

Book Reviews

Comprehensive Work on Security

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Nitin A. Gokhale
Securing India The Modi Way
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Nitin Gokhale's latest book, "Securing India the Modi Way," naturally arouses high expectations, as he is a leading security analyst, accomplished author, an eminent journalist. Neither too long to pall, nor too short to be considered skimpy, it strikes a happy via media leaving the reader satiated yet longing for a little more --which is, perhaps, the true measure of a well-produced book.

Nitin Gokhale's racy writing style makes the book an easy and enjoyable read. I finished it in a couple of sittings. It is, as admitted by the author, "a journalistic record of some of the bold and unconventional decisions taken by the Modi government since 2014" about security-related issues.

Just under 230 pages, it presents a comprehensive overview of the security scene under Modi with specific chapters on the Surgical Strikes, the Pathankot incident, the Myanmar strike, Internal Security, our China policy, Re-engaging with the Middle East, Defence, Space, and the Cyber Domain. In the process, the book inevitably dwells on several other important issues with a

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vital bearing on security, such as the Rafale deal, relations with Pakistan, ties with the USA, etc.

What makes the book invaluable and indeed a reference piece is that it is exceptionally well researched and based on innumerable on record insider inputs. There are not many like Nitin who have such contacts within the security establishment, including, in particular, the armed forces. Accordingly, the book bears the imprint of authenticity.

The author, quite appropriately, zeroes in on Modi's mindset and attributes. Quoting the NSA, he makes the point that Modi is a staunch nationalist with a "civilizational awareness and a long-term strategic vision of India's security" who wants Indians "to be proud of their past, resolute in their present and imbued with high hopes of the future." Making India secure and stable constitutes the paramount criteria when formulating national security policies or taking difficult decisions irrespective of the political consequences. Additionally, he argues, Modi is an "innovative genius" who brings to bear a new dimension to each issue.

It is the combination of these elements cited in the book together with the fact that being something of an outsider and never a part of the Delhi Durbar that led Modi to adopt much tougher and out of the box policies than any previous government. The surgical strikes in Myanmar and Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), the tough approach towards China on a variety of issues like Doklam, China Pakistan Economic Corridor, etc., and the convening of the BRICS-BIMSTEC meeting to underline the isolation of Pakistan are some illustrative instances of the boldness and innovative nature of Modi's security policy.

The book underlines that central to Modi's security policy was a selection of a capable team which shared his vision of making India secure, robust, potent, and prosperous. In selecting Ajit Doval as leader of the team Modi made an excellent choice as he not only had the expertise and integrity but who is committed to make India strong and secure. As someone who has known all our National Security Advisor and worked with some of them, I may

add that Ajit Doval brings a distinctive quality to his task. He is a doer when it comes to the nitty-gritty of hard security issues with hands-on experience of actual operations. Accordingly, in the Modi government, one can see the Doval imprint on many issues and this has been highlighted in the book.

The book provides considerable fine detail on the surgical strikes. What is significant, apart from the fact that they took place in some depth in PoK and across a front of 250 km, is that they were meticulously planned over 6 to 8 months and were an unqualified success. It is also reassuring to note that much contingency planning was done to cater to any escalation, and critical shortfalls in defence supplies were made up before undertaking this exercise. For the first time in decades, India went on the offensive and outside the usual character of its operations. It was an out of the box and bold response par excellence.

The book makes a compelling case that Pathankot was indeed a successful counterterrorism operation. It makes the point that overall coordination remained with Commander in Chief, Western Air Command. Also, the sending in of the National Security Guard was a wise to move which saved the day, and that above all the critical assets at the airfield remained unaffected in contrast to what had happened in similar incidents in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Internal Security

The author argues that in the shadow of Modi's foreign policy successes, the considerable improvements in the internal security situation have gone mostly unnoticed. Apart from J&K, the rest of India has remained largely untouched by any major terrorist attacks that periodically shake India. Left-wing extremists are on the run due to the unrelenting application of the hard power of the state and the soft tools of development, though continued efforts are called for to achieve complete success. Preventive action has also kept in check the threat posed by ISIS. J&K, however, remains on the boil thanks to Pakistan's machinations and despite Modi's outreach to the latter. Indeed, the author concedes that the Prime Minister "clearly underestimated"

the Pak Army's resolve not to let the India-Pakistan peacebuilding process succeed. He commends the relentless counterinsurgency operations mounted soon after the disturbances that followed the Burhan Wani episode coupled with the crackdown on the Hurriyat which brought about a semblance of order in the area.

In a broader context, the book candidly admits that basic policing in India is not up to the mark and needs a drastic overhaul. It laments that police reforms have for years been on the backburner, first responders are ill-equipped, poorly trained and under strength, and critical capacity building projects are fitfully funded and implemented. Since this increase India's vulnerability to violence it exhorts Modi's national security team to take remedial action.

On China

The chapter on China appropriately titled "Standing up to China" while dwelling in detail on the Doklam issue also addresses other aspects of the relationship. It underlines that the government is determined not to be pushed around by China without, of course, being provocative. Modi's no-nonsense approach to China is a welcome departure from the submissive approach of earlier governments. However, as in the case of Pakistan and in that of China, there is no indication of the government's evaluation of the nature of the threats posed by them and of the steps we need to take to address them. Both countries are determined to undermine India for their reasons, and accordingly, New Delhi needs to strategise policies to deal effectively with them. This is an area on which one expected more enlightenment from the author.

The Chapter on Defence is instructive on the many good things that have happened, such as One Rank One Pension, a more effective Defence Procurement Policy, the purchase of 36 Rafale's as a more cost-effective package than the earlier MMRCA deal, several new defence systems like Ballistic Missile Defence, an outreach to the Indian Ocean states, official institution of trilateral maritime exercises, conclusion of LEMOA, etc. The

author admits that much remains to be done. I would submit that India needs to put in place a Chief of Defence Staff and enhance defence spending, which currently languishes at an all-time low of 1.6% of GDP.

The Chapters on space and cyber security reveal that government also has a focus on these areas. Indeed, our increasing capabilities in space --such as the development of sub meter resolution and the range and scope of satellites launched by us -- is an eye opener as is the diverse manner in which these are being put to use. The book does not fail to draw attention to the development of a SAARC satellite--- another of Modi's innovative ideas. Today our enhanced capabilities are being put to multiple uses for mapping, disaster management, navigational systems, agriculture, communication, real-time surveillance, town planning, etc. ISRO is servicing as many as 58 ministries as about 10-12 in the past.

In the 21st century with increased internet usage cybersecurity is a felt need the world over. Under Modi, this assumed an additional urgency with his thrust on digital India and Make in India. As a result one of the first decisions of his govt was to implement a National Cyber Security Assurance Framework for governance of cyberspace. Some components of this are a national watch and alert system, protection of critical infrastructure, capacity development, testing products for cyber security, legal framework development, etc. The National Security Council was designated as the nodal organisation for coordination. This was only appropriate as it was already involved in this exercise earlier, and was the first within the system to develop a comprehensive paper, some 15 years ago, on cyber security.

In sum, therefore, "Securing India the Modi Way" constitutes a valuable addition to the security-related literature of contemporary India.