

Emerging Threats To India's National Stability

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Abstract:

It is known truism that no country can achieve economic growth and resultant prosperity unless it has a well-thought-out plan in place to meet these goals. And, such a plan cannot be achieved unless the country is stable and secure. This prescription is also relevant for India as it stands at the cusp of a greater economic growth and a more prominent role and standing in global politics. As the world enters a new era of global politics, marked by the growing interests and aspirations of the erstwhile colonized nations, the Republic of India stands as a shining example of how a nation, despite all its adverse historical experiences, has been able to make substantial progress in the fields of economy, science and technology, human security and development to the extent of being recognised as an emerging power of the world. Relatedly, the country has had to ensure the availability of requisite conditions to facilitate this progress and continued growth in multiple fields. Further, through optimum usage of its soft and hard power, as well as its value-based attributes such as its multiculturalism, its pluralistic values promoting respect for all religions and furthering the ideals of democracy, India has been able to carve a place for itself on the right side of history in this changing world of geopolitics and geo-economics. However, there are many challenges in the realms of security, both internal and external, which need to be addressed effectively in a timely manner for India to make speedy progress and achieve its aspirational goals. Through careful identification and examination of the challenges that India could face in the realms of national security, it is intended to define the means and methods to deal effectively with these challenges so that India can achieve its carefully formulated national goals, interests and objectives in an optimal and timely manner. The agencies concerned of the government will accordingly be able to prepare themselves not only for the challenges of today, but also the future, so that India can achieve its developmental and aspirational goals of becoming a developed country and a major global power by 2047.

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I. Introduction:

National security can be described as the protection of national aims and interests from multi-dimensional threats and challenges, both external and internal, in the current and future perspective. National security, in its modern definition, deals not only with traditional threats in the military, police, intelligence, cyber and informational realms, but also with non-traditional threats to the other aspects which make a nation and its people secure (Holmes, 2014). Objectives like food security, pandemic security, water security, energy security, environmental security and human development security (Reinsberg, 2022; Browning 2013), the last of which includes life expectancy, education and *per capita income* of the people, are considered equally or more important in the quest for national security. And then there is aspirational security – when a country like India also wants to redefine its place in the comity of nations – to assume a more influential role, i.e., to be a ‘rule maker’, rather than just a ‘rule follower’ (De Estrada²⁰²², pgs 435 – 438), at the regional and global level. Not surprisingly, a democratic and multi-cultural country like India uses soft power as much as hard power to build up its stature and influence among other nations. India, was holding the rotating presidency of the G-20 group of nations as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Suryanarayana²⁰²³), last year, and rightfully took upon itself to make concerted efforts to take advantage of these opportunities to achieve a more substantial role in world affairs. So, what are the threats and challenges that India is facing now, and likely to face in the foreseeable future? Before we examine this issue, there is a need to contextualise these by setting out a possible ‘national aim’ for India to achieve, and accordingly, what should be our ‘national interests’? There is also a need to analyse the current and future global strategic environment. Only then would it be possible to define and accurately predict the emerging national security challenges that India is facing and is likely to face in the foreseeable future.

II. India's National Aims And Interests

The formulation of a national aim for India should take into consideration the country's history, culture, strengths and weaknesses. India's strengths lie in its geography, its natural and human resources, its growing economy, its democratic values, its peaceful nature, its multi-culturalism, its formidable military and its 32 million strong diaspora (Paranjape, 2016; Campose, 2016). Its primary weakness lies in the economy not growing fast enough to keep pace with the needs of human development of its continuously growing population and other needs like infrastructure development (Adhikari, 2023), modernisation of the military and providing assistance to less-endowed nations, all of which are considered essential pre-requisites as India moves forward. So, what could be a possible national aim for India, i.e., what our leadership and governance structures should be striving to achieve (Niti Aayog, 2018)?

'To achieve momentous economic development and focused technological progress for the country and its people – in a secure environment of sustainable peace and human security, discernible stability and substantial prosperity – where individual genius and aspirations can flourish, leading to the collective well-being of India and the happiness of its people, while assuming its rightful role and place in the emerging regional and global order, i.e. a regional leader by 2030 and a major global power by 2047.'

Accordingly, our national interests, deriving from this national aim, could be:

- Preserving the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Indian republic.
- Retaining strategic autonomy while dealing with other nations.
- Maintaining an environment of peace and stability within the country and on its borders, while strongly defending our territorial claims and interests.
- Preserving India's core constitutional values of democracy, equality, freedom, secularism and pluralism and holding these out to others as a shining example of what India stands for.
- Achieving and safeguarding the nation's existing and emerging strategic goals – political, diplomatic, economic, military and informational – in consonance with our national interests.
- Achieving unhindered economic growth and development, under sustainable ecological and environmental conditions, which generates jobs, human security and prosperity, as well as related security and political benefits for the country at large.
- Preserving ecology and environment, while minimising the risks due to climate change, global warming, pollution and environmental degradation.
- Achieving excellence and self-sufficiency in all facets of science and technology, in consonance with the highest global standards.
- Building mutually beneficial relations with other nations, to gain friendship and assistance in specific fields from stronger or better endowed nations of the global north, as well as respect and political support from others of the global south.
- Attaining India's rightful place in the comity of nations by building mutual trust with other nations, while contributing towards the promotion of regional stability as well as global peace and security.

III. Global Security Environment

The global strategic environment is undoubtedly in an unprecedented churn over the past few years, especially in the last 30 months or so (Kotoulas and Pusztai, 2022, pgs 32 – 41). The factors which are determining the current global security environment are as follows:

- Firstly, the United States, with support from other Western and like-minded democratic nations, still remains the global leader and the sole superpower in the economic, military and technological realm. It continues efforts to undermine and weaken its perceived adversaries, especially Russia and China. However, it is no longer getting unquestionable support from the Global South as its moral standing has slipped globally after the Iraq war (Saikal, 2022) and it is increasingly being seen as supporting the warmongering interests of the military industrial complex, earlier in Iraq, Syria and Libya, and now in Ukraine and the Middle East. Its military standing has also taken a beating after its disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.
- Secondly, the rise of China, as a global power, continues unabated. China continues to grow economically and technologically as is evident from its nominal GDP in 2022 reaching 18.3 trillion US dollars, which translates to 30 trillion dollars GDP in PPP terms. This included a historically high merchandise trade surplus of 877.6 billion US dollars in 2022, 200 billion dollars more than the previous year. Its trade surplus last year included a trade surplus of 383 billion dollars with the US. China ranks No. 1 globally in patents, trademarks, industrial designs and creative goods exports. China's overt defence budget this year amounted to 225 billion US dollars, over three times higher than India's defence budget of 72 billion dollars. China's main areas of defence spending this year include commissioning of its third aircraft carrier, rapid production of submarines, destroyers and fighter aircraft as well as investments in space technology and artificial intelligence for missile targeting systems. China's economic clout, military strength, diplomatic skills and consultative style has enabled it to

develop political and economic ties with many countries of the global South (Ahmed, 2022), including those viewed as 'rogue states' by the US.

- China, in concert with Russia, plays a leadership role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, SCO, which is increasingly looking like a counter to the NATO. Last year, China displayed exemplary political clout and diplomatic skills when it mediated a peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Baker, 2023; Yu et al., 2023), which is a remarkable feat considering deep rooted Sunni-Shia antagonism between the two as also the fact that these countries were on opposite sides in recent and ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Clearly, by achieving this peace deal, China has secured its burgeoning energy requirements of the future, and displaced the United States as the primary global influencer in the Middle East. However, China's efforts have its downsides too, if we go by the experiences of Sri Lanka, Uganda, and even Pakistan, which have suffered China's debt trap diplomacy (Gulati and Babu, 2022). China has also been seeking to bring peace between Russia and Ukraine, to bring the 30 month long war to an end. This undoubtedly will be much more difficult to achieve, considering that China is perceived to be inextricably aligned with Russia, which is guilty of perpetrating this war (Yew and Chen, 2023).
- The next factor is the Russia-Ukraine war, with all its unpredictable strategic, operational and tactical nuances - basically a war between Russia and the NATO, with Ukraine acting as the latter's proxy (Toft, 2022). Not only has the war caused unprecedented levels of destruction, death, displacement and misery in Ukraine, the economic sanctions against Russia have caused economic upheaval throughout the world, not only in the global South but also in Europe, in terms of rising prices of food, fertilisers, fuel and gas, as well as high inflation (Rapoza, 2023), which has refused to go away. Most countries of the global South are not willing to buy into the justifications given by US and other Western nations for provoking the war, and largely believe that the war has been brought about by NATO obduracy and interests of the Western military industrial complex (Askew, 2023). Consequently, the so called 'rules-based world order' which had been established by the US and other powerful Western countries nearly 79 years ago, since the end of the Second World War, is going through an unprecedented churn.
- Next, it appears a new Cold War has already started (Osnos, 2023; Hal and Gaddis, 2021). US supremacy of the world, the sole superpower status it has enjoyed for the last thirty years, is under serious challenge, with China seeking equal power status in a future bi-polar world. Countries like Russia, India, Türkiye and Brazil are seeking global multi-polarity (Sirohi, 2022), with a leading place for themselves in global power equations. In this new Cold War, the Western nations, led by the US, which are largely democratic, who dominate the financial and information sectors of the virtual economy, appear on one side of the divide. Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and Israel are aligned to the Western group. On the other side are China and Russia, whose economic power rests on their control of physical goods, including energy products. They are autocratic in their orientation. Countries like Iran, North Korea, Belarus, Syria, Eritrea and Serbia are allied to this group. The US and NATO is struggling to dominate Europe, using Ukraine as a willing proxy, to try and undermine Russia, while also preparing to face future threats in the Asia-Pacific. They have completely severed trade relations with Russia and have made a series of moves to halt the development of China's technology sector. US-China economic and technological rivalry is on the rise, and extending into the military realm. The QUAD, CHIP-4 and AUKUS are initiatives to secure Anglo-American interests in the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region (Benson et al., 2023). The US appears to have, largely, lost control and influence over the Middle East, to China, while its influence in Africa is also waning.
- Global terrorism, as represented by organisations like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda are on the wane but the Af-Pak region, with its plethora of terror organisations, many of which are state-sponsored, is seeing a rise (Department of State, 2021), reinstating its status as its epicentre.
- Also, the potential of pandemics to disrupt the world remains ever present. Although Covid-19 appears to be over after an excruciating three years, but it has shown the world how ill-prepared it is for dealing with disasters, natural or manmade. The global South was also witness to an unseemly spectacle of the world's more powerful countries willing to hoard excessive reserves of vaccines rather than share these with their less fortunate brethren (Peters and Prabhakar, 2021). Economies have suffered a double whammy – first the adverse effects of COVID, and thereafter by those of the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Palestine war. The possible meltdown of US banks resultant also holds serious economic portents for the world.
- Last, but not the least, it has become obvious to the world that the perils of climate change and environmental degradation cannot be wished away in view of the disastrous effects these are having on the world (EPA, n.d.; The White House Archives, 2015).

IV. Challenges For India's Rise

The ten most important security challenges that India is likely to face in the foreseeable future are as follows:

The first and foremost security challenge is the threat from China (Pant and Bommakanti, 2019, pgs 836 – 838) - and the threat is not only territorial, from the military, but also economical, technological and political.

From the very beginning, especially after the Tibetan uprising of 1959, China has clearly identified India as a rival and has been trying to undermine India and its interests in the region and the world. Such an attitude led to China attacking multiple Indian military positions on the India-Tibet border in October 1962, which resulted in defeat of the less-prepared and equipped Indian Army. Thereafter, it started using Pakistan as its proxy and started providing it military support, even support in Pakistan's nuclear weapons program – aimed towards limiting India's influence within and the South Asian region. In recent times, China has been following a coercive strategy and trying to unilaterally change the status quo on the Line of Actual Control, the LAC, the disputed border between India and China. Significantly, China has yet not reversed its incursions across the LAC by Chinese troops in Eastern Ladakh which it surreptitiously undertook nearly three years ago, in April-May 2020 (Lalwani et al., 2022).

There have been attempts at shifting the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh too. Clearly, these are attempts at 'salami slicing', at adding more and more Indian territory under its control, a little at a time. China's military modernisation - with the aim of taking on the US military in a battle over Taiwan – is making it very powerful. China continues to build a string of military facilities around India. What is most worrisome for India is that most countries of the region and much of the global South have been economically enticed or scared into submission by the Chinese display of wealth and weaponry – especially its record of delivering on infrastructural projects. China is also the primary reason that India's dreams of becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council are unlikely to fructify in the foreseeable future (Gupta, 2020). All these are the reasons why China has been rated as the No. 1 security challenge.

The second national security challenge is the threat from Pakistan. The significance of Pakistan in this context is not only due to the fact that it is a hostile neighbour, a reasonably strong military power and a proxy of China, but it also wields adverse influence against India in the Islamic world (Mehta, 2019), more so in terms of raising the bogey of human rights violations in Kashmir. Thus, powerful Islamic countries like Iran, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and UAE, with which India would like to develop strong mutually-beneficial relations, are at times perceived as being circumspect, sometimes hostile, in their dealings with India. Also, Pakistan has been promoting separatism and sponsoring terrorist actions in India, especially in J&K. Some of our security experts appear to play down the status of Pakistan as a serious military threat (Sanghvi, 2023) because of its recent economic and political troubles, but that would be a mistake. Its progress and accomplishments in disruptive technologies and its close bonds with China and Türkiye need to be taken note of.

The third security challenge is related to balancing our relationship between Russia and the US, in the context that the US and other Western countries want India to join the sanctions regime against Russia (Press Trust of India, 2022) and also scale down our military relationship with Russia drastically, more so after Russia launched its attack on Ukraine in 2022. This aspect has to be seen in the context that India considers both these relationships crucial for its security interests (Tellis, 2022). On the one hand, Russia has always been India's benefactor politically, militarily and technologically, while on the other, India needs US support desperately in its efforts to counter the Chinese threat. What has complicated the matter however for India is the growing strategic partnership between Russia and China, to the point that the possibility of Russia providing assistance to India in case of a conflict with China appears increasingly remote. India has been instrumental in helping Russia bust Western sanctions imposed against energy sales by Russia. Consequently, Western leaders continue to make efforts to convince India to comply with the sanctions' regime against Russia. Nonetheless, interestingly, the US House approved the waiver of CAATSA against India (PTI, 2022) for purchasing the S-400 air defence systems from Russia, agreeing to India's plea that the weapon system is meant to counter aggressive acts by China. It appears that India has no choice but to maintain good relations with both sides. But, for how long can India continue to play both sides of the new Cold War divide, without paying a serious price, is the moot question.

The fourth security challenge is the slow pace of military modernisation (Tarapore, n.d., pgs 12 – 15, 18 – 21) due largely to perceived budget cuts in capital allocations to the extent that it may negatively affect our deterrence posture against our adversaries, especially China. This problem is essentially related to the lack of high levels of economic growth in the country for quite some time now, first with the demonetisation and then with the pandemic, followed by the Ukraine war – economic growth is low around 6.5%, unemployment is high at 7.45% - it is said that 80% of the rural and urban population do not have enough purchasing power. Unfortunately, whereas we keep referring to the fact that we have become the world's fifth largest economy, it is also a fact that we figure a lowly 125th when it comes to *per capita GDP* and 132nd in the global human development index (HDI). Therefore, we also need to step up economic growth and raise the military's capital budget so that we can modernise our military. In addition, we need to address other social issues like poverty alleviation and human development, which are also essential for our nation's security.

The fifth national security challenge is from cross-border terrorism. Though globally, in recent times, the sources of this threat are primarily associated with the Middle East, Afghanistan and parts of Africa, e.g., the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, Taliban and Boko Haram, the terrorist threat that India faces is more specifically from Pakistan based agencies, controlled by the Pakistani Army and the ISI. Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Lashkar-e-

Tayyiba (LeT) and Hizbul Mujaheddin (HM) are the three main anti-India terror groups (PTI, 2019), all sponsored by the Pakistani deep state, which have been involved in innumerable attacks on targets in India, especially J&K, over the last three decades. In July 2019, Pak PM Imran Khan, on an official visit to the US, acknowledged the presence of some 30,000 to 40,000 terrorists operating on Pakistani soil (Razdan, 2019). Though some of these like the Haqqani Network are focused against Afghanistan and some like TTP against Pakistan itself, the bulk of these terror organisations, and the infrastructure that supports them, are targeted against India.

The sixth security challenge for India is from other forms of violent extremism (Gupta, 2023). This includes the threat from separatist Assamese and Manipuri insurgent groups in North East India, especially the NDFB, ULFA, UNLF and PLA-M, and from Left Wing extremist groups in the tribal areas of Central India, especially in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. There are also radicalisation threats to Muslim youth in South India from elements operating in the Middle East. There are also early indications of Khalistani extremists trying to revive their movement for a separate Sikh state (Patil, 2018). Khalistani groups in Canada, UK and Australia are making efforts to build up support against India in some of these countries. As in the past, Pakistani ISI is reportedly supporting the movement to regain a foothold within Indian Punjab.

The seventh security challenge is the increasing divisiveness in our country, combined with the dilution of our core constitutional values as a country and a people (Chellaney, 2020). India has always stood out as a beacon of democracy, equality, freedom, pluralism, secularism, unity and human rights – and has been praised in various global forums for these attributes. However, we have been steadily going down in global perceptions and rankings in many of these value-based assessments. Dilution in these core values could lead to internal strife and our losing support among governments of the Western world, howsoever much we may try to entice them with our markets.

Eighth is the ever-increasing threat of attacks in the cyber realm. Recent data suggests that India has become one of the most attacked and breached countries in the world, accounting for almost 59% of breaches in the last quarter of 2022 (IANS, 2023). Data from Indian Computer Emergency Response Team, CERT-IN in short, indicates a 26-fold increase in cyberattacks in the four years from 2017, rising to over 14 lakh attacks in 2021. These include website intrusion and malware propagation, malicious code, phishing, DDoS, website defacements, unauthorised network scanning or probing activities, ransomware attacks and data breaches. The perpetrators are not only cyber criminals and private agencies, but also state agencies. For example, the ransomware attack on AIIMS, New Delhi in November 2022 (ET Online, 2022) had Chinese links. Not only Defence and other govt agencies, but private companies will have to spend much more in the future to secure their digital systems from attacks.

Ninth, is the threat of attacks in the informational realm. Domination of the visual media by one group or another and promotion of fake narratives can threaten our democracy and value systems, disrupt communal harmony and also raise internal security issues (Sarts, 2021). Publishing negative articles, including fake or exaggerated stories, against one community or another, for political gains, has become commonplace. Recently, we saw how a fake story of Bihari migrants being beaten up was created in Bihar and circulated as having happened in Tamil Nadu (Kumar, 2023) – causing counter currents in North India.

Tenth, is the threat of humanitarian disasters, including pandemics, both natural and manmade. Many of the humanitarian disasters are occurring due to climate change and environmental pollution issues (Singh, 2020; Parry n.d.). Global warming, if left unchecked, could mean significantly more heat waves, extreme rainfalls, droughts and ice melting, all of which have serious portents for the lives of our existing and future generations. The long-term consequences of rising sea levels could be threatening to lives and livelihood in our coastal areas and island territories. Air pollution contributes to global warming and also raises serious health concerns for our younger generation, if we do not act with the required amount of focus and seriousness.

And last but not the least, is the threat from non-traditional sources affecting food & nutrition security, job security, environmental security, water security, health security (Banerjee and Basu, 2022), all of which can hamper our progress and have serious adverse effects on our lives. If the young generation is not provided proper science-based education and skills, the demographic dividend we have been talking off could well become a disaster with serious security portents.

V. Conclusion

National Security in the Indian context is likely to continue to pose a number of challenges to India's security planners and organisations. Whereas, India's security establishment appears to have the required resources and experience to largely address the current set of possible threats and challenges, it will need much more resources in the economical, technological and military realms to deal with, especially deter, potential threats and adventurism by our potential adversaries in a futuristic context. 'Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.'

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