

Singapore shines the spotlight on South Asia

New director of the Institute of South Asian Studies has plans to bridge South and South-east Asia.



Vikram Khanna

Associate Editor

As India expands its engagement with East Asia, the need for the deeper study of the Indian subcontinent has grown, says the new director of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) C. Raja Mohan.

And he plans to make ISAS one of the key centres in the world for research and debate on the future of what has become one of the fastest growing sub-regions in the world.

One of India's top geo-strategic thinkers, Dr Raja Mohan, who assumed his post on May 21, has impressive credentials to lead Singapore's sole think-tank dedicated to the study of South Asia. He holds a PhD in International Relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University, where he was later a professor. He has held the Henry Alfred Kissinger Chair in Foreign and International Relations at the United States' Library of Congress. A regular visitor to Singapore for more than a decade, he also served as professor of South Asian Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang

Technological University from 2007 to 2009. Most recently, he was founding director of the Carnegie India, a think-tank based in New Delhi, funded by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Dr Raja Mohan believes that ISAS is well placed to take the study of the Indian subcontinent and its relationship to the rest of Asia to a higher level.

First of all, it has had a head start. It was established in 2004, when there were not many centres dedicated to the study of South Asia – and particularly few in Asia, outside India.

"Singapore was ahead of the times in realising that South Asia was going to be important and deciding to establish an institution to study the region," he said, in an interview with ST last week.

"This was an exception to the trend where many schools of South Asian studies were shutting down in the rest of the world. ISAS marked the beginning of a resurgence of interest in South Asia."

THE ECONOMIC STORY

The catalyst for the resurgence was India's economic liberalisation, which started in 1991.

"Up to the 1990s, India and the region was largely inward oriented," said Dr Raja Mohan. "So, for much of the second half of the 20th century, South Asia declined as a force in international politics. What changed the story was India's economic reforms. Singapore was one of the first to see the importance of these reforms in terms of India re-emerging and reconnecting with the world."

India's economic rise was contagious in the subcontinent, he added. "Today, Bangladesh is growing fast. Sri Lanka is a thriving economy and even Nepal, despite

its difficulties, has shown good growth. So barring Pakistan and Afghanistan which have specific problems relating to radicalisation, the rest of the region is doing well. But there are signs that even Pakistan will catch up on growth."

Economic growth has enhanced India's weight in the international system. India is going to become the third-largest economy in nominal terms in four to five years – it's already the third-largest economy in purchasing power parity terms. So for Singapore and the rest of Asean, India has become an important market.

STRATEGIC ISSUES

India has also emerged as a major military power. It has the world's third-largest armed forces and is

CHANGING MENTAL MAPS

Our mental maps are changing... We're no longer seeing South Asia and South-east Asia in separate compartments. What we're beginning to see is the eastern subcontinent being increasingly linked to China to the north and to Myanmar, Thailand and Singapore to the east.



PROF C. RAJA MOHAN, the new director of the Institute of South Asian Studies

the sixth-largest spender on defence. "So India's weight in the balance of power is also being seen as important today – which was not the case 20 years ago," said Dr Raja Mohan.

Thus India has also become an important part of the security architecture in South-east Asia. "Given the rise of China, the uncertainty about America's future role in the region, the tensions between US and Russia, US and China and China and Japan, having an Indian connection provides an opportunity for Asean to diversify its strategic partnerships, as well as stabilise the balance of power in the region. India in turn sees Asean as also playing an important role in the region's security and therefore you have a natural connection between the two."

India's interest in East Asia and Pacific is growing, he added. "The South China Sea is an important trading route for India, since India's trade is increasingly with the east. So India's maritime and naval profile in the region will grow, although at a slower pace than China's."

"As the maritime footprints of India and China expand, there is going to be friction. But the wisdom of statecraft lies in finding ways to reduce friction – how to come to a common understanding, what rules can be agreed on to prevent conflict and expand engagement. There will be areas of cooperation between India and China as well."

So maritime issues are going to be an important area of research and enquiry for ISAS, he said.

SYNERGIES WITH SINGAPORE

Another important area of focus for ISAS, according to Dr Raja Mohan, will be the economic cooperation between India and Singapore.

"Singapore is a centre for innovation – it is trying to stay

ahead of the curve in the fourth industrial revolution, whether it is in the area of artificial intelligence, or big data, genetics, or materials science. Singapore is focusing on the technological future for the global city. India has become the hub for many areas of technology. Bangalore for example, is a hub for both information technology and biotech and like Singapore, it's globally connected."

He pointed out that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is putting a lot of emphasis on digital. For example, its use of Aadhaar – a biometric ID system that covers more than one billion people – is creating huge digital platforms. These can serve as an interesting interface for some of the innovation Singapore is doing in fintech and other areas. If innovation is the future, there is a lot that Singapore and India can do together.

"Then there are smart cities. Singapore is involved in the development of Amravati, the capital of Andhra Pradesh. It's a huge undertaking. Success there would demonstrate how Singapore can contribute to India's development and how India can benefit from collaboration with Singapore. India under Modi is open to expanding this collaboration."

"So, bringing ideas from Singapore and India together is another huge opportunity for ISAS."

But ISAS will also focus on the other countries of South Asia and their relationship with the wider region, according to Dr Raja Mohan.

"Our mental maps are changing," he said. "We're no longer seeing South Asia and South-east Asia in separate compartments. What we're beginning to see is the eastern subcontinent being increasingly linked to China to the north and to Myanmar, Thailand and Singapore to the east."

"Some of the smaller countries of South Asia have the potential to become 'bridge states'. For example, Nepal is a bridge state between China and India, Bangladesh is becoming a bridge state between South and South-east Asia and Sri Lanka is a bridge state in the Indian ocean."

So ISAS has a huge canvas to cover, he said. "The stars are aligned to explore a new agenda between South and South-east Asia."

vikram@sph.com.sg