

National Security Challenges and Imperatives for India's Strategic Transformation

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Abstract

With the Covid-19 pandemic, as the resources are diverted towards medical and social emergencies, an uncharted economic territory necessitates an overall assessment of strategic outlook and subsequent realignment of priorities — in line with available resources. This assessment becomes even more critical at a time when global order is at the cusp of major transformation and India is facing new challenges to its National Security. In spite of its setbacks, the Covid crisis offers the Indian establishment an opportunity to take long pending difficult decisions towards transforming its policy approach and undertaking structural reforms. Through the 'Atma-Nirbharta' (Self Sufficiency) policy, India has initiated its movement towards self-dependence in defence manufacturing. However, to meet the future security challenges, a holistic transformation through self-analysis, with ingenious solutions, is the need of the hour.

Introduction

At the end of the Cold War, as the US emerged victorious, Francis Fukuyama's famous proclamation of 'The End of History' was received with wide optimism. The emerging global order of 21st century was led by the US — with prediction of liberal democracies sweeping across the world. While Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' theory expressed its

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reservations, the real rude shock to the liberal order came from within, in the form of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008. The resulting socio-economic realities have led the world to a transition phase where there is a definite decline in western geopolitical influence and a shift of power to the east in the newly coined sphere of Indo-Pacific Region (IPR). India with its inherent advantages is looked upon to play an important role in this emerging 'New World Order' and competition. This is also the *raison d'être* that the Western liberal world appears more in congruence with India to check the rise of autocratic China.

Covid -19: Impact and Challenges

The second wave of Covid-19 has raised major questions over the Indian state's capacity and landed a major blow to its recovery from the first wave impact. After a substantial negative dip in 2020-21, the prospects of 'V-shaped recovery' have been severely dented by the second wave.¹ While some international media have gone to the extent of raising doubts "about India's potential as a regional powerhouse"², there is an unanimity that substantial investments and reforms are required to raise state capacity in social sectors to meet future challenges.³ As the resources are diverted towards medical and social emergencies, an uncharted economic territory necessitates an overall assessment of strategic outlook and subsequent realignment of priorities — in line with available resources. This assessment becomes even more critical at a time when global order is at the cusp of major transformation and India is facing new challenges to its national security.

Geostrategic Challenges

In a world mired by competition and rivalry, Covid-19 has proved that greater cooperation and international assistance are paramount for mutual benefit and global good. India through its 'Vaccine *Maitri*' initiative provided critically required assistance to the Global South, strengthening its reputation as the 'Pharmacy of the World'. This assistance was reciprocated when India was hit by the second wave, and medical assistance poured in from the world over. However, certain countries have utilised the global pandemic as an opportunity to extend their hitherto 'hibernated agendas'. The 'Great Game' has continued unabated and poses challenges for India with even higher stakes.

Chinese Continental Push

On the occasion of CCP's centenary, President Xi Jinping's fiery speech — "Today, we are closer, more confident, and more capable than ever before of making the goal of national rejuvenation a reality"⁴ — gives the intent of an assertive China on the global stage.

Towards 'Chinese Dream 2049'. Beijing has utilised the Covid-19 pandemic as a strategic opportunity — with a crackdown in Hong Kong and enhanced assertiveness in Taiwan and South-China Sea. People's Liberation Army (PLA) incursions in Eastern Ladakh Region are also a part of this opportunism. China is now indifferent to its earlier commitments through 'Wuhan spirit'. As US scholar Yun Sun wrote, "China believes in power politics and its own natural superiority. Beijing's vision for Asia is strictly hierarchical — with China at the top — and does not consider India an equal".⁵ Thus, it would continue to maintain an unsettled border in its attempt to subjugate India and bolster its primacy in South Asia Region, which it considers to be its 'sphere of influence'. China's relentless support to Pakistan, and plans for further expansion through CPEC, is part of its strategic intent to keep a proxy for flummoxing India's strategic goals.

This challenge is only going to compound for India — as evident through the recent heavy infrastructure investments made by Beijing along its western borders.⁶ The long-term expansion — specifically of airfields and air-defence facilities — indicates Beijing's intent to ensure availability of overwhelming airpower in case of conventional armed conflict with India. Parallel with this, Beijing is going to utilise its growing strength in asymmetric warfare to keep India subdued, as displayed during recent incidents.⁷

While this intrusion has been met by the active posturing by the Indian Army (IA), the catalytic event has transformed the force structure at LAC. With the talks between two sides stalled, India has enhanced its force levels on ground by more than 40%, to roughly 200,000 troops focused on the border. The increased force level involves higher men and material cost including cold weather structures and transportation costs. Already, INR 20,776 crores were spent on emergency procurements in FY 2020-21 to meet the adverse situation.⁸ A 'hot' LAC would thus involve substantial increase in already stretched IA revenue expenditure.

As the Chinese threat is expected to continue or even increase with time, a long-term change in India's strategic posturing is inevitable. This is required to be coupled with adaptations in economic arena, an even more complicated field. While the Indian government has taken various actions to reduce its dependence on the Chinese imports, China continued to be India's largest trading partner in 2020.⁹ Thus, in order to meet the Chinese challenge, India needs to undertake a detailed assessment of strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis China — including military, technological, diplomatic and economic fields. As the power asymmetry is phenomenal at present juncture, initiation of a long-term action, jointly with other strategic partners, is the need of the hour.

Maritime Growth

In line with Mahan's dictum "Whoever rules the waves rules the world,"¹⁰ Beijing has calibrated its naval strategy in line with its aspirations for global dominance. As was the case with all global powers of yesteryears, the PLA Navy (PLAN) growth has been in tandem with its growing trade across the world — with gradual transformation from PLA dominated land forces to a powerful navy. Thus 'Maritime Silk Road' has been an integral part of President Xi Jinping's key strategic policy of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's 2019 defence white paper description "to build a strong and modernised naval force" that is capable of carrying out "missions on the far seas" — is a glimpse of Beijing's aspirations for its maritime growth. Utilising its huge ship-building capability, it is already on its way to implement this vision — with PLAN recognised as the largest navy of the world.¹¹

Towards its quest for dominance of the sea, China is challenged primarily by the US and countries such as India. Through its A2/AD capabilities in South China Sea, Beijing has already secured its littorals. Its next area of interest is Indian Ocean Region (IOR). To protect its Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), it continuously deploys a substantial force, has developed a military base in Djibouti and is continuously adding dual usage ports across the region.¹²

India's location in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) gives it a geographical advantage, where it could threaten Chinese trade at vital choke points. This advantage has attracted various major

and regional powers to align with India in balancing a hegemonic China. In acting as a bridge for developing this strategic partnership, the Indian Navy (IN) regularly conducts joint and multilateral exercises with its partner countries as well as undertakes 'Mission Based Deployments' in its role as 'Net Security Provider' of the IOR. In order to tilt this balance of power in its favour, Beijing has a substantial motive to scuttle the growth of the IN. Thus the 'real intent' behind PLA incursions in Eastern Ladakh may be to restrict IN expansion. As stated by Maj Gen BS Dhanoa (Retd) of the Observer Research Foundation, "China keeping us focused on the land borders may be with a secondary aim to keep the navy underfunded".¹³ While India has to handle its continental conflicts in the immediate terms, Indian policy makers — with their eyes on long term requirements — would have to ensure adequate budgetary support for IN expansion. This would serve the motive of countering China, strengthening partnerships with like-minded nations and to further develop the indigenous industry, as the IN has always been a key proponent of 'Atma-Nirbharta' in Defence.¹⁴

Geo-political Environment

India's idealistic policy post-independence resulted in a 'risk-averse strategy'¹⁵, ensuring minimal tangible rewards from its foreign policy. Further, disjointed civil-military relations ensured that use of military force became a medium of last resort, delinked from overall strategic calculus. The result had been absence of a defined and integrated strategic policy, emboldening India's adversaries to take significant risks despite India's material strengths.¹⁶ However, as the tectonic plates of global order shift, Indian policy makers have realised the need for "advancing [its] national interests by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions".¹⁷ This policy change is critical as the Chinese juggernaut rolls through South Asia — challenging India's regional supremacy in its own backyard.

In order to balance a rising China, India has utilised key partnerships with the liberal world, forming multilaterals such as the QUAD and securing important agreements with EU countries. The arguments within the Indian strategic community continue with respect to upgrading these strategic partnerships to 'security alliances'. The reservations are justified because unlike Cold War, there is large economic interdependence with China, different

strategic goals in other geopolitical spheres and a natural urge to hedge in a transforming multipolar world. As clarified by the Minister of External Affairs Shri S Jaishankar, “To the uninitiated or the anachronistic, the pursuit of apparently contradictory approaches may seem baffling. The answer is in the willingness to look beyond dogma and enter the real world of convergences. Think of it as calculus, not just as arithmetic”.¹⁸ The negative aspect of avoiding such a ‘military alliance’ is that India would have to cater for its security by itself — at least till PLA keeps its actions below the threshold of total war. Thus Indian Forces would have to be ‘*Atma-Nirbhar*’ to not only meet the enemy at the LAC but also face the storm brewing on its western side. As the US Forces withdraw from Afghanistan and the Taliban returns to centre-stage, a new security challenge is expected on the Line of Control (LoC). That the Indian establishment is already looking for some out of the box solutions is indicated by the fresh ceasefire compliance by Pakistan on LoC.¹⁹ Indian strategic policy would have to be agile and dexterous to meet this fluid geo-political environment.

Military Challenges

Indian Military, as always, rose to assist the nation, in handling the Covid second wave. The IN launched ‘Operation *Samudra Setu-II*’ for shipment of oxygen-filled cryogenic containers and associated medical equipment from various countries. While playing a stellar role in security and nation-building, Indian Armed Forces require a major transformation to meet the challenges of changing nature of warfare itself.

Budget Constraints

Defence expenditure is paramount to ensure that the Services are capable to meet the novel challenges of the 21st century. However, the defence budget has grown at an annual average rate of 8.4% in the last decade as compared to total government expenditure growth at 10.3%.²⁰ Thus, overall defence budget has gradually reduced as a percentage of GDP — reaching 2.1% for FY 2020-21, the lowest figure since the early 1960s (Figure 1). The share of capital outlay for defence in total government capital expenditure also decreased from 41% to 23% in this period. The present budgetary allocations are already lower than the committed liabilities for the capital acquisition.

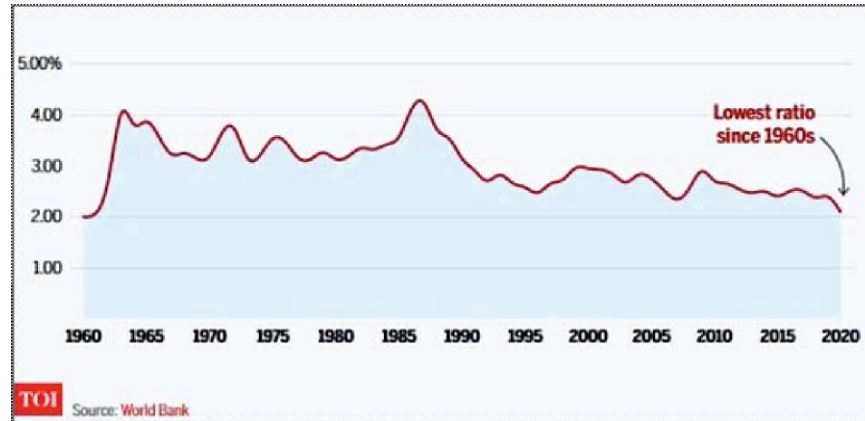


Fig. 1 : Defence Budget as percentage of GDP²¹

One of the prime factors for resource shortfall has been the ballooning revenue budget requirements for the IA. Out of 61% allocation of the total defence budget of FY 2021-22 to the army, a mere 11% is for modernisation. This is in stark contrast to modernisation allocations of 46% for IN and 52% for the Indian Air Force (IAF). As manpower intensive IA utilises a lion's share of defence budget, the allocations for other Services as well as incorporation of advanced technologies are correspondingly reduced. In light of dwindling budgetary allocations, IN has already reduced its planned procurements — which would impact the future force levels and power projection.²²

A series of recommendations have been projected on the budgetary front by 15th Finance Commission for 2021-26 such as setting up of a dedicated, non-lapsable Modernisation Fund for Defence and Internal Security named the "*Rashtriya Suraksha Naivedyam Kosh*", which could be used to make capital investments for the modernisation of defence services, CAPFs, and state police forces.²³ A non-lapsable fund, along with an assured annual allocation projection, would assist in long term acquisition planning. The same needs a leap of faith on the part of bureaucracy, as a similar recommendation by the Standing Committee on Defence (2017) was rejected by the Ministry of Finance earlier. On the military front, a major restructuring involving reduction of manpower and adopting latest tools of technology to adapt to modern warfare is already running late. A process similar to Chinese Military, wherein PLA was downsized to give greater emphasis on building

up of PLAN and PLAAF²⁴, needs to be adopted for improved and agile operational capabilities.

Capability Enhancement

The decimation of Armenian tanks by Azerbaijan through Turkish supplied armed drones has been a glaring example of the fast changing nature of warfare through adoption of modern technology. In the words of the UK Chief of General Staff, General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, today's army will be "more networked, more expeditionary and more rapidly deployed, more digitally connected, linking satellite to soldier and cantered on a Special Operations Brigade".²⁵ In contrast, as per Standing Committee on Defence (2018) report for the IA, 68 per cent of the equipment is in the vintage category, with just about 24 per cent in the current, and eight per cent in the state-of-the-art category.²⁶ In spite of being the third largest defence spender, Indian forces capability enhancement has been inadequate, primarily due to import dependence, budget limitations and rigid acquisition processes. As resources dwindle further and amid planned force restructuring process, there could be a squabble among the Services for their respective share of the pie.

A series of long-outstanding reforms have been taken by the government in the last one year towards faster acquisition process and impetus on indigenisation through crystallisation of policy on '*Atma-Nirbhar Bharat*'. The major steps include corporatisation of the Ordnance Factory Board, increase in the limit on FDI in the defence sector through the automatic route from 49% to 74%, allocation of separate modernisation budget for indigenous procurement, promulgation of a positive indigenisation list and a shift to Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020.²⁷ However, to ensure fructification, the MoD needs to chart a long term and assured acquisition plan based on requirements of modern warfare, adoption of niche technology and resource availability. An assured acquisition plan, with business in sufficient numbers, would attract private investors ensuring development of indigenous defence-industrial complex.

In the interim, Services have started utilising 'lease' clause of newly introduced DAP to meet their critical requirements. The IN has already taken on lease two Sea Guardian drones from a US firm, and is processing the case for lease of 24 utility helicopters.²⁸

While the process would assist the Services in meeting their minimum critical shortfalls, due care is required to avoid making it a 'quick-fix' solution. These lease agreements, majorly with foreign contractors, if continued for a long term may become an end in itself — leading to loss of in-house maintenance expertise with the Services (a critical requirement for war fighting capability) — as well as scuttling of larger acquisition numbers.

Military Reforms

World over, armed forces are transforming themselves to suit the new geopolitical realities, threats of asymmetrical warfare, budgetary constraints and assimilating latest technologies. The 'Digital age' has finally entered the warzone and in the words of Lieutenant General DS Hooda (Retd), "Cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, attempts to influence election outcomes and even destructive attacks like the one on the Saudi Aramco oil facility have blurred the lines between war and peace".²⁹ Indian establishment, after decades of hesitation, finally initiated military reforms through appointment of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and creation of Department of Military Affairs (DMA), defined by Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd) as "the most significant development in the national security domain since Independence", with "[...] military for the first time [...] into the central edifice of the Government of India (GoI) and a participant in policy-making".³⁰ This restructuring has ensured resolution of various anomalies in organisational structures as well as initiation of jointness in Services. The jointness at top level is critical to ensure rebalance of capabilities, adoption of common technology, scale in numbers and most important strategic and operational synergy. With network centric operations as the future, real time interaction between all force components is paramount for any operational commander to make effective utilisation of all available resources at his disposition. The same requires common communication protocols, a field where even the US Forces are struggling till date due to lack of synergy between Services at the stage of technology absorption/ acquisition of a platform. The charter for reforms is wide scale for the DMA starting from Service-MoD integration, management of intelligence, optimisation of manpower, joint training etc.³¹ However, one paradox here is that these military reforms are being led by the military leaders themselves. As the process being adopted for making a structural change aren't evident, turf battles between Services are

already out in the public domain. As recommended by Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd) earlier, “GoI needs to seriously consider the constitution of a Parliamentary Committee, with military advisers, to oversee and guide this transformational process”.³² As these reforms are going to bring permanent changes in the national security setup, a detailed assessment with inputs from all stakeholders is vital towards changing command and control structure, followed by incremental changes. A guiding document, formed by studying the reforms in advanced militaries and then tailoring it to Indian requirements viz. grand strategy, threat perception, enemy capabilities, geography, force levels, etc., is a prerequisite to ensure all-encompassing reforms in the right direction.

Need of a Vision Document

In the fast changing global order, deeply impacted by Covid-19, India faces a slew of challenges in economic and strategic front. The steps taken today to handle these challenges would decide its future growth trajectory and its status as a global power. As the current multi-polarity, with blurred inter-state rivalries, throws a plethora of diverse options, each country has to carefully chart its path, based on detailed assessment of various options for national interest and a joint response by all the arms of the governance. The same necessitates a policy or vision document as the starting point, a regular feature for all major powers in the form of Security Strategy or Defence White Papers.³³ India has shied away from promulgating any such paper in the public domain which may be a step in sync with its stated policy of ‘strategic autonomy’. However, as ‘Great Game’ rivalries have intensified and reached Indian boundaries, an open domain promulgation of ‘National Security Strategy’ (NSS) has become critical due to following factors:

- An epidemic impacted economy entails careful assessment of resources and systematic prioritisation of areas for funds allocation.
- With the changed geopolitical scenario, post PLA incursion, a long term and clearly defined plan for strategic cooperation is required to balance against China — involving all areas of alignment.

- A detailed assessment of strategic threats and long-term vision for capacity building through on-going military reforms requires to be undertaken.

In order to overcome India's parochial stance on national security issues, a long term planning is paramount. With representatives from finance, foreign policy and defence experts, an objective assessment of strategic threats, their capabilities and future trajectory could be undertaken, followed by a policy document/road-map for unified response involving resource allocations, capability enhancements, technology absorption and other measures as suggested earlier. Further such a committee could recommend out of the box solutions/ radical changes in the existing policy — to the highest echelons of political executive for consideration — with examples such as creation of 'National Defence Fund', review of 'No-First Use' policy for Nuclear Weapons in case of two front war, shifting of counter-insurgency duties from the IA to CRPF³⁴, etc. Further, from such a policy can flow a document/white paper detailing holistic transformation of Indian Armed Forces with changed command and control structure, new operational doctrines, modernisation plans and acquisition roadmap.³⁵ This would also provide a reference, based on which regular reviews could be undertaken to assess goals achieved and changes required to meet future challenges — again a regular feature in most major powers.

Conclusion

The Covid crisis, with all its setbacks, offers the Indian establishment an opportunity to take long pending difficult decisions towards transforming its policy approach and undertaking structural reforms. Through the '*Atma-Nirbharta*' policy, India has initiated its movement towards self-dependence in defence manufacturing. However to meet the future security challenges, a holistic transformation through self-analysis, with ingenious solutions is the need of the hour. That our policymakers are aware of the urgent requirement is evident in the address by Hon'ble PM Modi during the last Combined Commanders Conference, wherein he stressed "the importance of enhancing indigenisation in the national security system, not just in sourcing equipment and weapons but also in the doctrines, procedures and customs practiced in the armed forces. He emphasised the need to optimise manpower

planning in both military and civilian parts of the national security architecture. He also called for a holistic approach, focused on breaking down civil-military silos and on expediting the speed of decision making. He advised the Services to rid themselves of legacy systems and practices that have outlived their utility and relevance. Taking note of the rapidly changing technological landscape, the Prime Minister highlighted the need to develop the Indian military into a future force".³⁶ As India prepares to celebrate its 75 years of independence, the time for any evolutionary change is already over, the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' is now required at a revolutionary pace!

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