
National Security Architecture and Decision-Making

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Speaking Notes

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Lt.-General Narasimhan,
Gentlemen.

It is a real pleasure to be back in the Army War College. From previous experience, I know how high you set your standards, and the quality of those who study and teach here. It is a privilege to be back.

It was suggested that I speak to you about the National Security Architecture and Decision-Making in India. This is a subject of vital importance to our future, but also one that is evolving, not just in India but around the world. I will speak about our present structures, how they have worked and how they might, in my view, be improved.

But before that, let us look at the basic issue of the function of the national security apparatus and how we prioritise between the numerous threats and concerns that clamour for our attention.

The function of the national security apparatus

The **primary function** of the national security apparatus of India is to **enable the great national task of transforming India into a prosperous, strong and modern country**. Our task is to identify, deter and defeat threats to our national security which could prevent India's transformation. Each part of the national security apparatus does so in its own way. Diplomats do so by shaping the environment and diplomacy, (ranging from cooperative to coercive means). The armed forces do so by the use and threat of use of force, and the intelligence agencies and other arms of the state do so in their own way. No single part of the national security apparatus can function without the others, no matter how much its own *esprit de corps* leads it to stress its own role and importance.

From this it follows that the most important national security threats and concerns are those that will or could derail our quest to transform India; and that we will build up and deal with the hierarchy of threats accordingly. Furthering the transformation

of India is also the ultimate criterion by which the success of the apparatus should be judged.

Breaking that down, ranking opportunities and threats according to how they affect our ability to transform India, gives us a **hierarchy of five major national security tasks** that looks something like this:

1. The **territorial integrity and defence** of India.
2. **Internal Security**: Unlike the fifties and sixties, we face no external threat to our existence as a nation. The risk of war is not what it was. The balance of power in our immediate neighbourhood is better than it was. It is our internal polarisation and divisions — **LWE and communal violence and polarisation** — which could threaten the existence of India as we know it.
3. **External Challenges: China's rise** is the foremost challenge which could derail our quest. But it is also an opportunity. As is the **return of classical geopolitics** and the **fragmentation of the globalised world economy after the end of the world's unipolar moment**.
4. **Terrorism and Pakistan**: Pakistan has sought to compensate for her internal decline by making herself useful to outside patrons — a nuclear bomb for Saudi Arabia; checking India and access to the Indian Ocean and Afghanistan for China; a toehold and the promise of a clean exit from Afghanistan to the US, and so on. Pakistan and the cross-border terrorism she sponsors could derail our quest only if we allow them to. However, as India's responses to terrorism have improved, terrorism itself has enjoyed a global resurgence — in West Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan and North Africa. In Afghanistan Pakistan has got the US, Russia and China to buy into the idea that the Taliban should be accommodated in the government, and that Pakistan can deliver that outcome.
5. **Indirect threats**: These would affect our quest unless we handle them properly. They include **energy security, nuclear weapons, and cyber security and the global commons such as the high seas and outer space**.

For each of these tasks we need **awareness, (or intelligence**, particularly its proper analysis), and to **improve our capabilities to deal with them**, keeping pace with the evolution of the threat and situation.

Of course, in national security decision making there is **no such thing as absolute security** and there are **no complete or permanent solutions** to these problems — these are not engineering problems with a perfect or correct solution. They mutate, can be neutralised or made harmless or minimised. In most cases we are faced with **mini-max decisions** where you seek to maximise your gains and

minimise your losses. And this is done **within the constraints of limited knowledge and limited means**. The real challenge of national security decision making lies within those limitations — which are inherent in national security decision making for all powers, whether they are superpowers or minnows.

If these are our goals, three questions arise: **is our national security apparatus fit for purpose; how has it performed; and, what could we do to improve it?** In my experience, the **answer** to each of these questions must be a **mixed one**, neither black nor white, good nor bad, but grey and patchy, good in parts. Let us consider these three questions.

Is the present apparatus fit for purpose?

At the **apex** of our present national security structures is the **PM** and his Cabinet. For all practical purposes, the PM works through the **Cabinet Committee on Security**, (chaired by the PM and normally including the Ministers of Defence, External Affairs, Home and Finance). Political oversight and decision making on national security is exercised by the CCS, ensuring the democratic principle of civilian and political control of the apparatus. It helps that the **same ministers are members of the NCA and the NSC, both of which are assisted by the NSA**.

Ours was the **first parliamentary system in the world to experiment with a National Security Council and a National Security Advisor** to the PM over sixteen years ago on 19 November 1998. Since then several others like the UK, Japan, Spain etc have also done so. That is because the nature of the threats and the security issues that need to be managed have long outgrown the silos of individual ministerial responsibility in the parliamentary or cabinet system of government. The NSC and its Secretariat's **function is to identify cross cutting and strategic national security issues and to suggest policy responses**. In doing so it is assisted by the NSAB composed of outside experts and professionals. The implementation of responses and policies approved by the NSC and CCS is entrusted to the Cabinet Secretary led Strategic Policy Group.

In India's case the **immediate spur** for the creation of the NSC was **cross-border terrorism which peaked in J&K in the nineties, the lessons of the Kargil conflict of 1999, and our overt nuclear-weapon-state status after 1998**, all of which required holistic and coordinated national direction and management.

Kargil had shown that while raw intelligence was available, it was not shared, understood, analysed or acted upon in time. Besides, the nature of war had changed, with Pakistan trying for the first time to use its nuclear weapons to cover their traditional mixture of conventional and jihadi forces.

The intensity and nature of **cross border terrorism** in the nineties had shown that our responses could not be left to old-fashioned policing and politics. Instead it required the coordinated application of force across the spectrum, including the Army, the armed police and the state police. It required new structures and formations like the Rashtriya Rifles, and needed multi-level responses — intelligence, political and social responses — if India was to prevail.

Besides, our **nuclear weapons programme** and the development of the doctrines, structures and practices for their use and management were neither a purely political nor a military or scientific problem. Here we were in uncharted territory after 1998. This is an area where no one shares their real experience or knowledge. What the US took forty years to do, and China thirty, we have done in a little over a decade, building up the Nuclear Command Authority, standing up the Strategic Forces Command, (India's only truly joint command), and creating the staff, production, scientific and military structures required to manage and build a credible deterrent based on a triad of sea, land and air vectors. This has been a remarkable unsung achievement by scientists, the armed forces, and civilians working together, outside the glare of publicity.

The **NSC has done good work**, particularly in areas like cyber security. It is today the only regular high level policy forum where our top leadership sits together with the three Chiefs and other top national security professionals and discusses national security issues in detail. In the four plus years that I was directly associated with the NSC it met regularly, never for less than two hours at each sitting, and discussed complex and major issues like LWE, China, Afghanistan after 2014, the Indian Ocean region, cyber security, the Naresh Chandra Committee report, and so on in great detail, considering our options and actions.

None of these tasks was the work of one day or of one order or decision. The **series of rolling reforms of the national security system, begun by NDA-I and carried on by UPA governments**, that the NSCS midwifed included:

- the setting up of the **NTRO** to deal with techint, critical cyber infrastructure and cyber intelligence;

- a **national policy framework for cyber security** which has led to the creation of a National Cyber Security Coordination Centre in the NSCS and the strengthening of capacity;
- **reforms in intelligence** tasking, analysis and monitoring under the JIC of the NSC;
- the **creation of covert and other capabilities** to deal with cross border terrorism and the support that it gets in our own society; and,
- **coordinated policies in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean Region** which have paid dividends.

The NSC also undertook two major exercises of **introspection** to suggest further changes. One was the **Naresh Chandra Committee** which made several suggestions for reforming national security structures based on the experience of the first ten years of the NSC. Most of these have been approved by government and implemented. The exception is the one that got all the attention — the proposal to have a CDS equivalent permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. That is in limbo, neither accepted nor rejected, awaiting a government decision.

The other was the **Rabindra Gupta Committee** which proposed fundamental reforms of the defence procurement system and in the way we undertake defence R&D. Again, many of these ideas are now being implemented in the form of “make in India”. They had recommended that we leave it to Indian industry to involve outsiders — rather than “Buying Global” we should “Buy Indian and Make Indian with Global Technology”. The Indian Navy has shown the way and government decided in 2012 that all future naval hulls would be built in India, but that our yards, private and public, would collaborate with the best in the world to equip these platforms. This was possible because of the R&D base in naval design that has been cultivated in India. While it may be difficult to do the same in aeronautics, it is not impossible and should certainly be possible for land force platforms.

To sum up, I would answer the question whether our national security apparatus is fit for purpose in three parts:

1. There has been a **continuous effort**, accelerated in the last twenty years, **to improve and redesign** our national security structures. We have begun to break down the silos and create the capacities we require but still have some way to go.
2. The single greatest reason why they are not entirely fit for purpose is the **shortage and quality of manpower** to staff and man these institutions,

agencies, forces and bodies. The quality of our thinking, work and institutions all depend ultimately on the quality of the people involved in our national security. We simply do not have the right kind of trained or even trainable manpower available today, and it will take a long time to develop the infrastructure and eco-system that requires. To mention one example, the National Cyber Security Policy Framework estimates that we need at least 500,000 trained professionals if we are to secure our critical cyber infrastructure (as defined in the IT Act) and perform our legally mandated regulatory and monitoring functions. To solve the manpower problem we need to start education in security studies in our universities — just one NDU will not be enough. Mr NN Vohra has spoken of a cadre of national security professionals for some years. I think the time has come to consider this seriously and take some decisions.

3. The **answers** to many of the shortfalls of the present apparatus **are well known** and have been repeated by successive committees. For instance, the same solutions to defence procurement issues have been reiterated by each committee that looked into the issue — corporatising the defence PSUs, using the Indian private sector, tighter monitoring, accountability and competition in defence R&D, and so on. Again, it is clear that present structures of the MHA and states are incapable of bringing about the minimal operational coordination and sharing of intelligence that is essential if we are to eliminate Naxalite violence. Some solutions are known from our experience in J&K. **What prevents their implementation is the strong defence of existing vested interests,— political, bureaucratic and institutional.** (Frankly, the time to break these vested interests is at the very beginning of a government's tenure, when it is not staring reelection in the face. Think of the 1998 atomic bomb test, the 1991 economic reforms, the Green Revolution, the 1971 War, the creation of the NSC. All of them were done within the first year or so of the formation of a government by a new party.)

How has the apparatus performed?

This is a harder question to answer. Here again the answer is mixed. But overall, if you bear in mind the national goal of the transformation of India, **the apparatus has delivered enough security for us to have grown** at an average of over 6% for over 35 years. No other country except China has done so in history, not Britain during the industrial revolution, not the USA in her Gilded Age between 1900-1929, and not Bismarck or Hitler's Germany. We still have a long way to go before we can say that we have abolished mass poverty and wiped out illiteracy, disease and hunger from India. But we have made progress in our main task.

Yet the record of the national security apparatus has not been as spotless and exemplary as we may have wished. Until 1971, our record in war was mixed — a stalemate in 1965, a defeat in 1962 and a heroic rescue in 1947-48 of part of J&K. (The real gain from the 1947-48 war in Kashmir was that the Army of the Raj became the national army of India.) In internal security, by a combination of force, politics and economic development, we have managed in the last sixty years to ensure that there are no longer any serious separatist threats to India's integrity, and that most insurgencies have been either eliminated or reduced to marginal levels. **But what is more important than our failures is that in both cases, whether in war or internal security, the Indian state and society have shown an ability to learn from bad experiences**, and to respond to crisis, and that the trend line is in the right direction.

A good **example** of that learning is **counter-terrorism** which is much more professional than it ever has been, and where we now get cooperation from several partners abroad who were not so helpful in the past. The setting up of the NIA after the Mumbai attack of 26/11/08, the MACs at central and state levels to share intelligence, and other steps to tighten our response and awareness have led to eight years without a major terrorist attack. This is not to say that there could not be one tomorrow. Terrorists too are quick learners, as the rise of ISIS or *Daesh* in Iraq and Syria and their attempt to spread to the Indian subcontinent shows. Unfortunately we have not set up the NCTC yet as it fell victim to political grandstanding.

The **major exception** to this process of the Indian state learning and improving is the **Naxalites**, who have tenaciously eliminated the writ of the state from large areas in central India. While they may have stopped expanding, and they have so far failed in their attempt to enter the cities, it is hard to be confident that the Indian state has learnt how to deal with this phenomenon.

Equally worrying for me is the fact that **the nature of violence in our society seems to have changed**, with crimes against the person, against women, and social polarisation and violence between communities increasing. If you look at the figures on the MHA website, you will see that while the number of deaths among civilians and security forces from jihadi terrorism, in the NE and J&K, or from LWE declined steadily in the ten years till 2014, communal violence and crimes against the person have been growing for the last three years. My worry is that we do not have the right tools to deal with this phenomenon of **social violence**, which is as much a consequence of rapid social change as a law and order problem. It cannot

be dealt with by traditional policing in a society that is now young, mobile and aspirational, technologically empowered, and free of traditional inhibitions.

So my answer to the question about how our national security apparatus has performed is two-fold.

Externally, we have created a sufficiently peaceful environment to enable India's economic and social transformation, particularly in the last four decades. **For over forty years the combination of deterrence and diplomacy has worked to keep us out of a major war**, (unlike the first twenty five years of the Republic which saw four wars in quick succession). We have done so **despite the fact that this was a period of rapid shifts in the global and regional balances of power**, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of China, the world economic crisis of 2008, and history's greatest arms race in Asia in the last three decades. India was quick to adjust to these shifts, as we always have been. (We were among the first to recognise the seriousness and opportunities in the Sino-Soviet split in the fifties, of the Cold War in the forties and early fifties for a non-aligned stance, and of the changes in the nineties.) Capabilities have been built up to deal with external threats, and to counter new ones like cyber security and nuclear threat and blackmail. The apparatus was changed when necessary — the Army reorganised after 1962, R&AW separated out of the IB after 1965, MEA reformed in the seventies and 2004-9, and the NSC structures established and other reforms after Kargil. We might look enviously at what the USA or other powers have and wish that we had done more. But I think that we have not done badly while staying within our means. (Not doing so is what destroyed the Soviet Union.) Since grand strategy is a matter of matching ends and means to achieve an overarching goal, I would say that at the grand strategic level India has not done badly in dealing with the external environment.

But **we have not been so successful in internal security**. In my opinion that is largely because **we have not reformed the internal security apparatus or changed its ways of working** as we have done for those parts of the apparatus that deal with the external world — which I mentioned earlier. (The exceptions that prove the rule were J&K and Punjab where we succeeded.) Instead, when it comes to internal security we have chosen to double down, creating new forces based on the old pattern to deal with new threats, such as the creation of the NSG and several armed police organisations. Equally we have created new institutions that overlap with existing ones, such as the NIA with the IB and anti-terrorism task forces in the state police. Doubling inefficiency is not the answer. Sadly, sixty-seven years after independence we retain the lack of accountability and transparency in

policing and internal security that our colonial masters left us. Nor has there been institutional reform in response to the changes in society that have led to new phenomena like Naxalism, social and gender violence, and so on.

What could we do to improve the apparatus?

The **three suggestions** that I consider most important improvements to the national security architecture in India are clear from what I have said so far. They are: Jointness and coordination across sectors and services, civilian and uniformed; the cultivation of manpower; and a thorough reform of our internal security structures. Let me explain.

When I seek **jointness** it is not just in the military sense of the term. Most of our security challenges cannot be dealt with by one force or ministry or service, whether civilian or in uniform. This is as true of cyber security as it is of counter-terrorism or China's rise. And as far as I can see the hybrid nature of the threats that we face, such as that from Pakistan, makes it essential that we make a real start in creating jointness. So a CDS by any name would be a good start. But we also need more mixed manning of institutions like the National Cyber Security Coordination Centre in the NSC, in the JIC, and vigorous sharing of intelligence in real time through the MAC and other institutions that already exist. To my mind we need to use our present institutions jointly, rather than creating more and more new ones which duplicate each other's functions and step on each others toes. (For instance, a separate Army Cyber Command could be looking at and attacking the same sites and actors as other existing institutions like NTRO, R&AW and IB — fratricide seems inevitable. Clearly tasking and sharing are the key. The earlier practice of retired or serving armed forces officers working for extended periods in MEA, R&AW, the JIC and other agencies needs to be revived and made part of the career path for good officers. The same is true of special forces and covert ops which need to be better coordinated, and certainly better explained than the recent ops in Myanmar, which, by the way are not new, as some of you know.)

A prerequisite of jointness is improved and much **tighter civil-military relations**, cultivating the habits of working together. The Naresh Chandra Committee made some useful suggestions for armed forces officers in the MOD and civilians in the Service HQ which would be a beginning.

Dealing with China is a good example of why we need to act in a much more coordinated fashion across services and institutions. The **challenge that China's**

rise poses us is multi-dimensional: military, political, economic, security, and sometimes even social. It is therefore clear that it needs a response from across all the institutions of the state and in society as well. When we do so, we succeed, as in the case of the Depsang intrusions in May 2013 when we managed, through a coordinated combination of moving our forces, diplomatic pressure and clear messaging at all levels, military, civilian and political, to get the PLA to restore the status quo in two weeks. It is that combination and the successful creation of local equilibria in the balances of power on the border that has ensured over twenty years of peace and tranquillity on the border with China. It remains to be seen whether we can continue to do so in the future, with the changing balance of power and more assertive leaderships in both countries with limited experience of such issues.

We can probably discuss China in some detail in the question and answer session. But I would like to say that **we should not flatter ourselves that China is fixated on encircling India. She has greater goals**, becoming the preeminent power in the world, and India as a major power is dealt with as part of that strategy. In other words it is not a simple binary opposition but a complex interplay between India and China in political, economic, security and other terms.

I am therefore less pessimistic, and certainly **less willing to be emotional about China and some of these issues. Strategy consists of making the most of available means to achieve one's goals. Our goal is to transform India.** China, like the US, or the world economy for that matter, is a fact of life. **We must learn to use it to achieve our goals.**

I have already spoken in some detail about the **cultivation of manpower** and improving skill and knowledge levels among national security professionals. This is also a question of basic education, of ensuring a proper career path for these professionals, and of nurturing talent within organisations, many of which by their nature are closed shops, secretive and not publicly answerable, traits which extend into and affect the work culture in security organisations. Our institutions and structures are only as good as the men and women who fill them.

As for our **internal security structures**, the normal excuse for inefficiency and incompetence, (as was on display on global television when Mumbai was attacked on 26/11), is divided mandates and authorities between the states and the centre. And yet we have the examples of the railways, of taxation, of our markets and of several other state functions where it has been possible to pragmatically work out a clear division of labour between central and state agencies and authorities and to

get the nation's work done in a coordinated manner across state boundaries. This should not be impossible in internal security as well. **Local and community policing are clearly best done by state police, while dealing with today's terrorists, cyber crime or other modern phenomena needs central and coordinated responses.** There is more than enough work to keep central and state police busy in their own spheres. It is the political will that is lacking today to enforce accountability and transparency on these organs of the state. The lack of accountability and transparency is what permits their misuse for political and other purposes. Our Constitution has already been amended over seventy times. If we do not modernise the Constitutional provisions on law and order we risk even more serious problems than we are now facing with LWE, social violence and cross-border terrorism.

In Conclusion

Avoiding war and attaining one's goals is the highest form of strategy by any tradition or book — whether Kautilya, Sun Tzu or Machiavelli. And if you look at India's record over sixty-eight years of independence, we have not done badly in moving towards our main goal of transforming India. That has required that the national security calculus consider broader questions — from technology issues, like atomic energy and cyber security, to resource issues like energy security, while building the strength to deal with traditional hard security issues. We have weathered several storms and performed our basic functions in the past. But it is certain that what will face us now will not be more of the same. Which brings me to the last and most important improvement that I think we need to make in our national security structures and decision making — **introducing flexibility into our thinking and our structures.** For **change is the only certainty in life.**