

CHALLENGES OF CHANGING GEOPOLITICS: INDIA'S OPTIONS

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Air Mshl KK Nohwar DG CAPS, former Chiefs, distinguished panelists, and participants from Armed Forces and Civil Services, ladies and gentlemen. A very good morning to you all. As part of the annual Subroto Mukherjee Seminar, in honour of IAF's first Indian Chief of Air Staff (CAS), it is indeed a privilege for me to deliver the Inaugural Address and share my thoughts on a topic that is very contemporary with you all. Forging discussions like these with eminent thinkers from various disciplines allows us to brainstorm and find solutions to further India's national interests in the constantly mutating regional and global environment.

As you all have witnessed, there has been a paradigm change in the geopolitical landscape across the world especially in the last three-four years. We are witnessing shifts in geopolitical tectonics like never before with regional and global powers jostling for larger influence in the emerging world order and increasingly for regional domination and increasingly in our neighbourhood. The challenges and threats that were earlier perceived or assessed and most often dismissed are now making themselves clearly discernible. Being central to the sub-continent, India has high stakes in

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ensuring stability in the regional landscape as well as rightfully gaining its place in the new world order.

The current pandemic has further exacerbated existing inequalities amongst nations, and has undoubtedly been the biggest geopolitical event of the century this far, due to the social, economic and health impacts it has had. Events like these have the potential to change the global order. To quote Lenin “There are decades where nothing happens and there are weeks where decades happen”. I think we all have witnessed the second half of this prophetic quote.

Today, in the emerging global order, interstate relations have become increasingly transactional and perhaps entirely an outcome of interests. It is quite clear that contest and conflict will increasingly characterise the scheme of things, something which is very relevant and visible in our neighbourhood. The world is witnessing a turn of events where we find a rule-based international order challenged by a complex interplay of global forces. It is clear that a policy of contestation is being preferred over traditional tenets of cooperation and collaboration by some countries which has a direct bearing on our security scenario. The coming decade will undoubtedly see these trends increase, and it is against this backdrop of a changing geopolitical setting in which “while diplomacy must remain the primary driver, military capability and the will to give an unexpected and disruptive response will be the prime deterrent”.

Nation-states, who have succeeded in attaining a great power status, did so by achieving dominance over the creation and employment of military power. Military power in that sense is one of the most important components of Comprehensive National Power since it is essential for ensuring deterrence and providing the instruments to a nation for securing its interests. Therefore, if we—as a nation—aspire for peaceful growth and contribute to regional stability, in view of the clear and present security challenges that are manifesting along our borders we have to continue to enhance our military power intelligently and carefully—because of the budget constraints.

Currently there are two major geopolitical developments which are altering the strategic assessments world over. The first being the “growing demonstration of China’s power ” and the second being the “uncertainty of familiar commitment to global security by the US” due to its ‘America First’ policy.

The responses to these twin trends—a more assertive China and a more uncertain US, has been varied among the US allies as well as the countries which have traditionally leaned towards US for politico-military support. With US being firm on reducing its military footprint, the Chinese are aggressively stepping in the strategic spaces that are being vacated by the US and, of course, Pakistan has jumped ships to take advantage of this shifting scenario and remain relevant in Afghanistan.

In the last one month itself there have been two major events which are going to have a huge impact on India’s security policy. The first being the change of guard in the US and the other being US brokered normalisation of ties between Israel and the Arab World. Would the US President elect maintain the policy of a tough stand, or would the US go soft in its approach is what we need to wait and watch. I personally feel that with broad consensus amongst the Americans of the aggressive nature of the approach, the President elect would in all probability retain the current firm policy in dealing with China.

The historic Israel-UAE agreement has paved the way for a complete realignment of the Middle East. Normalisation of relations between the two countries, with whom we have strategic partnerships, would definitely buttress India’s ties further in the region. However, this also provides an excuse for traditional rivals of Israel like Turkey, Iran and Pakistan to strengthen their geopolitical and military alliance further which may have security connotations for India and this is going to be an increasing trend of Turkish technology and equipment being available to Pakistan in particular.

In any case, I strongly feel that ‘one has to fight his own battle’, something that I have shared in earlier forums. The stiff and swift Indian response at Galwan has shown to the other affected countries which were looking up to the global powers to come to their assistance on territorial disputes, that

while you may get moral and diplomatic support, you have to fight on your own. Hence there is a requirement to maintain and sustain own organic capability to fight our wars; we cannot rely on foreign assistance in direct conflict.

Our proactive actions and strong posture was instrumental in dissuading the adversary from making any further attempts to alter the status quo and we remain hopeful that peace and stability will be restored along the LAC through the ongoing dialogue.

On our West, with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) withdrawing from Afghanistan, Pakistan would be keen in getting control in Afghanistan through Taliban. Hence, the Indian armed forces need to stay proactive and alert against increased attempts along the LoC. A state of No War No Peace (NWNP) and emerging threats from adversaries as well as non-state actors shall continue in the foreseeable future.

Towards our south, the increased presence of extra-regional forces in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Indo-Pacific and close to our island territories poses a challenge. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, a huge network of military and commercial facilities is being created. The debt-trap diplomacy to achieve geopolitical goals by ensnaring recipient countries with loans which cannot be repaid has been a subject of debate for long. However, this has allowed foreign created and controlled ports and facilities perilously close to our mainland and island territories.

We must also take into account the emergence of new domains of cyber and space which transcend all aspects of the security paradigm and are massive potential disruptors. While some of these are state controlled, a large majority is ungoverned and in the hands of non-state actors. Most nations are unprepared and vulnerable despite best efforts. Cyber is already the biggest disruptor as it causes disproportionate damage across domains. This instrument is being used by forces inimical to India to malign and damage our reputation globally. Our adversaries are investing a huge amount of effort through cyber warfare and disinformation campaigns to constrain India into a regional power and hold it from playing a larger, more comprehensive global role.

The recent years have seen a transformation in the security paradigm. Our definition of national boundaries has shifted well beyond the classical definitions of land borders, shorelines, etc. We cannot remain chained to our old concepts of fronts—one front and two front wars. The nature and scope of warfare has expanded both in physical and temporal terms. The days of classical static force-on-force conflict, preceded by a clear warning period are over.

In order to address such geopolitical challenges, we have to be ready to swiftly identify a threat, and swiftly respond to counter it appropriately. The immediate aim should be to gain instant asymmetric advantage. Attainment of strategic advantage should be simultaneously pursued. Any force structure in this regard therefore has to be agile, flexible and hard-hitting in order to be effective and be able to respond at short notice.

As India moves ahead in these unpredictable times and navigates its way through the shifting plates of global politics, fundamentals that guide its engagement with rest of the world are undergoing a considerable change. A re-calibration of our national security policies has prompted this change and is based on a clear understanding of a need to secure our national interests through a firm bold strategy in matters of national security.

So what are the options for India? What should be our approach to these changing dynamics? I would primarily identify the important aspects as:

- Growing and aggressive participation by India with all the like-minded partners as a security provider particularly in our region.
- We have to be adequately capable to fight our battles—therefore, build comprehensive national power in which the military capability pillar needs to be focused upon by the defence services.
- Realise the growing importance and inevitability of air power providing the swiftest offensive and conventional deterrent capabilities and IAF needs to build this in our plans.
- Build our capability on indigenous systems because in the emerging scenarios—and in the long run—you can never win if you import your substantial capability.

I will touch upon important aspects of these thoughts.

Engagement with partners in this vast geographic expanse to counter hegemonies is important. Towards this, bilateral and multilateral partnerships are steps in right direction. As part of military diplomacy, the Indian Armed Forces have been shouldering their responsibilities of strengthening bilateral partnerships for peace and security through multiple means with the rim countries of IOR as well as countries in the Indo-Pacific. The IAF has been actively engaged with countries like Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Australia through joint exercises and goodwill visits furthering goodwill between the nations.

Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) has been a historic cooperation agreement between India and Australia which allows reciprocal access to military logistics facilities allowing improved interoperability between the security forces of the two nations. Similar Government-to-Government (G2G) agreements and Quid Pro Quo arrangements between India and rim countries of IOR and Indo-Pacific will help in deepening relationships based on trust and mutual respect and also for countervailing forces detrimental to Indian national security.

Air power is playing a pivotal role in these endeavours since it is best placed to handle dynamic requirements that emanate from ever-present traditional as well as non-traditional security challenges in our region. The inherent flexibility of air power allows prompt response options within often narrow time-frames. The freedom of manoeuvre provided by air and space capabilities enables us to exert influence in a sustainable and easily scalable manner, while minimising collateral damage on the ground.

Our Honourable Prime Minister during his historic keynote address at Shangri La Dialogue-2018 had articulated the key role of India's Armed Forces in building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region for peace and security, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. As a critical tool of national policy, air power plays a key role in not only ensuring regional stability but also enhancing mutual cooperation. Air power, by its nature being offensive

and punitive arm of war fighting, adds element of deterrence in the entire gamut of war fighting. When there is credible deterrence, then nations tend to be responsible in their approach towards neighbours and there is general sense of stability and mutual coexistence. In the current multipolar world, it is very difficult for one nation to assume and claim the role of a regional security provider especially if the area of interest is vast. IAF has the capacity and the capability to respond to any situation in our area of interest.

While we aim to work towards the mutual good of the region, it is important to highlight the overarching offensive capabilities that IAF brings to the table today. IAF has rapidly evolved its air-to-air refuelling (AAR) capability and seamlessly integrated the same in its operational matrix where our reach has extended tremendously. Our expertise in undertaking complex long range operational missions by day and night across diverse fighter platforms is unmatched in this region. As we rapidly integrate new long range stand-off weapons with pinpoint accuracy, IAF can easily undertake precise targeting missions at long distances over targets 3000 km away from our mainland and most of the Indian Ocean Region.

We need to reorient our capability requirements of the near future and we have done that. Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) will be a 5th generation aircraft in terms of platform with a host of 6th generation technologies in sensors, directed energy weapons, networking, AI and ability to handle the sensor to shooter loop including control of UCAVS. We are also envisioning Manned-Unmanned Teaming MUM-T concept involving teaming of manned aircraft with UCAVs in a highly networked air battle scenario. We have inducted smart weapon, and are actively pursuing niche technologies in the field of space based capabilities, Data Link, AI, big data handling, swarm drones and stealth UCAVs.

The knowledge that we are able to kinetically deliver a weapon or a relief pallet swiftly and surely, is a source of concern to our adversaries, and one of comfort to our friends. We will continue to maintain our capabilities and training to remain able to deliver precise and calibrated effect throughout our Area of Responsibility, and touch anywhere in our extended neighbourhood.

This ability, to instantly deliver either a swift blow, or instant assistance, is what will temper adversary's ambition on the one hand, and build trust with our friends on the other.

Like the other big powers, for India to assume a bigger role in the global security apparatus, we need to ride on the pillars of indigenisation and manufacturing. As envisioned by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of an '*Atmanirbhar Bharat*' to make India a self-reliant nation, our indigenous defence industry needs to take the lead. This would also serve as engine for regional economic revival and growth. Aerospace manufacturing sector plays a pivotal role in our quest for self-reliance.

In the cyber domain, there is a need to espouse our sovereign right to frame national policies. A multi stakeholder approach would make cyber governance, stakes in managing internet, hardware employment, etc. multipartite, transparent and open to all. This would let us unveil the "trust deficit" in a domain that is largely managed by organisations contractually affiliated to a single nation.

To conclude, seen through the geopolitical prism of the security forces, India is central to the peace, stability and security in this region. As part of the Comprehensive National Power, air power would remain vital for providing a degree of assurance in strengthening regional peace and security initiatives. A modern air force operating in synergy with the Army and Navy will ensure that India fulfils its role as a net security provider. And the IAF is well poised for significant effort to serve national interests and provide key capabilities for extending a stabilising hand in the region.

Jai Hind!