
India's National Security Calculus

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Speaking Notes

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Thank you for asking me to speak to this premier institution of professional military education.

Each of us, soldier, diplomat or scholar, concentrates on improving our own professional skills and competence. That is what institutions like the War College do, and each profession has its equivalents. And yet it is not often that national security professionals take a step back to think about why we do so, and of how it fits into the larger picture of national endeavour.

I would, therefore, like to speak today about the national security calculus — of how the larger national goal or purpose imposes a hierarchy on the threats and opportunities that we face and on the responses that we choose.

I. The goal

All right thinking Indians would agree that our goal is to transform India into a strong, prosperous and modern country, free of the disease, hunger, illiteracy and poverty that exist today. We Indians might differ among ourselves on how to achieve this, but not on the goal itself.

II. The Calculus

This overriding goal logically means that we should evaluate and rank opportunities and threats according to how they affect our ability to achieve the goal of transforming India. And this hierarchy should also determine how we deal with them, the effort and mind-space that we devote to dealing with challenges. In other words we would consider threats to our existence as a nation as matters of the highest priority, followed, in descending order, by those that would derail our quest, those that might affect our quest, and by threats to our well-being (but not to the quest itself).

III. The Hierarchy of Threats

What does this mean in terms of the hierarchy of threats that we face today?

1. **Internal threats:**

India is fortunate in that today, unlike the fifties, 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 sub-continent is better from our point of view. Such existential threats as we face are primarily internal. It is our internal polarisation and divisions which could threaten the existence of the Indian nation as we know it. Our hierarchy of threats should therefore begin and assign the highest priority to the present threats of **LWE**, and of **communal violence and polarisation**. After eight years of steady decline, the last two years have seen a considerable increase in communal violence in India, mostly in Northern and Eastern India.

India is undergoing unprecedented and rapid social and economic change. Urbanisation and social mobility create a new set of security challenges. As a state India has learnt or is learning how to deal with organised violence in our society, whether it is separatist violence, terrorism or militancy. Over the last decade the figures for incidents, civilians killed and security force casualties in J&K, the North-East, as a result of terrorism or as a result of Left Wing Extremism/Naxalism in India, have declined steadily.

But the same is not true of what may be called social violence, such as crimes against the person, gender related crime, and communal violence. Measured in terms of incidents and victims communal violence has risen each year in 2012, 2013 and 2014. We are a society in rapid change and the social equilibrium that we take for granted is under severe stress. The aspirations, anonymity and rootlessness that urbanisation and rapid social change create are loosening traditional social restraints that limited such violence in our society. When these fractures are exploited for short-term political purposes, polarising society to consolidate votes, our internal security is heading for real trouble.

Policing, at least traditional policing, or the type of policing we have adapted for LWE/terrorism/separatism, is not the first, best or preferred answer to the problems of an aspirational society in rapid change like ours. These internal threats could tear our society apart and pose an existential threat as they feed into separatist and other divisive ideologies and should rank highest in our hierarchy of threats.

2. External Challenges:

China

This is not to say that there are no external challenges to our security. **China**, in itself, could derail our quest.

First the good news. We have kept the peace and have improved our capabilities and position on the India-China border. Of course we have a long way to go to match the Chinese in terms of military capability or infrastructure on the border. But we do not need to do so. We need to be able, through asymmetric, indirect or direct means to cause him embarrassment, to stop or pause him, politically and militarily. We can do that. And we have the beginnings of nuclear deterrence against China today.

We have brought negotiations on the boundary to the point where it awaits acts of political will on both sides to find a settlement.

China is now our largest trading partner in goods and seeks to invest and use her excess capacity by manufacturing in India and investing in India's infrastructure. She is also keen to involve us in connectivity, such as the BCIM Corridor and is ready to open up undisputed portions of our border to trade and travel. There are economic opportunities here for us, such as the 96 million Chinese who travelled abroad last year as a potential source of tourists to India.

For several reasons China presently finds it convenient to work with us internationally, even in Nepal and Bangladesh in the aftermath of their elections. We compete with China in the periphery we share, and in the world. At the same time we cooperate where we can. Maritime security is probably the best example of this bivalent relationship.

The bad news is that in strategic terms the gap between China and India is growing and could continue to grow in the near future. I personally think this will not continue for long, because internal stresses in China are leading to the increasing concentration of power in Xi Jinping's hands, where Xi is going for broke. One consequence of internal stress is that China will be tempted into a much more assertive foreign posture, in the making of which the PLA will play a greater role, as we already see in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Tactically, their present preoccupation with Japan, the US and Vietnam has so far led them to seek to maintain the even keel of our bilateral relationship. We owe some of our friends

to China's behaviour. The prospect, to my mind, is of growing internal stresses in China resulting in an increasingly cranky China, touchy and quick to react abroad, insisting on her rights as she sees them. This will not be easy to deal with.

The policy answer to China is to engage with her and with others on her periphery, building up our own strength, countervailing influences, and incentives to moderate Chinese behaviour.

We are today dealing with a China whose accumulation of power is making even the US think twice about confronting her. In 2007 the US economy was four times the size of China's. By 2012 it was twice its size. The balance of economic and political power has shifted. The balance of military power is also shifting as China's area and access denial strategy takes hold in her vicinity. And when you consider that China defines her territorial and maritime disputes as core interests while they are not so for the US, the balance of interests is also in China's favour — she would be ready to pay a price to get her way which the US and other extra-regional powers would not.

Our approach has been to engage, cooperate and compete with China. We both compete and cooperate in the periphery that we share, and in the world. At the same time we cooperate where we can. Maritime security is probably the best example of this bivalent relationship, where China has responded by agreeing to a maritime security dialogue. We have a common interest in keeping open the sea lanes carrying our energy imports and our trade. But within that larger interest there is the fact that China is building infrastructure, increasing PLA Navy reach, and being politically assertive, leading to reactions in her periphery.

We are working on the various means of counterbalancing the rise of China — becoming a net provider of security in our neighbourhood, finding countervailing powers, and working with the potential eternal balancer to the rise of China, and engaging China. We do so conscious that none of these offers a complete solution to the security implications for India of China's rise, unless they buttress a strong domestic effort to build up our own strength and capabilities.

Ultimately it is the internal balancing that we achieve that is the critical and determining factor in our response to the rise of China, that could ensure that China's rise remains peaceful so far as we are concerned. **The long term answer is to bridge the power gap between India and China.** If any country can do so it is India. **In the meantime we need to build the asymmetric capabilities** that

ensure that China does not obstruct or distract us from India's transformation into a modern power.

This is why we **have done more in the last ten years** to strengthen and build border infrastructure, military preparedness, and our offsetting and asymmetric capabilities than in any decade since independence. These have included: the first military raisings on the India-China border since the sixties of two mountain divisions and now a mountain strike corps; the reactivation of 19 Advance Landing Grounds in the China border; the 72 CSG and GS roads begun in 2005; the creation of imint and techint capabilities including drones; and, the induction of Su-30s and heavy lift aircraft into the North-East. We have improved and tasked our intelligence capabilities and have a survivable deterrent in place.

Our **goal is not necessarily to match the Chinese** PLA weapon for weapon, acquisition for acquisition, or dollar for dollar. It should be to convince him that any misadventure would result in embarrassment and pain to him and frustrate his political goals. This requires asymmetric actions and capabilities on our side. The deterrence that maritime strength gives us is not directly relevant to handling the situation on the long, disputed India-China boundary but it is supremely necessary to defend our growing maritime interests when the Chinese are heading towards basing and other arrangements in Gwadar and the Gulf. To my mind the nature of the Chinese challenge, which is political, military, economic and psychological at the same time, requires a comprehensive response from us, using and coordinating all elements of national power, or, jointness in the true sense of the word, not just between the three services but between the civilian, intelligence and armed forces and agencies, working to clear political goals.

Pakistan and Terrorism

Elements in **Pakistan** and the **cross-border terrorism** they sponsor could also derail our quest if we let them. **Pakistan's secular decline into incoherence** means that the threats she poses us are really determined not by the government of Pakistan but by diverse Pakistani armed groups (jehadi tanzeems or the Pakistan Army), or by her allies (including the USA and China) who find her useful and arm, train and encourage these groups. We will have to deal with these irrespective of what we do with the Pakistan government. And we are clearly learning from experience.

There is a strange paradox at work on terrorism. As we in India get better at dealing with it, terrorism is enjoying a significant resurgence globally, boosted by wars and

political uncertainties in West Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and by weakening international will, after the 2008 economic crisis, to engage with the causes of terrorism.

In India, the number of victims of terrorism has steadily declined, year on year, over the last decade. The figures are available on the MHA website. The years when Pakistan threw every thing it could at us in terms of terrorists in J&K and in the rest of India, are precisely the years when India was most successful in transforming herself. We have had several successes in operations in the last few years against the LeT and Indian Mujahideen, both strongly supported and created by the Pakistan Army and ISI.

On the other hand, there is no question that **global conditions are more propitious than ever for jihadi terrorist groups**, whether it is LeT working in the Rohingya refugee camps in southern Thailand, or Al Nusra and ISIS in Syria and Iraq, or conditions in Pakistan which have empowered the TTP politically and militarily. The lethality of new technologies, and the effect of ICT in empowering small groups and individuals, has made the terrorist's life easier, and increased his reach. He uses ICT to communicate, recruit, spread propaganda, for his finances, and in several other ways.

These factors will affect the evolution of terrorism in India, where we now see self radicalised middle class youth joining these organisations. Fortunately, we are getting better counter-terrorism cooperation than ever from regimes in West Asia, each of which now see some of these groups as a threat to themselves. But ultimately there are limits to what diplomacy can do for counter-terrorism. We will have to continue to hone our own effort and rely on our own intelligence based operations.

All in all, I am not entirely convinced that terrorism or Pakistan is a strategic threat to India of the same order as our internal security or the rise of China. Terrorism depends on the psychology of its victims for success, rather than on the absolute damage it actually causes. It is therefore important that we build our defences against terrorism in the public mind and do not allow the terrorists to distract us from the real work of the security *apparatus* of the state. The discontents that enable the Naxalites and other Left Wing Extremist groups to challenge the writ of the state, the absence of community policing, cyber security, and the need to build a twenty-first century army capable of meeting today's threats must figure much higher in our security calculus.

3. Indirect Threats

Energy Security

The third category of challenges is those that may affect our quest unless we are successful in handling them properly. In this category I would list **energy security** as the most important.

For the first time since the late fifties we have managed in ten years to create the industrial capacity in India to actually meet our power demand internally. However, we rely on the outside world for hydrocarbon and fossil fuel to feed that capacity. Apart from the short term bonanza of falling oil prices, changes in world energy supply, particularly in natural gas and shale oil and gas, create an opportunity for India to tie up long term supply arrangements at favourable terms and secure access. The time to move is now, taking risks, when the entire global energy market is changing. On the other hand, if we miss the opportunity, lack of energy could be the greatest threat or limitation on our ability to transform India.

Nuclear Weapons

The other challenge is nuclear weapons.

You are familiar with our nuclear doctrine, of how we became a declared nuclear weapon state in 1998, and of why we did so. We were in a situation where two of our neighbours with whom we had fought wars were already armed with nuclear weapons. We did so in the face of the opposition of the major powers and despite several misgivings within our own society, after twenty four years of nuclear sanctions after Pokhran-I. We were threatened with nuclear weapons at least thrice before 1998, twice by Pakistan and once implicitly by the US nuclear armed aircraft carrier Enterprise during the 1971 war.

It was always clear to us that nuclear weapons, because of the scale and duration of the destruction they cause, were primarily political weapons, the currency of power in the nuclear age, rather than effective war fighting weapons. We therefore declared after our 1998 tests that our weapons were to prevent nuclear threat and blackmail, and that we would not be the first to use nuclear weapons against other states. If, however, anyone dared to use nuclear weapons against us, we would assuredly retaliate massively and inflict unacceptable damage on the adversary. This is our doctrine of credible minimum deterrence. Assured retaliation combined with NFU also mean that it is not the number of our weapons or of our adversary

that matter but our ability to inflict unacceptable damage in a retaliatory strike. That is what determines our nuclear weapons posture.

There has been some debate on whether this **No-First-Use (NFU)** commitment adds to or detracts from deterrence. My view, and that of successive Indian governments who have reviewed the question repeatedly since 1998, is that it enhances our deterrence. It is a useful commitment to make if we are to avoid wasting time and effort on a nuclear arms race, such as that between the US and Soviet Union, producing thousands of nuclear weapons and missiles, an arms race which contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In our geography, the use of nuclear weapons as weapons of war is hardly useful militarily. For nine months of the year prevailing winds on the India-Pakistan border are westerly, and population densities guarantee that there is no distinction in effect and practice between the use of tactical or strategic nuclear weapons in the India-Pakistan context. (Notice that the Pakistan Army started talking of developing and using tactical nuclear weapons in response to our alleged Cold Start only when there was a real risk of the Pak Army losing their relevance with Musharraf seeming close to settling Kashmir and taking some actions against the *jehadis*.)

Since our doctrine is based on NFU, our posture and nuclear arsenal have to survive a first strike by an enemy. Hence our decision to go in for a triad of delivery systems, by land, sea and air. Once our SSBN Arihant is fully commissioned the triad will be fully in place. Today, we have effective deterrence against both China and Pakistan. This has been a huge, and largely secret, effort, and has been achieved by us faster than any other weapon state. We are sometimes accused of excessive secrecy from our own people and scholars. That is because the purpose of the nuclear weapons programme is to deter our adversaries, not our own people or scholars. And our adversaries will believe what they think they have discovered and ferreted out, not what we say in public. [As PVNR told me in 1995 when I said that we could get water and irrigation technology free from Israel, “No one values what he gets for free. Make the states pay for it.” He was right. Today it is those states which paid for drip irrigation, like Maharashtra and Rajasthan which are using it, while those that got it free like Bihar are not.]

There has also been some criticism that while Pakistan uses her nuclear weapons to deter India and to carry out “nuclear enabled terrorism”, India has surrendered her conventional military advantages over Pakistan by going nuclear in 1998. This is false. We are capable of dealing with each portion of the spectrum of violence and conflict, and have superiorities in each — whether sub-conventional, conventional, nuclear, or new domains like cyber. Our nuclear weapons are meant

to deter nuclear weapons. To expect them to deter terrorist attacks is illogical and foolish. Each portion of the spectrum must be dominated and shaped by us independently. Those are the capabilities we build and work on. As Kargil showed, Pakistan miscalculated when it thought in 1999, one year after the tests, that its nuclear weapons would deter India from responding militarily to their intrusion and would bring India and the world to the negotiating table. Neither expectation was fulfilled. Pakistan is still debating what went wrong and who was responsible for the Kargil mistake.

Going forward, the real dangers of nuclear proliferation around us and globally, whether from Iran or from others like Myanmar, (who were tempted when isolated), are less than those from weak political and civilian control over Pakistani nuclear weapons. For terrorists to use and manage nuclear weapons is a complex problem. More likely and serious is an insider threat, such as, say, a rogue Pak Air Force pilot deciding to take the law into his own hands. If the Pakistan Army do actually develop and deploy tactical nuclear weapons, (as they wish us and the world to believe), command and control over the only militarily controlled nuclear weapons programme in the world will be even more tenuous than it is today.

So please do not be misled by motivated and sometimes ignorant voices, Indian or foreign, which seek to question the effectiveness of our nuclear weapons programme and our deterrent. The programme is in good shape and **our deterrent is strong.**

Cyber Security and the Global Commons

And then there are threats to our well being, which are not necessarily threats to our quest to modernise India, such as **cyber threats**, and attempts by any one power to control the **global commons** like the high seas and outer space.

The ubiquitous mobile is an instrument of social mobilisation and protest, as Arab Spring and AAP have shown. We saw the effects of social media in summer 2012 when rumour and lies drove tens of thousands of North-Easterners home from Karnataka and Maharashtra, and fed violence in the Bodo areas. Terrorist groups now use the internet to recruit, for communication, and even (with less success so far) as a weapon.

Technology has created new domains of contention such as cyber space. What we assumed were global commons, in the oceans, outer space, cyber space, and, in some respects, even air space, are now contested. Cyber space and outer space

now see military contention, and are used for espionage and both conventional and sub conventional warfare.

India is well placed to take advantage of the new situation in new domains of contention and to exploit risks and opportunities in cyber space. The ICT revolution plays to our strengths. We have the human talent and operate well in the small groups and disaggregated manner that these domains require. As revolutions in military affairs and circumstances take us away from the era of mass industrial warfare to net centric and small group counter terrorism and counter insurgency, and to small quick applications of force for limited political purposes, the lessons that we in India have had to learn in the last sixty years are increasingly relevant.

IV. Our responses

In dealing with this hierarchy of threats successive governments of India, whatever their political complexion, have followed a **three-fold strategy**:

- We rely on our own effort to the extent that we can for traditional, hard security issues of military defence, maintaining territorial integrity and so on. (This is logical. By choosing not to join any alliances we recognised that no one else will fight for our survival or territorial integrity, as Pakistan discovered in 1965 and 1971.)
- Secondly, we cooperate with others, like the US, to deal with non-traditional security threats, most of which are transnational, (like cyber security, energy security and so on). We know the limits of this cooperation, particularly on issues like cross-border terrorism. For example, such intelligence sharing as occurred about the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks took place after the event rather than before even though it was available with our partners. But some cooperation is still better than none.
- Thirdly, we depend on the international order for global public goods such as freedom of navigation on the high seas, an open international trading system, the internet, and so on. This is still primarily a Western, US led, order. While we recognise its iniquities and seek to improve it, India has also been the greatest beneficiary of the two post-Cold War decades of an open international trading and investment order, second only to China.

In overall terms this three-fold strategy has worked, enabling us to concentrate our effort on developing and changing India rather than being sucked into costly foreign entanglements either on our own or as part of any alliance systems. This is one reason why India has been one of the fastest growing developing countries over the last thirty years, growing at over 6 percent, and averaging over 8% GDP growth in the first decade of this century.

The choice between outside involvement and staying non-aligned was most stark in 2001 and 2003 when the NDA government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee had to choose whether to participate militarily in the coalition effort in Afghanistan and then Iraq. At that time there was an overwhelming body of professional military and political opinion in the country in favour of Indian military participation. In retrospect, however, seeing how those wars have gone, Vajpayee's decision not to go in was a wise one.

Which brings me to my main point. Central to our success in transforming India will be our ability to stay calm, understand the security situation around us, and to know the tools available to us to deal with them — in other words, **a healthy dose of realism**. Intelligence is critical, as is our ability to think through these issues. This is why we need to improve the quality of our training not just in our own professions and disciplines but also of the larger national security calculus.

Secondly, it is important that we realise how each of us, — soldier, diplomat, scholar, or businessman, — fits into that national security calculus. This is particularly so for national security professionals like us. That is why the design and running of institutions like yours and of new institutions like the National Defence University are so important. (Sadly my experience of dealing with the NDU proposal in government suggested that instead of realising its potential, each service and bureaucracy saw it as an opportunity to grab jobs for the boys rather than to create an institution of global excellence.)

Only by looking at the broader national security calculus will we be able to **take the holistic view of national security issues** that today's interconnected and globalised world requires of us as a state. It is because we realised this need after Kargil that the National Security Council was set up with its own Secretariat, to coordinate and advise the highest levels of government on cross cutting and strategic issues of national security. 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 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, and so on in great detail, considering our options and actions.

As we move forward, we will need to build on the basis that we have established, learn from experience, and increase integration across professions that is only now beginning in our system. If we do so, I am confident that we would have made a major contribution to the transformation of India into a strong, prosperous and modern country.