

“Managing New Delhi’s participation in the Afghan endgame will be critical, and it will require a review of US-India policy in Washington.”

The Fate of India’s Strategic Restraint

SUNIL DASGUPTA

In February 2012, India selected a French jet, the Rafale, as the new mainstay fighter for its air force. A month earlier, the country had leased a nuclear submarine from Russia. The acquisition of the fighter aircraft and submarine is part of an ambitious military modernization that has made India the number one arms importer in the world.

This rearmament effort, riding on the nation’s unprecedented economic growth, has prompted some observers to wonder whether India has decided to balance Chinese power in Asia or is seeking to correct the anomaly of strategic parity with Pakistan, a country one fifth its size. Indians themselves want their country to act more assertively, and India’s primary rival, Pakistan, has never bought into neighborly restraint.

So, could we be witnessing the start of an India-China arms race in Asia that would become the defining global conflict of the twenty-first century—as the United States returns to its traditional role of offshore balancer, reduces its overseas presence, and husbands resources for domestic recovery? Could we also be standing on the precipice of a nuclear confrontation with Pakistan?

The answer is: Probably not. India’s rearmament efforts are unlikely to turn the nation into an aggressive power, seeking military balance with China and upending the existing balance with Pakistan. Indeed, not only have India’s political leaders traditionally hesitated to use force as an instrument of foreign policy even when the conditions were right for it, they have neglected to provide clear strategic guidance to the military. In

a 2010 book, Stephen P. Cohen of the Brookings Institution and I called this phenomenon “arming without aiming.” We found that the disconnect between strategic purpose and military planning is both shaped by and reinforces military-strategic restraint in India’s foreign policy.

Today, notwithstanding growing uncertainty in South Asia and the recently accelerated arms buildup, New Delhi appears unlikely to abandon this military restraint. Certainly, fears of American withdrawal from the region are making Indians jittery about a resurgence of terrorist threats. At the same time, New Delhi likely will strive to wield its growing economic and international influence in Afghanistan as US troops pull out. Although India’s engagement probably will not rise to the level of military intervention, it might be sufficient to fuel another dangerous rivalry with the Pakistanis in Afghanistan.

Outside of an unlikely new war, however, India’s political leaders will not want to spend the political and monetary capital necessary to transform growing resources into military power and purpose sufficient for a reordering of their country’s strategic condition.

This is not a pessimistic view of India’s prospects in the world. To the contrary, military-strategic restraint has paid off handsomely despite the resulting inefficiencies in defense planning. Restraint has contributed to greater accommodation of India’s rise as a great power in the international community. The rise of China led Singapore, for example, to exhort India to become more engaged in Southeast Asia. Today, even the Russians hesitate to sell advanced weapons to China, but Western firms want to be part of India’s military revival. They are motivated by profit, of course, but also by the recognition that India is unlikely to become hostile to their own nations’ interests.

Most notably, the US-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, based on a framework agreed

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to by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and then-US President George W. Bush in 2005, has legitimized India's status as a nuclear weapons power, making it the only country to be accommodated this way since 1968, when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was concluded. Would a militarily aggressive India have received the same accommodation?

EXCEPTIONAL INDIA

Historically, India's nationalist leaders have steered away from using force in pursuit of political goals, a strategy that is rooted in their choice of nonviolent struggle to press for freedom. This approach has deemphasized security threats and the role of military power, even though a war with Pakistan over Kashmir accompanied Indian independence.

India's boldest military decisions—its 1971 invasion of East Pakistan and its 1998 nuclear tests—were far more reactive than widely believed. In 1971, millions of Bengali refugees poured into India to escape the Pakistani army's genocidal violence in the eastern wing of the country. India won a quick and easy victory in the east and took 90,000 prisoners, but it did not attack West Pakistan, which was the true source of anti-India sentiment in Pakistan.

In 1998, the Indian government conducted nuclear tests in response to American efforts to close down the nuclear option for India through the indefinite extension of the NPT and the imposition of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty—an agreement New Delhi rejected. India had conducted nuclear tests in 1974 but had put its nuclear program into a deep freeze until the mid-1980s. Indeed, public reports suggest India has not pursued the development of a nuclear arsenal with vigor since the 1998 tests, even at the risk of falling behind Pakistan.

In practice, when India has tried to be militarily assertive—such as when Jawaharlal Nehru pursued a forward policy against China in the 1950s, and when Nehru's grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, sent the Indian army to police a peace deal in Sri Lanka—the results have been disastrous. Prime Minister Nehru's forward policy resulted in a humiliating defeat in a war against China in 1962. In 1987, India sent four army divisions to monitor and enforce a peace agreement between the separatist Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government, but the peacekeeping mission turned into a conflict that has been called "India's Vietnam," one of the

bloodiest and most demoralizing wars fought by the Indian army.

In an October 2011 speech, when it was clear that the United States was going to withdraw from Afghanistan sooner rather than later, Indian National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon sought to highlight the importance of armed force in international politics, yet he described his country's approach to the use of force almost entirely in terms of strategic restraint.

Menon pointed out that India had set clear limits on the use of military force even against insurgencies that received foreign assistance. The nation's defense spending had exceeded 3 percent of GDP in only a single year since independence. India returned territory it won in war and has not sought to project power overseas. Indian troops have gone abroad only when invited by other governments and usually under the United Nations flag. Menon argued that India's history made credible its no-first-use commitment on nuclear weapons.

CONTROLLED ESCALATION

With Pakistan, nuclear weapons have reinforced Indian restraint. As the country with the smaller military capacity, Pakistan has threatened the first use of nuclear weapons and India has backed down four times—in 1986, 1990, 1999, and 2001–02. New Delhi has succeeded in controlling escalation even as proxy conflicts with Islamabad have grown worse.

In 1990 and 1999, India was careful to limit its military responses to Pakistani provocations. In 1990, New Delhi responded to Islamabad's support for rebels in Kashmir not with war but with a counterinsurgency campaign inside Kashmir. The disputed territory has remained violent for two decades now, yet India has not expanded the conflict by crossing into Pakistan. In 1999, Indian armed forces responded to Pakistani incursions into the Kargil district of Kashmir with a hard-fought clearing operation that took pains not to enter Pakistan. Both campaigns cost India greatly in dead and wounded, but India did not escalate the fighting.

In 1986 and 2001–02, India's military maneuvers produced standoffs from which the country stepped back when presented with Pakistani nuclear threats. In 1986, New Delhi conducted military exercises on the Pakistan border that General Krishnaswami Sundarji, who was then chief of India's army, later called the last chance to resolve

the Pakistan problem. But India did not go to war. In 2001–02, India deployed hundreds of thousands of troops to the border in an effort to coerce Pakistan to stop supporting terrorism in India. But the effort failed. The Indian government was simply not ready to go to the nuclear edge.

In the years since the failure of coercive diplomacy in 2001–02, the Indian army has sought to break out of mere escalation control with its “Cold Start” doctrine, which proposes that a quick and deep strike inside Pakistan would catch the country unawares. By the time Islamabad could react, international pressure would come into play to prevent nuclear escalation. India’s political leaders, however, have not endorsed this doctrine.

With China, India has generally sought détente since the 1980s. Although many Indians—including large sections of the military—remain suspicious of Chinese intentions, India’s governments across political parties have wanted better relations with Beijing for almost three decades. In the 1980s, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi revived diplomatic relations with China after two decades of estrangement following the 1962 war. Since then every Indian prime minister, including Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the right-wing nationalist BJP party, has reaffirmed the policy of engagement with Beijing.

The rapprochement seems to have been motivated by Indian concerns about a growing Pakistan-China alliance (Beijing in the late 1980s had been accused of transferring long-range missile technology to Islamabad in violation of the Missile Technology Control Regime). In 1999 the reconciliation effort paid off when China adopted a neutral stand between India and Pakistan during the Kargil War.

On the Chinese side, the rapprochement with New Delhi has been driven in part by concerns about a rising US-India alliance. The Kargil War marked the first time that the United States definitively sided with India against Pakistan in the history of American diplomacy in the region. What might have led to an outbreak of competitive, balance-of-power politics instead became a virtuous circle. When two of the three actors drew closer, the third moved in to close the gap.

India and China remain unable to settle a long-standing territorial dispute, and recently both governments have been acting tough. Beijing has re-

fused visas to two Indian officials on the grounds that they are Chinese citizens by virtue of their birth in territory claimed by China. New Delhi in 2008 approved two new army divisions for use on the Chinese border and ordered the reopening of some forward airfields.

Even so, neither government appears to have an interest in exacerbating their mutual challenges. China is focused on the United States and considers India a sideshow; Beijing is most concerned about the possibility of a US-India alliance against China. If Beijing becomes antagonistic, that will push India closer to the United States. India for its part sees China as more powerful and not a challenge to take on directly; New Delhi is most concerned with China’s Pakistan relationship. Better Indian relations with China reduce the need for Beijing to draw closer to Islamabad.

UNGUIDED WEAPONS

It is hardly surprising, then, that India’s political leaders have neglected military planning. Political guidance to the military in public is banal at best and often contradictory. In 2011, Prime Minister Singh told an annual conference of the country’s top military commanders that “networked, nimble-footed, and more lethal” terrorist groups posed the greatest threat to the nation. He clarified further that cyber-terrorism and nuclear proliferation were significant emerging challenges.

The military commanders, however, are not responsible for counterterrorism, except in Kashmir and in India’s northeastern states. They certainly do not deal directly with cyber and nuclear issues. What were they to make of the prime minister’s comment? Was it an invitation to the military to become more involved in domestic security issues, or was it an acknowledgment that the country’s primary security threats are ones with which the armed forces need not concern themselves?

Singh’s speech obliquely referred to Pakistan, but he followed up that reference with discussion of the need to give neighboring states a stake in India’s economic success. The prime minister’s liberal approach to international relations is widely lauded, but his public comments offer little guidance for military planners.

A few days before Singh’s speech, National Security Adviser Menon delivered a more pointed

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lecture on the role of military force in an anarchic international system. Menon tried hard to strike a realist tone that contrasted with the prime minister's more liberal approach to security. But which speech represented official policy? One consequence of the lack of clarity was the banality of Menon's conclusion that "the primary purpose of Indian military power remains the defense of India's territorial integrity . . . and to prepare for the threats of war that exist." Do national forces do anything else?

Private direction from political leaders to the military is undoubtedly more detailed, but it is still not driving military choices. Rather than following an agenda set by the political leadership, the armed forces appear to be driving their own modernization plans. Prime Minister Singh accepted the premise of military-led planning in a 2004 address to the military commanders' conference. "The impulse of technological modernization," he said, "has to come from within our armed forces and our defense establishments."

Taking their cue, India's highly professional armed forces have done what professionals do, which is to pursue technological advancement within their own well defined but narrow domains. The original justification for what became the Rafale fighter decision, for example, was to replace the Indian air force's aging MiG-21, a Soviet-supplied lightweight interceptor jet. But the Indian air force altered the selection criteria and held competitive trials for a more versatile, more expensive, medium-range, medium-weight, multi-role fighter.

One consequence of the air force's choice was the rejection of the indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), which its developers had hoped would replace the MiG-21, but which the air force has always regarded as subpar. Whether the air force should support indigenous aircraft development by backing the LCA, even if it were inferior, is a matter of policy coordination—it is a decision that political leaders need to make. To invest in aircraft development and then go outside to buy foreign planes suggests either research and development failure or poor policy making.

The lack of policy coordination is endemic. The Indian army, for example, has not been able to convince the air force to adopt its Cold Start doctrine even though no invasion of Pakistan would be possible without air power.

Since the US Navy SEALs raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad last year, India's special forces have been thinking about how to conduct a similar operation. Although India can physically strike deep inside Pakistan, it does not have the intelligence capability to conduct months of surveillance on the ground inside Pakistan. India's special forces need to work with its intelligence agencies, but the intelligence agencies have their own imperatives and are in dire need of reform themselves.

The most dramatic example of the lack of policy coordination is the military modernization effort itself. The armed forces appear to be buying new weapons to fight another conventional war, yet the political leadership and in particular the current prime minister have repeatedly identified insurgency and terrorism as the primary threats to Indian security.

Since political supremacy over the armed forces is not a problem in India, it is hard to understand how the armed forces could so baldly deviate from political direction, unless of course the political leaders are not holding the military to their guidance. In my view, this hands-off approach is a choice that Indian political leaders make because they do not believe in the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy.

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AMERICA IN THE MIDDLE

Rather than military power, India's grand strategy today depends on diplomacy and in particular on a transformed relationship with the United States. New Delhi's ability to continue the détente with Beijing is contingent on whether America has an appetite for better relations with China. If the United States revises its China policy toward greater confrontation, India will lose its room for maneuver and will be forced to choose between Washington and Beijing. If America decides to downgrade its ties with India, New Delhi will perforce become closer to Beijing and presumably accept Chinese terms in their territorial dispute.

Following a difficult period in US-China relations, the Barack Obama administration appears to have gained ground with Beijing by disavowing the view that the United States fears the rise of China. The administration has won concessions from China on currency revaluation, environmental rules, and censorship. On the other side of the

triangle, the Indian and Chinese governments have failed to resolve irritants in their relationship, but both seem committed not to exacerbate matters. The three-way dance among New Delhi, Beijing, and Washington has thus allowed India to remain strategically restrained, reduced its costs of defense, and encouraged other states to accommodate its rise.


The US-India side of the triangle, however, has been buffeted by developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since 1999, when the United States unequivocally turned toward India—and away from Pakistan—for the first time during the Kargil War, New Delhi has sought to leverage its improved relations with Washington to make gains with Islamabad. With concern rising over extremist groups in Pakistan, India found a receptive ear in Washington. When President Bill Clinton made a celebrated trip to India in 2000, he stopped at a Pakistani airport to lecture the country about the evils of terrorism.

India already was seen as an important potential ally when President Bush took office. Washington regarded India as a diverse and democratic republic that could balance growing Chinese power in Asia. The September 11, 2001, attacks against

America refocused the president's agenda. However, a December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian parliament showed that the United States would have to satisfy Indian concerns about support for terrorism in Pakistan in order to pursue war in Afghanistan effectively. Washington persuaded Pakistan to sanction extremist anti-India groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba.


Over the next five years, US-India ties improved dramatically, culminating in the nuclear deal that essentially legitimized India's nuclear weapons program in return for bringing India's civilian nuclear program under international safeguards. With American nudging, India-Pakistan ties improved as well. By the end of 2007, the two countries were on the verge of a diplomatic breakthrough, but then another terrorist attack, this time in Mumbai in 2008, derailed the process. Clearly, US officials were not entirely successful in influencing Pakistani behavior, but their efforts were credible enough for the Indian government not to take military action against Pakistan in retaliation for the attack.

The Obama administration has altered the trajectory of US-India ties. President Obama wanted to end the war in Afghanistan and saw the roots of



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the conflict inside Pakistan. His special representative to the region, the late Richard Holbrooke, spoke about including Kashmir as part of a regional solution, angering Indians. Holbrooke dropped Kashmir from his agenda, but the tenor of US-India ties has not improved much, even with a presidential visit in 2010. India has adjusted its expectations of what this administration will deliver with respect to Pakistan. In addition, the decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan by 2014 has prompted India to redouble its engagement in Afghanistan, which in turn has made Pakistan more hostile to American efforts to bring about a political settlement in Afghanistan.

PRESERVING RESTRAINT

From the Indian perspective, the Obama administration has brought opportunity on the China front but danger on the Pakistan front. Indian officials are apprehensive that the US departure from Afghanistan will raise the costs of managing their Pakistan problem. Because Pakistan does not buy into the idea of military-strategic restraint, its behavior has always presented the toughest tests of India's approach. The potential for direct confrontation remains unlikely, especially given the nuclear standoff, but another proxy war is possible.

The Obama administration envisions a political agreement between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the Taliban (which also at least temporarily satisfies Tajik and Uzbek leaders and Pakistan) as the ticket to withdrawal from Afghanistan and a reduced military presence in South Asia. But it is hard to see how any agreement might endure in the face of renewed rivalry among India, Pakistan, Iran, and possibly Russia over influence in Afghanistan. Regional politics has not really changed since the 1990s, except for the death of bin Laden.

Recently, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and President Karzai visited Pakistan to try to develop a regional approach. The Pakistani government has publicly come out in support of the US-backed reconciliation talks in Afghanistan. Whether the Pakistani army and the country's intelligence services, let alone the Taliban, will heed Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani's call for a settlement is unclear. The violent protests

following the burning of Korans at a NATO base in February 2012 suggest that the Taliban are in the ascendant. A section of the Islamist insurgency could certainly break away to make peace with the government, but such a peace would likely prove untenable.

Indian officials see two interrelated problems in Afghanistan. First, India is being formally excluded from the Afghan solution, which means, applying zero-sum logic, that Pakistan comes out ahead. Second, they see a diminution of Indian interests in Washington. It was not long ago that David Petraeus, when he was military commander in Afghanistan, called Indian interests in Afghanistan legitimate.

New Delhi has been sending strong signals to Washington. The Rafale decision, for example, was noteworthy not only as the largest single weapons purchase in Indian history, but also because India rejected US-built fighter aircraft. In a country where military modernization and strategic purpose are divorced, the decision to exclude American fighters, in spite of the centrality of US-India ties in New Delhi's foreign policy, suggests dissatisfaction with the bilateral relationship, which the United States needs to address soon.

Although strategic restraint remains the natural disposition and preferred approach of India's political leaders, there is no guarantee that, in a context of reduced American influence, such reticence will spare South Asia from chaos and conflict. In Afghanistan, my expectation is that the Indian government will not act militarily, but it will likely defend its interests in ways that jeopardize peace, such as by renewing help to the Northern Alliance, the umbrella group of factions opposed to the Taliban.

Another civil war could return Afghanistan to the conditions that led to the rise of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the first place. Clearly, a regional settlement is necessary for a durable peace. Hence, managing New Delhi's participation in the Afghan endgame will be critical, and it will require a review of US-India policy in Washington. The objectives of this review ought to include a clearer vision of how to engage India in a way that keeps its strategic restraint firmly in place. ■