

Twelfth Colonel Pyara Lal Memorial Lecture Regional Security Dynamics and their Impact on India*

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It's good to see so many of my friends here. I acknowledge and salute the presence of many elders and seniors from whom I have learnt over the years, and whose careers have been the role models for my generation of military leaders. Thanks for being here, each one of you. I take your presence here as acknowledgement of Colonel Pyara Lal's great contribution far more than of any special skills that I might have.

I remember Colonel Pyara Lal when I was a junior officer. Whenever I was in Army Headquarters, and the USI was in a very old part of Kashmir House; always warm, very leaky in monsoons, where the books had to be covered in tarpaulins and plastics with limited staff. Yet it was the place where one could find the book or reference one needed, due to the care Colonel Pyara Lal took of the library's efficient management. My generation owed him a great debt because he encouraged us, personally took interest in our work, and guided us on how to work on research issues. It is an advice I share with many young officers today. Every time one gets posted to Army headquarters or in Delhi, use the USI's facilities to widen one's military knowledge base. I ask them to choose the subject of interest and specialise in it, go deeper into it, write about it, talk about it because that will give them a unique speciality. It would also become a window to another career when they retire. As General Nambiar said, we are grateful to Colonel Pyara Lal in providing leadership to this fantastic organisation for so many years, and bequeathing to us the legacy of USI's traditions.

The title of my talk is, "Regional Security Dynamics". The phrase dynamics is from engineering which refers to powers that force a change. Let me start by saying that the word 'region' itself has undergone a change of interpretation. Regions during the Cold War, were determined in terms of the Cold War geopolitics. They were products of super power perceptions of how the World was divided during that period. In the post Cold War era and in a globalised World, the regions are seen through new prisms. Consequently new geographical and strategy related linkages have emerged which make regions into a dynamic - powers that force change - with evolving interpretations. They are being redefined, rephrased, re-titled and regrouped. Remarkably, this is happening more as a result of the market forces than geo-political drivers. When one sees the investment by Japan in China, by China in the United States, the trading and security relations in the ASEAN Region and role of the Asian tigers, the growth of India itself; we find that regions mean different things in different contexts. What was called South Asia, our foreign office now calls Southern Asia. It makes good sense to look at the South Asian region as extending from Afghanistan through Central Asia to the Malacca Straits. Thus there is a change in the dynamics. I feel this title would have pleased Colonel Pyara Lal because he was the one who always encouraged us "to look beyond the immediate, to beyond what is obvious."

There is an extended Southern Asian Region in which India figures prominently. It is also a region which connects almost seamlessly with the rest of Asia and Middle East. In the globalised World, regions are not sui generis and by themselves as they were during the Cold War. They are now interdependent and closely linked. One can't say that one region is in itself an entity. This is because it has close linkages with others: Africa with Southern Asia, Europe with the Middle East, India's own emphasis on ASEAN, its tremendous interests in the Shanghai Cooperative Organisation (SCO) are indicative of the overarching linkages of regions.

This has led to a change in the World from what was called the bi-polar world to a multi-polar world. Recently the USA strategists, like Richard Haass, are beginning to say that we are now in a non polar World. According to Haass instead of looking at poles, we should look at powers - major powers, medium powers and other powers who have meaningful influence. Countries like Brazil and India today can force the WTO discussions into directions that matter to them. They can influence the global warming discussion. They can force issues, even though major powers have considerable undeniable powers. It is a World where emerging powers with meaningful influence, are in a position to influence global issues. That is the World which we have to look at to understand the regional dynamics.

I have just come back from Stockholm where there was a major conference on, "What the World would be like after the American global domination changes?" Thus you can see people are looking at the World from a different prism altogether. There is the National Intelligence Commission of the United States of America which has just produced a draft assessment of 2020 period which is titled "A Transformed World". That looks at a world where America may not have the power it now has. It doesn't mean that it will be a weak power, it will continue to be the dominant power, but it will not be the pre-dominant power. The report acknowledges the context in which India should see itself as part of the global shift of power to the Asian continent.

The South Asian region's dynamic would be influenced by the power shift towards Asia. Everybody is taking stock of the new Asia. According to one estimate by 2025, about 55 per cent of the global population will be Asian. China, India and Japan would be the third, fourth and fifth largest economies respectively. Together, they will consume 80 per cent of the global energy. There will be five, if not six, nuclear weapon states in Asia. And there will be possibly the same number of states in Asia who will possess intercontinental ballistic missiles. There is the book by Bill Emmott titled "Rivals: How the Power Struggle between China, India and Japan will Shape Our Next Decade". There is the new book by Fareed Zakaria which talks of "The Rise of Others", the title of the book is

“The Post American World”. These are telling phrases which people are using to indicate the new World that is emerging. Kishore Mahbubani of Singapore has written a scintillating book, “The New Asian Hemisphere”, whose sub title is “The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East”. That is the World in which we are going to be and that is how we should see ourselves.

If that is the case, what is the global security dynamics which we should keep in mind while examining the regional security dynamics? Last week I was in Geneva attending the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Annual Conference which is held in Switzerland every year. It is called the Global Strategic Review and some of the top leaders come from all over the World to speak there. There were six or seven major issues that this Global Strategic Review Conference covered which tell us how the major powers, Europe and Asia look at the Global dynamics? What are those overarching issues which are attracting the attention, that are going to define the strategic dynamics? First on the list is whether there would be a new Cold War? The Russian action in Georgia has triggered this new anxiety. Global leaders do not want this kind of a conflict again. They do not want the re-emergence of the Cold War. Then there is the question of missile defence, expansion of NATO, etc which in some ways led to Russian actions – seen as an overarching issue. Second, the subject, “Climate Change” and the “Environment Issue”, with Kyoto becoming the sort of symbol of all that is wrong which figures high as a global issue. Major powers are resisting change while India, Brazil and others are demanding their rights. The Indian position is admired in such conferences. Indian Government’s position is that it would agree to all the caps on global warming, but Indian emission levels will never exceed those of developed societies. Whatever be the lowest level which major powers will come down to, India will maintain its emissions below it. India argues that it cannot be blamed for Global Warming, which is something it did not contribute to. Global Warming is a consequence of policies of developed societies. The Indian call, “to not demand from it more than what developed states are willing to give” finds wide resonance. That is the new power structure in the World in which India is working.

The third area is of energy and in that the new magical phrase that is capturing attention is of Resource Nationalism. That is instead of looking at energy as a global need, a state which has control of energy will decide how the World should respond to it. Everyone is talking about Russian Energy Nationalism and Mr Putin’s policies on gas control, petroleum control, and control on the rise of price of gas. Since much of Europe depends on Russian energy resources, what Russia does in Georgia, through which many pipelines pass, has cardiac arrest kind of response on the European powers.

The fourth area in the global context is about conflict zones in which Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and of course, the Middle East play a very big part. Pakistan now figures very high as the absolute centre, the consequences that would flow, nobody might be able to control. Pakistan is our neighbour in the regional dynamics. Then comes the question of nuclear proliferation of North Korea, Iran and others where India figures in a completely different light, as a responsible nuclear weapon state. Then comes the question of global terrorism. A phenomenon that is rapidly changing its face; and we have the new face of international terrorism in India. Finally, there is the critical issue of economic stability which is highlighted by collapse of the Wall Street foundations of economy.

If we look at these 6 or 7 overarching issues, which globally affect all regions, two patterns emerge. One pattern on the global scene is the American and European perspective which is seeking stability. These powers want the present strategic stability to continue. They don’t want to go back to the Cold War. They want the international globalised World of the market economies to continue to flourish. However from that part of the World, Asia is seen as seeking greater military capabilities. So, one part of the World is looking for stability while there is a shift of the global power to Asia, and yet that Asia is busy developing its military capacities. Thus, China’s military modernisation is causing high concern; China’s budget figures are very high; and China’s capacity to bring down a satellite from space has led to anxieties in the USA. Fear of an arms race in space is real. Space had been kept free from being made into a military high ground. Now the risks of militarising it are creating anxiety. Asia has in it some of the largest arms buyers in the World, and China and India figure very high on that. That is the global strategic dynamics in which we are functioning and in which we will remain as a principal and an important player. This is the context in which we should look at the regional security dynamics.

Where is India in this review that I have briefly described? One must start by saying with great pride that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Indian leadership, whether it was the Congress or the BJP, moved very fast, very determinedly and I think very successfully in strategic terms to reposition India. The endeavour to reposition India from where we were during the Cold War, to our current position in the emerging international architecture, based on economic linkages is a fine achievement. The Indian emphasis is on economic growth. Economic growth will depend entirely on massive foreign investments. Technology and foreign investments can come only from the developed world, which is the Western World. We needed to re-engage with that World and that is why the repositioning exercise. The entire outcome and the results which have flowed from it are strategic issues. The 123 Agreement, the Nuclear Deal with the USA and everything else is a consequence of that re-positioning exercise, and the economic reforms. It is a success story, in economic and strategic terms.

We have also to take note of our neighbourhood i.e. the turbulent world around us. India is politically more stable, and economically growing fast. It is a success story economically and yet, the latest Newsweek journal has Dr Manmohan Singh’s picture on its cover labelling “India Isn’t Shining.” It blames Manmohan Singh for being a man who has failed to deliver. That is another story and a passing phase. India cannot be stopped from where it is headed. We may go slower or faster, but the journey would surely continue. A slow down in Indian economic growth is a major global concern and demonstrates the importance it receives in the global security calculus. One western analyst had said five years ago, “the greatest thing India did was to have determined its political destiny, by proving itself as the democracy which can be worked.” What we are doing now amounts to proving our economic destiny and I do not think that the process can be stopped.

Then of course, came the nuclear test. It’s amazing, what an impact Indian nuclear weapons have had! The test of 1998 led to a new thinking on nuclear regimes nuclear deterrence, and started a new discourse on disarmament.

General Nambiar, Director, USI and I are members of a new movement called “Global Zero” which has got some of the top thinkers and scientists on it, pushing for new ways to obtain disarmament. A statement by Messieurs Kissinger, Schultz, Nunn and Perry in two Op-Eds in the Wall Street journals last year had surprised many. These strategic thinkers and leaders were the legendary Cold War practitioners. Now they are saying that America’s interest would be better served by disarmament. This is also the consequence of 1998, albeit an indirect consequence, of the realisation that a country determined to have nuclear weapons will have them. Yet, in a World worried about proliferation, India is an exception by virtue of the responsibilities that it has demonstrated. That is why wherever I speak abroad, experts would say that they do not recognise India as a Nuclear Weapon State. I would then reply, “you may not, but you have to recognise India as a State with Nuclear Weapons.” India has not bothered about these labels. We have moved from being a “Non Nuclear Weapon State” to become a “State with Nuclear Weapons” and last month the phrase I heard was “Responsible Nuclear Weapons Possessor”. India is graduating in the Nuclear World. It is a grudging admission of India’s reality which is of a new India. That is what we should take note of. Indian military capability is now seen as a stabilising element. As a former Ambassador of the USA to India once put it, India’s Army is one of the few which has actually been in combat for years. It knows that Indian Navy is a stabilising element in the whole region from the Straits of Malacca to the Middle East.

I want to draw your attention to a letter written by twenty American strategic analysts which was published in the Indian Express last Saturday. It is a letter to the Congressmen explaining why they should support the 123 Agreement. It says, “India is the primary resident Naval Force in the Indian ocean and works with us to maintain the security of the sea-lanes through which most of the World’s oil trade travels.” The same letter talks about India’s impeccable non proliferation record and says, “We are poised to reap the non-proliferation benefits of ending India’s nuclear isolation.” Could we have imagined this perception 10 years ago from the Western World? Our stature as the Nuclear Weapon Power also has added to our value to the global security balance.

I remember in Oslo, in a conference on nuclear disarmament, I said, “sometimes weapons can also do good”. I mentioned that since 1998 both India and Pakistan, after making some serious mistakes, had realised that war was no longer a practical option. You cannot go to war with nuclear weapons, since major powers will not countenance it. Global pressures will make war a ‘no choice’ option as it happened in 2002. Nuclear weapons have thus added to stability. The whole peace process with Pakistan has developed momentum after 1998. It is the consequence of the realisation that political disputes can no longer be resolved by war. It was however agreed that in the Indian Subcontinent, nuclear weapons have produced a degree of stability.

India thus figures in a different perspective from the point of view of major powers. We are being seen, as more than a regional player. We are being seen as a global security asset. We are being seen as a strategic balancer from Japan to Singapore. Major powers view India as a balancing element in a large area where their ability to influence matters militarily is reducing. India is considered as one of the keepers of the global concerns. Indian strategic assets, whether in space or in the nuclear field or in missiles are seen as non-threatening. These are remarkable gains considering that two decades ago India was viewed, notwithstanding its non aligned posture, as part of one Cold War block.

Expectations of a larger role from India have led to new strategic partnerships with major powers. There are triangular strategic partnerships like that of China, Russia and India. There are other strategic partnerships in which India is welcomed. These partnerships go beyond the regional patterns as understood in the Cold and Post Cold War era. Regional strategic dynamics is thus ever more linked through economic relations with larger perspectives of security.

There has been a lively debate in India on the India - USA Nuclear Deal. In most parts of the World, and in the strategic communities, there was initial surprise that such a deal was agreed upon by the USA. As the debate evolved and Indian adherence to international norms became clear there was a greater sense of re-assurance. The strategic implication of the deal is the acknowledgement of India as a responsible nuclear weapon state capable of playing a responsible and stabilising role.

There is now a new thinking on nuclear weapons and nuclear regimes that were designed to control their proliferation. The plea from Kissinger, Schultz, Perry and Nunn for nuclear weapons abolition is getting picked up globally. New global organisations are coming into being to push this idea forward. India had taken that position many decades ago through the Rajiv Gandhi Plan and India was the lead player in this. India has willingly supported this call for abolition and consequently there was a conference this year which the Prime Minister addressed in Delhi.

I was a member of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (WMDC), headed by Dr Hans Blix whose report is on the web. Now the Australian and Japanese governments have instituted a new International Commission on Nuclear disarmament, to which I am an Adviser from the Indian side. In the emerging discourse on nuclear abolition, India now figures on the positive side in the global strategic dynamics from whichever combination of issues one looks at.

In the larger context, how should we look at the Regional Security Dynamics, in which India is the central player in Southern Asia? The first thing is that Nuclear weapons have substantially reduced the possibility of a full scale war, at least between the two major countries - India and Pakistan. But that has produced a classical response of the Cold War, by enhancing the potential and the temptation to engage in sub-optimal wars like insurrections, insurgencies and the conflicts of terrorism by non state actors with global linkages.

Oxford University did a project over the last few years on the changing nature of war. It looked at the objectives that can be achieved by conventional military operations in the new global scene and threats. One has to go back to Clausewitz’s famous comment on power and military. Clausewitz’s advice to his monarch was to go on the

offensive, capture more territory, to fight and win battles. Later Clausewitz was critiqued for ignoring the basic idea that the purpose of war was not victory but peace. The question now being asked is whether the Israeli military victories of 1967, 1973 or the military victories in Korea, Vietnam and in Iraq, helped in achieving peace? The answer obviously is 'No'. This is a new thinking on warfare. We must recognise this reality.

South Asia is a region of inbuilt conflicts which are never ending. India is not free from it either. It's a region of substantial political turbulence. It is also a region of very severe economic stress. One cannot talk of India shining without talking about the 40 per cent of population living below the poverty line, which is factored at one dollar a day by the United Nations. So there is poverty and deprivation in this region which is combined with dysfunctional governments. The narrowing of the National discourse from truly macro to very marginal issues is the reality of the region of which we are the principle player.

Our wish to be a global player will always be constrained by the realities that I have listed. Therefore, the growth and success of our region is critical to us. It is a strategic necessity for India. If we look at countries, all the way from Afghanistan to Myanmar, no country is free from strife and turbulence. Whether it is Sri Lanka, Bangladesh or Nepal; for that matter even Bhutan and of course Pakistan. They have a direct impact on Indian security in different forms.

So what are the challenges of the region with this background? I think the principle challenge is of democratic transition. Every country around us, including us, are transiting to a new form of democracy, be it from a single party to a coalition, or from military governance to democracy. Sri Lanka will have to learn, if it wins the war against LTTE, on how to absorb large numbers of Tamil population in the mainstream of its polity. Bangladeshis have yet to resolve the democratic question. Pakistan is in serious democratic difficulties. Nepal has embarked on a route which is unclear. Nepal is divided in two parts – the hill people and the plains people, called the Madhesis, who control half the parliamentary votes. I think these are major challenges and it is a security challenge. India remains an exception. On a lighter note, while in Singapore a month back, I asked a Singapore diplomat as to, how and what did India look to him from Singapore? He replied, "India has too much democracy". He wondered why, India going into strategic deal with the United States of America, (which is the envy of many countries) was being held hostage by its democratic divides? Democratic transition remains the challenge. There is also the challenge of ethnicities. The great Indian State, thanks to its fantastic leaders who had strategic vision, undertook to reorganise the States on a linguistic basis which has given us great strategic stability. But none of the countries in the region including India, have been able to resolve or overcome the question of ethnicities. And, therefore political activity and internal conflicts are driven by ethnic divides which we are yet to overcome. So, whether it is Shias and Sunnis of Pakistan, or Tamils and Sinhalese of Sri Lanka or the Hill Tribes and Madhesis in Nepal, or in India's Northeast – basically, it's all about ethnicities and democratic transition.

There is the challenge of unequal economic growth. In India itself, its five Southern states are the best governed. There is greater social cohesion. They have the highest literacy and the highest foreign direct investment. If India is on the global map, it is largely because of Southern India. Today no coalition can be formed in Delhi without at least two, if not three, out of the five Southern states being partners. That is the power of South India. And yet, when we did a study with a well known economist, the conclusion was that this growth had a security dimension. The Southern Indian growth path is already witnessing a population shift from other parts of India to Southern India. Migrant labour in search of employment is moving in to Southern India. Can Southern India sustain that demographic shift of unequal growth? We are seeing a similar pattern, though in a small measure, in Punjab where labour comes from Bihar. The same is true of J&K. The challenges of unequal economic growth within the regions of India will have a security impact. Asia, from Afghanistan to Japan, also harbours ancient animosities. Europe has overcome it but Asia is yet to do so. Whether it is between China and Japan, or Japan and Korea, or within ASEAN, or between Central Asian States, or claims to energy rich areas, potential conflict zones are very much present.

What should the Indian perspective be in this regional dynamics? India and our generation is at the cusp of the historic moment with huge opportunities and challenges. But the central requirement for India would remain of maintaining a sustained and stable region. The essential dynamics would be to maintain India's growth and internal stability. Therefore, the Indian challenge will have to be to minimise the impact of turbulent neighbourhood on our own internal security. We have to find ways to enhance the strategic autonomy for our Country in the global scene with all the challenges we have.

India is being called in the western strategic discourse as a "swing state". What is a swing state? A swing state is the one which can swing its position to create balance between competing major powers. China, the USA, Japan, Russia are powers that are jockeying to seek or retain a dominant role. How will India play a stabilising role? It is going to be a major challenge for diplomacy and for political leaders. What will be our role in the new balance of power that may be emerging? I think the greatest challenge for the strategic practitioners in India would be to maintain a balance between the two terrific new relationships that are emerging. A stable relationship that is carefully crafted over forty years with China and a new strategic relationship with the USA. These two are not complementary. The India-USA relationship can never be free from the shadow of the Sino-American relationship. We have very little control over what the USA does, what its assumptions of China should be or would not be. We will have to manage these two relationships which will require tremendous skill. I think the Indian Foreign Service and the political leadership have risen to the occasion in the past and will continue to function that way. Lastly, I would say India would need to balance another relationship. That is, of being rooted in Southern Asia and yet working the global strategic commons as a major player. That would be a major challenge for us.

In conclusion, we are not just a resident power in Southern Asia, we are the principle determinant of security in this region. This role will be contested by some and supported by some. I think the major powers will support that. The only way forward is through economic growth and political stability. I wish to draw on the statement of the Prime Minister at the SAARC meeting in Colombo recently where he said, "Our aim should be to create

virtuous cycles of growth in our region, i.e. growth through partnerships.” That vision will need to be pursued with determination.

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