

## The Role of Public Policy in Ensuring Peace and Prosperity for Asia

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The current chaos and uncertainty across the world is a result of “policy-induced crisis” and a failure by governments to harness the potential of their young populations, said two speakers from India at a recent seminar titled “Challenges to Peace in Asia — ISIS, Competing Oceanic Claims, and the Scope for Multilateral Intervention”. The event on 1 September was organised by IPS and the India Foundation, and featured former Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations Ambassador Hardeep Puri and retired Indian Army General Syed Ata Hasnain. Both were in Singapore to attend the Indian Ocean Conference 2016.

Around 25 people attended the seminar at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, which was moderated by the President of the India Foundation Shakti Sinha. Addressing a point Mr Sinha made on multilateral interventions in his opening remarks, Ambassador Puri argued that the uncertainty, helplessness and conflict in the world today were the results of poor policy choices by governments; and in most cases, interventions by foreign parties had resulted in “predictable devastation”. Drawing on examples of what had happened in Iraq, Libya, Ukraine and Yemen, he said that any benefits, if at all, of foreign intervention, were usually unintended.



Concurring with his contemporary, Lt Gen Hasnain added that multilateralism was more prone to failure when there was a lack of trust between parties involved in the intervention. In Syria, for example, US forces and Russia have been supporting parallel but separate efforts to bring down the ISIS terror group. The US is backing Syrian rebels working to bring down President [Bashar al-Assad](#), who is Russia's ally.

***Governments need to “get it right” for their people***

Ambassador Puri and Lt Gen Hasnain noted that the ongoing troubles in the Middle East and the humanitarian crisis in North Africa bore lessons for Asian countries.

One, governments need to recognise citizens' basic liberties, give them a means to address their grievances and “get it right” for the young by providing them with opportunities. Ambassador Puri noted that this was what Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government had been working on in the last two years, through job creation, as nearly one million youths entered the workforce every month. This would allow India to turn its youth into a force for progress and modernisation, he said.

Also, there should be active management of a society's diversity and efforts to foster inclusiveness, added Lt-Gen Hasnain. “If you can handle your diversity correctly, you will never have a threat from terrorism. Half the time the problem is that you have multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-faith nations in situations where they have not been able to integrate their populations together. And when that happens, it becomes a major problem,” Lt Gen Hasnain warned. Divided and fragmented societies create a vulnerable citizenry that is easy to target, he said.

### ***The ISIS threat***

Both speakers highlighted the threat of ISIS, which has been able to hold territory in parts of the Middle East and run itself like a state, providing water supply services and collecting taxes in areas it occupies. While it is not in a position to physically expand worldwide, ISIS' ability to reach out to vulnerable populations via social media is of growing concern to governments worldwide. Lt Gen Hasnain said that one vulnerable group was that of single Indian males living alone in the Gulf states. They accounted for at least half of the Indian nationals that had joined ISIS. Also, the south of India was under a greater threat from ISIS' social media offensive, given factors such as greater Internet penetration there. This is why ISIS cannot be dealt with just by military or security means, pointed out Ambassador Puri.

Drawing from his own experiences and his reflections on the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, Lt Gen Hasnain highlighted three key lessons for Singapore's homeland security efforts. First, the early signals of potential terror threats need to be taken seriously, with the appropriate actions implemented to address such threats. Intelligence on these threats must be passed through word of mouth, from one senior official to another, "not just between clerical entities in different offices", said Lt Gen Hasnain.

Second, a country's special forces also have to be special in more than just name, said Lt Gen Hasnain; otherwise, they would not be able to protect the citizenry. Third, no matter how well-trained a country's security forces are, it will be for naught if members of the public are not alert and do not report suspicious activities to the authorities.



### **Question and Answer session**

A member of the audience asked the speakers for their thoughts on outcomes for Syria. Echoing Ambassador Puri's earlier comments on the failure of multilateral interventions, Lt Gen Hasnain said he believed the crisis would end only if all sides agree to a ceasefire. There should be an "all-inclusive" Syrian peace process as part of the ceasefire, allowing the Syrians to work things out by themselves, he said.

There was also some discussion on the impact of falling oil prices. This had affected ISIS' revenue sources and also overseas Indians working in the Gulf. In the Arab states, the elites would need to consider how to reinvent their countries and societies in a post-oil economy, noted the speakers. The stability of the Arab states was important for global stability, they said.

Concluding the session, Mr Sinha said that a challenge for policymakers worldwide would be to serve the interests and desires of the middle class, and on the fight against terror, to look for "solutions outside the battlefield".

"As far as possible, it is always political and social engagement that is required," he said, adding that the absence of such engagement in the Middle East had led to people feeling empowered by ideology.

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