Global rebalancing in the internet age : impact on society, government & business

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2011

RSIS COMMENTARIES

No. 134/2011 dated 26 September 2011

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By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

The Second Singapore Global Dialogue saw a heated debate over issues relating to the changing world order. Can there be an Asian response to the search for global governance and innovative solutions to the common challenges of humanity?

Commentary

FOR THE second year in a row, a major international forum in Singapore saw heated debate among opinion shapers searching for new global norms and solutions amid a rebalancing of the world order. A major underlying theme occupying them, however, was the rise of the Internet Age and the defining influence of new technology on society, government and business.

Leading the charge, Andrew Sheng of Hong Kong's newly-founded Fung Global Institute identified finance as one of three "weapons of mass destruction" -- apart from pandemics and terrorism. To him, the current turbulent world of finance exemplified how technology-enabled global shocks are causing "new instabilities". "Technology has for the last 50 years been seen as good. In the last five to 10 years, we begin to see the unstable side of technology," he told a 400-strong global audience that included policymakers, opinion influencers, academics and business leaders. The world, he said, has become a networked society -- a system of systems -- in which the frequency of global shocks is no longer predictable. He was one of several prominent speakers at the Second Singapore Global Dialogue organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

Can Governments Cope?

Barry Desker, dean of RSIS, said the dialogue, which included a session with former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, continued the Asian search for solutions to a rapidly evolving world order. The big question was whether governments could cope with the shocks in a far more complex scenario where many things are unknown, said Peter Ho, a retired top Singapore civil servant and still sought-after strategic thinker. The uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa underscored how autocratic governments were unable to cope with the shocking effect of social media, although technology was an accelerator, not a cause, of political change, said James Dorsey of RSIS. Mr Ho said in response that actually "all governments cannot deal with social media, it's a universal challenge".

The forum's backdrop was cast by Singapore's deputy prime minister Teo Chee Hean who highlighted "the central dilemma" -- how to balance the benefits and risks that come with the Internet Age. He identified three

benefits of the Internet – openness, accessibility and convenience – against three risks of abuse, exploitation and criminality. "This balance plays out on three different fronts – Society, Government and Business," said Mr Teo, who is also Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs.

While the Internet has been a positive force in creating new social networks, it has also given rise to concerns over personal data online being exploited for harmful means. The cyberspace has also shaped social change and activism. However, he said, the mass mobilising power of social media can also be misused, even generating "a culture of irresponsibility". What is needed is a set of norms to guide behaviour on cyberspace so that individuals can be protected when they use social media, and social media does not become a tool to spread violence "whether they are in Ambon or London". As the global response to cyber security threat called for collaboration across borders, INTERPOL would be establishing the INTERPOL Global Complex in Singapore soon.

Participants, however, were against regulating social media. A young Western participant warned against seeing social media as a threat. He reminded that as the main users of social media are the young generation, to view it as a threat could amount to treating the young generation as a threat.

Global Governance amid Rebalancing

Another major issue debated was global governance amid a world order in flux. A key question was whether one was in sight, and who would lead the process. Linked to this was the question of who defines the global system. Lord Peter Mandelson, a former top European policymaker, pointed to the need for a rebalancing of the global economy. Two major financial crises in recent years have stemmed from the Western-defined system. Current global institutions built on Western priorities have to be recast to reflect the rise of Asia.

Participants also noted that market forces, hedge funds in particular, have grown more powerful than governments, to the point of undermining them. Mr Desker wondered whether the current financial crisis in Europe would lead to ASEAN states slowing down their own push for monetary integration.

Another Singapore thinker, Kishore Mahbubani, said the end of Western domination, coinciding with the "return of Asia", would not however mean the end of the West. His comments about Australia's uncertainty of its place in Asia however drew a sharp response from former premier John Howard who said Australia had no problems choosing between its past and its present. A question from the floor about what new ideas and values China could offer for the future also evoked a sharp response from Mr Mahbubani. He said the question reflected "Western wishful thinking", as if the top power would always be the West.

Asian Response?

Former President Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, the father of Indian atomic power, called for out-of-the box solutions to new challenges. With human security his underlying concern, he suggested using technological solutions to global problems such as energy shortages, literacy and jobs. One such solution would be space-based solar power. But Dr Kalam spent much of his time talking about the role of civilisations in bringing humanity together. He called for "enlightened leadership" in the service of universal humanity.

Good governance was also a subject of attention in the dialogue with Mr Lee Kuan Yew, with participants eager to learn about Singapore's experience. He said the fundamentals of Singapore's success revolved around good governance, which hinged on three key factors -- anti-corruption, meritocracy and pragmatism. "If you drop any of the three factors, you will lose your momentum.

On a larger note, Mr Lee said the shift in economic power from West to East was inevitable. But too rapid a shift could lead to global unease as China could become pushy. Still, the rise of China could not be balanced without the US.

Going forward, forum participants in future need to ponder a key poser: can there be a collective Asian response to global strategic issues?

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