

Dialogue on Diversity, Diplomacy and Peace: A Roundtable Discussion

A *Dialogue on Diversity, Diplomacy and Peace* was jointly organized by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia and the Asian Peace and Reconciliation Council (APRC), in conjunction with the Inaugural General Meeting of the APRC. Held on 11 November 2013 in Putrajaya, the Dialogue was convened to discuss how diversity could be harnessed for national and regional development, as well as contribute to peace and stability. A Roundtable Discussion at the event was chaired by **Tan Sri Dato' Seri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan**, Chief Executive of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia. The panelists were **Distinguished Professor Datuk Dr Shamsul Amri Baharudin**, **Professor Emeritus Surichai Wun'gaeo**, and **Professor Dr David Kennedy**. Former ISIS researcher **Hani Noor Azlan** and ISIS intern **Melody Goh** report.

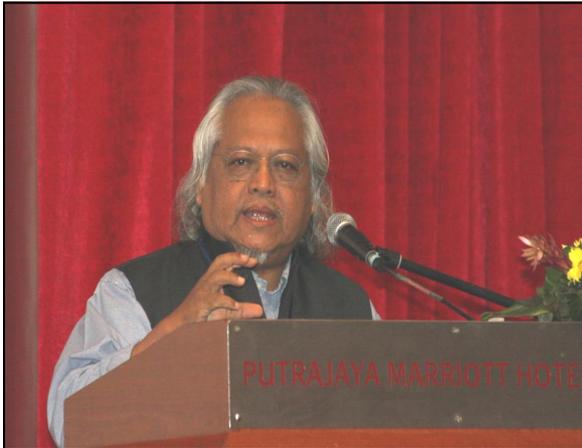


From left: Shamsul Amri Baharudin, Surichai Wun'gaeo, Mohamed Jawhar Hassan and David Kennedy

In his welcoming remarks, **Tan Sri Dato' Seri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan** described Asia as a celebration of diversity, showcasing countless ethnicities, cultures, religions and civilizations, all existing side by side. While its diversity is sometimes a source of contention and conflict, nonetheless, in most times, this diversity has also served to enrich and strengthen the region's political, economic, and social fabric. For many countries, the biggest challenge to peace, stability, and harmony involves grappling with issues of state-making and nation-building. Thus, to arrive at peace resolutions, there is a pressing need for dialogue, negotiation, and diplomacy.

Diplomacy does not occur in a vacuum. It requires a unique blend of factors which can enable resolutions even amidst challenging circumstances. A group of outstanding individuals with exceptional experience, skills, and reach can discover possibilities and establish pathways that others may find difficult. The APRC is a bold initiative to strengthen diplomacy and promote peace in the region. It also blends well with Malaysia's launch of the Global Movement of Moderates.

The first panelist, **Prof Dr Shamsul Amri Baharudin**, in placing the dialogue in its context,



Shamsul Amri Baharudin

noted that debates on diversity, diplomacy and peace go back to the notion of nation-building and state-building. Although a distinction is often drawn between nations and states, he suggested that we re-consider our analytical tools to look at notions of nation and state. No textbook in political science will separate the word nation-state illustrating the closeness between varying notions of nation and state. However, this is not seen on the ground. People talk about nations without states, states without nations and then of nation-states.

The question is how do we make sense of these three different notions of what is supposedly a nation-state. It forces us to reconsider our analytical tools in looking at these issues and problems, whether it is about diversity, diplomacy or how we conduct this dialogue.

We have nations without a state such as the Kurdish nation that is still seeking territoriality, citizenship and rule of law. We have states without nation like Malaysia which has a state but is still seeking its nation or 'Bangsa Malaysia' and then we have an example of a nation-state that is clear about its state and its nation, and that nation-state is Brunei. The challenge is to understand the different notions of nation available in society.

Then there is the competing notion of nation-of-intent and this is what we're looking at.

Many movements such as terrorist and secessionist movements have their views of the kind of idealized nation they want to create and are willing to fight for and even die for. If we don't understand the complexity of information on these nations-of-intent, then we will have a problem when we want to negotiate with the people who want to form such nations. What do we know about them? What do they want? What is in their imagination? These contending notions of the nation-of-intent are still there and are articulated in various movements, peaceful or otherwise.

We need to ask the question, what sort of nation do these people imagine they want, before we can have a dialogue with them. If we cannot find this out, we will be enforcing a particular brand or version of nation that we want but that they might not want. No matter how much we force them, if they have their own version of what they want, then they will fight for and die for that ideal.

Superimposed on these different notions of nations-of-intent are issues of traditional and non-traditional security as well as the quality of life sought by these groups. Their demands are not crude economic demands. Instead they are concerned over quality of life issues such as education and health. So in finding a space for peace, how do we find space for these different notions?

These issues of nation of intent, and traditional and non-traditional security, superimposed on the notion of the nation-of-intent and quality of life will be raised if a dialogue on diversity, diplomacy and development is

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arranged. Competent analytical tools are the most important part in the process of understanding diversity and diplomacy.

On the other hand, **Prof Surichai Wun'gao** voiced his concern about the world becoming increasingly conflict-ridden, internationally, regionally, and locally. In order to address these conflicts, we need to reconcile our knowledge that is fragmented, in terms of the various disciplines engaged in addressing these conflicts, and the different groups we are addressing.

We must not label groups as rebels simply because they hold different notions of state. This is especially true in the Southern Thailand conflict which has been going on for nine years; the situation there demands more dialogue at the grassroots level, and this dialogue, instead of being merely a formal dialogue structure, should ideally incorporate more effective and meaningful means of peace-building.

In addition, civil society and institutions play an important role in resolving conflicts. Political initiatives from the government alone are insufficient for this task. Local communities who have been affected also need to be part of such

efforts in rebuilding peace. Universities should be included as an important actor in facilitating public understanding and cooperation.

The state of Thailand today comprises approximately 15 ethnic groups. However, the numbers may be more since there has been no ethnicity-based national census carried out in the last 20 years. Hence, it is high time that the multi-cultural roots of Thailand be understood and the understanding of others within the state be broadened.

Given how other states are also facing similar issues in defining their nation-states amidst a globalized world, the initiative of the APRC becomes ever more important to alleviate inequality and conflict. Although economic integration has gained prominence as a viable strategy, markets can never integrate human beings. Humankind share too many values beyond market values alone and ASEAN must not let itself be dominated by the idea of a single market. The socio-cultural aspects of its citizens demand a much more sophisticated understanding of these issues so as to confront conflicts with more understanding.

Greater understanding is called for to properly address inequalities, conflicts, and potential violence. Thus, the various disciplines within social sciences need to work together, not separately, in order to face the difficult realities on the ground. We need to go beyond our simple linear understanding of what constitutes national, regional, and international and put them into the context of what is local, cultural, and historical.

In continuing the discussion, **Prof Dr David Kennedy** reflected on the asymmetrical

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relationship between economic development and societal cohesion. Although Asia has experienced a series of enormous successes in the foreground of its development, it has also seen increasing tensions both within and between societies in its backyard. Making a simple observation by thinking at the global level, Kennedy suggested that due to the political economic nature of these struggles, the problems cannot be addressed merely by state intervention or by the upgrading of market forces.

If the conflicts are rooted in the political economy, it will then raise questions on the distribution of growth, gains, and vulnerabilities that come with participating in a global marketplace. The classic issues of economic development — national economic strategy, the globalization of resources, maintaining the competitive advantage in a global economy, and managing the internal and external imbalances that arise from global growth — are common to all states.

With the growing awareness of the political-economic nature of conflict, there is also a growing understanding of the asymmetries. Not everyone is equally vulnerable to risks — things turn at a different speed in the global economy, and people can get left out, nationally and internationally. Rather than responding to this



David Kennedy

challenge, the public hand has everywhere become a force multiplier for leading sectors of nations and regions, harnessing national resources around national leaders. Thus national strategies which focus on pushing leading sectors actually make conflict more and not less likely. In fact, it threatens to make national development seem like a zero sum game. As a result, economic development, as it is currently pursued, makes political conflicts more likely. Real development takes place when carried out in the context of dynamic relationships. We can anticipate more, and not less, conflict as the global economy becomes more integrated.

With the rising political populism, nationalism has become a framework for interpreting political economic challenges. Economic competition has turned into political competition, thus reinforcing the cultural experience of local and national chauvinism. There is now no space to resolve these competitive struggles. Political and economic leaderships have drifted apart, even as they stress their linkages.



A question from a member of the audience

If we are serious about doing something about this, we should turn things around. This requires reconnecting political and economic life, piece by piece, linking economic life to community, and generating transnational political constituencies.

Addressing disputes does not simply mean splitting resources and getting on with it, but rather, looking for opportunities to collaborate in pulling divergent political and economic interests together into productive engagement. In the long run, it is important that conflicts be engaged in a way that links estranged regions and political and economic interests.

During the question-and-answer session, a participant observed that to achieve peace, it is vital for people at the grassroots level to be happy. Although the political apparatus should ideally represent the people and bring about harmony, he saw an increasing disconnect between politicians and the people, which is happening because politicians no longer feel

accountable to the people. He added that there exists this notion of 'state capture' where the government uses the state apparatus to perpetuate itself. Given this background, he continued, what can we do to mend this broken bridge between political representatives and the people, and to build a stronger connection between them.

Wun'gaeo answered that the complexity involving politics and the people is something to be taken seriously. Fundamentally, politics should not be seen as something that should be left to the ruling elite to decide but rather, it should have society's well-being at heart. Dialogues and interactions need to be created among key actors of seemingly different worlds. In addition, these dialogues need to be as inclusive as possible.

On the other hand, Kennedy noted the increasing weakness in ties between government and the economy, at both global and local levels. We have been trying to create national politics and a global economy. We are now reaching an



Participants at the dialogue

inflection point where there is now tension between them. Hence the success of creating a global economy has disempowered politics at the national level. This has created the mobilization of political classes everywhere who are catalysed by economic interest. In order to solve this problem, we need to reverse the idea that all economic instrumentalizations ought to be legally constructed so that they can be parceled out and rearranged in every possible way across the largest possible terrain.

Another participant asked if the new emerging conflicts reflect the declining use of diplomacy in finding effective solutions. In addition, are the factors for these conflicts value-

focused, economy-focused or a combination of all other factors?

Kennedy replied that part of the management of diversity, invented in Europe and later in other places, was to transform questions of value eg. spirituality and personal identity, into either matters of personal citizenship or matters below the line of national sovereignty, thus taking them out of discussions at the global level. This approach did work for some time. However, it is now not difficult to imagine that in the process, some may have been cut off from the political and economic spheres. When discontent with outcomes in those spheres exists, it emerges through areas that have been marginalized.

