The 5th NTS-Asia Consortium Annual Meeting:
"Asian Security in a Post-COVID-19 Environment"

13-15 April 2021

Summary Notes

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting multiple aspects of human life and is exacerbating various existing non-traditional security challenges in the society. The first issue area is the impact of the public health crisis on vulnerable groups, particularly women. Experiences in India and Indonesia show that women are being disproportionately affected. Women are more likely to lose their jobs and undertake unpaid care work for their families in exchange of or in addition to their work. Additionally, domestic violence against women and children have increased in both countries during the pandemic. Structural, systemic, cultural and societal constraints are factors that have been militating against efforts to close gender gap, and their detrimental effects on women are ever more pronounced in this time of pandemic. These need to be addressed at their roots because women have the capacity to be resilient, innovative and entrepreneurial even in times of crisis. For example, in various places in South Asia, women are setting up mask-stitching businesses, establishing e-commerce trading platforms with global reach, and turning flowers used in temples into incense sticks, among others. Measures that can be taken to empower women, close the gender gap, and ensure inclusive growth include embarking on a gender-responsive social re-engineering where governments will need to aggressively address issues of gender inequality and allow for greater women representation in decision-making level to enable better participation in social dialogue, collective bargaining and policy development; having better pathways through social protection, health and nutrition, and education, and investment to improve the delivery of aid and social assistance; and making investment in gender-sensitive and culturally appropriate labour-saving green technologies.

The pandemic has also necessitated intensifying use of data and digitalisation. This renders issue of digital security becoming even more important especially in view of future uncertainties. The non-traditional security threats of today can become the traditional security threats of tomorrow. When it comes to digitalisation, there is a generation gap created artificially by humans and technology between the youth and the elderly. The conflict is with "who should maintain security" and "what kind of security should be maintained." In the digital age, data is the basic element. This therefore raises a potential conflict over who owns data and begs the question of ethical frameworks of technology. The ever-increasing use of data may lead to the creation of Digital Intensive Society (DIS). DIS is a society based on data thinking and intensive data as a production factor. DIS has changed the questions of "who is safe" and "who is vulnerable." For example, vulnerable groups identified in the past are those who have fewer material resources and less education. This definition, however, has now enlarged to include those who do not have access to information, lack e-infrastructure, and are less digitised. This then may lead to a blurring line of "people versus state" as the referent subject of security since both are almost equally vulnerable to hacking and other cyber threats. In terms of practical use, there is a need to establish a data thinking model and establish more cooperation with data technology institutions.

The expanding space of virtual interactions has led to some undesirable consequences such as the disruption of social harmony through social media campaigns as seen in Sri Lanka. Some ways to confront cyber hate include monitoring and research, hotlines and complaint forms, law and government intervention, social media literacy, education, and awareness raising, national counter misinformation policy, educational reform, and urban planning. Sri Lanka is also grappling with human and drug trafficking issues that despite various laws and institutions in place remain a difficult issue to solve because of systemic problems such as corruption.

The current pandemic also shows how much uncertainty there is over the robustness of the various systems in the society until a real crisis truly happens. It has demonstrated the scale of challenges that potential massive crises such as climate eventualities can pose not only on the economy but also on state-society relations and regional and international cooperation. The efforts to effectively address the pandemic are being hampered by vaccine imperialism that is driven by hunger for profit, coupled with vaccine nationalism. State responses have also widened political distrust and politicking is intensifying in many places including Malaysia. Against this backdrop, to avert similar chaos arising from a future crisis notably one that is climate-driven, there is a need to adopt a holistic approach to the current COVID-19 pandemic from the lens of planetary health. Its emphasis on environmental stewardship points to the need to effectively address the issue of human consumption that is taking a toll on nature. Some ways of doing so include finding an alternative economic development model that is not dependent on consumption, adopting circular economy model to reduce food waste, and pursuing inclusive green growth for sustainable development and environmental protection.

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