address these on a collective basis. China is in the process of drafting a new counter-terrorism law that would mandate PLA to undertake counter-terrorist operations. China would avoid deploying its troops abroad, UN peacekeeping being the only exception. The Post 2014 scenario in Afghanistan was deliberated upon with focus on critical uncertainties and transformational challenges and prospects.

The panelist from Pakistan presented a pessimistic view of security scenario in Afghanistan and portrayed Pakistan as the main victim of terrorism in the region. He lauded Pakistan's role in combating terrorism but was reticent on how to undertake coordinated operations against jihadi network on both sides of the Durand Line.

The Afghan speaker showed hope and optimism and urged for the continued engagement by the US and international community in Afghanistan. Russian speaker mainly focused on the failures of the US in Afghanistan and rather blamed the Afghans for their dire state of affairs. In my presentation, I flagged the challenges of building Afghan economy, political transformation and capacity building of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) followed by the prospects of Afghanistan emerging as a land bridge between Central Asia and South Asia in terms of fructification of energy and transportation corridors.

In reference to Afghanistan's implications for India, it emerged that the Unity Government had made a policy choice to invest in a triangular Pakistan-Afghanistan-China relationship. President Ghani, in his foreign policy prioritisation, has put Afghanistan's neighbouring countries on top, followed by Islamic countries, US/NATO, other Asian countries and international organisations. The nature of bilateral agreements signed by the new Afghan Government with China and Afghanistan, suggest that relations with India are being accorded lower priority at this point in time. In my discussions with top Afghan participants, I was given to understand that one of the reasons for this shift in Afghanistan's policy towards India was the perceived lack of initiative and will on the part of Indians to help ANSF at critical junctures. Nonetheless, they assured that India continued to enjoy considerable support from within the new political dispensation that advocated close relations with India vis-à-vis Pakistan or China.

The 5th Xiangshan Forum was given wide publicity by the Chinese media and its international CCTV channel. Besides live coverage of the event, the electronic media conducted vigorous interaction with foreign participants. The grand media finale was in the form of a special programme hosted by China's CCTV English news channel, 'Dialogue Special: New Security Outlook in Asia'. The panel comprised participants from China, the USA, Russia, Malaysia and India. CCTV was particularly keen on having an Indian voice, hence they invited me to participate in this prestigious 45-minute long programme that has a viewership of nearly 85 million people across the globe. The discussion devolved around, on China's new Asian security vision, implications of China's military rise, role of major players in Asian security and measures for building a new Asian Security Architecture. The media event was meticulously planned with a view to disseminate the theme of the 5th Xiangshan Forum to the wider international community.

During the panel discussion, I clearly brought out the vital role that India will play in the geopolitical and security arena in Asia as a major power and a responsible stakeholder. The dominant position of India as an important player in the economic and security architecture was amply highlighted.

Having participated in Beijing in the 4th Xiangshan Forum in Nov 2012, in the 2nd International Symposium in Security and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region in May 2014 and interacted with the visiting Chinese delegations, one could see a perceptible shift in China's policy from that of maintaining a lower profile to that of a high-profile striving global power for a prominent role in reshaping the geopolitical and strategic landscape of Asia.

Conclusion

Participation in the 5th Xiangshan Forum was highly useful in gaining insight into the Chinese thinking on Asian security issues; understand perspectives of foreign participants and to articulate India's position and interests in the evolving geopolitical milieu. It was heartening to note that a buoyant India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi inspires hope and confidence in the international community and that Indian views on geostrategic issues resonate well with the audience. India being at the cusp of its strategic destiny, the Government of India should encourage proactive participation in such events at the official and think tank levels.

@Major General BK Sharma, AVSM, SM and Bar (Retd) was commissioned into the 7 SIKH LI on 15 Dec 1976 and later commanded 6 SIKH LI. He has been India's Defence Attaché to Kazakhstan with simultaneous accreditation to Kyrgyzstan. He retired as Senior Directing Staff at the National Defence College, New Delhi on 30 Apr 2012. Currently, he is the Deputy Director (Research) and Head of the Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation at the USI.