12

INDIAN SECURITY PERSPECTIVES

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Any discussion on security perspectives should be preceded by attempting an answer to the question—security of what? Like in any other nation state the concept of security involved the preservation and perpetuation of the core values fundamental to the Indian state; values revolving around democratic norms, secular society, federal polity, moral and ethical values, fundamental human rights and above all national strength and power. These values had shaped the Indian civilisation; and they provide the foundations on which modern India can be built by taking into account the historical socio-economic conditions in the country. Given the pluralistic character of the society, socio-economic inequalities and the regional disparities at the time of Indian independence, it is only through the adoption and pursuit of these values that internal dissonances could be resolved within reasonable limits. This is why these core values are enshrined in the Constitution; and Indian security perceptions revolve around these core values.¹

I

Since the second half of 1980s there is a growing realization among the western strategic community about India emerging as a regional power in the South Asian context. This found reflection in statements made by important officials of successive US administrations. Such an open admission by the US was viewed by the Indian strategic community with a feeling that at long last the

¹ Jasjit Singh, Strategic and Security Perspectives of India (Unpublished).
global community is acknowledging India’s pre-eminence in South Asia.

However, a strange thing seems to have happened since then. When the print media started writing about the emergence of India as a ‘regional power’ or ‘mini super power’, there is an all round denial from the highest political authority in the country to an average intellectual. This trend in the print media started around mid-1989; and denials at regular intervals followed it first by the intelligentsia and then by the Prime Minister’s statement in September 1989, that India has no desire to become a super power.

In any discussion of this nature foremost point to be noted is the peculiarities of the Indian subcontinent. India, with almost the size of a continent is surrounded by small neighbours. While India, immediately after independence, started nation building with definite political institution, the same cannot be said about others with the exception of Bhutan and Maldives. Lastly, India was fortunate enough to have a galaxy of charismatic leaders during the 1950s and 1960s to nurture the politico-social values enshrined in the Constitution. The same cannot be said about India’s neighbours. In addition history and geography gave India a pre-eminent position in the Indian subcontinent; and the Indian economic base is vast and all encompassing compared to its neighbours. In other words, a classic case of big power-small power syndrome operates in the Indian subcontinent.

If one accepts the idea of big power-small power syndrome in South Asia with all its diversities, many of the irritants that crop
up from time to time can be explained. When the big power is demonstratively weak like in 1962 after the Sino-Indian war, small powers try to resolve bilateral disputes through use of force like it happened in 1965 and 1971. If we go by conventional wisdom of force levels and military superiority, both 1965 and 1971 wars should not have been fought.

The absence of any major military conflict during the last 17 years in the Indian subcontinent is demonstrative of the fact that India won a decisive victory in 1971 armed conflict; and periodic power projection since then brought in certain amount of stability to the region.

II

The immediate question that arises is how India is projecting its power; and what signals it is conveying to others. According to Ross H. Munro in his article 'Super Power Making' in *Time* (3 April 1989), India's power projection can be understood by five major actions in the 1980s:

—Siachen Glacier incident in 1984 *vis-a-vis* Pakistan

—Sumdorong Chung Valley incident in Arunachal Pradesh *vis-a-vis* China

—Operation Brasstacks

—Sending Indian Peace Keeping Force to Sri Lanka

—India sending its military power to the assistance of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in Maldives.

The second and equally important point Ross H. Munro makes is that of India's quest for military modernization as reflected in increased defense expenditure during 1984-88; and the weapon acquisition and development programme.

The first three incidents - Siachen Glacier, Sumdorong Chung Valley incident and Pakistani response to Indian military exercises operation Brasstacks - were obviously efforts by Pakistan and China to take advantage of fragile domestic situation in India. The simmering Punjab problem culminating in operation Blue Star in 1984 to flush out militants in Punjab, followed by the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister and the swearing in of new government under Rajiv Gandhi—all created doubts in the minds of neighbours
about New Delhi's capability to respond decisively. Apparently, the ruling elite in Pakistan during this period could have easily adopted the same deescalation measures after the Indian response, before also. For instance, when Pakistan was driven out of Siachen, the then President of Pakistan, Zia ul-Haq declared Siachen as a waste land where even grass does not grow. Similarly, during the operation Brasstacks, the Pakistanis moved two armoured brigades to the forward positions in Punjab sector, resulting in massive Indian response all along the Indo-Pak border and this forced Pakistan to defuse the situation by asking for a meeting at the Foreign Secretary level. The proposal was readily accepted by India. In fact, one wonders, why Pakistan, if it had any misapprehension about the proposed military exercises Brasstacks, has not adopted the approach of bilateral negotiations, before thinking of military response at the first instance itself.

India's sending of Peace Keeping Force to Sri Lanka in July 1987 is a separate case by itself. Unlike the US in Vietnam and Soviet Union in Afghanistan, India sent its armed forces to Sri Lanka to protect its territorial integrity and the duly elected government. India has done so in the past in Sri Lanka in April 1971 to protect the elected government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Colombo. Of course there was a token participation from some of the other Commonwealth countries along with India in 1971.

In 1987 Indian troops alone went into Sri Lanka under the Indo-Sri Lankan Treaty of July 1987; and are withdrawing on consent of both the contracting parties, India and Sri Lanka felt that a reasonable amount of neutralisation of Tamil militants demanding 'Eelam' was achieved.

Indian assistance to Maldives has been swift and successful. In fact the speed with which India went to the assistance of Maldivians raised some totally unnecessary apprehensions in some quarters. Surprisingly, no one questioned India's legitimacy in assisting M. A. Gayoom to put down the coup attempts.

From the above analysis one can draw three broad conclusions:

— India has not shown any expansionist tendencies as apprehended by the strategic community in the smaller neighbourhood. A detailed examination of the documents pertaining to the period of Indian independence shows that the often cited Sikkim case of 1975 does not stand any scrutiny. More than
that Sikkim's absorption into the mainstream political process of the Republic since then shows the futility of this argument.

Secondly, there is consistency in India's policy of assisting their smaller neighbours in moments of national crisis - Burma, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Maldives. In retrospect one can see certain amount of continuity in Indian policy.

Lastly, Indian polity which is in transition is trying to provide a stable security environment to the extent possible.

This leads us to the next question why a section of Indian elite is unwilling to accept the pre-eminent position which history and geography have conferred on her. One explanation could be the traditional underplaying of virtues among a section of the elite, a typical characteristic of the subcontinental civilisation. Another explanation could be the usual caution, as like any other society in transition, there are many contradictions still in Indian polity which are yet to be resolved before India can consider itself as a regional power in the strict sense of the term. A third explanation could be that a section of Indian intelligentsia's psyche finds 42 years of independence too short a time in a nation's history, after over 200 years of colonial legacy, to assume the mantle of leadership of the entire subcontinent.

These socio-philosophical interpretations apart, some of the stark facts and figures quoted in this regard need to be noted. Indian economy for a variety of reasons got stuck with Hindu growth rate of 3.5 to 4.0 percent since 1950; and even after 35 years of planned development 37-38 percent of the population live below the poverty line. The 1980s also witnessed the debt burden to Rs 52,000 crores (roughly in US dollar terms 3.5 billion); and if corrective measures are not taken immediately India may fall into the trap of proverbial Latin American economies. The precarious balance of payments position in 1989 further reinforces this argument.

The intelligentsia advancing this argument forget the fact that such aberrations have occurred in the Indian economy from time to time. In fact, the Indian Republic was not able to feed its population in the mid-1960s; and was totally dependent on PL-480 US food aid to feed its population. The balance of payments was much worse then; and in fact at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund the Indian rupee was devalued to boost the exports. More than half the population was living below the poverty line.
When the Indian economy was subjected to such stresses and strains, it bounced back on food front with the Green Revolution; 17 years later it could voluntarily surrender IMF loan; and Indian economy withstood global inflation remarkably well. The people living below the poverty line came down from over 50 percent to less than 40 per cent as per the current estimates. All this indicates that Indian economy has acquired the necessary resilience; and can withstand stresses and strains without any serious dislocations. In fact, as Jasjit Singh quoted in his paper ‘Strategic and Security Perspectives of India,’ during the next 30 years, India’s Gross National Product is expected to equal or exceed that of every European country with the exception of the Soviet Union. In other words, the Indian economy is not in a shambles as it is being made out to be; and the long term perspectives are looking good. However, the cautioning from this section of the Indian intelligentsia about the Indian economy is needed to act as a check on the political leadership which can go wayward.

This takes us to the next question—the resurgence of subnationalism in India. Basically, the Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir problems can be characterised as the manifestation of this subnationalism; and like in the past, the militants in these provinces started getting support from the external powers. In military parlance one can classify them as low intensity conflicts. A section of the Indian intelligentsia feels that a nation besieged with such problems at regular intervals, cannot claim itself to have completed the nation building process. In such a situation India cannot rate as a regional power.

While there is some truth in this argument, one cannot ignore the fact how India dealt with the Mizo, Naga and Naxalite agitations in the east, and Telengana and DMK agitations in the south. In fact, the successful absorption of the communists into the nation’s democratic process should be considered as unique in the contemporary political history of any nation state in the world. This gives the Indian Republic confidence that it can cope with the current Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir problems.

IV

However, the immediate question that arises is—as we are entering the new decade of 1990s, what would be India’s security concerns
during the next decade? For any crystal gazing of this nature one has to depend on the experience of the 1980s.

The developments in the 1980s show three distinct trends. The use and threat of use of force to resolve the bilateral disputes became totally irrelevant as the 95-month Iraq-Iran war demonstrated. Even before the Iraq-Iran war demonstrated the futility of armed conflict, South Asia enjoyed relative peace since 1972.

At the same time one witnessed any number of low intensity conflicts (LIC) like the company level fighting in Siachen between India and Pakistan. Interestingly, this LIC was accompanied by bilateral discussion at political and military levels. This in a way ensured localisation of the conflict. At the same time, if we keep the Indo-Pak relations aside, India's relationship with all its neighbours followed the familiar pattern of usual ups and downs. Each nation state tried to acquire a pressure point vis-a-vis India and vice-versa.

The resurgence of sub-nationalism and religious fundamentalism surfaced again. As has been mentioned earlier, militancy in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir looms large in front of the decision makers in New Delhi—though qualitatively these are different from the earlier ones like Mizos, Nagas and DMK agitations. The developments in these states during the past few years do pose some challenges to the security of Indian Republic. The situation is undergoing a qualitative change with Punjab acquiring the unique distinction of being the only state in Northern India where elections were held to the Ninth Lok Sabha peacefully. (One cannot miss the striking similarity at this point of the Punjab problem with the DMK agitation in late 1960s). With the change of guard in New Delhi, new political initiatives are being taken; and it will take some time before some of these initiatives get translated into policy and implemented.

An equally important thing is the development in the Socialist Europe and their likely impact on the Indian economy.

In the emerging new setup the trade preferences that India is enjoying, though mutually beneficial, may disappear. With the Soviet rouble getting into free currency category by mid-1990s, the strain on India's limited foreign exchange reserves is going to be substantial. In addition, the concessional aid from the North is depleting in absolute terms; and the developments in Eastern Europe
may necessitate further pruning down. In these circumstances, the
competition for the resources of the members of the Organisation of
Economic Cooperation and Development is going to be intense both
in technology transfers and money.

Lastly, the wave of religious fundamentalism though subsided
partially, does pose a threat to India's secular and plural polity.

To sum up, history and geography conferred a pre- eminent status
on India. There are different interpretations regarding this pre-
eminence.

The last 17 years of developments have shown that India acquired
the needed deterrent capability to make the armed conflict to resolve
bilateral disputes a non-viable proposition. Of course, this is
achieved with considerable amount of goodwill from the neighbours.

With the resurgence of sub-nationalism, the 1990s may witness
LICs. Though these LICs are qualitatively different from the ones
experienced by India since independence, these are not insurmount-
able.

The developments in Europe may have considerable impact on
the Indian economy.

Lastly, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism may pose
fresh threat to India's secular polity.