

India's Defence Policy : A Conceptual Perspective

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Defence is a principal component of national power. Defence policy is an integral part of national security policies. The role of the armed forces is to preserve the core values of survival and political independence against any external or internal threats by deterrence or by waging a war. The armed forces with their secular base and professional ethics also contribute to nation-building process.

The purpose of this article is to impart a conceptual perspective to India's defence policy. Development of a conceptual framework for understanding and analysing India's defence policy is dependent on three tasks: First, to identify the interface between national defence and national security and the importance of defence in national security management. Second, to gauge the nature of the articulation of India's defence policy and how it operates on the military and the political and diplomatic fronts. Third, to analyse defence policy keeping in view the goals, constraints and opportunities in the given environment and the capabilities to achieve the stated goals. This article seeks to discuss these tasks and analyse their contribution in providing a conceptual understanding of India's defence policy.

Defence and National Security Interface

With the rise of realism in the post World War II period, security came to be equated with protection against external threats. The traditional concept of national security was based on military defence against external threats. This view emphasised national security policies in unidimensional terms and the terms 'national security policy' and 'defence policy' were used as synonyms. This view was based on (a) the concept of maximising national power in conflict situations, and (b) the assumption that a nation can be secure only if it increases its own power at the expense of another nation or nations. Walter Lippmann noted: "A nation has security

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVII, No. 568, April-June 2007.

when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by war".¹ National security, therefore, was understood as the ability of a nation to protect its core values from external threats. In other words, national security became coterminous with military and external security. Internal threats and non-military threats were neglected in the realist conceptions of security policies.

In the post-colonial period, India's political leadership did not accept the western unifocal perceptions of security policy based on military power. India took note of the non-military dimensions of security. It followed a development oriented political economy and sought to do away with internal socio-economic causes of insecurity. A Government report admits, "India's primary strategic priority and goal even at present remain the rapid and well managed socio- economic development of its people. This requires a stable and durable environment of peace and security at global, regional, national and societal levels."² India's conceptualisation and approach to security is broad-based, and not merely defence-oriented. First, India has sought to defend its national security through building internal strengths. Second, it has highlighted the transnational threats or aspects of security, and overcoming them through non-military and collective efforts of the international community. Third, it has based its national security on the principle of 'security with each other' rather than 'security against each other.' Finally, India has consistently believed in the efficacy of political approach to managing or resolving inter-state or intra-state threats to its national security. India as a post-colonial state has essentially based its conception of security on transnational cooperation and development. Its rise as a military power is a natural reaction for self-defence in the wake of worsening international and regional security environments.³

India's defence policy is one component of the larger national security system. *The Standing Committee on Defence* in its Sixth Report, 1995-96, has observed: "National Defence Policy is an integral part of national security policy, which by its very nature, is multi-disciplinary in character and encompasses all aspects that enhance a nation's strength and thus furthering its security."⁴ Defence policy being an integral part of national security means that at times interchangeable use of the term 'defence policy' and 'security policy' becomes unavoidable.

Over the years the management of defence in India's national security system has acquired increasing importance. The importance of defence in India's national security policies is mainly due to the continuing and multiplying external threats - both military and non-military. In fact, the *Kargil Review Committee Report* and the *Report of the Group of Ministers on National Security* have emphasised the need for changes in national security system and better defence and strategic management.⁵ Both the reports have taken note of the gravity of the security environment. According to one observation of the *Report of the Group of Ministers*, "Indeed, in just the last decade, India's security scenario has witnessed nothing short of sea change as a result of the end of the Cold War, the proxy war in Kashmir, militancy fuelled from abroad in many parts of the country, the Revolution in Military Affairs and the increasing nuclearisation of the neighbourhood."⁶ This observation highlights the importance of external threats in national security policy and the need for a credible defence.

Nature of Defence Policy Articulation

There have been two divergent opinions about India's defence policy. One, the country does not have a clearly articulated and integrated defence policy. Some even go to the extent of saying that let alone a well-articulated defence policy, India does not even have a policy.⁷ Two, India is not only having a well-articulated defence policy which has stood the test of time, but also has the capacity to meeting future needs.⁸ It is worth noting what the Indian Prime Minister, PV Narasimha Rao had stated in the Lok Sabha on the matter on 10 May 1995:

"We do not have a document called India's Defence Policy. But we have got several guidelines which are followed, strictly followed and observed... This policy is not merely rigid in the sense that it has been written down, but these are the guidelines, these are the objectives, these are the matters which are always kept in view while conducting our defence policy."⁹

There may be some element of exaggeration in both the views. But what is true is that India has a defence policy and it has been formulated rationally keeping in view the several constraints it has suffered from the international system and at the domestic level. The existence of a formal document does not by itself guarantee

an effective policy nor does the absence of such a document imply lack of policy or bad policy. In India's case the absence of a formal document called 'India's defence policy' has neither hampered the process of articulation of responses to the existing threats, challenges and opportunities, nor has the country lacked in raising the level of defence preparedness.

Policy represents articulation of interests, purposes and goals. Defence policy is perennially concerned with the defence of the realm. The *Sixth Report of the Standing Committee on Defence*, 1995-96, defines India's defence policy as a very vital part of national security policy which addresses specific issues directly concerned with the defence of the nation and its territorial integrity. The Report enunciates the policy articulated since Independence thus:

"That our military capability is to be directed to ensuring the defence of the national territory over land, sea and air encompassing among others; the inviolability of our land borders, island territories, offshore assets and our maritime trade routes. Governments have repeatedly made it clear that it is not our objective to influence or interfere or dominate the region on the basis of *military* strength (emphasis added).¹⁰"

It may also be defined as "preserving the core values of the nation from external aggression and internal subversion."¹¹

Articulation and formulation of defence policy requires an objective assessment of a number of factors. The key factors that have influenced the articulation of India's defence policy are:¹²

- (a) Policies and capabilities of major powers and their power relationships in India's neighbourhood.
- (b) Regional security environment in a wider Southern Asia.
- (c) Military capabilities and potential of neighbours and their policies and strategies and external military linkages.
- (d) Rapid military technological developments.
- (e) Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.
- (f) Internal security environment.
- (g) Budgetary constraints.

India's defence policy operates on two fronts. One is on the diplomatic and political front and second is on the military front. The former is "centred around building bridges of peace in our neighbourhood."¹³ Broadly, diplomatic and political aspects of defence policy include managing and resolving conflicts, and enhancing national-interests through non-military means. However, India understands that maintaining peace and stability with its neighbours in the region and even in the global context through diplomacy would be effective only 'when diplomacy is backed by credible military deterrence' and 'keeping its armed forces at the highest levels of defence preparedness with the ability to react swiftly'.¹⁴

The military aspects of defence policy are more comprehensive in scope. They include military capabilities and guidelines for operations. *The Standing Committee on Defence* highlights the latter thus: "there is a top secret document which the government has given to the Services Chiefs which is known by the term 'Operational Directive'. This clearly lays down what exactly should be the approach in the event of hostility. So, the concerned agencies are well aware of those aspects. To that extent, there is no confusion on this."¹⁵ The Ministry of Defence (MoD) prepares the operational directives after obtaining inputs from various agencies. Doubts have been raised over its limited nature or efficacy to be called defence policy document. According, to Lieutenant General KK Hazari, "Whatever its contents the Operational Directive cannot be equated to a Defence Policy document which, if it has to be meaningful, should cover all aspects to include, military objectives and tasks, force levels and force mixes, research and development, equipment management, production and acquisition, manpower policies and the short and long term defence requirements."¹⁶

According to the *Annual Report 2005-2006* of the MoD, Government of India, the military component of India's defence policy also includes strategic defence dialogue for defence partnership with a number of countries, leading to greater joint partnership towards preparations for a globally coordinated initiative to fight against the menace of terrorism, proliferation, trafficking, piracy and the nefarious activities of non-state actors.¹⁷

Though there is no national security policy or defence policy document, yet India has policies on both. It is argued that in the

absence of any document "explaining articulated policy with stated national objectives and national interests it is not possible for the policy to be analysed and modified."¹⁸ Hence, the importance of having a formal document on defence policy. But the Government of India seems in no mood to publish such a document immediately. Obviously, it sees certain advantages in not publishing a formal document, or not making it public.

Policy Analysis

Three sets of questions need to be considered for analysing policy:

(a) First, what are the goals? Is it just a question of self - defence or defending from external threats, or do we envisage more ambitious goals of prestige, power and hegemony?

(b) Second, what are the obstacles that threaten the realisation of these goals? What are the opportunities that can be utilised to further these goals? Do these threats and opportunities have an environmental explanation? What is the nature of relationship between the variables of environment - international and domestic?

(c) Third, what are our capabilities to achieve the stated goals? What are the perceptions of others (regional and global powers) of our capabilities? What role have they played, or can they play, in enhancing, balancing or undermining these capabilities?

These questions are typical of any policy analysis and they can help us to understand important aspects or patterns of the events of past and present, and make predictions for the future.

Policy analysis must take into account not only the new and continuing threats and challenges but also the opportunities for enhancing policy goals. Threats, challenges and opportunities "change with time and environment; and that is why the defence policy must have the capacity to remain flexible and responsive to change."¹⁹ Threats, challenges and opportunities are not the same; hence their accurate assessment and policy response are not simple. Threats always require immediate addressing; challenges can be dealt with over a period of time. Opportunities in international politics come rarely; therefore, they require immediate attention of the policy-makers.²⁰

Defence policy involves decisions in the context of the international security environment and the domestic constraints and motivations. Policy-makers, therefore, make two kinds of decisions for dealing with international and domestic environments respectively. Samuel Huntington has distinguished between the two kinds of decisions and terms them as *strategic and structural*. Strategic decisions are made in the context of international politics and structural decisions are made in the domestic context.²¹ Strategic decisions deal with threats and challenges of the alliances, balance of power, nuclear weapons, transnational terrorism, and war and peace.²² Structural decisions mainly deal with the issues of modernisation of armed forces, procurement of weapons, allocation of defence budget and decision-making structures.²³ These strategic and structural variables are not independent but mutually interactive. For instance, India's arms acquisition and nuclear deterrence involve both the strategic and structural constraints, ie, at the strategic level, decision makers think of enhancing the credibility of deterrence and at the structural level they are faced with problems of resourcing and lack of institutional support or speedy decision making.

India's defence policy making involves both strategic and structural dimensions of decision-making; hence, the importance of the study of the role of international strategic environment and domestic constraints in conceptualising defence policy.

Over the years importance of defence policy in India's national security studies has increased a great deal because of the continuity and multiplicity of external threats - both military and non-military. India is feeling the pressure for having a well articulated policy that can meet not only the present day threats and challenges, but also has the capacity to meeting future needs. Threats and challenges from the emerging international security system dictate better political and strategic management of defence.

External and domestic environments in the context of India's defence policy making are not competing but mutually interactive influences. Over the years, particularly after the end of the Cold War, the predicament of India's defence policy-makers has grown due to (a) the worsening geo-strategic environment in the region and (b) no significant change in the continuing domestic constraints. In other words, India has faced several external strategic challenges,

yet India has been guided by several domestic constraints, such as institutional constraints, lack of adequate resources, lagging behind in self-reliance in defence production, slow pace of modernisation of armed forces, increasing burden of internal security management and lacking in a sound strategic culture. Multiplicity of these domestic constraints indicates the failure of domestic policies or structural decisions. These constraints have also tended to confine India's area of influence to the South Asian region.²⁴

Determining relative importance or primacy of international environment or domestic variables in decision-making is a difficult proposition. The question of relativity or primacy has twin interfaces; one is between the two environments and the other is within the respective environment. Policy-makers in India have faced an overriding role of domestic constraints. Often strategic decisions are either not taken or delayed due to domestic constraints. It is easier to establish the relative importance of influences within a particular environment. So far as the international security environment is concerned, primarily the regional security environment in South Asia influences India's policy-making. Within domestic constraints, the problem of resourcing has acted as a recurring and an overriding influence on the policy makers.

Formulating an effective defence policy will require articulation of interests and purposes, and means to achieve them within these limitations. To overcome its domestic constraints, India has taken some structural decisions such as the establishment of National Security Council, Integrated Defence Staff and integration of Service Headquarters with the MoD. Also the Indian economy has grown impressively over the past one decade. There is a likelihood that India will emerge as one of top five economies of the world in near future. Then even about 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product as defence allocation will help in solving the problem of resourcing to a large extent. A credible and an affordable defence will depend a great deal on the success of these structural decisions for better political and strategic management of defence.

Conclusion

National interests and objectives and also political aims drive defence policies and strategies. India's defence policy plays the

most critical role in the country's national security management by addressing external and internal threats to national core values. An objective study of India's defence policy is possible only in the context of current international security system and the domestic environment.

Change in the nature of international security environment can bring about a change in a nation's defence and security policies. The post- Cold War security environment adversely impacted upon India's national security interests. Therefore, it decided to go nuclear. Similarly, a change in domestic variables can also alter the nature of a country's defence policy. We have often witnessed that changes in administration, say, for example, in the United States, had brought about redefinitions of national interests; hence the changes in security policies. This applies to India as well. If India redefines its national interests and objectives and its strategic horizon, then its defence policy or policies will change accordingly. Also, as India's domestic constraints are transforming and it is seeking to play a greater role in international affairs, the importance of defence as an instrument of national power will increase.

References

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3. Rajpal Budania. *India's National Security Dilemma: The Pakistan Factor and India's Policy Response* (New Delhi: Indus, 2001), p.16.
4. *Standing Committee on Defence*, n. 2, para 1.1, p. 1.
5. *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report, 1999* (New Delhi: Sage publications, 1999); *Reforming the National Security System: Recommendations of the Group of Ministers*, February 2001.
6. *Reforming the National Security System*, n.5, para 1.1.
7. *The Nineteenth Report - The Estimates Committee, 1992-93* (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1993) has highlighted the lack of a clearly articulated and integrated defence policy.
8. According to the Ministry of Defence, although there has been no specifically written document called India's national defence policy, yet it has been articulated clearly and unambiguously through various

policy statements over the years.' See *Standing Committee on Defence*, n. 2, para 1.2, p. 1. The report also highlights that there are several publications on defence matters. "There have been policy pronouncements by Ministers in Parliament. So our national security doctrine is well known and the absence of a written document...does not create confusion or any lack of clarity in this matter." Para 1.9, p.4.

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