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China's influence, Islam's role in S. Asia to figure at key meet

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The role of Islam in South Asia, China's relationship with the sub-continent and the impact of Britain's vote to leave the European Union (EU) are among the issues to be discussed at the third South Asian Diaspora Convention next month.

Organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), it will be held on July 18 and July 19 at Raffles City Convention Centre.

More than 1,000 participants are expected to attend, institute chairman Gopinath Pillai said yesterday.

Mr Pillai said ISAS has hitherto been studying contemporary South Asia, but two factors concerning the region need to be examined further: the growth of Islam and China's influence as a rising power.

The reason for the first: in 30 years, India will have the largest Muslim population; and in another 30 years, South Asia will hold the biggest bloc of Muslims in the world.

With Mr Pillai yesterday were three panellists slated to appear at the convention: Apex Avalon Consulting executive chairman Girija Pande, Ascendas-Singbridge deputy group chief executive Manohar Khiatani, and ISAS visiting research professor Riaz Ul Hassan.

They gave a preview of the conference by discussing South Asian regional developments and institutions like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc).

Saarc is not as integrated as other regional groupings like the EU, as citizens of certain Saarc member countries still require a visa to go to other member nations.

But Mr Pillai noted that the current troubles in the EU is partly due to the unease of some member countries at the pace of political union in the bloc. "We should not lament the fact that Saarc is not moving fast enough... We should leave it to move at the pace of the slowest member," he said.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will hold a question-and-answer session at the gala dinner on July 18.

Other Singapore ministers who will attend the two-day conference include Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Minister for Trade and Industry (Industry) S. Iswaran.

Foreign dignitaries who will be at the event include Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and India's Minister of Road Transport, Highways and Shipping Nitin Gadkari.

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