

FUTURE FIRE: CHALLENGES FACING INDIAN DEFENSE POLICY IN THE NEW CENTURY

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Let me start with a confession. I am not a security fundamentalist. I am not one of those who believe that war makes the state and that the state exists only to make war. States have multiple objectives, many more than are sometimes imagined and given consideration. But when one looks at the broad sweep of history it becomes clear that countries cannot become great powers unless, at some level, they demonstrate mastery over the creation, deployment and the use of military force in the service of national objectives. I am not convinced that Germany and Japan represent an alternative form of politics to the kind that the international system has seen for at least the last two thousand years--in part because the exceptionalism of Germany and Japan was born out of the crucible of defeat and remains sheltered in an alliance relationship where others make arrangements for their protection. For a country like India, which essentially seeks to follow its own path, the rise to great power status will require it to be able to integrate the creation, deployment and use—and I use the term "use"—in the broadest sense of the word—of military instruments in support of national objectives. The ability to create and use military force for national purposes is, of course, not the only criterion for greatness. But it has to be an element integrated with other measures of greatness like economic prowess, social cohesion, and political stability. In this context, whether India can master military instruments of power and develop the tools that have made great powers for the last two thousand years will depend on its ability to master three macro and five micro problems.

The first macro problem that must be resolved, if India is to rise as a great power, is achieving higher rates of economic growth. The reason for that is simple. A competent military costs money and modern defense capabilities, which are sophisticated and effective, are priced in numbers that boggle the imagination. I will give you just two simple examples. The United States' most sophisticated stealth fighter intended to secure air dominance, the F-22, costs \$187 million apiece. An aircraft carrier, when evaluated by the best cost assessment methodology in 1987, cost \$3.8 billion for the ship and

another \$3 billion for the air wing. It should be no surprise that with unit costs of this magnitude, the US defense budget is truly as stratospheric as it is.

What does such kind of sophistication or such kind of technology buy you in the end? It buys you an ability to sharply reduce your casualties in the face of adversary action. It buys you increased effectiveness, even in the face of numerical inferiority. And it buys you the potential for quick and decisive victories that minimize political complications. If you seek these attributes, you recognize that you need good tools of the trade and good people who can use these tools—and that costs big money. For a country like India, which has to deal not simply with questions of defense but also questions of development simultaneously, high economic growth becomes the only solution especially in those situations when India cannot choose between the objectives of defense and development.

When one begins to think of the revolution in military affairs—the kind of capabilities today that characterize the military forces of the great powers—it is simply impossible for India to acquire such capabilities without sustaining economic growth of at least 7 to 9 per cent per annum consistently. China is a good example. A country that has experienced close to double-digit growth for more than twenty years since 1978, still finds it hard to develop the kinds of sophisticated military capabilities it seeks to acquire across the board. Therefore, one must be prepared for the fact that even if the Indian economy were to grow between 7 and 9 per cent consistently for the next twenty years, the best India would be able to do in the area of cutting edge defense technology is to acquire niche capabilities. But those niche capabilities may be enough for the specific strategic circumstances that it faces.

The second macro problem that India needs to engage and satisfy is the development of an appropriate national vision and appropriate institutions designed to manage the acquisition of great power capabilities. If you were to ask me what India's political objectives are in the post-Cold War period, I would argue that they are the continuing quest for security and the search for great power capabilities and status in support of expanded national autonomy. This is a formal definition. It is not obvious, however, what the import of this definition is in practice. What substantive goals, defined in terms of national interest, does India really seek to service? The answer to this question cannot be defined in terms of platitudes like a "just world order." That is a useful phrase for a political campaign. It is a terrible criterion for defense planning and force structuring. It is also not obvious whether India will develop the kind of state and national institutions that allow it to define its political goals clearly; that allow it to mobilize its resources effectively; and finally, that allow it to transform its resources efficiently into the kinds of instruments required to make it a great power. The other aspect of this question of defining India's goals and creating the appropriate institutions pertains to the issue of

whether India will be able to achieve the right balance between state control and societal autonomy. It is very important to realize that successful states in the modern era have been those that have maintained this balance in the most creative way possible.

The third macro challenge that I would highlight for your consideration is whether India is capable of exploiting the existing structure of the international system to its advantage. In this context, I think India should get rid of the notion of a multipolar world order as a practical outcome in the relevant future. Pursuing chimerical goals like multipolarity does not make for good policy. The international system, for all practical purposes, is going to remain a unipolar system for at least the next half century. By all indicators, if you define power in terms of comprehensive national strength, it is unlikely that the United States will face serious peer competitors for at least another fifty years. Consequently, the challenge for India becomes, can it develop a viable strategic partnership with the United States that serves both mutual interests and India's own unilateral interests? Can India develop a relationship with the United States that helps it enhance and magnify its own power? This is not to suggest that the United States is the only power in the international system. Clearly not. There are many others. This is also not to suggest that India's goals ought to consist solely of developing a relationship with the United States, or that India somehow is constrained solely to develop a relationship with the United States and no other. Not true. India has the flexibility to maneuver within the interstices of the international system. But at the end of the day, there is one eight hundred pound gorilla that has to be engaged. And that is the United States. That gorilla is not going to go away. That gorilla has already put its nose for the first time in modern history, into the physical environment of the subcontinent. And it is in India's national interest, and important for its capacity to generate and magnify its power, to develop a productive and a collaborative relationship with the United States that enhances the interests of the two countries.

Besides these broad macro questions, which in some sense India will have to deal with for a long time in the decades ahead, there are micro problems that India has to master if it has to be able to make the leap to great power capabilities. The word "micro" is not used in the sense of trivial, but in the sense of "bread and butter" issues confronting Indian security on a day-to-day basis.

First, India has to deal with the challenge of neutering internal security threats without undermining its capacity for effective external defense. This is harder to do than is sometimes imagined. It is unfortunate that the principal security threat that India is going to have to deal with on a day-to-day basis is the threat to internal security. There is no running away from this problem. Historically, India dealt with this challenge by essentially throwing manpower at the threat instead of technology. And the reason it did

this was simply because it enjoyed a surfeit of manpower and a deficit of technology. There were two consequences to this strategy. One was that its approach to preserving internal defense was probably not as effective as it could be, because technology could provide that valuable supplement which was not available to India. The second consequence was that preserving internal security became extremely expensive and has now come at the cost of being able to acquire the new technologies required to raise a modern military force. It is a myth that India's manpower is cheap. Maintaining the size and kind of forces that India does, if maintained over the secular period, will undercut its ability to acquire the kind of RMA capabilities that wins modern wars. And this is going to require India to make very painful choices—painful choices about reducing its manpower strength and changing the inter-service budgetary balances, choices that it cannot make today because of the gravity, importance, and burdens of its internal security commitments.

The next micro issue is the need to preserve effective external defense, now in a nuclear shadowed environment. This brings us face to face with the vexed question of whether India has the capacity to successfully prosecute a limited war. Most commentary so far has focused on the issue of limited war as an example of Indian recklessness. People have chastised the Defense Minister, Mr. George Fernandes, for arguing that limited war in fact represents a solution to India's external security problems. My take on the issue is somewhat different. I believe that limited war should be viewed not as a product of the proclivities of the state, but rather as a predicament resulting from a specific set of structural circumstances. The transparent presence of nuclear weapons in the subcontinent for the first time makes unlimited wars untenable as a matter of state policy. Ideally, they should also make war itself obsolete. But oftentimes, nuclear weapons don't do that. So we are confronted with a dilemma. On one hand, unlimited war is not feasible, but on the other hand, the obsolescence of war is not assured. And if one is confronted with this vise, then the only alternative one has is to think of how to manage and prosecute limited war successfully. This is not simply India's choice—it actually represents a dilemma of the nuclear age. And it is a challenge that faces India both with respect to Pakistan and with respect to China. In both cases, unlimited war is not feasible. There is also no guarantee that war is obsolete. And therefore the challenge of limited war confronts India squarely, both with respect to its northern and its western borders.

What does limited war mean for Indian defense policy? It means that India is now confronted with the task of being required to hit hard and effectively enough to punish an adversary, but not hit so hard or so effectively as to cause inadvertent escalation. This in turn leads to questions like "how do you avoid escalation?" Most commentaries have focused on this aspect of the problem. But there is another aspect to the problem, which has largely escaped attention. That is, how do you prosecute and attain success in a limited war so that the issue of escalation becomes relevant in the first place? After all, if

you are incapable of prosecuting a limited war, you do not have to worry very much about escalation. It is only in the context of being able to successfully prosecute a limited war that the threat of escalation—deliberate or inadvertent—becomes real as a matter of public policy.

It is to this question that India's policy makers and its defense establishment need to pay some attention. Because it is going to demand of India a new style of war fighting that New Delhi traditionally has been uncomfortable with and which historically it has been relatively incapable of. It is a style of war fighting that puts a premium on achieving very speedy decision on the battlefield and then terminating offensive action either before the international community intervenes or before the conflict degenerates into unavoidable attrition. Getting the Indian military to successfully prosecute a fast paced war that generates quick decisions is something that we have not seen in fifty years of India's independence. It is also the kind of war that traditionally the United States was not very good at. We preferred wars that allowed us plenty of time to mobilize, plenty of time to deploy, and then plenty of time to be able to grind down the adversary at our convenience. If India is to be able to prosecute the opposite kind of war, as the United States is now proficient at—fast, decisive, and yet limited—it is going to require an investment in new technologies and new operating skills apart from new doctrines and new concepts of operation.

And do not forget the constraints. Acquiring these capabilities is going to be costly. They do not come on the cheap. Acquiring these capabilities also requires changing certain political constraints. You cannot win limited wars successfully if you are hamstrung by the political constraint that you cannot lose a single inch of territory in any circumstances. And you are going to need a readiness to change the inter-service resource balance away from capabilities that are slow to capabilities that are flexible, precise, speedy and lethal.

Third, if India is to become a great power of the sort that it seeks to become, it also has to become a net provider of regional security, both in the sub-continental and in the extra sub-continental arenas. This is easier said than done; yet at one level it is the quintessential part of the definition of a great power. After all, what is the meaning of having great power capabilities if at the end of the day you cannot extend net security to others? And yet any Indian attempt to provide the kind of regional security that I am talking of, even in the sub-continental arena, is fraught with hazards because it risks deepening intra-regional rivalries and it risks deepening the suspicions India's weaker neighbours have of its capabilities and its intentions.

There are further problems. If India decides to provide regional security within the subcontinent, how do you direct these capabilities? Do you direct them towards the state or do you direct them towards society? It is not easy to make this choice and it is not obvious where India ought to direct its security resources especially in those situations when state and society are constantly at loggerheads, as they are in many countries of South Asia. If one shifts the focus a bit, and looks at the extra sub-continental arenas, you begin to realize that there are parallel sorts of dilemmas. What exactly is India prepared to do in practical terms to secure its interest in its extended neighborhood? Is India interested in peace keeping? Is India interested in peace making? Is India interested in post conflict stability operations? This range spans a wide gamut of requirements. What does India really want to do? And even if it could make up its mind about what it wants to do, what framework is it willing to accept in order to do this? Is it willing to provide security unilaterally? Is it willing to provide security only through the U.N.? Or is it willing to provide security through coalitions of the willing?

Assuming it has managed to resolve the above questions of what it seeks to do and the frameworks under which it seeks to provide security, it is still faced with another set of questions. Does India have, and is it willing to acquire, the capabilities that are required by even the most minimal set of contingencies that one can imagine in its extended neighborhood? Even if one presumes that all India is going to do is engage in post conflict stabilization operations and it is going to do this in the easiest form possible, which is in the form of coalitions under the U.N. flag, it requires India to make very expensive choices with respect to force modernization. It will require India to develop at least a small subset of formations that have world-class capabilities in terms of interoperability or India risks becoming an ineffective member of the force. It would also require India to develop capabilities that provide it with increased endurance and increased reach. You cannot be a serious claimant to providing extra-regional security if you have, for example, a hundred ship navy with two underway replenishment vessels. You cannot be a serious aerospace power if your fighters are so short-legged that they cannot move from a rear base of operations to a forward facility abroad. Finally, will India develop the organizational structures that are required to maintain and operate these capabilities if it seeks to provide the kind of regional security that is to be expected of a great power?

The fourth micro problem pertains to whether India can acquire an effective nuclear deterrent without breaking the bank. My view is that nuclear weapons are important for India's security in some limited sense, but it is also essential to remember that they are actually relatively obsolescent technologies. Nuclear weapons are now over fifty years old and they are generally unusable as instruments of international politics. And, therefore, while I can understand India's decision to acquire these weapons, I would make the argument that they are not worth any over-investment. India's intellectual triad, minimum deterrence, no first use, and strict civilian control, provides in

my judgment the recipe for allowing it to develop a nuclear deterrent without moving in the direction of either an arms race or bankruptcy. But to ensure this outcome it must successfully resist the temptation over the long term to discover new exotic operational uses for its nuclear weaponry. This was a task that we in the United States failed at during the fifty years of the cold war. The United States repeatedly succumbed to the temptation of discovering new operational uses for its nuclear weaponry, which resulted in a nuclear force of about 50 weapons in the early 1950s becoming a nuclear force of about 50,000 nuclear weapons by the early 1990s.

The last micro problem is the question of India's developing an appropriate defense industrial policy that recognizes and accepts the limits to autarky. I recognize that India's fear of vulnerability has driven its traditional strategy of large-scale defense import substitutions. I think the time has come though to resist the temptation of trying to develop *everything* from assault rifles to main battle tanks to advanced combat equipment. If you look at India's record in this regard, successes have been relatively far and few. There are things that can be done to remedy this. These may include creating better institutional arrangements for coordination, technical audit, and hard-nosed external review. But even when these are successful, there is a simple economic fact of life that cannot be lost sight of. The demand for advanced equipment in India's armed forces is relatively small and the resulting economies of scale often do not warrant India's undertaking the effort required to create end-to-end, design-to-production, capabilities required to produce expensive, complex weapon systems.

Where does all this imply in terms of conclusions about India's capacity to develop the defense capabilities that would make it a great power in this century? My argument essentially would be that its capacity to master the creation, deployment and use of military instruments is still not assured at this point in time. Whether it will succeed in this endeavor will depend greatly on how it resolves the three micro and five macro problems that I have identified. India may not succeed in this endeavor for many reasons, the most important of which may be, in the final analysis, its lack of, in Sunil Khilnani's phrase, "an instinct for power." At one level, however, that may be what is most attractive about India: its innate tendency towards moderation and its reluctance to resort readily to the use of force to secure the political outcomes it desires. India still remains, in my judgment, a deeply conservative, relatively inward looking, state that has focused more on "satisficing" rather than "maximizing" military power. But that also implies that as far as military instruments go, India might be condemned to remaining a middle power for at least for some time to come, as opposed to becoming a true great power in the Kennedysque sense of the term. And if that be the case, then perhaps the "bridging strategies" that Sunil Khilnani spoke about may turn out to be even more important than the votaries of a strong Indian military capability might be willing to countenance today.