

Opening Remarks by Mr Gopinath Pillai, Chairman, Institute of South Asian Studies, at the Second International Conference on South Asia, 8 November 2006

Mr George Yeo, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore, members of ISAS Management Board, Excellencies, eminent speakers, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of the Institute of South Asian Studies, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Second International Conference on South Asia. The theme of the Second International Conference is 'South Asia in the Global Community: Towards Greater Collaboration and Cooperation.'

It is now well known that China and India are on a growth trajectory that has given momentum to the economies of East Asia and South Asia and the world at large. For the last three years, India's economy has been surging forward at almost 8 per cent. It is expected that, in the concluding year of India's 11th Five Year Plan, that is, 2011-12, economic growth will touch 9.5 per cent in India.

While India and the rest of South Asia are growing fast economically, the region is also beset by a host of problems. As papers in this conference will point out, India's post-reform growth experience is marked also by high rates of unemployment, inequality, poverty and regional imbalances. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism and militancy are posing obstacles to peace and development in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Sri Lanka, the continuing tensions between the government and the LTTE are a threat to the very fabric of the nation.

Opportunities abound for cooperation among countries in South Asia as well as between countries in South Asia and the rest of Asia.

In July this year, Nathu La Pass in Sikkim in India was reopened after 44 years for trade between India and China. The frostiness in India-China relations following the border war between the two countries in 1962 is finally giving way to pragmatism in economic cooperation. China has opened the Qunghai-Tibet railway line that brings eastern China closer to western China and South Asia.

Still, much more has to be achieved. There are no transit links between India and Bangladesh, and one of the casualties has been India's north-eastern region, which is landlocked as a result. The entire region, comprising Tibet and Yunnan in China, Myanmar, India's eastern states, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, is one of the least developed in the world. This whole region can be transformed into a dynamic economic zone, provided there is greater regional cooperation among the various players.

This is just one of the potential areas of collaboration. There are many more. India and China produce the largest numbers of research scientists and engineers in the world. Therefore, the future of technological innovations

should rightfully belong to Asia. And, indeed, with greater degree of cooperation among them, firms in India, China and Singapore can hope to become leaders in the new technologies, biotechnology, for example.

Singapore has a great role to play as a facilitator for regional cooperation in Asia. We played a leading role in the building of ASEAN. We are confident that we can also contribute towards fostering cooperation among the South Asian countries and between South Asia and East Asia. Last year, Singapore signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with India, and this could be the forerunner to an era of greater Asian integration.

Singapore has long been the logistics hub of Asia. It is increasingly emerging as the intellectual hub of Asia, drawing in talent from China, India and Southeast Asia. The diverse community of students and staff at the National University of Singapore (NUS) bears perhaps the biggest testimony to this.

ISAS, established in July 2004 as an autonomous research body within NUS, is now entering its third year of activities. Our aim is two fold. First we want to build a pool of knowledge on South Asia that will be useful not only to Singapore but also to other countries that want to engage South Asia. Second we want to hold events that allow Singaporeans to interact with visiting leaders from South Asia.

Our researchers have carried out studies on the political economy of the South Asian countries, economic growth and business opportunities in Indian states, and sector-specific studies on health, the special economic zones, cold chain management, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, telecommunication and interactive media. An edited volume titled 'Engaging South Asia: Challenges and Opportunities' has just been released. This volume brings together the papers presented at the Inaugural International Conference on South Asia organised by the Institute in January last year. Another collection of articles that deal with contemporary economic and political events in all the seven South Asian countries will be published very soon.

On the events side, the Institute has been hosting a series of activities on South Asia, including lectures by the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and Pakistan, senior Ministers in the South Asian countries, Chief Ministers of Indian States, policy and business leaders and academicians. The Institute organised a number of sectoral seminars on the India-Singapore CECA. The Institute will organise an academic seminar on Pakistan in May next year.

In August this year, J. Mohan Rao, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, joined the Institute as the Director. He now leads a research team comprising a senior visiting research fellow, three research fellows, and two research associates. The Institute is in the process of expanding the strength of its research team.

This morning, we are honoured to have Minister George Yeo as our keynote speaker. We also have an eminent and distinguished panel of speakers. We can look forward to in-depth analyses of South Asia's political economy as

well as South Asia-East Asia links. The papers that will be presented today will cover a range of issues, including India's post-reforms growth experience, South Asia's look east policy, cooperation between South Asia and the Far East, Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan, terrorism in Bangladesh and ethnic strife in Sri Lanka.

You will have ample opportunities to engage the speakers in discussions and ask questions. I hope you will make the most out of this opportunity. I am confident that you will have a fruitful, engaging and exciting conference.

Thank you.

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