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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Singapore's Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Charting the Unknown**

By S R Nathan

### **Synopsis**

*The world is faced with unpredictable threats, in traditional and non-traditional security, economic and social maladies and climate change. Singapore has to look beyond the present to find ways to meet the challenges of the future.*

### **Commentary**

TODAY, AS never before, we are all in an unpredictable world. We are confronted by a confluence of threats. The economic situation is threatening, with ramifications for countries big and small. Much depends on whether the problems of the eurozone, the economic situation in the United States, and uncertainties in China, with their inter-related ramifications for the world, will see improvements before long. The fluidity in the strategic picture gives no reason for comfort. Domestically, many countries are facing unexpected societal disturbances over disparity in incomes; problems of immigrants and their impact on employment opportunities and a restless youth agitating through the social media.

What I have touched on reflects the wide scope of the issue of security in today's world. Indeed, any discussion of security nowadays will not be confined to traditional questions of military security, but may encompass climate change and environmental disasters to radicalisation via the Internet and cyber security.

### **Singapore's pivotal role**

Singapore's approach to security has always been a collaborative one, with a network of strategic partnerships with friends and neighbours. As Singapore developed and matured as a nation we sought a role in the Southeast Asian region and the world. We took an active part in fostering the growth of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, and played a leading role in the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum. The ARF emphasised the central role of ASEAN in the regional security architecture. It brought together ASEAN members and dialogue partners to discuss regional security issues and build mutual confidence among them.

Singapore went beyond Asia in reaching out to Europe to initiate the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and across the Pacific to convene the East Asia Latin America Forum (EALAF). Singapore joined other ASEAN members in creating the ASEAN Plus Three grouping with Northeast Asian states China, Japan and South Korea. At Singapore's urging, India, Australia and New Zealand were included, forming the ASEAN Plus Six. Today that grouping has expanded to become the East Asia Summit with the addition of the US and Russia. All powers

with an interest in peace and security in Asia-Pacific have some part in some, if not all, these collaborative endeavours.

Singapore also initiated an informal meeting of ASEAN defence ministers, which now includes the defence ministers of the US, Europe and Asia in parallel with the IISS Shangri-la Dialogue, an international conference with which RSIS is associated. Now the ASEAN Defence Ministers have convened an ADMM Plus Eight grouping, (with the same membership as the EAS), meeting every three years.

It is by such incremental steps that Singapore has contributed to bringing about a web of inter-connected political-economic and security groupings in the Asia-Pacific region, one that not only straddles the Pacific Ocean, but also joins the Indian Ocean Rim countries to the Western Pacific. That is the pivotal role that Singapore plays in trans-regional affairs, by helping to create synergistic linkages between West and East, between different regions of Asia, and between Asia and Oceania. Singapore scholars and researchers, including those in RSIS, have supported the policymakers in contributing to the conceptualising of these regional security architecture and giving intellectual content to the physical arrangements that have been created in the Asia-Pacific.

### **Beyond the horizon**

What about the future? What will the 21<sup>st</sup> century bring? One decade into the new century strategic scholars and seers are still wondering. To be sure, we already have a taste of it, by way of the rapid technological changes and tectonic shifts in the global economy. But no one is sure what new security structure will emerge out of all these efforts. Will the international community emerging from the Cold War and an America adjusting itself to a multipolar world bring about a better changed world of peace and prosperity? There is a question we need to ponder on.

The new global order is expected to be shaped by the rise of new powers, particularly China and possibly India in Asia, Russia and Brazil, with a diminished role for Europe. China's military modernisation and expansion is set to be in full stride by 2030 along with its economic and technological development. Will China become the new regional superpower of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How far behind will India be?

Will America still outstrip both, by dint of its intellectual and technological superiority and its ability to absorb the best and the brightest from Asia and elsewhere? Will the US recover, as it has done many times before?

Following the winding down of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, will the 21<sup>st</sup> century be rid of military conflicts, or will we be embroiled in new wars growing out of religious ferment? Will we see nuclear confrontation or adventurism over energy and mineral resources? Or can we expect a renewed race to acquire nuclear weapons by players beyond the nation state? Those countries which lack the physical and technological ability to become nuclear powers – will they have to adapt their capabilities to deal with new forms of security challenges and threats?

### **New Strategic Issues**

What are the new strategic issues facing the world? What unexpected directions will these threats take? Will the current international order and the system of sovereign nation states continue? Or will the smaller countries be forced to come to some accommodation with bigger neighbours in a new international architecture dominated by a consortium of major powers? Will ASEAN follow the path that European integration is going through or will it blaze its own path?

These are imponderables which may spring up to surprise us all. But they are precisely what we need to ponder upon in addition to the various questions of economics, scientific research and new technologies that our scholars and researchers in universities are pursuing.

It is my hope that scholars and researchers will also peer into the uncharted terrain of the future geopolitical environment and look hard to see through the murky environment for a way out of our maladies and the challenges facing us.

As they deliberate on the question of security, I am sure they will look over the horizon of today's world to discern the fault lines and outlines of our future. That is the strategic foresight that we need to develop, to learn how small countries can continue to survive and prosper in this ever changing world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*S R Nathan, former President of Singapore, is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. The above is based on his remarks at the opening of a RSIS Seminar on Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Opportunities and Challenges on 6 Dec 2011 following the conferment of an honorary Doctorate of Letters by NTU.*