



DEFENCE PRIMER

India at **75**



Edited by
Sushant Singh & Pushan Das



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India's Strategic Environment & Adversaries



SHASHANK JOSHI

Shashank Joshi is a Senior Research Fellow of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London and a Research Associate at the Changing Character of War Programme at Oxford University. He specialises in international security in South Asia and the Middle East.

The Backdrop

India's strategic environment is turbulent. China's rise has supported a decade of sustained growth in Asia, but has also placed unprecedented stress on the security order. China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative for westward connectivity is potentially transformative, but likely to worsen those pressures. The American pivot to Asia is in its nascent stages, but Asia's hub-and-spokes alliance system is evolving as middle powers question Washington's commitment, grow more active, and forge deeper ties with one another. India fits this trend of internal and external balancing against China, moving steadily closer to the United States and Japan and so deeper into the security system of maritime Asia. In contrast to these slow-moving processes, an emerging power vacuum in Afghanistan could threaten Indian power and security much sooner. The space from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea is undergoing even more rapid state breakdown, with Saudi Arabia and Iran competing in the interstices.

India, then, is uniquely situated between state-centric great power competition to the east and state-fragmentation to the west. Each places divergent demands on Indian defence posture, at a time when India's leaders are increasingly embracing the prospect of new security responsibilities farther from Indian soil. Yet India faces these challenges with more partners and suitors than ever before, with its domestic security environment the calmest in decades, and from a position of economic strength.

Pakistan

Pakistan remains a familiar adversary. Cross-border violence in Jammu and Kashmir has declined substantially since 2003. However, Pakistan continues to shelter, sponsor, and in some cases direct a range of armed non-state groups who seek to conduct terrorist attacks on Indian soil and against Indian interests abroad. The largest and most threatening of these groups is Lashkar-e-Taiba, but others include Al Qaida-allied Jaish-e-Mohammed, which re-emerged in January 2016 after a period of dormancy, and the Taliban-allied Haqqani Network. Pakistan has tactically restrained these groups, typically in line with Western pressure, but they remain entrenched. Separately, the Pakistan-based Al Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) may draw support from these groups and presents a threat to India and other South Asian states.

Jihadist violence in has steadily declined since its peak in 2009, reaching its lowest level in almost a decade. If sustained, this could allow a larger concentration of forces on Pakistan's eastern border. Pakistan's army has consolidated its power over the civilian government, buoyed by the relative success of Operation Zarb-e-Azbin the northwest. Pakistan's diplomatic position is also strong. It has preserved a balanced posture between its patron Saudi Arabia and neighbour Iran, stands to benefit greatly from the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which passes through Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, has played a central role in talks over the future of Afghanistan, and plans to hold its first-ever drills with Russia – a traditional defence partner of India – in 2016.

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Pakistan's conventional armed forces represent one of two conventional military threats to India. Despite a renewal of hostile rhetoric on Kashmir by Pakistan Army chief Raheel Sharif, a Kargil-like surprise attack is unlikely. War is likeliest to arise as a result of a terrorist attack. But recent research has emphasised that India has little conventional advantage over Pakistan in short land wars, owing to a combination of defense-dominant terrain, a lack of strategic surprise, and slower mobilisation times. The ratio of Indian to Pakistan fourth-generation combat aircraft has nearly halved since the turn of the millennium.¹ Finally, Pakistan's nuclear weapons place fundamental limits on the scope of Indian military gains with (built not yet deployed) tactical nuclear weapons potentially complicating India's nuclear doctrine of massive retaliation.

Afghanistan and Central Asia

Over a decade of US-led war in Afghanistan has failed to defeat the Taliban, eliminate Al Qaida, or create an effective state. As foreign troops have drawn down the Taliban have made large territorial gains, Afghan security forces have suffered unsustainable losses, political divisions have widened, and Islamic State are establishing a presence. The Afghan government's outreach to Pakistan over 2014-15 has been divisive and yielded nothing, but the US and China both continue to encourage Pakistan to deliver the Taliban to the negotiating table.

While all regional powers have expressed rhetorical support for the Afghan government, their responses and interests differ in important ways. Russia has been paid by third countries including India to provide arms to Kabul, but its priority is on preventing contagion into Central Asia and would likely adopt a pragmatic approach to any settlement that reduced violence. Iran has maintained good ties with Kabul, but hedged its bets by simultaneously arming, training, and supporting particular Taliban factions.² This suggests its attitude to peace talks is likelier to be shaped by the specific participants rather than blanket opposition to the Taliban's empowerment.

In this context, India is somewhat isolated. It has viewed peace talks with greater concern than any of these powers, in part because any settlement that empowered Pakistan-backed Taliban factions could disproportionately hit Indian interests. This could include the closure of Indian consulates, an end to India's training of Afghan military officers, and curtailment of valuable

intelligence cooperation between Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies – not to mention more threatening possibilities still, similar to the hijacking of IC-814 in 1999. However, India would also face serious problems if the conflict continued unabated, especially if Western financial support to Kabul were to dwindle and India's anti-Taliban partners from the 1990s, Iran and Russia, were to align with China and Pakistan in favour of an imperfect settlement. India has only a limited ability to launch a sustained, effective, and independent challenge to such an outcome.

These changes in Afghanistan should also be seen in the wider context of Central Asia. The space from the Caspian Sea to Xinjiang is where China's expanding sphere of influence runs into that of Russia. India may depend on Central Asia – specifically, Tajikistan – to project power into Afghanistan in the future, but its own access to the region depends on good relations with Iran and Russia, and stability in Afghanistan. Yet Tehran and Moscow are experiencing warmer ties with Islamabad, while Afghan security is deteriorating.

China

China presents a large, long-term, and multifaceted challenge to India: on the disputed border in the east and west, on India's land and maritime periphery, to the survivability of India's nuclear weapons, and throughout the Indo-Pacific. In the past decade, China has grown from being three times the size of India to over five times as large. President Xi Jinping has consolidated political and military power since 2013. However in 2015 China faced its lowest growth rate in a quarter-century (6.9%) and other long-term challenges, such as dysfunctional capital markets, an ageing population, and a lack of close partners to its east (North Korea being more a liability than asset).

China's presence and influence in India's traditional spheres of influence has grown at the expense of India, although this process is uneven and reversible. It is most durable in Pakistan: China is crucial to Islamabad's military modernisation, notably combat aircraft, and fissile material production. China's OBOR initiative – a vast network of Chinese-funded land and maritime infrastructure stretching from Asia to Europe, intended to stimulate China's western and southern provinces – could stimulate growth and benefit India. But parts of the infrastructure (such as Gwadar port) might have future military utility, while the lure of Chinese capital is likely to increase Beijing's regional influence. India's Act East policy in some ways mirrors China's effort on India's periphery. But India has greater constraints. India's partners in East and Southeast Asia are richer and less politically pliable than China's in South Asia, while India's resources are fewer. Between 2011 and 2015, China's arms exports grew by 88 percent, with over two-thirds going to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

The military imbalance on the Sino-Indian border has eased over the past decade with India's concerted effort to improve transport links, reactivate airstrips, and raise new mountain infantry units. China intends to unify the two military regions responsible for India (Chengdu and Lanzhou) into a new 'West' zone that will stretch from Central Asia to the Korean Peninsula and contain a third of land forces, but it is unclear how this affects India.

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India will also be affected by Chinese efforts to extend the reach of its naval forces. These include the construction of a second aircraft carrier, submarine modernisation, and increasing naval activity in the Indian Ocean (including the planned construction of a proto-base in Djibouti).³ The geographic position of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands is both a vulnerability and an opportunity. Finally, Chinese nuclear forces are modest in size and defensive in configuration. But advances in American missile defence and long-range precision-strike conventional missiles could stimulate a change in Chinese warheads numbers and postures that would affect the survivability of India's own arsenal.⁴ Over the longer-term, changes in India's nuclear posture or doctrine might in turn affect Chinese behaviour.

The United States

Despite military setbacks and the perception of retrenchment, the United States exerts a profound influence on India's strategic environment. It can empower or constrain Pakistan, reinforce or abandon the Afghan government, confront or accommodate Chinese power, and transfer or withhold advanced military technology to India. Despite a lull during UPA-II, the US-India relationship has continued to deepen, notably evident during 2014-15 in the two sides' shared language around Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea. The US-India relationship also reinforces India's independent relationships with US allies and "middle powers" like Japan and Australia, as evidenced by Japan's permanent accession to the previously bilateral Malabar naval exercises. This synergy is reflected in the truly far-reaching US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region of January 2015.

The US continues to engage Pakistan in ways that adversely impinge on India. This includes the sale of F-16 fighter jets, suggestions (disavowed) of a civil nuclear deal, and encouragement of Chinese efforts to broker Afghanistan-Pakistan and Afghanistan-Taliban talks in Pakistan. The US budgeted \$860 million in financial assistance to Islamabad for 2016-17, merely a 0.2 per cent decrease from 2013-14, noting that Pakistan "lies at the heart of the US counter-terrorism strategy, the peace process in Afghanistan, nuclear non-proliferation efforts, and economic integration in South and Central Asia".

However, the broad trend points to a continued US tilt towards India and away from Pakistan. US arms sales to India have exceeded those to Pakistan since 2013. In 2014-15, Pakistan-sponsored terrorist groups like LeT and JeM were included in the US-India joint statement for the first time. And in 2015, Washington withheld a third of payments to Islamabad on the grounds that Pakistan had not taken action against the Haqqani Network. Although the US and India remain divided on a number of regional and global issues, ranging from the Syrian civil war to global trade talks, the bipartisan US political consensus on supporting and accelerating India's rise is likely to hold.

South Asia's Smaller Powers

As a large power surrounded by smaller ones, India has long faced the traditional dilemma of losing influence, worsening threats, and provoking third-country involvement through an excess of either strength or weakness.

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India's controversial effort to coerce Nepali elites in 2015 through diplomatic pressure and economic blockade, and Kathmandu's ensuing efforts to court Beijing, was the latest illustration of this process. Successive Indian governments have sought to strike the right balance, most recently by stressing regional economic integration, presently abysmally low, and opting for lower-profile, often intelligence-driven interventions as in Sri Lanka in early 2014. The region remains characterised by low state capacity, porous borders, and zero-sum politics that can result in countries veering between alignment with and estrangement from India as different factions assume power.

The steady growth of Chinese influence, though not without reversals and setbacks, has a number of consequences. China's presence close to Indian borders, whether naval port calls or listening posts, is one concern; but it is not the only one. India is also exposed to illicit cross-border flows, including weaponry, narcotics, and radical non-state groups. India benefits from and sometimes relies on cooperation with neighbours to tackle these threats, as a June 2015 special forces raid into Myanmar demonstrated. Other threats, such as a surge in radical Islamist activity in the Maldives in recent years, require access for intelligence. Many factors – including Indian behaviour, local elites' attitudes, and the Sino-Indian balance of influence – impinges on New Delhi's ability to manage these challenges. India increasingly sees itself as a net security provider for smaller Indian Ocean island states; this enhanced role presumably secures greater Indian influence, as reflected in an unfolding series of coastal surveillance radars in the Seychelles, Maldives, Mauritius and Sri Lanka.

West Asia

The risk factors manifest within South Asia – weak states, permeable borders, powerful non-state actors – occur in extreme form in large parts of the Arab world, exacerbated by the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and uprisings in Arab states from 2011 onwards. Great powers and their allies – the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran – compete for influence in new power vacuums, as the US-led security architecture forged in the 1980s buckles under these new conditions. Russia has returned to the Middle East in force, transforming the military balance in Syria and deepening ties with Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a nuclear deal agreed between Iran and six other powers, has greatly lowered the risk of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. It has also made it easier for India to deepen its ties with Iran, albeit when Iran's economic attention is directed to Europe and security attention to Iraq and Syria. But in strengthening Iran's finances and enabling US-Iran dialogue, JCPOA has also sharpened Arab fears and fuelled Saudi-Iran competition. Saudi Arabia continues to spend several times more than Iran on defence, but Iran's military expenditure rose by 29 per cent in 2015 and several Iran-Russia deals – for air defence systems and combat aircraft – are likely to further narrow the gap.

In this environment, the threats to India are diffuse, but growing. Some are direct. Consider the hurried evacuation of Indian nationals from Libya in 2011, the loss of Syrian oil fields in 2013, and the mass abduction of Indian

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workers by Islamic State in Mosul in 2011. Others are indirect, such as Islamic State recruitment and propaganda within India (which remains limited), or the broader economic impact of oil price volatility. West Asia is also connected to South Asia in important ways, with Iran as a bridge. Iran's Chabahar and Pakistan's Gwadar ports, developed by India and China respectively, are less than 200km apart in the Arabian Sea. India has successfully balanced its relationships with the antagonistic trio of Israel, Iran, and the Arab states – but deepening Indian involvement in West Asia would strain this balanced posture.

The Broader Strategic Environment

This survey should not be taken to mean that Africa, Europe, or Latin America are unimportant to India. But in the context of defence preparedness, India's strategic environment is most powerfully shaped by South Asia, Asia-Pacific, and West Asia. These regions present radically different challenges, with fragmentation to the west and great power competition to the east, but common to both is that older US-led security architectures are under strain from a changing balance of power and changing threats. Seapower will be crucial in both directions, but much more so to the east, indicating greater long-term resource allocations to the Indian Navy. India's ability to shape outcomes in these places will depend on how deeply it wishes to become involved. For now, particularly in maritime Asia, it has secured influence without intervention largely as an expanding force-in-being. The extent of India's future influence will be shaped by continued economic growth, economic and military reforms, Indian signalling around foreign and security policy, and potentially social and political stability at home.

More broadly, India also faces an environment in which the "global commons" – air, sea, space, and other domains like cyberspace – are perceived to be under stress, weakening the liberal international order on which India depends for stability and trade. Pessimists point to, inter alia, China's militarisation of reclaimed islands in the crucial sea-lanes of the South China Sea, the development of anti-satellite weaponry and problem of space debris, competition in resource-rich Arctic waters as the Northwest Passage opens up, and the intensification of cyber-espionage from India's partners and adversaries. As the world becomes more networked, these domains are as much part of India's strategic environment – and therefore considerations for defence policy – as traditional geographic zones.

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