

Indian Armed Forces and the Changing Strategic Environment*

Shri MJ Akbar**

Introduction

Thank you very much for according me the privilege of delivering the General Sinha Memorial Lecture and for the pleasure of being in front of such an august audience. I am already feeling mildly intimidated at the thought of treading on a subject which has been dealt with by you throughout your professional lives. I don't think I can claim that I would end today's session with much more clarity on the subject. But, I will stress that I recognise, while there are many kinds of fogs, the worst and the most mysterious of them all is the 'fog of war'. It does many things. The fog of war blurs geography. You can start a war at point one, and before you know it, it has developed tentacles and absorbed spaces which you never imagined at the start. But more important – I think this is the relevant starting point of our discussion and interaction today. The fog of war blurs time. That is something that we are not totally conscious of. One of the great mistakes all of us make, when we think of history, is to confuse military history with our lifetimes. When history is written, we will be lucky to get a page or two which deal with the 60 or 70 years that we become a part of the rational discourse of the unending line called the timeline.

A Historical Perspective

I would like to begin with two salient points. In exactly two years from now, we will witness (I don't know if I can use the word 'celebrate' or 'commemorate') the Hundredth year of the most significant fact of the last century. In 1914, the First World War began. Technically, India was out of both the World Wars. That is as fatuous a lie as I have ever heard. The Indian Army was involved in playing a critical part in both World Wars. In fact, the

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first major confrontation of the Ottomans and the British was at Kut in which the Indian Army played an extremely significant part. I often say, in the last century we have witnessed four World Wars. Why are we discussing the subject today? We are discussing this subject today because 'The War' that began in 1914 has not ended in many senses. The Second World War ended, with the defeat of Hitler. The Third World War ended, with the fall of the Soviet Union. But the Fourth World War has segued back into the First, in ways that we have not been able to fully comprehend.

I was speaking at Halifax last year, where Canada hosts an annual conclave on strategic issues. The US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta opened the conference; I was scheduled to speak in the final session, but a common thread ran through the conference, contemporary wars. I had a basic question to ask of American and NATO fellow delegates: Why did America, which has been involved in all four world wars, win the first three but seems to be floundering in the fourth? There are many answers but the principal answer, in my view, is that, in the first three wars America had the correct strategic partners, principally Britain and Free France.

America and its allies fought the First World War against German militarism, the Second against Fascism; the Third, against Communism. In all three, America's strategic partnerships were held together at the core by a shared ideology and commitment. In fact, Britain was fighting before America entered the War. Even in the Cold War, the term 'Iron Curtain' was given by Churchill.

In the Fourth World War, America seems to have lost its way because - and I am sure the analogy will not be lost - instead of Winston Churchill and Charles De Gaulle as strategic partners, America has the Vichy government of Marshal Pétain as its principal strategic partner in the crucial and central battlefield of this conflict. And who is this Vichy government? Pakistan, since its strategic policy is controlled by generals who are ambivalent. *Pakistan is not the strategic partner that America needs.* The analogy can be better understood with a parallel: if Marshal Pétain had been the ally, every detail of Normandy and D-Day would have been passed on to Berlin.

So, why does it surprise Washington to find that the enemy in Afghanistan is waiting for NATO, while NATO goes in circles searching for it. The equivalent of Britain in the South Asian

battlefield is India. India has been fighting the war against terrorism long before America took to the field.

A strategic partnership is not created by the search for 'common friends' – friendship is an emotional, not strategic, equation. It is built on the unemotional reality of common enemies. Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin could begin the Second World War as separate powers, come together at the decisive moment, and then go their separate ways after the war was over.

The most important event in the recent history of USA-India relations is not the nuclear deal; nor are dinners at the White House of more than symbolic interest. The most important thing that has happened is the trial of Dennis Headley, among the most wanted terrorists in India, in a court in Chicago. America is not in the business of being generous to either friend or foe – certainly the Pentagon isn't. America has put Headley on trial not because Headley is India's enemy; but because, Headley is also America's enemy. America and India have found '*an enemy in common*', and this is the basis of a strategic relationship.

What are India's present objectives? Without understanding Indian objectives, we cannot understand the objectives of the Indian Armed Forces. The Indian Armed Forces, unlike in Pakistan, are not a law unto themselves. They are not the final decision makers on matters of war and peace, but they are at the heart of India's national purpose.

Over the years, India's understanding of its strategic role has changed. The first phase was from 1947, when we won our freedom from the British, to 1962, when we were humiliated in the war against China. 1947 was epochal, because India was the first nation to reverse the 300-year tide of European colonization. Britain created an international empire after it became a major force in India with victory in the battles of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1765). The latter was the more significant, and I cannot quite comprehend why its victor, Major Munro, is not given at least as much credit as Clive. Maybe Clive succeeded in winning the battle for space in history books because he was corrupt enough to buy a place in the House of Lords.

After 1765, the power of Indian wealth and human resource, as much the steel of the Sepoy Army, helped the British to conquer a substantial portion of India. No one travels many months on

ship or horseback, to conquer a poor country. The investment required in war must be worth the returns. Nobody was interested in the dead deserts of the Ottoman empire until oil was discovered. The reason why, through the 17th and 18th centuries, every major European power had an outpost on the banks of the River Hooghly, that decants the Ganga into the Bay of Bengal, is because India was one of the richest countries in the world. In the millennium that preceded the rise of Britain, India was an economic and political superpower: when Clive reached the capital of Bengal, Murshidabad, after Plassey, he observed that it was richer than London – which of course it was at that time.

In 1750, when these statistics began to be collected, India produced roughly 24 per cent of world's manufacturing output – China, about 31 per cent. That means half of the goods in the world were produced between these two nations. Britain's share was less than 2 per cent. By 1947, Britain's share was 24 per cent and India's less than 2 per cent. I may add, in parenthesis, there is no point blaming the British. We were colonised because we were weak, not because Britain was strong. Conversely, Britain never gave India Independence; India took it.

So, our strategic thinking, inevitably, emerged out of the experience of the struggle against the British; and the unique moral and intellectual qualities of our leaders, Mahatma Gandhi before Independence and Jawaharlal Nehru after it. I was in Bihar recently, and recalled that we seem to have forgotten that in a few years the centenary of the beginning of our freedom movement will come: Gandhi stepped into Champaran in 1917. As a nation, Champaran seems to have disappeared from our collective memory. Is it because Champaran was a struggle for the poor, rather than a movement launched by the middle class or the rich? If it had been, would we have been celebrating it with a row of drums that started in Delhi and ended in Kerala?

In 1947, however, we emerged out of a 'triumph of idealism' as has rarely been witnessed in history. Who could have believed that a nation could liberate itself from the seemingly invincible grip of the British Empire? When Gandhi began his struggle conventional wisdom was reflected by a remark made by Lord Sinha (a respected Member of Viceroy's Council) who said, that he could not understand what Gandhi was all about since the

British were destined to rule India for 400 years. Gandhi converted that 400 to 40 years.

Jawaharlal Nehru understood that freedom might have been won, but Independence had to be preserved. He refused to enter either war camp during the Cold War, theorizing that since the age of colonization was unwinding, wars would also become increasingly irrelevant. Instead of searching for enemies, he began to search for an alliance of equals and friends. Rational nations would have rational interests, which could always be sorted out through a rational discussion.

Even a war with Pakistan, started by Pakistan through irregular forces which would later segue into terrorist bands, did not prevent the sense of complacency which dominated India's defence policy through the 1950s. The successor institution of the British Indian Army, once at par with the Japanese military might at its apex, was weakened by partition, and debilitated by neglect.

There is an excellent analogy for those who live in Delhi. There are two forts in Delhi which are still an important part of the scenery in the heart of the capital: the Old Fort (*Purana Qila*) built by Humayun at the beginning of the Mughal Empire, and the Red Fort, built by Shah Jehan. The first has thick walls designed for defence. The Red Fort was built in 1660's, after 150 years of total peace and security; it is famously the only fort in the world which was designed to keep its doors open. Mughals became victims of an illusion that an empire could be preserved without a strategic vision against an external threat. In exactly 50 years, a Persian called Nadir Shah taught the Mughals the meaning of complacency when he ransacked Delhi for three days in 1739 and rode away with the Peacock Throne and the riches of the treasury. The Empire which was once considered impregnable, became a laughing stock. The Mughals used to laugh at the Ottomans because the Ottoman GDP was one quarter of the Mughal GDP. In a sense, 1962 was the psychological equivalent of 1739. But unlike the Mughal dynasty, which never recovered from 1739, the modern Indian nation found the inner resources to stabilize itself, and revive. I wonder: had 1962 not happened, would our Army have been prepared for Pakistan's invasion of 1965? While the consequences of 1962 were injurious to our 'sense of ourselves' and 'self confidence'; defeat in 1965 would have damaged the nation far far more.

The Present Day Reality

The North West has reappeared on Delhi's strategic horizon, first in the form of a threat from Pakistan towards Kashmir, and now in the equally virulent shape of terrorists, many of them financially sponsored and trained by the Pakistan Army. This has merged into the larger Fourth World War against terrorism, with this important fact: that the land between Amritsar and Herat, with arcs moving north and northwest, has become the central battlefield of this world war. This is enlarging slowly into the dangerous arc between the Nile and the Ganges, as conflicts overlap into one another. This war will have two great problems – both of which armies are not used to. One side is fighting in uniform and, therefore, is living by rules, and is being held accountable by them. The other side has none, except perhaps the 'rule of barbarism'. Nations, across the divisions of faith, ideology and even the irregularities of national interest, are beginning to understand that terrorism is a demon that will destroy its benefactors as easily as its opponents.

India has been forming a ring of strategic partnerships, including with Afghanistan to the west and Vietnam in the east; there is what might be called an implicit strategic relationship with Japan and growing cooperation with the Pentagon. The Indian State as well as the Indian Armed Forces have developed a political and military strength which is the bulwark of their confidence. This strength has given India the confidence to become a 'status quoist' power. What is a status quoist power? We are essentially content with the status quo along our borders; both in government thinking and public we have moved away from border claims and are willing to solve disputes on the basis of existing possessions. No one wants Pakistan-Occupied-Kashmir anymore. Equally, we will not surrender an inch of what we hold.

I keep telling my friends in Pakistan that it is time to bury the canard that we want to repossess the country. It is a bit embarrassing, but the truth is that no one in the world in his right mind would want to conquer Pakistan; it has become ungovernable space. The solution to Kashmir has been staring at us in the face for 65 years: turn the Cease Fire Line into the International Border and get on with the rest of life. I tell my Pakistani friends: Over six and a half decades, six and a half inches of land has not changed

hands. You can fight for another six and a half decades and six and a half inches again will not change hands. Because, while we have accepted in our minds that we will accept the status quo, we are equally determined, that not a single inch of territory that we possess today shall be lost.

The Indian Army is a 'defensive army' and that gives it unique strength. That gives it the kind of moral strength which we saw at Kargil. It is the strength which an 'occupying army' can never have. The Army is trained for the defence of the Nation; not for offence against any other country. Such moral force brings clarity and conviction. This is why India could recover Kargil, because it was fighting for 'its land' – it was not fighting for Muzaffarabad.

The Extended Neighbourhood

Most wars do not revolve around a single theme. The original purpose may be a starting point, but quickly expands and accepts within its circumference a number of supplementary purposes. The dynamics of conflation takes us inevitably to a question: what is happening in the Arab world? *'The Shade of Swords: Jihad and the Conflict between Islam and Christianity'* was mentioned in the list of my books. It first appeared in 2002, and argued that large parts of the Arab world were 10-15 years away from their French revolution. The map of the present Arab world was drawn largely after 1919 by colonial powers, mainly Britain and France. It is based not on what the Arabs wanted; but what the British wanted; or, far worse, what the British wanted the Arabs to want. The Arab world shifted from occupation to colonisation to neo-colonisation.

What is neocolonialism? It is a grant of independence as long as you do not exercise it. Neocolonialism was perfected by the British in India, in the Princely States. The Maharajahs and Nawabs who ruled in Princely India surrendered their strategic options in return for preservation of family rule over guaranteed territory; that was the equation developed in Queen Victoria's proclamation after 1857. The British protected a family's interests; a family protected British interests.

The apotheosis of this model is in Saudi Arabia; where a ruling family went to the extent of renaming a country after itself, and Arabia became 'Saudi'. There is no similar instance in geopolitics. I am a Muslim and proud to be one. Arabia is important

to me because it is a land of the Prophet. But no one ever suggested that it be called Mohammadia Arabia.

Some of the reasons offered for the perpetuation of family autocracies is no different from that offered by the Bourbons during the French Revolution: 'after me is the deluge'. Thank you! I am tempted to welcome the deluge. The wealth of nations has been usurped by families supported by a military infrastructure that is given its share of the loot. There is a point beyond which the young will not accept such reservation of power; they want the rights of equality and democracy.

One evident problem of change, where it has happened, is that successor regimes are turning out to be less than wholesome in the eyes of the liberal elite. While researching *'The Shades of Sword'* I was travelling from Cairo to Alexandria. It was a Friday afternoon. I could hear the *Khutba* which had begun in mosques along the highway. I told my driver to stop as he might be wanting to pray. I went along with him to the mosque. I could not understand a word of what the Imam was saying, but, what I could hear all the time was anger; and the code word for the expression of anger was 'Israel'. The mosque was the one place, even more than the university, which kept the notion of a post-Mubarak future alive. During the dictatorships, while much of the liberal elite had been co-opted into the administration, it was the mosque which became the repository of mass sentiment. It is inevitable that the first rewards of change should go to those who had represented change at the grassroots, but, as we are already seeing in Egypt and Tunisia, this change will slowly learn to become inclusive.

Dictatorships which abolished the space for opposition parties, forgot a basic law: when you remove institutional opposition the people become the opposition. There are many sub-currents and undercurrents that flow between the Nile and the Ganges. If we want to better understand this, we have to look at the strategic map of undivided India. You know it better than anyone else, that when you look at the map of undivided India, the subcontinent's natural neighbour is Iran, and the Arab world begins a whiff of sea away from Gwadar in Baluchistan.

I was in Jerusalem in January, to interview Shimon Peres, and spent a day with the Israeli Foreign Office. The big question there was of course Iran, and India's relations with Iran. My response,

in sum, was: why would we abandon Iran when Pakistan blocks our land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and NATO does nothing about it. India is not going to serve America's or Israel's interests at the cost of India's interest. This is axiomatic. It doesn't require Shakespeare, Einstein or Sun Tsu to come and explain that.

India, Pakistan and China

The last theme of this presentation: What is the nature of India-Pakistan relationship? When we talk of our changing strategic environment, much of it is related, in practical terms, to Pakistan and China.

It is difficult to comprehend, even for those in the vicinity, how colossal a barrier the Himalayas are. India and China are only technical neighbours; but through a variety of circumstances, we have become competitors. In my view, the Chinese do not aspire to "defeat" India, but they do want to keep it under control, and limit its ability to nationalize and internationalize the Tibet issue. The military edge is part of a larger game, a threat that will materialize only if India drops its guard, but not much more than that.

We must not forget that China's biggest problem is internal instability. *The Economist* reports that there are over a hundred thousand insurrections each year in China, statistics which are now being admitted by Beijing. The first strategic objective of the Chinese Communist Party is survival of the Party – not of the nation. Number two, how to stave off 'the fires and the winds of democracy'? That is their greatest fear. Their real worry about India is not about what the Indian Army may do or may not do, or what our missiles may do, but what Indian democracy could achieve. Because if democracy succeeds in India, the excuses run out in China. The Chinese government is far more afraid of its own people than of Indians. So, I think vis-à-vis India, the idea that Deng prescribed – 'peace and tranquility on the border' will sustain. However, it would be a very foolish Indian Army which thought that peace and tranquility were guaranteed just because the Chinese had put their signature to a few agreed words. Nor will peace be a necessary concomitant to trade. It will be guaranteed by the commitment that the Indian Army makes to defend and protect that peace. Vigil is the price of both liberty and peace.

More dangerous is the fact that China has developed a very astute nuclear policy, in which it has outsourced the nuclear confrontation with India to Pakistan.

I tried to make one point in Jerusalem. They think of the Pakistani nuclear bomb as India-centric; and Iran's potential as Israel-centric. In geographical terms, Pakistan's missiles are not all that much further away than Iran's. The history of Pakistan's nuclear bomb is interesting: It was financed and created as an Islamic bomb. Of course that terminology is absurd; Islam does not need a bomb, or indeed Pakistan, for its security. Nor is this weapon at the potential service of a Muslim country like Indonesia. It was conceived as a Pak-Arab weapon.

What really is the problem between India and Pakistan? It is not a problem over land. If it was merely over land, the Kashmir issue would have been settled. The confrontation is an ideological one, between an exclusive faith-theocracy and a secular democracy.

Diplomats are trained to deal in 'nation to nation' relationships. It is very rare indeed when neighbours do not have problems. When Delhi deals with Nepal which is Hindu, Bangladesh which is Muslim, Sri Lanka which is Buddhist; what happens? You begin ten points on the agenda; three points you agree upon, three points you disagree about, four points you relegate to the next generation; then retire for a drink and return to your capitals and life goes on.

The dispute over Kashmir with Pakistan, that holds up progress elsewhere, is a conundrum: Pakistan demands Kashmir because it is Muslim, and India cannot abandon Kashmir merely because it is Muslim.

What is the difference between Indians and Pakistanis? This is a key question in my book *Tinderbox: The Past and Future of Pakistan*.

There is no difference between an Indian and Pakistani. So, after six and a half decades, why is one nation travelling towards a positive horizon and the other showing every sign of collapse? Indian Muslims created Pakistan to ensure their security; why has it become a country where more Muslims are being killed - by fellow Muslims - every day than in any other country? The

reason is that the idea of India is stronger than an Indian and the idea of Pakistan is weaker than the Pakistani. If an idea is proved by the logic of history to be sustainable, it will take a nation forward. What is the idea of India? The idea of India, is essentially modern. This was a true genius of our 'Founding Fathers' that they created a Constitution which sought 'modernity' as its ideological template.

Now 'modern' is an easy word to use, but what do you mean by it? I have four basic fundamental non-negotiable pillars that define modernity. One: democracy, with adult franchise. By the way, we should not fool ourselves that the British gave us democracy. The elections of 1946, in which the Muslim League captured approximately 95 per cent of the Muslim seats became the basis for the creation of Pakistan; only 11 per cent of India was allowed to vote. If the poor had been allowed to vote, I don't think the vote would have gone the way it did. The developed world, particularly British Tories, laughed in 1947 at the thought that democracy could succeed in India. No one is laughing now.

Two: modernity includes freedom and equality of faith. Our definition of secularism is not Voltaire's definition of secularism – which is separation of Church and State. We mean co-existence of all faiths as equals before the state. In that sense, China may be a successful state but it is not a modern state.

Three: you cannot be a modern state without gender equality. When Nehru was asked what was his greatest achievement, he did not say, freedom of India. He understood that freedom of India was a national enterprise. He said it was the passage of the Hindu Code Bill; which ensured equality for Hindu women. He was then asked why he had not extended the same favour to Muslim women, and he did not have an answer, except a weak one, saying that the 'time was not right'.

Four: economic equity. Contesting two elections for the Lok Sabha taught me more about poverty than my career as a journalist or as an author of nine books. It is only when you go to a constituency like Kishanganj; that you really come to know what a national humiliation poverty is. There is nothing called economic equality – but unless the poor feel that they are a part of the rising narrative of India, we have not become a modern nation. Our freedom movement began with the promise to end poverty, when

Gandhi went to Champaran in 1917. Gandhi understood that freedom has no meaning without freedom from hunger. Poverty remains our weakness, but I think that in the next ten years, we as a nation will address this curse precisely because we are a democracy.

What is the idea of Pakistan? Basically, that religion is sufficient as the basis for nationalism. The idea was the subject of much debate during the seminal 1930s and 1940s. Maulana Azad of the Congress and Maulana Madani of the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind led the debate against the idea. While there were many subtleties in the debate, Azad made a clarifying observation: Islam is a brotherhood, not a nationhood; Islam is an eternal and divine concept, not a political idea that divides people. There has rarely been political unity among Muslims; Sunnis and Shias divided during the time of the first four Caliphs. If Islam was sufficient as a glue for nationalism, why would there be over twenty Arab states? They have not only religion; but culture and language also in common.

Pakistan rationale shifted from a security zone for Muslims, to a fortress for Islam. If it had been a question of sanctuary for Muslims, there could have been a negotiated Constitutional settlement. But there was no way that the Constitution of India or United India could guarantee a space which would be a fortress of a faith.

I have argued in *Tinderbox* that there is no place in the world where Osama bin Laden could have been living, except in Pakistan. Even Saudi Arabia would have apprehended him and handed him over to justice. You know the motto of the Indian Armed Forces – ‘*Service Before Self*’; What is the motto of the Pakistan Armed Forces? It is ‘*Jihad fi Sabilillah*’ – Jihad in the name of Allah. It is not the Jihad in the name of Pakistan.

The idea of Pakistan has turned it into a Jelly State, to use a term from *Tinderbox*. The jelly state is a state which will neither be stable, because it will always quiver, nor will it melt away and disappear like butter. Pakistan is not going to collapse. And, because it has both fundamentalism as well as nuclear power, it will be a toxic jelly state.

Thank you.