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Singapore Global Dialogue: Heated Start to Strategic Debates

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

Asia's new forum to debate global issues kicked off with a surprisingly fiery exchange between China and Japan over their latest dispute in the East China Sea. Can Asia be at the forefront of international discourses on strategic issues?

Commentary

THE INAUGURAL Singapore Global Dialogue on strategic challenges got off to a heated start as China's rise dominated the debates, with prominent opinion leaders engaged in rare open exchanges. Indeed, China's game-changing emergence was a recurring theme. Inevitably, the territorial maritime dispute between Japan and China grabbed attention, leading to a sharp repartee between a Chinese scholar-general and a former Japanese deputy foreign minister -- even as the fracas was being resolved by Tokyo.

Timely Forum

Japan's timely release of a detained Chinese ship captain however failed to defuse the dispute; Beijing instead demanded an apology and compensation -- which Japan has rejected. Whether the new crisis -- their worst in years -- would blow over is too early to tell. But the Singapore Global Dialogue witnessed the spillover as the two protagonists -- China and Japan -- crossed swords openly.

The Singapore Global Dialogue on 23-24 September 2010, the first by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), is designed to be a premier platform for an Asian voice in global debates on strategic issues. In that respect, the international forum was fortuitous. Speakers underscored its utility, pointing to Singapore's location as a natural meeting point to discuss trends and changes in world order.

Amongst the keynote speakers were Singapore's cabinet ministers K. Shanmugam and Tharman Shanmugaratnam as well as top policymakers and former leaders like Australia's John Howard, China's Tang Jiaxuan, America's Paul Wolfowitz, Japan's Hitoshi Tanaka, Indonesia's Nur Hassan Wirajuda, India's Shashi Tharoor, Malaysia's Andrew Sheng and Singapore's Tommy Koh. President SR Nathan was guest of honour at the event, sponsored by Temasek Holdings.

The deliberate invitation to former policymakers, being out of office, allowed a freer airing of views -- as shown by the sharp exchanges on the China-Japan dispute. The dialogue also debated other major themes like

transnational threats and the future of global governance. But it was the rise of China which kept many participants abuzz.

The China Challenge

Former Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan set the ball rolling with an oblique aim at the United States and its allies when he urged all countries to abandon “a Cold War mentality” and “zero sum thinking”. Emphasising that a growing China would not seek hegemony, he said Beijing welcomed a US role in regional peace and stability. In the evolving regional architecture, China supports ASEAN’s central role and would like to see it remain in the driver’s seat. China, he said, was against the creation of new mechanisms for regional cooperation.

During question time, he went on the offensive, admonishing Japan for what he described as its inexplicable stance over the disputed Diaoyu / Senkaku islands with the detention of the Chinese captain. A Japan expert who had served as a diplomat in Tokyo, Mr Tang rebuked Japan for its “tough and unreasonable attitude”. Accusing it of harbouring “a special agenda”, he said Tokyo’s intention to charge the captain amounted to a formal challenge to China, leaving Beijing no choice but to react strongly.

On the same day, Japan surprisingly released the Chinese captain; this was promptly announced at the forum by former deputy foreign minister Hitoshi Tanaka. He described the incident as an “accident” arising from the political transition in Japan. Tokyo he added had no interest to make it an issue “because Japan effectively controls the islands”. That remark sparked a sharp rejoinder from another Chinese speaker, Major-General Zhu Chenghu, dean of the Defence Affairs Institute, the National Defence University of the People’s Liberation Army.

General Zhu reminded Mr Tanaka that the disputed islands were annexed by Japan during the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 and were to be returned to China in accordance with a post-war international agreement. To suggest that Tokyo controlled the islands was offensive to China, he said. Gen Zhu, who has a reputation for blunt-speaking, created a stir recently when he warned the US that any attack on China over Taiwan would invite a nuclear response.

The rise of China was also a key theme raised by former premier Howard and Finance Minister Shanmugaratnam. Mr Howard said China’s emergence should not be seen as a threat as Beijing desired peace for its economic progress. Mr Tharman saw China’s rise as a game-changer. China’s first game-changing impact was when it opened up in the 1980s and joined the global economy. China is now changing the international game again as it moved up the value chain, which will have wide-ranging repercussions on the global economy.

Transnational Threats

Transnational threats were another major challenge debated. There was broad consensus, Mr Tanaka said, that non-traditional security threats were emerging as a critical issue given their impact on economic prosperity and human security. Yet, greater coordination is lacking at the regional and international levels to respond to such issues. He proposed transnational threats as a major agenda for the East Asia Summit. The US and Russia could be invited to join the EAS to address emerging global concerns such as energy security, disaster relief, piracy and counter-terrorism. In a keynote speech earlier, Singapore’s Law Minister and Second Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam spoke about the threat of jihadi terrorism in Southeast Asia.

Ramesh Thakur pushed for collective global action on non-traditional security issues such as climate change, terrorism and human security lest they provoked conflict and instability. Shashi Tharoor said new threats like climate change, poverty, famine and illiteracy make states insecure but they required new responses from the international system. Both Thakur and Tharoor were former senior UN officials.

Global Governance

But transnational threats cannot be addressed effectively without improving global governance. There was agreement that non-traditional security issues like climate change, natural disasters and pandemics needed effective governments to tackle them. Prominent Singapore thinker Tommy Koh said global problems like climate change urgently needed global solutions. Yet, speakers noted the growing crisis of confidence in global governance. A fundamental flaw of the UN Security Council, according to Professor Koh, was that members looked after their own national interests. Otherwise, he said, there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the primary institutions of global governance, such as the UN and the World Trade Organization. He was not, however, optimistic of the prospects of global governance, at least in the short term.

In a nutshell, the Singapore Global Dialogue is off to a good start. Its position as a key forum for Asia's voice in global strategic debates can only grow as Asia itself rises.

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