

National Security and Growth

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In this era of nation-states, safeguarding and perpetuating the security of the country is one of the biggest challenges that a nation faces. While threats to national security can be both internal and external, the necessity to resolve internal threats before tackling external ones can hardly be overemphasised. Let me add that in the current environment of globalisation and connectivity, the line dividing internal and external threats invariably gets blurred with internal threats having external linkages and vice versa. Also, events do not necessarily play out at the international level in the manner each nation envisages. This underlines the need for making suitable modifications to the national policy in the national interest.

National security and growth are both complementary and competitive at different levels. At one level, growth is only possible in a secure and stable environment while turbulence, uncertainty and insecurity are detrimental to growth. Yet, at another level, both national security and growth compete for the nation's limited resources. Growth requires infusion of massive doses of investment on a continuing basis to improve infrastructure, healthcare, education levels, agriculture, production, etc. In a developing economy like India, investible funds being limited, priority invariably goes to growth, at times at the expense of security.

We, in India, have a reputation for *jugaad* and moving from crisis to crisis. Instead of planning and working to avoid a crisis, the tendency is to let things slide till a crisis hits us. When it does, the attempt is to somehow get over it

and move on to other issues rather than finding a permanent solution against a recurrence of the same crisis. Floods in India are a classic example. Every year, due to the rains, the same rivers get flooded, wreaking havoc and causing death and destruction in the same areas with consistent regularity. Yet, 67 years after independence, we still have not found a permanent answer to tackle this menace.

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Our record in the field of security has been somewhat similar. The Chinese invasion of 1962 shook us out of our complacency and resulted in a realistic appraisal of our weaknesses. A slew of measures were instituted to set things right. Consequent improvements that took place enabled us to acquit ourselves creditably against Pakistan in 1965 and 1971. Post that, we seemed to have lapsed into hibernation till rudely awakened by the Pakistani adventure in Kargil in 1999. Restoration of the situation at Kargil was achieved at the expense of large scale sacrifices and massive support of the entire nation. But, once again, after that crisis was over and the situation restored, we appear to have lulled ourselves into a false sense of security and not followed through with permanent measures to avoid a repetition of such instances in the future.

Thus, post the Kargil War, our budget on defence in terms of percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has gradually gone down till, in the current financial year, it stands at a paltry 1.74 per cent of the GDP. Modernisation of the military has suffered since at the first whiff of allegations of wrongdoing, a normal phenomenon in a competitive environment, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has taken the easy and convenient route of black listing/ banning the concerned foreign Multi-National Corporations (MNCs). Excessive protectionism of Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) has resulted in denial of growth to the indigenous private sector in defence. The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and PSUs have not been able to deliver on most of their promises in terms of both quality and quantity. As a result, the Services have been unable to acquire weapons and equipment for making up even deficiencies, leave alone modernisation. Plans for upgradation of infrastructure in border areas stand stuck due to lack of funding and environmental clearances. Structural reforms in higher defence management have not come about despite strong recommendations by a series of government appointed committees. Civil-military relations continue to remain at a low ebb. Jointness and integration, so vital for conduct of

operations in the current environment, have not been achieved in real terms due to the tendency for turf protection and empire building, on both the civil and military sides. The picture is dismal and unless corrective steps are undertaken on an emergent basis, our national security would be endangered in the long run.

It is interesting to note that the Chinese defence budget for the current financial year stands at approximately \$ 130 billion as compared to our budget of approximately \$ 42 billion. Such yearly differentials in our budgets over the last two decades point to a widening gap between our respective military capabilities. While the talk of cooperation and healthy competition between the two countries is welcome, the possibility of competition turning to confrontation at some stage in the future cannot be ruled out, especially in view of the unsettled boundary issue between us. Surely, we would not like 1962 to be repeated ever again.

Likewise, as an overall percentage of its GDP, Pakistan has been spending much more on its military as compared to us. The fact that the military has been in power in Pakistan for almost 50 per cent of the time since independence and has ruled Pakistan from the background for the balance period, has enabled the military there to corner a large share of the available resources, thus, reducing the comparative edge enjoyed by the Indian Army over the years. Bhutto's famous quote, "We shall produce the nuclear bomb even if we have to eat grass" in response to the Indian nuclear explosion at Pokhran in 1974 epitomises the India-centric phobia that Pakistan suffers from. Even though terrorism and fundamentalism are striking at the roots of Pakistan as a nation, its Army's anti-India stance shows no signs of diminishing.

The possibility of collusion between China and Pakistan being strong, we need to possess the capability of defending ourselves in a two-front war at the conventional level. Of course, our relative vulnerability vis-a-vis the two is much greater at the nuclear level.

National security cannot be built up and ensured overnight. Unlike other crisis situations which can be tackled or overcome by quick fix solutions, a crisis in national security can only lead to embarrassing humiliation for the country, as happened during 1962. Thus, preventive actions assume greater importance in preparing for, and tackling, this sensitive issue. Forethought, planning, earmarking requisite resources on an ongoing basis and constant reviews and monitoring of the security situation are the pillars on which the edifice of national security structures need to be created.

Appropriate growth is only possible in a secure, stable and peaceful environment.

The previous government blamed the constraints of coalition politics and lack of consensus in its ability to push through important agenda, including on matters of national security. Large scale subsidies, which in its perception were contributing to growth, further limited its efforts to bolster national security.

In the ultimate analysis, these subsidies have turned out to be more of a drain on the exchequer than growth oriented. The public at large has realised it and the electoral verdict has reflected it unambiguously.

The present dispensation is starting with a clean slate and suffers from no such constraints. What is more, it has sufficient majority to push through reforms in the national interest. Both the President's address to a joint sitting of the Parliament on June 09, 2014, and the Prime Minister's address while proposing a vote of thanks to the President on June 11, 2014, have given a glimpse of the agenda that the present government intends to pursue. If it can deliver even 50 per cent of what it has promised in the next five years, it would have achieved a lot.

There is no dearth of suggestions that have been made to the new dispensation on governance issues. The media continues to carry them on a daily basis besides adding some of its own. This phenomenon and the elections have basically underlined the fact that people are tired of poor governance and corruption and look forward to growth and development. However, appropriate growth is only possible in a secure, stable and peaceful environment. Conversely, only when the nation can generate adequate resources through growth and development, will it be able to secure better national security for itself. Thus, the two are interlinked and interdependent. This underscores the necessity of ensuring a delicate balance between them while allocating limited national resources. Of course, the benefits of national security are intangible while those of growth are visible over a period of time. This is where the vision and far-sightedness of the political authority are important for the good of the nation.

In India, the political class, by and large, has displayed a marked ignorance and apathy towards national security issues since independence. A background check of our successive Defence Ministers would reveal that barring an odd exception, none has had any exposure to national security studies. Even in successive Parliaments, our elected representatives have rarely had a formal exposure to security studies. The reasons for this anomaly are not far to seek. Firstly, for almost the first 50 years since independence, a misplaced sense of security resulted in

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defence being treated as a holy cow in the Parliament, whose budget was passed without much discussion or debate. It is only in the last couple of years that there has been some lively debate over the defence budget, prompted more by a series of scams and general inertia in the Defence Ministry than a genuine informed attempt to improve national security.

Secondly, issues of national security do not influence votes and have minimal effect on the constituents of the parliamentarians concerned. Issues relating to growth, development and welfare are vote catching, resulting in parliamentarians vying with each other to speak on them, especially since proceedings of both Houses are being telecast live on the media networks. The effect of such contributions by the members may be felt in their constituencies in a short time-frame, enabling them to claim credit. However, national security related issues do not impact the constituents directly and the effect of such debates is felt over a much longer time horizon, in most cases beyond the next elections.

Thirdly, national security debates require specific knowledge and understanding of the issues involved, demanding hard work and dedication from the members to enable them to participate in them. On the other hand, growth and development oriented debates are more generic in nature enabling members to speak on these issues with little or no prior preparation. Debating skills and semantics rather than thorough knowledge are the refuge of a large number of members in their attempt to impress their electorates. No wonder then, that national security debates do not reach the required level of excellence. In fact, strategic experts like George Tanham have opined that India has no strategic culture.

In reality, the Parliament has a major role to perform in funding, formulating, implementing and monitoring national security policies. The Parliamentary Standing Committee for Defence is a watchdog set up by the Parliament to ensure full-time monitoring of these functions and report back regularly. Conceptually, the national security strategy should be discussed and debated in the Parliament before finalisation and passing on to the government, with appropriate funding, for implementation. The MoD, being the nodal ministry, is expected to implement the national security strategy laid down by the Parliament on an ongoing basis. Thus, the authority of the Parliament in this respect is supreme.

In practice, however, the bureaucracy in the MoD has been running the show, taking approvals from a political head whose knowledge of security matters is invariably limited and rendering perfunctory briefings to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence, whose members have had little or no exposure to security or Services related issues. Even recommendations made by this committee are given short shrift, being obeyed more in the breach and soft pedalling than in observance. Ultimately, we end up with 'civilian control' being effectively converted to 'bureaucratic control', an undesirable situation.

Hard political decisions are the need of the hour. Resources need to be generated to implement national security and growth related policies. If it means cutting down on subsidies and populist schemes, so be it. The right balance needs to be struck between national security and growth while allocating resources. Self-reliance in defence by involving the indigenous private sector in a big way will bolster national security tremendously besides giving a fillip to growth.

Reforms in higher defence management, long overdue, need to be pushed by curbing attempts at turf protection and empire building. Effective 'civilian control' of the military needs to be implemented by incorporating the military in national security related decision-making and limiting the role of vested interests. National interest should be the sole overriding criterion in achieving greater integration both within the Services and between the civil and military sides to meet the challenges of the future. The present dispensation has the mandate and the backing of the people to achieve these objectives. The hopes and expectations of the nation are high for it to deliver and take India to its rightful place in the comity of nations.

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