

## Strategising India's Long-term Security

*Lieutenant General Harinder Singh, PVSM, AVSM, YSM, SM, VSM (Retd)*

*Note:- This article was first published as an opinion piece by "The Sunday Guardian" on 12 December 2023. (<https://sundayguardianlive.com/investigation/strategising-indias-long-term-security>). It is reproduced with due permission of the author and the newspaper.*

India's posited rise is hindered by its lack of a national security strategy. Not only does it lack a formal strategic review process, but there has also been a hesitancy to articulate its interests with precision and objectivity. The annual reports of its key ministries also do not shed light on its security related milestones, with clarity. Attempts to forge a security strategy post a crisis or conflict, and on few occasions in the past, have been far from useful. However, this past hesitation to articulate our interests with accuracy is witnessing a change for the better.

### A Strategic Necessity

The need to institutionalise strategy in national security is a politico-military imperative. Simply put, an understanding to define our vital interests, the primary threats to these interests, and resources required to deter or defeat these threats, is important. A formal articulation of our interests, threats, resources and policies can help successive generations of political leaders, policy makers, diplomats and defence practitioners to foresee, prepare, and respond to the evolving security environment. Accordingly, a turbulent world order makes long-term security strategy, a strategic necessity.

National security being an expansive subject, the strategic planning process should incorporate a hierarchy of strategy documents and guidance to all components of the state. A hierarchy of documents emanating from the highest political office and going down to the lowest level is essential. This ensures continuity in political vision, strategic thinking and bureaucratic buy-in at each level. As a case in point, last year, Japan released three interrelated documents: the NSS, the NDS, and the Defence Build-up Program, which highlights the importance of strategic guidance in the strategy formulation process.

Promulgation of a comprehensive national security strategy and defence strategic guidance would ensure that all stakeholders, both civilian and military, understand the strategic intent of the political leadership, and the military doctrines and concepts, structures and capabilities that are necessary to deliver on the strategic choice(s) in question.

### Strategic Guidance in Modern Democracies

While the articulation of a national security strategy is a matter of political choice, recent decades have witnessed the crafting of security strategies in several modern democracies, notably the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil, Japan, South Korea and South Africa. Each of these countries, and several others as well, have recognised the need to formally articulate their security interests, priorities, and the paths they wish to adopt to secure their territories and populace against external or internal threats.

Even though, these policy choices or strategic preferences would be unique to each country, some aspects are relevant in our context. First of all, a legal basis is essential to enable a national security planning process in any country. The US codified legislation (in 1947 and 1986 respectively) which mandate the crafting of national security strategy on a periodic basis. In the case of the UK, Australia and South Africa, this process was driven by a political decision at the highest level. Either a legislative basis or a political decision is well-suited to inform the strategy crafting process.

Second, in all cases, the national interests were derived either from prior security related documents, or the Constitution, or legislations, or presidential speeches. For instance, the Brazilian interests were derived from the National Defence Policy of 2005, the South Africans drew from their 1996 Constitution, and the Australians from their previous white papers. This highlights the need to locate an infallible document that could provide the intellectual basis to the national security planning process in the country.

Third, in these countries, the primary stakeholders include all departments within the executive and legislative branches, and the strategic community, and in few cases, even neighbouring countries. In the cases of Australia and South Africa, civil society, too, plays a unique role in shaping the wider acceptance of the national security strategy in the country. An all-inclusive approach builds the required buy-in of a strategic planning process and ensures that any aggrieved parties do not undercut the process.

Fifth, barring the Brazilian national strategy for defence, the 'ways' and 'means' part of the strategy in respect of most countries is kept under wraps. Tasks are shared with due confidentiality, and as relevant, with departments and agencies responsible for executing the national strategy to play their role in accordance with the defined goals and objectives.

And sixth, in most cases, the draft strategy is approved at the highest level. In a few cases, it is referred to the parliament for approval. No formal feedback mechanism is constituted in most countries other than in the case of Australia, which carries a long-time tradition of white paper reviews in public domain.

### **Strategising India's Security**

Strategising security has never been a priority in India. Even when, it was an inescapable requirement to promote unencumbered planning and socio-economic growth in the country. In absence of an articulated national security strategy and a persuasive strategic guidance issued to the military components, there has been a gap in terms of what national security outcome(s) are desired by the political leadership, and what can possibly be delivered by the armed forces to secure India's rise in the twenty-first century.

A government-wide security-planning framework that facilitates the production and promulgation of the security strategy and downstream strategic guidance, is important for a number of reasons. First, it would guide India's ability to build strategic coherence on matters of national security. Thus

far, India's reluctance to frame a strategic review process has come at a reputational cost to the State. Barring the triumphant Indo-Pak War of 1971, there is no other war in our conflict-prone history, where the Indian State can claim its strategic conduct to have been flawless, or bereft of any major criticism.

Second, as seen in other democracies, it would drive the strategy-formulation processes and enable the State to draw precise policy imperatives that are necessary to institutionalize the national security strategy and strategic guidance. Political leaders and policymakers tend to carry an expansive view of security that is heavily biased towards humanitarian or developmental issues but is shy on matters of hard security. A formal articulation can help correct this disposition.

Third, it would elicit the broad contours of a military-strategic guidance that could enable the shaping of useable instruments of force. Any strategy document will have to be supported by a military-strategic guidance, so as to inspire the subordinate levels to deliver on assigned military goals and objectives.

And fourth, it could promote and produce policy-relevant research to overcome the inadequacies in national security. Think tanks and the larger strategic community would have a substantive role to play, in undertaking policy-driven research and studies.

### **India's Challenge**

For a long time, India's strategic outlook has been cautious and introspective. Engaged with the idea of economic growth and development (and rightly so), Indians have viewed themselves and their role, not from the perspective of how they can shape their immediate or extended neighbourhood, but rather on how they can cope with it. Consequently, India's hesitancy to produce and promulgate a security strategy made it vulnerable to myriad external and internal threats. This resulted in shaping of instruments of force that were either lacking or inadequate to deliver on desired outcomes, in crises or conflict.

With the increasing buzz on India's national security strategy-in-the-making, the policy landscape stands to transform constructively. From a military planning perspective, the key argument is that a formally articulated national security strategy and strategic guidance that identifies the utility of force in peace and war is crucial to shape the primary military roles and missions, and in turn, the structure of future force.

However, any strategic planning process is constrained by three factors: the availability of funding; a lack of integrated planning expertise; and paucity of tools to review the strategic outcomes. India's challenge will be to keep the strategic planning process resource and risk informed.

*About the Author: Lt General Harinder Singh (Retd) is a former Director-General, Military Intelligence (DGMI); a former Commander of the Indian Army's 14 Corps (which he commanded during the eastern Ladakh Crisis of 2020); and a former Commandant of the Indian Military Academy (IMA), Dehradun. He is a prolific and deeply respected writer on matters of defence- and security strategy. He may be contacted on [harinder41@gmail.com](mailto:harinder41@gmail.com))*