

India in a corner: Beneath the foreign policy bluster is a great floundering

India finds itself increasingly cornered into a strategic cul-de-sac. Even as its diplomacy expands, its political options seem to decrease; even as it reaches out to look east and look west, the strategic space to address its core concerns does not seem to be expanding; and even as its bluster about a strong state grows, doubts about its military capabilities are growing equally louder. So, paradoxically, India finds itself in this position that even as it is globally recognised, it looks more helpless in its own backyard.

These are days where strong propaganda obscures the most basic of common sense. To begin with a simple question. A hallmark of the strategic success of any government is whether it expands the options available that can help you achieve your core objectives. Have the options available to India expanded?

The first core component of having options is raw capability. One would be hard-pressed to find any evidence that India's capabilities, on any dimension of hard power, have significantly changed for the better over the last four years. The military modernisation programme seems to be still in the phase of arming without aiming; all the grand talk of defence production in the private sector has not taken off. As Vipin Narang has pointed out, a central element of our deterrence capability, Arihant, is still out of commission.

Defence expenditures in real terms have been falling. It is only in the fourth year in office that Cabinet has finally approved a panic buying of assault and sniper rifles. The one element on our strategy vis-a-vis Pakistan is fortifying our bases so that they are not easy targets of terrorist attacks. As the situation in Jammu and Kashmir has shown, we do not seem to have made much success of this. The sophistication in the political establishment on understanding military matters is scarcely more evident. India's raw hard power capabilities still constrain options.

The second component of having more options is new partnerships and alliances. India has been forthright enough to deepen its partnerships with Japan, Australia and other countries concerned about China. Its engagement with West Asia is impressive. It has announced greater maritime ambitions. These might be worthwhile initiatives in their own right. But these initiatives do not, for the most part, help mitigate India's core vulnerabilities. It is not clear that these initiatives are enough to get Pakistan to change its behaviour, or secure our long-term objectives in relation to China. It tells you something about the unreality gripping public strategic discourse that our hearts flutter with joy at a term like "Indo-Pacific". This term may have some nominal rhetorical value.

But the idea that merely by creating a new maritime nomenclature that flatters us, we will somehow outgrow the real strategic dilemmas that face us vis-a-vis China and Pakistan, is wishful thinking. It is good India is deepening its engagement from Seychelles to Oman, acquiring new docking capabilities and logistical support. But with what wars and what interventions, what military objectives will these achieve? It is almost like we will acquire these facilities without any clear sense of the uses to which we will put them. They signal our global intent but do not add much to our capabilities.

This expansive outreach has also, in some strategic circles, created this illusion that India can outgrow its region; it does not have to be tied down to its geography. From Doklam to Kashmir, from the Maldives to Nepal, India has been rudely reminded about how easy it is to put it in a helpless position in its own neighbourhood. The idea that India can do a great power projection without being able to manage its own neighbourhood was a pipe dream in any case. In relation to almost all our neighbours, with the possible exception of Bangladesh, India's diplomatic, moral and coercive authority stands diminished. In Nepal, it ended up with the worst of both worlds — it did

not have the power to follow up its implicit promises to the Madhesis, and no matter how one dresses it up, it has had to eat humble pie and accommodate Oli. India could not exercise any leadership in the Rohingya crisis. In the Maldives, it is looking increasingly more helpless.

To put it politely, our Pakistan strategy is in tatters. The fact that the Americans might be willing to sanction Pakistan is a double-edged sword. For one thing, in the short run it will lead to Pakistan turning the heat on India in the hope that ratcheting up the tensions, and provoking an Indian response, will once again put the spotlight on the risks of the Kashmir crisis. We trumpeted the fact that surgical strikes would be a deterrent; they turned out to be a virtually useless instrument. Worse, the fact that we trumpeted them so loudly has created a domestic expectation of retaliation, every time more Indian soldiers are killed. So we are caught in a political trap on engagement with Pakistan. On the one hand, the NSAs are apparently talking. On the other hand, you have created a public discourse where a chief minister has to explain that she is not being anti-national in calling for talks with Pakistan. There is a simple point: Even if you intend to exercise military options, they have to be embedded in a political strategy. Is there a political strategy on Pakistan at all, or is it all bluster covering up a great floundering?

China's aggressive posture has to make India wary. But surely the idea of deft diplomacy is that you do not reach a point where literally every single line of engagement becomes a zero-sum game, and you convert a hard-nosed contest of interests into a more publicly-charged, ideologically potent contest of self-esteem. Perhaps we do not have any other options. But the net result is that we are more cornered by China than we were a few years ago.

Add to this the atrocious deterioration of public discourse in India, where Mohan Bhagwat can openly taunt the army, and you have to wonder: Have India's strategic options in dealing with its core challenges expanded or have they diminished? On any measure, hard power, diplomacy, alliances, political framing, and consistency of domestic resolve, we seem to have fewer not more options. The vigour of Modi's travels can barely disguise the fact that in terms of India's security objectives, he is looking very weak indeed. Any other prime minister would have been hauled over the coals if India had been backed into the corner it is now.

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com