Is Asia Becoming a Militarised Region?

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The focus of this paper is mainly on the region of Asia-Pacific, including Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia. This region which is currently the most dynamic and rapidly growing component of the global economy, is also witnessing a parallel and competitive arms build-up. There will be an effort to examine the drivers of this build-up and its likely impact on the Asian power balance. Since this region is also home to several nuclear weapon states, it may be worthwhile to explore the nuclear dimension of Asian security.

There is no doubt that Asia is home to some of the biggest defence spenders in the world. China, with a current estimated military expenditure of US $ 91 billion (2011), Japan with US $ 51 billion, India with US $ 36 billion, Republic of Korea (ROK) with $ 24 billion and Australia with US $ 30 billion are the region's military heavyweights. What is more, there is ongoing upgradation of the military assets of all these countries. Examining publicly available information, one may point to the following significant improvements in the force structures of some major countries.

China

China's military modernisation plans have been directed towards acquiring the attributes of a front-ranking comprehensive national power, for which military power is an essential component. In more specific terms, China's acquisitions of capabilities have been motivated by the aim of sustaining a naval blockade of Taiwan against US intervention of the kind that took place in 1996. These capabilities

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include a growing and effective fleet of submarine and surface naval vessels, acquired from Russia as well as indigenously manufactured. Twelve Kilo class submarines, equipped with SS-N-27 Klub anti-ship cruise missiles, have been sourced from Russia. China has developed 2 Shang class nuclear attack submarines, 10 Song diesel electric submarines and 2 Yuan class diesel electric submarines. These are expected to replace the older and much noisier, Romeo and Ming-class submarines.

From Russia, China has also acquired, between1997-2007, 4 Sovremanny destroyers equipped with S-N-22 anti-ship cruise missiles. Another 8 are reportedly on order. Lately, there have been reports that China has developed a sophisticated anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM), based on its Dongfeng 21 model, specifically to target US aircraft carriers.

While Chinese naval forces are currently focussed mostly on the Yellow Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea theatres, it is only a matter of time before we see a more visible Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. However, for India, the build-up of Chinese military and logistics capabilities across the border in Tibet over the past decade is a more important factor in assessing the overall military balance. The long-standing military, including nuclear, relationship between China and Pakistan means that Indian security planners have to cater to the possibility of confronting an interconnected single theatre to the north and west as a worst case scenario. The Indian Defence Minister, AK Antony, recently told the Indian Parliament that apart from nuclear missile bases in Qinghai, China has built 5 fully operational airbases, the Qinghai-Tibet railway and 58,000 km of roads in the Tibet Autonomous Region(TAR). With these upgraded logistics, Indian defence planners estimate that China may be able to move upto two divisions (30,000 troops) to the Sino-Indian border in just 20 days as compared to 90 days a decade ago. China is now the largest purchaser of weapon systems from Russia, displacing India. Between 2005 and 2009, out of total arms sales from Russia, China accounted for 35 percent and India for 24percent. Chinese acquisitions covered mainly naval assets, and also top of the line Sukhoi aircraft.

Japan

In December 2010, Japan announced revised defence guidelines, shifting its focus from the north and Russian oriented posture to a China and North Korea

oriented south. It has unveiled plans to spend over $ 248 billion between 2011-15 to acquire 5 new submarines, 3 destroyers, 12 fighter jets, 10 patrol and surveillance aircraft and 39 helicopters. There will also be increased deployment of missile-intercepting Patriot missiles. The December guidelines have also removed the one percent Gross Domestic Product (GDP) limit on defence spending. Taken together with the considerable military assets that the US has based in Japan, this projected build-up will add up to an impressive array of countervailing power.

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India

It is reported that India has launched a five-year $ 80 billion defence upgradation programme which includes the procurement of 126 multi-role combat aircraft for $ 12 billion, the induction of the reconditioned Russian aircraft carrier, *Admiral Gorshkov* for an increased price tag of over US $ 3 billion, the construction of an indigenous 40,000 ton aircraft carrier *Vikramaditya*, at Cochin, which will be inducted in 2014. These carriers will be equipped with 29 MiG 29K fighters and the indigenously produced light combat aircraft, Tejas. India has also contracted with France to build 6 low noise Scorpene class submarines with a plan to construct 6 more subsequently. The first Scorpene will be inducted in 2015 having been delayed three years. The Indian Air Force, which has 32 fighter squadrons currently, expects to have 42 by 2022 and these will include 270 Sukhois, 126 multi-role combat aircraft and 120 Tejas.

The US is now an important new supplier of defence hardware to India. Six C-130J tactical air lifters were acquired in an initial breakthrough in 2007. This was followed by the purchase of 8 P-8 surveillance aircraft from Boeing in 2009 for $ 2.1 billion and 10 Boeing C-17 transport jets for $ 4.16 billion. Israel has also emerged as an important defence partner for India. Rafael's Derby air-to-air missile systems will equip 200 Tejas fighter jets. In 2008, the Indian Army purchased Israeli Spyder anti-missile systems for $ 270 million and in 2009, advanced anti-aircraft missile batteries were contracted for $ 1 billion. These have a longer range of 45 km. Analysts expect that in the next decade, India is likely to spend over $ 100 billion on new military equipment. On the nuclear side, the 6,000-ton nuclear submarine *Arihant* is likely to enter service soon. India's nuclear capable missile programme has been making steady progress, with a

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whole range of short, medium and long-term missiles, including the Prithvi, Akash, Trishul and Agni. There are plans to MIRV (multiple independently reentry vehicle) the later versions of the Agni. A missile interceptor has been successfully tested recently.

India has launched a major programme for the upgradation of its border infrastructure, particularly at the Sino-Indian border. Deployments in the Eastern sector have been augmented with the raising of two additional divisions and the planned basing of two Sukhoi squadrons at Tezpur in Assam. Several advanced landing grounds (ALGs) in the Eastern and Western sectors have been revived and are being upgraded.

Republic of Korea (ROK)

In 2006, ROK announced a 15-year military modernisation programme, totalling US$ 550 billion. The programme is under review after the recent armed clashes with North Korea. There is likely to be an increase in acquisitions of submarines, destroyers, F-15 or even F-35 US made fighter jets.

Singapore

Among the other countries in the region engaged in significant defence upgradation is a surprise entry – Singapore. Its military expenditures as a proportion of GDP have been consistently higher than other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, nearly 5-6 percent, totalling $ 8 billion currently and constituting 23 percent of all ASEAN defence spending. Singapore possesses one of the most modern and sophisticated military forces in the region, with its "third generation" assets. These are currently being further upgraded through the doctrine of integrated knowledge-based command and control, utilising advanced electronics and signal processing, information systems security, advanced guidance systems, communications, electronic warfare, sensors and unmanned vehicles. Singapore has recently inducted 6 Formidable-class frigates, based on the French "stealth" design. These are armed with Harpoon anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM) and French Aster-15 air defence missiles.

Singapore's submarine fleet has been augmented as well. Two Swedish Vastergotland class submarines have been retrofitted with Stirling engines for air-independent propulsion (AIP) permitting them to remain under water for longer periods of time. No other navy in the region has such sophisticated

systems. Singapore's Air Force is also the most advanced in Southeast Asia, with 74 F-16s and the more recent acquisition of 24 F-15 SG fighters. For a small country, Singapore has deployed 9 tanker aircraft for air-to-air refuelling and is replacing its E-2C Hawkeye surveillance aircraft with newer 4 Gulfstream G550s equipped with the Israeli Falcon radar. Also on order are 20 AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters, the first of which was inducted in 2006. Singapore is the only Southeast Asian country which is a partner in the F-35 joint strike fighter programme, an advanced 5th generation fighter jet.

Trends in Military Upgradation and Deployment: Russia and the US

Russian military expenditures have begun to rise quite significantly in the recent past, after hitting a low point after the break-up of the Soviet Union. It is reported that Russia's military expenditures will rise from about US $ 42 billion in 2010 to $ 66.3 billion in 2013. It was recently announced that the country will spend US $ 650 billion to equip its armed forces with 600 new warplanes, 100 ships and 1,000 helicopters by 2020. These will include 20 new submarines of which 8 will be nuclear armed vessels, 2 French made Mistral amphibious helicopter carrier assault and command ships, 35 Corvettes and 15 frigates, Su-34 and SU-35 fighters, Mi-26 transport and Mi-8 helicopter gunships.

Of interest for Asia-Pacific nations is the plan to deploy two Mistrals in the Far East, along with 2 batteries of the new S-400 surface-to-air missile systems. The Russian naval base in the Southern Kuriles and submarine base at Kamchatka are being upgraded. Nevertheless, the Russian military remains focussed on its Western periphery.

The United States of America remains, by far, the strongest military power in the world and in the Asia-Pacific. Its annual military budget of over $ 700 billion dwarfs all the other major powers put together. China, with about $ 90 billion in defence spending, is still far behind and is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. With substantial troops, about 60,000, deployed in the allied nations of Japan and ROK and basing facilities across the region, the US has capabilities that far outstrip anything that potential adversaries like China and Russia can bring into the reckoning. The quality of US weapon systems, the advanced integration of different fighting platforms and its information, electronic, command, control and communication systems, remain far superior to any other country's.

It has been reported that the US has plans for a new, stealthy, long-range manned bomber, specifically intended to penetrate Chinese air defences. One

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hundred such aircraft are planned. Long-range spy drones are being based in Guam. The US has also test-flown a carrier-based drone fighter. A new supersonic anti-ship missile is under development. In the Pentagon's newly released Air Sea Battle Plan for the Pacific, the objective appears to be to thwart any Chinese assault on Taiwan and to limit China's navy to within its territorial waters.

In a recent speech (February 21, 2011) to the Asia Society, Hong Kong, Vice-Admiral Scott R. Van Buskirk stated:

> The 7th Fleet has actually increased its capabilities in several significant ways. The ships and aircraft that we operate today are vastly more capable than they were just a few years ago. At the same time, we have enhanced our maritime partnerships with navies around the region, enabling us to work together cooperatively more than ever before.

The Vice-Admiral also revealed that on any given day, about 70 ships on an average ply the Asia-Pacific region, about the same as 10 years ago but with increased capabilities. What is clear from the admittedly selective information presented above is that:

- The major resident powers in Asia-Pacific are all engaged in a significant upgradation of their defence assets, although the rate of expansion and military spending does not qualify as an arms race, at least for now.
- Military spending and investment in upgradation appear to be focussed mainly on maritime forces, air capabilities and missiles. It is clear that the emerging strategic order in the region is in the words of one analyst, "profoundly maritime" and that "geo-politically speaking, the maritime balance would appear to be the key to future stability in Asia."
- While the US retains overall military preeminence and, in particular, naval and air dominance in the Asia-Pacific theatre, there is a growing perception in the region that its hitherto overwhelming strategic superiority is being eroded steadily by the rapid expansion of Chinese military capabilities.

However, even if Chinese capabilities continue to expand at the current pace, it will be some time before China can match US power in the region, let alone globally. Being aware of this, China's strategy appears to be to acquire asymmetric capabilities in the meantime, capable of neutralising the superior firepower of US forces in the region of greatest strategic interest to China i.e. the Yellow Sea, Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

- In this sense, the shift of the centre of gravity of global economic power to Asia, led by China's extraordinarily rapid and sustained growth, has not led to a corresponding shift in the centre of gravity of military power to Asia. There is, therefore, an asymmetrical shift taking place and this is unlikely to change unless there is an unexpected collapse of the US economy.
- The military build-up being witnessed in countries like Japan, India, Australia and Southeast Asia represents a classic "hedging" response to the rapid accretion of China's military capabilities, enabled by a four-fold increase in its military spending just over the past decade. As these capabilities continue to be augmented and upgraded, there will inevitably be countervailing responses, such as closer security arrangements with the United States and among other powers of the region that feel threatened by Chinese power. This explains the growing defence collaboration between India and Japan, Japan and Australia, India and Australia, and India and Indonesia. Such countervailing action may fall short of the classic containment of the Cold War variety, but would act as a constraint on China's ability to project its military power across a wider expanse of the Asia-Pacific region.

Drivers for the Changing Security Landscape

So what are the drivers of the changing security landscape in the Asia-Pacific region? Clearly, the most important driver of change is the emergence of China, within a short period of time, as a major economic and military power. It is today the second largest economy in the world, with the largest foreign exchange reserves, a volume of exports that has overtaken Germany and which is acknowledged as the world's manufacturing workshop. It is the world's third largest shipbuilder after Japan and ROK; it manufactures 90 percent of the world's containers and Shanghai is the world's largest cargo port. China has recently overtaken the US as the world's largest energy consumer and its dependence upon energy and other resources from around the world has dramatically increased in the recent past. Sea lines of communication, both east to the Pacific and west to the Indian Ocean, have become exceedingly important to China's economic well-being. It

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is no surprise, therefore, that as China's economy is becoming more globalised and interconnected with other economies in the region and the rest of the world, there is a concomitant emphasis on expanded military capabilities, in particular, naval capabilities, to safeguard these economic lifelines. There is, of course, an element of ambition engendered by a sense of opportunity.

At the 17th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress in 2009, China's leadership asserted that the global power structure had been transformed in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis and the ability of the US to continue leading the international order had decreased. Countries around the world were seeking development paths other than one led by the US. Therefore, China sees the current period as "a period of great development, great change and great adjustments." This is a period in which "the competition among major powers for a position of overall, comprehensive strength is becoming an important feature of the changes in the global situation."

Reading between the lines, China sees a strategic opportunity to enhance its global stature and influence in the space created by the relative US decline. This, too, is a driver. What is true for China is also true, perhaps to a lesser extent, for other countries in the region, that are responding to their own greater dependence on maritime commerce as well as to fears about Chinese ability and suspected intentions to interdict these maritime links. The percentage of the GDP of Asia derived from international sea-borne trade is estimated to have risen from 47 percent in 1990 to 87 percent in 2006. It is probably over 90 percent currently. It is no surprise that all major powers in the region have sought to expand and upgrade their military capabilities, but most particularly their naval and air capabilities.

The South China Sea is one of the world's busiest shipping channels, with more than 40,000 vessels per year passing through. Further south and east, the Malacca Strait, which is a chokepoint between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, handles at least 50,000 vessels annually. These ships carry over 30 percent of goods traded throughout the world, including oil from the Persian Gulf to the East Asian nations, including China. It is estimated that over 20 million barrels of oil traverse the strait every day.

The economic drivers are overlaid by festering territorial disputes in the region as well as politically contentious and often emotionally charged inter-state conflicts. These include the Japan-Russia dispute over the Kurile Islands; escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula with an increasingly unpredictable but heavily armed North Korea; the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku Islands; the unresolved status of Taiwan, which China considers a renegade province; the Chinese claim, recently and assertively reiterated, over the entire South China Sea; the territorial disputes over islands in the South China Sea between China, on the one hand, and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei on the other; the unresolved border dispute between India and China; and over Kashmir between India and Pakistan. This long list creates myriad, intersecting points of potential armed conflict. The economic rise of Asia has taken place in spite of these inter-state disputes and hostility. Unless these are managed with statesmanship and enlightened diplomacy, there is every danger that Asia's economic success story may grind to a halt or even be reversed as a result of a cumulative dynamic of rising mistrust and misunderstanding.

The 'Nuclear Dimension' of Asia-Pacific Security

The security landscape in the Asia-Pacific region has also been complicated by the nuclear dimension of the arms build-up in the region. Even if the US and Russia are excluded, the region has, in the past decade and a half, witnessed the emergence of three new declared nuclear weapon states – India, Pakistan and, more recently North Korea. Nuclear weapons and their delivery systems are being expanded in China, Pakistan and India. China is reported to be developing strategic missile forces which could strike the US mainland to deter the US from intervening in a conflict over Taiwan. This force includes 17 liquid fuel, silo-based DF-5A missiles with a range of 13,000 km and 6 solid-fuel mobile DF-31 missiles with a range of 7,200 km. China has also been developing the Jin class ballistic missile carrying submarine equipped with the J-2 S missile with a range of 7,200 km, as part of a survivable second strike retaliatory capability. Chinese military planners claim that these nuclear forces will enable them to achieve "escalation dominance" in any conflict with the US.

Of more immediate concern to countries in the region is a report that China has established two new missile bases in the mountains north of Guangdong, which may be equipped with DF-21C ballistic missiles or CJ-10 long-range cruise missiles. There is speculation among US military analysts that these bases may also be equipped with the DF-21D anti-ship missile or the so-called "carrier killer" to target US aircraft carriers which may be deployed in the Taiwan Strait and the South China

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Sea. China has also engaged in what has been described as "containment through surrogates." It has actively supported the acquisition of nuclear weapon and delivery capabilities by Pakistan to contain India and by North Korea, to deter a South-Korea led unification of the peninsula and to contain Japan. A Chinese official was quoted by the Russian commentator, Konstantin Garibov, as saying, "North Korea is our Eastern Germany. Do you remember what happened when Eastern Germany fell? The Soviet Union collapsed."

Chinese assistance to Pakistan's nuclear weapon programme is well documented. However, there is recent evidence that Chinese support to Pakistan's civilian as well as military nuclear programme continues apace. Despite being a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), China has agreed recently to construct two, possibly three, civilian nuclear reactors in Pakistan, in addition to the two it has already constructed at Chasma, of 330 mega watt (MW) each. The latter were "grandfathered", with China claiming that these contracts were concluded before it became a member of the NSG. These reactors will not be subject to full-scope safeguards which is a requirement for supplies from NSG members to other states. In addition, Pakistan has been building reactors to produce bomb grade plutonium at Khushab. While two are already operational, another two are reportedly under construction. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal may have now crossed the 100-mark and is being steadily expanded. India's stockpile is still modest at 70-80 weapons, but is being expanded though at a slower rate. Its delivery capabilities are being augmented with the new class of Agni intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and the deployment of submarine-based nuclear missiles. This will give the country a true triad of nuclear forces which is essential to the credibility of its no-first use doctrine.

There has been a limited number of nuclear confidence-building measures (CBMs) between India and Pakistan. These include an agreement not to attack each others' nuclear facilities, concluded in the 1980s, a declaratory commitment, post-1998, not to conduct any further nuclear tests, prior notification of missile tests and the establishment of a "hotline" to avoid nuclear war as a result of misunderstanding or accident. However, there are no nuclear CBMs between India and China. China's nuclear assets and the doctrine governing their deployment and use remain opaque. India has released some information on its nuclear doctrine, but details are scarce.

Adding to the region's security concerns is, of course, the volatile domestic situation in Pakistan which leads to doubts about the safety and security of the country's nuclear arsenal. A report by Harvard University's Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs states:

> Despite extensive security measures [in Pakistan], there is a very real possibility that sympathetic insiders might carry out or assist in a nuclear theft, or that a sophisticated outsider attack (possibly with insider help) could overwhelm the defences.

There is also concern over North Korea's nuclear weapon arsenal, its well-developed delivery capability coupled with the extreme unpredictability of its regime. The impending leadership transition is adding to the uncertainty in the Korean peninsula and it is not clear that China has the ability to rein in its ally and nuclear protégé. The fragile security situation in the region is, therefore, compounded by a worrying nuclear dimension, which has not been addressed in the limited engagement on security matters among the Asia-Pacific countries.

A New Security Architecture for Asia-Pacific

Given the complex and rapidly evolving security landscape in our region, it is essential that the major stakeholders create open, inclusive, transparent and balanced security architecture in the region. A formulation on these lines is included in the Declaration of the East Asia Summit convened in Hanoi last year and also reflected in the Sino-Indian Joint Communique of December 16, 2010, and the Indo-US Joint Statement of November 8, 2010. A competitive arms build-up, both conventional and nuclear, driven by mutual mistrust and suspicion, is likely to derail the very real gains the region has made in economic terms, emerging as the new centre of gravity of the global economy. It is unlikely that, in the foreseeable future, the several territorial disputes listed above will be settled. Therefore, they need to be managed in a manner that reduces the risk of precipitating armed conflict, which, in some cases, may carry the risk of nuclear escalation. The region needs multiple and parallel fora where engagement among countries can be fostered and expanded on a range of security related issues. However, there should also be an effort to create a region-wide forum that looks at security challenges and confidence-building in a broader context. A possible reference point could be the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe.

Indian strategists have welcomed the establishment of the ASEAN+10 Defence Ministers' Meeting, which brings all the major stakeholders in the region together on a single platform to specifically promote dialogue on security issues. It has the advantage of being inclusive and balanced, though only time will tell whether it will pursue transparency in terms of both capabilities and intentions. In our view, it may be worthwhile to initially attempt such architecture in the maritime domain, since all the stakeholders have an overriding interest in the security and safety of sea lines of communication on which their economic well-being depends. Instead of competitive naval and related build-up to secure trade routes and access to extra-regional resources, the Asia-Pacific countries could create a collaborative regime to safeguard these maritime routes and provide mutual assurance and guarantees of non-interdiction. These could be the preliminary building block of a more elaborate and comprehensive regime in the future, which should include the nuclear dimension to be effective.

Prospects for Maritime Cooperation

As countries heavily dependent upon sea-borne trade, the Asia-Pacific countries have been deeply affected by the growing incidence of piracy both in the South-China Sea as well as currently in the western reaches of the Indian Ocean off the Somali coast. There are bilateral and some regional agreements to combat piracy. For example, India and Japan have such an understanding and Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia have had a trilateral agreement, codenamed Malsindo, since 2004. Recently, Thailand has also become a participant. In 2008, the first ever Indian Ocean Naval Symposium was convened in Goa, bringing together the naval chiefs of all major Indian Ocean littoral countries and user nations, to discuss the reinforcement of maritime security in the Indian Ocean. This was followed up by a second Symposium in Abu Dhabi in 2010. Quite predictably the major preoccupation of the Symposium has been the growing threat of piracy but the forum can evolve into a valuable mechanism for regional confidence building and for building a network of professional and personal relationships among the naval forces of countries of the region.

These initiatives could be expanded to cover other littoral and user countries both for the Asia-Pacific region and the Gulf of Aden. Indian and Chinese naval patrols in the latter theatre have been operating largely on their own, as have some other countries whose shipping has been threatened, such as ROK. The menace of Somali-based piracy has become an international threat and merits a coordinated and collaborative response from the major naval powers. The experience and, more

importantly, the habit of cooperation this would engender, could become the basis for a more ambitions maritime security regime in the region and beyond.

Nuclear Confidence-Building

Creating a less threatening nuclear environment in our region, could also benefit from some modest steps. At the first ever Nuclear Summit convened by the US in Washington in April 2010, there was consensus on the need to take cooperative steps to ensure the security and safety of nuclear materials and to prevent such materials falling into the hands of non-state actors. Among the countries of our region, China, Japan and India announced the setting up of Nuclear Security Centres, open to participation by other countries, to promote the goals of the Nuclear Summit. These centres could also advance research and development in proliferation resistant nuclear technologies and capacity building. The next Nuclear Summit will be convened in Seoul in 2012. It would be worthwhile for the initiators of these centres in our region and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to work together to evolve a regionally coordinated effort to promote nuclear security and non-proliferation. These initiatives could hopefully pave the way for a frank and constructive exploration of the nuclear challenge confronted by the region and the means to address it.

Conclusion

The countries of Asia-Pacific have every reason to be proud about the successes they have achieved in sustaining rapid economic growth, raising the living standards of our people and becoming a dynamic centre of global manufacturing and trade. It is also to the credit of our countries that despite several lingering territorial disputes, ideological differences and differing perspectives, tensions have been contained, armed conflicts have been minimal and, by and large, an environment conducive to economic development has been maintained. However, rising prosperity and rapid transition bring new challenges in their wake. The world we live in is full of uncertainty and ferment. The reflexive reaction to this may lead to a competitive build-up of military capabilities, heightening and exacerbating the several unresolved issues that our region is beset with. Our collective ability to maintain an environment conducive to continued economic and social development will require that we delve deep into Asia's wisdom, its tradition of consultation and consensus building, and capacity to adapt to changing situations, to construct a regional political and security architecture that reflects the region's enhanced role and stature in the emerging world order.