

INDIA'S RESPONSE STRATEGY TO CHINA-PAKISTAN COLLUSIVITY

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A LIKELY SCENARIO IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

India and Pakistan are celebrating the 75th year of their independence, but their relations have been strained, owing primarily to territorial disputes, and Pakistan's proxy war and terrorism against India. Pakistan has illegally occupied a part of Jammu and Kashmir and the Gilgit-Baltistan area in the Pakistan occupied Ladakh region, which issue has not been resolved to date. India and China had relatively peaceful relations from 1962 till 2020 when the Galwan incident came to the fore. China too has illegally occupied the Aksai Chin area of Ladakh and is not coming to the table to release the Indian land. To resolve these border issues, India has adopted various methods of negotiation and diplomatic efforts to bring a conclusive end to the issue at hand.

However, should there be the use of force as a last resort, the likely scenario emerging in the Indo-China-Pak triangle would require deliberations. Certain questions which may arise based on the experience from the Russia-Ukraine conflict are: Will a military operation be restricted to between India and Pakistan or India and China? Will there be chances of Pakistan and China fighting against India in collusion or collaboration?

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By now, it is evident that Ukraine has been able to withstand the Russian aggression mainly because of the extensive and consistent military supplies provided by the US, European nations, and NATO.

In the case of the Sino-Pak association, will the war be fought with India on a single front or will it manifest into a two-front war? Will other nations outside Asia come out in support of any of the three countries? What could be the Comprehensive Response Strategy (CRS) to resolve these border issues, militarily or otherwise? To analyse these situations in the prevailing geopolitical context, this article attempts to highlight

some of the reasoning and comprehensive response strategy in the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

WEST-UKRAINE COLLUSIVITY

Russia, after having annexed Crimea in 2014, decided to recognise Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine on February 21, 2022. A year and half old invasion, which somehow could not be wrapped up in days and weeks by a technologically and militarily superior and powerful Russia over a much weaker, non-nuclear Ukraine, has posed several questions for military thinkers, planners, and academicians around the world. The failure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the West to come to the forefront in Ukraine's favour, in the beginning, caused Volodymyr Zelensky to gather global support from nearly 150 countries on the grounds of a humanitarian crime and crisis. However, as the war progressed into more than a month, the Ukrainians started getting military aid in terms of war clothing, communication sets, artillery, mortars, unmanned aerial vehicles, armoured vehicles, radars, etc. from the Western world. By now, it is evident that Ukraine has been able to withstand the Russian aggression mainly because of the extensive and consistent military supplies provided by the US, European nations, and NATO. Without their support, it would not have been possible for Ukraine to have given such a fight to the much superior opposition.

India-China-Pakistan Triangle: The triangular relationship among India, China, and Pakistan is of critical importance to regional and global stability. In the case of an Indo-Pak conflict, both India and Pakistan have their cards to play. Pakistan will likely repeat the mistakes of Kashmir and Khalistan, creating internal communal unrest and making the Line of Control (LoC) live again. India can exploit the issues of Balochistan along with exposing Pakistan on the international stage on account of terrorism. China has got no interest in this conundrum except that it wants its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar port to remain unaffected. China is also certain that India, under its current leadership, has a very responsible standing in the world order and, thus, it is better to keep a distance, except to exercise the veto power in favour of Pakistan whenever needed. Notwithstanding, India, with its present military holdings, is fully geared up to fight a single-front war. However, it may not be a cakewalk in the case of two-front scenarios.

China and Pakistan are undoubtedly all-weather friends, and the chances of both countries standing together against India will always remain high. China in the past has always favoured Pakistan on all issues, especially on terrorism, on all occasions.

WHAT COULD BE EXPECTED OF THE CHINA-PAKISTAN NEXUS?

China and Pakistan are undoubtedly all-weather friends, and the chances of both countries standing together against India will always remain high. China in the past has always favoured Pakistan on all issues, especially on terrorism, on all occasions. As Pakistan has become a nuisance to India, so too is China becoming an irresponsible state on the international stage, especially in the Security Council. Though the P5 states have the right to their perspectives or interests, it is of concern, especially in India, when China often exercises its voting rights in favour of Pakistan, especially on the issues of terrorism. In such a case, China could enter into either a collusive or collaborative relationship with Pakistan in a military conflict with India.

Collusivity, which is more covert in nature, will likely be in terms of providing military equipment in all three domains and also for space surveillance and intelligence. Also, reportedly, China has invested in infrastructure development, including in the air base and associated areas in the Gilgit-Baltistan area, which will be one of the important areas to be tackled by India. China has also invested heavily in the Gwadar port and is in control of it. If Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) is to be believed, China has also been in control of important areas opposite Sir Creek for two years or so, though this has not been much in the news in the media or otherwise. Apart from this, the CPEC is functional all along the length of Pakistan, though the Chinese have been facing a public outlash along this route in many places. In November 2022, a high-level Chinese delegation, led by the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, visited Pakistan and met the president, Prime Minister, Bilawal Bhutto, and army chief and vociferously demanded the setting up of security outposts at various places on the CPEC spread over the country. Therefore, it can be concluded that such physical presence will enable ease in the establishment of collusivity at all levels in the case of a conflict. Collusivity between Pakistan and China against India will be mostly Pakistan-led and is here to stay. It is highly unlikely that China would take the mantle of leading the campaign. Hence, India must be cautious about the nature of the collusivity in all its planning and execution of military affairs to mitigate such emerging plans.

China's collaboration with Pakistan against India remains a little doubtful. It cannot, however, be completely ruled out. In a situation of India-Pakistan confrontation, China's direct participation in the war is a remote possibility. In fact, China does not need to adopt this strategy as it would accrue more damage than benefit to it. China understands quite clearly that it may not be supported by any major power in the world if it militarily collaborates with any country. Beijing is quite aware that it is capable of achieving the same effect by a method of collusion rather than collaboration. China also has its hands full with domestic issues, and at this stage, it can ill afford to participate in the war along with Pakistan. Therefore, the ideal way would be to open

up a few fronts at places where the respective versions and perceptions are ambiguous. These places could be from the Aksai Chin area in the north to Kalapani, Doklam, and Arunachal in the eastern sector.

The possibility of China waging a full-fledged war against India as a second front when India is already engaged with Pakistan militarily is remote. Xi Jinping is also certain that India, under the current leadership, has a much more responsible standing in the world arena, and, thus, it is better to maintain the status quo than to have a confrontation. Actions like Galwan, Tawang and prolonged inconclusive decisions in the form of bilateral military and diplomatic efforts appear to be more a way of testing of the waters with India. Meanwhile, China is continuing to build infrastructure for its second artillery force and troop concentrations at high altitudes in order to intelligently mitigate its lesser airlift capability from its airfield opposite India. However, it does not absolve India from maintaining the highest operational preparedness, not only in training but also in terms of the availability of adequate military equipment, infrastructure, and manpower from eastern Ladakh to the northeast areas.

SCENARIO POST CHINA-PAKISTAN COLLUSIVITY

It emerges from the analysis that, in all probability, the China-Pakistan nexus will result in a Pakistan-led confrontation, and China, in all likelihood, would not assume the role of leader. But it will continue to maintain collusivity to the maximum extent. As a result, it is critical to investigate how serious this is for India.

Status of Pakistan: It is a fact that, apart from China, the Islamic states will directly or indirectly extend their support to Pakistan partially, if not wholly, in all its endeavours. China and Turkey would turn out to be the main contributors in terms of providing military aid during the conflict. Pakistan would be on the wrong side of the global reputation and moral support which will become an important factor in the restraining of Pakistan by the rest of the world, resulting in the adoption of negotiations and a ceasefire approach.

India may get support from trusted partners such as the US, France, and Israel (UFI) in getting production and technological capability in the form of military aid during the conflict. However, physical support during the conflict may not take place in the land and air domains and may be restricted in the maritime sphere to the Indian Ocean.

(SAARC) countries, as most of these nations will, in all probability, support India. In such a scenario, India will have to make the CRS keeping all the factors in mind.

Status of India: India may get support from trusted partners such as the US, France, and Israel (UFI) in getting production and technological capability in the form of military aid during the conflict. However, physical support during the conflict may not take place in the land and air domains and may be restricted in the maritime sphere to the Indian Ocean, creating difficulty for China at choke points in the eastern and western Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In such a case, UFI could be considered a likely source of assistance for India. Although India is aiming for a \$5 trillion economy, it would require the economic superpowers to help out economically, during and after the conflict. The United States will, in all probability, be in a position to bail out India, but how much this would fructify in reality is difficult to predict due to India's demonstrated performance

However, it is to be realised with caution that India's position may become difficult when China uses its veto power, as it has been doing in the past in support of Pakistan and terrorism. Though winning the war against India will still be a far-fetched dream, it will be able to increase the difficulty for India in such a scenario. In the case of an escalated scenario, states like North Korea (DPRK) would also join the bandwagon along with China. It needs to be appreciated that China, with its inherent numerical, technological, and economic prowess has the massive capability to turn the tide in its favour. The only factor where it may not succeed completely would be in gathering support from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

and manifested behavioural approach on the geostrategic front during the ongoing Russo-Ukraine conflict. However, India, due to its benign standing in world affairs, will get tremendous support across the globe. In all probability, India will not get the support of its immediate neighbourhood in terms of use of their soil or air space, etc. due to the sole fact that none of the neighbouring countries would like to get involved militarily between India and China, despite giving them moral and ethical support. In totality, it can be deduced that India will be in a comfortable position to deal with its adversary.

It is important to note that any effort to weaken the China-Pakistan nexus requires a comprehensive and long-term approach. It would involve a combination of diplomatic, economic, military, and regional strategies while also considering the broader geopolitical dynamics of the region.

CAN THE CHINA-PAKISTAN NEXUS BE WEAKENED?

The ever-changing geopolitics in South Asia has always kept the security situation in the region volatile. As an important global player in Asia, India deserves a more peaceful environment in the region. One of the probable solutions would be to weaken the China-Pakistan nexus. However, given the present circumstances, geopolitical ties, and historical linkages between them, it would be a complex and challenging task for India. There is no doubt that Pakistan is heavily dependent on China in the economy and defence sectors. It is important to note that any effort to weaken the China-Pakistan nexus requires a comprehensive and long-term approach. It would involve a combination of diplomatic, economic, military, and regional strategies while also considering the broader geopolitical dynamics of the region.

Nevertheless, there are several strategies and approaches that India could consider to pursue this goal. It can strengthen regional alliances with other countries in the region, such as Afghanistan, Iran, and the Central

Asian nations to counter-balance the influence of the China-Pakistan nexus. India can focus on bolstering its economy and attracting foreign investment to become a more attractive alternative to China for Pakistan, thereby enhancing its economic competitiveness in the region. India can also actively counter-balance the influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), by promoting alternative connectivity projects. Initiatives like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar port development in Iran need to be aggressively pursued as effective alternative routes that bypass Pakistan and reduce their strategic significance. India can also strengthen its defence capabilities and maintain credible deterrence against potential threats by investing in advanced military technology and enhancing cooperation with like-minded countries. India can counter the military dimension of the China-Pakistan nexus by closing the gap with the US in the defence and diplomatic arenas. It is essential to approach these strategies with a long-term perspective and an understanding of the complex dynamics in the region. Weakening the China-Pakistan nexus would require sustained efforts, collaboration with other stakeholders, and a careful balance of hard and soft power approaches.

COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE STRATEGY

The analysis outlined above requires a Comprehensive Response Strategy (CRS) at the strategic and national levels to mitigate the emerging threat. It also requires a review at the operational and tactical levels in the military domain. It needs to be understood that international relations are mainly dependent on three factors: geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomics. All other issues, be they nuclear, military, diplomacy, etc., are heavily dependent on these three factors only. So, keeping these factors in mind, certain response actions which India can think of in mitigating the turbulent environment on the continent are elaborated below.

AT THE STRATEGIC LEVEL

Changing Geopolitics: The current geopolitics of the world is under alteration. The theorists of social sciences have mainly given three theories of geopolitics. These are Mackinder's Heartland theory, which means that whosoever controls the land and Eurasia, controls the world; the Spykman-Rimland theory, which advocates that whosoever controls the littoral states in the seas, controls the world; and the Mahanian Theory, which suggests that whosoever controls the Indian Ocean, controls Asia. However, it is important to note that China is one country in the world that has added twists and imbalances to the stated theories through its BRI and by seizing the vital points in the Indian Ocean. Thus, it is imperative for India to get into small groupings to make its presence felt not only on the land but also in the Indian Ocean. India's initiative in formulating its policy or doctrine of maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in the form of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) has proved to be effective and a step well taken by India. The opening of the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) by the Indian Navy, which is aimed at promoting collaboration for maritime safety and security in view of the region's importance with respect to world trade and security in the IOR, is another significant step in this direction.

The Groupings Era: The era of bigger groupings and organisations is briskly losing its relevance in the rapidly changing global equations, and it is shaping the world order quite fast. Smaller multipolar and bipolar world orders are taking the driving seat as compared to the bigger groupings such as the G-20, G-7, Commonwealth, etc. Now is the time for smaller groups such as 2+2 Formats, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS), Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2), a nuclear collaboration of India, France, and the United States (INFRUS), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), etc.

Fig 1: The Era of Smaller Groupings



Source: Author's creation adapted from various tutorial videos available on YouTube.

These bilateral and multilateral groupings are becoming more effective in ensuring closer cooperation for mutual interests. It is evident that countries are no longer fascinated with only siding with the powerful camps but are exploring multilateral engagements while keeping the alignment factor at a distance. India also seems to be taking advantage of these new strategic partnerships with countries all over the world. India's approach to politics and international relations has changed over time. It used to be based on non-alignment and strategic autonomy, but now it is based on strategic engagement.¹ India is taking the G-20 to a new, greater height through its

1. "India-U.S. Delhi Declaration of Friendship", January 25, 2015, http://pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/india-us-delhi-declaration-of-friendship/. Accessed on September 22, 2022.

responsibility of the presidency. It is giving a new definition to the bipolarity and multipolarity equations as witnessed in the past two to three years and during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.

The Outer Circle (I3 Formats): But apart from these, to balance China, India must establish firm relations with countries in mainly two circles. Firstly, the countries in the outer circle include the UK, the US, France, Australia, and Japan. India must leverage three more countries proactively into this circle by harnessing the potential of the geostrategic locations of **Indonesia** in the east and **Iran** in the west. This is mainly to impose a blockade at all vulnerable points, if need be, right from the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Hormuz to the Gulf of Aden. Another country, **Israel**, which has always been with India for 30 years now, could become a trusted partner in ensuring cyber warfare against Pakistan and China. More than the US, Israel could be the most effective player in ensuring cyber supremacy over our adversaries. Also, more military support and supplies from Israel to ensure adequate war reserves would keep India better prepared and stocked up for a prolonged engagement. Thus, India may bolster bilateral relations with Iran, Israel, and Indonesia individually to draw new cooperative terms of reference in the 2+2 format. Subsequently, India may think of leveraging the success of bilateral relations in the proposed I3 formats of “Israel-India-Indonesia” and “Iran-India-Indonesia”. These proposed I3 groupings will prove to be quite effective in ensuring a balanced sea state in the western and eastern IOR.

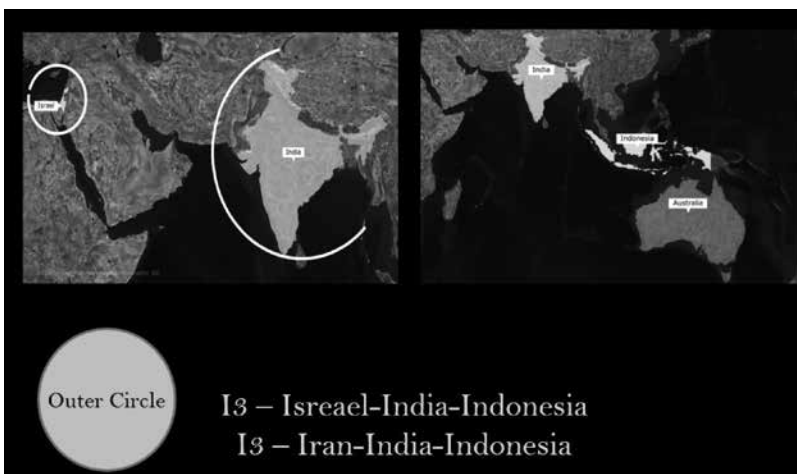
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Fig 2: Comprehensive Response Strategy at the Strategic Level



Source: Author's creation adapted from various tutorial videos available on YouTube.

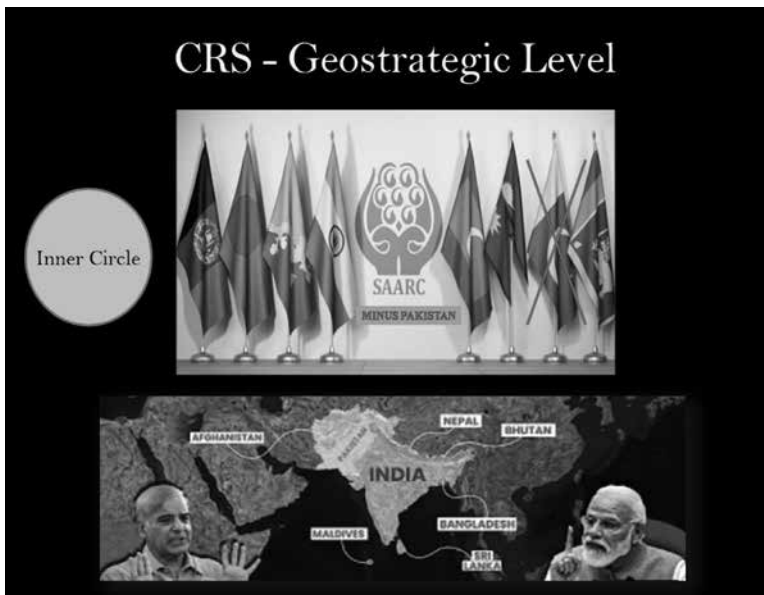
Fig 3: Comprehensive Response Strategy at the Strategic Level



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The Inner Circle (SAARC minus Pakistan): Secondly, the countries in the inner circle include all the countries of SAARC. It is beyond doubt that India will be in a better position if it maintains cordial relationships with its immediate neighbours. Towards this end, the revival of SAARC minus Pakistan may immediately be brought into the foreign policy outlook of the country. The existing bilateral relations with each country independently would not be adequate in composite posturing against China in the case of a military conflict. The five-day visit of the Chief of Army Staff, General Manoj Pande, to Nepal, and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s four-day visit to India in September 2022 has enabled further strengthening of bilateral relations. Sheikh Hasina considers the bilateral relationship between the two countries a model for neighbourhood diplomacy worldwide. Thus, the ideal would be to regroup these neighbours together for the revival of SAARC under the neighbourhood first policy of the current government.

Fig 4: Comprehensive Response Strategy at the Strategic Level



Source: Author’s creation adapted from various tutorial videos available on YouTube.

Today, India's ranking has improved in the economic and military fields. It has always been the first responder, especially for its neighbours in any situation as seen during the COVID, human assistance and disaster relief operations, human evacuations, etc.

Declare India a Regional Power: Not many would buy the idea of India being a "docile democracy" or a status quoist nation. However, India's global standing and reputation have seen a phenomenal rise in recent years. Today, India's ranking has improved in the economic and military fields. It has always been the first responder, especially for its neighbours in any situation as seen during the COVID, human assistance and disaster relief operations, human evacuations, etc. Thus, it is high time that

India, in the 75th year of its independence, announces its arrival on the global map as a regional power. By doing so, it will boost all sectors of nation-building with tremendous confidence and a positive outlook on its accomplishments.

NATIONAL LEVEL

Politically Driven Directives: Even after the completion of 75 years of independence, India does not have a National Security Strategy or Doctrine in place. In the absence of such a vision, the elected government may frame the Raksha Mantri's (RMs) Directive in accordance with its ideology or election manifesto. If we analyse the shift of gear in the government's approach towards taking tough calls such as abrogation of Article 370, using air power at the Balakot terror camps, etc., the possibility of an attempt to take back Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK), Pakistan Occupied Ladakh (PoL) and Aksai Chin in the coming decade may not be remote. As a result, the armed forces, despite being apolitical, may be forced to read between the lines of the ongoing political developments and futuristic military actions.

Atmanirbharta vs Atmaraksha: Building infrastructure and bolstering defences all along the borders on the eastern, northern, and western fronts

are part of the national response strategy to counter the China-Pakistan nexus. The purchase of sufficient quantities of military hardware, including rifles, landmines, sensors, drones, anti-drones, and various types of aircraft, and the short, medium, and long-term military requirements must be honestly assessed while maintaining a proper and sincere balance between *Atmanirbharta* and *Atmaraksha*. Wholeheartedly supporting *Atmanirbharta* is a win-win situation for all the agencies involved, but this idea needs to materialise into deliverables, which, regrettably, may not be as easy as it sounds, especially in the aviation sector, which requires technology with extremely stringent aerodynamic compulsions, and airworthiness certifications.

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While the need for adequate numbers of fighter squadrons, aircraft carriers, tanks, and artillery guns has found a significant place in the list of concerns, it is also important to procure many of the important legitimate requirements such as the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) aircraft, Operations Data Link (ODL), and Flight Refuelling Aircraft (FRA) in their entirety. The vision of developing indigenous Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft is definitely a boost in this direction, but its fructification in the near future is a distant dream. Also, AEW&C may not be adequate for the continental size of the country and would have to rely more on AWACS as the orchestrator of air operations in the current scenario. The immediate purchase of these enablers and orchestrators or buying them on lease would help maintain and ensure *Atmaraksha* at all times, especially in the interim till *Atmanirbhar Bharat* becomes a reality.

Infrastructure Development: While comparing the force ratio and capability of the air forces, India has often felt some satisfaction in the fact that although China may have a greater number of air bases in the Western Theatre region, its airlift capability gets highly restricted due to the elevation of the airfields. Compared to China, India may have fewer airfields but it has the advantage of more airlift capability, so the force ratio is almost at par or comparable. This thought process, however, must be reconsidered and reconciled in the light of China's massive infrastructure build-up across the border over the last decade. On top of that, China has also carried out infrastructure build-up in the Aksai Chin area post-Galwan and it is reported that it has also substantially contributed to the upgradation of infrastructure at the Skardu and Gilgit air bases in PoL. India cannot be oblivious to this fact. And it is also certain that infrastructure build-up on the Indian side requires the whole of government approach. The military alone cannot address this issue. It will not be wrong to assume that there cannot be a better time than this as India has been witnessing a phenomenal rise in the construction of high-class roads, highways, bridges, and tunnels. In the last five years or so, India's outlook has seen a massive transformation in the surface transport sector. It truly meshes with the logo of the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI): "Not Just Roads, Building a Nation." The present initiative for infrastructure development along the China border needs a greater impetus and push from the highest leadership as a top-down approach. It will suffice to state that such a top-down approach would prove to be highly effective, as has been recently seen in drone proliferation. The prime minister himself has steered the liberalisation of the drone policy and the results are visible to all to be analysed as to how the drone industry has been revolutionised as a result of the top-down approach.

Total Combat Capability: Fighting with the enemy, especially against a collusive threat, will require contemporary military assets, be it aircraft, missiles, radars, unmanned aerial systems, Command and Control (C2) networks, etc. For the Indian Air Force (IAF) in particular, the discussion is often about the depleting number of squadrons, but India needs to

look beyond the strength of fighter squadrons alone. In today's highly technological warfare scenario, all tools of air power are going to operate simultaneously and seamlessly, and all efforts should be made to achieve complete interoperability. To achieve this, India needs to invest in manned and unmanned aircraft, missiles, ODL, C2 centres, and most importantly, the networking and integration of all elements in a real and true sense. Apart from current and futuristic fighter aircraft, we need to equip ourselves with more AWACS, ISTAR, FRAs, ODLs, communication and data systems, and potent Electronic Warfare (EW) suits.

CONCLUSION

The present world order is neither bipolar nor multipolar, though we may be trending toward a multipolar world. We live in a world between orders. India's foreign policy, like that of every other country, aims to expand its sphere of influence, strengthen its role among states, and make its presence known as an emerging power. In the pursuit of achieving foreign policy objectives, the recent years have brought a number of obstacles and opportunities. India must take measured action in response to the changing global order. A revision is necessitated by India's isolation from SAARC, of which it was a founding member. A more worrisome aspect of the Indian foreign policy is the deterioration of relations with its neighbours. Uncertainty and a changing geopolitical environment pose big problems for Indian policy, but they could also give us more strategic options and diplomatic freedom, especially in the subcontinent, if we change our domestic and international policies. India must adapt to the shifting conditions. It has no choice but to engage in this increasingly unpredictable and uncertain environment. Issue-based coalitions comprising various actors, depending on their interests and capability, might be a useful method for achieving this goal.

While reducing reliance on China and pursuing external balance, our primary focus must be on self-strengthening. India is the only country that can match or beat China in terms of size, population, economic potential, and

scientific and technological skills. China's land and marine boundaries are constrained by its congested topography. It is anticipated that its prominence and influence will continue to grow, especially in our periphery. As neighbours, the India-China relationship is likely to continue to be a mix of conflict and cooperation as long as they are in their current states. China has considerably reinforced its military and now aims to control the Indo-Pacific Ocean. In this setting, a breakthrough in Sino-Indian ties is improbable, and the conflict between the Indian and Chinese militaries is anticipated to persist. China moving away from Pakistan also seems to be unrealistic.