India: Security Challenges and National Responses

Lt General Kamal Davar
1. Introduction

India stands at a crossroads. One of the world’s oldest surviving civilizations, albeit a young nation with all the potential to become a global player, India is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious nation that symbolizes a unique ‘unity in diversity’ in today’s increasingly violent world, which is fractured by religious, sectarian and ideological divides. The success of the Indian experiment is important not just for India, but for the prospects for global peace.

With a population of 1.25 billion, India constitutes the world’s largest democracy, the seventh largest country, has the fourth largest military, and is a nuclear-armed state. With a US$2.1 trillion economy, India is widely acknowledged to be an emerging global player. Yet, India today confronts a wide spectrum of strategic challenges to its security, economic growth and values that may yet slow its inevitable rise.

Is India ready to successfully confront the existing myriad challenges to its security and economic wellbeing and those likely to come its way in the foreseeable future? And is India’s security architecture and its politico-bureaucratic elite alive and responsive to the formidable multi-dimensional challenges to its security? This remains a debatable question in the minds of many of India’s security analysts and well-wishers.

2. India: Lacking a Strategic Culture

“Indian elites show little evidence of having thought coherently and systematically about strategy”, lamented the renowned American scholar George Tanham, in 1992. Tanham went on to state that “no serious strategic planning institutions, if they ever existed, have survived in independent India, and none exists today”, before concluding that “strategic innovation will not come from within the traditional government bureaucracy.” Even the UK based Economist journal, in its 30 March 2013 issue, opined that “instead of clear strategic thinking, India shuffles along, impeded by its caution and bureaucratic inertia.”

This malaise in India’s strategic outlook could largely be attributed to its overly peaceful moralistic orientation and the lack of aggressive and expansionist intent among its rulers (barring an odd exception). Indian rulers, historically, have mostly been occupied defending their territory against invaders from foreign lands, rather than embarking on expeditionary missions beyond India’s frontiers. India has to rid itself of such perceptions for they do not work in today’s unforgiving world. A judicious policy mix of the pursuit of peace and preparedness for war is consequently the only answer.

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In today’s context, national security challenges include not only traditional military and nuclear threats, but a multitude of other threats, including; terrorism; energy security; cyber security; demographic, ethnic and communal challenges; the proliferation of drugs; and, economic crime. Some of the challenges in the security and strategic spectrum that are likely to acquire greater salience for India in the coming years are discussed below.

3. China: Not a Peaceful Rise

Nearly 200 years ago, Napoleon had prophetically stated that “let China sleep, for when she wakes, the world will tremble”. Notwithstanding the very recent economic meltdown in China, it is the second largest economy by nominal Gross Domestic Product and largest by Purchasing Power Parity. It boasts of the world’s largest standing armed forces (2.3 million active troops) and the second largest annual defence budget (US$13.5 billion, which a number of security analysts suggest is actually much higher). China’s burgeoning financial and, consequently, its military might continue to be on a gigantic upswing propelled by its ancient civilisation wisdom of realpolitik, embellished now by a well thought out strategic vision and nationalistic ambitions which are distinctly unparalleled. That China will be a super power by 2028-30, if not earlier, is understating a stark reality.

Many geopolitical luminaries have often exclaimed that the 21st century will be an Asian century and named China and India as the lead players, alongside Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam, among others. China sees India as its main rival - globally, regionally, economically and militarily. However, the growing asymmetric chasm, economically and militarily, between Indian and China should surely be a serious cause of worry for New Delhi.

In the last few years, China has unabashedly been assertive in Asia, especially in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. It has been arrogantly disregarding the universally accepted United Nations Law of the Seas, expanding its naval footprint in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea region and the Western Pacific. It has been feverishly reclaiming land in the South China Sea to construct artificial islands which can be employed for military use.

One of the manifestations of the changing Chinese military doctrine is the introduction of a new cliché in the lexicon of the Chinese military, namely ‘Grand Periphery Military Strategy’. The Chinese move to expand high speed rail networks and equipping over 1000 railway stations with military transport facilities points towards the furtherance of its strategy in its diverse border areas, enabling it to ensure rapid offensive deployment. The excellent fast rail network to Tibet is an appropriate example of this. Apart from ensuring excellent connectivity with Tibet, China is well on the way to replicate the same with Nepal and also to Chumbi Valley (towards Sikkim and Bhutan). The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Pakistan in March 2015 and his announcement of the ambitious US$46 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), from Kashgar in China’s restive Xinjiang province to the deep sea Gwadar Port in Baluchistan on the Arabian Sea, via Gilgit Baltistan (GB) and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), is an example of China’s ever expanding strategic reach. Once fully operational, this corridor will enable China to overcome its energy apprehensions commonly referred to as China’s ‘Malacca Dilemma’. 
China’s relationship with Pakistan, based on nuclear weapons and strategic missiles, and its modernizing of Pakistan’s armed forces is aimed against India. For China, Pakistan is a low-cost guarantor of security against India. For Pakistan, China is a high-value guarantor of security against India. Apart from nuclear, missiles and many forms of modern military largesse to Pakistan, the Chinese footprint in the disputed Gilgit-Baltistan and POK regions is on the increase. Reportedly, nearly 10,000 Chinese military personnel have been stationed there, in the guise of engineer personnel and labour, for infrastructural development of the Karakoram Highway and flood relief. Media reports also indicate that POK has been leased to the Chinese for 50 years and this adequately conveys Chinese determination to go ahead with the CPEC. This mega-connectivity corridor has serious strategic ramifications for India. Not only does it run through India’s periphery, it also runs through GB and POK, which India claims, on the basis that these areas formed part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir which acceded to India in 1947. For India, how it tackles the Chinese on this issue will be a significant pointer of its strategic determination. Interestingly, Pakistan also has security concerns for the proposed CPEC, while some inter-provincial discord exists on the alignment and investments in Pakistan’s different provinces.

The term ‘enigma’ has symbolized China, down the ages. But in the past few years, China has transcended this definition to emerge as an ambitious, assertive and focused country unabashedly pursuing its core interests, unmindful of any upheavals which may result in its neighbouring regions. The world needs to consider China’s unrestrained motivations.

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and Tibet, which has been in existence since the 1962 India-China war, is yet to be physically demarcated on the ground and officially delineated. In the relations between the two Asian giants, this ambiguity remains a major destabilizing factor. Unfortunately, despite lip service to maintenance of peace and tranquillity in the Aksai Chin region, the Chinese are showing no signs of resolving this vexed issue with any alacrity and, instead, resort to frequent incursions. China remains in physical possession of 38000 km² of Indian territory in the Aksai Chin region. Also worrisome to India has been the Chinese disregarding of the 1913 McMahon Line and now claiming 96000 kms² in Arunachal Pradesh (earlier known as NEFA or the North East Frontier Agency), which the Chinese refer to as Southern Tibet.

In the foreseeable future, whether India-China relations will be symbolized by cooperation, competition or conflict is an analysis which many Asia watchers may opine is fraught with uncertainties. But it is clear that it will largely depend on the military preparedness and future economic resurgence of India, for China respects only strength. As the academics Michael Swaine and Ashely Tellis argue: “the continued increase in China’s relative economic and military capabilities, combined with its maritime strategic orientation, if sustained over many years, will certainly produce both a redefinition of Beijing’s strategic orientation ... that directly or indirectly challenge many of the existing equites.”


4. Pakistan: Unchanging Mindsets and Self Destructive Strategies

Born from the womb of the same Mother India in August 1947, Pakistan has since partition displayed animosity and belligerence towards its parent nation. With the sixth largest armed forces and an alarmingly growing nuclear arsenal – reportedly slightly larger than India’s – Pakistan is indeed a credible security threat to its larger neighbour independently or in collusion with China, its mentor nation.

Pakistan has been badly affected by corroding Islamic radicalization, not only in its society, but even in its armed forces, especially in the middle and junior ranks. It also suffers frequent terror attacks perpetrated by those very elements it had raised and trained for terror activities in India and Afghanistan. Its economy is on the brink of bankruptcy and surviving because of aid from the US, China and Saudi Arabia. Many South Asia watchers opine that Pakistan has all the ingredients of a ‘failing or failed state’. Terrorism and nuclear weapons go on/together to make an apocalyptic cocktail and thus the world and India, in particular, has to factor in weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of the many terror organisations working inside Pakistan. In addition, Pakistan periodically brandishes its possession of nukes to India to achieve some deterrence vis-a-vis its economically and militarily more powerful neighbour.

Regrettably, for Pakistan, criticism of India is the most convenient fall back option. India looms all over the Pakistani strategic mind-set, in its geo-political formulations and the centricity of its military and nuclear ambitions. Pakistan seeks parity with India in all spheres, but India, as it embarks on any peace initiative with Pakistan, may wish to recall Pakistan’s track record. Pakistan has waged wars with India in 1947-48, 1965, 1971 and, in Kargil, in 1999. Apart from stoking the fires of insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, engineering major terrorist strikes in Mumbai in 1993 and 2008, Pakistan’s fostering of Sikh militancy in Punjab, support of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) insurgents in Assam, and training and indoctrination of some misguided Muslim youth in the Indian hinterland continues. Through the aegis of its sinister spy agency, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan regularly pumps fake Indian currency, via Nepal, and smuggles terrorists into India. The ISI allegedly supports a variety of anti-India terror outfits, such as: the Jaamat-ul-Dawa and its affiliate the Lashkar-e-Tioba; Jaish-e-Mohd; Hizb-ul-Mujahideen; and, Sipah-e-Sabah. The ISI also allegedly nurtures the Afghani Talibán, and the Haqqani and Hekayatmar networks in Afghanistan.

The Indian security establishment also needs to carefully monitor the growing military collusion of the Pakistan-China strategic axis. Most analysts conclude that it would not be possible for Islamabad to wage its proxy war against India without Beijing’s military backing and financial support. China has ‘guaranteed Pakistan’s territorial integrity’ but it is not clear against whom. Beijing has also furnished much military hardware to Islamabad.

It requires no detailed analysis that the modernisation of Pakistan’s armed forces is primarily directed against India.
The Modi government, as it works to establish good neighbourly relations, has to make it clear to Pakistan that the sooner the Pakistanis rid themselves of their Kashmir fixation and India centricity in all their formulations, India-Pakistan relations may move beyond a zero-sum game. Pakistan has to rid itself of its propensity of planning terror inside India and rein in its infamous ISI from its anti-India machinations. Pakistan needs to be strongly told that India has not exploited Pakistan’s many fault lines, but India’s patience should not be taken for granted. Relations cannot improve in a one way alley.

5. Tackling Terrorism, Internal Security Challenges and Left Wing Extremism

Terrorism has been the scourge of the modern age for decades and India too has been gravely afflicted with this externally foisted evil phenomenon, especially in the last 25 years or so. Since its independence, India has also faced indigenous insurgencies in some of its north-eastern states. In addition, violent Maoist/Naxal movement, officially called the Left Wing Extremism or LWE, has gained strength in India’s hinterland running across the country’s central heartland from north-east to south-west, referred to as the ‘red corridor’. Thus, serious internal security challenges also impinge the Indian state.

As is widely accepted the world over, Pakistan has used the instrument of terror in its efforts to destabilize India. In full knowledge that it was impossible to wrest Jammu and Kashmir by force, Pakistan has been pursuing a well-calibrated strategy to stoke the fires of separatism in Jammu and Kashmir. Whenever peace and relative stability returns to the state, Pakistan, through its paid agents, endeavours to whip up tensions in the state whilst also stepping up ceasefire violations along the Line of Control and the international border. While India needs to adopt a consistent, firm and realistic policy towards Pakistan, it must also be introspective. Despite generous financial and developmental assistance to Jammu and Kashmir and the holding of several elections to its state assembly, some Kashmiris have not been integrated with India.

Though India’s response to counter terror has been mostly reactive, there have been some encouraging signs as regards major structural changes in our internal security architecture and some modernization effected, especially after the 2008 Mumbai terror strike. However, much more has to be done in India to put into place various measures to reduce terror related incidents. At the outset, political parties must not politicize terror and a broad national consensus among all parties must be ensured on a national strategy and measures to be adopted to combat terror. Secondly, India may consider drawing up pre-emptive strike plans against terrorist infrastructure in POK. Thirdly, India must continue to improve its intelligence gathering, analysis and dissemination machinery, both in human and technology intelligence. Pakistan has to be impressed upon, first by dialogue and if it fails, by speedy and effective kinetic responses, if required, that terrorism against India will not be tolerated. Pakistan has to be widely ostracized by the international community until it changes tack. In all likelihood, it is likely never to do so until financial aid to it is cut-off.

As regards tackling LWE, sadly India has still not come out with a coherent integrated policy to combat this indigenous phenomenon. On the other hand, Naxals/Maoist terrorists are growing in
strength, acquiring modern weaponry (some of which is smuggled from outside the country), employing innovative tactics to inflict casualties on the security forces, and are becoming financially self-sustaining to fuel their violent activities. The Indian government has to adopt a multi-dimensional and multi-layered policy to combat the LWE phenomenon, modernize the state and central police and the paramilitary forces, and improve the intelligence gathering mechanisms at the grassroots level while also addressing the socio economic malaise contributing to the LWE phenomenon.

6. The Asia Pacific Region and Maritime Challenges

Since the end of the Cold War, the centre of gravity has shifted decisively from the Euro-Atlantic region to the Asia-Pacific region. The US, which wishes to retain its primacy in the Indo-Pacific Asia, has looked to strengthen its “Pivot to Asia”, now referred to as “Rebalancing to Asia.” The US desire to maintain strong economic linkages with the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) nations and maintain a strong naval presence in this region is singularly prompted by the unabashed assertiveness being exhibited in the Asia-Pacific region by a militarily powerful China. Dangerous maritime encounters in Asia are on the rise with diplomatic crises, mostly engineered by China scoffing at international norms for the high seas. Such altercations could easily result into kinetic conflicts because of China’s frictions in these choppy waters with the US, Japan, India, Vietnam and others. It is increasingly evident that overall power equations in the IOR have implications not only for the littoral states but for the entire Asia Pacific region.

Some of the globe’s busiest sea lanes run through the Indian Ocean, carrying oil and natural resources, from the West to the East, for the ever burgeoning energy needs of China, Japan and other nations. Alive to threats in the Indian and Pacific Ocean to its energy sea-lanes and the Malacca Straits choke point, China has focused on the modernization of its navy. By 2020 or 2025, it could have three aircraft carrier battle groups, 60 submarines including 10 nuclear and over 100 surface combatants, if not more.

By virtue of its size, geographic location, economic and military potential, India is expected to play a leading role in keeping these sea lanes safe for international trade and commerce. The growing might of the Chinese Navy and its outreach to the IOR nations concerns India’s maritime interests. China’s Navy is developing formidable capabilities suited for sea denial. India will thus be wary of China’s recent initiative to rope in the IOR nations for its ambitious Maritime Silk Route. Whether it is a manifestation of China’s ‘string of pearls’ encirclement strategy of India as feared, or an engine of economic growth, needs further analysis.

The recent and long overdue visit by Prime Minister Modi, to some smaller, yet strategically significant, island states in the IOR, namely Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Seychelles, underscores India’s urgency to exercise its rightful influence in this vital region. The Chinese have often stated that the Indian Ocean is not India’s Ocean. Nevertheless, it is abundantly clear that the Indo-Pacific region is the zone for the next “Great Game” and India better be prepared to play its role. Thus, India will also have to strengthen its eastern seaboard maritime resources and importantly, the Andaman and Nicobar Command. In addition, India could take the lead in instituting confidence
building measures for all nations in the IOR and establishing mechanisms for preventing any untoward incidents in the high seas – China, importantly, will have to be taken on board.

7. Countering the Global Jihad

Islamic terrorism spanning increasingly wide swathes of the globe has emerged as one of the harsh realities of our age. The concept of the “global jihad” – whatever one thinks about the perverse interpretation of such a movement – is related to the Caliphate or “khilafat”, meaning an “Islamic world empire”. The Islamic State (IS), the brutally cruel terror organization earlier called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Al Shams (ISIS), presently straddles parts of Syria and Iraq, though the envisioned Caliphate of Salafist orientation includes areas of the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, including India.

The IS legions have far transcended Al Qaeda in their ability to mount strong attacks against their diverse targets, not only employing irregular warfare tactics but adding adequate conventional weaponry to their arsenal. West Asia today has become a battleground of Sunni-Shia conflict with thousands of casualties already and IS having converted this region into one huge disaster, millions displaced, rapes and sex slaves, cultural genocide and the subjugation of all others than those who practice the Sunni faith. With its vast social media reach all over the globe, including the western world, IS is attracting a sizeable number of young and even educated youth to their ranks.

So far the IS appeal to some misguided Sunni youth in India has been rather limited. A few IS flags have been brandished on a couple of occasions in the Kashmir Valley. Thus India will have to take note of all these future threats which may intensify in the years ahead. The Pakistani-Kashmiri separatists link to brainwashing young Muslims to IS’ global agenda has to be carefully monitored. Employing the services of secular minded Indian Muslim clerics to firewall Indian Muslim youth should also be considered.

8. Ensuring Requisite Combat Capabilities

Over the past two decades or so, the overall combat capabilities of the Indian Armed Forces have had a marked decline in ability to successfully tackle the challenges of a two-front war (China and Pakistan). Additionally, India has the dubious distinction of being the world’s largest importer of weaponry and equipment for some years. Successive governments have failed to energise the sluggish public sector Defence Research and Development Organisation and the Ordnance Factories. The Indian private sector, otherwise vibrant and forward looking, is also eagerly looking forward to partnering with the public sector on defence. PM Modi’s call for “Made in India” has to be accorded all the encouragement for it to be a success incorporating the public and private sectors and, importantly, global defence majors to produce state-of-the art defence equipment in India, including for export. However, critical deficiencies in the three services should be made up expeditiously by imports as required.
With the Chinese capability to cause electronic paralysis and cyber hacking, as already evident globally, India will also have to undertake urgent steps to ensure the security of its cyberspace, communication networks, systems and weapons which are computer controlled.

9. Conclusion

To meet the diverse likely security challenges to its integrity and economic growth and to successfully confront all challenges to its wellbeing, India has to get its act together to become a reckonable global power. India requires a nationally inspirational vision, a clear cut strategy embracing all the constituents of Comprehensive National Power and to synergise its diplomatic, economic, political, social and its military strengths, which it has in sufficient measure. Importantly, India must endeavour to achieve the capability and status of being a “net provider of security” for the region. The “India Story” has to succeed not only for itself but for all nations striving for democracy, freedom and stability in today’s increasingly troubled world.
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