



India: Strategic Challenges and Responses

Policy Brief

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India: Strategic Challenges and Responses



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Introduction

The above subject has been primarily dealt from the foreign policy and security point of view.

Many believe that strategic challenges should now include those relating to energy, environment, population, food, health, climate change and the like. With the end of the Cold War and the perception that all-out conflict between the principal powers is now out of the question as everyone has too much to lose, attention has shifted to non-military challenges.

The phenomenon of globalisation has contributed to this changed perspective. Countries have got tied together increasingly through global economic integration and therefore their prosperity has become intertwined. Nothing is to be gained by capturing territory and acquiring resources through the use of force. It is better to capture markets and acquire control over resources through investment.

Economic prowess and technological innovation enable countries and corporations to exercise global power without the burden of governing foreign lands and peoples. That is why so much importance is being given to innovation for survival in what is becoming a highly competitive world.

Some of this may be true, but this is looking at the world from the perspective of the West. The collapse of the Soviet Union ended the military challenge to the US, leaving it as the only global power. It also ended a military threat to West Europe.

With the incorporation of East Europe into the European Union and the dismembering of Yugoslavia, Europe has secured peace within its frontiers. Consequently, the West stresses non-military threats or threats by non-state actors as the real strategic challenges to its security, prosperity and traditional dominance of international affairs.

India's Perspective

India's perspective has to be different. We are still vulnerable to traditional threats, quite apart from those emanating from non-state actors. The structures of the international system are biased against countries like India. Changing them to reflect the realities of today is a strategic challenge for us. This is exactly the opposite of the challenge that the West faces.

We are a country still ravaged by poverty, and, consequently, our challenge is to bring modest levels of prosperity to all sections of the population. It is not to protect high levels of prosperity already reached from being threatened by the shifts in global economic power. Of course, all the other challenges pertaining to energy, environment, population, food, health, climate change etc face us too, and this makes the totality of our burden bigger and more complex.

Worse, we have to confront these broader, non-security challenges in a position of disadvantage, as the terms of debate on these issues is largely set by the West, again with a view to preserving its privileged positions and channeling decisions by the developing countries in directions that suit western interests the most.

India's Unique Strategic Challenges

India's strategic challenges are in many ways quite unique. We are among the biggest countries demographically and geographically; we are endowed with considerable natural and human resources; our industrial and technological base is sizable; we are a nuclear weapon state with impressive space capabilities; we are an old civilisation.

A country with these attributes cannot but play an important role, not only regionally, but also globally. Even if we seem to lack a thirst for power and do not pursue it with determination and a clear sense of purpose, we will not be able to survive without being one of the world's foremost powers.

Only growing political, economic and military strength can enable us to confront the challenges we face, as otherwise we will be overwhelmed by them in the years ahead.

Pakistan

Historically, India has been exposed to military threats and conquest from the north-west. With the creation of Pakistan that military threat persists, even if the danger is no longer of conquest.

Pakistan claims Indian territory even now; it has not shed the animosity of over 66 years. It has used various means to pursue its feud with India, whether direct military aggression, infiltration, supporting insurgencies, stoking communal tensions or use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy.

We have a tendency at times to play down the threat to us from Pakistan, claiming that we are much bigger and stronger than our neighbour and can meet any challenge that it poses. Such a view misses out many dimensions of that challenge.

The Islamic Challenge

The first is the challenge of our complex relations with Islam.

India has been partitioned by Islam geographically and fractured by it internally. Our secularism and democracy have succeeded in managing these fractures, though not in eliminating them completely.

Nevertheless, India's worthy example of accommodating Islam internally at the political, religious and cultural levels, more particularly because of the huge size of our Muslim population, has not induced change of thinking on managing diversity, building a tolerant political system and society and respecting different religions either in Pakistan or beyond in the Islamic world in general.

On the contrary, fundamentalism and religious extremism have grown in our region. India has not seen any Shia-Sunni clashes, whereas not only in Pakistan, but in the larger Islamic world, a Shia-Sunni confrontation is looming larger and larger.

Pakistan represents, in a sense, the unwillingness of Islamic lobbies to make definitive peace with India. Kashmir, in turn, symbolises the clash between India and these Islamic lobbies that has not ended despite our internal accommodation of Islam as part of our composite heritage with which most Indians relate easily and unself-consciously.

So long as Pakistan uses the argument of Islam against us, we are hindered in our relations with the Islamic world which dominates the geography from our western borders across to North Africa and to southern Russia.

The fact that we have energy, manpower and financial ties with the Gulf Arab states and have had strong political ties with countries like Egypt in the past within the nonaligned movement does not negate the proposition that the Islamic world is unable to relate to India uninfluenced by the Pakistan factor, which for it is not geopolitical, as in the case of the West, but religious.

Even if the Islamic countries bilaterally do not make Kashmir a point of contention, the desire by some of them to be “helpful” in resolving the issue surfaces discreetly. The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), of course, regularly slams us on this issue in an unacceptably partisan manner.

Many in India have felt that despite India’s record of unstinted political support for the Palestinian cause, the Arab world hasn’t reciprocated with less partisanship on the Kashmir issue.

In spite of the presence of a huge number of Indians in the Gulf and the links created at the human level, Arab visibility in India in political terms is muted; high level visits are few; there is limited Arab investment in India despite the size of our market and prospects of expansion that all analysts are agreed upon; culturally the Arab world is inactive in India. Defence cooperation is token.

In all this the Pakistani factor plays a part to a lesser or greater degree- less in the economic domain but more in the political and security domains. Even President Morsi was obliged to visit Pakistan before he came to India in March 2013.

The Challenge of Terrorism

The second dimension is that of terrorism. India is a country most challenged by terrorism because, unlike any other country, a powerful, nuclear armed state is using it as a form of asymmetric warfare against us. Our situation is unique.

If the US is targeted by terrorism it is because of the perception that it controls Arab resources, has protected dictatorial Arab regimes, protects Israel unconditionally, is

engaged in military operations against Islamic countries and has military bases in the Arab world. Some European countries are targeted because of their colonial past and continued interference in Arab affairs driven by past colonial impulses.

If Israel is targeted by terrorism, it is because it is seen as a country parachuted on Arab lands that continues to occupy the West Bank and the Golan heights, apart from the emotive issue of settlements. Israel also has a robust policy of retaliation which leads to a spiral of action and reaction.

Iraq and even Pakistan are being ravaged by terrorist attacks, but these represent a settling of scores internally between politically driven religious groups, with no external involvement.

India is not engaged in military operations against Pakistan or any other Islamic country; it is not occupying Pakistani territory- even Pakistan acknowledges that Kashmir is “disputed” - or that of any other country; it has no military bases as symbols of domination in any Islamic country; it is neither interfering in Pakistan’s internal affairs, nor abetting terrorism by local groups there; it has also eschewed a policy of reprisals against Pakistan despite intense provocations like the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 2008.

Pakistan’s involvement in terrorism in India is a huge problem as Pakistan is not being sanctioned for its conduct either by India or the international community. On the contrary, it remains a non-NATO ally of the US, has a strategic partnership with it and receives US economic and military aid. Pakistan is truly the epicenter of terrorism in the region, with its involvement also in such activities in Afghanistan. It was also involved in attacks against our Embassy and other establishments housing Indians there.

The proliferation of extremist religious groups in Pakistan, the inability and unwillingness of the government to deal with them, the nurturing of jihadi groups by the ISI, the fact that jihad figures in the motto of the Pakistani army, the legitimization of jihad in school text-books and the explosion in the number of madrassahs, have raised questions about Pakistan’s future as a viable state.

Instability in Pakistan is bound to spill over into India; increased radicalization of Pakistan is a threat to communal harmony in India as the threat of ISI and other elements fomenting trouble in India through proxy groups here could worsen.

Instability in Pakistan and its unwillingness to bury its differences with India means that Afghanistan will continue to be seen as a space for rivalry with India.

This also means that Pakistan will continue to support the Taliban, will look for “strategic depth” against India there not in military terms- except for using Afghan territory for training terrorists for operations in India and using Afghan irregulars in J&K- but enlarging the space for Islamic ideologies around us and preventing us from having any strong foothold in Afghanistan. This, in their calculation, will strengthen the combined Islamic challenge of Pakistan and Afghanistan to us.

Central Asia

India, as a result, will continue to be strategically blocked in building an optimal relationship with Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries. The economies of Central Asia or their energy resources cannot be linked to South Asia to any degree unless Afghanistan is stabilized and Pakistan overcomes its internal challenges and decides to be part of a larger circle of prosperity in this region, rather than be fixated on denying India space to extend itself into its westward hinterland.

As things are, China is fast linking the energy resources of the Central Asian region to its economy, leaving energy hungry India- and Pakistan- out. Pakistan’s policies are also preventing Central Asian economies to develop links in non-energy areas with India.

Pakistan is no doubt aware that Central Asian countries are very wary of any Taliban take-over of Afghanistan because of the impact of their ideology on the secular ethos of their countries. They are suspicious of Pakistan’s intentions.

Pakistan is also aware of the good relations between these countries and India, and particularly India-Tajikistan ties which also have a modest military dimension. It may actually favour the idea of more Islamization of these societies to bring them closer to Pakistani ideology and weaken their secularism driven links with India.

By hindering India from building a productive relationship with Central Asia, Pakistan is aiding the entrenchment of Chinese influence there. India’s exclusion from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has also helped China to achieve its goals in Central Asia without any Indian competition.

India's strategic interests require that we have a long term presence in Afghanistan. But, without direct access to Afghanistan this will be a difficult challenge to overcome.

Afghanistan

India enjoys much goodwill in Afghanistan, amongst the non-Pashtun groups as well as Pashtun, as our development activity is not limited to non-Pashtun areas.

We propose to make large scale investments in Afghanistan's natural resources sector, in the Hajigak iron ore deposits to begin with. Afghanistan is willing to offer us a natural resource corridor for development, but our decisions will have to depend on internal stability in the country, apart from road and rail links that can make investment and transport of raw materials out of the country possible.

There is much uncertainty about the situation in Afghanistan after the US/NATO withdrawal in 2014. The West is reaching out to the Taliban for some kind of a negotiated settlement that would allow its troops to withdraw in reasonably good order.

The High Peace Council set up by the Afghan government to promote intra-Afghan reconciliation is proposing a solution that would give the Taliban a share of power. President Karzai is discussing with the Qatar government the proposal of opening a Taliban representation in Doha.

This reaching out to the Taliban is worrisome for India, Iran and Russia, as well as Central Asian countries. It is not unlikely that conditions will get created for the Taliban, once accommodated, to make a bid for power, raising the possibility of a civil war in Afghanistan. India has to begin playing its cards now to secure the future of its interests in that country.

Pragmatism may dictate opening lines of communication with the Taliban, but that would be playing into the latter's hands as India's negotiating hand is weak. The Taliban cannot be India's friends, even if their antagonism gets blunted because they may wish to have countervailing cards against too much Pakistani influence.

Iran

In the developing situation, discussions with Iran become very important. Iran can provide us access to Afghanistan through the Chabahar port and the various road and rail links with Afghanistan that it has already completed or will be completing. Until now, Iran has given low priority to Chabahar, looking at it as a project that serves primarily Indian interest in expanding its regional role. That position seems to be changing.

India has decided to make some investment (\$100 million) to improve berthing facilities at Chabahar, while Iran has decided to give priority to the port as part of development plans for this economically backward and troubled region. President Ahmadinejad's meeting with President Zardari at Chabahar in connection with signing the agreement on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline sends, however, some mixed strategic messages to us.

Contradictions between Iran and Pakistan are evident, but Iran's reaction to the persecution of Shias in Pakistan is muted. Iran claims it is interested in stability in Pakistan and wants to contain tensions with it. This adds to our challenge to build strategic bridges with Iran in Afghanistan, especially in the context of US withdrawal from that country.

The strategic importance of India's relations with Iran is evident. Iran, with its huge reserves of natural gas, is a durable energy partner for India. It can provide us access to Afghanistan as well as to Central Asia, not to mention southern Russia through the north-south corridor. Our relations with Iran are important for maintaining an external balance in the looming Shia-Sunni conflict, which also has internal dimensions for us because of our own large Shia population.

However, India-Iran relations post 1947 have not been particularly friendly, with Shah's Iran siding with Pakistan in the 1965 and 1971 conflicts. The religious nature of the Iranian revolution and India's secular polity have not been easy to reconcile in terms of the role of religion in politics and the world view of the two countries.

India reached out to President Khatami's Iran, but India has found Iran a difficult negotiating partner. The tensions over Iran's nuclear programme, our vote against them in the IAEA, the imposition of US/EU sanctions on Iran and the deterioration of

the country's relations with the US just when India-US relations have improved very considerably, has made the strategic handling of our relations with Iran difficult.

The Gulf

With its huge interests in the Gulf involving expatriates, remittances and 80% of our energy supplies, this region has become very important for India strategically. With this kind of dependence on these small but rich countries, made more problematic because of the concentration of people from one particular state in India- Kerala- in these countries, relations with them have become one-sided.

Whether the large Indian population in these countries is an asset or a potential liability can be debated. In any case, it is a point of debate whether we should be even-handed between the Gulf countries and Iran, given that we have huge interests on the ground in the former and much less in the latter at present, even though potentially we could have more.

Prudence demands that we preserve our existing equities in the Gulf countries but also not compromise our future interests in Iran. We do not need to choose, just as these countries do not choose us in favour of Pakistan, even though we have much more to offer to them than our neighbour. Our goal, however, should be to neutralize as much as possible the Islamic links between these countries and Pakistan by creating secular links with these countries in trade and investment.

Defence is one area where we could try to make more headway in some of these countries, though it will not be easy because of the Pakistan factor. Cooperation in combating terrorism is an area with potential as these regimes are themselves targeted by terrorism from some groups like Al Qaida.

We have been successful in meeting the challenge of building productive ties with Israel without losing ground with the Arab world as a result. Israel has become a major defence partner of India and a sizable economic partner too relative to our economic exchanges with non-Gulf Arab countries.

We are yet hesitant to exchange high level political visits with Israel and prefer to keep the relationship somewhat below the radar. We should become more open about this relationship consistent with the independence of our foreign policy.

China

If historically India was threatened only from the north-west, and later during the colonial period, it was the European sea-borne power that overwhelmed us, independent India is now threatened from the north.

For the first time in history China threatens our security by occupying Tibet militarily and destroying this buffer between the two countries and, indeed, civilizations. The Indian and Chinese civilisations have never been in conflict in Asia as a whole where the two have spread their influence peacefully.

China imposed a conflict on us in 1962 even when India had recognized Tibet as part of China, which was a huge unilateral strategic concession. It has since militarized Tibet beyond the security requirements of the situation, as India has no intention to destabilize China's hold over that territory.

China continues to assert its claims on Arunachal Pradesh, which it now calls south Tibet. It has challenged India's sovereignty over Jammu and Kashmir through its visa policy. It treats J&K and POK on a different footing, with its increased presence in POK complicating the strategic scenario for us. The Chinese leaders have stated publicly- including President Xi Jinping most recently- that the border issue is not easy to resolve, without explaining why this is so. This implicitly makes the work of the Special Representatives redundant. China wants to retain the border issue as a pressure point on India while seeking more entry into the Indian market with its mounting economic and financial strength.

POK has become the key to China's links to the Arabian Sea through the Karakoram highway and Gwadar port, and to China's investment plans in Afghanistan. Its increased stakes in POK, including project implementation there, contrary to the argument it uses against funding of projects in "disputed" territories by international institutions, mean that it is positioning itself as a third party in the India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir.

It has neutralized India strategically by arming Pakistan with nuclear and missile technologies. Its strategic commitment to Pakistan is unique, in that it continues to boost Pakistan's nuclear capability with its latest announcement to construct a 1000 mw nuclear reactor there contrary to its international obligations. It seeks by this to

balance the India-US nuclear deal with a parallel deal of its own with Pakistan without NSG approval.

Apart from Pakistan, China is also positioning itself in the rest of our neighbourhood politically and economically, strengthening proclivities there to play the China card against us. In Nepal it wants to have parity with India in terms of treatment, which means eroding also the Nepalese buffer between India and China-controlled Tibet. In Sri Lanka, China is looking for key port facilities for the movement of its sea-borne trade, to be followed no doubt by naval berthing facilities when China's international clout increases further and the capacity of India to resist diminishes.

Maldives also finds encouragement from China's overtures to it to resist India politically as is apparent in the GMR case and that of the treatment of former President Nasheed, notwithstanding India's diplomatic intervention.

This is part of China's strategy to increase its assets in the Indian Ocean and balance India's domination of the sea lanes of communication.

The economic and military gap between India and China is growing. This weakens India strategically vis a vis China. The challenge for India is to build its own economic and military strength while also forging partnerships with others that could act as restraints on muscle-flexing by China.

United States

India now has a strategic partnership with the US. Given the disparity of power between the two countries- the one being a global power and the other at best a regional one- the challenge is how to leverage the new relationship in political, economic and military terms to maximum advantage without losing independence of decision making.

India has to establish a constructive strategic partnership without losing its strategic autonomy. It is not an easy task as the US is used to leadership and not equal say in policy making.

India and the US do not as yet have sufficient convergence on basic principles that should govern international relations as well as on specific issues. India has views on

sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, human rights, spreading democracy, the responsibility to protect etc which differ from those of the US.

On specific issues such as soft treatment of Pakistan, the willingness to accommodate the Taliban, sanctions on Iran, the earlier intervention in Libya and now in Syria there is divergence of thinking. The challenge is to maintain the momentum of the relationship and manage differences with the least amount of contention.

The implications of the US pivot towards Asia have to be assessed by us very carefully. US capacity to restrain China is limited by the reality of the economic and financial interdependence between the two countries, the inevitable reduction of US defence expenditure because of budgetary deficit issues and US's military overstretch.

The challenge for us is not to distance ourselves from US plans- however uncertain at this point in time- to hedge against China's rise and also engage China productively as the US does. We have to see what advantage we can take of rising China-Japan tensions to strengthen our political and economic linkages with Japan, especially with Prime Minister Abe in power.

We have to take a calibrated position on maritime differences between China and other littoral countries on jurisdiction in the South China Sea.

Look East Policy

Strengthening our Look East policy is necessary both to derive full benefit from our economic engagement with ASEAN and East Asian countries as well as to shape the agenda of the East Asia Summit and the emerging Asian security architecture.

Increased connectivity between India and ASEAN by land and sea corridors is essential to make our economic weight felt in this region, with a positive fall-out on political and cultural ties.

The civilizational ties between India and these countries are exceptionally rich but are not sufficiently leveraged for our overall relations with them. Myanmar and Thailand are the key to such connectivity.

Russia

With Russia the challenge today is to nurture a relationship that has served our political, economic and security interests exceptionally well over decades but has lost its relative importance today with the transformation of international relations after the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, the phenomenon of globalisation, the vast improvement of India-US ties, and, in general, new opportunities that have arisen for India to build productive relationships with diverse countries.

Defence supplies is at the core of our relationship with Russia today; economic exchanges remain modest; Russia is not in a position to meet India's needs for modernization of its industry, provide the technical inputs required or mobilize funds for developing its infrastructure.

The energy relationship with Russia, despite its vast resources in this sector has not broken new ground. Nuclear cooperation has stalled because of our nuclear liability act and public agitation against the Kudankulam project following the Fukushima disaster. Space cooperation has not got galvanized.

India and Russia have similar views on several core principles that should guide the conduct of international relations, on a better redistribution of power in global institutions, and on building a multi-polar world in general.

Even as we are becoming closer strategically to the US, we need a strategic relationship with Russia too for a better balance in our external relations and for preserving our strategic autonomy.

Europe

In any discussion on our strategic challenges, Europe has a tendency to get excluded, although two European countries are permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany, France and the UK are the fourth, fifth and sixth largest economies in the world. We have strategic partnerships with France, Germany and the UK.

The European Union is our largest trading partner. We have long-standing defence partnerships with major European countries. Europe also offers advanced industrial

technologies. We have valuable nuclear and space cooperation with a country like France.

We have a tendency to downplay the strategic importance of Europe to us, believing that closer ties with the US are enough to take care of our relations with Europe. This is a mistake. Europe has interests in India independent of the US and, indeed, in several key areas- defence supplies and nuclear, for instance- there is severe competition between the two in India.

In the multi-polar world in the making, India must work strategically with Europe, bilaterally and multilaterally.

Finally, we have the challenge of retaining our historical position in Africa, not the least in the face of the competition that China is posing to our interests.

Our Responses to Challenges

I have listed most of the foreign policy challenges. Let me now look at our responses and evaluate them, suggesting in the process how they could better adjusted to meet the challenges.

The caveat is that our positions on some matters are long standing ones and any change will be difficult. We should look at suitable opportunities to revise or nuance our policies, rather than be accused of an unprovoked, abrupt change of course.

Pakistan

Pakistan has never been only an issue of foreign policy; it is in many ways an issue of domestic politics too, linked to electoral considerations. We have even given Pakistan a role in Kashmir politics.

We are willing to discuss the Kashmir issue with Pakistan and dutifully include it any agenda of bilateral talks despite the latter's history of military aggression, infiltration, terrorism and violation of accords. We still consider Pakistan a valid interlocutor for a peaceful, negotiated solution. This gives Pakistan space to claim a political and legal right to discuss the Kashmir issue with us.

We have missed opportunities to reject any Pakistani role in Kashmir, as, for example, when last year the Pakistani parliament passed a resolution asking for a resolution of the Kashmir problem on the basis of UN resolutions in violation of the Simla Agreement.

We should move to a clear position that our full sovereignty over J&K is non-negotiable, but that we are willing to discuss a peaceful solution to Pakistan's illegal occupation of POK, including the Northern Areas.

We have not only included Siachen in our composite dialogue, we eroded our negotiating position in advance by proposing that it be converted into a mountain of peace. The former Pakistani President General Musharraf has again lauded the Kargil aggression intended to destabilize our hold over Siachen. We should remove Siachen from the agenda of our bilateral discussions. All the more so because of the Chinese presence in POK. We should also demand that Pakistan first correct its maps that show the LOC extending to the Karakoram Pass contrary to the 1949 cease-fire agreement and the Simla Agreement.

Incidentally, we should also ask the US to undo the mischief done by its Defense Mapping Agency in this regard.

We have shown great anxiety to enter into a dialogue with Pakistan, despite major terrorist attacks against us, including the unpardonable Mumbai terrorist mayhem. We have, again, eroded our negotiating position in advance by announcing that we have no choice but to have a dialogue with Pakistan and even offering to go the extra mile if Pakistan walked the high road of peace with us.

We should cease giving signals of such over-anxiety to engage Pakistan and our readiness to make concessions. We have also committed a huge political error by conceding that Pakistan is as much a victim of terrorism as us, obliterating the fundamental distinction that India is a victim of Pakistani abetted terrorism and Pakistan a victim of local jihadi groups and jihadi culture that has been promoted in the country. We have also allowed Pakistan to equate the Mumbai terrorist attacks with the attack on the Samjhauta Express.

We should not repeat such formulations in any oral statement or written text in the future.

We have been pleading for the masterminds of the Mumbai attack to be brought to justice in Pakistan, without result. We have slipped into making such a demand pro forma because Pakistan's recalcitrance has not affected our willingness to engage it.

We should no longer put ourselves in a position where we have to plead with Pakistan and invite the rebuff that we should now move beyond Mumbai or be insulted by innuendos by the erstwhile Pakistani Interior Minister that the Mumbai attack was a conspiracy against Pakistan in which India had a hand.

We allow the separatist Kashmiri leaders to meet Pakistani leaders both in India and in Pakistan. It is bizarre that those leaders who will not talk to the government of India are allowed to confabulate with the government of Pakistan.

This should stop.

We have been critical of the US for being soft on Pakistan. But we ourselves have been overly soft. Even when the US and others began to be publicly critical of Pakistan's duplicity on terrorism, we have not only not taken advantage of such change in attitudes by helping increase international pressure on it, we have in fact helped to release the pressure by continuing to engage Pakistan and treat it as a country we can do business with.

We have to be more thoughtful of our strategy towards Pakistan, give up wishful thinking, cease believing that the problem between us is one of "trust deficit", when actually the problem is much deeper with historical, religious dimensions that condition the mind of Pakistan's ruling classes.

China

Pragmatism no doubt demands that we contain our differences with China, avoid a two-front situation by having tensions on both the western front with Pakistan and the northern front with China, build trading links with a neighbour that has made impressive economic strides, separate to the necessary extent our bilateral differences from global issues on which we can work together to mutual advantage.

However, we have allowed China to dictate the terms of engagement with us. For instance, China has kept changing its position on the mechanisms for discussing the border issue.

It walked out of the agreement to exchange maps of each side's perception of the line of actual control and then modified the mandate of the Special Representatives set up to discuss only the border issue to cover the entire relationship, diluting thereby the centrality of the border issue for building a solid base for the future relationship, instead of the present uncertain one that can wobble any time depending on misunderstandings.

We seem to be comfortable with China's position that the solution of the border problem can be postponed *sine die*, judging from the fact that we do not spell out the advantages of resolving this outstanding issue that is compelling us to increasingly militarize the border and raise the potential of a conflict.

There is something wrong with a strategy that seeks more CBMs and mechanisms to implement them even when China's bad faith in claiming our territory ostensibly on behalf the Tibetans whose country they occupy by force and whose leader they constantly denigrate is patent.

On the stapled visa issue we are satisfied that China is no longer issuing such visas, though China has already conveyed a damaging political signal to us without any reciprocal response from us. China has also redefined the length of our common border without an appropriate political response from us.

While China retains the political space to question our territorial integrity, we keep on closing political space for ourselves, as, for instance, our reported assurance to Chinese President Xi Jinping at Durban that India recognizes Tibet as part of Chinese territory and that we will not allow Tibetans to conduct political activities against China in India. Even if this remains our policy, why state it in the face of China's uncompromising stand on the border issue and on the Dalai Lama?

We may be right in being cautious about getting roped into any uncertain US rebalancing towards Asia, but why do we distance ourselves from it by stating that the security architecture in Asia should develop at a pace with which the regional countries are comfortable? Since the thrust of the policy is directed at China, why do we want China to feel comfortable?

If the Chinese reports are right, we also assured President Xi Jinping that India has an independent foreign policy and that we will not be used as a tool to contain China.

Why are we diplomatically disarming ourselves of options for the future? Are we threatening China or is China threatening us?

If China feels that the US intends to make India part of its strategy to encircle China, it should sort out its misgivings with the US directly. In reality, we feel China is encircling us in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Our strategy should focus on this rather than giving China strategic comfort.

We should be clear-sighted about the tactical nature of China's current overtures to us. President Xi Jinping is closing the doors for a solution to the border problem for at least the next 10 years and wants India to respect its "core interests", presumably in Tibet and claims on Arunachal Pradesh.

We should not allow ourselves to be "managed" in this manner. The belief that the moment is ripe for us to hold China's extended hand and further our strategic goals with it is markedly naive. We seem to have told the Chinese president in muted terms that its relations with our neighbouring countries should not be at our cost. This is a useful point to make only if we make our concerns more specific and public.

We should express concern officially about China's nuclear cooperation with Pakistan, about the purpose of Gwadar and its intentions in Sri Lanka.

Instead, we say that the world is big enough for both China and India to rise, that we should get used to China's presence in our neighbourhood and in the Indian Ocean as a fact of life. We even say we are open to maritime cooperation with China in the Indian Ocean. We are ourselves politically legitimizing China's presence around us.

Even if we cannot prevent China from extending its sway in our neighbourhood, why say it, especially when China does not offer us similar legitimacy in its neighbourhood. There is no need to make such statements, especially as they send a misleading signal to China and our neighbouring countries, when actually we are concerned about China's ingress in these countries and in the Indian Ocean.

Our economic relationship with China is becoming lop-sided, with India facing a huge trade deficit that is becoming unsustainable. We have to control the corporate lobby that is pushing for expanded trade and investment ties with China. The large scale presence of Chinese companies in our power and telecom sectors is a cause for strategic concern in the face of the cyber security threat from China. We are ill-

equipped to meet this threat. This is an area to which we have to devote pressing attention.

We have to be very watchful of Chinese projects on the Brahmaputra. We were unaware of the several planned Chinese projects until China revealed them, though earlier there was talk only of one run of the river project. We are giving ourselves comfort that all these run of the river projects will not affect flows downstream. President XI Jinping seems to have parried our concerns at Durban.

Our Neighbours

There is much anguish in India about the way even our smaller neighbours defy us. This is partly because over time they have assessed our reactions to the challenges we face and have determined what the limits of this defiance are, and find that there is considerable room.

They use the China and Pakistan to balance us, a classic strategy of bringing in an external power to balance a big neighbour. In the past they used the US also, which Pakistan still tries to do.

Our neighbours may be small but they are sovereign countries and we cannot ride roughshod over their sovereignty without falling afoul of international opinion. Even the US has found it difficult to deal with small countries like Cuba and Venezuela.

Link between Foreign and Domestic Policies

We are temperamentally disinclined to wield the large stick. We are cautious and prudent even when provoked. Unlike China which is supposedly prone to provoking a foreign crisis to distract from problems at home, we are too bogged down in internal problems to want to add to them by creating an external diversion.

The answer to our weak handling of foreign policy in general lies in the way we function at home. If we function at home with firmness, clarity of purpose, efficiency and effective implementation strategies, this will get reflected in the conduct of foreign policy too.

If, internally, we are inclined to look for compromises in every situation, if we are reluctant to avoid trials of strength as far as possible, if adherence to principles is

looked upon as undue rigidity, if accommodation is considered a virtue in all circumstances, if the limits of tolerance are far too elastic, then this amorphous approach will characterize the handling of foreign affairs also.

If, for instance, we cannot pass tough legislation at home to deal with terrorism, how can we deal with the issue externally with the requisite firmness?

If we play political games with terrorism at home by equating isolated terrorist attacks by Hindu extremists with three decades of Pakistani promoted terrorism in India and accuse the principal opposition party of running training camps without thinking of the consequences of such utterances externally, we run the risk of not being taken too seriously by our adversaries.

The way we have handled the vote on Sri Lanka at the United Nations Human Rights Council gives the impression that the central government is losing full control over foreign policy.

No country can have a robust foreign policy without a robust indigenous capacity for defending itself. We are the largest importer of arms, but this only exposes our strategic weakness. Yet, we continue to neglect this huge chink in our armour.

Our strategic challenges are massive in scope, yet we are building our strategic capabilities at too slow a pace. This means that we are not giving ourselves the wherewithal to weigh more heavily in international affairs and meet our challenges with greater self-confidence.

Our borders are porous. A country that is unable to control its borders and prevent an influx of hostile elements can hardly defend its interests further afield.

We can't let external challenges to our security find a base to challenge us from within, reinforcing an external challenge with an internal one.

As India's prosperity grows and our periphery remains unstable, the threat of illegal migration into India can worsen. We have to prepare against this.

Our profile is not increasing as rapidly as it should. At the same time the gap between us and China is growing, putting us at a disadvantage.

We are not a member of any alliance. We have to stand on our own feet, this makes it all the more necessary to give ourselves the means to be autonomous.

Our longer term challenge is not the power of the United States but that of China. The US does not claim our territory, China does.

We can manage our relations with the US to our advantage. The US can help build our strategic capabilities in military and non-military ways even if we maintain our strategic autonomy, while cooperation with China will only undermine them.

Our big handicap in dealing with our strategic challenges is that we lack a strategic culture. We have not handled our security as an independent country for centuries.

We now have an opportunity to restore India to its historical status. Let us not miss it. Governance and growth are the keys for achieving our goals.

About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non- partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its commitments to core national interests, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational objectives. With the experience of its faculty and contributors from strategic community VIF aims to gain fresh insights to foster actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders

Since its establishment, VIF has successfully embarked on quality research and scholarship in an effort to highlight issues in governance and strengthen national security. This is being actualized through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive-dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of the VIF form the lasting deliverables of the organisation's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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