

Asian Security Challenges

(Speaking Notes)

(DPG and MIT, 10 January 2011)

S. Menon

Introduction

There is no shortage of security challenges in Asia. Asia, I suppose, is what would be called a target rich environment. This is natural in a region where the balance of power is changing so fast.

Of the multiple choices that present themselves, I have chosen what appear from Delhi to constitute the 'Big Three' challenges to Asian security. I have left out those, like cyber security, which are not unique to Asia, and also those that are so particular in their Asian manifestation that they do not have impact outside Asia.

The three Asian security challenges that do have global impact are: the cluster of security issues around Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran-Central Asia; the effects on security of the rise of China and Asia as a whole; and, maritime security in the Asia-Pacific, from Hormuz to the western Pacific.

1. Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran-Central Asia

The last four decades have seen a struggle in this belt against the forces of religious extremism, allied with terrorism and political opportunism. Despite opportunistic attempts by great and local powers to use the forces of religious extremism and terrorism for their own political ends, (whether to defeat superpower rivals or to promote local regional agendas), the struggle has continued. The struggle has had a double impact: firstly, on the 1/5th of global population, mostly Muslim, in Central Asia, West Asia and North Africa; and, secondly, on global energy security through its effects on

oil supplies. The longer term significance of this three decade old struggle is sometimes ignored in the West when Western fatigue with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is so great. For instance, we now see talk of various forms of power sharing (in the name of “reconciliation”) with the Taliban in Afghanistan. There is no longer a serious international effort to encourage Pakistan’s evolution into a moderate, democratic and normal state.

From an Indian point of view, after an unprecedented attempt to remake India-Pakistan relations and resolve all issues including J&K between 2004 and 2007, the key determinant is the internal political dynamic in Pakistan. This is what stalled our efforts in 2004-7, and, after a short while, caused them to regress. This is also what creates and supports the terrorist sanctuaries in Pakistan which make Afghanistan’s problems so hard to resolve and which breed the cross border terrorism, like the Mumbai attacks, which is the major obstacle to India-Pakistan normalization. While India has shown some capacity to learn from our experience, in terms of dealing with the mechanics of counter-terrorism, the larger dilemma of dealing with Pakistan remains.

India’s security dilemma with Pakistan arises from secular trend and the nature of Pakistan’s internal decline. Politically these are expressed in the existence of multiple power centres, power divorced from responsibility, and legitimacy issues in Pakistan. As Pakistan’s capacity to function as a normal state declines, its use of asymmetric and illegitimate means against India grows. As Pakistan’s internal condition deteriorates, the threats to India from terrorism, mass migration, radicalisation and other side effects grow. [We are sometimes accused of meddling in Baluchistan and Pakistan’s troubles are routinely ascribed to us by some Pakistanis. Frankly, why murder someone who is committing suicide?] Therefore a peaceful, moderate and stable Pakistan is in India’s interest.

The legitimacy issue is real, and not only in Pakistan. We have in our neighbourhood two regimes who seek to bolster regime legitimacy by the possession or quest for nuclear weapons. Both use nuclear weapons to pre-

empt regime change. In Pakistan's case, these weapons have already proliferated, and they pose a continuing risk of nuclear material or weapons falling into the hands of non-state actors or terrorists.

2. The Rise of China and Asia

There is no question that the rise of China is the major geopolitical fact of our times. What China has achieved in terms of the rapid accretion of power and wealth in the last three decades has never been done so fast in history by any other rising power. That rise of China has been accelerated by the world economic crisis since 2008, particularly the crisis of confidence in the Western developed world.

But, stupendous as the Chinese achievement is, we must remember that it is qualified by several factors, and that these constraints may explain in part the present edginess in China's behaviour:

- China is not the only rising power. In Asia itself, on China's immediate periphery, other powers like South Korea, Indonesia and India are also developing rapidly. We should therefore probably speak of the rise of China and Asia.
- China is rising in a very crowded environment, where two and a half established major powers, the USA, Russia and Japan, are already present and have interests that are not always congruent with China's. We already see the classical responses to the rapid rise of a major power in terms of internal and external balancing. Internal balancing is evident in increasing defence budgets throughout the region, particularly in ASEAN, over the last two decades. External balancing is evident in the coming together of traditionally antagonistic peripheral powers, such as South Korea and Japan or Vietnam and the USA.
- China's geography is not as favourable as that of some other powers in history. As a continental power surrounded by several large powers China is not an independent or fixed geographical unit in history. As a relatively resource poor power, and as a power that lacks ideological or

cultural attraction, China is not as geographically well placed as previous hegemon or dominant powers like Britain or the USA were when they rose. Think of her present geographical situation: facing the world's greatest naval armada within her continental shelf. China's fears of encirclement have a basis in geography and are real. She acts on them. (As Shamir used to say, "Even paranoids have real enemies".)

- China also still faces formidable internal challenges and questions: will she grow old before she grows rich; will she sustain economic growth despite the structural, social and political changes that it has caused; can regime stability be maintained in a political autocracy where legitimacy is being redefined; and so on.

This is not to say that the relative rise of China will not continue in the medium term. But straight line extrapolations have never worked in history. (Japan's case in the eighties proved this truth once again.) This is just to say that the issues that we are likely to face in dealing with the rise of China will be different from those that we see in historical analogies of rising powers in the past. For the present Asia and the world have yet to work out a security architecture that accommodates the rise of China and Asia and the legitimate interests of all the countries concerned without reducing them to a zero sum game. Our preference is that the new architecture be open, inclusive, and flexible. But this still is a work in progress.

Let me just outline some of the security issues that arise for India from the rise of China:

- Contested peripheries: To a considerable extent, India's periphery is also China's periphery. As each of us develops and therefore expands our definition and uses of the periphery, we rub up against one another. Whether in Myanmar or Pakistan or Central Asia and Afghanistan, our interests are growing exponentially, and we need to find a new equilibrium. Our concerns about China's possible diversion or use of trans-border rivers in Tibet are new, and a result of China's changed capabilities. Today China is actively considering building railways and ports in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar. If these

result in a healthy competition to build up infrastructure, which can then be used by all in the region, we will avoid the zero-sum outcomes that traditional geopolitics foresees.

- The Indian Subcontinent: Our immediate neighbours in the subcontinent have a great opportunity of large neighbours who are growing rapidly, despite also facing fundamental challenges to their internal political order. India and China are the rising tide that raises all boats. If Nepal survived twelve years of insurgency and five years of political chaos thereafter with a positive growth rate, it was because it is economically linked to a growing India through one of the most liberal free trade arrangements in the world. This is also true of Sri Lanka's growth rate of around 4-5% during twenty-three years of civil war. The simple solution to Pakistan's economic woes would be for her to open her economy to India's.

To sum up, the rise of Asia/China has created both opportunities and challenges, but these are new and different from what we faced before.

The Indian response to the rise of Asia has been a renewed engagement with Japan and ASEAN through the "Look East policy, free trade arrangements, and active participation in new institutional arrangements like the East Asia Summit and the expanded Asian Defence Ministers Meeting. We work with others for an open, flexible, balanced and inclusive security architecture in the Asia-Pacific, rather than cutting it up into smaller sub-regions or groupings that ignore the reach of power and technology in today's interdependent world.

Evolving the Indian response to China's rise has been complicated by previous bilateral disputes like the boundary question. Fortunately, since we began a policy of engagement with China in 1988, we have both shown a capacity to manage disputes and difficult issues, while building mutual stakes in the relationship. These stakes are today largely economic. With around US\$ 60 billion total two way trade last year, China is now India's largest trading partner in goods. There is also increasing congruence in Indian and Chinese

approaches to certain global issues such as climate change, energy security and food security. We now face new problems brought on by our success. There are structural issues arising in our economic relationship, the beginnings of which are reflected in our trade imbalance. We have therefore set up a Strategic Economic Dialogue with China during Premier Wen Jiabao's visit last month.

For the present, both India and China seem to be concentrating on their domestic transformations and therefore avoiding entanglements with each other. So long as they continue to do so, one might expect the present trajectory of relations to continue, simultaneously combining elements of competition with cooperation.

3. Maritime Security in the Asia-Pacific

Maritime security in the Asia-Pacific is critical to the future growth of Asia, the driver of the world economy. The rising geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean, the third largest ocean in the world, is part of this phenomenon. The Indian Ocean is vital to India's interests, not just for the trade and energy supplies that it carries. Even for cyberspace, 95% of internet traffic is at some stage carried under the sea by underwater cables.

But the Indian Ocean is also vital to China, Japan and other powers too. Today 90% of global commerce and 65% of all oil travels by sea. Of this half the world's container traffic and 70% of the total traffic of petroleum products is accounted for by the Indian Ocean.

Both India and China are at an energy intensive phase of our development. Between 1990 and 2003, oil consumption in India and China grew by 7% on average, against 0.8% in the rest of the world. By 2050 India could be the largest importer of oil in the world. Thus both India and China face a "Hormuz dilemma". For China this is compounded by a "Malacca dilemma".

There is therefore a common interest in freedom of navigation and maritime security not only in the Indian Ocean but in the waters to which it is a

highway, all the way to the Pacific. A beginning has been made by India and China in fighting piracy off the Somali coast within a larger international effort.

[The rising significance of the Indian Ocean, taken with the secular decline of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran has an interesting side effect. It enables India to compensate for the strategic disadvantages imposed by Partition in 1947, which cut India's access to the Eurasian landmass and Central Asia, by concentrating her strategic effort in a maritime domain of increasing global significance.]

Conclusion

I suppose that one could have chosen a different set of Asian security challenges. But, as I said, these are the ones that are in Asia and have global impact, unlike, say, cyber security or technology security, or developments in India's smaller neighbours.

For the same reasons, these are also three issues on which there are great power interests involved, with differing degrees of congruence or similarity with India's interests and approach. If one were to compare Indian interests in these issues with those of the US or the West in general, the degree of congruence increases with each of these issues. On Pakistan we find it hard to understand why, with unprecedented leverage in Pakistan, the West is unable to close off the terror machine and finds it necessary to supply arms rather than public goods. For us in India there is no exit strategy or end-game in the struggle on our doorstep between religious extremism and moderation. On China, both India and the West have chosen engagement, each in their own way, simultaneously cooperating and competing with China. On maritime security, we have a strong common interest in keeping trade and energy flowing from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. India will work with friends, partners and other powers as and where we find congruence or similarity with India's interests.