

Emerging Paradigms of National Security: Threats & Responses

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Abstract

With the rise of China, and the deepening contestation between several powers, the international order is in a state of flux, searching for equilibrium. India's relationships with internal and external political entities are now increasingly complex and elastic, with dynamic variances between cooperation and conflict. The rise of China and its disputes with the US have unleashed multiple tensions due to shifts in the tectonic plates of global geopolitics. These shifts have manifested in the reworking of relationships that impact the sources and characters of threats. This article brings out that In India's national security paradigm, all threats that have the potential to impact its core interests and developmental progress substantially and negatively, would be issues of concern for national security.

Introduction

National Security paradigms are generated from the interplay of external and internal environments. For India, important changes in both the environments, have been picking up pace over several decades. The broad trajectory of these changes is characterised by a mutation in relationships between political entities. Externally, with the rise of China, and the deepening contestation between several powers, the international order is in a state of flux, searching for equilibrium. Presently, it seems, the world is between orders. The major alterations in India's internal environment, meanwhile, relate to sustained, albeit inequitable, economic growth for three decades, despite setbacks in social harmony.

Earlier, India had to navigate the muddy waters of global power shifts while promoting and protecting its fundamental aspiration of pulling its people out of poverty, illiteracy and ill-health. Post Kargil, security was redefined as the peaceful management

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of change in an orderly way and the harmonisation of conflicting interests, as also understanding the views and perspectives of different groups within the nation and internationally. Dogmatic attitudes, whether political, religious, sectarian, or ethnic, and the resistance to necessary, non-violent changes are considered the biggest threats.¹

The aim of India's national security paradigm framework has been to focus on responses to threats that impede the pathways to its fundamental goals. While the paradigm itself remains unchanged, the context within which it operates keeps changing, due to varying tensions in relationships, both externally and internally. India's relationships with internal and external political entities are now increasingly complex and elastic, with dynamic variances between cooperation and conflict. Ties are also constantly pounded by pressures generated in bilateral and multilateral contexts. This is further complicated by the maze of networks produced from global connectivity. Old associations are giving way to new groupings that are better described as partnerships, since cooperation and conflict are becoming increasingly contextual. For instance, India could cooperate with China on climate change and with the USA on nuclear proliferation while disagree on trade. In particular, India's relationships with most world powers are ever-changing.

Among the emerging downstream national security paradigms is the draining of the energy and resources of India's political, economic and security forces due to an increase in external and internal threats. Resource availability for developmental goals has decreased and the situation has further worsened due to the impact of Covid-19 on the Indian economy. ***The extent of progress made in national security and developmental goals will depend on how India responds to the threats and opportunities of the strategic environment*** that are going to present themselves during what is likely to be the stormy 2020s.

India's Strategic Environment

The rise of China and its disputes with the US have unleashed multiple tensions due to shifts in the tectonic plates of global geopolitics. These shifts have manifested in the reworking of relationships that impact the sources and characters of threats. Simultaneously, the means enabling both the threats and the responses to them are constantly evolving, driven by a combination of human ingenuity and technological progress. The interaction of the changes in the means used to achieve objectives in the context of changing relationship equations underpins the ambience of India's strategic milieu.

At the global level, superpower competition has deepened. Sino-US relations have worsened; Russia and China have moved closer to each other and the European Union's relations with the US have weakened. Global, multi-lateral initiatives, structures and institutions like the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organisation (WTO), Nuclear Arms Control and Climate Change Treaties have been rendered fragile due to dilution in international cooperation. In addition to military tensions, the relations between major powers are being defined and driven by trade frictions; including coercion through economic leverage and technological disruption and denial. Increased Sino-American military tensions, especially, in the maritime space in the Asia-Pacific, have drawn several nations including India, Japan, Australia, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Korea and most nations of the Indian Ocean littoral, closer together. Cyber and Space technologies are increasingly being used for surveillance, subversion, exploitation and coercion in international relations.

China's impressive economic growth has facilitated the use of economic statecraft, as a weapon to increase its influence across the globe. Its flagship project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), includes digital connectivity as an important component. Though justified in its economic logic, BRI has significant geopolitical consequences that will impact the entire Eurasian land and maritime space through control of connectivity and infrastructure. Ironically, distaste for globalisation has spread in the U.S., while China champions its cause. Though there is talk by many countries of economic decoupling, it is easier said than done given China's status as the manufacturing hub of the world and its impressive strides in cutting-edge technologies. Technology has thus, emerged as a major actor in geopolitical rivalries.

For India, the shadows cast by the superpower rivalry continue to challenge the firming up of its geopolitical stance. India's relations with the USA, China, Russia, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, South Korea, the African nations, and the West and South Asian countries are in a state of transition. In 2020, relations with China and Pakistan worsened with increased potential for conflict. India's influence in its neighbourhood is facing the headwinds generated by China's use of its economic clout to incorporate India's neighbours in a Sino-Asian sphere. This quest is part of China's wider play for influence in the Eurasian land and maritime space, in which Russia is its major partner. Russia's growing proximity to China has complicated Indo-Russian relations. Worsening U.S.-Russia relations have also had some impact on Indo-Russian relations, as evidenced by the fall out of the S-400 deal.

India's growing proximity in defence cooperation with the U.S. is a concern for China. India's participation in the QUAD and its indications of moving towards a QUAD plus arrangement, have been opposed by Russia and China, and described as an

attempt to create an Asian NATO. China's aggression on the Sino-Indian border and the loss of lives in the Galwan incident on 15 June 2020, have buried the hopes for stable Sino-Indian relations in the foreseeable future though an easing of tensions is becoming slowly visible. For India, two implications are evident. First, it is saddled by seemingly never-ending military confrontations on its borders with China and Pakistan. This will add to India's resource constraints that will weaken its quest to be a maritime power. Second, India may no longer continue to hedge its bets regarding its geopolitical stance and continue to sit on the fence, as its present posture does not inspire confidence among its possible partners.

External Threats

There should be no doubt that China presents the greatest threat to India's developmental agenda. China's attitude to India is conditioned by its geopolitical rivalry with the U.S. The sensitivity arises from India's geopolitical heft, impacting the global power balance. In particular, the maritime space of the Indian Ocean, as part of larger Indo-Pacific, presents a geographic dilemma for China, which is anchored in the strategic logic, of the need to secure vulnerable trade routes, especially, those of energy, raw materials and manufactured goods.

Impeding India's growth and keeping it confined to the South Asian sub-continent has been on China's geopolitical agenda for several decades. Earlier, Pakistan was China's primary cat's-paw to keep India distracted. Since 2012, the Northern border and India's neighbourhood, including parts of the Indian Ocean littoral countries, have been added to China's strategy to contain India. Threat from China is fundamentally fuelled by the tyranny of geography and will last until alternatives open up through the Arctic or overland through Eurasia. For India, throughout the next two to three decades threats in varied forms from China, supplemented by Pakistan, can be expected to continue. The lethality of threats can also be expected to sharpen due to Xi Jing Ping's authoritarianism and ambitious proclivities. This will be her primary national security challenge.

The nature of the threat from China is manifold: military, economic, diplomatic, and technological. Militarily and diplomatically, this threat clearly is in nexus with Pakistan. A prolonged, low-level conflict on the Northern and Western borders would provide pathways for achieving the higher-level strategic aims of China and Pakistan, which is to keep India contained within the sub-continent. Salami Slicing on the Northern borders and improving naval capability in the Indian Ocean can be expected to be China's core military activities. Pakistan is likely to continue to use terrorism and sporadically, light up the LOC as a tool of foreign policy. However, any attempt at

application of force by either power would have to take into account, the nuclear factor. ***The military paradigm with China and Pakistan would thus, be one of Confrontation – Crisis – Limited Conflict – Confrontation. While Confrontation with both countries would be the default condition, crises could be frequent and sometimes prolonged.*** Limited conflict could consist of short and sharp exchange of force and may simultaneously involve both China and Pakistan.

Diplomatically, China can be expected to play spoiler in India's international efforts towards counterterrorism measures, obtaining membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, setting norms for a free and open Indo-Pacific region and the use of cyber and space technologies. Pakistan and China could also be expected to side-line India in the Afghanistan peace process and block its efforts for permanent membership in the Security Council.

Technologically, China's presence in India's critical infrastructure in communications, financial technology, defence and governance could pose serious threats to national security. The transfer of nuclear and defence technology to Pakistan by China, which has been going on for long, poses an additional national security threat.

Internal Threats

India's internal security challenges are either standalone or linked to external support. Terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir and other parts of India continues to be orchestrated by Pakistan. Violent uprisings in the Northeast, use Myanmar as the conduit and have China's patronage. Left Wing Extremism (LWE) in the tribal belt of Central India has indigenous socioeconomic roots. Going forward, with China's increasing influence in Nepal, the probability of a Nepal conduit for LWE has increased. The political objective of interference in India's internal affairs will be to contain India by drawing its political energy inwards.

The machinations of external actors are converging with a churn in India's domestic polity. India's social harmony, based on a plural and secular outlook, is under pressure from forces that believe that India's appeasement of minorities has disadvantaged the Hindu majority. This phenomenon is now coupled with an exponential surge in unemployment, due to inadequate economic growth that must accommodate the burgeoning numbers entering the job market. Unemployed youth are fodder for extremist views in a society that can be radically networked through social media. ***The prospects of radicalism could be carried on the shoulders of unemployed youth and given wings by the calls for global Jihad and Hindu***

majoritarianism. This combination could present a lethal threat to India's internal security.

Responses

National Security Strategy. For India, in a material sense, equitable and speedy economic growth is an indispensable condition, to develop the tools of power. But developing various forms of power requires political sagacity that has to contend with the pushes and pulls of the political economy. Without strategic guidance, capability building lacks political direction and oversight. An essential first step in India's security responses is carrying out a strategic review that will identify threats and opportunities within the framework of the basic paradigm of securing India's growth. This must be followed by crystallising a National Security Strategy (NSS). Nearly three years ago, the Defence Planning Committee, headed by the National Security Agency (NSA), was tasked to evolve the NSS, but is yet to complete the task. Surprisingly, the Home Ministry was not represented on the Committee. Logically, the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) which was established for such purposes should be hosting it.

As stated earlier, India should no longer hedge its bets on global geopolitical rivalries. India's political leadership will have to decide the type of bilateral and multilateral relationships it wishes to establish with various international actors, even if these are contextual. Specifically, India's geopolitical stance towards Sino-U.S. rivalry must no longer be ensconced in ambiguity. This is not about jumping on to the bandwagon with one or the other, but about adopting a strategy that will expand India's range of choices while preserving its strategic autonomy, thus enabling the achievement of security and development goals with a certain amount of flexibility. The dilemma is that even though China is a geopolitical adversary, economically, India cannot disengage itself due to critical dependencies. On the contrary, China's dependence on Indian markets is minimal though India's market size cannot be ignored. India needs USA, Russia and other powers, like Japan and Israel, for strengthening its defence capability, diplomatic support; trade and provision of technology. The U.S. has been coveting India's participation as a counter-balancing force for a long time now, as signified by the nuclear deal in 2005. Though considerable progress has been made in these relationships, especially in the defence arena, India's ambivalence regarding China has been a cause of disappointment to the U.S. and others.

The on-going Sino-Indian border crisis should serve to disabuse India's political leadership of the fancy notions of China seeking a friendly relationship between the elephant and the dragon. India's political leadership must accept that contemporary Sino-Indian frictions are not a purely bilateral construct. It is, in fact, embedded in a

multilateral landscape that makes them prisoners of geography. ***As long as China views India as a potential spoiler in achieving its goal of becoming a Number One global power, applying varied types of pressure to influence India's strategic behaviour can be expected.*** Such an acceptance will provide clarity on the nature of relationships India must seek with USA, China, Russia and other powers, including its immediate neighbours. Without doubt, this will be a balancing act that will put to test the efficacy of Indian statecraft.

In the international arena, continuous application of the instruments of power is required to support foreign policy. Political engagement through diplomacy, which is backed by hard and soft power, has to absorb changes in the form and use of specific tools that may require modification over time and space through human agency and technological innovation. Human agency, it must be noted, is the abiding shaper and mover of the strategic actions of political communities. Notably, the leaders, as the practitioners of power, cannot be free of human frailties, even when blessed with highly desirable human qualities.

What is likely to characterise the future of security strategy is the speed of change in the means used. These means rest in tools, whose application is guided by strategy. Intelligence, diplomacy, hard and soft power, technology, strategic communications, and economic strength are the tools of strategy that must be nurtured endlessly.

Intelligence. With the relentless increase in the pace of change in the methods, the inability of India's national-level political and bureaucratic decision-making systems to foresee and respond to threats is a cause for concern. The weakness in our strategic intelligence assessment capability has been repeatedly exposed, most recently by China's aggressive moves on the Northern border. It is also a basic principle in national security decision making that intelligence acquisition, assessment and policy formulation must be kept separate. The 2018 reconfiguration of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the apex committee for assessment, seems to have violated this principle. The methodology being followed requires review. Also, although technical intelligence is rapidly progressing in the Cyber and Space front, human intelligence retains its utility and must not be neglected.

Diplomacy. Fostering sound relationships is the touchstone of diplomacy. India's diplomacy has a distinguished history and the human capital of its diplomats has been the subject of global recognition and acclaim. The expansion of India's engagement with the world as also the exponential growth in diplomatic activities, call for considerable expansion in the size of the diplomatic cadre. This problem has been acknowledged,

but for several reasons, the required expansion has not materialised, with attempts at lateral induction being stillborn. The need is for political intervention to address the issue. Recognition of the importance of soft power in foreign policy has resulted in it being accorded due importance by the Ministry of External Affairs. Cultural exchanges, educational support programmes and deepening people-to-people contact have been the main activities. A major weakness is in the inadequacy of scholarship and research work on China, and the limited availability of Chinese language interpreters that limits our understanding, analysis and ability to respond to the challenges posed by China. The decision by the education department to stop teaching Chinese in schools must be reversed as it is a retrograde measure. However, despite the presence of nuclear weapons, politics and diplomacy can still fail and resorting to hard power may become inevitable.

Hard Power. The growth of India's hard power has been handicapped by lack of political direction. The problem emanates from the absence of a NSS and is reflected by incoherent military strategy. With the institution of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Department of Military Affairs and Permanent Chairman of the Chief of Staff Committee, the incoherence should be addressed better. Broadly, three areas require clarity and they can be achieved only through an institutionalised civil-military dialogue. First, given the likely availability of resources, what political objectives should the Armed Forces be prepared to achieve against potential adversaries? Second, the answer to the first query will allow for a clear focus of our nature and scope of our military makeup and posture. Third, a balance between continental and maritime power should follow, which will indicate the military instruments which require building up. Once these issues are decided, the structural conception and the establishment of the future Theatre Command System should be carried out.

Cyber and Space are the emerging 'geographies' that are gaining pervasive influence in war. Although the strategic logic of war is indifferent to geography; the character of war is unique to differing geographic environments. Technology is expanding the material aspect of warfare through platforms and devices. But given the instrumental nature of technology and the contestation of its utilisation in warfare, demands on human agency for successful outcomes would still endure.

Strengthening military effectiveness must also involve the development of joint doctrine and training. Importantly, it must be accompanied by addressing long-pending insufficiencies of the Defence Research and Development, Defence Industrial base and the Defence Acquisition systems. ***The major areas of weakness are in the aeronautics and the maritime domains. Developing state-of-the-art technologies, and their application and production as military gadgets, calls for a consistently-***

comprehensive governmental approach that improves the ecosystem which includes the following: a sturdy academic and research base; level playing fields for public and private sectors, both Indian and foreign; a vibrant start up ecosystem that is backed by easy access to capital and a regulatory framework that favours functional speed and equal opportunity to vendors.

Strategic Communications. In the ultimate analysis, seeking political influence is a mind game which is about affecting or changing the will of the other. The human will is shaped by beliefs that are in turn influenced by narratives. Therefore, effective strategic communications are indispensable. Judged from the long periods of official silence during the Ladakh crisis, it is an area that has considerable room for improvement and needs to be addressed on an urgent basis.

Meritocracy. The ultimate strength of responses will rest on the quality of human capital that populates the structures in the wider systems of the government. While the private sector continues to become increasingly meritocratic, government structures are unable to privilege meritocracy as the prime vehicle for selecting key persons and leaders. Entrenched political and bureaucratic interests, coupled with the grip of a generalist civil services cadre on key appointments, has created a system that has undermined the linkage between performance and promotion. A parliamentary commission should examine this issue.

Conclusion

In India's national security paradigm, all threats that have the potential to impact its core interests and developmental progress substantially and negatively would be issues of concern for national security. While there is always the danger of overemphasising security concerns that could be better dealt with as development issues, it is also important not to ignore the security aspects of development while preserving constitutional values of individual liberties, privacy and human rights. Similarly, India should never endanger its economic growth, social harmony and political democracy. National security threats can no longer be responded to only by acquiring greater hard power. National security is deeply and intricately linked to the knowledge society and the knowledge economy, which at its core is multidisciplinary and highly collaborative.²

The role of technology in engineering changes in support of diplomacy must be acknowledged. ***Further, force, intelligence and strategic communications is reliant on economic and scientific strengths, that are grounded in the twin factors of resource availability and the knowledge ecosystem.*** India's emerging paradigm of

national security has to align its response to threats, by prioritising the building of capabilities in the domains of diplomacy and hard and soft power. It must be accompanied by concomitant efforts to strengthen intelligence, technological capability and strategic communications. Moreover, one should never forget the instrumental nature of power, that relies on wisdom, to achieve its purpose. In statecraft, as in other modes in human affairs, seeking to maximise cooperation without conflict, is an eternal goal, that has to often confront the reality, that force in a variety of forms could be used for coercion, in the pursuit of political objectives. The ultimate purpose of power is to endure even as the means of its realisation changes. In imagining India's security paradigms, one must not conflate purpose with the means.

End Notes

¹K Subramanyam, *The Making of the Security Policy Structure, Shedding Shibboleths*, (Wordsmiths 2005), pg 18.

²Sunil Khilnani et al *Non-Alignment 2.0*, (Penguin, 2013, Kindle edition), pg 177.