

Security Challenges and Opportunities Facing India

Lieutenant General HC Dutta, PVSM (Retd)*

Introduction

The two main challenges to India's security are from China and Pakistan. China is an economic giant and an unfriendly super power breathing down our neck - laying claim to vast stretches of our territory and ever ready to threaten us. Our litany of woes is endless. We befriended China at the earliest, and espoused its cause for membership of the UN and later the Security Council. We sang songs of "*Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai*", supported "*Panchsheel*", basked in the so called personal equation between Nehru and Chou-en-Lai. In the euphoria of friendship, we endorsed, perhaps unwisely at the time, Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, following the UK example although the latter hedged it, stipulating special rights of China alongside autonomous status of Tibet.¹

Threat from China

The Chinese response to our friendly attitude was brutal hostility. They inflicted a humiliating military defeat on us in our North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1962. Since then, it continues to be in illegal possession of vast stretches of our territory in Aksai Chin, Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. Worse, it lays claim to the entire Arunachal Pradesh², on the specious grounds that historically it was part of Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), which is now part of China. To rub it in, in May 2007, China refused visa to an IAS officer, Ganesh Koyu, pointing out that hailing from Arunachal Pradesh, he is a Chinese national so he does not need a visa to enter China. It issued only stapled visas to Kashmiris. It has tightened its grip on Tibet by constructing rail-road links, and settled large numbers of ethnic Han Chinese in Tibet, altering its demography. It ruthlessly put down the agitations for Tibetan Independence. It is building dams across Brahmaputra River and its tributaries in Tibet, endangering the entire ecological system with grave repercussions for the riparian states of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

China has been assiduously courting nations of South and SE Asia with trade pacts and other blandishments. It has been particularly active in India's immediate neighbouring countries, Tibet, Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka - a strategy termed as 'encirclement of India'. The Chinese have built an impressive infrastructure of airfields, rail and road communications and POL storage facilities in Tibet³, which would undoubtedly enhance her war waging capability in Ladakh, UP-Tibet border and Arunachal Pradesh; hence, a cause for serious concern to us.

China has forged close relations with Pakistan, according them the status of an "all-weather friend". It is a major supplier of arms to the Pakistan Armed Forces. Worse, it has transferred nuclear know-how and materials support, including aid for Pakistan's first nuclear test. It has provided missile designs and ongoing technological support and lately, assistance in building nuclear power plants. It gives Pakistan unstinted support on Kashmir and has constructed roads to ensure surface links for assured military support. In short, China-Pakistan nexus constitutes the single greatest factor of Pak belligerence and terrorist threats to India, arguably only next to American support and largesse. Chinese inroads into Nepal are particularly worrisome. Nepal has been a traditional friend of India and has been part of our area of influence. China has built roads over passes from Tibet, offered trade concessions and exported Maoism to Nepal, thereby destabilising its political and social system.

Engaged in a major effort to modernise its armed forces since the last two decades, China has built-up a formidable military machine which though still not equal to that of the USA, nevertheless poses a threat of awesome magnitude to India and countries of Asia. Its vastly improved Navy is making strides to dominate the Indian Ocean; and is busy building naval bases in Sittwe in Myanmar, electronic hub on Coco Island in Sri Lanka and Gwadar port on west coast of Pakistan - termed a 'string of pearls' in the Indian ocean".

Indian Options vis-à-vis China

What are our options? Clearly, we are not going to be able to match China in economic power or military prowess for a long time, if at all. Also, we cannot hope for a friendly China or a relationship of equals. Therefore, a policy of confrontation is out of the question. At best, we can expect to live in intense rivalry or watchful co-existence, i.e. a policy of "engagement", which seems to be the current wisdom. However, being a loose, undefined term, it is liable to be misconstrued as an alibi for inaction. What is the true 'policy of engagement'? It would cover a wide spectrum of options, from inaction or passive acceptance to active protests, to defiant objections, to mobilising world opinion, and at the extreme end, brinkmanship. This range of actions will perhaps be followed by India in a selective manner for various disputes, depending upon the validity of our stand on issues, state of global perceptions and state of relative military preparedness and our ability to take calculated risks, important thing being not to take any transgression lying down. Hence, policy of active or muscled engagement; certainly brinkmanship, presupposes capacity to fight a limited, high intensity military action, should things go wrong, hence, the reported plans for raising additional formations and additional air assets in the Eastern Sector.

In addition, we should vigorously drum up support for our cause, building-up lobbies against Chinese wrongdoings to us or to others. We could target their dismal record of human rights violations against Tibetans and other minorities such as Uighurs, demolition of Tibetan culture, and worst of all, destruction of the ecological system of Tibetan Plateau which will have disastrous impact on entire Asia and perhaps the world ecological balance. Diplomatic insults such as denial/stapled visas, and Chinese objection to visits by our Prime Minister and Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh should be repudiated in strongest terms. Indeed, India should emphasise in clear, declaratory manner that it does not accept the Chinese so called claim lines or their claim to Arunachal Pradesh. India has a legitimate cause to lodge formal protest in the UN forums against adverse possession by China of Aksai Chin Plateau and other Northern territories and areas of erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, illegally ceded to them by Pakistan. We should declare, to reserve the right to use force to make amends, whenever we are in a position to do so. The Chinese position regarding the validity of McMahon line and annexation of Tibet (extending the concept of suzerainty to total sovereignty) is debatable. These issues could be raked up in the world forums. In the prevailing mistrust and apprehension regarding China the world

powers such as, the USA, the UK, EU and Russia would probably favour giving justice to Tibetans.

The dialectics of big power versus middle or small power relations, call for skill and nerve on the part of the smaller powers to survive in an imperfect world where might is usually right. Sure, there would be risks, but it need not inhibit the lesser beings from talking tough and at times even acting tough, whenever possible and then raising a hue and cry for the big players to step in. We would do well to study the antics of Pakistan against us and more importantly their practice of the art of masterly brinkmanship in their dealings with the USA, and how they managed to hoodwink a mighty super power, milking it of billions of dollars for decades.

How does China plan to contend against the USA, a vastly bigger power. Apart from diplomatic ball-juggling at which they are an expert, the Chinese have been devising a workable strategy and building requisite capability. China lacks the capacity to risk armed conflict with the USA – theirs strategy is to restrict American capacity to operate in South and SE Asia at extreme range. The limited aim being, to be left free to bully and coerce smaller powers in the region, ie, strategy of “anti-access capability”, so as to establish itself as Asia’s dominant power by eroding the credibility of America’s security guarantees. For this, the Chinese plan to deploy low cost non-nuclear ground, sea and air launched missiles with the backing of only a small number of long range nuclear ICBMs – should things get out of hand. Similarly, India and the smaller countries in the region will have to think up such ‘out of the box’ answers. Equally, the Indian military will have to devise a cost effective strategy for taking on the Chinese and to ‘do more with less’. Indeed a new ground-air war doctrine for the mountains and high altitude warfare is required.

In response to China’s strategies of ‘encirclement’ and ‘string of pearls’, we need to mend fences with our neighbours. We should forge new links with Myanmar,⁴ which is being courted by China, as it will give them access to the Bay of Bengal. It is also important for its reserves of natural gas. It had drifted into the Chinese camp, consequent upon UN sanctions and our ill-conceived support to the movement for democracy, but there are signs that Myanmar is seeking ways to balance out its dependence on China. Indeed, this is the story for almost all states of Central Asia, South East and South Asia; who are becoming apprehensive of the growing might of China. Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka – in fact all countries with the solitary exception of Pakistan are nervous. Hence, our “Look East” policy has come into play not a day too soon. Same would be the case for countries of the outer ring, ie, Russia, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Indeed there are signs that countries are exploring possibility of a multi-polar world instead of only a bi-polar order between the USA and China. In addition to shoring up of bilateral relations, India will need to rethink its traditional aversion to alliances and pacts for trade, defence, intelligence sharing and so on.

Amongst our immediate neighbours, friendliest relations with Nepal are of vital importance. We have had a special relationship and common ethnic ties for centuries. We maintain an open border, currency convertibility, and full freedom to Nepalese to live and work in India. Thousands of Gorkhas serve in the Indian Army, including a number of officers in senior ranks. We have a long standing treaty of Peace and Friendship with Nepal⁵ since 1950, though actual relations have had minor ups and downs. Now, the advent of China on the scene has exacerbated the situation with Maoist propaganda which apart from infecting the Nepalese body politic has also spilled over to the Terai. China has also built roads over the mountain passes from Tibet. China’s influence has given an opportunity to Pakistan to exploit the open border to infiltrate Jihadists to infect Muslim communities living in north UP and Bihar. All in all, an extremely sensitive and complex political and security situation for India, which calls for tact, firmness and blunt speak. Nepal must be made to cooperate and accept full responsibility for the open border and respect special privileges and concessions. India does not want to have to seal and fence the border but the fact remains that India dare not leave this gaping big hole in her ‘vulnerable upper cerebrum’ unguarded.

Threat from Pakistan

The second major challenge to India’s security is from Pakistan. A country born in hate and Islamist bigotry, it has been motivated exclusively by twin forces of fundamentalism and visceral hatred of India through all 64 years of its existence. The situation has been further exacerbated by the canker of Jihadism and terrorism which has become its state policy. It has earned the dubious sobriquet of being the epicentre of global terrorism. It has been India’s nemesis. Its avowed state policy is ‘make India bleed from a thousand cuts’. Its hand is seen in all devilry perpetrated against India: aid and abetment to the Sikh insurgency in Punjab; aid to Ulfa movement in Assam; the ongoing virulent insurgency in Kashmir; cross border infiltration; terrorist attacks in Indian cities; attack on Indian Parliament; plane hijacking; attack across the LC at Kargil; fake currency racket through Nepal; “Karachi project”⁶ to train Indian Mujahidin for committing acts of terror and sabotage in India; the commando raid in Mumbai in 2008 (26/11); attack on Indian Embassy in Afghanistan; et al. It has acquired nukes and missile technology from China and North Korea, which it has traded to Libya, Iran and perhaps countless other countries. Since the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in the 1970s, Pakistan has milked the USA of billions of dollars and a trove of the latest armaments, in addition to arms aid from China. As a result, it has built-up a formidable military machine and fearful capacity for clandestine activity. For a decade now, Pakistan has bamboozled the USA, on the pretext of aiding American war effort against Al-Qaida and Taliban in Afghanistan, but playing both sides as a master stroke of duplicitous behaviour. In fact, it is largely responsible for the American imbroglio in Afghanistan.

Its trump card is its Nuclear arsenal and the spectre of its falling into the Jihadists’ hands – a card which it plays with great aplomb and truculence. Interestingly, Pakistan has been likened, by one of its own journalists, to “a man holding a pistol to his own head, threatening to pull the trigger if his demands are not met”. In a word, Pakistan is the scourge of our time. Unfortunately, India is its prime target. So, how do we deal with Pakistan? The answer is, we cannot; certainly not in the manner we have been trying to do, since 1947. A few home truths. One, Pakistan will always be hostile towards us – never friendly. It will never respond to reason or friendship. Two, stranger things have happened in history, but on its record so far, it would seem that in all probability, Pakistan may never become a responsible peace loving state. Hence, contrary to the fond hopes of our intelligentsia and lofty idealism of our politicians, the current mantra that “a strong and stable Pakistan is in the interests of India” would be building a house on sand. In truth, it will be a dangerous leap of faith on our part to trust Pakistan. Our good man of peace, Vajpayee, perhaps, had time to rue his well-intentioned ‘bus diplomacy’ in February 1999 to swear undying friendship to Nawaz

Sharif, which was promptly followed in May, 1999 by Pak attack on Kargil. Also, our experience has been that whenever Pakistan was strong and doing well, there was a marked increase in her belligerence and a spike in infiltrations across the LOC. Three, the myth that the Pakistan Army is the villain of the piece, but the people are overflowing with good will for India. In reality, it is the darling of the Pakistani people whereas India's Army is most unpopular. Four, threat of Pak's Nuclear Weapons falling in Jihadist hands is the biggest myth masterfully conjured up by Pakistan. The fact is that the Pak Army controls most Jihadist factions. Besides, the nukes are extremely well guarded by their Military for their own good and to guard against danger of possession or deactivation by the USA. Another bogey is that if provoked, Pakistan is irrational enough to use Nuclear weapons against India. Not true. They know that a Nuclear strike by them will instantly invite a massive Nuclear response from India, and that in any Nuclear exchange, Pakistan will cease to be.

Indian Options vis-à-vis Pakistan

It follows, therefore that the only viable option of engaging Pakistan, is to deal with them as you deal with a bully, that is to hit him hard whenever he steps out of line. That is the only language its leadership understands; not reason, not love - only force. We must not be misled by fanciful formulations like 'non-state actors'. These are just alibis to which we also fall prey, as an excuse to avoid making of hard decisions. Instead, India should have a clearly stated policy - "any attack emanating from Pakistan soil will be instantly punished", which should be given out as a simple, unequivocal, one-line directive to the Armed Forces, who should then be given a free hand to plan, create capability and train the combined force. In this context our past experience is revealing. The usual drama starts with a Pakistan attack, whether it is hijacking of our aircraft or commando raid on Mumbai. It is immediately followed by much hue and cry from its leaders that it could only have been the work of non-state actors, hence India should be dissuaded from retaliating, in which case Pakistan will have no option but to use Nuclear weapons. So, its masters (the USA and China) go into diplomatic overdrive advising restraint on India, and cautioning against 'unintended consequences'. By way of doing something, to assuage the agitated public, Indian leaders declare stoppage of bilateral dialogue till the perpetrators are punished. After six months of diplomatic notes and a flurry of demarches, and the US pressure, India 'reluctantly' agrees to resume dialogue. Business as usual till the next outrage. Sounds familiar!?

Indeed, Pakistan is a test case. How, we succeed in putting it in its place, will be the benchmark of effectiveness of the Indian State. The whole world, specially the super powers, the USA and China, are watching. Most importantly, all our smaller neighbours are looking at our reactions. Our credibility is at stake. The situation is equally unacceptable with regard to China.

Conclusion

The question, often asked is: is the country getting a full bang for its buck? In the aftermath of the Mumbai carnage with the tempers running high, a noted industrialist asked, "How can such a thing be allowed to happen? We maintain a huge military, if it is not fully equipped to protect the country, let the Government tell us how much more money it needs". That is the crux of the situation. We are a Nation of more than a billion people, we have the third largest military of the world, we boast of being one of the fastest growing economies, our bureaucracy is supposedly packed with brains and our leaders are full of sagacity and wisdom. Yet a 'failed state' like Pakistan can tweak our nose at will, and China can threaten us and inflict provocations with border violations, territorial grabs and preposterous claims. On the diplomatic front, we have more enemies and fence sitters than friends. How have we allowed ourselves to come to such a sorry state of affairs and what should be done to put things right?

We have to make up for a lot of lost ground and we do not have the luxury of too much time. Firstly, India would need to sculpt a 'National Vision Statement' and a 'Grand Strategy' to fulfil that vision. Of course, this will require national unity, as against the present spectacle of politicians squabbling over local issues as also, to somehow, overcome the evil of political expediency inherent in coalition politics. The Grand Strategy, in essence, an exercise in systematic weighing of 'ends and means', should spell out as to what are our options; short term as well as long term, across the board in economic, political, social and military spheres. Thereafter, like other major organs of the Government, the Military will work out coherent strategies, operational doctrines pertaining to different sectors and threats, requisite capability in terms of men and material, including induction of advanced weapon systems as also procedures and training required for welding various components into integrated commands, formations and battle groups. Above all, what will then be needed is a political will and resolve to activate such a purpose-oriented and motivated power structure. India will have to understand and cultivate a culture of power and force. In the past, India has been economically rich and famous for soft power, but never as a political or military power, since after the Maurya and Ashoka Periods. Whereas the reality is that no country may count for much unless it has the hard capacity and the will to protect its people and territory.

Equally, apart from modernisation of our Armed Forces, overhaul of the intelligence system and systems for timely threat assessment, the country needs to improve governance, streamline systems for policy formulation and, institute an effective decision making apparatus at the highest level. There should be intimate interface between the Defence Services and Foreign Service, both concerned with developments abroad and in other countries. Equally, most importantly, the service heads and military commanders of integrated theatre commands must be in the decision making loop at the highest level, at all times and in an institutionalised manner. For a country whose politicians have little expertise in military matters or experience of having served in the armed forces; and a country which is living in the most unsettled times in history, amidst the most violent and hostile neighbours, it is dangerous not to have the benefit of professional advice from the military commanders on a continuing basis. Similarly, the Nation should not be deprived of their experience and talents in other fields - there is a conspicuous lack of senior retired service officers in the ranks of ambassadors, PSU heads, and as advisers in various echelons of the Government. As a result we do not have a military culture or flair for muscled diplomacy, and our political leaders expend most of their talents and energies on internal politics and local issues. This, perhaps, is one reason why our foreign policies, though strong in academics and sophistry, have been singularly lacking in muscle and blunt speak.

Lastly, there is an urgent need for an institutionalised system whereby an independent government body carries out annual "performance evaluation" of important organs of the Government like the Defence, External Affairs, Finance,

Home etc. This could take the form of Parliamentary hearings somewhat like the Congressional/Senate hearings in the US system. It should be, of course, in addition to the office of Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). This must be preceded by 'self or internal audit'. The fact of the matter is that no organisation is perfect, so periodic stock-taking and fine tuning is necessary. The system will identify oversights and bottlenecks and highlight areas of critical concern like the continuing shortages in personnel and equipments of the Indian Army which has been recently described as "unfit for war" in a topical journal.⁷

Endnotes

1. UK relations with Tibet. Sir Algernon Rumbold, President of Tibet Society of the UK.
2. China's 'Aggressive' Territorial claim on India's Arunachal Pradesh by Namrata Goswami, Strategic Analysis (IDSA), Volume 35, Number 5, September 2011.
3. Infrastructure Development and Chinese War Waging Capabilities in Tibet by Shailender Arya, Journal of Defence Studies IDSA. July 2011, Vol.5 No.3.
4. Sino-Myanmar Military Cooperation and its Implications for India by H Sivananda, same publication as 3 above.
5. Text of Indo Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed at Kathmandu on 31 july,1950.).
6. CTC Sentinel, Article by Praveen Swami dated 3,May,2010 titled, "Riaz Bhaktal and the Origins of he Indian Mujahidin".
7. India Today November 7, 2011. Articles "The Big Story, Unfit Army' and "Dragons' Familiar Dance" by Brahma Chellaney.

***Lt Gen HC Dutta (Retd)** served in 8 Gorkha Rifles, commanding its 5th Battalion in Chhamb-Jaurian Sector in 1965 war. He was an Instructor at the Defence Services Staff College and Commandant, College of Combat, Mhow, before serving as GOC, 2 Corps and GOC-in-C, Central Command.

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