

India's External Security Challenges

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India today is in the fortunate position of facing no existential threat to her security. In that respect India is better placed today than she was in the past. She also now has increased capacity to deal with external challenges to her security.

But this cannot obscure the fact that the international environment in which India makes her foreign policy and national security decisions has worsened recently. At the same time, her internal security challenges, many of which have strong external linkages, have also increased. Despite her improved capacity to deal with these challenges, it would appear that India is entering a new era which will require new responses from the country.

I. The regional context

A major determinant of India's external security is the international context within which we operate and seek to develop and transform India.

Today's world is less supportive and offers more difficult choices than the binary ones of the Cold War. Nor does it offer the economic opportunities of the years before the world economic crisis of 2008. Both world politics and the world economy are fragmenting and becoming increasingly regional. Protectionism has risen around the world. The rise of China, and her quest for primacy, first in Asia and then globally, and her hierarchical view of an international order centred on herself, epitomised by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), pose a new set of questions and challenges to the established order and to Western supremacy. China now uses economic means, such as the BRI infrastructure programme, to pursue geopolitical outcomes. In effect, economics and politics are no longer separate in today's world. Indeed politics may now be driving economics.

Pressing issues for India are the disequilibrium or accelerated imbalances of power in the Asia-Pacific, and sub-regional vacuums created by the rise of China and other powers and by the Trump administration's effective disengagement from the world. While these imbalances and vacuums will be corrected, re-calibrated or filled over time, that is a slow process of adjustment that itself creates friction and tension. China seems to have decided that the time has come for her to reorder the broader region. The US administration under Trump is yet to make clear its approach to China and the region — the initial signs are of a more transactional and less geopolitical US approach, driven by what she can get out of China and the Asia-Pacific rather than by the effect of US policies on other states, friends or allies, or on regional order. It remains in doubt whether these will amount to a long-term approach that other states can base their policies upon. These processes will, therefore, take time to work themselves through to a new equilibrium.

In the meantime, disequilibrium is liable to: ignite flash-points like the Korean peninsula; to invite overreach by one power or another in territorial and maritime disputes like the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the India-China boundary; or to create space for insurgents, extremists and terrorists to exploit in fragile societies and states like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar and the southern Philippines. Whether they admit it or not, states in the Asia-Pacific today face unparalleled uncertainty. They are responding by tightening internal controls and building up their own defences, in what amounts to the world's greatest arms race, seeking partners who share their security concerns, and hedging their relationships with great powers like China and the US.

The commons in the Asia-Pacific are now increasingly contested, whether on the high seas, or in cyber and outer space. Since the commons are increasingly critical to the prosperity and security of the region, and for India, this poses a real problem for all the countries of the region. The traditional regional security architecture, of a hub-and-spokes arrangement centred on the US, or even a new G-2 of the US and China, is unable and unlikely to be able to address these issues. The Asia-Pacific is a crowded geopolitical space with several established, re-emerging and rising powers jostling in close proximity, all of whom have to be part of a solution if that solution is to be lasting.

Secondly, domestic developments in many large countries have heightened the uncertainty and complexity created by the regional imbalance of power.

Since the 2008 crisis we have seen the rise of authoritarian centralisers to power in several large countries, including China, Japan, India, Russia, Turkey, the UK, the USA and elsewhere. They base their legitimacy on a heightened appeal to nationalism or nativism. In a slowing global economy, and despite the diminishing capacity of their governments to deliver domestic growth, they promise more and more and rely on nativist appeals (like "America first" or "The Great Rejuvenation of China"). In southern Asia, this phenomenon takes local forms: India is no exception to the global trend; in Pakistan, the power, influence and role of the Army has been considerably enhanced at the expense of civilian governments nominally in power.

One result of this phenomenon is to accentuate the fragmentation and regionalisation of world politics. As important, the powers' capacity for compromise and to negotiate is lessened, thus making relations between competitive powers more fraught than in the past. Some of this dynamic is visible in India-Pakistan relations and in India-China relations over the last year or so. Neither relationship is as smooth or predictable as it was a few years ago, and they today pose new challenges to Indian security policy, separately and together.

The 2003 ceasefire along the LOC between India and Pakistan has broken down, and political communication between the two states is minimal. As a consequence, the SAARC Summit has been postponed and cooperation in SAARC has been driven down to sub-regional levels which exclude Pakistan. Even if there were to be a warming of India-Pakistan relations, the underlying causes of the tension — cross-border terrorism from Pakistan, and Pakistan's quest for "strategic parity" with India and for strategic depth in Afghanistan — are rooted in Pakistan's internal condition. Therefore, they are likely to repeatedly assert themselves, and any warming is likely to be temporary. The prospect of difficult India-Pakistan relations is a geopolitical fact that affects and will affect the geopolitical choices of India and other Asian countries.

The last few years have also seen a considerable strengthening of China's ties with Pakistan, her only ally apart from North Korea. As China steps out into the region, and as China-US strategic contention strengthens, she has hinged her Belt and Road Initiative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Not all projects under the BRI seem viable economically, which suggests that they have been included for geo-political or other reasons. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, (CPEC), for instance, lacks economic justification, and it is its strategic portions like Gwadar port that have been implemented first, thus giving the Chinese navy, which is now building a base at Djibouti access and presence in the northern Arabian sea and the approaches to the Hormuz strait. This changes India's security calculus. The CPEC is to traverse some of the most lawless and insecure parts of the world. For India there is the added complication that it goes through Indian territory under Pakistani occupation, and by making a long term investment on that basis, seeks to solidify and legitimise that occupation. This is clearly unacceptable to the Indian government.

India-China relations have always had elements of both cooperation and competition, and are undergoing a shift, though the prospect is more positive than for India-Pakistan relations. The older modus vivendi from the eighties is no longer sufficient. (Under that modus vivendi India and China discussed their differences, like the boundary question, but did not allow the absence of a settlement to inhibit other cooperation such as trade etc.) Several signs of stress in the relationship have surfaced in the last two years such as China's attitude to India's NSG membership (in contrast to her attitude in 2008 to the special exemption by the NSG for India), the listing of Masood Azhar as a terrorist in the UN, India's attitude to the BRI, and so on. As India and China have grown and their definitions of their own interests have expanded, they increasingly rub up against one another in the periphery that they share, whether on the southern Asian landmass, in archipelagic and mainland south-east Asia, in the Indian Ocean, or in the seas near China like the South China Sea. My own sense, however, is that a new strategic framework for this relationship will probably be worked out by the two countries, since both countries have other domestic and international priorities, their core interests are not in fundamental conflict, and their differences can be managed.

Today, as a result of reform and rapid growth, both India and China need and see the world as essential for their domestic purposes — China Dream and single-party rule, or New India and economic transformation. Therefore, expect more interventions, expeditionary and activist external politics, playing to the nationalist gallery at home, relatively soon, and backed by the military in China's case. India and China will try and shape their world, China alone, and India working with coalitions.

I do not want to leave you with the impression that the future only holds gloom and doom. One effect of the economic growth spurt in India in the last three decades is that India today has tools and abilities that we never had before — we may face new problems but we also have new ways of dealing with them. And the new problems in themselves possess potential opportunities.

This becomes evident when we consider security issues facing India, such as cross-border terrorism, maritime security, or cyber security, all of which need primarily domestic capabilities and responses, have a significant external element, and which also bring opportunities in their wake.

II. Security Issues

Consider national security, internal security and personal security, three domains where Indians expect their government to deliver security.

- National Security: India's real threats to national security today are internal, but with strong external linkages. Cross-border terrorism from Pakistan, and the corrosive effect that extremism and radicalism can have on a plural and diverse society like India's, are today a major security concern. The situation in West Asia, which has deteriorated over the last decade, is further fuelling terrorist, extremist and radical religious forces in the subcontinent.
- Given trans-border ethnicities, there is fertile ground in the region for separatist movements and insurgencies. Many of these insurgent groups operate in less governed spaces and across national boundaries. Fortunately, cooperation among southern Asian states in dealing with these movements has improved considerably in the last decade, and we are, by and large, getting better at mastering the techniques to deal with such problems through a combination of political and other means. Deaths from terrorism and internal conflict in India have declined steadily in the last decade.
- The risks of inter-state conventional conflict in the Indian sub-continent have been managed successfully for over four decades now, and its costs and risks are now better appreciated than in the fifties and sixties. The fact that there are two declared nuclear weapon states in southern Asia has actually stabilised the situation as far as conventional conflict is concerned, and has driven conflict to other sub-conventional levels, to terrorism, covert action and forms of asymmetric warfare.
- Another aspect of national security that is increasingly relevant for India is maritime security in the Indian Ocean. When India started reform in 1991, external merchandise trade accounted for less than 18% of GDP. By 2014 that proportion had risen to 49.3%, and well over 80% of that was carried by sea. (The proportion of merchandise trade in GDP has since dropped as world trade has shrunk.) This gives you an idea of how important the Indian Ocean is to India's security and well being. Fortunately, the security situation in the Indian Ocean is not as acute as in the seas near China with their territorial and maritime disputes, or in the western Pacific where a real struggle for naval mastery and dominance is unfolding. The Indian Ocean's issues arise mainly from troubles on land, particularly around its seven choke-points, and the resulting piracy and instability that threaten the security and safety of critical sea lanes. 50% of the world's trade passes through crucial Indian ocean choke points, and its sea-lanes carry a large proportion of the world's energy flows. The open geography of the Indian Ocean means that no single power can or is likely to dominate it, but this does not prevent great powers from trying, and their contention is growing.
- Internal Security: The most significant security threats to India are today internal. They arise from a loss of social cohesion due to the very rapid growth and change that we have experienced in the last few decades, and external attempts to exploit that from Pakistan and west Asia. They also arise from the effects of new technologies, particularly information and communication technologies (ICT) which empower small groups and individuals, irrespective of

whether they intend harm or good. ICT has breathed new life into older insurgencies, terrorist groups, and rebellions, (like the Naxalites in India or ethnic insurgencies in Myanmar). ICT also creates new opportunities for criminals. In 2012, for instance, threats and malicious rumours spread on the social media drove almost 80,000 people from north-eastern India to return home from their jobs in Bangalore and Mumbai. They were soon back at work and government of India put in place systems to prevent such misuse of social media in the future, but that was an early example of the power of ICT to spread social panic.

- Of course ICT is a positive enabler for good as well. Look at: how India is now able to reach benefits from government directly to the most needy, through the Universal Identification system, or Aadhaar; or the difference that communications has made to our ability to manage disasters and respond to extreme weather events.; or at what ICT has meant for financial inclusion, for education. The list of benefits is long and far outweighs the dangers. And these economic benefits and platforms also have security advantages, vastly increasing the state's reach and capacity. But that long list also makes it all the more important that we treat cyber security with the seriousness that it deserves. This is one domain, cyber space, which recognises no national boundaries or man-made sovereignties. We must cooperate across boundaries if we are to be successful at securing it.
- ICT also has a broader political effect. It helps to create and spread expectations and aspirations among the young, uprooted and mobile population of all our countries. History (and de Tocqueville) has shown that revolutions are produced by improved conditions and rising expectations, not by mass immiseration. This is exactly what globalisation has left us, a world where everything is amazing and nobody is happy, where life is better than ever before for most people but anger and dissatisfaction is high. This is especially true in India, which has just undergone its fastest economic growth spurt in history, thus accentuating inequalities just when ICT has spread knowledge of what is possible and available elsewhere, and thus raised expectations. Traditional elites and establishments are under attack everywhere. The resulting pressure on governments to deliver security and growth is, therefore, at unprecedented levels.
- Personal security: It is also probably true in several countries that individuals no longer feel as secure in their person as they used to. Statistics and polls, when available, bear this out. Crimes against the person and violence against women are increasing in all our societies. Some of this is the result of the uprooting that comes with massive urbanisation and migration. As women join the work force and social mores change, personal security and policing face new challenges. Traditional policing no longer suffices.

Fortunately, we today have the means in India and the world to tackle these problems if we find the political will to work together.

III. Next steps

What should India and the region do about the security issues that I have mentioned?

- There is certainly much more that the region could do against multinational threats such as terrorism, and against state sponsors of terrorists. Information sharing and joint actions against cross-border terrorism, its financing and support come to mind as immediately feasible.
- The time is also probably ripe for us to make much more use of the extended AMF to work together on maritime security. A start should also be made in capacity building and in cooperation on border and coastal security and policing which require cooperation across boundaries.
- We also should share best experiences of community policing and to find effective ways of cooperating against internal security threats and the new crimes that an interconnected globalised world makes possible, working together to enhance cybersecurity and personal security.
- I have lower expectations of new legal instruments or multilateral initiatives. Experience shows that they are unlikely to be effective in practice without the necessary political will among all the states involved. Instead, coalitions of those affected who share the same approach may be the best way forward on issues like radicalisation and maritime security.

IV. Conclusion

India is at a moment when the threats that she faces have evolved, and changed. Most of these demand more, not less engagement by India with her neighbours in southern and south-east Asia, and a new approach to managing her big power relationships. Fortunately, the international context, though complicated, also makes clear to several powers their common interest in working together to limit uncertainty and deal with security issues in the region. Besides, capabilities and awareness of these security issues have improved considerably throughout the region. It now remains for these countries to display the political will to tackle these security issues so that we can continue the Asian march to prosperity that has already changed so many lives in the Asia-Pacific.