

# OPTIMAL NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR SAFEGUARDING AND FURTHERING INDIA'S SECURITY INTERESTS

SUNIL KUMAR

## NATIONAL STRATEGY

According to Williamson Murray, et. al., and for the purpose of this paper, national strategy or grand strategy can be defined as: "A state's strategy of how means (military and non-military) can be used to advance and achieve national interests in the long-term. Issues of grand strategy typically include the choice of military doctrine, force structure and alliances, as well as economic relations, diplomatic behaviour, and methods to extract or mobilize resources. It is, thus, a state's strategy of how means can be used to advance and achieve national interests in the long-term."<sup>1</sup>

## Components of National Strategy

Rather than obsessing over the precise definitions and utility of grand strategy, it will be more useful to look at a framework which helps us in breaking it down into comprehensible components, for

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Colonel **G Sunil Kumar** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

ease of formulation and subsequent analysis. The article “Grand Strategy-Fundamental Considerations”, by F G Hoffman in the US think-tank Foreign Policy Research Institute’s journal, *Orbis*, helps us in constructing this framework. He says, “A grand strategy ensures that policy and strategic machinery are aligned and in good working order. Strategy should purposely link policy aims to competitive ways, with sustainable means. The eight fundamental considerations for framing an effective national strategy are Culture and Context, Constraints, Compromise and Consensus by Council, Competitiveness, Coherence, Contingency, Continuous Assessment/Adaptation and Communication”.<sup>2</sup> This paper would, thus, attempt to suggest an optimised Indian national strategy based on these considerations.

### **SECURITY ANALYSIS**

After having identified a framework, it would be useful to examine the security concerns facing modern India. These can be categorised as military conflicts (conventional and grey zone, including insurgency), cyber security, economic/trade security, internal security (internal socio-cultural conflicts, including illegal immigration and religious extremism), external diplomatic conflicts, nuclear deterrence, energy security, climate change, political stability, etc. Rather than analysing these individually, it would be apt to analyse the security concerns of India through the aforementioned national strategy framework, for arriving at a national strategy, to optimally address our security concerns.

### **CULTURE AND CONTEXT**

As per Hoffman, “Context is the basis for strategy, providing a grasp of the strategic and operational environment in which one’s strategy is to be conducted. The sources of context we should seek to understand are the political, military, socio-cultural, geographic, technological, and historical contexts. Comprehending the strategic context frames our understanding of our adversary and the particular environment

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2. F. G Hoffman, “Grand Strategy: The Fundamental Considerations.” *Orbis*, vol. 58, issue 4, 2014, pp. 472-485.

in which our strategies must operate within. Strategic culture is also a useful starting point for self-awareness".<sup>3</sup>

### **GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT**

Geographically, India enjoys a pivotal location as the south-central peninsula of Asia, astride the trans-Indian Ocean routes, which connect the European countries in the West and the countries of East Asia. It is, thus, an unavoidable and critical link in the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) network of the world. The Indian Ocean is a key arena for the movement of oil and goods from around the world. It covers about 20 percent of the world's water surface, a quarter of the world's landmass, and three-quarters of global oil reserves, iron, and tin. Around 80 percent of the world's maritime oil and 9.84 billion tons of cargo pass through the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) annually. Overall, India is both the largest import and export economy in the region. The projected growth of manufacturing and industry in Asia will continue to drive a demand for raw materials and value-added industrial products, bringing the region's trade routes, choke points, and geography into greater importance. As the region's economic significance increases, so does its vulnerability to maritime crime.<sup>4</sup> Independent anti-piracy operations by India in the IOR, while showcasing its prowess as an eminent military power, have also projected it as a prominent regional player which can help counter-balance China's hegemonistic designs in the Indo-Pacific. This status should be further enhanced through increased military cooperation and greater interactions in regional fora such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD).

Geography also affords India natural security. The ocean to the south and Himalayas in the north and northeast afford India an island nation's security in the southern peninsular region and extreme terrain-friction induced security to its northern and northeastern regions respectively. The Hindukush ranges in Afghanistan also

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3. Hoffman, n. 2.

4. Darshana M. Baruah, Nitya Labh, and Jessica Greely. "Mapping the Indian Ocean Region," [www.carnegieendowment.org](https://www.carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean). June 15, 2023, <https://www.carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean>. Accessed on August 28, 2024.

act as natural barriers in the northwest, thus, narrowing the routes of ingress into India through the Indus plains in Pakistan, in the northwest. This relative geographical security afforded to India has, however, been diluted by the unresolved border issues with Pakistan and China, drawing an avoidable cost in terms of excessive monetary expenditure for extended and continuous deployment of substantial military resources in these challenging and difficult mountainous terrains. It is, thus, in our national interest to deploy diplomatic and political means to arrive at mutually agreeable solutions to these border issues so that this excessive expenditure can be reduced considerably and redeployed for other economically productive development activities.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### *Pakistan*

Historically, India has always had strained relations with Pakistan. The underlying reasons include the religious underpinnings of the creation of Pakistan and the legacy of the prominent role essayed by its army in politics, which uses the bogey of India as an existential threat to keep the pot of strained relations boiling, for its own selfish intents. Any military solution can only be sustainable if it has political support. The issue of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is a major bone of contention between the two nations and it is unlikely that they would be amenable to any concessions in resolving this issue. A mutually agreed resolution to demarcate the existing Line of Control (LoC) as the International Border (IB) seems to be the most practical and least disruptive solution, as it already conforms to the current ground situation. This would, however, involve consistent and sustained political and diplomatic efforts, by evolving consensus and also convincing their respective domestic populations, to accept this mutually beneficial outcome.

### *China*

India historically had a friendly and cooperative relationship with China up to 1959, when the Dalai Lama crossed over into India and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile was set up in Dharmshala.

The environment of distrust and misunderstandings leading to the humiliating defeat of 1962, pushed this relationship further into enmity and suspicion. China has since then annexed Aksai Chin (claimed by India as its own) and claimed ownership of parts of northeast India (Arunachal Pradesh). It has also chosen to aid Pakistan in fomenting trouble in J&K, using proxy war. It has kept the Indian Army excessively committed along the northeastern and northern (Ladakh) regions through border skirmishes. What China has managed to achieve through this strategy is to divert India's attention from its Achilles heel i.e. the trade routes through the Indian Ocean, over which India holds sway, by forcing India to concentrate excessively on its continental problems and committing excessive land force resources in a costly, defensive posture across its entire northern and eastern borders.

It is in India's interest to engage with China to resolve the border issues and achieve demarcation of its boundaries in the northeast and Ladakh regions. With the South China region witnessing intense contestation, requiring greater attention and resource deployment by China, and its fear of Islamic religious influence in Xinjiang, India should manoeuvre to use these geopolitically favourable factors to convince China that an amicable settlement of the border issues, resulting in freeing up of military resources on both sides, is in China's interest as well. The weak economic and military condition of Pakistan and the increased Islamic radicalisation, with the additional stress of the sensitive Xinjiang issue, provide India an ideal opportunity to engage with China for resolving the border issue in a pragmatic manner.

Simultaneously/alternatively, till a resolution is obtained, India needs to maintain/enhance its military force profile (including in the maritime domain), forcing China to commit greater military resources against India, entailing higher economic cost, should it choose to follow the path of confrontation. India and China comprise two of the largest markets of the world, and with increased isolationism being practised by the Western nations, entailing onshoring of manufacturing in the respective countries, and limited market access to other nations, both countries stand to gain by engaging with each other in evolving a mutually acceptable

and beneficial trade agreement. This increased interdependence is likely to create more amenable conditions for the settlement of the border issues. The recent breakthrough agreement on patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh is a step in this direction. This agreement includes coordinated weekly patrols in the Demchok and Depsang areas, marking a step towards de-escalation and improved bilateral relations.

### *Other Neighbouring Countries*

India has generally had a benign and friendly relationship with its other neighbours such as Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. These relationships have been fostered on goodwill and mutually beneficial trade, economic and cultural ties although, at times, the domestic politics in some of these countries (Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, etc) may lead to strain in the relations. Geographic proximity, democratic and fair dealings and mutual trust should be used as tools to reinforce the bonds of friendship. Continuous engagement and reiteration of the dangers of a skewed, economically dependent alliance with China, likely to cause indebtedness and subservience to Chinese military and economic interests, are essential to strengthen these relations. A big brotherly, contemptuous or indifferent attitude on India's part would only serve to weaken these bonds and push these countries to look for other allies, especially China.

Deeper military relations, joint training, export of military hardware, assistance in regional security (especially in the maritime domain), enhanced economic interdependence through tourism (medical, educational, recreational, etc), cultural exchanges (Buddhism as a bond), greater trade, etc are perennial, subtle and deep-rooted means to achieve sustainable relationships. Strong measures for dispute resolution should be used only after exhausting all other means of reconciliation. Extension of UPI (Unified Payments Interface), a seamless and integrated financial network with these countries can also strengthen bonds of friendship. India should endeavour to reinforce the idea that it seeks to prosper inclusively. Our cultural ethos of *Bahujana Hitaya, Bahujana Sukhaya* (welfare

and prosperity to the many), *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the whole world being a single family), etc are apt references in this regard. These should be contrasted against the policies of some other nations (China) which seek to achieve prosperity through exploitation and manipulation, with least regard for the welfare or long-term prospects of the other smaller nations with which they ally. Favourable socio-economic and cultural attributes such as welfare of the society, restraint, religious tolerance and secularism, *dharma* (righteousness, morality, religion, responsibility, and duty) comprise the strategic culture of India. These, reinforced by a strong and capable military, should form the medium of engagement with our allies and foes. This firm and balanced approach would avoid many diplomatic conflicts and create a conducive security environment in the region.

India's COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy, known as "Vaccine Maitri" (meaning friendship), is one such example. Being the world's largest vaccine manufacturer, producing over 60 percent of global vaccines, this capacity allowed India to play a crucial role in global vaccine distribution. India donated millions of vaccine doses to neighbouring countries and other regions in need, including Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and several African and Latin American countries. By doing this, India aimed to strengthen its diplomatic ties and enhance its influence in the region. This approach was also aimed at countering China's influence, which also engaged in vaccine diplomacy.

Other such examples also include India's assistance to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, especially in crises. During Sri Lanka's economic crisis, India provided a comprehensive support package, including food, health, energy security, and foreign reserves support amounting to more than \$3.5 billion on mutually favourable terms. India has historically been a first responder to crises in the Maldives, providing immediate assistance during events such as the 1988 coup attempt and the 2004 tsunami. Recently, India announced an aid package of over \$800 million to help the Maldives address its foreign exchange crisis. India's economic assistance to Sri Lanka and the Maldives underscores its commitment to regional stability, development, and strategic partnerships in a mutually beneficial manner.

## TECHNOLOGY

In the context of technology, India is an emerging power, however, there is a large gap between India, China and the USA. China has already got a headstart of a decade vis-a-vis India by kick-starting its economic liberalisation programme in the 1980s. It has further increased the technology gap by engaging intensively with the USA and other Western nations for technology collaborations for extensive manufacturing in China. This period has been utilised by China for developing its own Research and Development (R&D) eco-system and creating educational institutions of eminence with added emphasis on research and higher studies. It is already looking to supplant the West in certain niche technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), cyber domain, rare earths, manufacturing, etc as the leading light of the world. A similar path appears suitable for India as well, especially now, when the Western nations are looking at the China plus One manufacturing policy to hedge their bets. India should definitely speed up indigenous chip manufacturing and design, as it has far-reaching security implications, besides the economic benefits which accrue automatically.

## CONSTRAINTS

As per Hoffman, "One makes strategy and executes it in the real world, and the real world is an environment in which constraints are almost always operative. The most obvious of which are time, information and resources. National strategies are longer term, but their implementation is still guided by time limits. There is generally not enough time to make deliberative steps and there are advantages to preempt one's adversary in the temporal dimension by anticipating, deciding and action, with time as a precious resource."<sup>5</sup>

In terms of 'time', India needs to speed up its reforms in education, socio-economic development and technology advance, in order to best utilise its demographic advantage (lasting up to 2055-56, with a peak in 2041) vis-à-vis China and other developed nations. It has to do this with limited economic and other resources, while trying to balance the needs of the socio-economic and security systems. The constraints of the information gap can best be ameliorated by

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5. Hoffman, n. 2.

realistic, long-term planning, reducing dependence on other countries developing own manufacturing industry, taking the Information Technology (IT) services industry to the next level through in-house R&D (especially in design and higher level IT-enabled services) and reducing overdependence on other countries for sourcing raw materials, through engagement with multiple sources and developing own sources within the country, especially in critical resources such as rare earths.

### **COMPROMISE AND CONSENSUS BY COUNCIL**

As per Hoffman, "Strategies are usually the product of negotiation and compromise, and these compromises are hammered out in councils of war and dialogue. These can be contested debates of collaborative or creative confrontation. Too often the edges of risk, assumptions and alternatives are watered down at lower levels. Leaders should ensure that clear alternatives and debates are used productively to fully examine true options."<sup>6</sup>

This principle essentially points towards a broad-based consultative process to arrive at an optimised national strategy which encompasses the aspirations of all its independent constituents, while balancing aspirations with available means, and providing an integrated approach to ensure that all of them are pulling in the same direction. In terms of India's security requirements, it entails civil-military fusion. There is huge scope for improving the current civil-military relations and elevating these to the level of civil-military fusion. The creation of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) is the step in the right direction but its powers need to be enhanced considerably to make the decision-making process faster and more streamlined. Theaterisation, enhanced civil-military interactions in development of military technology, increased involvement of military practitioners in policy-making, etc will serve to hasten this process. India also needs to look at lateral entries of domain specialists in staff and advisory roles in the military to intensify and speed up the civil-military fusion process.

The defence industry, with added emphasis on indigenisation of military equipment and other resources, can play a major role in

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6. Ibid.

the economic development of the nation by fostering cutting edge R&D and greater investment. This virtuous cycle of 'civil-military interaction, product design, product manufacture and maintenance' would, thus, enable overall socio-economic development, while ensuring the enhanced security profile of the nation.

### **COMPETITIVENESS**

"A strategy must be competitive. National strategies should be based on the need to define, create and sustain a competitive advantage, relative to the opponent or the environment. Competitive strategies seek to frame the contest to our advantage rather than play by someone else's rules."<sup>7</sup>

The favourable demographic profile, security advantages due to strategic geographic location, improving socio-economic parameters and aspirations of people transforming India into one of the fastest and largest developing market, inherent strengths of being the largest democracy of the world, professional and strong armed forces, aspirational and well-structured green energy transition plan, etc are some of the major competitive edges which India currently enjoys. It should leverage and strengthen each of these advantages in a holistic and integrated manner. India's current policy of issue-based/strategic alliances is a pragmatic approach in this regard. Our advantage is human capital and we must strive to utilise it in the best possible manner by framing strategy which emphasises human resource development by creating an enabling environment for quality education, equal opportunities and seamless facilitation of entrepreneurship. The state has to take the lead by investing heavily in the creation of modern IT, communication, transport, electric and water utility infrastructures. Creation of modern educational and medical institutions is also a step in the right direction. Having our own benchmarks (standards), especially in critical areas such as the cyber domain, finance, security, etc, in line with overall worldwide trends, will help us in setting industry standards and achieving self-sufficiency in design and manufacture, further enhancing competitiveness. Human resource development and better quality of

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7. Ibid.

life are the most effective counters to internal/domestic unrest and, thus, an effective hedge against internal security problems as well.

### **COHERENCE**

The fifth consideration is coherence. "It involves consistency in the logic that binds ends/ways/means. The enduring formula of ends/ways/means must be logically and coherently linked. If a strategy employs a 'way' that is inconsistent with policy, or if policy-makers provide too little means, then it lacks coherence. The prospects for success are very suspect if coherence is not sustained."<sup>8</sup>

For India, a long-term integrated strategy is a must to achieve coherence. Its developmental aspirations are inextricably intertwined with its security considerations. The right balance in resource allocation, based on current and future economic means shall decide the time needed for achieving our national goal of becoming a developed nation. A right mix of indigenisation, import of cutting-edge military platforms followed by licensed production and independent product design, manufacture and export should be our policy in this regard. Framing realistically aspirational General Staff Qualitative Requirements (GSQRs) constant interactions with, and handholding of, industry partners, R&D through educational institutes of eminence, etc shall help to improve coherence in security policy and optimise efforts.

### **NUCLEAR DETERRENCE, ENERGY SECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

The present policy of "no first use" of nuclear weapons is a balanced and apt nuclear doctrine for India to follow in its current circumstances. Enhanced nuclear power generation, along with progressive increase in renewable sources of power production (solar, green hydrogen, hydro, wind, etc) can, however, reduce dependence on oil and coal, thus, ensuring greater and sustainable, energy security. India has embarked on an aspirational journey to increase the contribution of non-fossil fuels in energy generation to 50 percent by 2030. These measures would also help fight climate change. India's ranking in the Climate Change Performance Index

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8. Ibid.

has improved significantly from 31st position in 2014 to 7th position in 2023. Production Linked Incentives (PLIs) for the green energy sectors and aggressive development of green hydrogen technologies will enable India to achieve a leadership position in this field. Sustainable development is a key to mitigate and eliminate climate change risks in our developmental journey.

### **CONTINGENCY, CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT/ADAPTATION AND COMMUNICATION**

A written national security policy is strongly recommended. It, in no way, implies rigidity, as it would have to be subject to regular review (at least on a bi-annual basis). The changed geopolitical landscape may necessitate tweaking at a later date. However, conformity to broad principles laid down in the policy would continue to hold. This, in turn, would act as a source for other national policies such as economic, external relations, industry policy, etc to draw inferences in their respective formulations, while ensuring coherence of purpose and economy of effort.

### **CONCLUSION**

The geographical advantages of a pivotal location in the IOR and natural security afforded by mountains on our borders, need to be leveraged by amicably resolving border disputes with all our neighbouring nations. A strong blue-water navy and potent air power need to be deployed for effective domination of the SLOCs passing through the Indian Ocean. This needs to be extended into the Indo-Pacific through bilateral and multilateral maritime cooperation and partnerships with like-minded countries such as Australia, Japan, the USA, Philippines, etc. India's foreign policy of strategic alliances, with case-based support to international issues, on its own terms, has helped to cement its role as a *Vishwabandhu*. Following this path seems to be beneficial for India currently. It should try to reinforce its image as a benevolent partner in the immediate neighbourhood while deriving strategic advantages through mutually beneficial defence and diplomatic engagements.

Creation of eminent institutes of higher education, with emphasis on research and innovation and fostering a healthy and competitive

entrepreneur eco-system, are India's ticket to self-reliance. This *Aatmnirbharata* in design and manufacture, especially in critical technologies such as semi-conductor chips, defence and space technology, etc, is indispensable for ensuring our national security. The mega PLI schemes for large semi-conductor chip projects and manufacture of critical electronic components by the government is a step in the right direction. A diversified, multi-source, raw material sourcing plan, development of alternate green energy sources and intensifying exploration and development of indigenous energy sources (including nuclear power) are critical for increasing redundancies and reducing vulnerabilities in the domain of energy security.

For India to realise its national security goals, it needs to seriously consider having a written national security policy, enumerating the general principles of engagement, while creating structures and institutions to implement it. The policy needs to incorporate our competitive advantages, as discussed above, and leverage these to offset our constraints through a balanced allocation of resources. This is essential to ensure coherence and commonality of purpose through optimisation of effort by dovetailing other long-term policies with the national security policy. Creation of the DMA, rapid infrastructure development in the border areas, concerted push to indigenise defence and space technology, etc are good initiatives in this regard.