

Valedictory Address

by



Shri Sanjay Singh

Secretary (East), MEA

at

**The Asian Relations Conference (ARC) IV
'Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: Asian Perspectives'**

at

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Amb. Rajiv Bhatia, DG, ICWA, Amb. Bhagirath, Secy. Gen., IOR-ARC
Prof Swaran Singh President AAS
Amb. Ravi, Amb. Saurabh Kumar
Senior Colleagues
Distinguished Panelists and Speakers
Members of the Think-Tank community and the Media
Ladies and Gentlemen.

At the very outset let me commend the effort by ICWA and the Association of Asian Scholars for organizing this very topical Asian Relations Conference (ARC) IV, on the 'Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: Asian Perspectives'. I would also like to thank ICWA for inviting me to deliver an address at the Valedictory Session on this very important subject to this distinguished audience. Since the last couple of years, the term 'Indo-Pacific' is being used increasingly during discussions amongst policy makers, strategic thinkers and think tanks. This Seminar has attempted to define it spatially, obtain perspectives from the Indian Ocean, South East Asia, US, Russia & EU. It has discussed India's engagement with the region and the prospects for its economic integration.

I am glad that ICWA has launched this debate seeking to contribute to the Asian perspective on it, given the significant geo-political and strategic importance this concept has regionally for Asia and, I daresay, even globally. It is not a construct that can be left ambivalent nor should it be understood in monochromatic terms.

I do hope that as a result of these discussions over the last two days, we have greater clarity, since this concept is increasingly being used to describe the dynamics within the region and has relevance to regional security, stability and development in Asia.



Shri Sanjay Singh, Secretary (East), MEA delivering the Valedictory Address

This debate on the Asian perspective of the Indo-Pacific comes at a time of significant progress in India's 'Look East' Policy, an important basis for an Indian definition. On the other hand, another anchor for an Asian perspective of the Indo-Pacific region would be the changing geopolitics and its effects on the region and on its stakeholders and their strategic priorities. There is an increasing desire within Asia towards tackling common challenges and creating a politico-security architecture to promote growth and prosperity, peace and stability. Indian strategic thinkers had traditionally focused on the area which extended from the Straits of Hormuz to the Straits of Malacca. They would describe Indo-Pacific as a logical corollary to India's 'Look East' Policy, and an extension of the region of interest to also include within its ambit the Western Pacific.

Over the centuries, the Indian Ocean Region has seen myriad nations that have navigated its waters with freedom, promoting trade and fostering cross-cultural influences. Today, through organizations like the IOR-ARC, the region seeks to open new channels of communication and cooperation towards the development of the economies along its littoral rim. The six priority areas of IOR-ARC – maritime safety and security; trade and investment facilitation; fisheries management; disaster risk reduction; academic and S&T cooperation; and tourism promotion and cultural exchanges – reflect this approach of a collective community seeking to deal with contemporary challenges, build collective capacity and assume greater salience to the strategic perspective in the region.

The same strength of purpose can be seen in some measure in the ASEAN+1 relationships, especially the ASEAN India strategic partnership, which has as its focus a common economic space of 1.8 billion people and a combined GDP of over USD 3.2 trillion. The ASEAN India Plans of Action provides direction to the project related aspects of our cooperation across the political, security, economic and socio-cultural pillars. It underlines our common perspective of economic growth, shared prosperity, peace and stability, the increasing focus on capacity building and connectivity across geographic corridors, over land, sea and air, between institutions, people-to-people and now through the digital space. All this is meant to optimize a unique partnership aimed at the constructive definition of our collective space. With the Eurozone crisis and the slowdown of economic activity in the United States, amongst the

fastest growing component of our trade and economic engagement is today with ASEAN and East Asia. With the likely fruition of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area and the launch of negotiations for a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the relative importance of the region for us is only going to increase. This is the natural culmination of 20 years of a constructive dialogue partnership between India and the ASEAN. We continue to believe in the central role of ASEAN in the evolving regional architecture. We have identified connectivity within the ASEAN India region as one of our strategic priorities, especially road connectivity with ASEAN along the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which would be a part of the proposed Asian Highway No.1, ultimately to connect Tokyo to Istanbul.

The East Asia Summit, and its evolving architecture in the political, security and economic realm, has brought in certain competing definitions, overlapping interests and reinterpretations. The state of the global economy, the ongoing and, perhaps, deepening crisis in the Eurozone, and the imperative of collective action to deal with this economic contagion as well as nontraditional security threats such as terrorism, piracy, energy and food security, sustainable development and environmental challenges have come in for increased focus, much as they have in the Indian Ocean littoral. India has been part of the EAS dynamics to invigorate the economic recovery, secure the global commons in the region, strengthen cooperation to meet common challenges and anchor an open, inclusive and transparent architecture of regional cooperation in the region. We have endorsed the utility of the EAS as a Leaders' led forum for contributing to enhancing mutual understanding and promoting peace, stability and security in the region. We have supported principles of international law and recourse to peaceful resolution of differences. Connectivity in the greater East Asian Region has also come in for greater attention since the 6th East Asia Summit. In this context, we believe that the development of East-West Connectivity corridors is essential and this objective should be internally driven.

Our perspective of the region is, therefore, more than just an economic and security one. It is about focusing the aspirations and the destinies of the people of this region on a common path.

The wider Indo-Pacific region is home to nearly 3 billion people and a combined Gross Domestic Product of nearly \$20 trillion. It has three of the four largest economies in the world i.e. China, India and Japan, and the most significant of the world's seaborne trade, including that most relevant for food and energy security. With globalization and the consequent compression of geographic spaces, 'Indo-Pacific' has come to reflect contemporary realities.

As our Defence Minister noted at the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, we are actively engaged in the process of constructive dialogue on security issues with a number of countries, especially with the ASEAN community, and support ongoing initiatives in building an inclusive security architecture, which would foster a spirit of consensus on all issues that have common resonance. We have active security cooperation with countries of the region. We are contributing to the discussions at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum.

Indian Navy and the Navies of the region are already coordinating, especially in anti-piracy and disaster management exercises. Multi-national maritime exercises have been held focused on common concerns in the changing and prevalent security scenario in the region, including gun running, anti-narcotics, and humanitarian issues, apart from maritime security and ways to forge specific cooperative initiatives. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is another initiative in this direction.

As the global power fulcrum sees further shift towards Asia, it is important to understand the dynamics within the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. We need to work towards a security construct that leverages the civilizational linkages to expand cooperation and build partnership across the Indo-Pacific.



Shri Sanjay Singh, Secretary (East), MEA with DG, ICWA at the Valedictory Session

To conclude my address, I would like to quote our Prime Minister who said “We see our partnership with ASEAN not merely as a reaffirmation of ties with neighbouring countries or as an instrument of economic development, but also as an integral part of our vision of a stable, secure and prosperous Asia and its surrounding Indian Ocean and Pacific regions. Our future is inter-linked and a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity”.

I am grateful that you gave me the opportunity to share my thoughts with you on this very important topic and I do hope that I have been able to share with you elements which should inform its delineation.

I thank you.

