India's Security Policy:
Ideas, Threats and Capabilities

An admixture of ideas, threats and resources has shaped India's security policies. This paper shows that this combination of factors has produced three distinct phases in their evolution. It also discusses the current security challenges that the country confronts.

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Introduction

What has driven India's security policies and how are they evolving? Looking back at the past 70 years, it is possible to argue that no single factor explains the origins and evolution of the country's security policies. Instead, an amalgam of ideas, responses to threats and the acquisition of capabilities best explains how the country's security policies have progressed. Indeed, it is even possible to outline three distinct phases in the country's defence policies. The initial phase, which had a distinct ideational bias, started under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and almost came to a close after the 1962 Sino-Indian border war. The second phase started shortly thereafter; it had some ideational traces but was mostly threat-driven and lasted until the end of the Cold War. The final and most recent phase began after the Cold War. It

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witnessed a steady jettisoning of ideational commitments, saw an increasing emphasis on meeting threats through the acquisition of a range of capabilities, both conventional and nuclear.

An Era of High Idealism

Even though some analysts have sought to portray Prime Minister Nehru as a closet realist, the evidence is quite overwhelmingly to the contrary. He may well have sought to limit defence expenditures because of two compelling reasons. First, he was acutely concerned about the dangers of Bonapartism in the nascent nation. Second, he was also most attentive to the opportunity costs of defence spending in a poor country. However, as the American scholar of the Indian military, Stephen P Cohen, demonstrated decades ago, Nehru also had significant qualms about the very profession of arms.[2]

His aversion towards military spending was not confined to the domestic realm either. He was keen on hobbling the use of force in the international arena too. To that end, as early as in 1954, he had introduced a resolution in the United Nations General Assembly calling for a "standstill agreement" on all nuclear testing. It is also little known that he commissioned the world's first unclassified study on the effects of nuclear weapons. Also, in an article written in *The New York Times Magazine*, "The Tragic Paradox of Our Age," he had referred to nuclear weapons as "these frightful engines of destruction". Indeed, as is well known, within the Non-Aligned Movement, of which he was a founder, he espoused the cause of universal nuclear disarmament.

The Shock of 1962

Nehru's idealism received its most devastating shock when negotiations broke down in 1960 with the People's Republic of China (PRC) over a border dispute. For complex reasons, outside the scope of this paper, the Chinese People's Liberation Army forces attacked along various points of the Himalayan border in October 1962. Despite their courage and determination, the

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[2] Stephen P Cohen, *The Indian Army : Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Indian forces were hopelessly ill-equipped to cope with this onslaught. Not only were their numbers quite limited, but they also lacked what in common military parlance is referred to as "teeth and tail" – they neither had the requisite firepower nor adequate logistical support. The war proved to be mostly a rout for the Indian army.

Idealism at Bay?

In the wake of this disastrous war, even as it left Nehru a broken man, India embarked upon a sizeable military modernisation process. It chose to raise a million-man army equipped with 10 new mountain divisions, laid the plans for an eventual 45-squadron air force (that goal has yet to be realised) and a modest programme of military modernisation. There was some discussion, especially in parliament, about abandoning non-alignment. However, despite the body blow that Nehru suffered as a consequence of India's abject defeat at the hands of the PRC, few could challenge one of the intellectual cornerstones of India's foreign policy. Though India sought and received assistance from both the United States (US) and the United Kingdom, it would not dispense with this cardinal principle.

Shortly after the terrible outcome of the 1962 war and Nehru's demise in 1964, India's military planners confronted another major exogenous shock. This came in the form of the first Chinese nuclear test in 1964. The PRC's breaching of the nuclear threshold led to a firestorm of debate in the Indian parliament. Once again, there were calls to end India's commitment to non-alignment. Indeed, soon thereafter, efforts were mounted to obtain a nuclear guarantee from the great powers. Despite several overtures to Moscow, London and Washington, these proved to be quite infructuous.

Unable to wholly terminate Nehru's legacy, rebuffed by the great powers in the quest for a nuclear guarantee but faced with a growing perceived threat from the PRC, Nehru's successor, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, authorised the Subterranean Nuclear Explosions Project in 1966. This project would eventually culminate in the Indian nuclear test of 1974.

Shastri's successor, Indira Gandhi, continued to rely on the lofty language of her father. However, under her, two factors increasingly drove Indian defence policy. First, she had, for the most part, a clear sense of external threats and the need to forge policies to cope with them.

Second, she was also quite cognisant of India's own capabilities and their limitations. Faced with these exigencies, and especially as a crisis in East Pakistan unfolded and embroiled India, she forged a treaty with the Soviet Union. The Soviets, in turn, proved to be mostly willing because of the emerging US-PRC nexus under American President Richard Nixon. The treaty not only included a tacit security guarantee, but also ensured a steady supply of weaponry from the Soviet Union at prices that India could afford. Despite her statements to the contrary, India had, for all practical purposes, entered into a period of strategic dependence on the Soviet Union.

This dependence worsened after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. As the Ronald Reagan administration in the US moved to embrace Pakistan to use it as a conduit for supplying weaponry to the Afghan resistance, it also poured substantial amounts of sophisticated weaponry into the country. To restore India's strategic advantages over Pakistan, she was forced to turn to the Soviets for more arms acquisition, thereby deepening India's strategic dependence.

A Requiem for Nonalignment?

The Cold War's very abrupt end delivered yet another exogenous shock to India's defence policy makers. The strategic relationship with the Soviet Union drew to a sudden close as its principal successor state, Russia, evinced little interest in sustaining the generous arms transfer relationship that had existed for so long. Furthermore, India also lost a vital counterweight against the possible revanchist behaviour of the PRC. Finally, it also meant the loss of a veto-wielding superpower at the United Nations Security Council that could protect India from a possible hostile resolution on the Kashmir question.

Simultaneously, the concept of non-alignment, which had remained, at least at a rhetorical level, as an ideological lodestar, retained little significance for India any longer. As a senior Indian policy maker once quipped, "It is a mantra that we have to keep repeating, but whom are you going to be non-aligned against?" The movement would limp along but, for all practical purposes, it had lost any lingering significance in global politics.

Confronted with these dramatic external developments, India had to reconsider some of the fundamental assumptions of its security policy. To that end, India's policy makers sought to improve ties with the US, the sole surviving superpower. However, three issues hampered any quick rapprochement. First, the long years of mutual estrangement during the Cold War had left a substantial residue of distrust in the respective bureaucracies of the two states. Second, the relationship had little substance. India was neither a major investment destination for the US nor a major trading partner, and certainly had few defence ties with it. Third and finally, the two sides had markedly divergent views about India's posture of nuclear ambiguity.

However, the opening up of the Indian economy after a major fiscal crisis in 1991, coupled with resolute Indian diplomacy, did, in considerable measure, help narrow some of the differences with the US. Nonetheless, the two states came to loggerheads over the issue of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Sensing that the CTBT might head towards ratification, and encountering considerable pressure to accede to it, especially from the US, India's policy makers crossed the nuclear Rubicon in May 1998. This decision was momentous but led to a raft of bilateral and multilateral sanctions on India. Only deft Indian diplomacy led to the easing of the sanctions over time.

The Indian nuclear tests exemplified the country's acceptance of the role of material power in international politics. Since then, Indian policy makers, regardless of regime, have steadily expanded India's nuclear forces. They have also fitfully sought to modernise India's conventional forces, providing the country with a much greater strategic reach.

The Challenges Ahead

Curiously enough, the strategic challenges that India confronts are longstanding ones. Its principal adversaries remain the PRC and Pakistan. If anything, the growing strategic ties between India's two major adversaries now pose an enhanced threat to the country. Despite extensive negotiations, India has made little or no headway in resolving the border dispute with the PRC. Worse still, the strategic competition between the two states has spilled over into the naval realm. India now has to contend with the steady naval reach of the PRC. In recent years, the PRC has sought and succeeded, to varying degrees, in establishing naval bridgeheads in Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan and Sri Lanka. To cope with the PRC's expansion of its naval

presence, India has also sought to bolster its naval capabilities. To that end, it has enhanced its presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Simultaneously, it has continued to expand the scope of its naval exercises with the US and Japan.

Beyond the threat from the PRC, India must also deal with Pakistan's use of terrorist forces to undermine its rule in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. Despite the fact that Pakistan adopted this strategy well over a decade ago, India has yet to devise a strategy to effectively deal with it. Consequently, it remains vulnerable to periodic terrorist attacks from Pakistan. To deny Pakistan the opportunity to meddle in the state, India will need to ensure that the domestic sources of discord are adequately addressed. Coupled with such an approach, India will need to devise an effective strategy of deterrence by denial. Otherwise, it will remain exposed to periodic terrorist attacks both in Jammu and Kashmir and elsewhere.

Apart from these two obvious external threats, India faces internal challenges to its security. It has witnessed a recrudescence of Maoist violence over the last decade or so. In part because of its federal structure, it has failed to devise a national strategy to deal with this particular menace. Some Indian states, which have greater resources and better overall institutional capabilities, have been more successful in devising strategies to contain the Maoist threat. Other states have not met with similar success.[3]

Finally, India also remains open to a threats from an entirely new realm. This is the arena of cybersecurity. Already the country has faced a series of cyberattacks. Yet, there appears to be no concerted strategy to fend of such attacks both in the present and the future. This is especially ironic as India is widely seen as a giant in the field of information technology. A failure to address the extant gaps in this particular field could have potentially devastating consequences for the country.

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[3] Sumit Ganguly and William R Thompson, *Ascending India and Its State Capacity: Extraction, Violence, and Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

Conclusion

In the 70 years of independence, India's military capabilities have undergone multiple transformations. A combination of ideas, threats and the concomitant development of capabilities best explains the origins and evolution of India's security policies. With vastly greater material resources at its command, with the past inhibitions on the utility and use of force no longer a part of its core beliefs and with the last inhibitions of military cooperation with the US falling away, the country may be better poised than in the distant or even recent past to cope with the myriad security challenges that loom over its horizon. The key tasks ahead require better coordination of the three branches of its armed forces, streamlining the defence acquisition process and working towards building an indigenous defence industrial base.

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