



DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

VOL. 10 NO. 3

ISSN 2347 - 3703

APRIL-JUNE 2021

- Security Sans Strategy?
Sumit Mukerji
- US Defence of Taiwan: Complexities and Challenges
Anil Chopra
- Assessing the Development and Challenges in
Pakistan's Civil Nuclear Programme
Zoya Akhter Fathima
- Wildfires and Climate Crisis: The Need
for International Cooperation
Megna Suresh and Dhanasree Jayaram
- Rentierism and the West Asian Economies: Case of Qatar
Anu Sharma
- India-US Relations: Convergences and
Divergences under the Biden Administration
Stuti Banerjee
- Deepening Indo-US Maritime Cooperation
in the Indo-Pacific
Rushali Saha
- Indonesia's Foreign Policy: Underlining Factors
of a 'Religious' State
Temjenmeren Ao

Book Review

SECURITY SANS STRATEGY?

SUMIT MUKERJI

INTRODUCTION

The past one year has been tumultuous for India and the world. The rapid spread of the Coronavirus—better designated as COVID-19—created a sort of upheaval amongst humanity not seen by the entire generation. A pandemic of such epic proportions was last seen a century ago when the Spanish Flu ravaged the world and India in particular. In nominal terms it may be considered an acceptable period lapse, but to hope and predict that nothing will happen for the next 100 years would be wishful thinking. Be that as it may, considering the evolvment and effect of other epidemics in the interim period, like AIDS, Ebola, SARS, Swine Flu or Bird Flu, with their spread and containment, one would have thought that the world would be better prepared to confront COVID-19 as it made itself visible across nations. It is probably the speed of transmission, compared to the other epidemics stated above, that could not be predicted, which caused the virus to engulf populations across the world. The threat to security of the population and that of the country was laid bare.

HISTORY, THE TEACHER

But in all this there is a ‘method in the madness’ or, as the more mathematically inclined gentry would say, there is a scientific reason

Air Marshal **Sumit Mukerji** PVSMS SC VSM (Retd) is a former AOC-in-C, HQ, Southern Air Command of the Indian Air Force.

as to why certain parts of the world and within them certain sections of the population are more affected than the others. Demographic distributions and their illustrations have highlighted studies because an epidemic ('affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population') and its bigger avatar, the pandemic ('occurring over a wide geographic area and affecting a significant proportion of the population'), very clearly map their spread and can be tracked. Glancing through history and a look at the effect of epidemics/pandemics on humankind, one will notice that the Bubonic Plague of the 14th century killed more than half the population of some countries and straddled the continents of Asia and Europe. The Bubonic Plague or the 'Black Death', as we have read, resulted in the death of 75-125 million people in Eurasia and Africa, creating major social and economic upheavals which changed the trajectory of development and progress. It was also noticed that the plague affected people in 'waves', the first wave from 1361 to 1363, the second from 1366 to 1367 and the third from 1369 to 1371. The Spanish Flu was declared a pandemic as it ravaged India between 1918 and 1920. It is supposed to have killed 17-18 million people in the country, the maximum among all countries. Was it because of our population density? The Spanish Flu broke out in June 2018 and had spread across the country by August of that year. Its onslaught consisted of three waves and the second wave was the strongest, with the highest mortality rate (was this an ominous sign?). At that time the healthcare system of the country just collapsed because of its inability to meet the medical demands of an afflicted population. This led to increased emotional accusations against the British and the colonial rulers, as they failed to save the millions of lives that perished. It definitely served as a contributor to the independence movement that was growing within.

In the present case of the COVID-19 pandemic, India by itself has not stumbled. In fact, every country has suffered the consequences. The nature of such pandemics has a direct relationship with population, of which we have the most (or almost). Consequently, the need to care for such an enormous number is a matter of concern. But India somehow, historically, has never been overly concerned about its casualties and human life. America, as a nation, went to

war after the 9/11 attack which killed 3,000 people. A couple of train accidents and a quarterly census of road accidents in India would account for that number. Given the huge population liability, the country today finds itself on the back foot to answer a well-informed public (unlike 100 years ago) as to the actions that are being taken to mitigate the hospitalisations and deaths. Was there a plan at all? So, what is the plan? Is the government following the plan on a charted path or is it, seemingly, staggering around like a drunken sailor, wavering from one decision to another? The whole issue becomes more glaring when one sees other nations able to get back on the tramlines and put their house in order—get things moving in an organised and disciplined manner. While the casualties continue, the population is reassured that the government is moving as per some predetermined plan or strategy. A strategy developed and structured as per the nation's anticipated/predicted vulnerabilities, assessed/reassessed and organised over periodic timelines.

COMPOUNDING THE AFFLICTION

As the pandemic manifested itself and was on the rise, early in 2020, the Chinese Army (PLA) crested the Himalayas and made an ominous move along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The Chinese appearing along the LAC and attempting to creep into and occupy areas across the LAC was not a new phenomenon. But what was definitely alarming were the numbers that became visible as the days went by and the sort of back-up firepower that followed. Such a Chinese presence had not been seen since 1962. Thanks to technology, the initial sparring between Indian and Chinese troops was reported back, waking up the system to take a serious look which, having assessed the impending threat, found itself wanting in many areas, both in terms of direct confrontation and in the logistical back-up. Both the teeth and the tail were frayed and devoid of giving a potent response. Was the appearance of such large numbers of PLA a surprise? Was there a failure of intelligence? Who provides the holistic picture? The sudden scramble to get troops up front, redouble the efforts to construct motorable roads for logistic supply, bring in suitable weaponry and air power—"Oh, my God! Let's quickly get the Rafales!"—the whole situation seemed like a circus playing out. A structured approach, as

a threat develops, seemed absurdly missing. Reacting to every input and countering every incoming information appeared a sporadic and ad hoc action to offset the threat in being. Did a holistic strategy exist, notwithstanding the tom-tomming about India being prepared for a two-front war? The limited sector aggression became such a crisis the country had to make contingency arms purchases which must have cost an arm and a leg.

NATIONALISM THE NEED

The security of the country seemed to be on the brink—a country already destabilised and weakened physically, psychologically and economically, faced with naked aggression from a neighbour with diabolic intentions. This is a classic situation when the country needs to unite in a nationalistic fervour and address the problems that have beset the nation. This author was fortunate to have been present in the USA immediately after the 9/11 attacks and three years thereafter. Two days after the attacks on the World Trade Center Towers, when President George W. Bush declared the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), the nationalistic expression of the people of the United States was something to be seen. Cutting across all political, religious, ideological domains, every building was flying the American flag. Every household had purchased a flag which was seen fluttering outside each door. Every car was adorned with a small flag sticking out of the window. The Stars and Stripes were everywhere! Lapel pins and brooches on office and evening wear invariably bore the national flag and any function carried out was festooned with the stars and stripes. It was the biggest display of nationalism and support I had ever seen. When you spoke to the public, they were all focused towards one thing—get the mastermind and eradicate terrorism.

Do we see this sort of nationalistic fervour in our country? Everyone seems to be at loggerheads with each other, the government taking the brunt of the attacks. There does not seem to be any consensus or cohesiveness on any subject. Fuelling the fire for their own benefit, the media in turn blows the issues out of proportion. We pride ourselves on being referred to as “the argumentative Indian” but is that a badge of honour in the hour of need? There seems to be criticism against everything that happens in the country and this is

not restricted to any particular party in power at the centre. If there is any country that needs a comprehensive document to bring about cohesiveness it is ours, and the document that could possibly provide the roadmap to collective and cohesive consensus is the National Security Strategy. A document that has been crafted and drafted by the acknowledged best brains in the country, a document cutting across political, religious and ideological lines, a document that can be considered a fulcrum around which the country can rally, especially in times of crisis. But defining instruments are effective if they are in the public domain, failing which there has to be a charismatic leader and his team of experts who must constantly reassure the population through their visibility and action, straddling whatever media is available to send the message.

The security of the nation does not just imply keeping the borders safe and maintaining our territorial integrity. Factors such as changing geopolitical paradigms, India's strategic vision and ambition to carve out a place for itself in the world order, the perceptible change in the nature of military conflicts and the overriding factor of technology which seems to be driving the nations and their progress, all contribute towards a vision. Like the tentacles of an octopus, issues across various spectrums get drawn into the canvas of national security; those relating to the economy, sociological factors leading to political upheavals, security of energy resources and the huge threat through cyberattacks on a highly networked and information driven world. It is multifaceted and a hugely diverse matrix which becomes even more complex in a nation like India with its incomparable diversity of demographic distribution, ethnic culture, tradition, religion, language, food and economic status.

THE STRATEGY CONSTRUCT

India, like the other major nations has, over the years, made an effort to set up an overarching system that would provide expert advice to the government. A series of organisations like the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), the Committee of Secretaries, the National Strategic Council (NSC), the Strategic Policy Group (SPG) and the National Strategy Advisory Board (NSAB) have been established and populated with prominent personalities, but somehow to the public

they seem ineffective or toothless in the face of emerging scenarios. Either there is a lack of channelisation or inadequacy in adherence to timelines because the nation continues to falter in the face of adversity. Is there no accountability? The SPG which was the principal driver for national security policy formulation has highly eminent persons on its rolls who, along with the lateral contribution of the NSAB and DPC, are more than capable of crafting a National Security Strategy document which could form the basis for action and an assurance to the public that a system for decisive action exists. In the past decade India has seen the flourishing of many respected Think Tanks, and seminars on subjects ranging from the ordinary to those concerning national security are de rigueur. Summaries and recommendations to the government from these Think Tanks provide a steady flow. In brief, there is no shortage of domain expertise across the spectrum or contribution from rational thinkers and strategists for the government to get its act together and spell out its National Security Strategy.

Militaries across the world function a little differently than bureaucrats and politicians because the military is constantly facing the sharp end of the stick and its accountability is high. The essence of National Security being that of self-preservation and protecting sovereignty, necessitates that the military is always well equipped and trained to perform its tasks. But it all works under a plan. Since time factors get compressed in military conflict, the armed forces work out a plan after carrying out an assessment of the situation as it exists and evolves. From a broad spectrum strategic outlook, it is worked out to the lowest tactical level. That is why the military is quick to respond to almost every situation and not found wanting. It also works on the principle of effective leadership with leaders who lead from the front. Adaptability to changed situations is a matter of experience and professionalism. The Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan (LTIPP) allows for a vision for modernisation to meet the predicted nature of likely threat amidst anticipated geopolitical changes. Plans and Appreciations are regularly reviewed and refined by successive Commanders. These appreciations and plans are documented to chart the course of changing paradigms and progress. One sometimes wonders why our national security strategists and organisations cannot function like this.

WAY FORWARD

Technology is the driver and it is spreading across many dimensions while offering the tools and mechanisms to provide and enhance security at all levels and for the benefit of many domains. Computer based 'dashboards' are providing enormous amounts of data and information to allow for effective analysis and decision making. Most of our critical infrastructure can be tagged and moulded onto the information board to not only make individual assessments but also supply solutions for lateral spread and effect into other domains and areas. Our potential to act is directly proportional to capabilities. The government, starting with a set of core values which emanate from the constitution, must be able to identify the likely threats and vulnerabilities in its security constructs. An enunciated set of threats can be modelled against extraneous factors to arrive at possible courses of action that need to be undertaken, from the first responders to the full potential of its capability. Decentralisation through identified competence and placing absolute trust in the executor makes any response viable and effective. Common strands which could lead to spread of a problem to another domain must be identified and addressed along with the main theme.

CONCLUSION

India's diversity sometimes is worse than its uncontrolled population. With a staggering stretch of more than 3,000 km north to south and east to west, with people from one region seemingly foreign to another from a different region, the population of this country really does not display the nationalism that must prevail in times of crisis. The lack of cohesiveness has led to lack of acknowledgement and confidence in the leadership. Insulated in their geographic regions, the populace, mostly with sparse education, reposes confidence in the local leaders who hold sway. Will the sense of nationalism ever penetrate the masses? Without that basic sense of belonging there will never be any allegiance to a leadership and the nation's efforts at providing security for its masses will come to naught. Since public opinion has become such a powerful tool, it is hoped that the educated populace will be able to carry the rest and infuse the assurance that a national security strategy exists, that actions follow a well-thought-

out path and cooperation is the only answer that will bring about the necessary result.

Security and strategy cannot be separate entities. There is an urgent need for the people of India to be assured that a National Security Strategy exists, that there are responsible people overseeing its execution and the country is following a charted path. If this belief and understanding can be instilled, we will overcome panic in crises (like that seen in hospitals for beds and oxygen, in the present case). The fact that a system is in place which can harness the comprehensive national power against a threat is the biggest comfort zone for the citizen. Leadership plays an immense role in times of stress when the chips are down. In the final analysis, the leader must display high moral character and the bottom line would be that the overarching accountability must remain with the leader, whatever be the outcome.