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Minister for Defence, RADM (NS) Teo Chee Hean Speaks at Dialogue on "Security in Asia: Concepts, Threats and Assurances after 9-11"

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Minister for Defence, RADM (NS) Teo Chee Hean, speaking at the dialogue

RADM (NS) Teo's speech was delivered at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) - New York University (NYU) and Centre on International Cooperation (CIC) Dialogue which took place from 21-24 April 04.

Good evening, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

The end of the Cold War did not bring the peace dividends we all hoped for. On the contrary, there have been more regional conflicts and now terrorism threatens many nations across the world. The asymmetric threat of global terrorism in the name of holy war is one of the two key defining features of the geo-strategic landscape today. The other is the pre-eminence of American military power, which is unrivalled in modern history. How vigorously Washington uses that military power to pursue what it defines to be critical American interests has an impact even on countries and regions not directly involved, because of the overwhelming strategic weight of the United States.

Regional Powers and Potential Flashpoints

In the Asia-Pacific region, American pre-eminence is set against the dynamic of active

regional powers. Key among them is China. A "new" China is emerging, open to the world and steadily growing in economic strength. Inevitably, China will grow in military capability as well. How this new China conducts itself with its neighbours and the rest of the region will shape the strategic landscape. An equally important factor will be how Sino-US relations develop. The defining experience of the current generation of leaders in China was the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. They therefore put a high premium on stability, and on economic development and growth. However, the outlook of the next generation is still being shaped. They are more exposed to the world and their experience today and in the coming years will mould their approach to the political and socio-economic development of China and China's interactions with the rest of the world.

India and Japan will also play significant roles in shaping the regional strategic landscape in the years ahead. India has in the last few years actively looked beyond the Subcontinent, both for economic and strategic reasons. Japan has avowed its aim to become what it calls a "normal" country. Japan and India can both be expected to, slowly but surely, try to claim a more active role on the international stage. With the aspirations and efforts of the regional powers and the active presence and influence of the United States, the regional balance may shift in the years ahead.

The resulting friction may set off a flashpoint. That could in turn result in some destabilising effects, perhaps even conflict. The cross-Straits situation is the most immediate concern, given that China has drawn a red line and the outcome of the recent Taiwanese election has sparked a controversy which has yet to be resolved. The involvement of the US makes this an issue with potentially global consequences. The next few months will be crucial. The situation will remain precarious so long as there is a deep lack of trust between the two sides, and a miscalculation could lead to a change in the status quo.

Another significant cause for concern - a leftover from the Cold War - is the situation in the Korean Peninsula. The prospect of an inscrutable and unpredictable North Korean regime armed with nuclear weapons threatens to upset the balance in Northeast Asia. The 6-party talks offer hope of a positive resolution. But a failure could cause a spiral of uncertainty, and even if hostilities are avoided, other countries might be prompted to consider nuclearisation.

The dangers of nuclearisation are already present further West in South Asia, where India and Pakistan both have nuclear capabilities. This raises the stakes in the Subcontinent where a highly volatile brew of territorial and religious differences already exists. It also has an impact on the security environment beyond the Subcontinent, particularly on contiguous regions such as Southeast Asia. Given the developments and uncertainties over nuclearisation in Asia and their delivery means even Australia, long protected by its remoteness and vast territory, has embarked on plans for a missile defense system.

Besides these major potential flashpoints, there are a number of smaller ones posed by longstanding territorial disputes. The Spratly Islands dispute in the South China Sea, for example, is a potential source of tension involving a number of Southeast Asian nations, and

China. The dispute over the Diaoyu or Senkaku islands is a thorn in the side of Sino-Japanese relations. There are many other such disputes between neighbouring Asian countries, especially over islands and maritime boundaries. While no country wants to precipitate a conflict, miscalculation and rashness can never be ruled out.

New Threats

What I have enumerated are, so to speak, traditional security problems. Unfortunately, there is now an additional array of new threats. These emerging threats are quite different from what we are used to dealing with. Their defining characteristics are their global objectives and disregard for national boundaries, and the non-state actors who are the perpetrators. Terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are the global enterprises which feature most prominently in this category. There are other trans-national problems like piracy and illegal immigrants. These are sometimes the spill-over effects of internal weaknesses in a country. The result is that peace and security are no longer simply a function of preventing conflict between states. The international community now has to grapple with trans-national non-conventional threats which pose a danger to diverse countries all over the world.

Of the emerging threats, global terrorism is the most immediate danger for the countries in this region, as it is for many other regions. The terrorists see it as an ideological struggle, with their ideology founded on a distorted interpretation of Islam. Their strategic objectives are to overthrow the modern international system, and take over countries and societies to be governed according to their brand of religious extremism. No one of us is immune, not even the Islamic states. The fight will be a long and arduous one. The question is how long it will take before the tide is stemmed.

The threat of terrorism is amplified by the risk of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The nightmare scenario of terrorists getting their hands on chemical, biological and radiological weapons, or collaborating with rogue regimes in the use of such weapons is no longer unthinkable. The illicit trade in weapons of mass destruction is intricate and sophisticated. The counter-proliferation effort has to be as sophisticated and comprehensive.

Existing Approaches

The challenges of preserving peace and security have become more complex, given the new regional environment and in the face of the new threats. Since the end of the Second World War through the tensions of the Cold War, the world has looked to international organisations and multilateral cooperation to preserve peace and security. Now, more so than ever given the character of the new threats, the responses to deal with them have to be multilateral ones if they are to be at all effective.

The basic multilateral architecture that currently exists has the United Nations and its associated bodies at the global level. In Southeast Asia, the United Nations has played a

critical role in enabling nation-building in Cambodia and Timor Leste. Then there are the international conventions which many regional countries are party to, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty and Chemical Weapons Convention. On a different level, such arbitration mechanisms as the International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea help to resolve disputes in a peaceful manner. Mediation efforts under the auspices of such organisations as the Henri Dunant Centre also help to prevent more bloodshed.

At the regional level, there are organisations like ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (or ARF), APEC and the Five Power Defence Arrangements. There are also multilateral conferences, such as that of defence ministers in the Shangri-La Dialogue and of defence chiefs in CHOD. All these foster a habit of dialogue and consultation, and of peaceful resolution of conflicts. They have proven valuable for encouraging the communication and transparency that help develop understanding and build confidence among regional countries. Such an achievement is not to be underrated in a region where communication and mutual understanding were not the natural order.

The multilateral security architecture we have today, at both the international and regional levels, is fundamentally sound. But as we move into the 21st Century, the world that these organisations have to deal with is very different from the one envisaged by their founders, and much more complex. The present is fraught with the threat of terrorism and the future looks even more uncertain with the prospect of destabilising shifts in the regional balance.

The Way Forward

It is a certainty that the geo-strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific will grow more complex. If the security structures are to remain relevant and effective, they will have to adapt and even reinvent themselves. International and regional organisations should set their founding assumptions against present-day realities, and consider new approaches and mechanisms for collective action. Inaction is not an option, for the stakes are high. There are no obvious solutions, certainly no single set of solutions. But there are two imperatives as we move forward.

First, all of us need to have a firmer commitment to multinational consultation and collaboration. We will have to work out solutions to enhance stability and peace through multilateral organisations and initiatives. While many would pay lip service, the inclination to autonomous national action is a strong one. Governments need to do what is necessary on their own, but they need just as importantly to cooperate and collaborate with other countries. This is especially so in the fight against terrorism, for the enemy's objective is global in conception and reach and it has no regard for national boundaries. Indeed the interstices between national borders and jurisdictions are often exploited for sanctuary and to carry out training and other activities. No country acting alone can hope to counter the threats of terrorism and proliferation effectively.

It is important to keep an open mind and explore creative approaches to building collective and individual security. We should be willing to experiment with new modes of interaction and new mechanisms of conflict resolution to meet the needs of the new security environment. We could, for instance, take a more robust approach in dealing with some of the new threats, while ensuring that we do so within the framework of the principles of international law. In this regard, the Proliferation Security Initiative (or PSI) stands out as an example of an innovative approach. In the PSI, like-minded states came together to build up a global response capability so that they could more effectively counter the increasingly complex threat posed by the proliferation of WMD. The PSI is an activity, not an organisation. It builds upon existing international and national legal frameworks and measures its success by action, for example, having exercises and not only meetings. Less than a year old, the PSI played a key part in the dramatic decision of Libya to give up its nuclear programme. A development such as the PSI is important also as a model of how we can tap on the multinational resources which are so critical for success in the fight against trans-national threats. Piracy is another characteristically trans-national problem which demands a multinational collaborative response. No single country has the resources to carry out the fight against piracy on its own. The littoral states and the users have an interest in securing the sea lanes and should contribute the resources needed for the fight.

The second imperative is for multilateral organisations (and indeed, governments) to adopt a multi-dimensional perspective in their search for solutions to enhance security. The causes and effects of the new threats perpetrated by non-state actors are invariably linked to socio-economic or ideological factors. Taking a single perspective would obscure the full range of solutions that may be required or are available.

This is most certainly the case in the fight against terrorism. At one level, there must be tough security measures to harden potential targets and flush out the terrorists. But such measures are not enough, no matter how fruitful the results may be. In Southeast Asia, the security authorities have managed to arrest more than 200 members of the terrorist group that calls itself Jemaah Islamiyah, including some leaders and many foot soldiers. But the terrorist armies will find new recruits and regenerate so long as extremist preachers feed the pipelines that produce yet more terrorists. At the core is a struggle for the hearts and minds of young Muslims. This is also a struggle within the Muslim community itself. This tide of Islamic extremism has to be stemmed before the fight against terrorism can be won. The effort will have to come from governments and Islamic organisations and within the Muslim communities themselves. It is an effort that international organisations can also contribute to.

A multi-dimensional approach will also offer nation states the motivation to engage in constructive and cooperative behaviour. States which have economic interests to preserve are far less likely to be inclined to bad behaviour than those which have nothing to lose. The dismal outcome of talks for a new WTO round are therefore unfortunate as it was a missed opportunity to enable more countries to derive tangible benefits from the international system. Giving them a stake in the international economic system and tying them into a network of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in a host of sectors are means by which to bind

countries in positive cooperative relationships and thereby enhance stability and peace. This is particularly important given the prospect of a more complex regional security landscape with the rise of regional powers and nuclearisation.

Conclusion

The road ahead will not be an easy one, as we try to fit together the existing instruments and new approaches in our efforts to build regimes and structures that are effective. I trust that your discussions at this conference will help illuminate the challenges that we face as a region confronted with complex security challenges, and will generate useful ideas and innovative approaches that can help enhance regional security.

Thank you.

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