

"India's crucial security challenge is not external, but relates to maintenance of domestic harmony and unity."

The seven decades since Independence have seen numerous analysts, scholars and researchers — foreign as well as Indian — bemoaning the absence of a “strategic culture” in India and the consequential disregard of national security by its rulers. Historically, India suffered a succession of invasions over its north-western passes by Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Mongols and Mughals, and over its shores, by Europeans. While we failed to defeat any of these invaders, let us note that those who came overland were assimilated into India's rich cultural fabric and became “Indians”. The European seaborne invaders, not in the least interested in assimilation, stayed for four centuries; only to exploit, plunder and establish empires.

The lacunae that, historically, enabled foreigners to violate our sovereignty and deprive us of freedom were: Lack of internal unity, absence of strategic thinking and planning, and technological backwardness. Proof that lessons of history have remained unlearnt is to be found in the Indian polity's sustained indifference towards national security issues, despite five major conflicts, ongoing internal insurgencies and frequent terror strikes. Rarely, in the past 72 years, has India's Parliament found the inclination to discuss the defence budget, address national security issues or demand a defence review/security strategy from the government. Not only does Parliament ignore the annual recommendations of its own Standing Committee on Defence, the government is seen showing displeasure when the Committee presents unpalatable facts.

The 1999 near-disaster of Kargil brought home to the political establishment that there was a great deal wrong with national security. Consequently, both the NDA and UPA regimes that followed constituted high-level expert groups mandated to undertake national security reviews and propose reforms. The crucial recommendations of both bodies, however, disappeared into the bureaucratic maw of the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Home Affairs and national security reform has remained in limbo thereafter.

Starting with the 1999 IC-814 hijacking, the early years of this century saw successive crises catching India by surprise. Each time, the country was unprepared and invariably in the reactive mode. The historic void in strategic thinking and planning apart, India's indecisiveness and vacillation in the face of repeated provocations were suggestive of timidity, masked by the fig leaf of “strategic restraint”. While this display of forbearance did garner international applause, it was frustrating and demoralising for the Indian citizen.

All this changed on September 29, 2016, when the NDA government deployed special forces to deliver a punitive strike on terrorist camps across the LoC, thereby breaching the self-imposed taboo that had paralysed previous regimes. The February 2019 air-strike that followed, on a terrorist facility in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa,

re-affirmed this government's resolve that cross-border terrorism by Pakistan would not go unpunished.

While these resolute actions have earned well-deserved public approval, two important aspects need to be highlighted. One, while the government deserved full credit for initiating long-overdue military action, clumsy use of these operations by party apparatchiks for election propaganda embarrassed the military, trivialised its achievements and undermined India's "perception management" campaign. Two, September 2016 became a "missed opportunity" for promulgating a national security doctrine — with the objectives of signalling red-lines for adversaries, providing guidelines for own forces, conveying a clear message that cross-border terrorism would invite guaranteed retribution, thereby boosting national morale and confidence.

India will soon have a newly-elected government in place. But as far as national security goes, all party manifestos appear equally insipid and unfocused, confirming fears that the recent hoopla about security was superficial and election-driven. Therefore, as a concerned citizen, one feels obliged to offer advice — albeit unsolicited — to the incoming government on three areas of national security; all of them "old chestnuts". First, India's most crucial security challenge is not external, but relates to maintenance of domestic harmony and unity. History is replete with examples like the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires as well as the Soviet and Yugoslav republics, which attempted to forge multi-religious and multi-ethnic populations into nation-states, but eventually failed and fragmented. With every major religion represented, and with thousands of ethnic groups co-existing harmoniously, India remains a brave but fragile experiment, but one that has stoutly upheld the citizenship rights accorded to everyone by its Constitution. Once the elections are over, our politicians need to reflect on whether India can afford to have religious majoritarianism dominating the political discourse.

Without stepping into this minefield, we need to remind ourselves that the Indian state can never consider itself truly secure unless it assures safety and freedom from fear and intimidation for each of its citizens. A fact unknown to most is that the Indian armed forces, as currently structured, are the embodiment of "sarva dharma sama bhava". Our newly-inducted soldier-politicians must explain to their parties, how the unit cohesion and fighting efficiency of our armed forces would suffer unless they can pursue their tradition of religious tolerance and co-existence.

Second, India's half-empty arsenal and heavy dependence on arms imports make a mockery of its claims to "growing power" status. A complacent and unaccountable scientific community entrusted with defence R&D and a languid MoD bureaucracy, charged with defence production and acquisition, has stalled India's military modernisation. "Make in India" remains an inspiring slogan that needs to be fleshed out and underpinned by a 50-year vision-cum-action plan. Its implementation must be accompanied by a drastic restructuring of India's military-industrial complex and the creation of a new "Ministry of Defence Production & Acquisition".

The last but most crucial national security flaw lies in sequestration of India's armed forces from a MoD, run exclusively by a generalist civilian bureaucracy, and its failure to integrate the armed forces with each other. Consequently, India is unique amongst major military powers in persevering with a bloated military and an outdated higher defence organisation of dubious utility in this age of cyber, nuclear and space warfare.

The media tends to fret about China's sky-rocketing defence expenditure. But the two things that should keep our politicians awake are China's recently downsized, integrated and modernised regional military commands, and the visionary White Papers its defence ministry issues biennially.

GS World Team...

National Security Council (NSC)

What is it?

- When India declared itself a nuclear power nation in 1998, it also raised the issue that a top institution for study of national security in its totality should be formed.
- An institution which studies all aspects of national security and gives suggestions to the government to frame the future and make policy decisions.
- The then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee formed a Task Force to form an institution, the members of which Krishna Chandra Pant, Jaswant Singh and Air Commodore Jasjit Singh (retired).
- In December 1998, following the recommendations of the committee, the National Security Council was formed.

Structure

- The National Security Council is a three-member council, whose chair man is the Prime Minister.
- The National Security Adviser of the Prime Minister sees the whole work of the National Security Council.
- The three components of this Council are as follows: Strategic Policy Group, National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) and National Security Advisory Board (NSAB)

Current scenario

- The Central Government has reconstituted Strategic Policy Group (SPG) constituted to assist the National Security Council (NSC) with National Security

Advisor Ajit Doval for strategic policy on matters related to internal and economic security (SPG) on October 08, 2018.

- With the help of the National Security Council, the Strategic Policy Group (SPG) will do the other with long-term strategic review of the security issues of the country.
- Significantly, the National Security Council advises the Prime Minister on the security and strategic interests of the country. This is an executive government organization.

Purpose of formation

- The objective of the formation of Strategic Policy Group (SPG) is to assist in the formulation of the policy of National Security Council and to make a long-term strategic review of the security issues of the country.

Strategic Policy Group (SPG)

- The Strategic Policy Group (SPG) was formed in April 1999. SPG was constituted to help the National Security Council (NSC) in matters of external, internal and economic security.
- It is notable that earlier, the strategic policy group headed by the Cabinet Secretary used to have 16 members, whereas now its members have been increased to 18.
- In which the Deputy Chairman of the NITI Aayog and the Cabinet Secretary have been appointed as the new members.

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Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements-

1. In 2017, Indian government had deployed special force to take punitive action against the terrorist camp across LOC.
2. First time the defence budget of India crossed 3 lakh crore mark in 2019-20.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1
- (b) Only 2
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q. "The important security challenge of India is not external but it is related to domestic goodwill and maintenance of unity." Critically evaluate this statement. (250 Words)
- Q. Considering the present scenario, why the 'national security doctrine' is required? Discuss. (250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 3 May. is 1 (a)

