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India's National Security: The Changing International Dimension

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Introduction

Many traditional ideas that dominated India's discourse on national security and its relationship to global politics have begun to evolve in the reform era that began in 1991. India's economic globalisation, the introduction of nuclear weapons into its regional security calculus, and the steady expansion of its aggregate national power are among the factors that are helping change the terms of the policy discourse on India's national security. This essay, which focuses on the external dimensions of India's national security, examines five unfinished policy transitions in Delhi.

Strategic autonomy to strategic influence

If rapid economic development was the principal national objective of India in the wake of its independence from colonial rule in 1947, the strategy Delhi adopted to achieve that goal was economic self-reliance. Independent India moved away from an extended period of global economic integration under the British Raj. The foreign policy flip side of economic self-reliance was the concept 'strategic autonomy'. The growing dissociation of the Indian economy from the rest of the world provided the basis for India's emphasis on an 'independent' foreign policy. The era of globalisation, however, produced a disjunction between the structure of Indian economy and the foreign policy tradition of seeking strategic autonomy. In the decades after independence, India's conscious de-globalisation reduced its economic exposure to the rest of the world. In contrast, over the last quarter of a century, the scale and scope of India's economic interdependence has dramatically increased. India's annual trade, including imports and exports, at the turn of the 1990s was barely 15 per cent of the GDP. It now stands at more than 40 per cent. Out of its total GDP of nearly \$ 2.2 trillion in 2015, India's exports and imports (both merchandise and services) constitute nearly 1 trillion.

The nature of this unprecedented interdependence is magnified by the lack of domestic energy resources and India's massive dependence on imports. Besides the growing volumes of hydrocarbon imports, India has also begun to source significant amounts of coal from abroad for electric power generation at home. This level of interdependence is bound to lead, over the longer term, to a significant change in the way India deals with its external security challenges. In the near term though there is

much tension between the changed nature of the economy and the political ideas that have governed national security thinking over the last many decades. Given the new structure of its economy, India will have to learn to manage its interdependence and limit the consequences of external vulnerabilities. Delhi's traditional emphasis has been on preventing the external world from impinging on India's strategic choices. A deeply interdependent India will need to try and shape its external environment. Put simply India is under pressure to move from the past emphasis on 'strategic autonomy' to a policy that seeks 'strategic influence' on the world around it.

From Continentalist to Maritime Orientation

As a newly independent country, India's immediate priority was to consolidate its territoriality, both internal and external. The nature of British withdrawal—the Partition of the Subcontinent and the option the princely states had in choosing between India or Pakistan—generated significant security challenges for Delhi. The creation of new borders within the subcontinent and the perennial conflict with Pakistan made territorial defence a critical priority for India. The emergence of communist China as a new neighbour after gained control over Tibet added to India's security burdens. Much of India's national security energies after independence went into dealing with the challenges on its land frontiers. Weighed down by the defence of its new borders, Delhi had limited resources to focus on the maritime opportunities. India's naval strategy followed the logic of sea denial and its maritime diplomacy campaigned against the role of the external powers in the Indian Ocean.

As the logic of economic globalisation unfolded over the last two decades, Delhi has begun to devote greater attention to maritime dimension of its national security. This is reflected in the slow rise of budgetary resources devoted to the navy since the 1990s. Since the late 1990s, India's two long serving prime ministers - Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh - have repeatedly underlined the expanded geographic scope of India's interests. The phrases from 'Aden to Malacca' or 'the Suez to the South China Sea' were re-injected into the national security discourse. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, hailing from Gujarat, whose maritime traditions date back to millennia has shown greater appreciation of India's maritime imperatives. He has become the first Indian prime minister to articulate a comprehensive strategy towards the Indian Ocean. He has sought to strengthen India's ties with the islands states in the littoral and take more definitive positions on the South China Sea territorial disputes. In the reform era the Indian maritime footprint has steadily grown with the Navy deepening its engagement with the smaller nations, regional actors and the major powers.

Territorial Defence to Power Projection

Although territorial defence remains a critical preoccupation for Delhi, the logic of power projection has begun to inject itself into India's national security strategy. Despite much diplomatic effort, India's relations with Pakistan remain testy and those with China are subject to considerable uncertainty. There have been recurrent crises on both borders. But land wars of the kind India had fought in the past Pakistan and China have become less likely thanks to the dampening effect of nuclear weapons. In the case of Pakistan, the focus is largely on sub-conventional conflict. While a limited war for territory might be conceivable in the case of China a large scale conventional conflict between the two sides on the border appears somewhat remote. Meanwhile India's interests beyond the borders are increasingly coming into view. The Indian navy, for example, has undertaken a number of operations far from India's shores—relief operations after the eastern Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004-05); counter-piracy activity in the Gulf of Aden (since 2008), and non-combatant evacuation operations in Lebanon (2006), Libya (2011) and Yemen (2015). These operations have demonstrated India's emerging capabilities for power projection, especially in the Indian Ocean. The idea of 'expeditionary operations', however, is viewed rather warily by the Indian political classes and civilian bureaucratic leadership of the Ministry of Defence.

Power projection needs a more vigorous military diplomacy that can reinforce the Navy's capability to operate far from its shores. This would mean creation of arrangements for friendly ports and turn-around facilities in other nations that will increase the range, flexibility and sustainability of Indian naval operations. No great power has built a blue water navy capable of projecting force without physical access and political arrangements for 'forward presence'. Having long rejected 'foreign bases' in the Indian Ocean, it is somewhat discomfiting for India's political and strategic communities to even contemplate the new imperatives. Yet we have seen over the years, India negotiate a range of agreements with friendly nations for turn-around facilities' and the deployment of maritime surveillance radars and satellite tracking stations on foreign territories. This approach has become more explicit under the Modi government. During his visit to the Indian Ocean islands—Seychelles and Mauritius—Modi unveiled commitments to build logistic related infrastructure in both countries. It will be a while before India develops effective capabilities for power projection, but the idea is no longer as alien as it looked a few years ago.

National Security to Regional Security

Over the last few years, the idea of India as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean and beyond has grown. Under the Raj, India was the principal security provider in the Indian Ocean. The undivided subcontinent made major military contributions to the two World Wars in the 20th century. This tradition barely endured in the decades after independence. India offered the largest number of troops to the international peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the United Nations. It also provided military training and support to a number of countries, but at a very low level. Since the end of the Cold War, though, there has been renewed interest in Delhi at expanding India's military and security cooperation with a larger number of countries, big and small, in the Indian Ocean littoral and beyond.

China's rising military profile in what India has long considered its own backyard, the American support to a larger role for India in regional security affairs and above all a growing demand within the region for security cooperation have together resulted in the expanding footprint of the Indian military. India has also shed some of its reluctance to actively participate in the regional security forums. As part of its Look East Policy, unveiled in the early 1990s, India has become part of the ASEAN led regional efforts to promote security in the Asia and the Pacific. India has also taken the initiative to set up new regional security mechanisms like the biennial 'Milan' multilateral military exercises with the neighbouring countries in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium that brings together the chiefs of the navies from the littoral for a professional discussion of the security issues. But India is a long way from realising its true potential as a security provider in the Indian Ocean. Although Delhi has emphasised capacity-building as a major objective of its military diplomacy in the region, it remains hamstrung by the lack of a comprehensive strategy for security assistance. The development of such a strategy involves the creation of a range of policy instruments including on transfer of arms, financial support for military exports, and a strong domestic defence industrial base to match the growing demand for military cooperation with India. Delhi also needs to devise frameworks for intelligence sharing as well as stationing of Indian military personnel and equipment in other countries. This, in turn, calls for the national security apex to bring synergy and coordination to the activities of the Navy, and the ministries of Defence and External Affairs.

From Lone Ranger to Coalition Builder

Despite the expansive interdependence of its economy and the growing salience of India's overseas interests, the national security debate in Delhi remains trapped in the old verities of defence isolationism. Notwithstanding the significant growth in India's military capabilities in the era of reform and the growing demand for security cooperation with it, both bilateral and multilateral, Delhi's responses have been ambiguous. Meanwhile, the strategic gap between India and China continues to widen in favour of the latter. China's GDP is now four times larger than that of India and so is its military spending. This gap has begun to reflect itself in the expanding Chinese military presence in India's neighbourhood and its growing capacity to limit Delhi's regional influence. It would seem logical therefore that Delhi would seek to augment its national power through partnerships with other powers to maintain a favourable balance of power in the Indian Ocean and beyond. While India has taken a few steps in this direction, for example its growing defence cooperation with the United States and Japan in recent years, Delhi appears reluctant to go the full distance. The ambivalence is rooted in the ideology of non-alignment that lingers on.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is making an effort to break this paradigm. Instead of restricting India's choices to alignment or non-alignment, Modi has begun to articulate the notion of India as a 'leading power'. Unlike his predecessors, Modi has rarely referred to the virtues of non-alignment. Instead his emphasis has been on framing the possibilities of India's own potential to play a larger security role in the Indian Ocean and beyond. He has been enthusiastic about a stronger defence partnership with the U.S. and Japan, demonstrating greater commitment to offering security cooperation to smaller countries, and more willing affirm a role in shaping the regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific through a range of coalitions. It will be a while before this new thinking filters down to policy makers at various levels, but Modi is clearly compelling India to rethink the international dimension of its national security policy.