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SHAPING A NEW STRATEGIC CULTURE FOR INDIA

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Shaping a New Strategic Culture for India

Concept Note

Twenty-six years ago, the American foreign affairs commentator and former military officer, George K Tanham, wrote a 70-page paper for RAND titled: “Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay”.¹ This was a pioneering effort at setting out an understanding of India’s strategic culture by a foreign observer who, in pursuing his research, spent four months talking to Delhi’s security elite. Though written in 1992, this paper remains influential and is referred to frequently by modern-day writers who seek to update, agree with or refute Tanham’s findings, particularly on the point that there is an “absence of strategic thinking” in India.

Discussion of “strategic culture” entered international relations discourse in the 1970s when writers sought to respond to the limitations of the Realist school by introducing into foreign affairs studies hitherto neglected factors such as “the sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behaviour”² that members of a national strategic community share on national security issues. These early contributions were written in the context of the Cold War and were anchored in discussions relating to Soviet strategic culture that would have a bearing on decision-making in regard to its nuclear strategy. These writings were later followed by analyses of strategic cultures of Japan, China, Germany and NATO and the European Union.

Explaining strategic culture, the authority on Chinese strategic culture, Iain Johnston, clarified: “Different states have different predominant strategic preferences that are rooted in the early or formative experiences of the state, and are influenced to some

¹ George K Tanham, “Indian Strategic Thought: An interpretive Essay”, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 1992, at: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/2007/R4207.pdf> (1 January 2018)

² Jack Snyder, quoted in: “Strategic culture: a reliable tool of analysis for EU security developments?”, at: www.lse.ac.uk/internationalRelations/centresandunits/EFPU/.../Margaras.doc (22 January 2018)

degree, by the philosophical, political, cultural and cognitive characteristics of the state and its elites.”³

Flowing from this, Colin Gray has defined strategic culture as “the persisting (though not eternal) socially transmitted ideas, attitudes, traditions, habits of mind, and preferred methods of operation that are more or less specific to a particularly geographically based security community that has had a necessarily unique historical experience.”⁴ Gray then went on to say: “Ideas about war and strategy are influenced by physical and political geography-some strategic cultures plainly have, for example, a maritime or a continental tilt – by political or religious ideology, and by familiarity with, and preference for, particular military technologies. *Strategic culture is the world of mind, feeling and habit of behaviour.*” (Emphasis added)

In writing about India’s strategic thought, Tanham took these factors into account. He explained Indian strategic culture as having been shaped by its geography, history, the experience of the British Raj, the values of the freedom movement and, above all, various aspects of its national culture as understood by him.

Geography, Tanham noted, provided India with a well-defined space in the Indian sub-continent, placed it at the centre of the Indian Ocean, and gave it a strategic location on the historic trade routes from Northeast and Southeast Asia to West Asia and beyond to Europe.

India took from its history the spiritualism of Ashoka and enlightened pluralism and accommodativeness from the Mughal emperor Akbar, both of whom became sources of inspiration to the freedom struggle and the secular, nationalist state that emerged at Independence.

The British Raj, Tanham said, provided India with the administrative unity that produced the “state” of India and imbued its people with nationalist fervour. The Raj also defined the strategic space of the country, embracing the northern region of Central Asia, the Indian Ocean region from the Suez Canal, the Persian Gulf and the Cape of Good Hope in the West to the Strait of Malacca, Malaya and Singapore in the East. The Raj also created buffer states in the north and west of India, and set up special treaty relations with small independent states to India’s north and west (Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Burma).

It was in regard to culture that Tanham was most controversial, though he claimed (and footnoted) that much of what he said had been conveyed to him by Indian security specialists themselves.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

Tanham said that most Indians believed that it was culture that was at the base of their sense of “Indianness”, which went back to time immemorial and which made up for the absence of political unity during most of its long history. But, he noted, the understanding of what Indian culture meant varied widely among Indians, incorporating the highly developed intellectual and philosophical traditions of the educated elite, to the emotive and personalised faith of most Hindus who revered Shiva and Krishna, and the superstitions of simple rural folk. Family and caste were the object of primary loyalties, at times even competing with national affiliations.

From his understanding of India’s history and cultural traditions, Tanham drew some important conclusions relating to its strategic culture, which may be summarised as follows:

1. **Indians lack strategic thinking and have produced little in terms of strategic planning and thinking:** he ascribed this to the absence of political unity through most of its history, though he also added some factors drawn from Hindu culture, such as: the absence of the concept of time, which discouraged planning and the sense of fatalism which limited control over one’s life. Other factors noted by him were: the exclusion of Indians from strategic decision-making during the Raj and the absence of strategic planning institutions in Independent India. There are, he said, no formal efforts at developing national strategies; policies and strategies developed so far have been on “an ad hoc and pragmatic basis”.
2. In regard to national security, Indians, he noted, display a curious contradiction in that they are proud of their heritage and feel confident about defending themselves, but at the same time feel “insecure and encircled by hostile forces”. This pushes them into conflictual positions: on the one hand they strongly assert their independence of action and aloofness from alliances, but on the other hand their sense of insecurity pushes them to seek affiliations with strong countries – first the British, then the Soviets, and now the Americans.
3. **India’s approach to strategic challenges is generally defensive and in military matters it displays “passive and reactive tendencies”:** In its history, Indian armies had hardly ever gone outside the confines of the sub-continent, contenting themselves with fighting their neighbours. At independence, India inherited the tradition of being a status quo power from the Raj. Even now (written in 1992), India’s approach to challenges from Pakistan and China is largely reactive.

Tanham ascribes this to: (a) India being largely an agricultural country (which breeds passivity); (b) the “rigid and hierarchical structure of Indian society”, and (c) the administrative services that react rather than initiate.

The exception is the Indian approach to South Asia: India views the sub-continent “as a single strategic space” where it robustly asserts its national interests. India, in this regard, has “inherited the ‘imperial’ mindset of the British”.

4. **In pursuit of projecting its great power status, India goes in for “status and symbolism” rather than with actual strategic needs:** In fact, “external recognition and validation of India’s place is almost as important as having that status”. This is reflected in its desire to acquire nuclear weapons, its missile programme, and the expansion of its navy to affirm its domination of the Indian Ocean. (In respect of the latter, Tanham thought, in 1992, that the acquisitions revealed “a limited power-projection against even modest opposition”!)

Tanham’s paper has been reviewed several times over the years, most recently by Peter Garretson in 2013.⁵ Garretson generally agreed with Tanham that certain attributes of Indian culture had imparted to the people “a conservative and non-innovative mindset”, and had encouraged “attitudes of passivity, acceptance, and fatalism”. Garretson also accepted Tanham’s conclusion that in India there is a “comparative lack of strategic thinking” and “paucity of a systematic articulation on Indian security principles”.

In order to remedy this situation, Garretson made some important and wide-ranging corrective approaches:

1. In present-day Indian strategic analysis, there is too much focus on the past, much less on the future, and too much attention is paid to threats rather than opportunities.
2. Again, analysts do not look at the perceptions of the other strategic players, but are concerned more with seeking “hidden motives and conspiracy theories”.
3. Indian analysts tend to be suspicious of the ideas of others and harbour a deep-seated concern that other ideas reflect the priorities of special interest groups.
4. Indian strategic writings give too much attention to analysis and give too little to solutions and providing options for policy-makers.
5. The Indian security establishment generally avoids brain-storming and consensus-building.
6. The security establishment should develop greater focus and capacities in regard to sequential thinking (through planning and war-gaming) and on systems thinking (ie, looking at interconnections and causations).

⁵ Peter A Garretson, “Tanham in Retrospect: 18 Years of Evolution in Indian Strategic Culture”, South Asia Journal, 22 January 2013, at: <http://southasiajournal.net/tanham-in-retrospect-18-years-of-evolution-in-indian-strategic-culture/> (1 January 2018)

7. While aspects of Indian culture do colour Indians' perceptions of strategic events, just changes in the "corporate culture" in Indian security establishments, suggested above, would effect significant changes in Indian strategic thought and practice.

India's strategic priorities

There is a broad national consensus among Indian policy makers and academics on India's principal strategic concerns. These may be summarised as follows:

1. Domestic
 - (i) National unity
 - (ii) Economic development
2. Immediate neighbourhood
 - (i) Pakistan
 - (ii) Other neighbouring states (Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Afghanistan and Myanmar)
3. China, Japan and Korea
4. The extended neighbourhood
 - (i) The Gulf and West Asia
 - (ii) Southeast Asia
 - (iii) Central Asia
 - (iv) The Indo-Pacific region
5. The big powers: the USA, EU and Russia

India's engagements with these geographical spaces have become more complicated due to significant changes in the world order. *One*, while the US remains the most important global economic and military power, it is no longer a hegemonic power, and has declined in power and influence relative to other powers.⁶

Two, China has emerged as a major global economic, political and military power and is shaping an influential role in international counsels. At the same time, it has shown a willingness to project force in areas of immediate strategic interest to it, particularly in the South China Sea and recently the Sino-Indian border. It is also steadily expanding its role in the economies (and occasionally politics) of South Asian countries and its naval presence in the Indian Ocean region, all matters having serious implications for India's strategic interests.

China has also signalled its interest in engaging logistically and economically with the Eurasian and Indian Ocean regions through its trillion-dollar Belt-and-Road Initiative

⁶ Shyam Saran, *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century*, Juggernaut Books, New Delhi, 2017, p. 262

(BRI) which, when completed, will ensure an enduring Chinese presence in areas of considerable importance to India.

The regional scenario has further deteriorated to India's disadvantage with the growing economic, political, logistical and military nexus between China and Pakistan, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a part of the BRI projects. This has raised the prospect of India having to prepare itself seriously for a two-front war.

Three, while Russia remains a major world power, it is unlikely that it will emerge "as one of the key architects of the emerging world order".⁷ It is still India's principal defence supplier. However, in response to changes in the international system and the perceived challenges from the US to its role in Europe and West Asia, it has sought strategic advantage in closer association with China and is backing the outreach of the latter in the Pacific and Eurasia, thus raising doubts about its support for India in its ongoing competitions with China.

Four, against the backdrop of the deepening divide between "new" and "old" Europe, the 2016 European Union Global Strategy document envisages a pronounced proactive approach with regard to the EU's role on the global stage.

Regional developments

Recent developments in the regional scenario have also thrown up fresh challenges for India by squeezing its strategic space. *One*, Pakistan remains a formidable and single-minded opponent. Benefitting from regular political and military backing from the US and China, Pakistan, Zorawar Daulet Singh writes, has "ensured that India's entire military posture and security institutions have been engaged in a policy of containing this threat to the Indian heartland".⁸

Despite serious setbacks in four conventional wars with India in seventy years of its existence, Pakistan has sustained a "proxy war" against India through the use of jihadi radicals, who are backed by its armed forces. While the US has from early 2018 been signalling its disenchantment with Pakistani support for extremism as state policy, it is likely that, given Pakistan's value as a US associate against transnational jihad, the US will not maintain its distance from it. In any case, China has quickly jumped into the gap and pledged full support for Pakistan in its hour of crisis.

Two, India is experiencing serious difficulties in its ties with its immediate neighbours. Tanham had noted in 1992 the difference between Indian and its neighbours' security perceptions: Indians believed that the neighbours shared its view of the cultural unity of the sub-continent and shared security interests, and viewed as a "betrayal" the

⁷ Ibid, p. 264

⁸ Zorawar Daulet Singh, "Thinking about an Indian Grand Strategy", Strategic Analysis, Vol 35, No 1, January 2011, p. 57

neighbours' attempts to balance Indian influence through association with other nations, the US or China.

Zorawar Daulet Singh repeated the Indian view recently when he said that "India's grand strategic objectives require a periphery that is ruled by regimes that at the very least follow policies ... that are not inimical to India". But, increasing Chinese economic penetration and political influence in neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and more recently in Afghanistan, and the expansion of its naval presence in the Indian Ocean demand a review by India of its foreign policy approach and even of its strategic culture amidst these new challenges.

The *third* area of concern for India is the deteriorating security situation in West Asia, where Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in proxy conflicts in Syria and Yemen in which over half a million people have been killed, several million have been displaced and face severe humanitarian crises, and cities and civic life have been destroyed. With full US backing, Saudi Arabia has sharpened its rhetoric against the Islamic Republic, even as both the US and the kingdom have threatened it with regime change by encouraging internal dissent.

India's crucial national interests are at stake – its energy security, its economic well-being and the welfare of its eight-million strong community in the Gulf. As of now, no country or grouping has initiated a peace process that would promote dialogue and confidence-building measures between the estranged Islamic giants. This scenario calls out for an Indian diplomatic initiative to pursue engagement between the Kingdom and Iran; sitting on the fence is just not an option.

Clearly, the changes in the world order and the immediate challenges India faces to its interests demand the shaping of new diplomatic approaches based on a new strategic culture that would leave behind the defensive, passive and reactive tendencies that have characterised Indian strategic culture for several years. These have not just been the observations of US writers Tanham and Garretson discussed above; Rahul Sagar, discussing Indian ideas relating to its role in world politics in 2009, had described them as "visions" rather than schools since, he wrote, "the objectives they commend are often elucidated as images or ideals, rather than as conclusions derived from sustained arguments about the nature of international politics".⁹

Similarly, Zorawar Daulet Singh wrote in 2011:

Even as India's relative material capabilities have increased, the posture of its security and political elites lacks the purposiveness one would expect from a rising

⁹ Rahul Sagar, "State of mind: what kind of power will India become?", *International Affairs*, 85:4 (2009), p.801

*power. The absence of an overarching template to guide different parts of the state and strategic bureaucracy ... has created a palpable inertia and an intellectual vacuum.*¹⁰

Shaping a new strategic culture

Insights offered by distinguished Western and Indian scholars discussed above have focused attention on certain important aspects of traditional Indian approaches to national strategic interests and have offered trenchant criticisms of what they see as passivity and reactivity and the absence of long-term perspectives and planning. They have traced these shortcomings to certain aspects of Indian history and culture, but have also recognised, in line with strategic culture theory, that these attributes are not cast in stone, but in fact mutate in response to new developments.

A commentator on strategic culture theory, Kerry Longhurst, says: “A strategic culture is persistent over time, tending to outlast the era of its original inception, although it is not a permanent or static feature. It is shaped and influenced by formative periods and *can alter, either fundamentally or piecemeal, at critical junctures in that collective’s experiences.* (Emphasis added).”¹¹ Following from this observation, Garretson had concluded:

But strategic culture is not fixed, and India’s own focus, outlook, and self-perception are changing significantly, and it is difficult to imagine that as India re-opens and finds itself able to compete and flourish in the world of business, that it will not adopt first there the conceptual toolkits that enable clear strategic thinking. That, in turn, will proliferate into other realms; find increasing pressure through politics, and eventually into government bureaucracy and supporting civil society organs.

In fact, a fresh approach to shaping a new India strategic culture can be derived from a convergence of the four “visions” relating to India’s role in world affairs that have been competing in India’s academic space. Rahul Sagar had identified them as follows:¹²

1. **Moralists:** deriving from the legacy of India’s freedom movement and Nehru’s foreign policy approach, they espouse India’s freedom of action in world affairs through the principles and institutions of the nonaligned movement, prioritising autonomy in decision-making on contentious international issues, rejecting the attributes of the iniquitous world order and upholding the interests of the developing countries.

¹⁰ Singh, p. 52

¹¹ Kerry Longhurst

¹² Sagar, p. 801-16

2. **Hindu nationalists:** They share with the moralists a vision of an important place for India in global counsels, and hope to obtain it through national unity, strengthening of national character, robust military force, and affiliation with like-minded allies.
3. **Strategists:** They give primacy to power and focus on economic and military power as determinants of national achievement. As Indian commentator Bharat Karnad has said, this approach is characterised by “unsentimental, quick-thinking, and fleet-footed foreign and military policies able to exploit opportunities and able to register tangible, not abstract, gains for the country”.
4. **Liberals:** This vision sees economic stagnation as having “undermined human development, devastated government finances and fuelled political unrest”. Their approach to foreign affairs prioritises economic power and pragmatic policies involving wide-ranging economic engagements and active participation in regional economic groupings.

Though these visions are projected by their votaries as separate and even competitive, there is considerable congruence between them and the posture projected by the so-called “Moralists” as reflected in the words and actions of Nehru, the principal advocate of this vision. It should not therefore be too difficult for strategists to mould them into a coherent “grand strategy” founded on a new, pro-active strategic culture. This convergence would be based on the following ideas shared by the four “visions”:

1. **India’s pre-eminent role in global affairs:** This view is shared by all the four visions. Soon after independence, Nehru wrote: “India is going to be a country that counts in world affairs”. Nehru, as Shyam Saran has noted, was “convinced that the extent of India’s territory, its large population, its civilizational identity and its growing economy marked the country for a global role and influence [and] pursue its destiny as a great power”.¹³
2. Recognition that India’s aspirations for a global role depend crucially on unity, internal strength and economic achievement.
3. **Insistence on freedom of action in world affairs:** Nehru explained the meaning of independence thus: “What does independence consist of? It consists fundamentally and basically of foreign relations. This is the test of independence.” Nehru saw the need for India to keep aloof from the dichotomous divide in world order on the basis of what he called “opportunism” and thus ensured that strategic autonomy and flexibility in making choices would remain a cardinal principle of India’s foreign policy.

¹³ Shyam Saran, p.30

Looking ahead, former foreign secretary and national security adviser, Shiv Shankar Menon, has described this approach most effectively: “India will continue to enlarge its strategic autonomy, remain fiercely independent, and remain convinced of its exceptional status and interests in the international system.”¹⁴

4. **No reluctance to use power where crucial national interests are involved:** Contrary to popular view, Indian policy-makers from Nehru to the present have regularly exercised power whenever crucial national interests were involved; examples of this approach include:

- Integration of states in the run up to independence
- Militarily confronting Pakistani forces in Jammu and Kashmir in 1947-48
- Accession of Goa to the Indian union
- Accession of Sikkim to India
- Military intervention in East Pakistan
- Nuclear tests and development of multiple range delivery systems

The shaping of a new Indian grand strategy founded on a new strategic culture would require a major national effort to discuss and flesh-out the various ideas and initiatives that would be a part of this strategy, and would take into account the furtherance of India’s interests amidst major changes in the regional and global scenarios that present not just challenges but opportunities for a country.

While Nehru understood the importance of foreign policy for the realisation of the national interests, in India today, foreign affairs seem to be very marginal in terms of achieving the national vision and its objectives due to the deep divide that persists between domestic and foreign policies. In fact, there is a pervasive impression that foreign affairs are of marginal significance and frequently tend to be subordinated to domestic priorities amongst the political leadership, the civil service, the corporate sector and the media. Hence, the promotion of a new strategic culture nationally will be a daunting challenge.

A central role in this endeavour would need to be played by national academic community that would have the freedom to debate fresh ideas, identify new opportunities and propagate the spirit and substance of the new strategic culture to the national strategic establishment.

Education policy needs to look at creating strategic mind sets by integrating the academic know-how into curricula. The successful realisation of a new national strategic culture is a comprehensive challenge that would require a paradigm shift in present day

¹⁴ Shiv Shankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy*, Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, Gurgaon, India, 2016, p. 201

educational policies that eschew analytical and independent thinking, the analysis of challenges and opportunities and the setting out of policy options on the basis of sequential and systems thinking, as recommended by Garretson above.

IRC-2018

IRC-2018 is taking place when important challenges for India's interests have emerged that demand a fresh look not just at its foreign policy options but also in fact, at its strategic culture itself, which needs to be, replaced by one address the following questions:

- What are India's diverse strengths and capabilities?
- What are the areas where domestic capacities need to be augmented? And, what policies need to be adopted to achieve them?
- What are the desired outcomes for India in different regional spaces of importance to its strategic interests?
- What approaches should be adopted to achieve those desired outcomes?
- What regional and global engagements/ arrangements should India pursue to become more effective in the pursuit of its interests in respect of: (a) Pakistan, (b) China, and (c) West Asia
- What initiatives can India develop to reduce competitive scenarios in the Indian Ocean region?
- Does India need to shape and pursue new approaches to its ties with its immediate neighbours? If so, what should be the content and style of these approaches?
- What should be the substance of India's ties with (a) the US and (b) Russia? What policies should be pursued to obtain optimal results

IRC -2018 will address these and related questions over two days, with presentations by eminent practitioners and academics, followed by robust discussions involving peers and students of international studies and other faculties from schools in Pune and other parts of India. The results of these interactions will yield a publication that will provide new approaches to contemporary challenges and will contribute to the shaping of a new strategic culture in India that, it is hoped, will be the bedrock of India's foreign policy in coming years.