

BUILDING A BETTER ASIA

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Keynote Address to Dialogue on “Shared Integration: Promoting a Greater Asia”, organized by the Asian Dialogue Society (ADS), in collaboration with the Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research, at Guwahati, Assam, India, on 23 November 2006

Honorable Shri Tarun Gogoi, Chief Minister of Assam,
Mr. Sanjoy Hazarika,
Mr. M. Rajaretnam,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Dear Friends and Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to visit Assam for the very first time and to address the Dialogue on “Shared Integration: Promoting a Greater Asia”, organized by the Asian Dialogue Society (ADS), in collaboration with the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, today in this beautiful city of Guwahati.

As Chairman of the ADS, I would like to take this opportunity to join in thanking our Indian friends and colleagues for their contribution to the organization of the Dialogue and for their warm hospitality. It is the kind of hospitality that invigorates the bodies and minds of itinerant conference addicts, with incurable wanderlust, like many of us here.

I flew in via Kolkata, which has many links with Thailand. It was a city where we had one of the first Consulates-General and Thai Airways has been flying here for over 40 years. On arrival at Guwahati, I found myself in very familiar social and physical surroundings. The Hon. Chief Minister and myself might even have common ancestry.

I also would like to thank my friend, Mr. Rajaretnam, for his generous introduction. Our friendship goes back over two decades. We have shared many an adventure, intellectual or otherwise. And we have many common affiliations. One of these happens to be the membership of the “Mutual Admiration Society”. So, your health permitting of course, please take Mr. Raja’s remarks with many, many grains of salt!

On a more serious note, let me say that, when a few days ago Mr. Raja indicated, or rather commanded, in his usual persuasive, charming and irrepressible manner, that I should give a keynote address to this distinguished audience, I felt a great deal of trepidation.

It was not just the time factor.

One other concern was that, because of my political commitments last year and this year, I had not been directly involved in the ADS’ Greater Asia Initiative, and therefore there are certainly far more qualified persons to undertake this task than myself.

This concern was exacerbated by the predicament I have found myself in. I taught at a university for 17 years, so presumably I must have had a modicum of knowledge and wisdom. Then came a decade in politics: I am afraid that ten years of politics have reduced what little knowledge and wisdom I once had to a parody of intelligence.

So, instead of performing the parody on such a great stage as this, I have opted to take the usual way out for politicians: when asked to talk about something he does not

want to talk about, a politician simply ignores the request and talks about something else *he* wants to talk about.

I call this “political pseudo-amnesia syndrome”.

To demonstrate that I have really learned a thing or two from my decade in politics, I am going to ignore totally Mr. Raja’s expectation that I speak on “Shared Integration: Promoting a Greater Asia”; instead, I will indulge in presenting more or less random thoughts concerning the building of a better Asia, which as you know is central to the mission of the ADS.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an axiom that we live in a world of rapid and far-reaching changes.

It is a world of unprecedented economic prosperity, material well-being, scientific advancement, technological development, movements of people, knowledge and ideas, and exchanges of goods, services and information.

It is also a world of grinding hunger and poverty, of growing trade in drugs and white slavery, of barely containable pandemics and diseases, of deteriorating ecological environment and increasingly severe natural disasters; a world where warfare remains an intrinsic part of the international system, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and new technologies of war abound, and racial, ethnic, religious and cultural differences all too often end up in conflict and violence, which in turn cause more conflict and violence; a world where all too often human rights and civil liberties are but a dream, and life is but an Hobbesian state of nature, that is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”.

It is a world of anomalies, extremes, and fault-lines.

Symptomatic of this world are 9/11 and its aftermath.

What do we see?

We see the US, the mightiest nation in history, yet vulnerable to devastating acts of terrorism by a handful of individuals.

We see a US-led global counter-terrorism campaign, which itself commits acts of terrorism, provokes more retributive violence and fosters conditions even more supportive of international terrorism.

And we see an enormous tragedy, which should have united mankind in grief and common commitment to prevent it from ever happening again, but in fact only serves to accentuate the world’s social, economic and religious differences.

In such a world of anomalies, extremes and fault-lines, what does “building a better Asia” mean?

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Perhaps like many of you here today, I have dreams that one day perfect democracy will reign in Asia, that one day all Asians will have the highest possible level of education, standard of living and quality of life, and that one day all Asians will enjoy freedom and live in perfect harmony with one another, as well as with others across continental divides.

But dreams must be tempered with judicious doses of reality.

A “better Asia” does not have to be a perfect Asia.

Rather, for me, a “better Asia” means *progress*, or *movement*, towards a geopolitical environment which has a number of key components.

One is cooperative peace and shared prosperity.

Another is ecologically, socially and culturally sustainable economic development.

The third is respect for and protection of the three “troika” of humanity. These are human rights, civil liberties and human security, which for me means freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom from constraints against fulfilling one’s human potential.

The fourth is empowerment of civil society and individual citizens.

And the last is the existence of social milieus, where racial, ethnic, religious and cultural differences can be tolerated, respected, understood and managed, and synergy among such differences created, transforming diversity from a potential liability into a powerful living asset.

How does one bring about such a geopolitical environment?

There are probably many ways to build a “better Asia”. No one, certainly not someone evidently lacking in wisdom as myself, has the monopoly of good ideas.

But it seems to me that at least three conceptually different but philosophically interconnected processes must be initiated and sustained.

They are *integration*, *disaggregation*, and *reinvention*.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me explain.

First, *integration*.

Europe’s post-World War II experience underlines the importance of economic integration as a foundation of cooperative peace and shared prosperity. Some progress has been made towards greater economic integration in Asia, through international

regimes, regional cooperation and, in more recent years, bilateral free trade arrangements.

This, however, is not sufficient. The process must be maintained and energised to yet a qualitatively different level by sub-regional and horizontal collaborative arrangements, especially in strategically important areas. If the most appropriate strategic and policy options for such arrangements can be identified and agreed upon, they will also help to bring about sustainable development, the kind of social milieus necessary for greater harmony among different racial, ethnic, religious and cultural groups, and conditions for closer functional cooperation in a variety of critical issue-areas.

This, I believe, is one underlying paradigm of the ADS' Report on "Shared Integration".

I do not wish to present the substance of the Report, for it is a task best undertaken by its authors. I simply would like to say that I fully subscribe to this paradigm.

I also commend the choice of the Northeast India- Southwest China-ASEAN nexus as the focus of the study.

The population of India, China and ASEAN makes up almost half of the world's population. The economies of the two powers and some of the ASEAN countries are among the most dynamic in the world, moving inexorably towards increasingly higher levels of technological development. How and how constructively they interface will have a crucial bearing for the future of Asia.

One word of caution may perhaps be in order here.

Progress in integration will depend on a high level of consensus among governments concerned. This consensus can be formulated and sustained if and only if there is no "systemic dissonance" in the ranks of participating countries.

Less-than-democratic regimes should be made welcome, if they honour their commitments and are prepared to contribute fully to the processes of cooperation. (For a liberal democrat like myself, it is always difficult to accept the fact that authoritarian or dictatorial regimes can have good intentions too, but accept it one must).

There is no room, however, for rogue, pariah or failed states, which cynically see international collaboration only as a short-term means of regime legitimation or merely as a tactical device for buying time in face of mounting external and domestic pressures.

The bottom line is that, when there is a real or potential rogue, pariah or failed state on the horizon, there should be concerted international and regional efforts to contain and reduce such "systemic dissonance".

The second process is *disaggregation*.

I have a confession to make.

Being a cynic from cradle, and probably to grave, or more accurately cremation, I do not easily indulge in hero-worship. But I absolutely adore the wisdom and mind of Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen, with his truly elegant intellect and deep love for humanity.

In a recent book, *Identity and Violence: The illusion of Destiny*, he questions what he calls, and I quote, the “solitarist approach to human identity”, which he believes is based upon, and I quote once more, “the odd presumption that the people of the world can uniquely be categorized according to some singular and overarching system of partitioning”. “A solitarist approach,” he says, and I quote,

can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world. In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups- we belong to all of them. The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theater lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk (preferably in English). Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity. None of them can be taken to be the person's only identity or singular membership category.

Much of the world's racial, ethnic and religious turmoil today, according to Professor Sen, results from the “miniaturization” of humanity, from the cultivation, deliberately imposed or otherwise, of the conviction that one has but a single unique identity. This limits or takes away one's right to reason and make choices regarding who one really is or wants to be, what different identities or affiliations one wishes to have, and what the relative importance of these identities or affiliations should be. Furthermore, it can make extensive demands on one to undertake “sacrifices”, often of an extreme nature, and commit belligerent, even violent, acts to protect, nurture and strengthen this single identity. “The imposition of an allegedly unique identity,” Professor Sen argues, and I quote, “is often a crucial component of the ‘martial art’ of fomenting sectarian confrontation...Our shared humanity gets severely challenged when the manifold divisions in the world are unified into allegedly dominant system of classification- in terms of religion, or community, or culture, or nation, or civilization...”

To address the problem of racial, ethnic and religious conflicts, our shared humanity has to be revived, restored. To do so, the “solitarist approach” to human identity must be rejected, and the impulse towards the “miniaturization” of human beings resisted.

Needed is what I call “disaggregation”, a far less elegant term than any Professor Sen would have chosen.

It is the cultivation of a notion that one can have multiple identities and affiliations, without necessarily compromising or reducing the quality of any one identity or affiliation.

For example, one can be a patriotic Thai and at the same time a great fan of Chelsea Football Club, a keen supporter of the England cricket team, an activist in the promotion of ASEAN regional cooperation, and an avid globalist, who is has faith in the UN and the WTO and is always willing to make some sort of contribution to the cause of human rights and environmental protection. Similarly, one can be a good Muslim *and* a good neighbour to Christians, working with them for the good of the country or the world, and *vice versa*.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

To build a better Asia, this notion has to be cultivated among political elites, bureaucrats, military officers, opinion leaders, teachers, the younger generations, as well as civil society at large.

If I am not mistaken, this is another underlying paradigm of the ADS' Report on "Shared Integration", which is to be presented before us today.

The third process is *reinvention*.

As I mentioned earlier, we live in a world of rapid and far-reaching changes.

It is an extraordinary age of unprecedented scientific advances and technological developments.

To be sure, these have provided the world with unprecedented prosperity and material progress. But, at the same time, science and technology have launched mankind on what many, including myself, fear would prove to be an unsustainable and enormously dangerous course.

One set of concerns is global warming and rapid deterioration of the natural environment.

Another is vast depletion of non-renewable resources, including those, such as air, water and top soil, which once upon a time were thought to be renewable.

The third is the modern technologies of war, which have become powerful enough to destroy the planet.

A renowned expert on military affairs, Professor Colin S. Gray, wrote in a recent book, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare*, and I quote: "It is not too fanciful to suggest that this century will witness: warfare in space; cyber war; war wherein weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are used bilaterally; the systematic application of nanotechnologies...: and the harnessing of biotechnology to produce physically and psychologically genetically engineered soldiers..." WMD, he went on to say, and I quote, are

weapons of the relatively weak. Relative to the military power of the American Sheriff, everyone, greater polities, lesser polities, and transnational anti-polities, is more or less weak... (I)t is only prudent, as well as reasonable, to assume that nuclear and biological weapons will be used in future warfare. There will be too many conflicts of all kinds, and nuclear weapons and devices will be too accessible, for motive and WMD means not to achieve some marriages of malign strategic convenience.

The tide of scientific advances and technological developments can not be arrested or reversed. But it does not mean that it can not be managed and used to provide solutions to major problems. These include, not only problems of the environment and proliferation of WMD, but also those related to poverty, education, human resource development, drugs, diseases and so on. Properly handled, science and technology can lay down the foundations for the kind of “green”, knowledge-based, human-centred development that will help to divert mankind from the unsustainable and dangerous course it is presently taking.

One does not necessarily have to be pessimistic about the prospects of putting science and technology to a better use.

Calling today’s young people the “Transition Generation”, Oxford University’s Professor James Martin, technology expert and futurist, wrote in his book, *The meaning of the 21st Century: A Vital Blueprint for Ensuring Our Future*, and I quote:

*Think of the 21st Century as a deep river canyon with a narrow bottleneck at its centre. Think of humanity as river rafters heading downstream. As we head into the canyon, we’ll have to cope with a rate of change that becomes much more intense—a white-water raft trip with the currents becoming faster and rougher...The job of the Transition Generation is to get humanity through the canyon with as little mayhem as possible into what we hope will be smoother waters beyond. **Solutions exist, or can exist, to most of the serious problems.** (Emphasis added)*

Needed is what I call “reinvention”.

This involves no less than a total reconceptualisation, on the part of both the public sector and the private sector, of the direction and purpose of scientific and technological development, the amount of manpower and financial resources that should and could be expended for these developments, and the ways that new scientific knowledge and technologies are to be used.

To build a better Asia, one has to reinvent scientific and technological development.

It will not be an easy task.

Politics, bureaucratic inertia, vested interests and just sheer ignorance are just some of the obstacles. Nor can the challenge be addressed by Asians alone. The US, Europe and several key countries in the Americas and Africa will have to be involved. But, with scientific advances and technological developments in such countries as Japan, India and China, Asia does have the capacity to lead by example.

If Asians can do it and are successful in persuading others to follow suit, the irony will not be lost on the international community: while the world's most scientifically and technologically advanced nation continues to have this penchant lust for the use of "hard power", countries, which not too many years ago were considered "backward" and "underdeveloped", can and do use "soft power" for the benefit of mankind.

I am not a starry-eyed pacifist. I do not believe that a disarmed world is necessary a less dangerous world. But I do think that "soft power" diplomacy is the wave of the future and that in recent years India and China, among others, have proved themselves master practitioners of it.

Again, if I am not mistaken, this is another underlying paradigm of the ADS' Report on "Shared Integration".

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen"

To build a better Asia, I believe that these three processes, integration, disaggregation and reinvention have to be initiated and maintained.

It will not be easy. There are no short cuts. To get things moving, believers in the kind of ideas I have just mentioned have only reason, dialogue, persuasion and networking as WMI, or weapons of mass indoctrination.

This is, in fact, the story of the ADS and its quixotic quest to help make, in our modest way, Asia, and the world, a better place to live in

I do not know if we will succeed. If we do, I do not know whether I will live to see our success. But I do take inspiration from what a great man, Winston Churchill, once said, and I quote:

Man in this moment of his history has emerged in greater supremacy over the forces of nature than has ever been dreamed of before. He has it in his power to solve quite easily the problems of material existence. He also conquered the wild beasts, and he has even conquered the insect and microbes. There lies before him, as he wishes, a golden age of peace and progress. All is in his hand. He has only to conquer his last and worst enemy – himself. With vision, faith and courage, it may be within our power to win a crowning victory for all.

Thank you.