

The Determinants of India's National Military Strategy

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Editor's Note

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Introduction

The enunciation of a nation's short and long-term security strategies is dependent on the geo-strategic environment. Conversely, failure of security strategies is also due to inappropriate assessment of the environment.¹ Therefore, in order to formulate a long-term military strategy, it is imperative to have holistic visualisation of the principal regional threats and challenges, including asymmetric ones, transnational threats, and even unanticipated ones! India is geographically located in a challenging strategic environment which argues for a strong and effective military force capable of defending territorial integrity and sovereignty. In a democratic dispensation like India, conduct of a military campaign will always be a political decision dictated by security considerations which are interpreted through a political lens.

Security Strategies

Military strategy cannot be viewed in isolation as in the prosecution of the national security policy, the military is one instrument along with other parameters of national power — diplomacy, economic leverages, political strength and will — cumulated with soft power. In a multi-domianal warfare environment, Joint Military Strategy (JMS) must become part and parcel of the mother document, the National Military Strategy (NMS), which by itself will draw from the National Security Strategy (NSS) which would bring all elements of national power together. In the Indian context, it is opined that the new structure

of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) has been established seamlessly in the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Creation of two separate strategies — the National Defence Strategy and NMS — will only lead to hair-splitting of thought processes and duplication within a deemed near-singular establishment! NMS, hence, would envisage employment of all the nation's military and civil capabilities at the highest of levels and long-term planning, development and procurement to create the requisite capabilities to assure victory or success.

The South Asian Geography

The Transition of Strategic Geography. The strategic geography of the South Asian Region is undergoing intense strategic transition due to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the geo-strategy of Indo-Pacific. The BRI is the most significant engine of China's geopolitical ambitions, and South Asia is at the heart of it. While Covid-19 has moderated the BRI, it has not put it on the backburner. In the coming decade, several projects will fructify, though some may get jettisoned for various reasons. The geographic barrier of the Himalayas between Nepal and China, and Pakistan and China will be changed by railways, roads, and tunnels. China will push its technology and deep pockets to ensure that this infrastructure development will make the South Asian Nations dependent on it for a long period. Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridors will come into being, linking Nepal and Myanmar with China's Yunnan, Sichuan and Gansu Provinces and Tibet and Pakistan with Xinjiang and Tibet. This will allow intensive trade and interaction. As part of BRI, China has been building or upgrading ports all around India — in Kyaukpyu, Burma; Chittagong, Bangladesh; Hambantota, Sri Lanka; and Gwadar, Pakistan, and in many other countries in the Indian Ocean Rim.

The Geo-Strategy of Indo-Pacific. The Indian Ocean has the most critical sea lanes and choke points connecting Middle East, South and East Asia and Africa with Europe. It is no surprise that the major naval powers and regional navies have placed the Indian Ocean as a priority theatre in current and future operations, strategic planning and maritime security operations which include

counter-terrorist, counter-trafficking, and counter-piracy missions. The lexicon 'Indo-Pacific' has found its way into official documents. Indo-Pacific Region contributes more than half of the world's GDP and population and has huge natural resources and potential for new economic opportunities.² Indo-Pacific countries sharing a maritime border with the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) or the Pacific Ocean have objectives to deepen their strategic bonding by enhancing maritime connectivity through quality infrastructure. Though these strategies or initiatives might appear to be common goals of Indo-Pacific, however, there are some differences in approaches towards Indo-Pacific construct that calls for convergence in the areas of cooperation to achieve peace and security in the Indo-Pacific Region.³ India's concept of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) believes in an Indo-Pacific that is free, open and inclusive, and one that is founded upon a cooperative and collaborative rules-based order. It is also apparent that China will have to cover the IOR with its naval presence, hence increasing the possibility of naval engagement in the region.

Strategic Threats and Challenges

Undeniably, India will be a leading power in the foreseeable future. However, India is a nation that has unsettled borders, rapidly militarised maritime environment and is also incessantly deployed in countering infiltration and terrorism, and left wing extremism. The context of creation of a NMS, hence, has to be visionary and with far-reaching implications.

China. With pending intransigent boundary dispute with China, it is mandatory for India to explore how the relationship with China will unfold? The 2020 tensions in Eastern Ladakh predict a continuity of aggression and belligerent attitude of China in pursuance of its geopolitical ambitions. At the same time, goading its client and rentier state, Pakistan, to keep ratcheting up tensions in Kashmir aids these ambitions. In light of China's increasing strength and global presence, stronger possibility exists of a threat manifesting from China in the mid and long term. India, hence, can ill-afford to ignore China's increasing economic and military might, its assiduous strategic bases in IOR, deliberate lack of progress in the Sino-Indian border talks, and close economic and

military affiliations with Pakistan. The interregnum up to 2050, with many intermediate milestones, will be an era of major tensions with India which is a major geopolitical competitor in the periphery.

Pakistan. It is obvious that the anti-Indian-ness that is a DNA of the Pakistan Army – which virtually controls the polity of the nation – is unlikely to be done away with in the foreseeable future. Pakistan defines its security in tangible terms – as military capability to thwart a military threat from India, and provides legitimacy to the Pakistan Army as the custodian of nationalism. The geo-strategic location of the nation, grave asymmetries in development among the provinces and the extraordinary role that the Pakistan Army has played, compounds the anxieties of Pakistan presently, and in the future. Any great socio-political change in Pakistan that would lead to attitudinal change may not happen without attendant internal upheaval and instability. A more benign thinking in Pakistan in the foreseeable future is most unlikely. Pakistan would keep India embroiled in combating an intransigent Pakistan Army on the Line of Control (LoC) and the International Border (IB), and in proxy war in the hinterland. Pakistan, therefore, will remain an adversary in perpetuity and, hence, does mandate hard power considerations and a war-winning strategy.

The Collusive Threat. In matters of China-Pakistan collusion, Pakistan has already upgraded its security calculus with China through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The collusive nuclear warhead-ballistic missile-military hardware nexus between China and Pakistan, described by both as an ‘all-weather friendship’, has grown to menacing proportions. With collusive support from China, Pakistan is also a testing ground for the latest Chinese technology, in the next conflict or even in peacetime. It would employ a combination of different types of warfare – conventional, insurgent, terrorist, Information Warfare (IW) and a concoction of military and non-military, kinetic and non-kinetic. The burgeoning nexus clearly indicates a unified front of the two adversaries, in the North and West.

The Maritime Frontier. China has created the world’s largest and modern navy in its attempt to expand its blue-water navy capabilities in the IOR. This points towards Chinese intent to

project power, seek to protect its maritime interests, and create a permanent naval profile in the IOR. These activities are portent of a future maritime arms race within the IOR and beyond. India, in all measures of contemplation, dominates the subcontinent and has the biggest role in the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the IOR. India's central location in the IOR, in proximity to the sea lanes emanating from the Persian Gulf, the Malacca Straits and the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden, makes it the natural naval power. Indian diaspora in the IOR nations also has its significant diktats. India continues to be the dominant naval power, with vast responsibilities due to the extensive maritime trade, the island territories, vast coastline, and geo-political ambitions. India has, through diplomacy, strengthened strategic links with IOR littoral states, closer ties with US and its allies, and internally has built up its own military power to complement its strategic outlook. It necessitates that India continue with the build-up and modernisation programs of its maritime prowess including amphibious, maritime air and naval joint warfare capabilities.

Insurgencies and Terrorism. Aiding insurgencies and indulging in terrorism against India will remain a low cost option for Pakistan as it simultaneously affects India's rise as a major power, influencing her neighbours. The Kashmir issue, being kept in public consciousness in Pakistan, allows the army to remain relevant and a sole institution of merit. Pakistan also employs technological tools like cyber warfare, information distortion, psychological warfare and propaganda, applied on nearly daily basis, while retaining a modicum of deniability. Indian armed forces have been and will remain committed extensively in internal security, in combating terrorism and insurgencies.

India's Strategic Culture: An Overview

Strategic Culture is stated as a set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behaviour, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives. Strategic culture and use of force are inseparable in most situations. Security today is no longer the responsibility of the armed forces alone. The world, in the post-Cold War period, has

been overtaken by the information technology revolution leading towards the formation of a knowledge society. Therefore, security as a notion has become all-pervasive and needs to be defined as the complex interaction between the culture and the capability of any nation-state.

India's strategic culture is a complex amalgam of historic myths and legends, and memories of ancient states and civilisations. "Discerning the underlying traits of India's strategic culture, its distinctiveness, and its resonance in India's contemporary actions may take some effort. But it can be done and [it is the], omniscient patrician type as opposed to others such as, theocratic, mercantilist, frontier expansionist, imperial bureaucratic, revolutionary technocratic, and marauding or predatory."⁴ India is perceived as a pacifist, having historically never invaded other territories and having borne the brunt of many invasions. Indeed, strategic behaviour in dilemma could give an impression of pacifism and defensive mind-set. The larger Indian thoughts on strategy in India relate to strategic autonomy and sovereignty and nuanced approach to resolution of problems. The strategic culture impacts civil military interface, which is important in evolving NMS.

Civil Military Interface and National Military Strategy

Apparently civil-military interface and NMS are mismatched terms in India, as far apart as it allows one to be insulated of the other. In the existential routine peacetime functioning, the bureaucracy retains a deliberate and well thought out detachment from strategy, shielding themselves from accountability and responsibility, and the political hierarchy is mired in more pressing matters and not inclined to contribute to the military's conceptualisations and war games of an unknown future. In a democracy, like a thriving one that India is, civilian control – that is, by elected representatives of the people – is the absolute imperative. Civilian control allows a nation to base its values, institutions, and practices on the popular will rather than on the choices of military leaders, whose outlook by definition focuses on the need for internal order and external security. However, if military strategy is compounding of ideas to be implemented by military organisations to pursue desired strategic goals, then how

can the strategy be formulated in a vacuum? Civilian control over the military in India is presently addressed in multifarious ways. In matters of acquisitions and procurement, right from approval of acceptance of necessity to control on finances, on structuring, on promotional and human resource issues, and the like, civil control exists everywhere. However, the politico-bureaucratic involvement in the NMS must not be relegated to the time of involvement in combat. This needs to be constantly revised and updated in peace time.

Technology - the Driver of Future Warfare and Military Strategies

The prospective great transition in warfare can be ascribed to the newer technologies of the information age – largely the computer and internet. Land warfare in the future will be restrictive of large and heavy formations manoeuvring for deep thrusts in the plains and deserts. It will be an era when combat will, in addition to conventional forces, include militias, guerrillas, terror groups, precision weapons and information warfare. Technology is placing warfare on a decisive threshold to transit into new modernity, and to forecast new warfighting strategies. In future wars, machines will make life-and-death engagement decisions even without reliance on human interface. Taking the technological advancements in China as cue for futuristic study, the following aspects need taking cognisance off in formulating military strategy:-

- Robotic vehicles – many of which are autonomous – in maritime, aerial and land warfare.
- Information warfare.
- Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities.
- Precision guided munitions.
- Space warfare.
- New forms of delivering kinetic effect. Notably through lasers and electromagnetic rail guns.

- Cyber war.

Articulation of India's National Security Strategy

India does not, as yet, have a well-articulated NSS document for two reasons. These can be adduced as:-

- First, there is no political consensus in the country on national security issues.
- Second, the government has not been able to address the crucial issue of coordination required to formulate and address the issues of national security. The National Security Council lacks the power to enforce anything. There is no common understanding of what constitutes national security.⁵

India's NSS should establish the national long-term objectives, action programmes and resource allocation priorities, and envisage development and coordination of all national power instruments to achieve national goals in an ever-changing globalised environment. In the past, security strategy has often been focused on external threats, and more specifically external military threats (which therefore require a military response). As has been evident over some time, it is imperative to accept that what can be regarded as developmental or policy issue, can become a major security challenge, especially of the non-traditional kind.

Formulation of National Military Strategy

The conceptualisation argued above denotes creation of NMS with sufficient forethought and analysis, and not on a trigger. National military strategy is a plan that signifies utilisation of means and concepts of employment of national power and the military to achieve political ends. Politics creates war, so success or failure in war is ultimately the responsibility of the political leadership.⁶ Military strategy in operational execution is a military responsibility, and stating the end-state is a political task. The duty of military leaders is to see that political leaders do not fail because they had poor advice. Hence, evolution of military strategy is two-way traffic between the government and the military professionals, in which, in a democratic dispensation like

ours, the final call will rest with the government. Hence, the government and the military together have to be accountable to the populace on the success, or otherwise, of the military strategy. As part of the NMS, there is a JMS that envisages utilisation of military force, denoted by the three services, jointly.

Joint Military Strategy

Almost all conflicts that India has fought have been essentially land wars in which the army has been the predominant player. The threats faced by the country have been focused across the border. Insurgency and low intensity conflict have also been in its domain. The air force, traditionally seen only as a supporting arm, has consistently sought an independent stature partly by refusing to get conjoined with the others, principally the army, and partly by stressing the strategic role of air power. The Indian Navy has a more fortunate position, operating, as it does, in a domain in which others can play only supporting roles.

What then is JMS? In ancient Greece, it was the 'art of the general'. In the USA, it is defined as the art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force, or the threat of force.⁷ As stated earlier, JMS is a subset of the NMS. It can also be defined as consisting of joint objectives, ways and means, as an equation: Strategy = Ends + Ways + Means, broadly:-

- Ends - Objectives that the three Services strive for, gleaned from NSS.
- Ways - Joint courses of action to attain the objectives.
- Means- Optimal use of instruments by which ends can be achieved.

A country is said to have attained jointmanship of its armed forces if it institutionalises the following:-

- Joint planning, development of doctrine and policy-making.
- Joint operational commands and staff structures.

- Evolution of joint equipment policy and procurement organisation.
- Integrated preparation of budget and monitoring of expenditure – both capital and revenue.
- Joint training.⁸

JMS, hence, becomes part of the NMS that would signify integrated utilisation of military means and concepts of employment of military. Certain significant issues in formulation of JMS for India are as below:-

- In JMS, the ultimate objectives are those of the national strategy. While conventional wars may be passé or limited, the military hierarchy must involve the polity at the highest of levels – to obtain guidance and directions.
- Some may say that it is unwise, impossible, or even dangerous to enunciate openly a JMS. However, enunciation formally denotes arrival of India in international stage as a nation in league with others who do so. Military strategy may, however, be fully or partially declaratory and/or classified or even deceptional.
- JMS must be 'joint' in all its forms. It should be a cumulative utilisation of national power. It will be subsequently necessary to translate it into Service-specific concepts and plans, at the strategic and operational levels. In the operational level, it is all the more important that all corresponding tri-Services echelons must operate with full synchronisation.
- Long-range strategies must be based on estimates of future threats, objectives, and requirements, and are, therefore, not constrained or dominated in considerations by current force posture. Operational strategies must be based on joint capabilities and not on threats alone, as threats are examined by each Service autonomously.

Conclusion

21st century warfare is metamorphosing without a distinct pattern, where conventional war with increasing utilisation of Special Forces, irregular war and terrorism are not dissimilar, or with fundamentally different approaches. There is an increasing blurring of distinctions between war and peace, between the different domains of conflict (land, maritime, air, space, cyber) and between kinetic and non-kinetic effect. Cyber contributes to this blurring of the distinction between peace and war by creating uncertainty as to what constitutes conflict in cyberspace. They are multiple means of war employed in combination by the adversary and conducted by both state and non-state actors. The Indian armed forces are one of the most significant custodians of national security. After the military strategy has been enunciated, and while the operational directive is laid down by the political leadership, the actual planning of operations is left to the armed forces and in future, the theatre commanders under the Chief of Defence Staff.

Endnotes

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