

Distinguished Speakers' Programme
for 42nd Command & Staff Course
Goh Keng Swee Command & Staff College
1 March 2011

“My Three Wishes For Asia In The 21st Century”

by
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Salutation

1 COL Ng Kin Yi, the Commandant of the Goh Keng Swee Command and Staff College, MAJ Chew Ann Boon, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for inviting me to share my thoughts with you this evening. The diplomat and the soldier play complementary roles. I consider myself a soldier for peace.

Introduction

2 I want to begin by explaining my choice of the topic of my speech this evening. I agree with my good friend, Kishore Mahbubani, that Asia is on the rise. I commend his book, “The New Asian Hemisphere”, to you. Barring unforeseen catastrophes and self-inflicted wounds, some countries and regions of Asia, such as China, South Korea, India and ASEAN, should continue with the remarkable progress they have achieved in recent decades. By the end of the 21st Century, many of the countries of Asia should have succeeded in joining the First World. Japan is already such a country. This is the best case scenario. The best case scenario will not come to pass if war were to break out between some of the major powers of Asia. The best case scenario will not come to pass if there is political turmoil in Asia, as we have seen recently in North Africa and the Middle-East, as a result of bad governance. The best case scenario will not come to pass if Asia fails to embrace sustainable development and, as a result, is faced with a serious environmental crisis. This is the background against which I have chosen to speak on my three wishes for Asia in this century: peace, good governance and sustainable development.

First Wish: Peace In Asia

3 My first wish is for peace in Asia in the 21st Century. At present, Asia is relatively peaceful. The only threats to peace are posed by North Korea, and by the continued conflict inside Afghanistan and along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The recent skirmishes between Cambodian and Thai forces along their border, in the vicinity of the ancient Preah Vihear Temple, have stopped due to the pro-active diplomacy of the ASEAN Chairman, Indonesia, and the benign pressure exerted by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers. The invitation by Cambodia and Thailand for observers from Indonesia, as ASEAN Chair, to the respective sides of the affected areas of the Cambodia-Thailand border, to observe the commitments by both sides to avoid further clashes, should help to silence the guns.

4 Why do I worry that Asia may not be peaceful in the 21st Century? I worry because although 66 years have passed since the end of the Second World War, there has been no historic reconciliation between China and Japan, and, as a result, this critical bilateral relationship continues to be haunted by the ghosts of the past. For the Chinese people, there are many painful memories from the period, 1931 to 1945, when Japan conducted military activities against China. This is unlike the situation in Europe where reconciliations have taken place between historic enemies, viz between France and Germany, and between Britain and Germany. They are allies and partners in the EU and in NATO. ASEAN has tried to promote cooperation between China and Japan by including them in the ASEAN+3 and the East Asian Summit (EAS). Since 1997, China, Japan and South Korea have held annual summits. ASEAN+3 and EAS are relatively new regional processes. They have not and are unlikely to achieve the deep integration which has been achieved in Europe.

5 Two other complicating factors are the simultaneous rise of nationalism in China and Japan and the change in the relative sizes of the Chinese and Japanese economies. I am struck by the fact that, in recent public opinion polls in Japan, the majority of the Japanese people expressed a negative view of China. I am also struck by the anti-Japan nationalism of the majority of China's netizens. This year, for the first time, Japan lost its status as the world's second largest economy to China. Although Japan's per capita income is 10 times

higher than that of China's, commentators have observed that there is concern in Japan about facing an ascending China. This situation is made worse by the fact that the Japanese economy has not recovered its buoyancy and the Japanese society is rapidly ageing. Beneath the surface, there is probably a subtle psychological game being played by Beijing and Tokyo to determine their relative place in the hierarchy. This may partly explain the recent dispute between the two countries over the arrest of a Chinese fishing vessel and its captain by Japan, in the waters near the disputed island/rock of Senkaku/Tiaoyu.

6 Economically, China has become Japan's no. 1 trading partner. Japan is a major investor in the Chinese economy. Culturally, the two countries and peoples share many commonalities and affinities. The two economies are fundamentally complementary and not competitive. It makes no sense for the two countries to be in conflict with each other. History, however, tells us that the leaders of countries do not always behave rationally. History also tells us that good economic relations have never been enough to prevent nations from behaving irrationally. In his interesting book, "Rivals: how the power struggle between China, India and Japan will shape our next decade", the British author, Bill Emmott, warns us that: "Japan and China are natural rivals, which makes historical reconciliation at once vital and elusive."

7 I also worry about the deficit of trust between China and India. The relationship between China and India is less complicated than the relationship between China and Japan. The Himalayan mountain constitutes a natural barrier between the two countries. The high mountains did not, however, prevent Buddhism from being transmitted from India to China. Buddhism has been indigenised in China and has become a Chinese religion. In the early part of the 20th Century, the Indian Nobel Laureate for Literature, Rabindranath Tagore, championed Pan-Asianism and encouraged the study of the Chinese language and civilisation in India. In 1947, Pandit Nehru took the initiative to convene the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi. For a short period, Beijing and New Delhi resounded with the slogan, Chinese and Indians are brothers. This honeymoon came to an abrupt end in 1962, when Indian and Chinese troops clashed on their borders. This border war may have faded away in the memory of most Chinese, but it is very much alive in the memories of the Indian elite.

8 Why is there a deficit of trust between China and India? It is due partly to their unresolved border and territorial disputes. It is also due to their differences over Pakistan, Kashmir, Tibet, the Dalai Lama, their competition for natural resources, their misreading of each other's intentions, their trade differences and their natural competition for prestige and influence in the world. On the other hand, trade is booming between China and India. They have also cooperated closely in such forums as the WTO, the UN climate change negotiations, BRIC, G20, etc. ASEAN has tried to be helpful by bringing both countries into the East Asia Summit and by promoting the idea of concluding a free trade agreement between the 16 members of the EAS. China has proposed negotiating an FTA with India but India is not ready to take up the proposal, fearing that such an agreement would be one-sided in its benefits.

9 My conclusion is that peace is likely to prevail in the relations between these two Asian giants, but we cannot be complacent. There would be no peace in Asia unless there is peace between China, India and Japan. Without peace, Asia's rise in the 21st Century would be aborted.

Second Wish: Good Governance

10 My second wish is for Asia to enjoy good governance. What do I mean by good governance? I mean that the people would live under governments which are chosen by them and accountable to them. I mean that the people would enjoy the rule of law and the government is not corrupt. I mean that the people are not oppressed but have access to the civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights recognised by the UN. Good governance is a broader concept than democracy. Democracy tends to focus on the form of government. Good governance is concerned with both form and substance. A democratic government can be corrupt and incompetent. In other words, you can have democracy without good governance. Can you have good governance without democracy? I do not think so. I am in favour of democracy because, as Churchill once said, it is the least bad system of government. I am, therefore, not a democracy ideologue. I would argue that a fundamental cause of the revolution in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya is that the peoples in those countries did not enjoy good governance. They lived under undemocratic regimes which were oppressive, corrupt and incompetent.

11 The rise of Asia in this century could be put in jeopardy if Asian countries do not make substantial progress in the quality of their governance. Let me use three criteria to make my point: corruption, human development and social equality. Corruption is a pervasive cancer in Asia. The best index on corruption is published by the Berlin-based NGO, Transparency International (TI). In the latest TI index (2010), out of 178 countries, China is ranked 78, India is ranked 87 and Indonesia is ranked 110. The least corrupt country in Asia is Singapore, which is ranked 1.

12 The second index which I would like to refer to is UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI). The merit of this index is that it goes beyond the single indicator of per capita income. HDI seeks to measure the quality of life of the different countries. It does not ignore per capita income, but it includes data on education, health, housing, employment, water, sanitation, gender equity, etc. In the latest HDI (2010), out of 169 countries, China is ranked 89, India is ranked 119 and Indonesia is ranked 108. The Asian country with the highest rank in the index is Japan, which is ranked no. 11. In the coming years and decades, I hope that the quality of life of the majority of Asians will improve substantially and this improvement will be reflected in higher rankings for the Asian countries.

13 The third criterion is social equality. All the Asian governments profess to believe in inclusive growth. They say that all segments of society should benefit from the country's economic progress. They agree that a society's unity and cohesion would be put at risk if there is a huge gap between a rich minority and a poor majority. The gini coefficient is often used to measure a country's social inequality and to compare countries. The coefficient measures the difference between the incomes of the top 20 per cent and the bottom 20 per cent of a population. A score of "0" means total equality. A score of "100" means total inequality. I will refer to the World Bank's Development Indicators for 2010. Japan's gini coefficient is 24.9. What about China, India and Indonesia? China's gini coefficient is 41.5, India's is 36.8 and Indonesia's is 37.6.

14 The recent turmoil in North Africa and the Middle East is a wake-up call to Asia. People will revolt if they live under undemocratic and oppressive governments, which are corrupt and incompetent, and which do not pursue policies of inclusive growth. The new media has helped to empower and connect the aggrieved, especially the young.

Third Wish: Sustainable Development

15 My third wish is for Asia to embrace sustainable development. With the exception of Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Bhutan, the other countries in Asia have done a very poor job in looking after their environment and in reconciling economic development with care for the environment. Let me cite a few facts. At the global level, one of the great challenges of our times is the threat of global warming and climate change. I think I can say with confidence that the scientists have proven, beyond reasonable doubt, that the earth is warming and that this is caused by the accumulation of man-made greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere. Carbon dioxide or CO₂ is one of the main culprits. The latest statistics from the UN and the World Bank show that the three largest emitters of CO₂ are China, the US and Indonesia. Indonesia has disputed this allegation. India is not far behind. The ongoing UN negotiations seek to arrive at a new legally binding agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. I will not discuss the details of the negotiations because they are not relevant to my point. Instead, I want to make a transition from the global to the local.

16 I think that in each of our countries, our citizens aspire to live in a safe, clean and wholesome environment. They want to be able to walk the streets without fear. They want to be able to breathe the air, drink the water, eat the food, dispose of their waste, in the same way as the citizens of the First World do. Our citizens want to live in harmony with nature. I am sad to say that, in most parts of Asia today, our citizens do not enjoy such a quality of environmental life.

17 Asia is rapidly depleting its natural heritage, such as, the rain forests of Southeast Asia. We are using fire to clear land for plantations. We are polluting our land, rivers and seas. We are exploiting our fish stocks in an unsustainable way. We are making our cities less and less liveable while we are getting richer. We are drowning in our own garbage. 1.9 billion Asians still do not have access to modern sanitation. As Asians get richer, they aspire to live the same unsustainable lifestyle of the rich in the West. The dilemma is that if the people of China and India were to live the lifestyle of the Americans, we will need another planet or several planets.

18 Asia must, therefore, find a new way, a different path to nirvana. We have no choice but to do a better job in looking after our environment. We have no choice but to make a transition to a low carbon economy. If we do not succeed, I fear that Asia and the world are heading towards an environmental crisis which will render Asia's rise meaningless. For this reason, it is not wrong to say that the threat to the earth's environment has become a security threat.

19 Let me conclude. We live in a very interesting moment of history. After several centuries of malaise, Asia is re-emerging to the pole position it occupied until 200 years ago. Asia's rise will change the geo-politics and geo-economics of the world. The road to that bright future is full of challenges. We will not get to our destination if there is no peace in Asia. We will stumble if we fail to embrace good governance and environmental sustainability.

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