



Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) Annual Conference 2015: A Report

26-29 March 2015, Boao, China

Speaker: Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam

Chair: Ambassador Vinod C. Khanna

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Institute of Chinese Studies

Delhi

Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) is a non-governmental, non-profit international organization initially sponsored by China with a pre-dominant focus on Asia. The idea of the forum was proposed by Fidel V. Ramos, former President of Philippines, Bob Hawke, former Prime Minister of Australia, and Morihiro Hosokawa, former Prime Minister of Japan in 1998 and the forum was formally inaugurated in February 2001. The headquarter of the forum is located at Boao, in Hainan Province of People's Republic of China. The forum has now become one of the most prominent forums for leaders in government, business and academia to share visions of the most persistent issues in Asia and the world at large. The BFA is committed to promoting Asian countries to achieve common development through further integration of regional economies. Since 2002, BFA has been holding its annual conference at Boao under different themes. The central theme of the 2015 conference was 'Asia's New Future: Towards a Community of Common Destiny'. Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam represented India in the 2015 forum on behalf of the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi, which is one of the founder members of the forum.

Introduction and Statistics of the Forum

In his introduction to the presentation, Ravi Bhoothalingam termed the forum as "poor man's Davos" because of the participation of smaller countries like Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Laos during the initial years of the forum. However, he noted that after the economic crises of 2008-09, BFA has broadened its horizons to raise funding also from the private companies across the world.

With the participation of 16 countries, the Boao Forum 2015 was attended by 1700 delegates from the political, business and academic circles with a 1000 delegates from the media industry.

The forum was a gigantic event with the presence of 15 heads of governments, 150 business chiefs and four Nobel Prize laureates. The speaker's observations were quite telling, in that, he noticed a very thin presence of top-ranking government officials and political leaders from India in comparison to others, including those from Nepal and Sri Lanka. As a result, India's weight and impact at the various sessions of the forum was barely felt. The Indian delegation numbered around 12 persons, with three officials from the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) including its former President, and the President and Director-General of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). Mr. Ratan Tata, who is a Board Member of the BFA was the highest ranking representative of Indian industry. Countries like Australia, Japan and a few member countries from ASEAN and the European Union were also present, particularly from France and Germany. Nevertheless, the number of delegations were significantly lower in comparison to the previous forums. It was mostly due to the exorbitant delegate fees. Fortunately, as a founder member of the Boao Forum, the Institute of Chinese Studies was entitled to certain privileges in the program and also exempted from the delegate fees.

Structure of the Forum

The speaker informed that the forum had 68 thematic sessions. He also mentioned his inability to attend all the sessions as most of them were held simultaneously. The structure of the forum included five dialogue sessions viz. China-USA, China-EU, China-Japan, China-Russia and Cross-Straits. There were special sessions where delegates could interact with provincial governors and city mayors. A youth session was also included in the forum where university presidents, youth leaders and youth observers participated. The speaker also highlighted the introduction of several new features in the forum such as the inclusion of the BRICS Chief Justices Forum. In addition to the normal sessions focusing on business, economics, trade, investment and finance, this year's forum also introduced new themes dealing with healthcare, environment (air quality, water and soil), food safety, corruption and shadow banking. Another highlight of this year's forum was that there were several sessions which featured the 'One Belt One Road' initiative, as well as the new entities such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS Bank. Interestingly, the session on South China Sea, previously a restricted session was made open to all delegates.

The forum also introduced a series of sessions focusing on science and innovation, specifically dealing with Big Data, Internet, Artificial Intelligence and Disruptive Innovation. The main highlight of these sessions was the participation of Bill Gates and Elon Musk. Some special sessions were also devoted to India and ASEAN. As compared to the previous forums, this year's forum was marked by the considerable presence of both local and foreign media. Some of the sessions were covered live and reports of sessions were available on the internet, as well as in hard copy within a few hours of the close of the session.

Details of Selected Sessions

Xi Jinping in his speech at the first plenary session of the forum emphasized common development for Asian countries and the need for building an Asian ‘community of common destiny’. In this regard the Chinese President used the Chinese proverb ‘*When big rivers have water, the small rivers are full; when small rivers have water, the big ones are full*’. With regard to issues of economic integration, cooperation and connectivity for Asia, Xi Jinping talked about BCIM, China-Pakistan, Maritime Silk Route, China-Central Asia, and China-ASEAN linkages. He also said that the ‘One Belt One Road’ is an open initiative and all the countries are welcome to participate in it. The Chinese President also highlighted the possibility of launching China-ASEAN free trade by 2015.

The title of the special session on India was ‘the new reform process’. The speaker reported that it was an energetic session with the participation of Indian business persons from FICCI and CII and Chinese economists. Although the session was muddled by border dispute and other differences between the two countries, yet the panelists were in complete agreement about the mounting importance of economic engagement between China and India, which they thought should go beyond the perimeter of geopolitics.

The session on ‘Silk Route Initiative’ covered a broad range of issues, including the various Silk Road initiatives, the AIIB, the BRICS Bank, Silk Road Fund, and the emerging trade agreements among nations across Asia. The session was attended by dignitaries from most of the participant countries. From the perspectives put forward by the participants, the speaker noted that most companies still see China as their single largest focus for growth and investment in the future. Martin Jacques, British journalist and academician, accentuated the United States’ anxiety with regards China who is increasingly playing an important role in the growth of world economy. Fan Gang, renowned economist of China highlighted the need of internationalization of Renminbi (RMB) as a global currency. Although China was the focal point of discussion in this session, there was one delegate from Indonesia who acknowledged India’s role in the development of Asia along with China.

In the session on ‘Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and New Development Bank’, Shaukat Aziz, former Prime Minister of Pakistan urged the need to go beyond the history and to create a world class institution for Asia. Jenny Shipley, former Prime Minister of New Zealand advocated reconceptualization of the emphasis on infrastructure development to include toilets for women, telecom, and maternal and child health care.

Another session titled ‘BRICS Judicial Panel on Pollution’ brought together Justices of the five BRICS countries in a discussion on environmental matters that have awakened public consciousness throughout China. Presence of the Chief Justice of the Supreme People’s Court of China made this session one of the exciting sessions of the forum. His interaction with the media revealed that class action suits are now possible for Chinese litigants in pollution cases, and

cross-regional jurisdiction is now being given to regional courts to enforce environmental law since rivers have extra-regional origins and flows. The speaker also mentioned that India's Justice Jagdish Singh Khehar conducted himself well in the forum.

A session on South China Sea sought to map out the issues and challenges related to the dispute on the South China Sea. In this session voices came out to solve the issue bilaterally and also called for the need to have remedial measures in order to prevent accidental incidents in the disputed sea.

There were also some new sessions introduced this year. The session titled 'Virus versus Mankind' brought forth the fact about how antimicrobial resistance was a bigger threat than the ebola crisis. The session on 'Water and Soil' came to the conclusion that a system-based approach was required to solve the complex problem of water, including across borders. The 13th Five Year Plan of China (2016-2020) is promising to be a green plan with lots of emphasis on water and soil.

The session titled 'Young Observers: Shaping the New Future of Asia' put forward the voices of the younger generation on a diverse range of issues. The panelists strongly recommended that education in Asia should evolve from rote-learning to a system fostering innovation and life-long learning for continued sustainable growth in all areas. Other issues discussed in the session were insufficient jobs available in the labour market; high population growth rates; and the challenge of sustainable and eco-friendly development. A pertinent point was made regarding harmonizing Asia's different cultures and communities. This was espoused as a creative way to realize the human potential that is being wasted or even being put to destructive use by way of engaging in terrorist activities.

Concluding Observations and Discussion

A general concern was raised with regard to the underrepresentation of India and its interests in the forum. Other important concerns pertained to the China-centric approach of the forum or whether China has a hidden motive to become a global leader by organizing a forum like BFA with a central focus on business.

The speaker noted that the forum has a structure of consultation with member countries before settling of the final agenda of the forum. Since China provides a huge amount of funding to the forum it is likely to be influenced by China to some extent. However, it cannot altogether be termed as 'China-centric'. Here, the speaker stressed the lack of enthusiasm of the Indian government as the reason behind India's inability to influence the agenda of the forum. With regard to the emphasis of the forum on business leaders, the speaker enlightened the audience that BFA is not only a business forum, but also pertains to social and political issues.

On a question related to the comparison of BFA with the World Economic Forum (WEF) of Davos, the speaker illustrated that the WEF is more corporate. He also noted that in the BFA, the governments of member countries play a more significant role.

Some of the participants were also curious to know about the representation of the South Asian nations in the 2015 forum. The speaker apprised the audience of the presence of top ranking government officials from Sri Lanka and Nepal. He also mentioned the absence of Bangladesh from the forum.

The speaker concluded by remarking that both the content and the process of this year's forum indicated an enhanced sense of confidence and comfort as displayed by China in foregrounding the various issues of contestation and engaging in a dialogue about them.

Report prepared by Jayshree Borah, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam has wide range of academic and professional experience. His extensive travel includes expeditions on the Silk Routes to China, Mongolia and High Asia, 3 trips to Tibet including a journey across the Tibetan plateau to Mount Kailas, and journeys to Xanadu and Shangri La. He is Convener of the Tourism Task Force for the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum ("the Kunming Initiative") and has chaired the Tourism and Heritage Committee of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). Mr. Bhoothalingam is also Founder and Chairman of Manas Advisory Committee. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, London, Visiting Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Distinguished Fellow, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Delhi, Visiting Professor, Administrative Staff College of India, Hyderabad, an International Moderator with the Aspen Institute, USA and on the Editorial Boards of World Affairs and China Report. He is interested in business synergies between India and China, and how Confucian thought influences leadership and management styles.

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