

**Fifth General KV Krishna Rao  
Memorial Lecture  
India's Strategic Autonomy:  
Opportunities and Challenges in the  
Emerging World Order**



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Memorial Lecture  
India's Strategic Autonomy: Opportunities  
and Challenges in the Emerging World  
Order**

**Manekshaw Centre: 05 Oct 2023**

**Speakers**

**Gen Anil Chauhan, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM,  
Chief of Defence Staff**

**Ambassador Sujan R Chinoy (Retd),  
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**Lt Gen Ata Hasnain, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM\*\*  
(Retd)**



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## About Gen KV Krishna Rao, PVSM (Retd)



Gen KV Krishna Rao, PVSM, the 11<sup>th</sup> Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), was a distinguished military leader and scholar warrior. Born on 16 Jul 1923, he played a crucial role in the growth of the Indian Army and contributed significantly to nation-building. Commissioned into 2 MAHAR on 09 Aug 1942, he later commanded 3 MAHAR, a Brigade in Ladakh, 8 Mountain Division, 16 Corps and the Western Army in various regions. He was the COAS from 1981 to 1983.

Notably, Gen Krishna Rao commanded 8 Mountain Division during the 1971 Indo-Pak War, contributing to the liberation of Bangladesh. His greatest legacy was the formulation of 'Cold Start,' a military doctrine involving multiple, shallow strikes at high speeds to capture enemy territory and end wars swiftly.

After retirement as the COAS, he served as the Governor of Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, and Jammu and Kashmir, playing a crucial role in restoring peace and democracy in the insurgency-driven states. As the Colonel of the MAHAR

Regiment from 1968 to 1983, he significantly influenced its reputation and legacy.

Gen KV Krishna Rao's multifaceted contributions, both in the military and as a statesman, have left an indelible mark.

The Gen KV Krishna Rao Memorial Lecture, instituted in 2018, honours this legendary personality.



# Introductory Remarks

by

**Maj Gen PK Goswami, Officiating Director General,  
USI of India**



The theme of the Fifth Gen KV Krishna Rao Memorial Lecture is 'India's Quest for Strategic Autonomy: Opportunities and Challenges in the Emerging World Order'.

In the prevailing geopolitical churning, India will remain beset with a volatile strategic environment underpinned by heightened regional instability and a growing 'Pakistan–China Strategic Nexus' directed against India. It is predetermined that China will remain a big elephant in the room and its intent, capabilities and strategic behaviour will remain inimical to India's strategic interests. At the same

time, today, the world is witnessing growing polarisation among major powers with the Euro-Atlantic and East-Asian Alliance on one side and China-Russia alignment on the other side. In the ensuing milieu, the positive trend is the traction of Global South in which India is playing a major role.

Thus, despite deepening strategic collaborations with both the western and eastern blocs, and given the intractable nature of disputes and the hostile intent of India's adversaries, India needs to maintain its strategic autonomy to realise the vision of *Viksit Bharat* (Developed India) 2047. It is in this backdrop that the topic stands out as highly contemporary and futuristic in nature.

# Key Note Address

by

**Gen Anil Chauhan, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM,  
Chief of Defence Staff**



The Chief of Defence Staff recalled General Krishna Rao's famous book 'Prepare or Perish: A Study on National Security'. The book dealt with 'Choices', 'Hard Choices' a nation will have to take to secure itself. Exercising autonomy in some manner is also about making choices. Choices involve uncertainty and risk and are generally made in an ambiguous environment when there is little clarity. It has a long-term impact on national security. The subject of strategic autonomy was as much relevant in 1991, when the book was

published, as it is today, when one is witnessing profound changes that are occurring in the world and neighbourhood.

In any subject related to diplomacy, national security or international relations, there is an abstract world of 'Theory' and for the real world of its 'Practice'.

The subject is aimed at bringing out:

- The evolution of the concept of strategic autonomy from what was practiced in the past i.e., non-alignment.
- The important ingredients that help nations practice strategic autonomy i.e., economic and military strength, partnerships and alliances and self-reliance.
- Exercising strategic autonomy in the emerging world order.

### **Non-Alignment and Strategic Autonomy**

Non-alignment has been an important cornerstone of Indian foreign policy ever since India became independent. In fact, India played a lead role not only in its conceptualisation but also in its practice. Looking back at non-alignment, one can say it was a product of the 'Cold War' and in its formative years helped in the de-colonisation of Asia, Africa and indeed the world. It also helped India to secure itself from power politics of the Cold War. Non-alignment passed away with the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. It gradually lost its relevance, at least in the context of Indian diplomacy.

Strategic autonomy, in some way, is a more evolved form of non-alignment. Absolute autonomy is not possible in a globalised world of today. Hence, even in exercising of autonomy there has to be a 'Strategy' behind it. Strategic autonomy is not exercised in vacuum. The choices one makes

in pursuit of national interests must be well considered and maintaining autonomy is part of the strategy.

Looking back at non-alignment, it was passive in nature. It thrived on not taking sides. Strategic autonomy is a far more active concept, based on the idea of positive action and making choices in the best interest of any nation. Non-alignment was non-assertive and strategic autonomy is about 'Power Politics', which is more pragmatic and visible.

### **Economic and Military Strength**

Strategic autonomy denotes the ability to pursue national interests and adopt a foreign policy without being constrained. A state has to be powerful to exercise strategic autonomy. A weak state can always choose to remain non-aligned.

The shift in Indian diplomacy from being non-aligned to exercising strategic autonomy has been a gradual process. The world, including India, is at a pivotal moment in history. The extraordinary changes in the last two decades have fundamentally transformed India's economy and society. These changes have created the possibility of India exercising its economic heft to play a major role in the emerging geo-political milieu.

The economic weight of the nation gets reflected in its military capability. Stronger armed forces are essential towards the practice of strategic autonomy. Economic and military strength creates leverages for diplomacy to succeed.

The Indian leadership has demonstrated its ability to maintain strategic autonomy and taken decisions in the national interest. It has been a slow but steady journey.

- The successful series of nuclear tests in 1998, in the face of increasing pressure to accede to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, was a test of Indian will

to retain its ability to take strategic decisions in national interest. India eventually became a victim of sanctions and the most severe technology denial regimes. It was a transitory phase in which India demonstrated its ability to make choices in the national interest and to be prepared for the consequences that were to follow.

➤ Twenty-five years later, after taking a neutral and nuanced stand in Russia, the Ukraine war is another example of exercising strategic autonomy. In spite of the looming threats of sanctions based on countering America's adversaries through the Sanctions Act, India went ahead with the purchase of S-400 missiles as well as the import of cheaper Russian crude. This time, strategic autonomy was being exercised by a different India, a stronger and more resilient India. There was also a greater understanding and acceptability of India's viewpoint.

### **Partnerships and Alliances**

India has transited ahead from non-alignment of yester years to multi-alignment. This was reflected in the recent statement of the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister (EAM) at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. He had said, "India has evolved from the era of non-alignment to the era of *Vishwa Mitra* – a friend to the world". Multi-alignment adds a totally different dimension in the diplomatic world of making choices.

Exercising of choices or strategic decision-making is more complex in today's environment. Countries are part of alliances and partnerships in bilateral, multilateral and mini-lateral forums. India is not only part of the UN or G-20 but also part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue at the same time. It is also pursuing

I2U2 [partnership between India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States (US)]. It requires balancing out relationships with multiple nations, organisations and international groups at the same time.

Being part of alliances or partnerships helps maintain autonomy in strategic decision making, but at times some decisions have to be subordinated to the larger interests of the group or the world. India, while advocating the philosophy of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' (The world is one family) on issues like global warming or climate change will take decision in the larger interest of the world. The theme of the G-20 Summit 'One Earth, One Family, One Future' is a pointer towards such trends.

In the last century, during the outbreak of World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII), most alliances had a military dimension attached to them. The structure of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation, Central Treaty Organisation, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and Warsaw Pact were a natural outcome of alliances between Axis and Allied powers in WWII.

Some global leaders also advocate being 'Allied' yet remaining non-aligned. However, in today's world, the global balance of power can be shifted by economic alignment, morality, rightness and convergence of global interests.

In India's famous epic of the *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna shifted the balance of power in favour of the *Pandavas* by joining them but without his military might. His military power went to the *Kauravas*. Sage advice and righteousness were key in shifting the balance of power. It is even relevant today. India as a nation, righteously utilised the G-20 platform to leverage the soft power to play a dominating role.

## ***Atmanirbharta* and Self-Reliance**

*Atmanirbharta* (Self-reliance) and 'Make in India' or 'Make for the World' are some initiatives, especially in the field of defence manufacturing, which have a major role to play in maintaining the strategic autonomy of India. Unfortunately, the concept of *Atmanirbharta* has not been understood in its entirety. It looks beyond the narrow arena of defence manufacturing.

In self-reliance the focus is on 'Self'. So is it in *Atmanirbharta* where 'Atman'—the inner self assumes importance? Knowing oneself or *Atman* is important. It will lead to self-realisation or self-actualisation.

- Self-reliance and self-confidence are important offshoots of it.
- Indigenisation or Indian ideas must guide the strategic thought and culture.
- India's history should be the source of motivation.

A truly *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, a nation, that has its own strategic thinking and does not rely for its major defence needs on foreign original equipment manufacturers will help in the maintenance of strategic autonomy.

## **Emerging World Order**

The global geopolitical environment is currently in a state of flux. The world is transiting between two orders. The old-world order is withering away. The new one is yet to evolve. The shapes and contours of the new order are difficult to predict accurately. The current flux is also being labelled as a world disorder.

The geoeconomic situation like the geopolitical situation is also in a state of flux. Repeated financial crisis, disruption



of global supply chains due to COVID-19, the food and fertiliser shortage due to Russia-Ukraine Conflict, renewed calls for delinking and de-risking economics from China due to tensions in the South China Sea and Taiwan are a manifestation of the flux.

Technological disruption is even more stark. The passing away of internal combustion engine and its replacement by electric vehicles, replacement of fossil fuels with cleaner sources of energy, shortage of microchips, rare earths, and advancement in artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data will have a profound impact on society, businesses and trades.

### **Challenge and Opportunities**

It is said that opportunities come at a time of disruption. What one is witnessing is a great disruption in the geopolitical, geoeconomical and geo-technological domains.

The decision or choices India takes today will decide where it will stand in the comity of nations in the future. Threats and challenges are well known. It is easy to make choices when dealing with threats and challenges, as they are identifiable, quantifiable and predictable. Making the right choices when opportunities present themselves will be acme of India's diplomacy. Towards this, the strategic policies must be rooted within the framework of promoting the larger righteous national interest without being constrained or under external pressure.

In its strategic calculus, India will have to take into account the emergence of China as a major power. China's assertiveness is more evident with its rise. India has a major dispute on its northern border with China and, hence, will have to play its strategic autonomy cards very carefully.

India's journey from non-alignment to exercising of strategic autonomy must be based on 'Principles of Three Ss'.

➤ **Securing India.** The first principle being 'Securing India from external as well as internal threats' is the foremost priority.

- **Self-Reliance.** The second principle of 'Augmenting the self-reliant potential of India' so that India can reduce its dependencies and increase the capabilities to support and shape the environment.

- **Shaping the Environment.** Following the first two principles will lead to the third principle of 'Shaping the environment favourably for India'. This will ensure a larger participative role in global affairs.

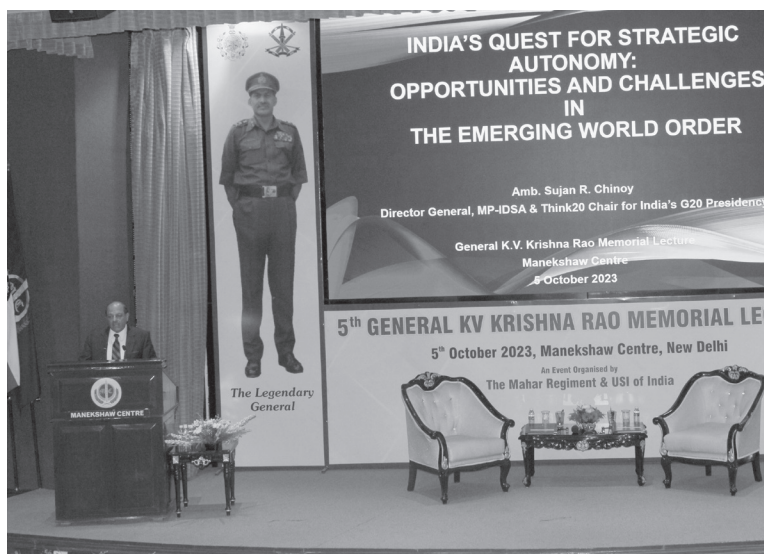
## Conclusion

As EAM Jaishankar in his book 'The Indian Way' has said that, it is "Time for India to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood and expand traditional constituencies of support"; all the while continuing to grow economically, reforming and strengthening the democratic system.

# Address

by

**Ambassador Sujan R Chinoy (Retd), Director General,  
Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and  
Analyses**



The immediate context is, that a great civilisation like India, which in fact was under a colonial yoke for many centuries, and that the expression of *Swaraj* (Self-Rule) itself, the independence movement, was in fact a search for that elusive strategic autonomy that had been denied to this great country for many centuries. Therefore, there was a certain expression and a realisation of that strategic autonomy inherent in India's independence in 1947 as well. But the

broad context in which one looks at strategic autonomy is in fact the global order and before the emerging order is seen, one must perforce take a look at the order that has existed for the past 80 years. That is an order that was created at the end of the WWII, and it is essentially an order that has actually retained its inequities since then.

The global order was created by the victors of the WWII, and as one knows, to the victors go the spoils. When the global order was created in 1945, India, though a founding member of the UN was excluded from taking a seat at the high table. It is that unequal structure that emerged from the WWII with permanent membership for a select few that has continued to dominate the discourse over the past eight decades. That is an order in which India successfully achieved independence, surprisingly through non-violent means. It is also an order in which initially Jawaharlal Nehru chose to follow the path of non-alignment, perhaps, given the fact that within two years after the creation of the UN the world had already descended into a Cold War by 1947. In fact, independent India was midwived into existence during the early days of the Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the western bloc led by the US.

Whereas the global engines of economic growth and political power continued to stay in the West for a very long time, there has been a shift in the balance of power, especially economic power, in recent decades. New growth in the global economy is coming out of developing countries, especially out of Asia, and contributing a great deal more to the destiny of the global economic situation than other geographies. The change in the balance of power is evident, but it has not proved sufficient to effect a fundamental change.

India, in my view, has coursed through the past nearly eight decades as a country with a unique identity of its own. It is not a western power, nor was it part of that power-sharing structure that was created by the victors, essentially the West, at the end of the WWII. At the same time, India is not an anti-western power either. It has always sought to have its own strategic autonomy in terms of identity and that behaves a great nation like India.

Today, when this existing order is examined, one is reminded of the fact that its main pillars have largely remained unchanged in form and structure. The UN Security Council (UNSC) has not been reformed, except once in 1965, when, after four years of negotiations the non-permanent category went up from 6 to 10, increasing the overall number from 11 to 15. That is where it has remained frozen since 1965. This, notwithstanding the fact that the balance of power has shifted in favour of other countries beyond the traditional major powers, not just the People's Republic of China (PRC) but also the Republic of India, and other countries across the Asian landmass.

This multilateralism that was created in 1945 stands greatly weakened today. But again, India is not a country that seeks to deconstruct the existing order; it is a country that seeks to enforce a genuine reform of the existing world order. Unlike China, and the Russian Federation or its precursor the Soviet Union, India has never fundamentally challenged the West's imprimatur over the existing world order.

Today, multilateralism has been greatly weakened and there is a genuine drift towards multipolarity, and this should be welcomed. There is reduced multilateralism, since the existing structures are not delivering in an effective manner, including at the UN. Multipolarity has created a situation in which it is not India alone that seeks strategic autonomy.

In fact, in an era of globalisation all countries seek a certain degree of strategic autonomy. The US, for instance, is mired today in efforts to seek strategic autonomy from economic overdependence on a single geography in East Asia. Over the past 35-40 years the Americans have become completely dependent on China in terms of their imports and exports and their economic dependence has snatched away a degree of strategic autonomy as well.

Even smaller countries are doing the same. In India's own neighbourhood, for instance, the Maldives expresses its strategic autonomy in the face of binary choices involving India and China. The latest election results are also an expression of its strategic autonomy. One discerns the same strategic autonomy when one looks at Nepal. It accepts the Millennium Challenge Corporation of the US for their infrastructure and connectivity needs, and at the same time, is also an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Strategic autonomy is not necessarily linked to non-alignment, it is not necessarily the purview or monopoly of great non-aligned countries like India. All countries, big and small, are seeking a certain degree of strategic autonomy, that is, multi-alignment and issue-based alignment in an uncertain world. There is a rebalancing underway in Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

Fundamentally, the definition of strategic autonomy is the ability to act independently, not necessarily as a linear function at all times, but when required, a country should be able to express itself independently and make suitable choices. The forces and factors that promote strategic autonomy are numerous. For example, if India had that elusive and privileged status in the UNSC right from the beginning, it would have expressed even greater strategic autonomy from inception. Overwhelming economic power

of the type that the US once wielded, which the PRC is now rapidly acquiring, predisposes a country to exercising greater strategic autonomy.

Robust military power, similarly, is a prerequisite. One of the foundational requirements of strategic autonomy is not only to possess robust military power but also to have credible deterrence capability. Deterrence capability and robust military power are not necessarily the same thing. North Korea, for example, exercises a fair degree of strategic autonomy vis-à-vis both China and its erstwhile patron, i.e., the Russian Federation, by following its own regional policies and mindlessly going in for atomic tests and developing delivery systems. This flows from a certain deterrence capability that it has developed, even though it cannot be said to possess robust military power. Hence, in a world which is very unequal, possessing deterrence capability even at asymmetric levels, helps develop a certain degree of strategic autonomy. Deterrence capabilities are usually less expensive to create, but robust military power makes for even greater strategic autonomy.

In the pre-independence period, the period in which a great civilisations like India was yearning for its own strategic autonomy, which was realised only in 1947. It must be kept in mind that India, in terms of formal structures, did not enjoy strategic autonomy as a political entity. India was led by the nose by the British before 1947. India takes great pride in the participation and the great sacrifices that were made in the WWI and the WWII, in which India's fine men and women participated with gusto, but it must be remembered that this was not of their own doing. India was a colony then. The nation was actually part of the British Empire. The use of Indian soldiers against Indians during the struggle for independence or earlier during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919, for instance, shows that

India was not really in a position then to be autonomous as a people, as a nation, or even as a civilisation. Yet, Gandhiji as an individual, supported by freedom fighters around the country, expressed his own version of strategic autonomy through the non-cooperation movement for Swaraj.

It is stunning to note India's inability to understand how differently the Chinese perceive the historical record of India's participation as a military force during China's century of humiliation. For example, about 8,000 Indian troops participated in the eight-nation punitive mission against the Boxer rebellion. Indian soldiers, Sikhs, Punjabis and the Rajputs, were part of the first echelons that had entered Tianjin and Beijing in 1900, in order to quell the rebellion. Therefore, when Indian soldiers faced off with the Chinese PLA across the Namka Chu in 1962, the Chinese might also have seen India through the prism of history in which they equated Indian soldiers with that past century of humiliation. Hence, the need to study these aspects in order to understand the Chinese psyche and motivations.

In many ways, Nehru decided on the policy of non-alignment as an expression of strategic autonomy because he knew that the alternative would be to pick from a difficult binary choice. He had concluded that India was neither a communist nation nor a western nation. After 1947, India was a very unique *sui generis* Asian civilisation, and a newly emerged power of sorts, that had shed the colonial yoke. Hosting the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in Delhi even before achieving independence in Mar-Apr of that year was an expression of that kind of strategic autonomy that Nehru felt India should develop. But Nehru also wanted India to play a larger role in Asia in terms of Afro-Asian solidarity, in terms of the tide of anti-colonialism, in terms of the emancipation of a large number of nations at that point of time from the colonial yoke. Nehru was careful, as far as the Korean War



was concerned, to ensure that India did not take sides and that strategic autonomy was maintained there because without being neutral in that war India would not have been acceptable to the belligerent parties that included the PRC. It was clear that without the PRC's concurrence, India could never have chaired the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission. So, that demonstration of strategic autonomy also came at a certain cost because India at that point of time was quite blind to the fact that the Chinese were pursuing their national interests, including rapid consolidation of territory in Xinjiang and Tibet and along the border areas with India. India, on the other hand, was pursuing the larger goal of exercising a strategic autonomy from its own national interests as it were, by promoting the PRC on the international stage as Nehru did at the Bandung Conference, only to have bilateral relations simultaneously deteriorate and spiral downwards in the 1950s.

In fact, non-alignment for India never meant complete autonomy. Even then India was capable, as was demonstrated in 1962, of seeking sides. When the Chinese attacked in 1962, Nehru wrote to President Kennedy asking for military assistance, no less. He sought entire squadrons of fighter aircraft with men and supporting equipment. A lot of it, of course, did not come; some of it came a little too late and the war had ended by the time even the automatic rifles came in and basically, they were lying in the packed boxes when the war ended, their greasing untouched. So, India did seek assistance and that is a form of alignment, a kind of issue-based alignment, under the overhang of non-alignment as a policy. India's treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1971, when India felt the pressure of the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet in the Bay of Bengal, is yet another example.

Some observers feel that India was closer to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. However, this viewpoint may

not be agreeable to many. But it is a fact that India was largely perceived to be leaning towards the Soviet Union. However, that perception came largely from the fact that the US and the West tended to view camp followers in absolute terms. The US has always had this underlying philosophy that if one is not with them, one is against them. The Soviet Union did not have that philosophy. Even today, some of that approach is evident in US policies.

One of the big problems in India's relations with the US in the past was the fact that the US itself had its own leanings and preferences. The leaning that the US had towards Pakistan led to the latter's participation in both Central Treaty Organisation and Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation. This was detrimental to India's interests since Pakistan was seen as a frontline state in the fight against communism at that point of time. But more relevantly, it came in India's way of building better ties with the US even as the latter went about its grand rapprochement with the PRC in 1971 after Henry Kissinger paid a secret visit to Beijing brokered by Pakistan. The then foreign secretary of Pakistan was an ex-Indian army officer affiliated to the royal family of Bhopal, the late Ambassador Sultan Khan. In the mid-1980s, he was in a sinecure, heading the local branch of the infamous BCCI Bank which collapsed some years later in the face of money-laundering charges. That 50-year strategic partnership between the US and the PRC, which unravelled only recently, was an influence on US perceptions of India. It did a great deal of damage as well during President Reagan's term when, in the early 1980s, the Americans transferred a great deal of defence technology to China, including munitions manufacturing and other hard-core defence technologies. The Americans then were blissfully indifferent to the longer-term consequences of what they were creating in China, that is, a military machine of the

type that would eventually rise like Frankenstein's monster and challenge a US-led world order.

There are other aspects that demonstrate India's constant striving for strategic autonomy. Perhaps, the most important is the peaceful nuclear explosion of 1974 and subsequently the overt development of nuclear weapons in 1998. Long before that, the negotiations leading to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) were themselves a demonstration of India's strategic autonomy, since India was one of the main participants in the initial negotiations calling for a world free of nuclear weapons. India has been one of the greatest proponents of general and complete disarmament, a world free of nuclear weapons, but by 1968 it was very clear that these negotiations were going in favour of a select few, the same privileged powers that had created the UNSC were arrogating to themselves special privileges. It was clear that there would be two categories of the haves and the have-nots, and India decided to walk out of these negotiations. By the time the NPT came to be signed and brought into force in 1970, India was completely outside the tent.

India's neutrality in the Ukraine war is well established and much discussed, and India has displayed capacity for going against the grain. India's policy towards Iran is yet another example. India has always had good relations with Iran. One recalls how in 1994, Iran bailed India out at the UN Human Rights Council when it was in a difficult part of the woods with regard to human rights resolutions being moved against India by Pakistan. Yet, in 2009, in sync with the growing relationship with the US, in a new world, India made an issue-based choice against Iran, and voted against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency which of course did not go down too well with the Iranians.

The importance of carrying a big stick and possessing robust military power cannot be overemphasised. This is something that one must always keep in mind, and it is good that currently the government of India is pulling out all stops to provide whatever the armed forces need in order to develop that kind of power. US President Theodore Roosevelt had said, "Speak softly and carry a big stick and you will go far". In fact, one will go far with strategic autonomy as well. The American strategist George Keenan had put it rather vividly when he said that "You have no idea how much it contributes to the general politeness and pleasantries and diplomacy when you have a quiet little armed force in the background". So, it does give one a little bit of swagger in negotiations as well and the US is one of the finest examples of having used that kind of power looming against the backdrop.

In a globalised world, it is very difficult to seek strategic autonomy all the time. But it is equally true that there is no single power today in a fractured world, in a world in flux, in a rapidly changing and evolving world, that can exercise its power on all issues in all geographies at all times. This gives nations around the world a chance to develop a degree of strategic autonomy.

The US is developing its own independence from critical supply chains emanating from China. So is India through the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India) policy, which is a demonstration of that critical requirement of not being overly dependent on any single geography or source for imports and things like that. The European Union (EU), for that matter, is trying to be independent of the US today in many ways and if former President Trump comes back to power, rest assured that Ukraine will very quickly be reduced to a footnote, and also rest assured that Germany and France will vigorously pursue their strategic autonomy in terms of developing even closer economic relations with the PRC.

These are the seven ‘T’ factors today that can impact on strategy. They impact on all geographies. They impair the spectrum of choices and create friction.

The first, ‘Trade’, is today an integral part of the globalised world. It is fungible, it is very difficult to control, which is why one sees that efforts to decouple have gone nowhere and that it is now transiting into what one can call de-risking as against decoupling. So, that emphatic idea of cutting loose from all trade dealings with the PRC has been modified to mean de-risking only in areas where one can actually control things. The fact of the matter is that tensions and friction with regard to trade are not enough today, to result in a global conflagration or conflict between major powers. In fact, experience has taught India that trade is very fungible and there being a very high degree of interdependence in an already globalised world, and globalisation being a genie that cannot be put back into the bottle, there is always a tendency between contending powers to seek a *modus vivendi*. That is exactly what is happening today between the two major contestants, the US and China. The outlines of a major trade war between particularly the Trump presidency and China were seen, but now a moderation is seen, not only on the part of the US but also on the part of the EU which openly acknowledges that decoupling is a chimera which may be impossible to achieve, as against the more feasible de-risking. Contrary to expectations, in fact, many of the major economic powers in the West are deepening their trade and other engagement with China at this time. But it is in the field of technology that one is more likely to see a higher degree of conflict and that is basically through a regime of denial of technology. The Americans, rightly so, have woken up to this threat albeit a little late in the day, and are now engaged in systematically eroding China’s technological ecosystem through denial, sanctions and export controls. The Inflation

Reduction Act, the Science and Technology Act, the Chip Act, as well as friend-shoring and re-shoring; all these are aimed at denying technology to China. The aim is essentially to either freeze what little technology gap remains between the two countries, that is, the first and the second largest economic powers, or to try and see if that gap can be deepened in certain core areas such as telecom, Artificial Intelligence(AI) and quantum computing. India is not likely to get into conflict with China as a result of trade friction alone. In fact, one has seen quite the opposite. Even as Galwan took place, even as India in its own way tried to erode the economic dependence on China by banning Chinese apps, by revising the policies with regard to government e-marketplace, rules and regulations, foreign direct investment, declaration of ultimate beneficiary ownership of suspicious money coming into the Indian financial market through Hong Kong and elsewhere. However, a significant spike in India's trade has been observed with the PRC for the past three years running. There has been no plateauing of that. So, that shows that when one has a high degree of interconnectedness, it is very difficult to engage in conflict over trade.

At the same time, the second factor, 'Technology', is an area in which one can control things a little better, an area which is not as fungible, which is not dealt with by the captains of industry but dealt more by the corporations and by governments with greater control. Hence, in technology, one sees on the one hand, greater friction, a greater desperation for engagement, and yet, on the other hand, one sees a desire to exercise degrees of strategic autonomy to develop specific ecosystems which can keep out certain countries. That is what is seen playing out in 5G, 6G, Open-Ran and AI.

The third factor is 'Territorial Disputes', which limits choices. When one is up against the wall on territorial challenges, sometimes there has to be a compromise on

strategic autonomy. It can limit choices or compel choices as one has seen that in the past from one's own strategic engagement of great powers in times of need.

The fourth factor, 'Terrorism', is something on which the entire world should be working together. But a country like China which itself is affected by terrorism has ceased to work with others in a normal way to prevent terrorism. India has seen the roadblocks that the Chinese have put at the UN in terms of the global listing of terrorists under the 1267 Al-Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee particularly with regard to Pakistan-based terrorist groups such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. That reduces the broad multilateral space in which India and China, despite their bilateral issues, would have been expected to work together. But that common multilateral space has shrunk simultaneously with the shrinking of space for bilateral cooperation as a result of recent events.

The fifth factor, 'Tenets', concerns narratives and they divide the world today, instead of uniting the world. There is the Chinese model of state-led capitalism. The Chinese even claim that they practice 'Whole Process Democracy' better than the democratic world. That is of course a joke in a country where the Foreign Minister and the Chief of Defence Staff can disappear in sequence within a few months. But it does not prevent them from claiming the superiority of their systems of governance, whether social, economic, political or cultural. There is, on the other hand, the liberal trading order, the democracies that are trying to come together in the context of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and other groupings with shared values.

The sixth factor is 'Transparency', or more particularly, the lack of it. Transparency is very important when one deals with an adversary. One cannot exercise any kind of choice

unless one knows what that adversary's intentions and motivations are. Capacities are easy to read. One can do the bean counting about how many ships, how many tanks, how many guns does the adversary have. And, if one has better intelligence, one will get a proper fix on all that. But if there is no clarity on intentions, it leads to situations where the choices are limited.

The lack of transparency leads to lack of 'Trust', the seventh of the seven factors. Trust, or more relevantly, the erosion of trust, is one of the biggest factors that impacts on India's choices today and it is occasioned by the great disruption caused by the rise of China. The economic rise and the transformation of that economic power into a coercive military power, demonstrably so on the part of PRC, has resulted in major disruptions in India's geopolitical environment.

One could list many more disruptions apart from China. North Korea is a disruptor too. One could even mention Iran as a disruptor if it inches further in nuclear fuel enrichment. The failure of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action could eventually push it in the direction of becoming a major disruptor to the US-led global order. This whole spread of weapons of mass destruction, not just in North Korea, can result in disruptive situations. Pakistan, if it fails as a state, particularly if its weapons of mass destruction fall into the wrong hands, can also be a huge disruptor. So, there is a multiplicity of threats that have emerged, and a plethora of disrupting factors have come together and weakened the formal multilateral system.

The key point here is that the UN is the only structure the world currently has to deal with issues of peace and progress. It is a global structure that came on the heels of the abject failure of first, the Treaty of Versailles after the WWI,



and later, the failure of the League of Nations. The hopes of the international community in 1945 were pinned on the UN and its Security Council but it has not been able to deliver even as much as it did at the height of the Cold War when the two contending ideological and military camps had a broad understanding. Today, in this fractured and fragmented geopolitical situation, the die is cast in a very peculiar fashion. There is a total lack of cooperation and sensitivity to each other's concerns, which is why multilateralism has been greatly weakened.

The other broad point is, that the PRC in fact is riding two horses at the same time. On the one hand, it is a beneficiary of the existing global order that emerged in 1945, since it seamlessly inherited the mantle of the PRC when the latter was booted out of the UNSC in 1971. The PRC helicoptered into the UNSC as a permanent member as a result of the geopolitical expediencies of the time. It had already by then sealed its status as a nuclear weapons power in 1964. But China is also trying to ride another horse. Having realised that the existing order is essentially one created by western powers, the Chinese have always been keen to curate parallel structures that are more in the likeness of the PRC's own goals and ambitions. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) and the New Development Bank (NDB) are examples. India is a part of the AIIB and the BRICS, including the latter's NDB as founding members. India is part and parcel of all this, but then there is also the *sui generis* Chinese model of the BRI driven by exclusively Chinese lending banks. And China also has announced the more recent initiatives of the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Cultural Initiative.

One has to keep in mind that forging a stable relationship with China remains a great challenge for India. It is important for India to understand the three key revolutions that have shaped China. For this purpose, one can divide China's history after 1949 into three 30-year periods. The first 30 years from 1949-79, it was a period best described as 'Stand Up China' in which it undertook political consolidation, territorial acquisition, and also faced domestic turmoil during the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution while attempting to forge an intra-CCP consensus on ideology. That is the Mao period. The second 30-year period is the one in which China discovered a Midas touch through which whatever they decided turned to 'gold'. After the reforms and Open-Door policy in 1979, they had a really great economic run all the way up to 2009. It was a period in which they became immensely rich, that is what is called the 'Get Rich China' period under Deng Xiaoping. Broadly speaking, Deng's policies were followed till then, particularly his cautionary maxim to 'hide one's capacities and bide one's time'. The third 30-year period is the one which is fraught with ominous possibilities and that is the one which began in the aftermath of the two global financial and economic crises in 2008-09. This is the time that the Chinese realised that the Americans had taken their eye off the ball, that they had made scarce their presence in the Asia-Pacific also. And, the Chinese moved into that vacuum, for nature abhors a vacuum, and the Chinese were quick to spot that opportunity. They went about engaging the world with deep pockets and following very independent, strategically autonomous policies of their own, fundamentally different from earlier times. This trend has acquired even greater momentum after President Xi Jinping, who came to power in 2012-13.

It has to be kept in mind that when India deals with the neighbourhood, and exercises strategic autonomy and choices, the Chinese continue to use their ancient stratagems

against India. They were obviously a country that dealt with encirclement in past history, but they are also very fine exponents of that policy of encirclement. Divide and rule is a policy that they have mastered, involving the weakening of contending forces and creating spheres of influence. However, China's fundamental objective today is to limit the extent of US power on core issues and particularly on its periphery. China is not yet a global military power. It is not quite the expeditionary power that it may one day aspire to be. But it is already a global economic power, the world's second largest.

As far as India is concerned, one has to deal with strategic autonomy in the context of the goals between now and 2047. If the Chinese have a dream, so does India. India also has its 'India Dream' which it wishes to achieve at the end of the 25-year *Amrit Kaal* period between 2022-47. The choices that India makes, both domestically and externally, are increasingly inter-related. India is building the necessary capacities for the major role that it seeks for itself, aided by the economic rise in particular. India is not there to challenge the existing global order. However, it is seeking genuine reforms and is seeking changes that can make the global order more effective and efficient. That obviously means that a country with 1.4 bn people with the kind of record that it has with regard to peacekeeping operations and contribution to the global good, whether it is the International Solar Alliance or the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, or now the successful G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, must be part of any rule-making structure. For that to happen, India must also have the necessary economic wherewithal to deal with the future environment.

India is increasingly seen as a country that is ready to take risks and play for higher stakes. That is evident in the cross-border operation conducted by India in 2015 against

insurgents in Myanmar followed by the cross-border land and air strikes against terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan in 2016 and 2019 respectively. It demonstrates the utility of robust military responses as a means of deterrence. It is believed that in order to be credible one does not need to be an equal or peer in military and economic strength. If that were the case, Pakistan should never have been able to possess any kind of deterrence towards India because they are one-eighth or ninth of India's size and maybe one-tenth of the economy. Yet, Pakistan has its own deterrence. In a situation involving two unequal powers with unequal comprehensive national strengths, it is still possible to bridge absolute gaps through asymmetrical means, grey-zone tactics and a 'Field all you have got against the adversary' approach.

The US has often found it difficult to understand India's geographical predicaments since its own immediate neighbourhood does not generate threats from immediate neighbours. Otto von Bismark once said, that the US essentially faced no threats. Bismark had stated tellingly that the US had no geopolitical view or threats because it had Mexico to one side and Canada to the other side, and fish on the other two sides. That was, as is true today, not much of a threatening geopolitical environment. This was long before the US became a proselytising power under President Woodrow Wilson in the 1920s and long before it actually demonstrated a capacity or willingness to stage a military presence in different geographies. By 1871, when Bismark united Germany, the US had emerged as the world's largest economy but not yet as the world's foremost geopolitical or military power. In military terms and as a defence manufacturer, the US emerged only during the WWII.

Today, notwithstanding China's rise, the US still remains a hyper power and still has many manifestations of the world's only superpower. It is still the world's largest economy. It is

still the largest and most potent expeditionary military power that the world has ever seen. It is also traditionally given to a very high degree of exceptionalism. This classic concept of US's exceptionalism is one which the Chinese are also trying to ape in their own way, through their own so-called Monroe doctrine. India has a strong relationship with the US with all the foundational agreements in place for furthering military and strategic cooperation. However, it is not an alliance or treaty partnership, and the US will continue to have other regional interests. Sometimes those interests will trump the interest that they might have in working with India on a particular issue. The US uses its exceptionalism against friends and foes alike. One has seen that, for example, in its conduct of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS). The list of target countries against the claims of which the US conducts FONOPS includes some very close partners and friends such as the Philippines, with which it has a treaty-based alliance. It includes Indonesia, a country that is ripe for wooing in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and, more tellingly it includes India.

US exceptionalism and its strategic interests in the current context will continue to shape its policy vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. India does not have a treaty-based alliance with the US, and it may not be necessary to have one. Both the great wars were fought by coalitions that did not exist at the start of the war. Take a look at WWI and WWII. In both, nations joined the fray depending on how their interests were affected. Hence, with reference to the Quad, the jury is still out. The Quad has great potential to flip over in any direction in the future, even though it is not a military alliance at present.

India is open to risk taking much more than before and it has been able to balance ties between various contending powers as well, whether it is the US and Russia or Iran and

Saudi Arabia and so on and so forth. So, India is capable of bridging the political divide. It is bridging the economic divide today in exercise of its own strategic autonomy. There are many new opportunities also when it exercises strategic autonomy. India's neutrality in Ukraine relates not just to the acquisition of equipment such as the S-400 air defence system but also the kind of energy deals that it was able to secure with the Russians. It saved India a great deal of money. In monetary terms, it is a very huge thing for a developing economy to source energy in such quantities as India did at such cheap rates.

India needs to keep in mind that it will have to continue to deal with China. To deal with China, it must have adequate deterrence capability. It is not a wise idea to go toe-to-toe or have a cage fight with China. That is a mug's game because of the differential and asymmetry that exists in terms of economic power. But in a world that is much flatter today, even smaller powers are able to use asymmetrical means to bridge absolute gaps in comprehensive national power. India should show the lead in this regard.

Dealing with Pakistan is also a challenge. It is a very difficult relationship and will remain so for the foreseeable future. It is difficult for India to resolve the issues with Pakistan. A weak and feeble Pakistan is even more likely to act to India's detriment in the future. Viewed in an evolutionary context, one can discern that China's stakes in Pakistan are growing by the day. But China may also regard Pakistan today much more as an albatross around its neck and a liability, given Pakistan's frail economic and political fabric and over dependence on China. One can say that the Sino-Pak tandem also constrains China's strategic autonomy in dealing with India.

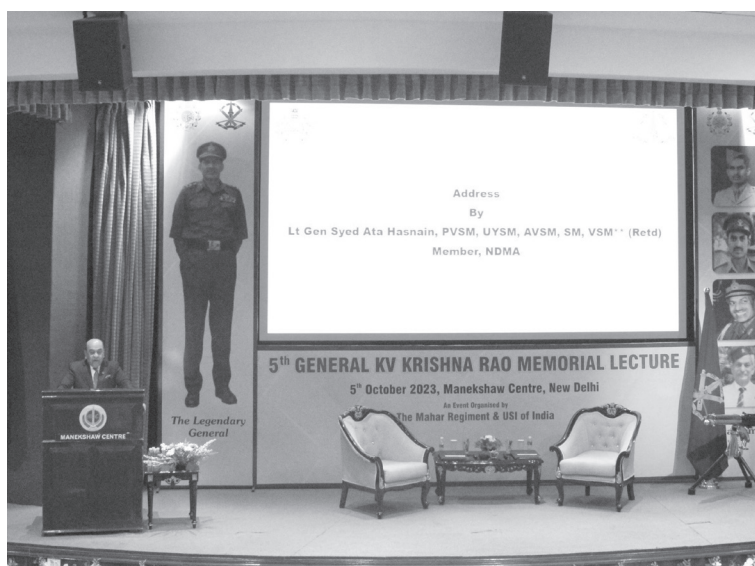
A two-front war is not something that is so easily conjured up by a Sino-Pak tandem. Whenever a great power, in this case China, seeks to insert itself as a third party in a direct military contest, as for example between India and Pakistan, one can be assured that other great powers will also step in. Hence, it is not a very easy decision for China to exercise such a choice. In the past, it has been seen that the record is clear. China did not exercise that choice whether during the Kargil War or in earlier India-Pakistan wars, in 1965 and in 1971.

It is not in China's character to step forth and pick other people's chestnuts out of the fire. The proposition that Pakistan would come to China's aid in a bilateral confrontation between India and China is also not very feasible because India is more likely to hit out first at Pakistan and inflict upon its great damage, which will not be in Pakistan's interests. There is absolutely no guarantee that either China or Pakistan would achieve their full objective through a tandem in a two-front war with India. India should fully and adequately prepare to deal with each of the adversaries independently.

# Address

by

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## Introduction

Strategic autonomy is a theme that any nation would always like to adopt as a part of its foreign policy, i.e., the ability to pursue one's national interests to the hilt, to be focused on its national aim, independent of external influence, free from the encumbrances of geopolitical contingencies and shorn of the internal pressure of politics and resource availability. However, in a complex, inter dependent globalised and regional system of co-existence that almost all nations have



chosen to pursue, there is always a compromise between what they choose to follow and what they should ideally follow. In other words, there is no absolutism in this. It is not a question of absolute autonomy in the management of their strategic affairs or a complete absence of autonomy that makes their interests subservient to others. It is always a question of maximising strategic autonomy which can be defined differently by various thinkers. Two of these definitions are:

- Strategic autonomy is defined as the ability of a state to pursue its national interests and adopt its preferred foreign policy without depending heavily on other foreign states.
- Practically, it is the ability of a nation to take decisions and follow its perception of national interest without being unduly influenced or pressured by external factors.

The degree to which strategic autonomy can be pursued by a nation is subject to its own Comprehensive National Power (CNP), its demographic make-up, its ideological leanings and the political will existing/prevaling at a given time.

Strategic autonomy is also not something that grows progressively with the existence of a nation. It is dynamic and much depends on the quality of leadership at a given time and the degree of strategic confidence that the nation enjoys.

Military capability is an essential aspect which contributes to strategic confidence and in turn to strategic autonomy. With the nature of India's strategic neighbourhood, and the hybrid nature of threats ranged against India, a weak military cannot be expected to meet the required level of deterrence/dissuasion.

After its independence in 1947, at the beginning of the Cold War, India aspired to achieve its righteous place in the world and make a full and willing contribution to the promotion of world peace. To achieve that goal, India's leadership endorsed the concept of non-alignment, thus, making decisions based on merit, without aligning with either of the power blocs. That decision worked well for a part of the Cold War as the non-aligned movement became the biggest bloc with a membership of 125 countries. India's foreign policy followed strategic autonomy to the extent it could but came under severe constraint at various times in the early years. Progressively, India gained more confidence, although in 1962 it had to seek the US assistance in arms and equipment, and in 1966 it could not do without PL-480 assistance to overcome a virtual famine. 1971 was a demonstration of the execution of national interests through compromise, with the signing of the 20-year Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship. Although India took a bold decision to go to war, its strategic autonomy was compromised in 1971 and its aftermath, even after the huge military victory and creation of the state of Bangladesh. The Shimla Agreement of Jul 1972 should have witnessed the exploitation of strategic military gains and the conversion to full strategic victory. India was under pressure from the international community and even from the Soviet Union not to pressurise Pakistan beyond a point. One always felt, that was the stage at which Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) may not have been resolved, but at least Article 370 could have been rescinded; political consensus existed then, and the momentum was already there, but it was not to be perhaps because of India's own strategic shortcoming in thinking, or the lack of strategic autonomy to rock the boat beyond a point.

In 1974, India made amends by executing the Pokhran Nuclear Test aimed at conveying an appropriate message to China despite the opposition of the majority of nations.

It was a demonstration of India's strategic confidence and autonomy. That should allow a brief digression to examine, how strategically autonomous a nation can be, while being a part of the international community and a member state of the UN. A nation obviously opens itself to the necessity of following rules and norms or be a declared a pariah at the behest of the most powerful cliques of a time. North Korea remains strategically autonomous but also carries a rogue status and pursues dictatorial norms that are against the interests of its people; this is possible in a dictatorship/non-democratic system. Iran is similarly placed. It may pursue a strategically autonomous policy, but it opens itself to a plethora of threats. Its autonomous decisions may not always be in sync with the interests of its people. (Within the constraints of a rule-based order).

The darkest period for India was from 1980 to 1991, as the nation lost its self-confidence at the altar of some poor strategic decisions and a deteriorating internal security situation. That indicates how dynamic strategic autonomy can be. It is obvious that peace and stability at the centre, an absence of internal violence and a stable and upwardly mobile economy enables the pursuance of a foreign policy that encompasses almost all national interests. For those in the military, this amounts to establishing what one calls a firm base before getting to undertake offensive operations. But in this period of 1980 to 1991, India witnessed snowballing internal security situations in Punjab and Assam (plus the initiation of the Proxy War in J&K), the assassination of late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a downturn in the economy with a need for bailout by the IMF, and the disastrous decision to experiment with expeditionary military operations in Sri Lanka (Op Pawan). The operation moved from peacekeeping to a warfighting mode and remained in the grey zone thereafter. When CNP takes a nosedive, as it did in the mid-80s, strategic confidence is the first

casualty, following which strategic autonomy becomes almost impossible; in fact, a nation opens itself to unstated and unidentified vulnerabilities. In 1989, this is exactly what happened. In the political, economic, military, diplomatic and social domains, India displayed intense weakness allowing Pakistan to exploit this to launch the proxy war in J&K without an aim; just the creation of a grey zone which would work against Indian strategic interests and force it on the back foot. Going back to J&K and to 1991, that is when the transformational transition to the altered system of economics instituted by former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao began. It was reasonably different from what India had pursued until that juncture.

It would be interesting to see how a few other countries are/were affected by the dictum of strategic autonomy, have handled this. Take the case of China. Although it remained strategically autonomous through the period of Mao's Cultural Revolution, without any superpower influence, it was internally a weak state, unable to pursue its people's interests. After 1978 and the advent of the Four Modernisations it followed a laid-back foreign policy deliberately awaiting the rise of its CNP. Roosevelt's famous doctrine of 'Talking peace but carrying a big stick' was best applied here. Three of the modernisations signified this i.e., agriculture, technical education, and industry. With these three, comprehensiveness was considered adequate but not complete; only when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) achieved a much higher level of modernisation was the confidence gained to undertake a policy of strategic autonomy. The 1979, Sino Vietnam War had hit China's confidence in no small way. It took many years for the PLA to gain that confidence with no guarantee that it has yet been adequately achieved. But this transition helped China take two bold decisions. First, it spurned all international pressure on human rights after its hard and coercive action

at Tiananmen Square during the famous student's movement in 1989. Second, it helped China adopt some progressive war doctrines, 'War Under Informationalised Conditions' in 1993 and the 'Three Wars Strategy' in 2003. The development of independent doctrines, through experimentation and a review of the ancient ecosystems is an indicator of strategic confidence leading to greater strategic autonomy. Is not India doing something like that today?

Can Israel be considered strategically autonomous? One may say yes, but in a very graded manner. It has the ability to develop and pursue its indigenous war doctrines and an autonomous foreign policy in search of its interests but only under the umbrella guarantee of the US. At times, there could be a clash of interests but largely there is congruity between the two nations.

Coming back to India's setting. In 1991, some sound transformational strategic decisions were taken with respect to India's economy but in foreign and defence policies there were only creeping changes. Cooperation with the US commenced, a little gingerly. Exercise Malabar was launched. In 1994, India initially lacked the internal resilience and strength to resist US led international efforts to coerce it over Kashmir. Assistant Secretary of State Robin Rafel's campaign to put India under intense Human Rights pressure, support the setting up of the All Party Hurriyat Conference and fund it, and generally sponsor Pakistan to raise its voice against India at the first ever UN Human Rights Council meeting where a resolution against India was tabled. India found the strength to counter this as soon as there was political consensus at the centre with the passage of the Joint Resolution of both houses of Parliament on 22 Feb 1994, which resolved to continue to aspire for the return of all territories of J&K, formerly under the Maharaja, to India. It proved very effectively that strategic autonomy is always a sum of internal resilience and political stability which are sub factors of CNP.

Towards the end of the Millennium, India's unilateral decision to conduct the second nuclear test at Pokharan in Apr 1998, was a demonstration of political will, strategic confidence and resolve to withstand the unfair responses of the international community. Initially, India came under sanctions, which led to the US finally initiating and signing the nuclear deal, after seeing off the sanctions. The decision not to cross the Line of Control (LoC) in 1999 during the Kargil War is viewed by some as a sign of a lack of strategic confidence at that juncture and adhering to the US pressure not to risk a nuclear exchange in South Asia. India perhaps lost an opportunity to punish Pakistan even while its nuclear doctrine was under formulation. It remains a moot point if it was the right decision, to launch or not launch across the LoC.

### **The First Decade of the Millennium**

The turn of the millennium saw India, a nuclear armed power with a raging proxy war within, a paradox of sorts. Pakistan tested India's resolve with the attack on India's Parliament on 13 Dec 2001. India dithered in response, uncertain of its capability of ensuring military victory and fear of a Pakistani nuclear initiation; supplemented by the international response. The 14 days limit of war was a thing in the mind; a notion that the international community would step in thereafter. Fear of loss of military face and reputation disallowed Op Parakaram from becoming an offensive operation from just a mobilisation exercise. Again, the strategic autonomy was in question. Most would recall from experience of the 80s and 90s, the K plus 4 Syndrome. It was in the psyche and a whole generation of officers was brought up on this philosophy. For those outside the uniform, K always signified counter offensive and India sought the fifth day (K plus 4) after conflict initiation by Pakistan, to launch their response. India never considered the initiation of the offensive; and one is not sure if that should be classified as being squeamish and

strategically not confident (it's a grey zone in one's mind). However, Op Parakaram somehow changed the thinking. The 'O' word got adopted and discussed more openly. That by itself was heartening as the defensive mindset was put behind in the current situation. India then planned to carry out Cold Start but quickly put that term into cold storage in favour of Proactive Strategy; apparently Cold Start sounded too dangerous and seemed to cross some thresholds which could mean Pakistani redlines too. Nevertheless, it resulted in many of the formations moving closer to the borders to overcome the mobilisation time asymmetry. Many a times, India tended to forget that it was a nuclear armed power, and with a doctrine comprising massive retaliation as the Second Strike. India's adversary's bluster was always a lot of bluff.

In 2008, the Mumbai Terror Attack (26/11) occurred. India could not retaliate, perhaps for fear of the inability to guarantee military victory. Actually no one demanded that India needed to go to war; a retaliatory strike was all that was necessary. What happened in 2016 could have happened in 2008? One is aware that the credible Indian trans LoC response was happening very often at the LoC but without official sanction. Taking ownership of this would have been a proof of the increasing strategic autonomy. It was India's retribution against the adversary, for the strike against the nation. That was the philosophy needed even earlier but India never pushed for it sufficiently.

It would be only correct to mention that the proposed transformation of the armed forces to meet George Fernandez's predicted big threat from China, failed to take off in the early years of the millennium adversely affecting the strategic confidence and autonomy. The Chinese threat was manifesting seriously by 2013.

## Post 2014 – the Rising Ambition

Post 2014, the government to its credit, tried a conciliatory approach with both the adversaries. It learnt a few things over time and taught its partners a few things too:

- It was straight off the block on self-sufficiency or *Atmanirbharta*. It took long for the realisation to emerge in India that a modern military needs a sustained supply chain of equipment and spares. In times of war nations are held to ransom if they are not self-sufficient.
- It was learnt that economic development and social engineering can continue simultaneously with military modernisation, although a requisite percentage of budgetary support for capital budget yet remains elusive.
- Realisation came that strategic partnerships can be established without being allied.
- It was also realised that India's strategic culture is weak and that civil society's understanding of strategic issues is very limited. Giving that a fillip is a necessity.
- It was rightly articulated that while India has much to learn from the world, it also has a lot to contribute to it.
- The standoff in Ladakh in May 2020 was a major test of resilience. Understanding it and the intent of the adversary was more important than just responding. The maturity of politico-military-diplomatic response drew respect from around the world and added to the strategic confidence.

With Pakistan, the efforts in pursuit of peace lasted until early 2016. Pathankot made it evident that India had to be more resilient, take more risks and be more decisive. There was a continuum in internal confidence building from 2016



to 2019. Uri was followed by surgical strikes; and Nagrota by Operation All Out, which improved the ratio of fatalities to 1:5 from the abysmal 1:1.5 in 2017.

India withstood Doklam in 2017 for 72 days, a phenomenon noticed by many in the world much to the PLA's chagrin. That was a fine example of strategic autonomy by staring back in kind. The government got bolder when the Pulwama incident took lives of 40 CRPF policemen. It launched the Balakote Strike. The use of air power needed greater strategic confidence because escalation would be almost immediate. Its rising confidence did not let the government be unnerved by the contingency of failure. Nations which do not fear failure and treat it as a stepping stone achieve much more.

### **Post 2020**

The years, 2020 to 2021 proved to be strategically beneficial for India. The impact is being carried over. What has largely contributed to enhanced strategic confidence are :

- Overcoming the challenges of the pandemic and being considered as the pharmacy of the world.
- Recovering from (-) 24 per cent GDP to a 7.8 per cent growth in the first assessed quarter of 2023-24.
- Building focus towards becoming a USD 5 tn economy by 2030 (possibly 2028).
- Maintaining neutrality in the Ukraine War and withstanding pressure of different stakeholders from the West.
- Not attempting to go beyond the non-strategic nature of the Quad partnership. No hurry to upgrade to a military alliance against China reflects maturity and a sense of strategic balance.

- Achieving a higher level of military readiness through Atmanirbharta.
- Launching its own perception of grey zone warfare against adversaries through an effective communication strategy.
- Initiating and being part of counter moves against China's blatant strategic aggression brought on by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the India–Middle East–Europe Trade Corridor.
- Facilitating various initiatives in the G-20, sponsoring the interests of the Global South, 13<sup>th</sup> Working Group on Disaster Risk Resilience and bringing in the African Union as a full member.
- An increasing trend towards better strategic understanding and an improving strategic culture.

## **Conclusion**

If there is anything to take away from this read, it is the understanding that there is no absolutism in exercising strategic autonomy. Decisions arise from dynamic situations which are contingency based. A strategically autonomous nation is one which takes its decisions on the basis of its extant interests and those of its partner nations. There will be ups and many downs, hence the necessity to build partnerships. There will be many challenges as one approaches the 100<sup>th</sup> year of India's independence. India's decisions may not always prove to be correct, but they would still be self-made decisions.

## Photo Gallery



**Brig IS Bhalla, VSM Commandant MAHAR Regimental Centre giving his Opening Remarks**



**Gen Anil Chauhan, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, Chief of Defence Staff being felicitated by Lt Gen C Bansi Ponappa, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, Adjutant General and Colonel of the MAHAR Regiment**



**Closing Remarks by Maj Gen PK Goswami, VSM, Officiating  
Director General, USI of India**



**Vote of Thanks by Lt Gen C Banshi Ponnappa, PVSM,  
AVSM, VSM, Adjutant General and Colonel of the  
MAHAR Regiment**



**Ambassador Sujan R Chinoy, IFS (Retd) Director General, MP IDSA being felicitated by Lt Gen C Banshi Ponappa, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, Adjutant General and Colonel of the MAHAR Regiment**



**Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM\*\* (Retd) being felicitated by Lt Gen C Banshi Ponappa, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, Adjutant General and Colonel of the MAHAR Regiment**



**Group Photo**