

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Jason Miks



Professor Madhav Das Nalapat is *UNESCO Peace Chair* and Professor of Geopolitics at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education. He is a former editor of the Times of India, and is influential in India's policy development.

International Affairs Forum: What is the UNESCO Peace Chair and how was Manipal Academy chosen to participate?

Professor Madhav Das Nalapat: The UNESCO Peace Chair at Manipal Academy is one of two such chairs to be established in India, the other one being in Pune. The aim of each Peace Chair is to promote peace and non-violence through research, exchanges and training.

I believe Manipal was chosen because of its history of providing quality education. It is unusual in India in that it is completely private and has never received state funding. This is very important in a country where state socialism was dominant for so long. It is now one of the largest universities in Asia and has expertise in a wide range of subjects.

IA-Forum: What have you been able to achieve since the Peace Chair was founded?

Das Nalapat: We made China a focus at a time (1998-99) when there was a great deal of tension in the bilateral relationship following India's nuclear tests. Relations between these two countries are at the core of the security and economic environment in Asia.

I like to think that I have been able to play at least a small part in improving relations by stressing what we call soft contact in repeated interactions with

policymakers and policy planners in the PRC. The Sino-Indian dialogue has typically been about hard issues such as boundaries or the nuclear issue. We focused on issues that affect people everyday, such as trade and tourism. It was suggested that cultural exchanges increase. That - for example - Indian movies get screened once again in China. A lot of these seeds have now sprouted into trees, including the expansion of trade, tourism and mutual propagation of films. As a result, the overall relationship has warmed despite a lack of progress on "hard" issues.

India and China are two neighbors who barely communicated before and Manipal has played a part in encouraging contacts between the people – as distinct from the administrative structures – of these two nations. In 2000, we held a very successful "Giants of Asia" conference, attended by a delegation from the PRC, including several serving officers of the PLA.

Another area I have worked on is developing relations between India and Israel. The first-ever India-Israel-US Trilateral Conference was organized by the UNESCO Peace Chair in 2003. The Conference brought together people from the three countries to discuss issues of common concern and has become an annual event.

What I would like to point out though, is that this is not an alliance against Islam. Turkey, for example, is now a welcome addition to the next conference, scheduled to be held in Washington on September 11, 2006. At the same time we have been developing relations with Gulf countries – we have been able to build very successful contacts with Gulf States. There is no fundamental contradiction between a Jewish Israel, a Shia Iran or a heavily Christian Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East, a region that needs to accept the multiculturalism and secularism that is the currency of progress.

An area we are now concentrating on is an Education Initiative to bring US university education to India, a country still backward in research. Yes, there is a generally high standard of education in India, the average is high, but the peaks get rubbed out. As a result, we have not been able to make those breakthroughs which are reflected in Nobel prizes for example. The US is unsurpassed in this and I want to bring this sort of academic training here, hence my contacts with US universities such as the Ohio State University, American University and Georgia Tech.

IA-Forum: What do you feel are the biggest threats to international peace?

Das Nalapat: The biggest challenge is the spread of what I call pseudo-religions, such as Wahhabism and Khomeinism. These two have much in common in that they try to impose their world view on others and they think that it is acceptable to try and force people to think a certain way by using any means available. I do not associate what I call the "W-K virus" with

Islam. Islam is a great religion and Wahhabists and Khomeinism have sought to camouflage themselves in the faith for their own purposes. The reality is that both Wahabbism and Khomeinism are pseudo faiths that bear no relation to the tolerance and vision of the religion of Islam.

I also think there is the problem of authoritarianism, not only with authoritarian states but also in democratic states that sometimes act in an authoritarian way. This occurs when governments try to impose their way of doing things on other countries.

Sadly the United States and Britain are doing this in Iraq – they are effectively in control of the country and I don't think any country has the right to do this to another.

IA-Forum: What does the United Nations need to do to stay relevant in the twenty first century?

Das Nalapat: In today's world things change incredibly quickly. Take a computer's anti-virus software as an example. There are changes effected every few hours. It has to adapt. Some cars change models about every six months, airplanes in as many years. Yet the UN's basic system and structure hasn't changed at all. The UN needs to change its outdated structure to reflect the world as it is today. To respond more quickly to the challenges it faces, the UN needs to accept that India and Brazil - and later South Africa - are definitely entitled to the same rights as are now given to France and Britain. The world in 2006 is very different from what it was in 1946, yet the UN structure still continues in this time warp. It's small wonder that the organization as a whole is usually ineffective and often counter-productive.

IA-Forum: What do you think about India's quest for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council?

Das Nalapat: At the moment India is looking at a permanent seat without the right of veto. But the veto is the crucial element. It is a contradiction in terms to have a permanent seat without the veto. I don't believe the Indian government should be putting so much time and effort into pursuing a seat. It should concentrate on addressing inequalities and poverty – on making India as prosperous and successful as possible. Thereafter, it will become impossible to sweep aside India's claims.

IA-Forum: Do you think the nuclear deal between the US and India is compatible with the objective of international peace?

Das Nalapat: In an ideal world every single country should abandon nuclear weapons. There should just be an internationally-controlled (by the UN Security Council, for example) stock that could be used, for example, in extreme circumstances such as if there were a meteor on collision course with earth or if nuclear blasts are needed to fight back deadly Climate Change. But no country should have its own offensive capabilities. That is in an ideal world.

But India does not live in an ideal world. It is confronted by proxy nuclear states – North Korea, Pakistan – who are developing nuclear weapons and who have certainly been building missiles. In this kind of system it is important that India has a deterrent.

As far as the Bush-Manmohan Singh nuclear deal is concerned I think it is a bad idea. India has an abundant supply of thorium, but not uranium. The deal risks making India dependent on uranium and as the price goes up, India could become dependent on expensive outside sources just like what is happening with petroleum.

The agreement will also likely damage India's science and technology base. Other countries should not be so quick to criticize India about its nuclear capability. India is in a tougher part of the world than countries like Britain and France, so why is it OK for France and Britain but not India? Any country that devotes itself to its own nuclear research is what I call a natural nuclear state. What poses the real danger is cross-border proliferation. This is what we need to work on. We need to completely stop the flow of nuclear-weapons technology across borders

IA-Forum: What do you think about the idea of an Asian NATO? Or NAATO as I think you once dubbed it?

Das Nalapat: I believe it is a good idea – in my view an Asian NATO is very important. Unfortunately Europe is viewed with some suspicion in Asia these days. This may be unwarranted but stems from its colonial days. Hence the presence once again of European troops on Asian soil leads to misgivings amongst many. Having European armies on Asian soil is causing resentment and discontent. If there were Asian rather than European contributors to military forces in say, Afghanistan, there would not be this same level of discontent.

The US must also remember that it has to be a force for the whole world, not just the leader for western countries. The US is multi-continental in its population and culture, and this diversity is yet to be reflected in its foreign policy. This is why its actions are causing so much resentment in parts of Asia and South America. Rather than rely on European forces, the US needs to work with Asian countries in creating an effective security system that's Asian-based. Otherwise it will fail.

Take, for example, the Vietnam experience: each American who arrived to fight caused two people to join the Vietcong; similarly in Iraq. Each heavy-handed operation of the US-UK troops there creates more volunteers for the Mujahideen. By continuing to see itself as the spearhead not of human progress but only of the western part, Washington is setting itself up for some very tough times. It is time that the US developed a security strategy in Asia that gives countries there the same status and responsibilities as those enjoyed by its major European partners. This was the background to my 1999 call for an Asian NATO

Unfortunately President Bush has in the last 2 and a half years gone back to a traditional Europe-centric policy, just consulting America's European allies. Take Iran. Why was only Germany added to the Permanent Five (US, UK, China, Russia and France) in dealing with Iran? Why not Japan and India as well? What is the difference between Japan and Germany? And recently the United States has through its own actions started to look like an imperial power in a way that is damaging not just to the international order but specifically to its own interests.

IA-Forum: Many thanks for your time.