

# Strategy – The Unexplored Frontiers: A New Strategic Direction for India

Major General PJS Sandhu (Retd)<sup>®</sup>

## Introduction

There is an interesting US document 'NSC 68' which had remained TOP SECRET for nearly five decades and had recently been declassified.<sup>1</sup> The document is a 'Report to the President (of the USA) pursuant to the President's Directive of January 31, 1950' which reads:-

*"That the President direct the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defence to undertake a re-examination of our objectives in peace and war and of the effect of these objectives on our strategic plans, in the light of the probable fission bomb capability and possible thermo-nuclear bomb capability of the Soviet Union".*

It is a 47 page document, which after due analysis, recommends a course of action (Course D) which in all probability was the underpinning of the US strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union till the disintegration of the latter in 1989.<sup>2</sup> The intention here is not to go into the details of this document or the attendant strategy but to extrapolate the process (evolution of strategy) to events of the present times. This article aims to analyse the unexplored frontiers (possibilities) of strategy as an instrument of statecraft in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with a focus on geostrategic environment of India as it prevails and in the years to come.

## Relevance of Strategy as an Instrument of Statecraft in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Strategy as a geopolitical instrument gained an overarching importance during the Second World War and the decades that followed, especially the Cold War years. However, with the onset of globalisation and social media, the pace of events quickened and gradually strategic thinking seems to have given way to personality driven policies and crises management. The long drawn out conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and ongoing strife in Syria and

---

<sup>®</sup>Major General PJS Sandhu was commissioned into 8<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1966 and later commanded 47 Armoured Regiment. He retired as the Chief of Staff 1 Corps on 31<sup>st</sup> July 2003. He served as the Deputy Director and Editor at USI of India from May 2007 to Dec 2016.

much of the Middle East are the cases in point. The Americans who could be singled out for strategic thinking during and after the war years seem to have abandoned it, perhaps due to their misplaced confidence in military power and technology to solve geopolitical issues on the world stage.

### **Neglect of History and Geography**

Another perceptible trend the world over has been the neglect of history and geography in dealing with geopolitical issues, which has not only prolonged the conflicts but has inflicted much suffering on the people of the affected regions. History helps us to understand the past, which has led to the present events while Geography acts as a restraint to human endeavors, notwithstanding the military power and technological superiority. The awareness about history and geography of a region imposes a sense of 'realism', which in turn helps the policy makers to evolve an achievable political objective which when linked with 'ways and means' becomes a strategy.

To illustrate the importance of history and geography in formulation of strategy, a few examples from the recent times come to mind. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 is a case in point. The Soviets seemed to have neither taken into account the outcome of historical interventions, nor the limits that geography imposed on military operations. The reality of the Hindu Kush mountains and the North West Frontier cannot be ignored. It is ironic that the Americans have blundered along the same route, perhaps due to their misplaced confidence in military might and technological superiority.

Closer home, the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka in 1987 comes to mind. One may iterate that history and geography of the area of operations, and ground realities of the situation were given a go by before venturing into the situation. To make matters worse, there was an absence of political aim and a sound strategy. However, the redeeming feature was the performance of the Indian Military which was functioning in a strategic vacuum. The memorial to the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) constructed by Sri Lanka stands testimony to the same.<sup>3</sup>

To further reinforce the above point, the success story of the Indo-Pak War of 1971 resulting in creation of Bangladesh merits

a mention. Historical and geographical factors were duly factored in while evolving a grand strategy which played out over the next nine months. The results are obvious. It is a different matter that a decisive military victory gave way to an incomplete peace. The statesmen are not infrequently known to have gone wrong while negotiating peace. The Treaty of Versailles, the peace parleys at the end of the First Gulf War, The Tashkent Agreement etc. being a few cases in point that readily come to mind. Hence, strategy of peace negotiations is as important, if not more, as the military strategy for war.

### **The Asian Landscape**

China and India are the two major Asiatic powers that are destined to not only determine the future of this part of the world but would also impact each other. First, an overview of Chinese geography and its geo-strategic maneuvering, and the upheavals that it may cause. To quote Mackinder:-

*“ \_ \_ \_ \_ the Chinese might constitute the yellow peril to the world’s freedom, just because they would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent, an advantage as yet denied to the Russian tenant of the pivot region.”<sup>4</sup>*

One cannot help but conclude that nearly a century later, Mackinder’s prediction by and large seems to be coming true. In fact, if we look at the geographic and demographic factors of China, it is obvious that China (and so is India) is destined to be an important player on the world stage. It is quite apparent that there is a kind of grand strategy at play for the last three decades which is not linear but has continuity in all its vectors. China is pursuing long term goals with the ultimate aim of being a world power, possibly of a different character than the United States of America.

The dynamism of Chinese economic growth, technological advancement in various fields, accumulation of military power and spreading of its influence (directly and indirectly in most subtle ways) has given a new meaning to strategic behaviour, i.e. to say ‘the unexplored frontiers of strategy’. The Chinese example is a good sounding board to analyse this phenomenon. *China’s emerging area of influence in Eurasia and Africa is growing, not in a nineteenth century imperialistic sense, but in a more subtle*

*manner better suited to the era of globalisation. Simply by securing its economic needs, China is shifting the balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere, and that will substantially concern the United States (and India). On land and at sea, abetted by China's favourable location on the map, Beijing's influence is emanating from Central Asia to the Russian Far East and from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean.*<sup>5</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are the manifestations of the grand strategy at play.

### **The Indian Scenario**

Taking into account the historical perspective and the ground realities it would be logical to begin at 1947, which determined the shape of the Indian Sub-continent and India, as it exists today. Independent India was quick to consolidate its geopolitical structure through the merger of princely states and in giving itself a workable Constitution, which has stood the test of time. India's role in ending the Korean War, especially its contribution in the 'Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission', and later in Indo-China is a testimony to the Indian prestige on the world stage. It was all the more creditable that such recognition was achieved in less than a decade after having emerged from two centuries of colonial rule.

However, there were two noticeable areas of India's failure as an Independent Nation. One, India did not do enough to secure its frontiers, especially so as the newly created Pakistan emerged a belligerent neighbour on its western flank and India had a new neighbour in Communist China after its annexation of Xinjiang in 1949 and Tibet in 1950-51. These were the geographic realities that had emerged soon after Independence but their contours had been visible in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The second failure which has had long-term effects on India's growth has been the absence of a well-crafted strategy. Mr K Subrahmanyam in his article 'India's Grand Strategy' had called 'non-alignment' as India's grand strategy at Independence and subsequent Cold War years.<sup>16</sup> It would be a misnomer to term non-alignment anything close to a strategy, leave aside 'grand strategy', for the simple reason that it did not fulfill the ingredients of a strategy. While it may have had an objective (to stay away from the two power blocks), but, lacked the 'ways and means' to

achieve the same. In retrospect, it could be viewed as a fair weather foreign policy which came under severe stress in times of national crisis; e.g. in 1962. No doubt, it was idealistic but devoid of pragmatism. Further, it was not evolved institutionally but based on personal whims and fancies of our first Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru who viewed the post-Second World War world as a benign world free from large-scale wars. It also helped him to project himself as a world statesman, albeit at the cost of India's national interests.

### **National Security Strategy**

Since the beginning of the 21st Century, particularly after the nuclear tests of May 1998, there have been a number of attempts by defence related think tanks and HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) to evolve and suggest to the government a National Security Strategy but all these efforts have come to naught, primarily because of lack of political guidance by successive governments which would define national aims and objectives, and terms of reference to achieve the same.

### **National Security Challenges**

It is common knowledge that our northern borders with Pakistan and China are undefined, un-demarcated and disputed. It is also a fact that a large section of the population of the Kashmir Valley stands alienated from the Indian State.

There are some home truths that need to be stated. First, though we maintain and rightly so that the whole of J&K is an unalienable part of India but have done nothing for the last seven decades to get the part vacated that was illegally occupied by Pakistan through aggression in 1947-48. In 1947-48, Major (later Brigadier) Sher Jang Thapa, MVC held on to Skardu (capital of Gilgit-Baltistan) for six months but India could not relieve it for want of a concerted effort. Eventually, after most of his force had been killed and the garrison was near starvation, he had no option but to surrender.<sup>7</sup> Had Skardu been relieved in time, there would have been no problem of Gilgit-Baltistan as Pakistan would not have shared a border with China. In retrospect, it was a failure to appreciate the strategic importance of Gilgit-Baltistan for defence of India.

Secondly, it was a cardinal mistake to have taken the case of J&K to the United Nations in 1948. It was essentially a case of aggression by Pakistan against the Indian State of J&K and India would have been justified to have it vacated by all means at its disposal. Well, it was not to be!

Thirdly, there have been a number of opportunities that have come India's way to solve the J&K problem once and for all. These are the wars or near wars that were initiated or abetted by Pakistan; the last opportunity being the attack on Indian Parliament in Dec 2001 and Operation Parakram that followed. In the last case, it was primarily lack of political will to adopt a hard option. To hide our failure, we chose to call it 'diplomatic coercion.'<sup>8</sup>

Fourthly, and most importantly is the case of Tibet. The way the whole issue has been handled since 1947/49 shows lack of strategy and failure to recognise the ground reality. The saga of 1962 war requires no repetition. No doubt, China was the aggressor but India played no small part in bringing about a war for which it was ill prepared. The net result is that the whole issue of boundary dispute with China has become intractable with no hope of a resolution in the near future. Though there is relative peace and tranquility on the borders, the boundary dispute acts as a limiting factor in overall development of Sino-Indian relations.

The net effect of the above has been the growing nexus between China and Pakistan, which has of late come to impact on geopolitical and geostrategic options for India. That India has to maintain a high degree of military preparedness to face security threats also impacts its economic growth, especially so, as India is still a developing country with almost 22 per cent (as per Indian Government's own estimate) of its population living below poverty line.

### **Relations with Pakistan**

Pakistan continues to illegally occupy large parts of the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir, i.e. Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) and has been sponsoring proxy war against India since 1989-90. Apart from the ongoing J&K problem, conflicting interests in Afghanistan are a major issue impacting on bilateral relations. Just as India considers its neighbours like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar as its areas of strategic interest and



influence, Pakistan considers Afghanistan the same way. Notwithstanding the historical ties, it needs to be realised and accepted that Afghanistan is Pakistan's neighbour while India is not; at least till Pakistan continues to occupy the northern territories of Gilgit-Baltistan. The people of Afghanistan consider the presence of the US and NATO troops alien to their culture and do not view their continued presence favourably. Hence, *the US presence in Afghanistan is part of the problem and not solution*. How does it matter which government rules in Kabul as long as the people of Afghanistan accept the same. It is time that India accepts the ground reality and comes to terms with Pakistan's interests in its 'backyard'. In fact, sagacity would demand that India and Pakistan are seen to be on the same page as far as Afghanistan is concerned. This could result in a major reset of bilateral relations and create a degree of trust, which is sorely lacking.

### **Relations with China**

This today is the biggest foreign policy challenge for India. We are neither moving any closer to resolution of the boundary dispute, nor in development of bilateral relations in other fields. As regards the boundary dispute with China, in spite of 19 rounds of talks between the Special Representatives (SRs) of India and China since 2003, we are no closer to a border settlement.<sup>9</sup> If anything, the Chinese stand has not only shifted from the agreed principles but their attitude has also hardened. Of late, a certain amount of chill has crept into bilateral relations. India's opposition to CPEC and not joining the BRI has been the latest points of friction. As a result, not only are the bilateral relations on a downward swing but China-Pakistan nexus gets even stronger to the overall detriment of our geostrategic interests. A major re-orientation of our approach towards China is required. It has to be a multi-pronged strategy, which is outlined, in the succeeding paras.

India could offer to become a partner in CPEC. If accepted, this would establish old linkages with Gilgit-Baltistan and western parts of PoK. This in turn would also address trust deficit with Pakistan. The point to be considered is that geopolitical environment cannot remain frozen for all times to come. It is subject to change based on geographical realities and peoples' aspirations. *Who knows what may be the shape of the Indian sub-continent by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is important for India to play its part in shaping the geopolitics of the region in the years to come.*

India could also join BRI, especially in India's neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It would also demonstrate India's confidence in being able to protect its core geostrategic interests.

The presence of His Holiness (HH) the Dalai Lama and his followers, and the Tibetan Government in exile in India are a major irritant in bilateral relations. Even today China feels quite insecure in Tibet. India could facilitate return of HH the Dalai Lama and his followers to their homeland through formal and back channel diplomacy. It is well known that India has no designs over Tibet and has accepted once and for all that Tibet is part of China. If the return of HH the Dalai Lama and his followers can be achieved with India's help, it will be in the interest of both and a great trust building factor. It is only when China feels secure in Tibet that there can be any forward movement on the boundary dispute. The aim should be to achieve free movement of people in the frontier regions of India and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, which was so historically.

Lastly, it is important to increase trade and people to people contact. This can happen only if irritants in bilateral relations are removed and there is greater sensitivity by both sides to give due consideration to each other's core interests which in turn would generate trust.

### **Situation in J&K**

The need of the hour is for the Indian Government to introspect and identify the factors, which have led to the present state of affairs. To begin with, the proxy war in J&K was abetted and sponsored from across the Line of Control (LC) but we chose to deal with it internally. Apart from deploying the Army within, we also created Rashtriya Rifles (RR) which is *de facto* Army but deployed for internal security in J&K. RR has been conducting sustained counter insurgency operations for over two decades and is being seen as a face of the Army. In the process, the Army has lost its salutary effect that was its biggest asset when operating in aid to civil authority. So, what needs to be done?

The first step is to start dismantling the RR as a force and hand over its responsibilities to CRPF which stands designated as the main force for counter insurgency (CI) and internal security



(IS). I agree its effectiveness in this role is suspect. The answer lies in inducting army officers into CRPF and other Central Police Organisations (CPOs) involved in CI and border management in place of Indian Police Service (IPS) officers. At least 50 per cent of the officer cadre in such forces, especially company commanders and above, ought to be from the Army on deputation. Over a period of time, this will develop a culture of a para military force in the CPOs, which will obviate the requirement to call in the Army at the first instance and to keep it there in perpetuity. The latest example of the language agitation in Darjeeling is a case in point. The point to remember is that political issues ought to be resolved politically and not by calling in the Army. *The Army may be called in as an instrument of last resort and that too for a short period, to have the desired salutary effect.*

### **Conclusion**

A well-articulated grand strategy is a sine-quo-non for any country in today's world. A strategy once evolved gives a direction along which a country moves to achieve its goals and objectives. However, in formulation of strategy due consideration has to be given to the history, geography and culture of any region or the country. Globalisation and economic power are not sufficient to overcome the restraints imposed by history and geography. The ongoing intervention by the US and their allies in Afghanistan amply prove the same.

India today is at the cross-roads in its journey to becoming a developed country. In the last two decades, there have been many false starts where it was felt that India had finally arrived (on the world stage) but it was not really so. Keeping in view the present state of development and security threats, India needs to re-assess the direction it is taking to meet its aspirations and evolve a strategy, which will be rooted in historical and geographical realities. It must be institutionally driven and should involve all stakeholders. India's geopolitical environment requires a reset of its various policies to be able to address the challenges that it faces and create fresh opportunities. A new strategic direction has been suggested in the paper. It is deliberately provocative and departs from the standard Indian narrative so that it could generate a debate and consequently a strategy that would serve India well during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm>. Accessed on 10 Jun 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Course D involved – A rapid build-up of political economic and military strength in the free world. This was to be the core of American strategy during the Cold War.

<sup>3</sup> The fact that the IPKF while withdrawing from Sri Lanka was not even allowed to land in Tamil Nadu goes only to prove that the intervention was undertaken without due thought being given to historical, geographical and cultural factors.

<sup>4</sup> HJ Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”, The Geographical Journal, London, April 1904.

<sup>5</sup> Robert D Kaplan, The Revenge of Geography, Random House, New York, First Edition, 2012, pp.12014. p.200.

<sup>6</sup> Mr K Subrahmanyam passed away on Feb 2, 2011. This article was adapted by Dhruva Jaishankar from four of Subrahmanyam’s unpublished essays on grand strategy, Indian foreign relations, defence policy and nuclear deterrence. It was published in the Indian Express on 02 and 04 Feb 2012. It can be accessed at <http://www.Indianexpress.com/news/Indies-grand-strategy1907157/0>.

<sup>7</sup> Lieutenant General MS Shergill, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (retd), A Hero Forgotten-Brigadier Sher Jang Thapa, MVC, USI Journal, Jul-Sep 2007, Vol.cxxxvii, No.569, p.419.

<sup>8</sup> Major General PJS Sandhu (Retd), Operation Parakram Revisited, Purple Beret, January 2012, Vol.3, Issue 1, p.18.

<sup>9</sup> The last round of SR parleys was held in Beijing on 20 Apr 2016.