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India's Strategic Culture and Security Challenges

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Delivering the 30th Bhimsen Sachar Memorial Lecture for 2009 in New Delhi, the former Chief of the Army Staff highlights the flaws in India's strategic thinking and stresses the need for a more focused and clearly defined vision for the future.

Thank you for asking me to deliver the 30th Bhimsen Sachar Memorial Lecture. It is an honor and a privilege. Also, a bit intimidating when I look at the distinguished roster of speakers who have delivered this lecture before me.

Shri Bhimsen Sachar was an active participant in India's freedom struggle. Later, he became Chief Minister of Punjab twice, Governor of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, and India's High Commissioner in Sri Lanka before retiring from public office. He was an erudite scholar, an astute administrator, a seasoned politician and, most importantly, a man of high integrity and values.

Shri Sachar imbibed secularist ethics from Swami Dayanand's teachings. He was an ardent follower of

Lala Lajpat Rai, who influenced him to join the Congress in early 1920s. Later, Shri Sachar followed Gandhiji to build his own political character. Like Gandhiji, he disliked double standards, double talk, and wastage of public money.

Shri Sachar believed in righteousness and scrupulousness. He was not just a secularist but an integrationist who believed in, and practiced, pluralism in public life. How we miss public leaders like him today!

There is one more reason why I admire Shri Sachar and believe that he was different from the present breed of political leaders. Despite his high political office and career, he encouraged his youngest son, Vijay Sachar, to join the Army. Vijay was three years

junior to me. A bright, happy-go-lucky officer. Unfortunately, he was not so lucky during a peace keeping mission. The Sachar family, and the Indian Army, lost Vijay when his jeep went over a land-mine in Gaza in 1967.

Introduction

Soon after the terrorists' attack on Akshardham Temple, the editorial in *India Today* stated, "As a nation of forgetting and forgiving, ever ready to bleed and wail, India is unique." This quote continues to haunt me because since then, we have had many terrorist attacks on our political, economic, educational and cultural establishments; more importantly, on our innocent citizens whose security is the primary responsibility of the state.

Why are we such a unique nation, 'of forgetting and forgiving, ever ready to bleed and wail?' Why are we so passive and reactive in our security, foreign relations, and other related policies? What is our problem that so often leads us to strategic in-decisions, or in-actions, and makes our future not *more*, but *less* insecure? Perhaps, it has something to do with our strategic culture.

Strategic culture has been defined as the '*ability of the people and the society to generate power; and to have the social will and ability for a full and effective use of that power*'. Let us look at India's strategic culture through our history. India was a powerful and rich nation during the Maurya dynasty (305 BC) and Gupta dynasty (400-600 AD). Indian scholars and seers went to several countries in Asia--on land and by sea--for trade and spreading the message of spirituality. We were a strong nation, with strong economy and a glorious culture. Friendly Asian countries feted our people and honored them. When the King of Thailand inaugurated the new Bangkok Airport called 'Suvarnabhumi', I believe he told an Indian journalist, "That is the footprint of your ancestors, a legacy of your forefathers who spread out and impressed other people, with the power and the strength of knowledge and character."

Next time, India became a powerful nation was when the Mughals from Central Asia conquered India

(1526-1761 AD) and then got absorbed here. They spread their power and Indo-Mughal culture in the whole of India and in Afghanistan. The Mughals were followed by the British who ruled us for the next 200 years or so. They used our resources to become rich; and even to fight World Wars I and II. These outsiders were able to conquer and rule us because *Indian society had lost the ability to generate power, and the will and the ability to make use of that power*. We did not think strategically, or consider ourselves as a nation. We were a house divided, fighting among ourselves.

Also, because we had acquired, and accepted, an image of being an accommodative and a forgiving society, full of piety and ahimsa: one, which believed more in God-given destiny than making our own destiny. Out of spirituality, pacifism and non-violence, many of our 20th century political leaders conjured up the idea of a morally superior India, professing peace and harmony, in a world where nations indulge in cut-throat competition for their national interests. We talked of *Vasudeva Kudumbakam*, when India itself could not live like a family. In foreign relations, our leaders professed, and practiced, morally superior value-based politics, but which does not reflect the international realism.

One cannot blame those leaders altogether because during centuries of slavery and colonialism, the Indian leadership had forgotten all about Chanakya's *Arthshastra*. The British never permitted Indian political leaders and civil servants to deal with strategic issues. Strategic thinking, planning and organizational affairs of the armed forces were kept away from public scrutiny. We gained Independence after a long struggle, but without fighting the British. We tackled the British non-violently, although the Hindus and Muslims of the subcontinent killed each other in lakhs.

Many Indians blame Gandhiji's strategy of non-violence for our 'passive' and 'inactive' strategic culture. That is not correct. Gandhiji functioned at two levels. He was a hard realist. He adopted a proactive, non-violence strategy against the British because at that time we did not, and could not,

possess the force of arms to fight them. In September 1947, he said, "If there was no other way of securing justice from Pakistan, if Pakistan persistently refused to see its proven error and continued to minimize it, war would be the only alternative left to the Government."

He maintained that violence was better than cowardice. He gave his blessings to Brigadier L. P. Sen and his troops when they were flown to Kashmir to fight Pakistani raiders and soldiers in October 1947. In matters of national security, Gandhiji was conscious of the compulsions and complexities of international power play. And for that reason, he was against India taking the issue of Kashmir, even as a complainant, to the UN: a strategic error for which we continue to repent till date.

Despite Gandhiji's realism, strategic thinking was missing; with one exception of the integration of over 600 states within the Indian union which included the use of military in Hyderabad, Junagadh.

Tragically, several successive events—approaching the UN Security Council on the J & K issue when we were winning that war, granting 'suzerainty' to China over Tibet in the 1950s without a quid pro quo (like the Indo-Pakistan dispute over J & K), provocative forward deployment policy on the Sino-Indian border without military preparedness in 1962, return of the strategically important Haji Pir Pass to Pakistan after the 1965 war, return of over 90,000 prisoners after the 1971 war without making Pakistan agree to a permanent solution of J & K and dithering for 24 years between testing of a nuclear device in 1974 and of the nuclear weapons in 1998—reflect on our inexperience and neglect of a strategic mindset.

In 1999, we prepared a draft nuclear doctrine but introduced a clause of No First Use: We shall not use our weapons till the enemy bombs us! In 2002, we kept the armed forces deployed on the border for 10 months. But we were not clear as to what we wished to achieve from that.

Our political parties keep criticizing each other daily over important national security policies. But they

will not sit together to work out a consensus on any long-term national security and national interest policies. Long term strategic thinking and the socio-political will and determination to set things right, I submit, continues to delude us.

Our weakness in strategic culture stems from our inability to learn from our history. There is too much of political infighting, too less of political consensus. Age-old weaknesses in our attitude to national security and interests are finding their echo in the lack of decision-making or wrong decision-making. We remain internalized, fixing each other rather than fixing the outsiders.

Let me go on to some major security challenges that we face today.

China

For many years, China's comprehensive national power has been on an upward trajectory—accumulating key military capabilities along with economic power. Some people say that China does not nurse extra territorial ambitions. But the problem is: what territories comprise the Chinese territory? Which era is present China's benchmark?

Ever since 1949 when China became Independent, India has been regularly conceding Chinese political demands without any reciprocity. We were the second nation to politically recognize Peoples' Republic of China in 1949; we looked the other way when China invaded Tibet on October 7, 1950. We even allowed Chinese food supplies to go through Calcutta and Gangtok to reach PLA troops. We accepted the Chinese condition not to have relations with Taiwan. We supported China for UN Security Council membership like no other nation. I can go on and on. And yet over the years, Peoples' Republic of China has been consistently aggressive and assertive; and India; timid, submissive, almost always appeasing.

Since 1988, India and China have signed several agreements and protocols to improve bilateral political, economic, strategic and military relations

(on 'Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question', 'Agreement on Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)', and 'Modalities for the Implementation of CBMs in the Military Field Along the LAC). From time to time, both sides have 'reaffirmed that neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means or seek unilateral military superiority'. We have rightly committed to work on the CBMs contained in these agreements. But till date, we have failed to obtain Chinese perception of the LAC on any map. Consequently, the CBMs envisaged in Article 3 of the 1996 Agreement, like the deployment of troops and heavy weapons, which are related to distances from a given LAC, cannot be implemented.

Current Sino-Indian relations are a bit reminiscent of the deterioration of bilateral relations in the early 1960s. The Chinese Government has backed out on the principle given in the Joint Statement between the two Prime Ministers (2005) which stated that populated areas will not be disturbed in the border settlement. In November 2006, in complete disregard of diplomatic norms, the Chinese Ambassador in India publicly voiced China's claims to the whole of Arunachal Pradesh. He said that just a few days ahead of the Chinese President's visit to India.

As we all know, by laying oil pipelines, constructing highway, extending airfields which can take fighter aircraft, and bringing the railway line up to Lhasa, China has increased its capability to rapidly induct, deploy and sustain large military forces into Tibet. The number of Chinese intrusions in the so called 'no man's land' or the disputed areas has increased. China has now started protesting Indian leaders' visits to Arunachal Pradesh; denying visas to officials of Arunachal; and issuing stapled visas to Indian citizens from J & K; even hinting at forcible recovery of Southern Tibet—which is Arunachal Pradesh to us. The flow of negatively worded articles in the state-controlled Chinese media has now become a flood.

All this is clearly a reflection of the increasingly uncompromising Chinese mindset vis-à-vis India. It

reflects renewed belligerence, and a very definite hardening of China's strategic attitude to India. If China continues to move on this belligerent path, then we can expect greater tension in the coming months. Under these circumstances, some skirmishes along the un-delineated LAC cannot be ruled out. Are we in a position to deter China from envisaging such a step? If not, why not? Strategically, China's competitive relationship with India far outweighs the cooperative one. China, therefore, will continue to exploit our appeasement to its advantage.

Let us talk about South Asia, where India has geographical contiguity, a unique centrality, and should, therefore, be its natural sphere of influence. India has special ties with each of its South Asian neighbours; of ethnicity, language, culture, common historical experience and of shared access to vital natural resources like water, of a degree of intensity that is not shared by any two others. Besides, India has a bigger area, larger population, larger GDP, larger military than the combined strength of all other countries in South Asia. But what is the situation today? Barring Bhutan, China has much closer politico-military relations with India's South Asian neighbours than India, and wields far greater clout than India. In some countries, Pakistan too manages to compromise our national interests.

I am neither a war monger nor wish to see a stoppage, or even a slow down, of a constructive Sino-Indian dialogue. But one would like to see a dialogue, which is strategic in content and does not compromise our national interests now or in the future.

Pakistan

China's relationship with Pakistan is the oldest, most consistent, strongest 'all weather' strategic relationship. The shared focus of this relationship has been to undermine Indian interests, and security, by fostering anti-Indian sentiment and policies, within India and outside.

Our major security problem with Pakistan currently is terrorism. Experts in India and abroad have no doubt that the 26/11 Mumbai incident originated in

Pakistan, and like most such incidents in the past, it was encouraged and supported by the ISI, which works under the Pakistan Army. Even Dr Manmohan Singh said, "There is enough evidence to show that, given the sophistication and military precision of the attack, it must have had the support of some official agencies in Pakistan."

The history of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in India goes back to the 1960s when it started giving training and safe haven to Indian insurgents in East Pakistan. In the early 1980s, it supported Bhindrawale's movement in Punjab. Infiltration of Kashmiri, Pakistani and other foreigner terrorists in J & K started in 1989. Terror incidents in Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Delhi, Benares, Bangalore, Hyderabad and many other locations in India are well known. I won't go into their details.

It is obvious that the Pakistan Army has demonstrated a new strategic use for nuclear weapons: of waging a subconventional level war to achieve revenge for its forced division after the 1971 war, coerce India on the J & K issue, and to seek strategic parity with India. The Pakistan Army, for long, has maintained its unholy alliance with terror organizations through the ISI. Recently, General Musharraf called the ISI as its strategic arm and its first line of defense. He has also confirmed that the ISI maintains representation in all jihadi outfits to promote the Pakistan Army's strategic interests. Last year, the Pakistan Army refused to place the ISI under civilian political leadership.

Our recent focus has been to get the 26/11 perpetrators of the Lashkar-e-Taiba punished in Pakistan. Meanwhile, the Pakistani official agencies, which have been using such terror outfits for last two decades, have got away neatly. The Indian diplomacy has reacted with old fashioned predictability, with repeated statements like 'India and Pakistan are both victims of terrorism'. How can you equate the victim with the culprit?

One year after 26/11, it is apparent that there is no change in Pakistan's policy. Its policymakers continue to believe that if pressure is maintained on India, it

would be in a better frame of mind to settle the Kashmir problem. Due to considerable domestic pressure, Indian leadership has suspended the composite dialogue. But the pressure to resume that dialogue is building once again, from within and outside India. To initiate a dialogue when the Pakistani establishments feel that they can get away with the terrorist murder would be yet another strategic failure.

We must realize that our enemy is not Pakistan or its civil society. It is the Pakistan Army. And yet, for eight years, and despite the Kargil war, we have continued to fete and make a hero of Pervez Musharraf. Strategically, we could not persuade or compel Pakistan Army to give up terrorism.

Internal Security

Let us now turn to the internal security dimension. Kautilya said that the worst enemy is the enemy within. In *Arthshastra*, he stated, "Arrows may not kill a soldier but skillful intrigue can kill even those in the womb."

India has a huge diversity—one billion spread over approximately 3.1 million square kilometers of territory. We speak 16 major languages and over 200 dialects. We have about one dozen ethnic groups, seven major religious communities with several sects and sub-sects, and 68 socio cultural sub-regions. When a socio-political and socio-economic equilibrium is maintained, there is unity in diversity. But if there is slight imbalance, we have more diversity and less unity. This has been the hallmark of India's history. And it is always exploited by external elements. But now it looks that our vote bank politics and political polarization are also becoming a threat to our national unity and security.

Internal security problems of J & K and North Eastern states are well known. Today, 45 per cent of India's geographical area, covering 220 districts, is in the grip of insurgency. Five years ago, on October 14, 2004, the Maoists had declared that the unified Peoples' Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) will become a full-fledged Liberation Army. It will transform

existing Guerrilla Zones into Base Areas, and by advancing wave upon wave, complete the New Democratic Revolution. Since then, their activities have spread to 180 districts in 17 states. Sixty districts in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Maharashtra are seriously affected; eight of them being critical. They now talk of a Red Corridor—a Compact Revolutionary Zone—extending from Pashupati in Nepal to Tirupati in India.

In Maharashtra, Raj Thackeray wants to create a nation within India wherein non-Maharashtrians will need work visas, and would have to converse in Marathi. In Andhra Pradesh, the Government conceded Telangana because the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) leader went on a fast. And now many small and big politicians are trying to follow the TRS example. Will a balkanized India be in our strategic and national interest? Strategically, India cannot afford to be perceived to be buckling down under internal security or externally induced terrorist pressures. That would be disastrous.

Defence Preparedness

Walter Lippman has defined national security as *“The ability of a nation to protect its internal values from external threats. A nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests. And if that is challenged, it is able to maintain them by war.”* We try to avoid an armed conflict by political and diplomatic negotiations, and through military or hard power deterrence. Even in political and diplomatic negotiations, very often, hard power deterrence becomes necessary. In 1990s, Kofi Annan said, “You do a lot with diplomacy but of course you can do a lot more with firmness and force.” US President Obama, while accepting the Noble Prize earlier this month said, “Instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving peace...To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism, it is a recognition of history.”

Since Independence, we have had to fight five wars, including the Kargil war, to maintain security and territorial integrity. Defence capabilities to develop

deterrence and dissuasion require money, time, and planning. We do spend money but there is little planning, only ad hocism. Last month, the Army reported to the Standing Committee on Defense in the Parliament that it has only 50 per cent of required capabilities to carry out its perceived missions. At the current rate, it will take another 20 years to achieve full capabilities. Same, if not worse, is the case with Air Force, Navy and our paramilitary and police forces.

Ever since the Bofors controversy, there are acrimonious debates in the Parliament; not on defense policies but about defense purchases. The Opposition, even the media, keeps blaming the Government for the lack of defense preparedness. But they also raise controversy over every defense purchase. The media, the CAG, the PAC, and the CVC, all keep talking of scams and procedural lapses. But till date, no political leaders or senior bureaucrats who play major roles in defense procurements have been punished. And due to 'suspected' scams and acrimonious debates in the Parliament and the media, no leader or official is willing to take a decision and expedite procurement of new weapons and equipment for the armed forces. How do military leaders explain this to the troops deployed on the front? Who is accountable to them?

Due to lack of expertise and awareness in the public domain, serious defence planning issues are seldom debated in the Parliament. Leaders lack awareness and in North and South Block civilian bureaucracy has much greater say in decision making on strategic and defense planning matters than the military. The result of ad hocism in planning and poor military preparedness is erosion of deterrence, and the adversary taking chances with diplomatic coercion, even with wars and through terrorism.

Soldiering, it is said, is an honorable profession. And yet no political leader, bureaucrat, or industrialist wants to send his children to the armed forces. That is how Shri Bhimsen Sachar was different. If our political, industrial and civil servant leadership neither know about the military nor has any personal stake, and tends to keep the military leadership

sidelined, how can they take correct strategic politico-military decisions or get a feeling of the morale of the armed forces.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I submit, in protecting its national interests and national security, India is perceived as a soft state. There is lack of security consciousness in our political class, and permissive nature in our administration. At the strategic level, you require a long memory and a longer foresight and vision. Indian leaders and governments, more often than not, have lacked holistic thinking, and are poor in coordinated implementation. There is a sense of self-righteousness and singular faith in words, without looking for underlying falsehoods and incompetence. We have seldom been demanding on strategic matters. And we are reluctant to use hard power, even when our critical national security interests are seriously threatened.

With greater globalization in future, we will require more active participation in international security issues. We must, therefore, develop the necessary strategic culture, political will, and capabilities to meet requirements for enhanced engagements, prevent conflicts and for possible conflicts.

To meet those requirements, I submit just five important points:

1. We need greater security consciousness and much better, informed discourse on issues related to defense and security. While it is necessary to discuss national security concerns in politics, playing politics with national security is harmful.
2. We must develop political consensus on important national security issues. Let us remember, and practice, 'the safety, honour and welfare of our country come first, always and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of our men come next. Our own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time'.
3. We must keep reminding ourselves that we are Indians first, and then Punjabis, Gujaratis or

Madrasis: or Hindus, Muslims or Christians; or Pandits, Thakurs or Dalits. Ernest Renan said, "What constitutes a nation is not speaking the same tongue, or belonging to the same religion or ethnic group, but having accomplished great things in common in the past, and the wish to accomplish them again in future." In the interest of Indian nationalism, such regional, communal and casteist identities and diversities need to be underplayed and not emphasized.

4. We must not politicize routine governance or demand actions from the Government services like the civil, police, armed forces, and judiciary for political parties' interests instead of national interests.
5. We need urgent consensus over a comprehensive centre-state strategy to deal with internal security and terrorism. That should include broad-based domains of national and states' policies, including accelerated economic development and social justice, security and media policies. Most importantly, it should address a dedicated and effective governance through good administration, prompt and fair judiciary and law and order machinery that inspires public confidence.

Strategy and diplomacy in international relations is based on the art of possible, and the advancement of national interests. The Western world believes that 'morality in this ethical system is the handmaiden of state policy. It is a virtue dictated by the situation in which we are placed'. The Vedic thinking had been that 'Chakravarty Raja is free to have his policies limited by strictures and tampered by ethical considerations and sentiments, but not if his intention is to best serve the national interests'. A righteous cause is important, but the method need not be sentimental, or even ethical. According to Kautilya, 'when the interests of the country are involved, ethics are a burdensome irrelevance'. Today, when several inimical and vested forces have one short and long term policy towards India, to make it weak and make it break, we need a strategic mindset and pragmatic policies. There is a need to 'act' and not always 'react'. We need to be realists; neither moralists nor

pessimists. That should be our strategic culture for powering the nation. Let me quote Akbar Allahabadi here:

*Tere lab pe hai Iraaq, Shamo, Misro, Romo, Cheen,
Lekin apne hi watan ke naam se waqif nahin,
Arre sabse pehle mard ban Hindustan ke wastey,
Hind jag uthe to phir saare jahan ke wastey.*

(A loose translation: The names on your lips are those of Iraq, Egypt, Rome and China, but you don't seem to

be acquainted with the name of your own country; the first thing you need to do is to become a man for Hindustan, and once you rouse Hindustan, then become a man for the whole world.)

Leaders like Shri Bhimsen Sachar have set certain examples in political ethics, nationalism, and governance, which we need to remember more often. Memorial occasions like today are both fitting and necessary to remind ourselves of their great contributions and also their good practices.

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