

Dynamics of Military Engagement in India's Neighbourhood

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South Asia is bogged down by an exacerbated security environment, caused by the adversarial relations between the two major countries viz. India and Pakistan. India is often perceived as being hegemonic and insensitive to bilateral issues and concerns of smaller neighbours. Indian actions such as 'liberation' of Bangladesh, absorption of Sikkim into the Indian Republic, deployment of Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka and anti-coup action in the Maldives; have all contributed to this perception. The sheer size and numbers of India, intimidate its smaller neighbours. Thus, most initiatives for regional cooperation generally come to naught on account of misperceptions.

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s predicated a fall in defence expenditure. While global military spending decreased six per cent annually between 1987 and 1994, it went up in South Asia by 1.6 per cent in real terms¹. In 2003, the entire region of South Asia spent a total of US \$ 25 billion on defence, which amounts to nearly 3 per cent of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the US. This does not include hidden defence expenditure in the form of pensions, covert weapon transfers and acquisitions, expenditure on internal security operations by the military and police operations. A conservative estimate would place expenditure on defence and security related issues to be a minimum of six per cent of the GDP. While this may not be as high as the amounts spent by many developed countries, it certainly has a negative impact in South Asia, where there is desperate poverty and a low human development index rating. As Admiral Arun Prakash, Chief of the Naval Staff states that India's resurgence as an economic power depends to a large extent on peace being maintained in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)².

Most perceived threats to security in the region are India-centric. These, in most cases are imagined and even hyped up to justify defence expenditure and protect vested interests of the

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVI, No. 566, October-December 2006.

military as a domestic power block. While Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar have serious internal security threats necessitating higher levels of weapon systems; arming against external threats, mainly from India, would be of considerably lower importance. In the case of Bangladesh, while there is no discernible external threat, there could be an envisaged threat if India ever decides on a limited military option to tackle the issue of Bangladesh's collusion in providing safe sanctuary to Indian terrorists.

India's neighbours have the option of joining cause with India or playing the balance of power game within the region by joining cause with Pakistan or with China or even at times with both. This aspect is evident from the bilateral relations between countries in the region and the influence wielded by China through the military dependencies that it has created in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar. A *Times of India* editorial summed up the situation when it stated "the reality is that New Delhi's stasis and Beijing's dynamism on economic policy is now casting its shadows on SAARC politics as well, and most of India's neighbours want Beijing to be a significant player in the region". An overview of military relationships in the region is given below:-

- (a) **Afghanistan.** Currently developing its national military and engaged in military relationship with the USA, the NATO and coalition partners exclusively. It has very little military relations with India despite a vibrant institutional military relationship prior to the takeover by Taliban.
- (b) **Bangladesh.** Has major military relationship with China and actively engages the militaries of other South Asian countries. It has minimal military relationship with India.
- (c) **Bhutan.** Confines all its military engagement to India exclusively.
- (d) **India.** Has major exclusive military relationships with Bhutan. It has major military relationship with Nepal and Maldives, some military engagement with Sri Lanka and Myanmar, and minimal engagement with Bangladesh. It has virtually no military relationship with Afghanistan and a well documented and discussed militarily adversarial relationship with Pakistan.

(e) **Maldives.** Has major military relations with India with nominal military relations with other Asia-Pacific nations and the USA. China, it appears, is wooing the Maldives in an endeavour to obtain a naval base on one of the islands of Maldives.

(f) **Myanmar.** Has a military relationship with China, India and Pakistan and virtually very minimal to no military relationship with other South Asian nations.

(g) **Nepal.** Has a major military relationship with India. Its military relationship with China is slowly developing. It has some military relations with Pakistan and relatively minimal to no military relations with other South Asian nations.

(h) **Pakistan.** Has strategic military relationship with China and the USA. It has major military relations with Myanmar. It has a dynamic military relationship with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal and relatively minimal to no military relations with other South Asian nations.

(j) **Sri Lanka.** Has a military relationship with India and increasing military relationships with China and Pakistan. It has relatively minimal to no military relations with other South Asian nations.

We see a trend wherein India has mixed military relations with some countries. Thus, while India enjoys good overall relations with those countries with whom it has healthy military relations – Bhutan, Maldives and Myanmar; India has turbulent relations with nations with whom its military engagement is not so healthy – Pakistan and Bangladesh. This impacts on India's security environment, detracting from achieving economic and social development goals. The militaries in India's neighbours carry more than a reasonable clout in government affairs. This must be tapped by establishing a higher level of military to military engagement and cooperation in the Region. India needs to engage and interact with all the militaries in the region with the aim of developing institutional access and relationships as also personal relationships in order to exchange perceptions and arrive at realistic threat assessments. Countering of neighbours perceptions of threat, their analysis, and assessment and resultant defence plans by dissemination of India's national defence and strategic objectives, both elucidated and

practiced would also be an important objective. While a lot is being done in the form of offering of military training course vacancies in India and specific activities such as specialised training for counter-insurgency, military material assistance etc; there is a need for greater interaction between the Ministries of Defence at the ministerial and bureaucratic levels, and more importantly at the military levels.

The US military's extensive engagement and interaction programmes for the Asia-Pacific under its 'Theatre Security Cooperation Programme'³ can serve as an excellent example for India. The programmes include reciprocal visits at various levels, 'Staff Information Exchanges' – conferences, seminars and staff liaison or exchange meetings, 'Individual Training' including personnel exchange programmes, small unit training, Joint Combined Training, Disaster Preparedness Mitigation Assessment (DPMA) Programme, and so on.

In order to create a conducive security environment in the region the options available to India would range from unilateral engagement (without taking into consideration the activities of other regional and extra regional players) to pro-active military engagement (to countervail the influence of other regional and extra regional players). A major portion of these engagements would be as under :-

- (a) Assistance in the form of military material and infrastructure development.
- (b) Engagement of the militaries to develop institutional and personal relationships and better understanding of respective perceptions.

India must develop dynamic and proactive military relationships with the countries in the region. Foreign military relations would be a sub set of the broader bilateral relations and would serve to maintain a strong institutional relationship as a catalyst for better strategic relation. Countries, that are not effectively militarily engaged must be engaged. India must develop an international military cooperation structure and evolve a strategy for military engagement of the militaries of the South Asian Region. The structure must include appropriate organisations with delegated decision making processes and the provision of funding support for initiatives. The

strategy would comprise a range of initiatives such as political, defence equipment related activities and defence ministry relationship. Uniformed military relations must be developed as part of the overall defence ministry relationships. There must be country specific defence and military engagement initiatives covering contact and interaction at various levels, military assistance in terms of equipment, training and advice; and opportunities for exchange of perceptions. The Indian Navy has already taken a major step by 'building bridges of friendship while projecting power' as part of its foreign military cooperation in the IOR.

Country wise options for India are listed below:-

- (a) **Afghanistan.** India should establish institutional defence and military contacts with Afghanistan which could be subsequently developed depending on how the Afghan political situation unfolds.
- (b) **Bangladesh.** India should be pro-active and establish defence and military relations with Bangladesh through a combination of bilateral and regional initiatives.
- (c) **Bhutan.** The current relationship with Bhutan must be further strengthened. India must ensure that it takes Bhutanese sensitivities, internal developments and aspirations into consideration while drawing up long and short term engagement plans.
- (d) **Maldives.** India should build on its military relations with Maldives as part of the security of the IOR. Further, India should dissuade Maldives from permitting China to establish a naval base on the island of Marao, as this would lead to the introduction of yet another military naval presence in the IOR.
- (e) **Myanmar.** India should enhance military relationship with Myanmar. Assistance and cooperation in the areas of military equipment – supply, maintenance and manufacture; training – military technology; joint exercises – in India and Myanmar by the three Services; and joint operations against militants in border areas; would have to be developed.
- (f) **Nepal.** The military relationship with Nepal should be further enhanced. India's domestic compulsions to support

Nepalese democracy notwithstanding; the presence of regional and extra-regional entities (Pakistan, China and the USA), in Nepal may not be in India's national interest.

(g) **Pakistan.** India should reach an understanding with Pakistan for lasting peace and stability. This would hinge on resolution of issues like Pakistan's insistence on the Jammu and Kashmir Issue and India's requirement of termination of Pakistani support to terrorism. A lasting peace solution, however distant, has economic and social benefits for the two countries and the region as a whole.

(h) **Sri Lanka.** Assistance and cooperation in the areas of military equipment - supply, maintenance and manufacture; training - military technology; joint exercises - in India and Sri Lanka by all the three Services; operational assistance in maritime surveillance would have to be developed. Domestic compulsions in the form of Indian Tamil sentiments would have to be balanced by national interests.

In addition, there is a need for an Indian initiative for the region. India would be hard pressed to initiate and develop programmes for multilateral interaction and cooperation in the region as is evident from the progress or lack of it in SAARC. A pragmatic and workable approach would be to take a leaf out of the cricket organisation for the Wills World Cup in 1996 when Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India set up a tripartite cricket organising committee and the more recent successful joint bid by four South Asian neighbours viz. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, to host the 2011 Cricket World Cup.

India could set up a South Asian Military Interaction Programme (SAMIP). Suggested aspects of this programme are given below:-

- (a) The aim of SAMIP would be to facilitate military interaction at all levels in South Asia to exchange perceptions leading to threat assessments and realistic military establishments and expenditure.
- (b) All costs for SAMIP should be fully met by the Indian military in the form of a separate budgetary allocation for the programme with delegation of authority to plan and execute

the programme. The entire programme could have a consolidated budget with country wise and event wise sub-allocations. There could be a programme director at Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff and appropriate functionaries designated at the Service Headquarters. They may form part of Defence Cooperation Cells.

(c) SAMIP would essentially be based in India.

(d) SAMIP activities could include the following:-

- (i) Joint border interactions -bilateral and multilateral.
- (ii) Joint maritime patrol and surveillance programme to monitor the sea lanes of communication and EEZs.
- (iii) Joint Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the areas of communications, joint relief operations, mutual assistance and so on.
- (iv) A unilateral Military Assistance Programme (MAP) covering areas ranging from training to material assistance.
- (v) Joint combined exercises.
- (vi) UN peace keeping operations and related activities.
- (vii) Seminars, conferences and symposia on military related subjects.
- (viii) Training institution conclaves for trainees and faculty.
- (ix) Military sports events.
- (x) Military adventure activities.
- (xi) Indian military training institutions alumni get-togethers.

India has to reorganise the present system of military engagement wherein all activities are centrally controlled from Delhi at the level of the Service Headquarters, with case-by-case clearances, first from the Ministry of Defence, and then by the Ministry of External Affairs. Further, Service Headquarters have to involve regional military commands and assign a greater role in developing and conducting military relations with countries that fall

in their jurisdiction, such as Eastern Command for interaction with Bangladesh; Southern Command for interaction with Sri Lanka and so on. There is a need for dedicated allocation of funds, with delegation of authority to incur expenditure, for planning and execution of foreign military cooperation initiatives and programmes.

Conclusion

India's immediate neighbourhood has a sensitive strategic security and military environment. Its social problems arising from teeming populations and low human development indices rating are compounded by a relatively unstable security environment due to terrorism, sectarian violence and hostile adversarial relations. If the countries of the region can work together, most internal security problems, and extra-regional players, would run out of steam. India has developed mutually beneficial strategic relationships, duly supported by similar military relationships, with some countries in the region. It needs to develop similar relations with other countries. Developing institutional military relations would be the corner stone of the larger defence and strategic relationships. In addition to developing and progressing country specific defence and military engagement initiatives, a South Asian military engagement and exchange programme like SAMIP would go a long way in achieving a stable security environment in the region thereby creating an environment conducive for economic and social development.

Notes

1. Dr Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, *The Armed Forces of Pakistan* (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2002), p 44.
2. Rajat Pandit, "INS VIRAAT Set to Host PM's Day at Sea in Feb (sic)" *Times of India*, New Delhi, 01 May 2006, p 10.
3. US Pacific Command website www.pacom.mil.