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# Crisis Culture in India's National Security\*

Deepak Kapoor

Two major aspects bedevil our approach to national security. In fact, they are not only relevant to national security but almost to all other spheres of our functioning as a nation.

Of which, first, is the aspect of being reactive to emerging situations. A peep into history would show that from time to time, series of raiders and marauding hordes have descended on our land, plundered it, occupied it and ruled over it. Starting from Alexander to Mohammad Ghazani, the Portuguese, the Mughals, the British and even the Chinese have occupied different parts of India. However, during the same period, we do not find many instances of our indigenous rulers going outwards to capture or rule over distant lands. In fact, even while trying to defend our land against incoming adversaries, India's actions have been reactive in nature rather than proactive or offensive.

Such a characteristic of India may be ascribed to its peaceful and non-aggressive nature. Wherein, the belief is pledged on peaceful co-existence rather than covet others' territory or possessions. However, it does place India at the receiving end most of the time when dealing with aggressors. More importantly, it does not bode well for India's national security in a global environment; wherein, territorial integrity remains sacrosanct.

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Even post-independence, the culture of being reactive has stayed with India, leaving it in a relatively disadvantageous situation of trying to restore status-quo-ante at great cost and effort. In 1948, 1965 and 1999, Pakistan initiated aggression against India. To which, India reacted with aggression and fought back to regain its lost territories. In 1971, Pakistan carried out pre-emptive air strikes on India in the morning of December 3, despite the expectation worldwide that India would initiate an action to set right the wrongs committed on the hapless population of Bangladesh, by attacking Pakistan.

In 1962, China's aggression found India totally surprised and unprepared, resulting in a defeat for India. Having achieved its objectives, the Chinese retreated. Since April/May 2020, India has been exposed to Chinese expansionism in Eastern Ladakh and is still trying to convince them to restore status-quo-ante and go back.

In most of the above cases against Pakistan, it was the grit and determination of the Indian soldier that saved the day and gave India 'victory' despite following a reactive philosophy. In 1962, while Indian soldiers fought valiantly against the Chinese, the odds were too heavily stacked against them to change the outcome decisively. In contrast, the encounter at Galwan on 15 June 2020, has amply highlighted what Indian soldiers are capable of achieving, if they are provided with the requisite wherewithal.

The second worrisome aspect, partially related to the first one, is India's tendency to react only when there is a crisis. In fact, this habit seems to be embedded in every sphere of its functioning. How else can one explain the massive traffic woes in India's urban conglomerates while the infrastructure is always trying to catch up or the hazardous pollution caused all over North India by burning of wheat crop stumps annually with a solution still not in sight?

In the realm of national security, why must only a strike by Pakistan-trained terrorists at Uri or Pulwama galvanise India into action, when terrorist attacks on security forces are taking place on a daily basis. To

stop proxy war in J&K by Pakistan, it is just not enough to launch an odd trans-border strike like Balakot every couple of years. There has to be a continuous pro-active approach for the adversary to realise the costs of supporting a proxy war, thus deter it from doing so.

Coming to Eastern Ladakh, India's intelligence agencies should have picked up aggressive Chinese movements and massing of additional formations well in time—given nothing can happen overnight in Ladakh, with the necessity to go through acclimatisation lasting weeks. The other possibility that India ignored was timely warnings of Chinese build up, which is more worrisome! The need to reinforce weakly held positions in Eastern Ladakh knowing well the Chinese propensity to indulge in salami-slicing was overwhelming, the moment their movements were discovered.

The problem with decisions taken during crises is that they are taken in a hurry with the specific aim of getting over the crisis. They tend to ignore the long-term perspective besides being expensive. In matters of national security, it is important to foresee emerging situations and have plans ready to tackle them. As noted, in 2008-09, India envisaged a two-front threat and sought approval for raising four divisions, which the government agreed to. Of these, two were raised in 2010 and the rest came later in the form of Mountain Strike Corps, which is now proving to be of great relevance.

The global reality is that the rise of a nation will always be opposed by the others. For instance, Germany rose twice only to be defeated during the two world wars. While during the rise of China in the 1980s and 1990s, Deng Xiaoping's advice 'hide your capabilities, bide your time' held China in good stead. Having become powerful, it now feels strong enough to indulge in expansionism not only towards its western borders but also in the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

It is important to note that a developing nation needs to be economically strong before it can allocate adequate resources to become

militarily capable. A fine balance has to be ensured between national security and economic progress while moving forward. COVID-19 has definitely put brakes on the economic progress and it would take time to recover from it fully. However, in view of the emerging situation along the India-China border, there is no choice but to rush for emergent imports. This was avoidable if India had allocated a larger percentage of GDP to 'Defence' in the past.

While initiatives such as *Atmanirbhar Bharat* and "Vocal for Local" are indeed excellent for developing a strong India, however, in defence production and induction of the weaponry into the services, a gestation period of at least 10-15 years is required. Besides, "Make in India" initiative, which commenced in 2014 has not been able to show much progress until now. To note, self-sufficiency in defence production is achievable only if the private sector is brought in to this field, in addition to the existing public sector undertakings (PSU). The private sector would also require deep pockets to incur heavy expenditure over a prolonged period before expecting any returns to flow in.

Current record of accomplishments of our Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and PSUs, including Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) does not enthuse much confidence. India's thriving private sector needs to be incorporated not only in the field of defence production but also in futuristic areas like artificial intelligence, cyber, space, and information technology. Frequent changes in Defence Production Policy (DPP), almost on an annual basis, have acted as a major dampener. The new policy, in its new avatar as the Defence Acquisition Policy (DAP) 2020, is expected shortly and would hopefully address all major concerns. The DRDO has to play an important positive role in encouraging and guiding aspiring entrants from the private sector by imparting technical knowhow until such joint projects become commercially viable.

The Chinese expansionism is now forcing India to rapidly develop its border infrastructure, which is in a comparatively poor state to that

of the Chinese on their side in Tibet. Strategic roads that India started working on in the beginning of the millennium are yet to be completed. Road construction in border regions is expensive and a time-consuming process. Thereby, to hasten it, the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) needs to be allocated additional funds as well as state-of-the-art road construction equipment.

Furthermore, in some forward areas, road construction activity is delayed due to lack of environmental clearances. For instance, in Sikkim, the state government's action of designating Pangolakha Wild Life Sanctuary and Kanchanjunga National Park in the forward areas has resulted into a ban on any road construction without environmental clearances, which at times takes years to be granted. In addition, India's judicial system too needs to be responsive to national security requirements, which are focused primarily to serve the national interest.

And finally, the necessity of increasing the defence budget to at least 3 per cent of the GDP has been highlighted to successive governments by various committees and the military from time to time. Even after project *Atmanirbhar Bharat* is fully implemented, this level of expenditure would be needed to maintain a military relevant to growing national aspirations. The Chinese 'official' expenditure on military has been approximately four times that of India for the last two decades, while the Pakistan military, of course, takes as much as it requires from the national reserve.

In the current geo-political environment, the territorial integrity of the nation is of paramount importance. The onus of defending it falls squarely on the military. The Indian soldier has repeatedly demonstrated his fighting capabilities successfully in snatching victory from the jaws of defeat at tremendous personal cost. Nevertheless, the nation needs to provide him with the necessary wherewithal in order to perform to his potential.