

## The silent water wars have begun

2011/05/25

By Santha Oorjitham



*Brahma Chellaney says water shortages are leading to 'hydrological warfare'*

Tension over precious water resources in Asia is already rising, warns Brahma Chellaney in an interview with SANTHA OORJITHAM

**Q: THE Tibetan plateau supplies water to 47 per cent of the world's population. How would you rate cooperation between upstream and downstream countries on managing water resources?**

**A:** There are treaties among riparian neighbours in South and Southeast Asia, but not between China and its neighbours.

For example, the lower Mekong states of Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have a water treaty. India has water-sharing treaties with both the countries located downstream -- Bangladesh and Pakistan.

There are also water treaties between India and its two small upstream neighbours, Nepal and Bhutan. But China, the dominant riparian power of Asia, refuses to enter into water-sharing arrangements with any of its neighbours.

Yet China enjoys an unrivalled global status as the source of trans-boundary river flows to the largest number of countries, ranging from Vietnam and Afghanistan to Russia and Kazakhstan.

Significantly, the important international rivers in China all originate in ethnic-minority homelands, some of them wracked by separatist movements. The traditional homelands of ethnic minorities, extending from the Tibetan Plateau and Xinjiang to Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, actually span three-fifths of the landmass of the People's Republic of China.

**Q: What are the main sources of water stress in the Asia-Pacific region?**

**A:** Many of Asia's water sources cross national boundaries, and as less and less water is available, international tensions will rise.

The sharpening hydropolitics in Asia is centred on international rivers such as the Amu Darya, Syr Darya, Brahmaputra, Mekong, Salween, Indus, Jordan, Tigris-Euphrates, Irtysh-Ily, and Amur. There is also the stoking of political tensions over the resources of transnational aquifers, such as al-Disi, which is shared between Saudi Arabia and Jordan, or the ones that link Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

**Q: Are there intra-state tensions over location and approval of dam sites?**

**A:** Intra-state water disputes are rife across Asia. The more democratic a country, the more raucous the intra-country water disputes tend to be.

In repressive political systems, water protests are quickly muffled. Yet China is discovering the hard way that it is difficult even for an autocracy to fully suppress grassroots protests over new water projects that displace residents or over diversion of water from farmlands to industries and cities.

**Q: You have also written about possible interstate tension over reduced water flows. Has this already happened?**

**A:** According to the United Nations, growing competition over water resources has "led to an increase in conflicts over water" in Asia between provinces, communities, and countries. Asia illustrates how rapid rates of population growth, development, and urbanisation, together with shifts in production and consumption patterns, can place unprecedented demands on water resources, bringing them under growing pressure and fostering domestic discord.

Water conflict within nations, especially those that are multiethnic and culturally diverse, often assumes ethnic or sectarian dimensions, thereby accentuating internal security challenges.

If the feuding provinces or areas are ethnically distinct, their water dispute also rages along ethnic lines. This pattern has been most visible on the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia and between Han settlers and ethnic minority people in Xinjiang.

In Central Asia, much of the freshwater comes from the Pamir and Tian Shan snowmelt and glacier melt that feed the region's two main rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya. The resources of these two overexploited rivers have become the target of appropriation and competition.

One of the underlying causes of the mid-2010 bloody riots in the Fergana Valley -- a minefield of religious fundamentalism and ethnic animosities -- was the local ethnic-Kyrgyz fear that Uzbekistan wanted to absorb that water-rich region of Kyrgyzstan.

**Q: What are the policies and strategies you suggest in "Water: Asia's New Battleground" (to be released in June) to prevent "water wars"?**

**A:** The water crisis and competition test Asia's ability to forge a more cooperative future. How Asia handles this challenge will shape not only its water future, but also its economic and political future.

Given that Asia has the fastest-growing economies and the fastest-rising demand for food, its water shortages will only worsen without major efficiency gains in use.

Three strategies are specifically recommended.

The first is to build Asian norms and rules that cover trans-boundary water resources. The second is to develop inclusive basin organisations encompassing transnational rivers, lakes, and aquifers in order to manage the water competition.

And the third is to develop integrated planning to promote sustainable practices, conservation, water quality, and an augmentation of water supplies through nontraditional sources.

**Q: Should water be "securitised"?**

**A:** Whether we like it or not, the "securitisation" of water resources has been going on for years. Indeed, in a silent hydrological warfare, the resources of transnational rivers, aquifers, and lakes have become the target of rival appropriation, with these watercourses being treated as national-security assets.

Water has become an important security issue in several important bilateral relationships in Asia, including those between China and India; between China and the other Mekong River basin states; and among states in South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia.

Singapore also "securitised" the water issue, using its concerns over a potential Malaysian cut-off of water supply to build a stronger military capability.

**Brahma Chellaney, professor at New Delhi's Centre for Policy Research, will be speaking at the 25th Asia Pacific Roundtable next week**



# 'Recharting' a region

Indonesian Foreign Minister Dr Marty Natalegawa and Asean secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan, former Thai foreign minister, speak to BUNN NAGARA about some current issues concerning the region.

## MARTY NATALEGAWA: We have issues, not problems

**CONGRATULATIONS on Indonesia becoming the only country in South-East Asia to join the G20 grouping. What does it plan to do within the G20 on behalf of the region?**

It is not just a plan, as nowadays we are in all kinds of forums - the Non-Aligned Movement, G77, G192, G20. In each one we speak on behalf of developing countries.

Now we also happen to be the Asean chair; by next year we would no longer be the chair of Asean.

Until recently people were writing political obituaries for Indonesia: its economy in a mess, having to receive IMF assistance. The country was about to be torn asunder.

Since then democracy has found some traction. But this is still very much a work in progress.

**Some Indonesian commentators have said the country has matured beyond Asean, so it should now move beyond Asean in its external relations. Do you agree?**

No, I don't. We are in the Asean community and in the global community of nations; it's not an either-or position.

Indonesia is not interested in doing the

world while our traction in the region is not positive. Malaysia also is prominent in a lot of forums, the OIC, NAM and so on, but it is not switching off the rest of the world.

Australia is part of an important intellectual debate in the region. Although its Asia-Pacific Community idea was not taken on in its precise form, still a sense of regionalism was endorsed.

**How does Indonesia regard attempts by Timor-Leste to join Asean?**

We support it. Timor Leste is a very important application.

We need to look at the big picture. Looking at South-East Asia, at geography, Timor-Leste is part of the region.

Do we want a community in Asean that's prosperous and successful, but with a neighbour that is not part of it looking in? Of course not.

It is better to have a road map for the application (to join Asean), and to work with it.

**Occasional hiccups in relations occur between Indonesia and Malaysia. How best are these problems solved or averted?**

When Indonesia and Australia began the Bali Process (in 2002), the idea was to have a regional process that would be inclusive. We have done away with finger-pointing, such as over the transit of asylum seekers.

In a regional approach, there is also room for a bilateral approach. These are all like building blocks.

As long as they are part of the overall regional architecture, that should be fine. The key thing is not simply to deflect the problem away somewhere else.

Indonesia does not have problems with Iceland or Costa Rica (they are not neighbours). We have issues, not problems, with our neighbours, such as Singapore as well.

The challenge is to find out how issues can be fleshed out. For example, there should be clear demarcation of borders, rules of engagement, and standard operating procedures in addressing these issues.

**What are Indonesia's plans in navigating through a world with rapidly emerging giants like China, India and Russia?**

We profess an independent outlook. In the past, we had the "dua karang" policy of navi-



gating between two rocks, a policy of dynamic equilibrium.

Now, with the absence of a preponderant power, we should not return to a Cold War relic kind of thinking. We should instead (share) common stability and common prosperity.

We should not adopt a "with us or against us" policy. Asean itself is not too powerful, so it is acceptable (to others).

We must not think as if the rise of one must be a problem or disadvantage to others.

We should see the rise of China and India as opportunities. We are very aggressive in waging peace, to create a virtuous cycle of positive security.

We have to remove any negative self-fulfilling prophecy. If we treat others as enemies, they will become our enemies.



# SURIN PITSUWAN: Nobody says non-interference is gone

Star Sunday 5 June 2011

**HOW should Asean respond to looming economic giants China, India and Russia in the regional neighbourhood?**

What we have been doing is to make sure we can really consolidate ourselves through community building and a masterplan for our connectivity, to become one integrated market and one industrial area.

Without that, and that weight, our legitimacy would be in question. Asean then will not be able to sustain its centrality (in the region).

If Asean is integrated

successfully, it won't be a threat to anyone but will open up synergies and opportunities for everyone in the region. Let Asean do the job.

Australia has identified with us more and more, and we welcome that. We have been able to bring the periphery to work with us rather than have the superpowers bringing it to us; we're doing it the other way, reversing it.

**To what extent can or should Asean help promote unity in North-East Asia among the "Plus Three" countries (China, Japan, South Korea)?**

It's been a measure of success of Asean to raise the level of cooperation, to get the three to come together.

You have to give credit to Tun Dr Mahathir, for helping the three countries to come together

for the first time in November 1997. They just met again, going to Sendai (in Japan, following the nuclear disaster in Fukushima).

There are certainly issues like nuclear proliferation; the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula will encourage competition. Tension will not go away, as Japan and South Korea won't feel secure (from North Korea).

I have just been invited to Pyongyang for the first time, with the visit to come before the next ARF-AMM (Asean Regional Forum - Asean Ministerial Meeting) in July. That is an interesting diplomatic move (from North Korea).

**Asean's "Cambodia glue" seems to be replaced by forces tending to erode unity, such as unilateral FTAs by some members with larger developed economies. How can Asean solidarity and dynamism be developed?**

We have had an open regionalism from the beginning, which was not to keep certain members from having FTAs with others. Asean itself has FTAs with all large economies such as China, Japan and Australia.

Eventually when things are more conducive, there will be an Asean-EU FTA, and one with the US too. So far the EU finds Asean too diverse for an FTA.

Things are fluctuating, with a lot of challenges and obstacles. But we have managed them and we are doing quite well.

Intra-Asean trade (as a proportion of Asean countries' foreign trade) has improved; we just want to do more. It used to be 22%, now it is around 24%-25%.

Multinational corporations are now taking greater advantage of Asean arrangements than Asean corporations, because they have deeper pockets, are better informed, etc. SMEs are the focus of Asean.

Also, the pie is much bigger now. We are trading more with the world than before, and we trade more than we produce.

**Should Asean maintain, mitigate, or abandon its principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of member states?**

The principle can never be abandoned. Yet absolute sovereignty (of states) is no longer a viable instrument in international relations.

Economic issues, tourism, migration, infectious diseases - these are not confined within borders. Now we have an office called the APT (Asean Plus Three) macroeconomic office to monitor and give advance warning on what economic policies

are detrimental, how and to whom in the region.

Nobody says non-interference is gone, but that is happening.

**Myanmar's internal issues have also had a negative impact on its immediate neighbours like Thailand, and the standing of Asean as a whole. How should Asean resolve this?**

Myanmar says they have completed the seven steps on their road map to democracy (with the recent election). Now they say they want to be the next chair of Asean.

All the reasons for Myanmar to defer (its previous turn at the chairmanship are gone).

But at the same time, there are not just 10 countries (of Asean) but 18 involved: the Asean 10 plus China, Japan and South Korea, then India, Australia and New Zealand, and now with Russia and the US as well (in the East Asia Summit).

All Asean countries are involved, but some more than others.

**What Asean consensus, if any, is there on the wishes of Timor Leste to join as full members?**

Geographically it is in the region, and (its bid to join Asean) has the full support of Indonesia and other member states.

The point is to make sure Timor Leste is ready. Some feel it would take time.

Asean connectivity is important, from fisheries to tourism. Otherwise Asean would be a rather dry proposition, with membership based only on geography, not economic connectivity.

*Dr Marty Natalegawa and Surin Pitsuwan were in Kuala Lumpur last week for the 25th Anniversary conference of Asean-ISIS' Asia-Pacific Roundtable.*





Sunday June 5, 2011

## Fine-tuning unknowns

**Behind The Headlines**  
**By Bunn Nagara**

**Perhaps inevitably, China's rising impact has now spread to the agenda of international conferences.**

THE more the international strategic scenario changes, the less any presumption about change holds up.

Consider the giant in the hall, China, and perceptions about its rise buzz and flit incessantly. And so it was at the 25th Asia-Pacific Roundtable organised by ISIS Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur over the week.

In opening the conference involving non-government security specialists, independent analysts and government officials in a private capacity, Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin talked about "equiproximity" in maintaining balanced relations between the US and China.



*Cementing ties: Muhyiddin and the Regent of Perak Raja Dr Nazrin Shah being greeted by participants of the 25th Asia-Pacific Roundtable*

The concept is not new, having been practised by others like Nepal between China and India, and Russia between the US and China. The point, however, is that equiproximity is seen as more positive than equidistance for all concerned.

From Muhyiddin's keynote speech on, it was China at centre stage for much of the day and beyond in the three-day conference.

Robert Kaplan of *The Atlantic* magazine and Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security said the US navy is likely to shrink besides being diverted to West Asia and the Mediterranean. European navies are also downsizing when some major Asian nations are raising their defence expenditures.

He said the South China Sea could become as important as the Persian Gulf from the vast oil shipments transiting through it. He expected China to establish a series of major merchant ports in the region as part of a commercial empire, rivalled by India for influence.

Prof Susan Shirk, director of the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, combines academic work with policy experience as former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the region. She credited China's current foreign policy for being sophisticated and effective, showing more concern for its international reputation than any other country in the region.

Always sceptical about the notion of an aggressive China in the future, she observed that Beijing has tried to avoid any possible conflict with the US and to prevent the formation of Cold War-type blocs in the region. She also noted that China's political leadership has become increasingly weak, from Mao to Deng, Jiang, Hu and beyond.

Shirk questioned the strength of China's internal workings: how strong is the Politburo Standing Committee's control over the military, particularly when Beijing's foreign policy formation has become somewhat ill-defined? Add to that the fact that China still has no National Security Council.

For Chu Shulong and Feng Feng of Beijing's Tsinghua University, China seeks military modernisation in its development strategy with no intention of being a military superpower. Its rise, focused on economics, strives for excellence in science and technology with no interest in exporting ideology.

To Aileen Baviera of the University of the Philippines, size is important – and China is big. Thus, perceptions of China's rise also define the size and position of the one perceiving it.

Prof Sun Zhe, director of the Centre for US-China Relations at Tsinghua, found many positive-sum opportunities between the US and China over a wide range of issues. This meant they both need a long-term vision for their relationship and a means to co-manage challenges that arise.

Sun noted the irony of the two countries being the only ones in the world trying to improve mutual relations while preparing for mutual war. He also observed that for decades the Chinese looked

to the US as a development role model, until the 2003 Iraq invasion and the 2008 US financial crisis.

Prof Harry Harding of the University of Virginia saw the world's most important bilateral relationship as a mix of cooperation, competition and confrontation. As each of these contained further possibilities, he tried to deconstruct them in some 25 minutes, without necessarily resolving the questions.

And so it was also for Prof Yoshihide Soeya of Keio University. But he did come round to conceding that much of East Asia's future revolved around the quality of the US-China relationship.

Another open-ended question concerns the path of North Korea. Who indeed can know anything about it aside from its being something of a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, sealed within a cocoon?

The short answer is that nobody really knows. The scary part is that this includes leaders in Pyongyang.

Other sessions included one on WikiLeaks and its political-security impact, as well as a luncheon talk on the International Committee of the Red Cross by its East Asian operations head Alain Aeschlimann. But the security-strategic angle kept returning, as through a full session on the question of a naval arms race in Asia.

The question has been on the minds of analysts for years, and on the lips of pundits for decades. It remains a question largely because it has never been answered properly.

Well, is there an arms race or not? Those like Kaplan impressed by impressions felt there was, but others were more cautious.

Defence budgets of some of the more prosperous countries have expanded, but with a lack of aggressive intent. Whatever the verdict, Asean can do more for the region with a larger presence by way of its vigorous moderation.

And so the code words for Asean action continue to grow: after being in the "driving seat" it became "centrality", and after "resilience" it is now "connectivity". As long as Asean acts to moderate temperatures and tempers, whatever term works, goes.

A separate session on Thailand revealed Asean's larger concerns might be internal. Besides Bangkok's dispute with Cambodia over some land, Thailand's impending election is another great imponderable coming to a head.

Whatever happens after election night, a deeply polarised society will continue to suffer setbacks but its economy will keep humming. That some countries can only aspire to that sums up the improbable prospect of a predictable region.



Sunday May 29, 2011

## Security issues to be discussed at Asia Pacific talks

By FLORENCE A.SAMY  
[florenceasamy@thestar.com.my](mailto:florenceasamy@thestar.com.my)

KUALA LUMPUR: WikiLeaks' disclosure of classified United States information, power struggles, the naval arms race and security issues in the Asia Pacific are among the pressing matters that will be discussed at a regional roundtable here tomorrow.

The 25th Asia Pacific Roundtable themed "Asia Pacific security in the 21st century", is organised by Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia and Asean-ISIS.

Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin will open the three-day dialogue to be attended by over 300 local and international security experts, think tanks, policy makers, academicians, government officials and journalists.

Influential speakers include US Pacific Command Admiral Robert Willard, Indonesia's Foreign Minister Dr Raden Mohammad Marty, former United States deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Prof Dr Susan Shirk and Asean secretary-general Dr Surin Pitsuwan.

ISIS Malaysia chief executive Datuk Dr Mahani Zainal Abidin said the conference would also discuss Indonesia's stronger role in Asean, the rise of China as a super power and whether it is on a collision course with the United States.

Other topics include possible water crisis in the region, Thailand's politics and impending elections and maritime piracy concerns in the region.

"The conference is important as some issues and its implications cannot be openly discussed by governments.

"It is less sensitive when it is done by academics and think tanks but it is still as important and provides valuable input for policy makers including in Malaysia," she said.

*The Star* is the media partner for the conference.