

# Indian Strategy in a Non-Strategic Age

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As India emerges in the 21st century, evolving gradually into a middle-income country with increasingly global interests, it will find itself adapting to a rapidly evolving international system. India's resources today are greater than at any time in its history, and it no longer confronts existential threats. But while the country may now be less vulnerable, it will have to confront different—and sometimes unprecedented—challenges.

Are India and its leaders up to the task? Sceptics often point to an absence of strategy. Indeed, a widely-held view, both domestically and abroad, is that India—its leaders, its polity, and its culture—is not strategic.<sup>1</sup> This is simply untrue. India would not have remained unified, grown stronger, slowly prospered, achieved military victories, or emerged as a de facto nuclear weapons power without some kind of strategy; these developments were not merely the product of accident or good fortune. In fact, a slew of histories and accounts document detailed deliberations and strategic decisions behind each of these outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

But the image of India as non-strategic is so widespread and so deeply ingrained that it is worth considering how and why it became so popular. One reason is that India has no single defining national strategic document. In fact, there rarely is one. Indian leaders—like their counterparts elsewhere—have often found value in ambiguity. Another view is that India's strategic culture has often been guided by the spoken—rather than the written—word, or that elements of strategy are intuitively understood rather than explicitly stated.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, analysts and commentators, particularly outside India, are often unable to discern a strategy amid the noise of the Indian public

sphere, mistaking public debate for strategic incoherence. At a very superficial level, democracy muddies the strategic waters. Finally, an absence of strategy is often inferred from India's poor or *ad hoc* implementation. India's record as an executor of strategy is at best uneven, although critics often overlook India's resource constraints. Yet while implementation has perhaps been India's greatest weakness, it is not for want of strategic acumen.

Strategy is a much misunderstood, misused, and maligned concept. In general, it refers to how individuals and organisations set goals and attempt to achieve them under uncertain conditions and with limited resources. In the context of national policymaking, the term 'strategy' is often used as shorthand for 'grand strategy'. Grand strategy is how a national leadership controls and utilises resources to effectively promote a country's vital national interests and secure those interests against adversaries. Strategy is, perhaps, illusory.<sup>4</sup> It may also be overrated. The mere presence of a strategy is not, in itself, a good thing. Major historical debacles—from Napoleon's Waterloo campaign, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, or the US involvement in Vietnam—were all motivated by clear-eyed strategies, even if they were flawed in hindsight.<sup>5</sup> Nor is a good strategy a pure reflection of public opinion, as can be attested to by numerous cases of extreme nationalism and populism gone awry. A successful strategy depends in large part on its feasibility and sustainability.

## **The Elements of India's Grand Strategy**

### **I. Resources**

Grand strategy requires drawing a connection between three elements. The first is national resources, which a leadership must identify, enhance, and control. This might include a country's ability to apply force, including through the use of its military or a covert action capability; its economic resources such as raw materials, industrial output, capital, and market access; its diplomatic abilities; and the information at its disposal, such as technological expertise, intellectual property, intelligence, and ideas.

India's resources are still modest, but are growing. Its military is large, professional, and battle-experienced, but has limited offensive capabilities and is not always adequately equipped. Its covert action capability is restricted. And although an existential nuclear deterrent has been established, many steps are still required before India has a credible minimum deterrent.<sup>6</sup> While

warfare is becoming increasingly rare, especially between states, there are many conceivable scenarios that might require India to use force. Security challenges within the country remain a concern, although violence of all kinds—including terrorism—has been steadily declining since the early 2000s.<sup>7</sup>

Economically, India has seen meaningful progress from a very low base. In a quarter century since the economic liberalisation of 1991, India's economy has grown seven-fold and per capita incomes have multiplied by five. It retains several structural advantages, including a large and youthful workforce and internationally competitive wages. But India remains resource-poor relative to the size of its population, and is heavily reliant on raw material imports. Its industrial output is still marginal, although its manufacturing base is gradually increasing. India's research and development capabilities in many sectors are still wanting, although it has been able to compete globally in such areas as software and space. The Indian government has a growing ability to provide international assistance and loans, including through joint initiatives with the private sector. India also remains a lucrative export destination and it is developing into one of the largest untapped consumer markets. This is in fact a source of influence, giving India greater leverage when imposing sanctions or threatening other discriminatory economic measures.

Although diplomatically overstretched, India wields considerable diplomatic power in its immediate neighbourhood, particularly with its smaller neighbours. It also has effective veto power over many decisions of global significance.<sup>8</sup> India is also a rich fount of ideas—from Buddhism and democracy in the developing world to yoga and Bollywood—all of which can be used to increase India's attraction or soft power. These military, economic, diplomatic, and information resources constitute but a sampling of the national resources at India's disposal. Along almost every dimension, including in areas where there is considerable room for improvement, India's capabilities are increasing, even if gradually.

## **II. Interests**

The second element of a grand strategy involves interests, which a national leadership must define. In any polity, the national interest reflects a general consensus among ruling elites. In democratic societies such as India's, this consensus about the national interest is influenced by a broad spectrum of public opinion, through the ballot box, the media, and formal and informal

lobbying. In most countries, the national interest involves the preservation of national unity and sovereignty, improved welfare through increased prosperity and security, and the defence of national values.

It is important to note that national interests can evolve over time. The United States' national interests as a newly-independent country in the late 18th century were very different from its objectives two hundred years later. Similarly, Germany's grand strategy in 1990 bore no resemblance to that of 1938. These changes were the result of changes to the national character and the structure of the international system. The end of the Cold War in 1991 altered the global context in many ways. For India, advancing the same national interests required establishing a relationship with the Soviet Union in the early 1970s but necessitated deeper relations with the United States in the 2000s. Yet there was not a fundamental change in India's national character that completely overturn edits interests, even if the *means* of advancing those interests may have changed in significant ways.

India's national interests, like those of many other countries, stem from its foundational document: the Constitution. The national interest therefore involves the preservation and strengthening of the Indian republic and its system of governance; the preservation of India's territorial unity and sovereignty; and improvements to public welfare, through increases in prosperity, security, and the rule of law. If much of this seems obvious, it is precisely because it has become hardwired into India's democracy. It is natural—even healthy—that there are robust debates about how to achieve these ends, and to what degree certain interests should be prioritised over others. But, by and large, these broad objectives of national security and public prosperity have guided India's leadership since Independence.

### **III. Adversaries**

The third element of a grand strategy involves adversaries, against whom a state must secure its national interests. Adversaries can sometimes be other states, occasionally on specific issues, but they can extend to non-state or sub-state actors. In India's case, certain adversaries are easily identifiable: those non-state actors who explicitly seek to undermine India's existence, unity, and well-being. They include those groups based in other countries, often with those countries' tacit support (e.g. Lashkar-e-Taiba) as well as those entities within India that do not recognise or abide by India's Constitution, such as

various violent separatist groups and revolutionaries (e.g. Naxalites). Non-state adversaries may also encompass those actors that directly threaten Indian citizens and interests farther afield, such as pirates in the Gulf of Aden or the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Identifying other states as adversaries is, in today's world, more problematic. However, there are two—China and Pakistan—that explicitly contest India's territorial integrity. This does not make them enemies in the classical sense. Both China and Pakistan officially recognise India's right to exist, enjoy diplomatic relations with it, and cooperate with India in a variety of ways. India is not in a declared state of war with either of these neighbours. But an adversarial relationship will exist at least as long as they claim Indian-controlled territory and use, or threaten to use, force in a bid to seize it. Although territorial disputes may be the most direct manifestation of an adversarial relationship, competition can extend beyond the territory in question, to third countries, multilateral bodies, economic competition, and the ideological realm. The view of the national interest advanced by the Pakistan army, for example, extends well beyond competition over territory, and presents India as an existential adversary.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, grand strategy requires tying together these three elements—resources, interests, and adversaries. Strategy is ultimately the *means* of using one's resources to advance and secure one's interests. India's grand strategy today and for the foreseeable future will involve how it controls, enhances, and utilises its military, economic, diplomatic, and information resources to strengthen the Indian republic, preserve India's unity and sovereignty, and increase public prosperity, security, and the rule of law, while securing these objectives against inimical non-state actors and regional adversaries.

### **A Strategy for a Non-Strategic World**

Although India has had a grand strategy, the world is becoming a less strategic place. This is not because states have less power.<sup>10</sup> Quite the contrary. The state is perhaps more powerful today than at any point in history. In most countries—both advanced and developing—the state's role increasingly extends into virtually every aspect of daily life. The state retains a monopoly on legal violence. There are fewer ungoverned spaces. The state bears ever greater responsibility for public welfare, providing health, education, basic utilities, infrastructure, energy flows, and retirement benefits—and even acts

as a lender or insurer of last resort. And, despite the lowering of international trade barriers and market liberalisation, the state has unprecedented regulatory authority over the private and non-profit sectors.

The world is become less strategic for three very different reasons. One, in an era of greater international interdependence, engagement, and peace, adversaries are more difficult to identify. Two, with the spread of democracy and proliferation of information and communication technologies, the public debate over the means of pursuing the national interest has become more cacophonous. And three, with the decline in traditional security concerns, increased globalisation, the rise of welfare states, and the advent of professional lawyers and diplomats, the tools at a state's disposal to exert influence have become more varied. Rather counterintuitively, grand strategy is becoming harder even as the state is becoming stronger.

Certain changes to India's strategic circumstances are to be anticipated. In terms of *resources*, India will almost undoubtedly have more in the near future than it has today. Economic growth will almost undoubtedly continue, fuelled by a growing working-age population and greater opportunity, although it remains to be seen to what degree. Economic growth will mean a larger revenue base for the government. This, in turn, will result in an increased ability to spend, whether on diplomatic efforts, foreign assistance and loans, military preparedness, intelligence, and research and development. A rising middle class will also enhance India's appeal as a market, increasing its international attractiveness and leverage. The objective of intensified industrialisation—if achieved—will lead to greater exports. Overall economic growth and industrialisation will remain necessary elements for India's grand strategy in the 21st century.

The broad contours of India's national *interests* are unlikely to change, barring an unforeseen structural change either to India as a state or the nature of the international system. But what about *adversaries*? Domestically, the broad trend lines concerning separatism, insurgency, terrorist activity, and overall violence in India have been positive of late. Separatists in Punjab and Mizoram have been successfully dealt with. Insurgents in Jammu and Kashmir have largely failed in their objectives, even if separatist sentiments have not been fully extinguished. Even Naxalite violence has declined, although the results have varied considerably state by state. This does not mean, however, that such positive trends are irreversible. The end to a fragile ceasefire with

separatists in Northeast India and periodic acts of dramatic violence by Naxalites hint at possible future reversals. While there has been a recent lull in terrorist violence in urban centres, this too is tenuous.

Therefore, while there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic about India's internal security based on the recent past, there remains the prospect—however remote—of greater violence at home. Examples include the sudden explosion of civil strife in more developed societies than India—such as in Iraq, Syria, the former Yugoslavia, Ukraine, or parts of Latin America—as well as the rapid rise of new extremist groups (such as the Islamic State). India's successes may in fact make it a more attractive target for those intent on threatening Indian values. And India's skewed gender ratio—resulting in over twenty million single men, or 'bare branches'—could have serious consequences for Indian security.<sup>11</sup> Economic growth alone does not guarantee a peaceful and harmonious society.

Internationally, India's ability to secure itself at the strategic level (as opposed to the tactical level) has improved significantly after it demonstrated an existential nuclear deterrent capability.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the prospects of India becoming embroiled in a major international war have sharply diminished since 1998. Yet India must continue to guard against—and potentially counter—the use of coercive force by regional adversaries. The nature of security threats will undoubtedly change, as an outcome of various technological developments. New threats could arise from developments in unmanned warfare, cyber conflict, and the targeting of critical infrastructure. Greater resources, more leverage, and better planning will naturally be required to address such contingencies.

### **Enhancing India's Grand Strategy**

By 2025, India will have an economy of between \$3.5 and \$5 billion, depending largely on the success of economic reforms and planning in the near future. A sub-par growth rate of roughly 5 per cent per year will position India closer to the lower end of that spectrum, while a healthier rate of 7.5-8 per cent annual growth would enable India to reach the higher end. There is no reason to believe that India will not have deepened and improved relations with most major economies in this process of growth, particularly given the absence of major points of conflict between India on the one hand, and the likes of the United States, Europe, Russia, Japan, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America on the other.

Still, four major uncertainties will remain with respect to India's strategic environment. The first is whether this process of development can be managed while mitigating social upheaval. The second is whether India will successfully leverage its economic growth to better integrate its smaller neighbours, such as Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, for mutual benefit. The third is to what degree will India become part of global supply chains, and what this means in particular for its integration into Asia more broadly. This will largely depend on the nature of India's future growth. Finally, it remains to be seen how India is able to manage tensions with Pakistan and China, even if it cannot fully resolve its differences with these two neighbours.

India's growing resources, its continuing interests, and its evolving threat environment suggest several areas that are deserving of greater attention. Of primary importance, given how much else depends upon it, are policies that stimulate economic growth, promote industrialisation, and lift some 300 million Indians out of absolute poverty. This process would expand India's resource base considerably, increase its global influence, and further empower both the Indian state and society. Better project management, faster clearances, lower barriers to investment, better land acquisition, and increased agricultural productivity offer one attractive path to achieving this objective.<sup>13</sup> Yet, some question whether such developments are feasible.<sup>14</sup> In either event, as India grows, a combination of economic and diplomatic policies will have to be devised to integrate India's neighbourhood more closely with its own economy. This will help expand India's regional influence, create mutually-beneficial and less adversarial relations with its neighbours, and thereby enhance India's regional security environment.

In terms of domestic security, police and judicial reforms will be of primary importance. They will be necessary to address domestic security challenges, including improvements to law and order. Beyond that, a number of wide-ranging defence reforms are required to better prepare the Indian military to meet various contingencies in the 21st century. This involves changes to command structures, acquisition, training, and doctrine. Other important steps will involve better information. This might include better contingency planning, domain expertise on adversaries, a better understanding of opportunities and influencers in the international system, and mastery over the next generation of security challenges that are an outgrowth of various technological developments. India's industrialisation and security reforms



may be a first-order priority, but increased diplomatic capacity as part of wider public sector reforms and more sophisticated information collection and dissemination will increase and broaden India's power potential.

All of these steps, while vital, should not be mistaken for a grand strategy. A strategy, after all, is a means to an end, and it will depend ultimately on India's leadership. India's leaders—whether political or bureaucratic, and of whatever political persuasion—would certainly benefit from having greater resources, a more varied toolkit, and a clearer understanding of India's challenges and adversaries. But they will have to contend with the inherently more difficult circumstances of a non-strategic age, as means proliferate, policies are more fiercely debated, and adversaries become less clearly defined.

In the Mahabharata, Vidura, counsellor to his brother, King Dhritarashtra, lists the qualities of wise men: self-knowledge, exertion, forbearance, and adherence to duty.

आत्मज्ञानंसमारम्भः तितिक्षाधर्मनित्यता ।  
यमर्थान्नापकर्षन्तिसवैपण्डितउच्यते ॥

A wise king, he argues, must be able to discriminate between right and wrong, and he must be able to control allies, neutrals, and enemies through gifts, conciliatory gestures, sowing disagreement, and ruthlessness. As these passages show, strategic instinct—what was later described as *chanakyaniti* or *kautilyam*—has been ever-present in India. But as Dhritarashtra learned as a result of his own follies and shortcomings, even the sagest advice, when left unheeded, can result in misfortune.

The outlines and limitations of an Indian grand strategy for the 21st century are readily apparent. And judging by the positive developments of the past quarter century, India has no need to fear imminent or dire misfortune. But the world is changing, and changing fast. It will be up to India's leaders to effectively utilise the resources at their disposal to advance the national interest in the face of rapidly evolving global circumstances.

## Endnotes

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