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# India's National Security Challenges: An Armed Forces Overview

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## Preamble

Admiral Arun Prakash, Chairman, National Maritime Foundation (NMF); Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal P.V. Naik; Mr. Raj Liberhan, Chairman, India Habitat Centre, Commodore Uday Bhaskar, Director, NMF; members of the NMF and Habitat Centre, distinguished guests, senior officers of the Armed Forces, friends from the media, ladies and gentlemen.

I am indeed very delighted to be here this evening at the invitation of the NMF to share a few thoughts on our country's national security challenges. The India Habitat Centre and the NMF deserve our unqualified appreciation for periodically conducting lectures and brain-storming sessions that focus our thinking on core national security issues. It is also a great pleasure to see so many friends and erstwhile colleagues as well as distinguished professionals from many walks of life in the audience, whose thoughts and actions significantly impact our national security outlook. Therefore, more than what I have to say, I look forward with much anticipation to hearing your comments and observations at the end of my talk. I am confident that by the time we are through, there would be valuable 'takeaways' for all of us.

Since the subject of national security is immense in its scope and expanse, to even attempt a complete treatment of all issues involved would be decidedly unwise.

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\*Address by Admiral Sureesh Mehta, PVSM, AVSM, ADC the Chairman, Chief of Staff Committee and Chief of Naval Staff, Indian Navy at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi on August 10, 2009.

Therefore, I propose to speak on certain key aspects of national security that impact the functioning of the Armed Forces and leave social, economic and environmental dimensions out of the ambit of today's discourse.

## Defining Security

Let me first make some very brief comments about the concept of 'security'. The traditional view of security focused on the application of force at the state level and was, therefore, a fairly narrow view, hinging on military security. It is now widely acknowledged that there is more to security than purely military factors. Today's definition of security acknowledges political, economic, environmental, social and human factors, among the other strands that impact the concept of security. In the most basic terms, the concern for security at the lowest common denominator of every society, namely the 'human being', has resulted in the development of the concept of 'human security', which focuses on the individual. Therefore, the definition of security is definitely broad and is related to the ability of the state to perform the function of protecting the well-being of its people. This formulation harks back to the days of Chanakya and *Arthashastra*.

However, the problem with such a broad definition of security is that anything that generates anxiety or threatens the quality of life gets labelled as a 'security problem', with a consequent loss of focus. In a democracy, it is for the elected government to provide this priority and focus, as only after this, a coherent national security strategy can be articulated. I am glad to learn that this exercise has commenced and is being steered by the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB).

## Managing Our Own Rise to Global Prominence

We often hear that our rise to global prominence is inevitable. It is an incontestable fact that the significance of India as a rising power is being widely acknowledged, as has been witnessed by several events in the recent past, the most defining of which has been the inking of the Agreement on Civil Nuclear Cooperation with the United States (US). Our growing economic status fuelled by a 300-million strong middle class, the demographic advantage of a burgeoning 'young population', our increasing ventures into high-technology areas like space, and future projections of national growth peg us amongst the world's top five economies by 2020. That is just 11 years away!

The professionalism and military might of the Armed Forces of India are respected the world over. The very recent launch of our nuclear submarine *Arihant* has sent out a strong signal of our desire to acquire the appropriate strategic military technology and capability. Despite our several internal challenges and diversities, we are 'rock solid' as a democratic country, surrounded by an extended periphery of varying instability. It is, hence, not surprising that the role of a 'natural' regional power is expected of us. Our aspirations for inclusion as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and for a greater voice in international diplomacy are a result of these developments.

However, there is a sense that we may not have done adequate rigorous thinking on how to 'manage' our pre-ordained rise to global prominence. With the realisation of our aspirations and greater international recognition will come many more responsibilities. India cannot afford to be indifferent and non-committal on any regional or global issue; we must have an objective 'national interest assessment' on all questions of importance. As military forces of India, we would be expected to function as instruments of peace and stability in this rather fragile environment of the Indian Ocean region. We have to get our 'hands dirty' in addressing common concerns in our respective domains. This will call for increased participation in peace operations, efforts such as anti-piracy as also capacity-building and capability enhancement of smaller and economically weaker nations, which look up to us for support and security. We must also be seen far away from our shores, working with friendly nations and shaping perceptions in furtherance of India's foreign policy. Quite evidently, the Navy will lead efforts of military diplomacy, given the medium in which it operates and the distinctive characteristics of its platforms. If we pursue a meaningful foreign policy to advance national objectives, as we do, then the military instrument can complement this collective endeavour.

## **Coping with China**

It is quite evident that coping with China will certainly be one of our primary challenges in the years ahead. China is in the process of 'consolidating' its comprehensive national power and creating formidable military capabilities. Once that is done, China is likely to be more assertive in its claims, especially in its immediate neighbourhood. Our 'trust deficit' with China can never be liquidated, unless our boundary problems are resolved. China's known propensity for 'intervention in space' and 'cyber-warfare' will also be major planning considerations in our strategic and operational thinking.

Common sense dictates that cooperation with China will be preferable to competition or conflict, as it will be foolhardy to compare India and China as equals. China's GDP is more than thrice that of ours and its per capita GDP is 2.2 times our own. China's early steps to liberalise its economy and invest heavily to modernise its physical infrastructure gave it a substantial edge over India, and made China a more preferred destination for FDI. India's annual defence expenditure (approximately US\$ 30 billion for 2008-09) is less than half of what China spends on defence. China's official figure is under US\$ 40 billion but it is widely believed that China actually spends more than twice as much. Studies by the RAND Corporation, US Defense Intelligence Agency and others peg China's defence spending to be anything between US\$ 70 and \$200 billion. Whether in terms of GDP, defence spending or any other economic, social or development parameter, the gap between the two countries is just too wide to bridge (and is getting wider by the day). In military terms, both conventional and non-conventional, we neither have the capability nor the intention to match China force for force. These are indeed sobering thoughts and, therefore, our strategy to deal with China will need to be in consonance with these realities.

The economic penalties resulting from a military conflict will have grave consequences for both nations. It will, therefore, undoubtedly be in both our interests to cooperate with each other in mutually beneficial endeavours, and ensure that the potential for conflict is minimised. This will require proactive economic, diplomatic, cultural and people-to-people engagement. Our relations with other major powers, notably the US, Russia, Japan and other East Asian nations need to be nurtured and leveraged to this end. Our growing relations with Southeast and East Asian countries will increase opportunities for cooperative engagement with China as well. Since the resolution of the border problems, autonomy of Tibet, the China-Pakistan connection, competition for strategic space in the Indian Ocean and management of water resources will be the prime causative factors for any potential tension with China, our diplomatic focus on these issues will have to be maintained.

On the military front, our strategy to deal with China must include reducing the military gap and countering the growing Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean region. The traditional or 'attritionist' approach of matching 'division for division' must give way to harnessing modern technology for developing high situational awareness and creating a reliable stand-off deterrent.

## **The Non-state Actor**

Today, we have come to live in an era characterised by the rise of sinister non-state forces, which have redefined security responses the world over. We have witnessed an even more worrying phenomenon of the occasional coalescing of the 'state' with some 'non-state' entities, which has created an evil hybrid. This hybrid, to my mind, was at the very root of the tragic events in Mumbai in November 2008. Where should we direct our security efforts? Towards the state-sponsor or the non-state entity? How do we expose the linkages, if any? We have been grappling with this problem for some time now, with no satisfactory solution emerging.

Asia today is witnessing the historical and simultaneous rise of at least four major powers namely, India, China, Japan and the 10 countries of ASEAN. Even in these recessionary times, the economic performances of India, China and Indonesia are quite impressive. On its part, Asia is also the ideological crucible of some of the world's ominous non-state forces. Maintaining economic growth, social development and harmony in the face of such disruptive forces will be a thorny problem for many years to come.

## **Responses to Threats**

This is a formidable challenge and no country, however large or powerful, has the wherewithal to insulate itself from such omnipresent threats, of which terrorism stoked by distorted religious radicalism is the latest and most grotesque manifestation. Other universal concerns include threats from traffickers of drugs, arms, human beings, organised poachers, ships that clandestinely discharge oil and toxic cargo into the sea or onto the shores of unsuspecting and ill-informed states, mercenaries and modern day pirates. In addition, there are several 'non-traditional security threats' as well. These common challenges can only be faced through the common resolve of like-minded states, facilitated through a multilateral structure as well as opportunities and mechanisms for constructive engagement. It will need a transformation in the way we think and in the way we look at one another. It will also require those nations, which have the necessary resources and wherewithal, to take the lead in ensuring all forms of security to life, trade and property. Concerted efforts at capability-enhancement and capacity building of the smaller countries of the region, through active assistance of larger neighbours, will be crucial to such efforts in the long term.

## Shaping Our Immediate Neighbourhood

Specifically, we have to be mindful of the need to assist our smaller neighbours in helping themselves. Our capability-enhancement and capacity-building initiatives with Sri Lanka, Seychelles, Maldives and Mauritius can be enhanced to a much greater degree, without the need for any kind of '*quid pro quo*'. I am convinced that as India grows in economic and military stature, it will have to take upon itself, the role of further enabling its neighbours in ways that not only enhance their own security, but contribute positively to regional stability as well. On the Navy-to-Navy level, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which was launched in February 2008, is a significant military maritime construct to bring together regional navies and is aimed at addressing common concerns. Our diplomatic utterances with regard to our maritime neighbours must be backed by cohesive engagement. This requires much greater integration of thought and action between the Ministries of External Affairs, Defence and the Indian Armed Forces. Our maritime neighbours are the gateways to our strategic frontiers. We need to engage them as much as they need our presence and support. It will be imprudent of us to leave voids in this strategic neighbourhood and watch others extend their influence in our backyard.

## Securing Our Maritime Borders

Coordination of maritime security closer to our coast is very important as preventing ingress of terrorists from the sea is an abiding challenge. Our long and porous coastline and several island territories, many of which are uninhabited, offer avenues for infiltration of men and material into our heartland as well as being safe havens for clandestine activities. Intrusions via the sea are extremely difficult to prevent with our current state of material and organisational preparedness, as we were rudely shocked to realise when the perpetrators of the terror attacks on November 26, 2008 breached the shores of Mumbai with impunity. With a host of ministries and agencies being stakeholders in the maritime arena, any attempt at coastal security will warrant a serious 'whole-of-government' approach, and robust coordination. The entire sequence of surveillance extending out well beyond our exclusive economic zone, suspicion indication, risk and threat assessments and, finally, investigation and prosecution is a very complex process that demands a high level of situational awareness, rapid response and total synergy between all concerned enforcement agencies. This kind of a capability is also technology-

intensive and obviously very expensive to set up and maintain. However, it must be done in the interest of national security, if we are to prevent intrusions and attacks through the sea route. Our acute consciousness of 'turf guarding' must give way to a more synergistic way of functioning. A modest beginning has been made, which has to be sustained through concerted efforts of all stakeholders, adequate funding and most of all, public awareness, which is why fora like the Habitat Centre are important.

## **Internal Security**

I also need to flag our growing involvement in internal security tasks. Over the past decade-and-a-half, 'internal security' requirements have grown phenomenally. There are unrests of various shades and hues in different states, borne out of equally diverse causative factors. The addressing of these causes and maintenance of order are, nearly in all cases, a matter of internal governance and, therefore, squarely within the purview of the civil administration and the police forces.

The rampant spread of Left wing extremism is particularly worrying and tackling the problem requires a well thought out strategy. However, the increasing demand on the Armed Forces to assume 'law and order' responsibilities is clearly an undesirable trend. While 'aid to civil authority' is a mandated role of the Armed Forces and they will deliver whenever ordered, this must always be a 'last resort' and 'temporary' measure to be expeditiously withdrawn when the critical need is met. The Armed Forces must never be seen as being used 'against' our own population; the irreversible damage of such action is there for all of us to see in our neighbourhood.

## **Intelligence**

Much has also been reported about our handling of intelligence in the past, as also in the aftermath of the 1999 Kargil War and, more recently, the Mumbai terror attacks. Our intelligence agencies need to be more focused towards long-term intelligence forecasting and, therefore, must direct efforts towards anticipatory security planning – predicated on actionable intelligence inputs, in addition to immediate and short-term requirements. Cohesion amongst intelligence agencies and sharing of intelligence in a far more integrated manner is an operational necessity. Integration between all organs of government dealing with intelligence and seamless acquisition, processing of strategic, operational and tactical intelligence and its timely dissemination is of essence.



Information exchange mechanisms with other friendly countries also need to be facilitated to enhance domain awareness in different arenas.

### Cyber Warfare and Web Espionage

One field, in which awareness is, at best, nebulous is cyber warfare. The annual Virtual Criminology Report of 2007, authored by McAfee, warned that international cyber espionage was set to be the biggest single threat to national security in 2008. It claimed that some 120 plus countries are already on the web espionage bandwagon. Primary targets include critical national infrastructure network systems with electricity, air traffic control, financial markets and government computer networks taking the centre-stage. Reports suggest that the US, Russia and China have acquired considerable capability in this domain. The Indian Armed Forces are increasingly investing in networked operations, both singly and in a joint fashion. We cannot, therefore, afford to be vulnerable to cyber attacks. Information technology is our country's known strength and it will be in our interest to leverage this strength in developing a formidable 'offensive' and 'defensive' cyber warfare capability. Harnessing the gene pool available in academia, private industry and the younger generation of talented individuals is imperative.

### Integration and Jointness

Let me now address the important issue of jointness and integration. It has been said that "war is a continuation of policy by other means". That was in an age when the military was used exclusively to wage war. Today, the scope of activity of the Indian Armed Forces spans a wide bandwidth. It ranges from internal security tasks, augmenting diplomatic effort, bilateral and multilateral cooperative efforts with other countries, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and it goes on to cover the entire range of tasks across the full spectrum of conflict. The Armed Forces are instruments of policy execution as much in peace as in war. The need for greater integration of the Armed Forces with the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs as well as the establishment of effective coordination mechanisms with several other ministries and agencies is, therefore, incontestable. If this is not recognised and organisational correctives are not instituted, we will not be able to effectively deal with the various security challenges that confront us – and only indulge in futile *post-facto* blame games.



As we develop leaders, organisations, systems and doctrines, we must continue to strengthen trust and confidence amongst the Services and between Service components that are committed to joint operations. Let me also state quite unequivocally that migration from a single Service mindset to a 'joint' one, essentially calls for enlightenment, borne out of a willingness to transform, and a realistic assessment of our operational needs. To this end, the Armed Forces and think-tanks, such as NMF, Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS), Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), United Services Institution of India (USI) and Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), have been conducting seminars and round-tables, the last being the NMF-CENJOWS Seminar on 'Jointness' held in July 2009. However, a consensus view is yet to emerge on "where and how to move on" from "where we are". The Strategic Forces Command (SFC) is a good example of how the Services can work together seamlessly and synergistically, in a 'functional' command. The Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) was meant to be a test case for possible future initiatives towards the creation of joint 'theatre' or 'geographical' commands. There are strong and divergent opinions about whether this experiment has really succeeded to the degree envisaged in 2001. I think we now have adequate experience to undertake a dispassionate assessment, with the aim of administering course corrections as may be necessary.

I believe that 'functional' commands are more likely to succeed in our environment – if SFC has worked, how about a joint information warfare command or a joint air defence command? At the staff and planning levels, jointness is sought to be achieved through joint capability development, joint planning, joint targeting, joint training, joint logistics and other functions that lend themselves to 'jointness'. During the recently concluded Unified Commanders' Conference, the Chief of the Air Staff opined that "jointness does not necessarily imply equal partnership" and that there was a need to "adopt correct combinations, whilst respecting the core expertise of individual Services". This is a widely held view and deserves serious consideration.

There is also a need to move beyond the present setup of our higher defence management. We must start thinking in terms of command and control structures and linkages, when we have the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in place. However, as we work towards creation of more joint commands, we must continue to critically examine the existing joint command for operational effectiveness, make amends and only then move on. We have to generate an India-specific model, since blindly aping an existing

model would be akin to forcing a “square peg into a round hole”. Each individual Service will quite understandably continue to have strong views on the subject, but if true jointness has to be ushered in, with a well-deliberated India-specific model, there is a need to foster much greater understanding of the subject amongst our apex level decision-makers and, perhaps, even work towards enacting our own version of a ‘Goldwater-Nichols’ Act (which, as you are aware, was the guiding legislation for the US Armed Forces to go ‘joint’).

Integration and jointness are as much required between the Service Headquarters and Ministry of Defence as amongst the Services. This is a transformational change and I believe that greater delegation of powers and cross postings of senior officers are steps that must be taken, without which this transformational progress cannot be realised.

## Nuclear Issues

I would briefly mention nuclear issues. Speaking at the launch of our first indigenously designed and built nuclear-powered submarine *Arihant* on July 26, 2008 Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said:

*“We do not have any aggressive designs nor do we seek to threaten anyone. We seek an external environment in our region and beyond that is conducive to our peaceful development and the protection of our value systems. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon us to take all measures necessary to safeguard our country and to keep pace with technological advancements worldwide. It has rightly been said that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty”.*

We have had a well-thought out nuclear policy since the 1980s. India is committed to building a capability that will serve her interests and despite several attempts to ‘isolate’ us in the field of nuclear technology, especially post-1998, we have walked the path alone and created a capability that is recognised today, albeit grudgingly. We have a draft nuclear doctrine in place, which is restrained, in keeping with our traditional national culture. Our efforts at achieving credible deterrence are not just about weapons and platforms but also include well-thought out strategies, policies, targeting plans, command and control structures as well as an occasional demonstration of capability.

Our increasing forays in the nuclear field, both military and civilian, will require the highest assurances of nuclear surety and security within the country. This calls for

substantial investments in safety and security procedures, testing of environmental parameters, accident prevention and disaster control as well as management. It also requires a very high degree of awareness and public transparency in proving that our nuclear assets and establishments do not pose a hazard in any way to the population at large.

### **Reducing 'Defence' Dependence on Foreign Countries**

Let me now make a brief mention of the critical aspect of self-reliance in the field of defence. Our past experiences of sourcing military hardware from abroad have been varied, depending on the relationship between the source nation and India at different points in time. However, the common strain running through each and every experience has been painful, one of 'technology denial' and 'post-procurement dependency'. Our material preparedness has often received setbacks due to these reasons. The only long-term solution to this problem is a much greater thrust towards indigenisation and transfer of technology. The Indian defence industry is gradually coming of age and we must, in due course of time wean ourselves away from foreign dependencies. Measures to enhance the efficiency of our Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) as well as putting much greater premium on time and cost consciousness amongst all agencies concerned are long overdue. There is also a need for greater accountability from our research organisations and defence public sector undertakings, which today rest assured of orders and modernisation funding from the military establishment without having commensurate results to show. The Hon'ble *Raksha Mantri* (Minister of Defence) has initiated some long overdue in-house reviews of our procurement procedures, aimed at enhancing the efficiency of the processes involved. Whilst the 'bottomline' of 'operational readiness' should remain the determining factor for our 'buy' or 'make' decisions, we will need to pragmatically consider some present-day compromise for a more secure future.

### **Defence Outlay**

I will now address some more routine and mundane issues but ones that have serious implications on defence preparedness and, hence, national security. With regard to defence spending, India will most likely continue to maintain a high growth rate between 7 and 8 per cent over the medium term. A vibrant economic environment

will need to be supported by strong defence forces. It is in this context that I have to observe that for many years our defence budget as a percentage of GDP has been hovering on the fringes of the 2 per cent mark, notwithstanding an increase in rupee terms. Let alone bridging the gap between us and our potential adversaries, without a substantial increase, the gap may widen further and dilute our operational edges. It must never be forgotten that India's growth as a military power is an essential component of its ascendancy to 'great power' status, and the security underpinning of economic development can never be over-emphasised.

### **Procurement Procedures**

While the Armed Forces have been seeking enhanced outlays, you will also be aware that we are unable to completely expend our capital budget, year after year. The problem is not of inadequate planning or insufficient desire to enhance capabilities, but one of procedure. Our procedures discourage participation by international and private players, who run out of patience with our protracted dealings. Measures to make the process more responsive and faster include closer integration of Service Headquarters with the Ministry of Defence, simplification of financial vetting procedures, downward delegation of powers for capital procurements, increasing the capacity of concerned bodies to process cases; and a much greater realisation of the adverse implications of delayed decisions on national security. In short, 'pragmatism' must prevail over 'procedure'.

### **The Culture of Strategic Thinking**

I will now return to two somewhat larger issues. Firstly, a word about the intellectual framework to support our national security planning. Any coherent national security strategy is the outcome of a long-term vision. Envisioning any long-term perspective calls for a deep and involved thought process. In other words, a culture of strategic thinking. John F. Kennedy had once remarked:

*"Too often... we enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought".*

Strategic decision-making cannot be guided by 'opinion' but by serious 'thought' – however, the reverse is sometimes true. It is unfortunate that discussions on national

security in our country have been left largely to think-tanks and academics, and whilst they may do some valuable work in this direction, they lack the executive powers to put thought into action. For a country of our size and stature, institutionalised strategic thinking mechanisms, within and outside the government, are woefully inadequate.

In several established democracies, specialist think-tanks have access to government information on a graded basis. They are often given contracts for studies to be done for the government departments. In India, we often jealously guard information, even if it may be required by other government agencies in the execution of their legitimate official duties. Our media, too, barring honourable exceptions, has very few people who specialise in defence, though of late a welcome start has been made.

We have to develop much greater mutual interaction between think-tanks, the government, its agencies and the media. In a democracy, the media must be critical – it is intrinsic to the profession – but not needlessly adversarial, which is often the case in our country. Actually, I was tempted to include some light-hearted humour during my talk this evening, but considering some media experiences that I have had in the recent past, I decided to resist that temptation.

In the same breath, let me add that I have the greatest respect for the Indian media and its vibrancy. But I would urge some self-introspection in this matter. Concurrently, there is a need to sustain greater Track-II interactions involving the civil society and the private sector as well in our efforts to bring about greater awareness on critical national security issues. And, I am happy to note that some commendable initiatives have been taken by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), among some other institutions.

## **Governance**

Finally, a brief remark about the all-important aspect of ‘governance’. Speaking to Indian Administrative Service (IAS) probationers in April 2009, our Prime Minister remarked that:

*“Governance is a buzz word today. There are many areas where governance is not keeping in contact with the requirements of the situation”.*

It is indisputable that no amount of discussion will translate automatically into result-oriented policy and firm action – with the existing lacunae that the Prime

Minister referred to. Politicians, bureaucrats, security forces, industry, academia, media and indeed any other organ of the state or agency involved in the management of national security must work in close coordination, and where necessary integrate so that they complement each other's efforts. The need for reforms in several sectors is indeed being recognised and these must be implemented without delay. Governance obviously needs to focus on securing our national interests and addressing our peoples' needs and aspirations. The Armed Forces must be an integral part of the 'decision-making' process on issues of national security that involve them, directly or indirectly.

On their part, the Army, Navy and the Air Force, individually and jointly, need to contribute in every way that they can, so that the readiness of the Armed Forces and their employment in war and peace can be optimised.

## Epilogue

Let me once again say how gratified I am to be in your midst today. My thanks once again to the NMF for providing me this opportunity to speak to such a distinguished audience in what is perhaps my last major public interaction on national security before I demit office at the end of this month. Some of you in the audience, as the next generation of leaders of the Armed Forces and major stakeholders in the security of the nation, will need to find ways to bring about much greater integration of thought and action to meet the various challenges that loom large over the horizon.

It is indeed a matter of great satisfaction to note that the three Services and the Integrated Defence Staff Headquarters have think-tanks of their own and their activities too are 'deepening' and 'widening' by the day. There is a need for these organisations to synergise their efforts with bodies such as the India Habitat Centre and others in a combined effort to raise the level of consciousness on matters relating to national security – and here again, the role of the media is critical as an 'awareness multiplier'.

Thank you for being a very patient audience.