

INDIA'S STRATEGIC PERCEPTIONS: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War contributed to a complex security and strategic dynamics. In the evolving paradigm, India, in order to pursue its geo-strategic and security interests, faces several challenges in reorienting its strategic reformulations and at the same time maintaining its strategic autonomy. Considering the current geo-strategic parameters in the form of rise of China, evolving Pakistan-China 'all weather friendship' and ongoing imbroglio in Afghanistan on the one hand and the US strategy to contain China, seek assistance from Pakistan to fight international terrorism and shape smooth transition in Afghanistan on the other hand, places India at the centre-stage of the happenings. Given the current circumstances, no doubt, India is not only poised to play an important role in its region but also, at the same time, it possesses the necessary leverage to shape the strategic and security framework in the region either by siding with China or aligning with the US. However, both the permutations would pose serious challenges to India's long term strategic calculations. A major objective of this paper is to trace the antecedents of India's strategic culture since its independence, make a descriptive analysis of the predicament in which India is placed in the post-Cold War strategic era and highlight on India's strategic policy postures portended not only to maintain its strategic autonomy but also to influence the future of the region and counter balance China-Pakistan nexus.

Introduction

Since independence in 1947, India has maintained a strategic autonomy in its dealings with big powers, regional states and developing countries in the form of Non-alignment. Since the end of the Cold War, disintegration of the Soviet Union, emergence of the United States as the only super power and rise of China, all have contributed to a complex security and strategic dynamics. In the evolving paradigm, India, in order to pursue its national interest, faces several challenges in reorienting its strategic reformulations and at the same time maintaining its strategic autonomy.

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Afghanistan on the one hand and the US strategy to contain China, seek assistance from Pakistan to fight international terrorism and shape smooth transition in Afghanistan on the other hand, place India at the centre-stage of the happenings. Given the current circumstances, no doubt, India is not only poised to play an important role in its region but also, at the same time, it possesses the necessary leverage to shape the strategic and security framework in the region either by siding with China or aligning with the US. However, both the permutations would pose serious challenges to India's long term strategic calculations.

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Geo-Strategic Antecedents

Thanks to Mahatma Gandhi's strategy of non-violence and *satyagrah* (insistence on truth). India got independence with a handshake and without any blood-shed. Based on this peaceful perception, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru shaped independent India's strategic perceptions on five principles, *panchsheel*.¹ Admittedly, it was an idealist and moralist approach based on the premise that no country would be aggressive towards a peace-loving country like India. However, not understanding the heat and rigour of the Cold War, India's idealistic strategic perceptions proved to be short lived.

India was caught unaware in 1962 when China invaded India. This situation shuddered the Indian leadership to do some serious thinking about self-defence and national security and evolve a pragmatic and rational strategic approach. While busy in discussions to make a shift from idealistic to evolving ground realities, the regional scenario changed swiftly with China's conduct of nuclear tests in 1964 and Pakistan's attack on India in 1965. Though India caught unaware again but these developments proved benchmark in drafting an appropriate regional strategic policy. In the process, India not only developed an effective naval defence strategy but also expanded its naval presence in the Eastern and Western commands, in addition to expanding the existing air base system. This strategy bore fruit which was visible in the 1971 India-Pakistan war, when India not only disabled the Karachi Harbour (headquarters of Pakistan's naval fleet) but also, notwithstanding the US despatch of the nuclear-

1 Principles included mutual respect for each-other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; non-aggression; non-intervention in each other's domestic affairs; mutual benefit and equality; and peaceful coexistence.

armed USS Enterprise into the Bay of Bengal as a show of support to Pakistan under Mutual Assistance Agreement, facilitated carving out Bangladesh from Pakistan's map.²

The 1971 war with Pakistan proved bench-mark for Indian leadership in understanding the realities of the Cold War politics and strategic underpinnings. Pakistan, a close ally of the US after defeat from India and being ditched by the US, initiated measures to develop cordiality with China. Subsequently, increase in the US economic and military aid to Pakistan to repair the strained ties, Pakistan's active but covert support to terrorism in Punjab and Kashmir³ and China's clandestine support to insurgency in the north-eastern region of India,⁴ all highlighted India's susceptibility. To counter the evolving strategic challenges, India signed a 20-year Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. Considering the evolving US-Pak-China nexus, it was imperative for India to chalk out long term strategies to face its hostile neighbours and at the same time, face the rigours of the super powers Cold War rivalry. Thus after signing the Friendship Treaty, India not only conducted nuclear tests in 1974, but also initiated manufacture of essential defence equipments. Subsequently, India signalled to the outside world that it was prepared to meet the challenges of any risk to its security both on its borders and in the Indian Ocean.

With the turn of the events, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, the US supplied sophisticated arms and weapons to Pakistan for use in Afghanistan against the Soviet influence. However, to avenge the liberation of Bangladesh, Pakistan diverted these weapons to flex its muscles against India with a motive to liberate Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) from India.⁵ Subsequently, China's sale of nuclear weapons to Pakistan, China's acquisition of ballistic missiles, enhanced air force capacity and the expansion of its naval power not only raised serious concerns in New Delhi but made the situation vulnerable for India.

In its defence, India conducted five nuclear tests in May 1998 to develop a full-fledged nuclear deterrence strategy. Though serious concerns were raised by India's neighbours and the Western world but India justified the nuclear tests on the ground that: "In the absence of global nuclear disarmament, India's

2 Jaswant Singh and S.P. Bhatia, *Conflict and Diplomacy: US and the Birth of Bangladesh-Pakistan Divides*, New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2008, p. 133.

3 Irfan Waheed Usmani, "Bleeding Wound: Analysing Pakistan's Kashmir Policy (1989-95)," *The Historian* (Lahore), vol. 7, no. 1, January-June 2009, p. 26.

4 Lt. Gen. J.R. Mukherjee, *An Insiders Experience of Insurgency in India's North-East*, London: Anthem Press, 2005, pp. 88-89.

5 J.N. Dixit, *India's Foreign Policy: Challenges of Terrorism-Fashioning New Interstate Equations*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2002, pp. 35-36.