

# Building Military Capability, Developing New Partnerships and Protecting National Interests in an Uncertain World Order

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## Introduction

The strategic need for nations to protect and promote their national interest in a changing world order has been the centre piece of global strategic discourse for some time. Linked to this aspect of national interest is the need to build military capability to prepare for the array of security challenges that lie ahead and also developing new partnerships, as the global order shifts from a unipolar model to a multipolar one. There is little dispute over the assertion that the world today is characterised by multi-layered and multi-faceted diversity from political, demographic, economic, environmental and strategic viewpoints. These issues are important from strategic perspective largely because it seems that the world is in another period of historical transition. It would be a fair assumption that we are living through a period of 'strategic uncertainty'.

## Review of the Global Order

A perfectly stable world order is a rare thing.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, in search for parallels to today's world, scholars and practitioners have looked as far as ancient Greece, where the rise of a new power resulted in war between Athens and Sparta. The global order which we live in today is widely believed to have been built in the aftermath of World War II. This order consisted of two parallel orders for most of its history.<sup>2</sup> One grew out of the Cold War between the United States and the then Soviet Union; and the other was the liberal order, which used aid and trade to strengthen

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ties and fostered respect for the rule of law both, within and between countries.

### **The New Normal**

The present competition between China and the United States is a new twist to an old story. Until the onset of the nineteenth century, China was by far the world's largest economy, with an estimated 40 per cent share of global GDP<sup>3</sup>. Then it entered a long decline, and around the same time the United States was born and began its long ascent to global dominance. Both countries have dominated the world, each has its own strengths and weaknesses and, for the first time, each confronts the other as near peer.<sup>4</sup> We can be confident that the game will continue as the world moves from an earlier unipolar or bipolar order to a multipolar one.

### **Important to have 'The Long View'**

There is a need to maintain a 'long view' and not be overly influenced by short-term changes. This is particularly important since there may be a tendency to view developments over the last few years as a sign of eclipse of a so called 'stable world order'<sup>5</sup>, but that would be a mistake. Although the recent challenges should not be underestimated, it is important to recognise that they are closer to the rule than the exception. Great power rivalry has been the driver of history, but we have to protect our core interests too. The power diffusion which we are witnessing is not a new or unique phenomenon. But at the same time, we will need to brace ourselves for the diverse array of strategic challenges which lie ahead. Many of these would have direct bearing on the national as well as regional security calculus.

We need to accurately assess as to where does India fit into this 'new normal'? The present phase is different from earlier ones. While geopolitical rivalry and the quest for global dominance may have been a '*signature phenomenon*' of the entire modern era, it is probably for the first time that we are sitting astride the centre-stage of this power competition – that of the Indo-Pacific. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed an eastward shift in the locus of global geopolitics and economic power play.<sup>6</sup> In the recent past, the idea of Indo Pacific has gained immense importance in international geopolitics. Given the arterial trade and energy routes originating

and passing through the region, several major players are making long-term investments to protect their energy interests hinging on this region. As an example to highlight the region's growing geostrategic importance, it is interesting to note that about 80 per cent of the trade originating from here is actually extra-regional. Unhindered flow of maritime trade through Indo Pacific Region thus assumes tremendous significance for the entire world. Further, in pure economic terms, the Indo Pacific Region contributes about 60 per cent of global GDP and is home to four of the top ten economies<sup>7</sup> of the world.

In military context, the region is home to ten largest standing armies<sup>8</sup> in the world.... and seven of the top ten countries in terms of global military expenditure<sup>9</sup>. The rising military power of the region has come to complicate the security calculus in many ways. The geo-strategic eminence of the Indo Pacific Region is here to stay. In the foreseeable future, the region would play a pivotal role in shaping the global economic and security paradigms. It is here that India has a definitive role to play in shaping the future world order. There is a renewed interest from the world to engage with India in this region, as the strategic need to preserve peace, promote stability and maintain security across Indo Pacific is no longer a regional necessity, but indeed a global imperative. It is this feature which makes the present times different from earlier ones, especially from an Indian perspective. We have the opportunity to play a central role in the primary theatre of geo-strategic competition

### **Opportunities for India**

This 'uncertain' world order affects India in profound ways. The challenges which it brings along are well known, but there is also the critical need to seize the strategic opportunities which these tectonic shifts offer. These opportunities cover the entire spectrum of global interactions, most prominent of them being in the economic, trade, technological and military domains. The growing stature and clout of India affords us the unique moment in history to play a major role in shaping the collective future of the world. Given the fact that by 2024 India is estimated to be a five trillion dollar economy<sup>10</sup>, it is but natural that we would have to assume a leadership role in global affairs, the signs of which are already on the horizon. We are better positioned to influence the new global and regional institutions<sup>11</sup> that are being created. The attributes of

our strong economy, robust governance and superior military provide us the prospect of reserving our seats on the table which nurtures and shapes the global future.

### **Protecting National Interests**

India's core interest centres around protecting our national interests in this uncertain world order, which forms the nucleus of all our future endeavours. The '*one and only*' driving factor of all our present and future endeavours will be '*National Interests*'. In fact, every measure that we initiate should have this facet at its very core. Safeguarding and promoting these interests would require a '*wholeship*' approach. Every arm of the government - be it finance, foreign policy, defence, trade, commerce, or technology - will have to work in unison to keep India's national interests safe and secure in these 'contested times'. While each enabler supports our national interests in myriad ways, a secure internal and external security environment, provided by the military and other agencies, facilitates sustained growth and development of the nation. Be it on land, in the air or on the maritime theatre, a benign environment is a catalyst for national progress. Speaking in pure military terms, this will require building deterrence, both conventional and nuclear, protecting our sovereignty, in all domains, as well as maintaining a credible presence in all areas of interest. Here, two aspects would merit consideration towards gearing for the future.

Firstly, it would be important for us to '*anticipate change*' and do it well. Change in the colours and shades of warfare will have to be accurately anticipated alongwith our response mechanisms. The times ahead are going to be different from the past. The rapidity with which events may escalate into full-blown conflicts cannot be overemphasised. As we have seen during the *Balakot* strike, in February 2019, a decisive, swift and calibrated response can lead to significant strategic gains. Therefore, our institutional capacity to anticipate changes across theatres would need to be of a very high order. This may also require a relook at our structures and processes, followed by corresponding recalibration, to keep pace with changing times.

Secondly, we would need to have an '*over-the-horizon approach*' towards our military capability building. Investments in developing futuristic technologies and achieving self-reliance in defence production should be high on priority list. While a lot has

been achieved in this area over the past few years, sustained efforts from all stakeholders including government, military, public sector undertakings, R&D organisations and private sector, including the Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), would be essential to pursue this line of effort. In fact, achieving 'Self Reliance in Defence Production', particularly in the field of niche technologies, should be a *national mission*.

As we progress along this vision, partnering with like-minded countries would play a key role, since both, the aspects of anticipating change and capability building, would prosper well when followed through a collaborative route. One important lesson, in this era of multi-polarity, is the growing relevance of regional balances and constellations. In this era, '*issue based convergence*' seems to be the new norm, in order to balance converging and conflicting interests. That means differences with a partner on certain issues should not obviate the scope of our mutual cooperation in other avenues.

We cannot afford to be flat-footed by dogma, prejudices or obsolete theories. When we look to the world, we would need to have an open-minded approach which allows us to pursue different approaches with different partners. For example, while we may *increase the tempo* of our engagements with certain long-cherished partners, we may also need to *manage* our relationships with others. At the same time, we will also need to '*cultivate and enthuse*' new partners. And, therefore, '*one-size-fits all*' approach may not serve our purpose in the coming times. It is important that every partnership, both existing and those on the anvil, is optimally leveraged for 'mutual growth'.

Distilling these thoughts into the military aspect, there are several opportunities for India to engage with the world, particularly in the aspect of capability and capacity building. With our robust defence structures, supported by credible multi-domain proficiency, we are very well placed to play a central role in pursuing government's foreign policy initiatives through military-to-military engagements. Several important policy initiatives have been introduced over the past few years, which have collectively enabled greater military interactions with partner states.

### **Promoting National Interests and Building Military Capability through Partnerships**

In this era of intertwined interests and challenges, it is imperative that we look at '*leveraging military partnerships*' as an essential enabler for pursuing and promoting national security objectives. These partnerships not only offer us an array of tangible benefits ranging from operational to capability building, but most importantly they also allow us to *hedge against the diverse security concerns* which pose serious challenges to the collective security. Some of our trusted military partnerships have contributed towards protecting our national interests as under:-

(a) *Foundational security agreements* enable significant sharing of resources and information in pursuance of respective national security interests. For example, the landmark conclusion of Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), in 2018, allows utilisation of US based encryption technology for communication instead of using the commercial communication technology. Similarly, dedicated logistics sharing agreements, like Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), allow us to mutually benefit through optimal utilisation of each other's logistics facilities covered under the provisions of the agreement. Another example is the Helicopter Operations from Ships other Than Aircraft Carriers (HOSTAC) arrangement which Indian Navy signed in 2018. This enables the Indian Naval helicopters to land on the decks of the ships of over 50 Navies and Coast Guards, significantly enhancing operational interoperability between countries.<sup>12</sup>

(b) Military engagements can also contribute towards new capability building initiatives, particularly as *joint developmental projects*, on advanced technologies. *Brahmos* offers one such shining example where a trusted military partnership translated into a tangible technological product, available to both countries. Similarly, our collaboration with Israel on such projects also substantiates this argument.

(c) Important *military acquisitions* also benefit from direct government-to-government (G2G) agreements. In our context, Navy's multi role helicopters, Air Force's *Rafale* fighters and Army's AK 203 Assault Rifles have all been possible because of robust inter-governmental partnerships.<sup>13</sup>



(d) Another important contribution of military partnerships is its role in enhancing the regional security environment. The *Indian Ocean Naval Symposium* (IONS), an initiative of the Indian Navy, started as a regional maritime security initiative in 2008. IONS, within a short span of 10 years, has evolved into a leading maritime organisation of the Indian Ocean Region, with 24 members and 8 observer states.<sup>14</sup> The forum today not only addresses regional and even sub-regional issues but also focuses on important security disciplines such as Maritime Security, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Information Sharing and Interoperability.<sup>15</sup>

(e) The cyber domain's emergence as the fifth theatre of war warrants us to look at this aspect with serious thought and focus. The cyber domain today has transcended national boundaries, acquiring a hybrid and trans-national character. It poses serious security challenges to law enforcement agencies, including those of legal jurisdictions, authorities, penalties etc. Any effective mechanism to monitor this domain would warrant a multi-lateral initiative, further highlighting the need for trusted partnerships.

### Way Ahead

There are *three essential ingredients* for developing our military capability, and nurturing partnerships, as an enabler for protecting our national interests. By charting a course around these three waypoints, we would be able to better prepare for the future.

Firstly, '*Optimisation of Resources*' should be high on our collective agenda. Given the diverse nature of socio-economic challenges which the country faces, resource availability to meet the nation's security needs would continue to be a challenge. Also, given the fact that capability building and force sustenance are expensive propositions, we will need to look at innovative measures to enhance sharing of our resources. It is prudent that every rupee committed towards building the military should give the nation manifold returns and for that, the Services would have to institutionally address the issue of optimisation. In this regard, much progress has been made in recent years with establishment of Joint Logistics Nodes and Joint Training Institutions, which were raised with the primary aim of optimising public expenditure. A lot

can still be done once the Armed Forces accord it the required impetus. The appointment of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) would be able to drive this further.

Second aspect is the need to focus efforts on achieving '*Self Reliance in Defence Production*', particularly in the field of core technologies involving weapons, sensors and propulsion systems. It is important to note that self-reliance in defence production provides a country with immense flexibility to commit resources in a calibrated manner, and to modify and customise the deliverables to the requirements of the times. In other words, it gives us 'Strategic Independence'. In its absence, our dependence on external factors would continue limiting our strategic choices in the future.

And lastly, we must work towards leveraging our partnerships for *enhancing interoperability* between the militaries of the region; this should be one of our key military priorities. Given the dynamic and diverse nature of challenges which the region faces, it would be imperative to maintain a high degree of military-to-military cooperation. Along with enhanced interoperability, there is a strong need to focus efforts on establishing '*robust*', '*reliable*' and '*real-time*' information sharing mechanisms with partner states. This aspect assumes special significance, given the speed at which local security threats can assume a national, regional or even global character. Information sharing, therefore, is not only essential but in fact, foundational to defending collective security interests.

Here, an example is the Information Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR) of the Indian Navy, which was commissioned in December 2018, to further our commitment towards achieving collective maritime security in the IOR. Given the facility's significant potential in enhancing the security quotient of the entire IOR, twenty countries and one multi-national construct are already partnering the initiative, making it a one-point convergence centre for the entire IOR's maritime activity. This collaborative initiative highlights the tangible gains derived out of trusted partnerships.

## **Conclusion**

The deterioration to a world order can set in motion trends that spell catastrophe. What we are seeing today resembles the mid nineteenth century in important ways<sup>16</sup>, but I strongly believe that



the world is not yet on the edge to a systemic crisis. It is upon those in policy making to make sure that a crisis never materialises, be it as an outcome of competing interests, hyper nationalism or even as a cumulative effect of climate change. Even in an uncertain world, our collective endeavour should be to aim for a '*certain future*'. Protecting our core national interests would warrant us to keep pace with the changing times, adapt to the evolving geo-strategic canvas and, most importantly, *anticipate change* and prepare for it.

Building inclusive partnerships is an essential pre-requisite to shape a positive national future for 'global good'. With deep-rooted mutual trust and confidence, a calmer future awaits us. In this regard, the Honourable Prime Minister's mantra of 5 'S', which elaborates the view of *Samman (Respect)*, *Samvaad (Dialogue)*, *Sahyog (Cooperation)*, *Shanti (Peace)* and *Samriddhi (Prosperity)*<sup>17</sup>, aptly indicates our resolve to engage with the world for a shared future. In this quest, developing new partnerships in the region and beyond, with like-minded partners can only be an 'influence for good', both for internal as well as regional security dynamics. How we garner strength from our collaborative partnerships, and bind together, would remain fundamentally important in maintaining the strategic equilibrium of our national security environment. The future of the global order hinges on collaborative efforts and India has a pivotal role to play in it.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Haas, 'How a World Order Ends', Foreign Affairs, Volume 99, Jan/ Feb 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kotkin, 'Realist World', Foreign Affairs, Volume 97, Number 4, July/ August 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, '*Liberal World*', Foreign Affairs, Volume 97, Number 4, July/ August 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Sircar, Saranya. Concept note on 'The Indo-Pacific: Political, Security and Economic Dimensions', available at [https://www.jfindia.org.in/jf/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Concept\\_Note\\_for\\_Young\\_Scholars\\_Conference\\_2019\\_on\\_Indo-Pacific.pdf](https://www.jfindia.org.in/jf/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Concept_Note_for_Young_Scholars_Conference_2019_on_Indo-Pacific.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Top ten economies of the World, in descending order are US (1), China (2), Japan (3), Germany (4), UK (5), France (6), India (7), Italy (8), Brazil (9) and Canada (10); source IMF 2018, available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/the-worlds-biggest-economies-in-2018>

<sup>8</sup> Largest standing armies, in descending order are China (1), India (2), US (3), North Korea (4), Russia (5), Pakistan (6), South Korea (7), Iran (8), Vietnam (9) and Egypt (10); source World Atlas, available at <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/29-largest-armies-in-the-world.html>

<sup>9</sup> SIPRI Fact Sheet of May 2018 for 2017: US (1), China (2), Saudi Arabia (3), Russia (4), India (5), France (6), UK (7), Japan (8), Germany (9) and South Korea (10), available at [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/sipri\\_fs\\_1805\\_milex\\_2017.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/sipri_fs_1805_milex_2017.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Remarks of Shri Arun Jaitley, then Finance Minister, GoI. Published in The Economic Times dated 06 April 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Alluding to institutions such as G20, BRICS, Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, New Development Bank etc.

<sup>12</sup> DAWFS Input – 30 May 2019.

<sup>13</sup> DNP Input – 29 May 2019.

<sup>14</sup> DFC Input – 29 May 2019.

<sup>15</sup> DFC Input – 29 May 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Haas, 'How a World Order Ends, Foreign Affairs, Volume 99, Jan/ Feb 2019.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*