



The Challenge of the Rise of China and the Response from Southeast Asia

Speaker: Prof. Baladas Ghosal

Chair: Prof. Patricia Uberoi

Date: 2 May 2018

Venue: Seminar room, ICS, Delhi

The speaker started his seminar by giving insights about the main challenges of the rise of China in the South East Asian Countries from two different perspectives - one is the military's challenge of the South East Asian Countries from the assertive behaviour of China in the South China Sea and second is the economic challenge. According to the speaker even though the South East Asian countries had experienced globalisation much earlier than China, it was China's economic growth that contributed prosperity and development to the South East Asian countries. In due course of time, China's interest and behaviour became more assertive in the South East Asian region which created both opportunities and problems for the South East Asian countries. But the South East Asian Countries somewhere focused more on the opportunities aspect with China.

The speaker then highlighted the details of the military challenge, where he focused on the South China Sea regarding China and also mentioned about China being successful in dividing the South East Asian Countries into two groups, one in which countries had disputes with China regarding South China Sea and the other group of countries which did not had any dispute with China. He then emphasised Chinese position where China has always been saying that it has no ambitions in the region and that its military development is more in the interest of its own sovereignty and it would not in anyway hamper or create a war like situation in the region. China has always been playing up with the agreements signed in the region where the code of conduct is always guided by China on their will whether it is binding to them or not.

In the South East Asian summit, the ASEAN countries could have put out a joint declaration against China on South China Sea issue. Malaysia tried to initiate a statement but within couple of hours Malaysia changed in its statement. Philippines was the only country which took China to the International Tribunal. However, just before the judgement came out the government changed and the speaker said that the whole election was funded by Chinese. Even the International Tribunal Judgement came in favour of Philippines but they never insisted the judgement should be implemented.

Then the speaker mentioned about the Chinese policy of how they try to accommodate these South East Asian countries by giving them financial incentives and when incentives are not acceptable they are also given economic punishment on them. Earlier Singapore had some dispute with China regarding the South China Sea and one of the outcomes was that Singapore was not invited to the BRI summit in China.

The South East Asian countries adopted the strategy in meeting with the Chinese challenge to at least forestall an immediate threat from the Chinese. The South East Asian countries have collectively come up with four strategies to prevent any conflict from breaking out. Firstly is the military modernization, Vietnam had bought submarines from Russia, Malaysia silently acquired weapons. Secondly, many of the South East Asian countries are coming closer to the United States. Third, is the internal intra ASEAN security cooperation and economic cooperation to bridge the gap. Fourth, is the engagement with China, even having a dispute with China the four countries - Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and Philippines, have relations with China to minimise the security threat. South East Asian countries have been trying to develop a code of conduct to prevent further militarization. Fifth, is the dependence of International law and rule based order.

The speaker then moved to the economy - the increasing trade between China and South East Asian Countries and the dependency of the South East Asian countries over China. China is not the major investor in the region but in the coming years China will be the main investor in the region through BRI. South East Asian countries, except Singapore, have a very low economy and somewhere all these countries have to accept Chinese capital to support its economy. The speaker then gave the insights into the economic challenge for the ASEAN countries. To meet these economic challenges, the countries have tried to come out of dependence looking for intra economic cooperation as well as other alternatives.

The speaker then moved to India's role in the South East Asian region. India has a major role in the economy as it does not have any role in with military in the South China Sea. India should focus more in its connectivity projects. All of them are facing difficulties. India should re-think the connectivity project. According to the speaker, India can offer economically to the region. India will have to offer an alternative to this region, otherwise, it will in couple of years erode in South East Asian region. Cultural agreements, ideational exchange, and education can help to develop relations between India and South East Asian Countries.

Discussion

During the Q&A session, questions were asked regarding the international tribunal judgement and China's stand. China has not accepted the judgement and still continues to maintain its interest in the South China Sea. The speaker stated that China's main interest lies in relation to United States, not to India or any South East Asian countries. He also emphasised on the fear of South East Asian countries about the role of United States in the region. Further questions were asked regarding India's capacity and role and its interest in the South East Asian region. The speaker gave his views on India's interest regarding the importance of trade through South East Asian countries. India's oil exploration in Vietnam could be beneficial for India. However, he said that India should quietly do what she is doing, as India does not have the military capacity. The speaker further added that India should be more focused in the South East Asian countries for maintaining its existence.

This report is prepared by Nashique Ahmed, Research Intern, ICS, Delhi.

About the Speaker

Prof. Baladas Ghoshal, currently Secretary General and Director (Academic) Society for Indian Ocean Studies; until recently ICCR Chair in Indian Studies at the Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow, is also honorary Distinguished Fellow at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Professor Ghoshal is a former Professor of Southeast Asia and South-West Pacific Studies and Chairman of the Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Professor Ghoshal is a doyen in Southeast Asian Studies programme in India. He has published extensively on Indonesian politics, ASEAN and regional security issues; reads, writes and speaks Malay and Bahasa Indonesia. His most recent publications are a book on India-Indonesia Relations published by the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, and a monograph on **China's Perception of India's Look East Policy**, brought out by Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Disclaimer

The Wednesday Seminar at the ICS is a forum for presentations and discussions on current affairs as well as ongoing research by scholars, experts, diplomats and journalists, among others. This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speaker(s) and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.