



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.