



In the current uncertain international system, India requires a foreign policy approach nimble enough to tackle the unprecedented. It also needs to be forceful enough to realize India's growing ambition to be considered a significant player in the world. CPR faculty offers a series of practicable measures for India to play a meaningful role in upholding the world order; ensure its national security; bring about institutional reforms necessary to realize its international ambition; find mutually-beneficial grounds for cooperation with China and develop a more decentralized framework for subregional cooperation within South Asia.



India's Foreign Policy in an Uncertain World

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The foremost foreign policy challenge for the incoming government will be to adapt to a changing world order. Even as Western dominance has diminished, no power has emerged that is capable of inheriting its mantle. Therefore, the current phase of disruption and altered relations among states is likely to continue. It is also becoming clear that the US and China are moving from competition to confrontation. Balancing relations with these two countries will become more difficult and India will have to contend with pressures to join one camp or another. Against this geopolitical backdrop, the new government will have to fashion a foreign policy that offers opportunities for expanding India's strategic space even as it seeks to tackle increasingly complex challenges. Some of these are discussed below.

Challenges, Old and New

While dealing with China has always remained one of India's biggest foreign policy challenges, today the asymmetry in economic and military capabilities between the two Asian giants is expanding rather than shrinking. Managing relations with China has involved confronting it whenever Indian interests are threatened but also being willing to work together where interests are convergent. This has served India well and may continue to be the template for the foreseeable future. Currently China has been presenting a more benign and accommodating face towards India. This is the result of pressures it is feeling from the US, not only on trade but also in the realm of security. While China's current stance is tactical, India should take advantage of this window to advance

its interests wherever possible but without losing sight of the fact that the long-term challenge is to narrow the power gap with its northern neighbour. If the asymmetry continues to grow this will inevitably constrict India's room for manoeuvre.

Moreover, despite the Middle Kingdom's changed approach, New Delhi will continue to face challenges from it in at least a few aspects of foreign policy. India's subcontinental neighbourhood is the most critical for its national security, and China's presence and activism threatens India's dominant position. India is unable to match the resources China is able to deploy in the countries of the region. This trend is unlikely to change even if China adopts a relatively friendly posture towards India.

Pakistan is unlikely to abandon its use of cross-border terrorism as an instrument of state policy though there may be tactical remissions. Despite the Indian government adopting a more aggressive retaliatory policy recently, it is debatable whether this has changed Islamabad's strategic calculus.

The Gulf and West Asia remain important for India's energy security, for the welfare of the six million Indians who live and work there, and because sectarian conflict in the region can have spillover effects on the fragile multi-religious fabric of the Indian state. The new government will have to deal with the ratcheting up of sanctions against Iran by the US. India may have to cut its imports from Iran which is likely to adversely affect its relations with Iran. This may have severe repercussions: Iran is important to India not only for meeting its energy needs but, more importantly, because of the stakes involved in India's development of the Chahbahar port on the Iranian coast and the Northern highway into Afghanistan and Central Asia from it. Iran will also play an important role in Afghanistan where a political transition seems inevitable with the Taliban regaining a prominent political role. For the new government both Iran and Afghanistan will be key challenges.

Recommendations

1. Neighbourhood First: Against this background, the new government must add substance and energy to the "neighbourhood first" policy. Fresh emphasis must be laid on regular political level engagement and on expanding the density of economic and trade relations with neighbours. Proximity is a key asset in promoting economic relations but they also require investment in both physical connectivity and the smooth and speedy passage of goods and peoples across borders. India is the transit country for all its neighbours and its transport infrastructure is more than adequate to handle transit traffic from one end of the subcontinent to the other. It will gain more political leverage vis-à-vis its neighbours by becoming the transit country of choice for them rather than by restricting access. India's economic cooperation programmes in its neighbouring countries do not match China's, but they are significant. The Achilles heel is poor delivery on those commitments compared to China. The new government should set up an autonomous Economic Cooperation Agency to manage all its economic assistance programmes in foreign countries, including lines of credit, capacity building and project assistance. While such a proposal has been on the table for a few years now, without any action, the changed South Asian dynamic (with China rapidly expanding its footprint) necessitates its reconsideration on an urgent basis.

2. Pakistan: Relations with Pakistan remain hostage to its addiction to cross-border terrorism. Repeated efforts to improve relations with Pakistan have been stalled due to terrorist attacks inflicted on India by terrorist groups aided and abetted by Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies. As long as Pakistan enjoys a strong Chinese shield and the US seeks Pakistani support for its withdrawal from Afghanistan, India's efforts to isolate Pakistan internationally will have only limited success. On the other hand, rising tensions between India and Pakistan bring back the hyphenation between the

two countries and invite meddling by outside powers. The new government must find a way to bring about relative normalcy in relations with Pakistan without giving up the focus on terrorism. There are signs that Pakistan is uncomfortable with its heavy, almost singular dependence on China. It may be ready to balance this dependence through a measured improvement of relations with India. The opportunity of a summit with Imran Khan at the forthcoming Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit may provide an opportunity to test this proposition.

3. China: For the foreseeable future, India is not in a position to single-handedly check rising Chinese power and influence. Therefore, it should seek to be part of a coalition of major powers which share its concerns about China. The new government must continue to strengthen relations with the US, Japan, Australia and South East Asia as part of countervailing and constraining Chinese power. India has been cautious about its role in the Quad, which is a grouping of the US, Japan, Australia and India, and serves as a forum for security consultations and cooperation. The new government should embrace a more significant role for the Quad while ensuring it remains below the threshold of a full-fledged military alliance. Australia should be invited to the next round of the Malabar Naval Exercise, which currently includes the US, Japan and India.

4. Engaging the World: Deepening relations with Europe – particularly with Germany, which is now the most powerful country in the continent – must continue to be high on India's foreign policy agenda even though Europe has been disappointingly unable to prevent the ongoing fragmentation of the European Union. Africa and Latin America will remain regions of interest, both for their economic potential and for imparting a global reach to India's foreign policy.

5. Russia: During the past few years India's relations with Russia have weakened despite regular summit

level meetings. There may be a perception that Russia is irrevocably committed to its virtual alliance with China. However, Russia continues to be a major power and is not about to become a subordinate ally of China. Central Asia and Eastern Europe, which it regards as its near neighbourhood, are precisely the areas where China's influence is expanding most visibly; this cannot but be a matter of concern to Russia. Furthermore, Russia remains a crucial source of high technology weaponry and military equipment, treating India as a privileged partner. The new government must review its Russia policy and endeavour to expand engagement with all levels of the Russian state.

6. India-US Relations: Despite the unpredictability of the Trump administration, India-US relations have been consolidated. This is reflected most visibly in defence and counter-terrorism cooperation. The challenge for the new government will be in managing the economic/trade pillar of the relationship, which has become a contested space over the years. India has been a major beneficiary of globalization. Its economy has seen rapid growth resulting from a more open trade and investment regime. The temptation to walk back from this must be resisted because this will push India towards the margins of the global economy, reduce its political leverage, and put paid to any prospect of catching up with China.

7. Strengthening MEA: Compared to other major countries of the world, India has an almost skeletal foreign service. In order to sustain foreign policy and live up to its ambitions of playing an active global role, India will need to significantly expand its foreign service corps. Moreover, the budget of the Ministry of External Affairs continues to be paltry compared to other ministries despite the critical role it plays in managing all aspects of India's external relations. It is imperative that sufficient resources are made available to the ministry to enable it to deliver on its critical mandate in a globalized world.



Time for Disruptive Foreign and National Security Policies

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Several mega-trends are visible in international affairs on the cusp of the third decade of the 21st century. After a trillion dollars spent on the 18-year old war with the Taliban in Afghanistan following a similar amount expended in Iraq and Syria, the US is drained of its wealth, stamina and will for military confrontations of any kind. A reactive and retreating America under President Donald Trump, besides generating unprecedented levels of uncertainty and anxiety, has accentuated the conditions of unusual flux in the international system. Second, with the old certainties gone, traditional alliances (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), trading regimes (Trans-Pacific Partnership), schemes of regional peace (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and technology and supplier cartels (Missile Technology Control Regime, Nuclear Suppliers Group, et al.) are all alike in disarray; their concerns are now matters of contestation with China staking claim to the pole position vacated by the US. And finally, these developments are compelling major countries to try to protect themselves the best they can by handling things on their own, in

coalition with other similarly encumbered nations, and by exploring new security/military cooperation agreements. There is particular urgency in Asia to blunt China's hegemonic ambitions and preclude its domination from taking root.

State of Play

Unfortunately India finds itself on the wrong side of these trends in the main. This is because it has, in the new millennium, accelerated its efforts to join the very same nonproliferation regimes and cartels that had victimized it all along. Worse, by sidling up to the US and virtually outsourcing its strategic security to Washington, India's historical role as prime balancer in the international balance-of-power set-up – courtesy its hoary policies of nonalignment and its latter-day avatar, strategic autonomy – has been imperiled. This is at a time when doubts about the US commitment to other countries' security have increased along with the apprehensions of allies and friends. With security made a transactional commodity by the Trump

administration, treaty alliances have been weakened, unsettling West European and Far Eastern states traditionally close to the US.¹ India's trend-bucking policy, in the event, will only cement the growing perceptions of the country as unable to perceive its own best interests and to act on them. Its downgrade, as a result of its more recent strategies, to the status of a subordinate state and subsidiary 'strategic partner' of the US means that India will have restricted strategic choices. Its foreign and military policies will therefore lose the freedom and latitude for diplomatic manoeuvre that they have always enjoyed.

Thus, the 2008 civilian nuclear deal, for all practical purposes, signed away India's sovereign right to resume underground testing and froze its nuclear arsenal at the sub-thermonuclear technology level (as the 1998 fusion test was a dud). Agreeing to the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement – the so-called 'foundational accords' – will, respectively, (i) permit the US to stage its military forces out of Indian bases and embroil India in its wars in the extended region, and (ii) to penetrate the most secret Indian communications grid, including the nuclear command and control network.

The Indian government's eagerness to cement the partnership is astonishing considering the trust deficit evident in a long history of duplicitous US behaviour and policies.² By clinging to a feckless and demanding US, India's profile as a fiercely independent state has taken a beating, distanced the country from old friends such as Russia (which is pivotal to balancing China and the US) and Iran (central to India's geostrategic concerns in the Gulf, Afghanistan and Central Asia), lost the nation its diplomatic elan, and has seriously hurt vital national interests.

Placating China is the other imprudent theme that Indian foreign policy has latched on to. It has mollycoddled its most dangerous adversary and comprehensively capable rival in Asia with giveaways – such as non-use of the Tibet and Taiwan cards, refraining from nuclear missile-arming states on China's periph-

ery as a tit-for-tat measure for Beijing's missile-arming of Pakistan, giving the Chinese manufacturing sector unhindered access to the Indian market through a massively unfair and unbalanced bilateral trade regime, etc. On the other hand, it has treated Pakistan, a weak flanking country, as a full-bore security threat when, realistically, it is only a military nuisance. This strategy is at the core of India's external troubles. It has practically incentivized Beijing to desist from peaceful resolution of the border dispute. It has also undermined India's credibility and credentials as 'security provider' to and strategic partner of a host of Asian littoral and offshore states fearful of an ambitious and aggressive China, as well as complicated the country's attempts at obtaining a tier of friendly nations around it as buffer.

A topsy-turvy threat perception has also meant a lopsided Indian military geared to handle Pakistan but incapable of defending well against China, even less of taking the fight to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) on land, air and distant seas; it is also laughably unprepared for future warfare featuring cyber pre-emption, remotely controlled armed drone swarms, robotic weapons systems managed by Artificial Intelligence, space-based weapons platforms, and clean micro-thermonuclear bombs. In the context, moreover, of a recessive foreign policy and a military that seems unable to wean itself away from imported armaments, it is almost as if the Indian government and armed services have given up on national security. This bewildering state of affairs is in urgent need of drastic overhaul and repair.

Geopolitical Vision and Strategy

Strong nations in the modern era have transitioned into great powers not only through expansive national visions, but also, more significantly, by pursuing policies disruptive of the prevailing order and multilateral regimes they had no hand in creating. India in the 21st century, on the other hand, seems content with the existing international system, measuring its foreign policy success in terms of entry gained or denied in congeries of international power (UN Security Council) and trade and technology cartels (Nuclear Suppliers

Group, Missile Technology Control Regime, etc.). In other words, it covets a place at the high table on terms set by other countries. It is not a mistake made by China or the US (or, to go back in history, Elizabethan England, Germany, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union and now Vladimir Putin's Russia). The Indian government is hampered by its mistaken belief that upholding the current regional and international correlation of forces and mechanisms of order, and stressing its soft 'civilizational' power, will make the country great.

India with its many infirmities is in no position to undertake system disruption by itself.³ For India to rise as the premier Asian challenger to China and as the other economic-political-military power node in the continent in the shortest possible time – which should be the legitimate national aim and vision – requires a subtle but telling approach. It needs a double-pronged strategy. One prong should stress absolutely reciprocal positions and policies. Thus, Beijing's insistence on 'One China, two systems' should be met with a 'One India' concept. So, the non-acceptance by Beijing of all of Jammu and Kashmir (including the Pakistan-occupied portion) as inalienably Indian territory should lead to formal recognition of and relations with Taiwan; it should also spark off New Delhi's world-wide advocacy of a free Tibet and a free East Turkestan, and of campaigns against 'cultural genocide' and 'ethnic cleansing' in Tibet and Xinjiang.⁴ And China's nuclear missile arming of Pakistan should, even if belatedly, trigger India's transferring strategic missiles to the states adjoining China on land and sea to ensure that, like India, China too is permanently strategically discomfited.

Hamstringing China should also involve meta-measures to carve out separate, loose and specifically anti-China security coalitions from the two important groups India is part of. BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) is an entity dominated economically and trade-wise by China. This is something that arouses wariness in the other three countries, which can be mobilized to form a smaller, informal, security-cooperation-minded coalition, BRIS (Brazil-Russia-India-South Africa). It will assist

in hedging Beijing's military options and affect China's economic expansiveness. Likewise, the US's importance to international security has to be whittled away. The Quadrilateral (US-Japan-India-Australia) proposed by Japan's Shinzo Abe to contain China in the Indo-Pacific is problematic owing to the centrality accorded the capricious US. India could propose a different set-up – a modified Quadrilateral or 'Mod Quad' with India, Japan, Australia and the leading littoral and offshore states of South East Asia, resisting China's over-lordship and disputing its claims in the South China Sea, with a cooperative Taiwan accorded, to start with, observer status. This would at once define the strategic geopolitical face-off between 'rimland Asia' and a hegemonic 'heartland' China, and reduce the uncertainty attending on America's security role (given that the US and China, owing to their close economic and trading links, are inseparable). Mod Quad will clarify the strategic calculi of member states, while encouraging the US to contribute militarily to the extent it wants to at any time but as an outside party.⁵

BRIS and Mod Quad are extremely practicable geopolitical solutions to share the cost, divide the danger, and generate synergy from the wide-spectrum capabilities, singly and together, of the member states in these two collectives. At the same time, they would stretch China's economic and military resources and minimize the consequences of ambiguity attending on the US role. These new arrangements adhere to the time-tested principle of vision shaping strategy but geography driving it, which makes for cohesion and sense of purpose. BRIS and Mod Quad will enable their member states to be less inhibited in cooperating with each other to deal with the overarching security threat posed by China, but without the intimidating presence of the US (which, typically, pursues its own interests at the expense of any coalition it is a part of). They will instill in the Indian government's external outlook an outcomes-oriented, competitive bent. It may result, for instance, in getting the east-west Ganga-Mekong connectivity project – as a rival to China's north-south Belt & Road Initiative – off the ground.⁶

But BRIS and Mod Quad leave Pakistan out of the reckoning. Pakistan is strong enough to be a spoiler and, in cahoots with China, pose a substantial problem. More than 70 years of tension and conflict with India haven't helped. For a lasting solution it is essential to break up the Pakistan-China nexus. The military palliative for terrorist provocations – air and land strikes – will only drive Islamabad deeper into China's camp. A Kashmir solution roughly along the lines negotiated with General Pervez Musharraf in 2007 that Prime Minister Imran Khan has said Pakistan will accept, is a reasonable end state to work towards.⁷ But India can lubricate such an offer with policies to co-opt Pakistan (along with India's other subcontinental neighbours) economically, by means of trade on concessional terms, and easy credit and access to the Indian market for manufactures and produce. This will obtain the goal of unitary economic space in the subcontinent and lay the foundations for a pacified South Asia – the first step in India's long overdue achievement of great power. Such actions should, however, be preceded by several unilateral and risk-averse military initiatives (outlined later) to establish India's peaceful bonafides and to denature the Indian threat that Pakistan perceives. Simultaneously, prioritizing strategic and expeditionary military capabilities against China and for distant operations jointly with friendly states in the Indian Ocean Region and in Southeast Asia will secure India's extended security perimeter.

National Security Policy Priorities

Lack of money has never been the hitch. Rather, the problem has been and continues to be the misuse of financial resources by the three armed services with their faulty expenditure priorities. Intent on equipping and sustaining inappropriate force structures geared to the lesser threat, they have squandered the colonial legacy of expeditionary and 'out of area operations'. Consequently, they have shrunk greatly in stature even as they have increased in size.⁸ Persisting with thinking of Pakistan as the main threat long after it credibly ceased to be one post the 1971 war has resulted in an Indian military able to fight only short-range, short-duration, small and inconclusive wars. Indeed, so geared

to territorial defence and tactical warfare are the Indian armed services that they have paid scant attention to strategic objectives and to the means of realizing them. The political leadership, for its part, has shown marked lack of interest, and failure to articulate a national vision and to outline a game plan and strategy. It has chosen the easy way of relying on the armed services professionally to do the right thing by proffering the right advice – which they haven't.

Breaking the Pakistan-China nexus is an imperative. It requires the Indian government to first seed a conducive political milieu by making certain safe unilateral military moves. What the Pakistan Army most fears is India's three Strike Corps; if this 'threat' is denatured, a milieu with enormous peaceful potential can be created. Considering the nuclear overhang and zero probability of the Indian government ever ordering a war of annihilation – which is the only time when these armoured and mechanized formations will fight full tilt – three corps are way in excess of need. They can be reconstituted and the resources shifted to form a single composite corps adequate for any conceivable Pakistan contingency. The rest of the heavily armoured units can be converted to airborne cavalry, and to light tanks with engines optimized for high-altitude conditions; three offensive mountain corps can thereby be equipped to take the fight to the PLA on the Tibetan Plateau. The nuclear backdrop can likewise be changed for the better by India removing its short-range nuclear missiles from forward deployment on the western border and perhaps even getting rid of them altogether, because hinterland-based missiles can reach Pakistani targets with ease. These two moves made without demanding matching responses will cost India little in terms of security, establish a modicum of trust, persuade Pakistan of India's goodwill, and confirm China as the Indian military's primary concern. It will hasten normalcy in bilateral relations.

Tackling China at a time when it is widening the gap with India in all respects necessitates India using the playbook the Chinese successfully used against the US, that Pakistan has used against India, and North Korea against America, when facing an adversary with

a marked conventional military edge. It means revising the nuclear doctrine to emphasise Nuclear First Use (NFU) and deploying weapons to make this stance credible. Emplacing atomic demolition munitions in Himalayan passes to deter PLA units ingressing in strength across the disputed border is one tripwire. Another is to declare that any forceful Chinese military action that crosses a certain undefined threshold may automatically trigger the firing of canisterised medium- and long-range Agni missiles, now capable of launch-on-launch and launch-on warning. Additionally, the large numbers of Chinese missiles positioned in Tibet should be seen as the third nuclear tripwire. As there is no technology to reliably detect and determine the nature of incoming warheads, any missile PLA fires will reasonably have to be assumed to be nuclear-warheaded. Such a posture leaning towards action will create precisely the kind of uncertainty about the Indian reaction and response that will bolster its deterrent stance.⁹

Exorbitantly priced aircraft carriers are unaffordable and, in the age of hypersonic and supersonic missiles, a military liability. The Indian naval budget should instead

prioritize nuclear-powered ballistic missile-firing and attack submarines, and a surface fleet of multipurpose frigates. The Indian Air Force needs to radically cut the diversity of combat aircraft in its inventory, rationalize its force structure and streamline its logistics set-up. This will be facilitated by limiting the fleet to just three types of aircraft – the multi-role Su-30MKI upgraded to ‘super Sukhoi’ configuration in the strike and air superiority role and progressively enhanced versions of the indigenous Tejas light combat aircraft for air defence, the follow-on Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft for longer reach and bigger punch, and lease-buying 1-2 squadrons of Tu-160M2 ‘Blackjack’ strategic bomber from Russia as the manned, recallable, vector in the country’s nuclear triad.

Politically, the most difficult policy decision for the government will be to resume nuclear testing. This is absolutely necessary to obtain tested and proven thermonuclear weapons of different power-to-yield ratios. India has got by with a suspect thermonuclear arsenal for 20 years. It is time India’s strategic deterrent acquired credibility.

END NOTES

1. An unreliable US, in fact, so concerns its NATO allies that the French defence minister Florence Parly in Washington asked a little plaintively, ‘What Europeans are worried about is this: Will the U.S. commitment [to NATO] be perennial? Should we assume that it will go on as was the case in the past 70 years?’ See ‘French defense chief questions US commitment to NATO’, AFP, *RadioFreeEurope, Radio Liberty*, 18 March 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/french-defense-chief-questions-us-commitment-to-nato/29829763.html>.
2. Bharat Karnad, *Why India is Not a Great Power (Yet)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 187-219.
3. For a detailed analysis of its various infirmities that preclude India’s becoming a great power anytime soon, see Karnad, *Why India Is Not a Great Power (Yet)*.
4. China sees itself as the main protector of Pakistan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Visiting Islamabad during the Pulwama crisis, the foreign minister Wang Yi declared: ‘No matter how things change in the world and the region, China will firmly support Pakistan upholding its independence and territorial integrity and dignity.’ See Sutirtho Patranobis, ‘China firmly with Pakistan, says Beijing as Islamabad raises Kashmir in top talks’, *Hindustan Times*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-firmly-with-pakistan-says-beijing-as-islamabad-raises-kashmir-in-top-talks/story-5qM8HPgUQkl7ZwPCQEfh3O.html>.
5. Bharat Karnad, ‘India’s Weak Geopolitics and What To Do About It’, in Bharat Karnad, ed., *Future Imperilled: India’s Security in the 1990s and Beyond* (New Delhi: Viking, 1994), 19-20.
6. Bharat Karnad, *Staggering Forward: Narendra Modi and India’s Global Ambition* (New Delhi: Penguin-Viking, 2018), ch. 4.
7. Imtiaz Ahmad, ‘2-3 solutions available to Kashmir issues, says Pak PM Imran Khan’, *Hindustan Times*, 4 December 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/2-3-solutions-available-to-kashmir-issues-says-pak-pm-imran-khan/story-AOHvnlYCspm1mOqHp74K6l.html>.
8. Karnad, *Why India is Not a Great Power (Yet)*, ch. 5.
9. Bharat Karnad, ‘Shifting the Nuclear Security Focus to China’, in Lieutenant General A.K. Singh and Lieutenant General B.S. Nagal, eds., *India’s Military Strategy in the 21st Century* (New Delhi: Centre for Land Warfare Studies and KW Publishers, 2019); Karnad, *Staggering Forward*, 344-349.



Need for a Comprehensive National Security Strategy

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In the recent general elections, national security has emerged as a major political issue. However, the discourse over national security has been limited to dealing with specific security-related episodes such as terrorist attacks at Pathankot, Uri and Pulwama on the Line of Control with Pakistan; the stand-off with Chinese forces on the India-Bhutan-China border; and the security operations in the disturbed state of Jammu and Kashmir. A holistic discussion of India's national security rarely occurs in the public space or even within the government. The Indian state does not possess an overarching national security strategy (NSS) that comprehensively assesses the challenges to the country's security and spells out policies to deal effectively with them; of course such a strategy must be executed within the parameters laid down by the Constitution of India and the country's democratic political dispensation. In the absence of an overall strategy, the state relies on ad hoc responses of questionable utility. Moreover, it

possesses no mechanism that permits it to learn from its experiences. Ad hocism also neglects the broader political, social and economic context within which specific episodes must be located and understood.

A modern state confronts multiple and simultaneous challenges across several domains. National security cannot be confined to the use of the state's coercive power to overcome domestic and external threats. For example, threats to domestic peace and stability may arise from economic and social grievances. A knee-jerk reaction may leave these grievances unaddressed while the use of coercive power exacerbates rather than ameliorates the situation. For instance, left-wing extremism in India is rooted in the persistent exploitation of tribal populations.

Similarly, the vulnerability of our borders is linked to a large-scale smuggling and contraband trade that permits channels through which terrorists and

criminals find easy access. Such threats cannot be dealt with solely through enhanced military capabilities without addressing the drivers of illegal trade. It is recognized that the prolonged use of subsidies for ostensibly social welfare purposes creates arbitrage opportunities for cross-border smuggling. Such criminal activities often entrench powerful mafia groups with close links to politics. While groups of this sort constitute a serious threat to domestic security, the solution lies as much in the economic domain as in strengthening the state's law and order machinery. The NSS will need to acknowledge such cross-domain linkages and policy interventions.

For a modern state operating in an increasingly globalized world, the line between what is domestic and what is external is becoming increasingly blurred. For example, terrorism is a threat to domestic security but may have external links. Dealing with terrorism may require not only domestic interventions but also action on the external front. Issues related to water security may involve dealing with neighbouring countries with which India shares its major rivers. Thus a combination of domestic and external interventions may be necessary. It is only within a comprehensive NSS that such complex inter-relationships between domestic and external dimensions can be analysed and coordinated policy responses formulated.

We live in a technology-driven world; new technologies such as the Internet and digitization are enabling powerful tools for states to enhance national security but also creating new and serious vulnerabilities and security risks. Cyber security has become a major concern and it is only through developing advanced technological capabilities that a state has a chance of defending itself against cyber attacks. The NSS would enable the identification of critical infrastructure that may be vulnerable to cyber attacks, and the development of human resources capable of identifying attacks and protecting and restoring critical systems. Anticipating cyber attacks and hardening systems against them become ever more necessary as economic and governance activities increasingly rely on digital technologies. Ad hoc responses would

be grossly inadequate. A critical aspect is that in a democracy like India, the state's use of advanced digital technologies for surveillance and intelligence gathering must not violate the citizens' right to privacy and freedom of expression. There is a trade-off between enhanced security and the citizens' rights guaranteed by the Constitution, and this must be clearly spelt out for the people of the country and well-considered solutions put forward. National security must not become a justification for a surveillance state. The danger of relying on ad hoc responses is that they may cumulatively lead to a predatory and authoritarian state that limits the exercise of democratic rights. The NSS must deal with this dilemma upfront.

Technological change and geopolitical shifts are also impacting India's nuclear security. The country's nuclear deterrent must deal with the challenge of two nuclear-armed neighbours: China and Pakistan. Furthermore, the nuclear domain is becoming closely interlinked with cyber and space-related capabilities. The development of India's nuclear deterrent must take into account the impacts of such technological change. The overall nuclear security environment is also being affected by geopolitical shifts with the gap between the US and Russia on the one hand and China on the other reducing significantly. The older nuclear order anchored in bilateral US-Russia arms control arrangements is now unravelling because China remains outside these arrangements. A new nuclear order is becoming essential as we move into a world of multiple nuclear states. India will need to determine what role it should play in the shaping of this new nuclear order.

Ecological degradation and climate change have significant impacts on national security. There may be direct consequences of the melting of glaciers on the deployment of troops at high-altitude locations on India's mountainous borders. Sea-level rise as a result of global warming may inundate naval bases along the coasts. There may be large-scale migration of populations from low-lying coastal plains towards higher ground, and this may lead to social disruptions and economic distress, undermining domestic security. Therefore, the NSS must anticipate the consequences

of ecological degradation and climate change, and formulate coping measures.

Another oft-neglected dimension of India's national security that must be integrated within the NSS is strategic communications. It relates to the indispensable need, particularly in a democracy, to shape public perceptions through constant and consistent public outreach and to provide a channel for public opinion or feedback. This would enable the government to explain its policies, garner public understanding and support, and review and adjust policies on the basis of feedback received. This has become a far more difficult and complex challenge due to the spread of social media, the phenomenon of fake news, and the instant nature of news gathering and dissemination. Governments need to stay ahead of the news cycle, establish credibility as a source of authentic and reliable information, and shape public opinion rather than be reactive all the time. National security may be adversely impacted by the spread of false news by hostile elements within and outside the country using social media. This will require strong and advanced cyber capabilities, which may have to be constantly upgraded to keep pace with rapid technological advance.

An NSS for India needs to take a comprehensive approach, encompassing domestic and external and economic and ecological challenges, highlighting the inter-linkages and feedback loops among them and on that basis formulate a coherent template for multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral interventions. Such a template would serve as a guide for a whole of government approach, ensuring that intervention in any one domain does not contradict or even negate intervention in another domain. It is only by having a big picture constantly at hand that contradictory and wasteful policies can be avoided. We should move towards a pattern of governance where interventions in one domain reinforce interventions in other domains.

Drawing up an NSS for India must be a key item on the agenda of the new government. This may be tasked to a group of eminent persons from different

disciplines who could consider India's national security in its multiple dimensions. In a democracy, an NSS should be citizen-centric and must reflect the values and beliefs of the people; at the same time, it must seek to raise public awareness of and shape public perceptions about national security issues. The proposed NSS must take the Constitution of India as its guide and its objective should be the safeguarding and consolidation of India's democracy. This approach would, for example, reject intrusive governmental intrusions into the lives of ordinary people, violating their rights enshrined in the Constitution.

In every domain of national endeavour there must be pursuit of excellence and high standards to enable India to compete successfully in a highly competitive and globalized landscape. Islands of excellence cannot be sustained in an ocean of mediocrity and low quality. This need not conflict with properly designed policies for affirmative action designed to reduce and eventually eliminate the consequences of long-standing social and economic disabilities suffered by sections of India's citizens. What is critical is the state's capacity to design, execute and evaluate interventions in different domains, and for this the institutions and processes of governance may need to be altered and strengthened. New institutions may be required to deal with newly emerging challenges. This, too, must be included in the NSS.

Previous exercises undertaken to promote national security could serve as useful reference material for the NSS. These include the Kargil Review Committee report (2000), the Report of the Naresh Chandra Task Force on Security (2012), and the document entitled 'Building Comprehensive National Power: Towards an Integrated National Security Strategy' prepared by the National Security Advisory Board (2015). Only the Kargil report has been made public. It is recommended that these reports and the NSS prepared by the new government should be public documents and open to public debate and review. A well-informed, vigilant and educated public opinion is the best assurance of national security.



Managing India-China Relations in a Changing Neighbourhood

ZORAWAR DAULET SINGH

The importance of India-China relations in India's overall foreign policy cannot be overstated. Not only is China's rise changing Asia's geopolitical landscape and the global balance of power, its involvement in South Asia in recent years has augmented its position from being India's largest neighbour to an engaged great power across the subcontinent. Unlike in the Cold War era, when a backward China had been confined to a limited role in South Asia's security and economy, four decades of reform and opening up to the world have equipped the country with the financial wealth, industrial strength and military capacities to pursue, should it choose to do so, an ambitious role in South Asia.

Thus, India's China policy choices are profoundly consequential for the Indian government. It entails opportunities as well as risks with implications across a gamut of issues such as India's global status and

effectiveness in international institutions, geopolitical security and economic transformation. The persistence of an unresolved border dispute in this context only reinforces the importance of crafting a sensible and effective China policy. As India's foreign secretary told members of the Lok Sabha in February 2018, 'We cannot see the relationship with China the way we perhaps saw it thirty years ago, or even 15 years ago ... both countries share the belief that this relationship is slated to become one of the defining relationships of this century, certainly in our region...'¹ One of the areas that India's China policy needs to focus on is the neighbourhood because it is the arena where India-China competition and mistrust have tended to be most acute in recent years. If not managed sensibly, it could undermine India's interests and regional position, along with unravelling the prospects for cooperation on other important fronts.

The Policy Challenge

For the past decade, India and China have been working according to rival geopolitical visions. Although China has been a direct neighbour of South Asia and India since 1950, it is only in the past decade that Chinese policymakers have reformulated their regional policy to pursue more sustained political and economic relationships with several states in the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean littoral. Following Xi Jinping's foreign policy guidelines of 2013 and 2014, China has adopted a policy aimed at enhancing the development options of its neighbours as well as promoting new lines of communication or corridors with its southwestern periphery. Much of this impetus has been provided by the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) – a grand connectivity plan that envisions a network of states economically linked to China through a variety of commercial-financial relationships and industrial projects. South Asia is one of five regions or subregions identified as areas to expand China's geoeconomic footprint.

Since the 1990s, India too has contemplated ways to reconnect with its South Asian neighbours and inculcate a spirit of integration and interdependence in the subcontinent. While this process has found bipartisan political appeal, the ideas, resources and institutions to advance meaningful regional integration remain at a fragmentary level. Nothing underscores the meagre level of interdependence than the following stark statistics: merely 5% of South Asian trade is intra-regional; intra-regional investments constitute less than 1% of total investment in the subcontinent.

Although India and China are today seen as regional competitors, neither power has succeeded in implementing its vision fully. Arguably, the main reason has been the inability of both countries to situate their rival visions in a region-wide approach. India has not fully come to terms with the utter lack of intra-regional trading and infrastructure networks; nor has New Delhi been able to allocate adequate resources and capacities or adapt or renew institutions

to match its aspirational rhetoric. Despite possessing far greater economic strength, and considering the scale and ambition of the BRI, China too has been unable to make a meaningful regional impact. Recent experience has proven that circumventing India – given its geopolitical centrality and market size – is not a viable path for any sustainable connectivity plan for the subcontinent.

Yet, unbridled competition poses grave risks for a fragmented subcontinent in the coming decades, a future that would undermine Indian interests far more than Chinese. Transforming South Asia must, therefore, be predicated on tapping India's unique advantages: the size of its domestic market, which makes any geoeconomic plan's success dependent on India's participation and involvement, and the overt and subtle geopolitical influence the country continues to wield across the neighbourhood; it must also leverage China's financial and industrial capabilities to construct infrastructure and connectivity capacities in the neighbourhood.

In short, both countries have strengths that are not being fully leveraged to advance an open subregional geoeconomic order. What has been missing from the policy discourse is an attempt to explore alternative futures and more constructive frameworks; there have been no attempts to visualize the changing regional setting in ways that would still secure vital Indian interests, advance stability and deepen regional economic development, while also enabling China to pursue its engagement with South Asia.

Intersection of Indian and Chinese Interests

The first step in such an exercise would be to undertake a brief assessment of how Indian and Chinese interests interact in the region. What can we observe about China's involvement in South Asia? China usually works with whatever regime is in power and avoids interfering in domestic political battles. Beijing's main priority is protecting its economic investments. In some cases where China has deeper geostrategic

interests, particularly in Pakistan and Myanmar, it has cushioned adverse reaction from the US towards these states. Hence, in limited ways, China is already a security provider – certainly at the political and diplomatic levels. And this factor shapes how many neighbourhood regimes now perceive China: as potential insurance against possible Western pressure and as a hedge against uncertainty about Indian positions in times of domestic crises in these states. There is little doubt that China's engagement has improved the bargaining position of India's neighbours vis-à-vis India and other major external powers.

India and China's regional policies suggest that there are both overlapping features as well as geopolitical faultlines at play. Both neighbours have a common interest in (i) managing non-traditional threats such as terrorism, extremism, separatism and distress migration that impact regime stability of smaller South Asian states; (ii) promoting secular and stable regimes; (iii) promoting open sea lanes and ensuring the security of their maritime trade routes; and (iv) geoeconomically connecting South Asia with East Asia.

At the same time, there are some key differences in India and China's regional approaches. First, China appears to be more interested in inter-regional interdependence and connectivity, while India is mainly interested in subregional integration. Put another way, China seeks to connect South Asia with China; while India seeks to bring South Asia closer from within as well as more connected with Eurasia and South East Asia. Second, there is a large measure of uncertainty about the geopolitical implications of the BRI in South Asia. India's main concern is that deeper connectivity between India's neighbours and China will reorient the foreign policies of South Asian states in ways that could eventually undermine Indian interests and challenge its claims to regional authority. More broadly, China's engagement in South Asia might also adversely influence domestic politics in the subcontinent and strengthen anti-India political forces; the latter could spill over onto the domestic politics in India's states, thereby impacting periphery security and

social stability. Third, a major faultline would be the militarizing of China's regional connectivity projects. Such a hypothetical scenario would pose military security challenges to India as well as place China in a position to act as a direct security provider in the subcontinent, an outcome that would have profound consequences for the geopolitics in the region.

Policy Recommendations

One of the key geopolitical challenges for Asia over the next decade is whether and how a rising India and a rising China can learn to be sensitive to each other's core interests while pursuing engagement with each other's neighbours. In the April 2018 'informal summit' in Wuhan, both political leaderships had sought to arrest the escalating tension and competition in the relationship. While their differences and disputes remain unresolved, both sides have come to recognize the costs and disadvantages of a semi-hostile and contentious relationship. In particular, building trust and 'strategic communication' in the neighbourhood have now been recognized by both leaderships as shared policy goals.

1. Capacity building and assisting weak states:

Although India and China have a common interest in regime stability, both sides have yet to explore structured cooperation on this front. One form such cooperation could assume is joint assistance of weak states through coordinated capacity enhancing projects and training programmes. Indeed, the April 2018 talks have laid a framework for 'India-China plus one', that is, India-China cooperation in third countries in the region.² In October 2018, India and China launched a programme to train Afghan diplomats as an initial step in a long-term effort for trilateral cooperation (India-China-Afghanistan).³ This confidence-building measure, albeit modest, has opened a window for precisely the type of coordination between two regional powers that has often been ambivalent of their shared interests. Such third-party cooperation should be extended to other states confronting domestic challenges; for

example, the two nations could together support Bangladesh's secular forces in their struggle against extremism or assist Myanmar in responsibly managing domestic order.

- 2. Coordinating geoeconomic plans:** Lacking in finance capital and industrial resources, India cannot undertake the sole burden of lifting South Asia from underdevelopment and low interdependence, especially given the growing domestic claims within the country itself. If Indian requirements in the subcontinent are to advance connectivity (both within and between South Asian states) and deepen the developmental process, China's engagement can be nudged or leveraged in directions that also advance India's long-term interests. Building constructive regional partnerships are unavoidable and China is one of the key players that need to be engaged more strategically by India.

Can China's infrastructure projects increase South Asia's internal connectivity and economic interdependence? Much of the viability of logistical networks and energy projects is linked with India's economy and access to its large market. For example, hydropower projects developed by China with India as the main eventual market could be a form of trilateral cooperation. Another instance is China's construction of a new terminal at the Chittagong port in Bangladesh, which complemented India-Bangladesh coastal shipping cooperation.⁴ Similarly, projects like the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) corridor could reconcile India's vision to deepen connectivity with its smaller neighbours with China's vision to connect its southwestern provinces with South Asia.

More broadly, India-China geoeconomic coordination and cooperation, including through joint bilateral and multilateral projects, is necessary to avoid duplicating large infrastructure projects that could otherwise burden the region with excess supply-side capacities and fiscal burdens. India's official position on the BRI (beyond the China-

Pakistan Economic Corridor that contradicts India's sovereignty over Jammu and Kashmir) is based on legitimate questions around sustainability, viability, transparency and industrial benefits to the local communities of some of China's economic projects. India-China coordination in third countries could help in addressing these issues by giving India a say in the choice and design of projects, along with making China's economic involvement more in sync with the subregional political economy as well as with established international norms. The second BRI forum held in Beijing in April 2019 indicates Chinese leaders might be responding to the critique from India and other countries. The communiqué called for 'extensive consultation'; 'green', 'people-centred and sustainable development'; and 'high-quality, sustainable infrastructure' that is 'inclusive and broadly beneficial'.⁵ But for India to explore whether the BRI's adaptation does genuinely augur a consultative and sustainable geoeconomic approach by China in the subcontinent, its own position on the initiative needs to evolve such that its legitimate sovereignty concerns do not constrain the formulation of a more sophisticated policy.

- 3. Maritime cooperation:** In recent years, India has recognized China's 'Malacca dilemma' – a reference to the long and insecure lines of communication through the northern Indian Ocean that China relies upon for much of its international trade – and its corresponding interest in improving the security of its Indian Ocean trade routes. China, for its part, too needs to reassure India on its port projects and the military aspects of its regional involvement, particularly in the South Asian littoral. Even as they recognize some of China's maritime security concerns, Indian policymakers must be prepared to counteract any attempts at militarization or conversion of Chinese infrastructure investments in South Asia into forward-basing facilities for the Chinese military. A failure to do so might impel other great powers to respond to China with their own military bases on the subcontinent's maritime periphery, a process that would pose adverse

consequences for regional geopolitics and also erode India's influence in the neighbourhood.

Competitive Coexistence in a Common Neighbourhood

India and China's policies are beginning to resemble each other. Just as Beijing's engagement with India's neighbours increases the status and bargaining position of these smaller states vis-à-vis India, New Delhi too engages with many South East Asian states who seek to hedge their dependence on China by developing more economic and geopolitical options. Yet, neither side is under any delusion that India's neighbours can be rallied against India or that India can rally South East Asian states to balance Chinese power. The balance of power simply would not allow such a thing in practice. The defence budget of the entire South East Asian region is about \$45 billion. China's is four times that figure and with far more modernized and balanced capabilities. Similarly, the asymmetry between India and its neighbours is even higher. In South Asia – with the exception of Pakistan – none of the other states are in any position to present a threat or challenge to India, even with outside assistance. This proposition is likely to be even truer over the course of the next five years.

If we look at the official rhetoric from the region, what stands out is a similar discourse being espoused by most of the smaller South Asian states. Nearly all of India's neighbours have expressed a preference for (i) non-alignment or strategic autonomy as a guiding principle in their foreign relations; (ii) multi-directional economic engagement with India, China, the US, Japan and other powers; and (iii) sensitivity towards India including publicly disavowing any move towards offering military facilities or bases to external powers and thus reassuring India on its vital interests. As one recent study observed, smaller South Asian countries 'largely still see India as

the dominant power in South Asia, suggesting that Chinese economic activity, while welcome, will not necessarily translate into major military or strategic gains'.⁶ Another discernible trend is that neither India nor China seems to be pressuring or cajoling smaller South Asian states to make hard choices, or persuading these states to adopt postures and policies that run contrary to the main interests of its regional competitor.

In short, we do not see a Cold War-style competition, which suggests some sort of a tacit acceptance of competitive coexistence in their overlapping peripheries. So while India and China are competing they are doing so within a framework of self-restraint. This could gradually pave the way for a conception of a regional order with informal norms on the 'rules of the game' in the subcontinent. Other things being equal, internally resilient and economically vibrant neighbours are likely to be in both India and China's interests. If stability in their overlapping peripheries is a common interest, it should pave the way for more sustained bilateral conversations to mitigate some of the uncertainty-induced competition and mistrust; these could also seek to proactively exploit the untapped overlapping interests likely to be emanating from China's growing involvement in South Asia.

Far-sighted and pragmatic voices in the West are advocating for 'stable competition' or 'responsible competition' with a rising China to avoid precipitating a second and costly Cold War. Indian policymakers must take the long view and pursue an approach of peaceful competition in the neighbourhood. India and China need to engage in a strategic conversation on the subcontinent and its various parts towards coordinating some of their regional connectivity visions and policies. The failure to pursue such a dialogue, and to arrive an understanding on an agreed framework for Indian and Chinese policies, would constitute a recipe for regional instability and a costly zero-sum rivalry that neither country can afford in a rapidly changing international environment.

END NOTES

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