India’s External and Internal Security: Interrelated Issues

Mateusz Gwozdz
Research Assistant
Indian Ocean Research Programme

Key Points

- Kashmir will remain the most dangerous flashpoint in India’s foreign policy, regardless of which major party leads the Indian Government.

- China’s relationship with India may lack the vitriol of the New Delhi-Islamabad relationship, but it will remain fundamentally rivalrous as a result of great power ambitions on the part of both countries.

- The Indian Government’s management of utopian movements, such as the Naxalites, is based on a fundamental misreading of the situation.

- If current projections of climate change come to pass, a new wave of violence between Muslim migrants and local communities along the Bangladeshi border remains a distinct possibility.

Summary

India faces four primary threats to its national security. Externally, its conflict with Pakistan is driven by competing geopolitical interests and bitter historical legacies. Since every future Indian Government will have to operate within those constraints, tensions over Kashmir will continue well into the future. The ruling parties will, at best, inform the intensity and shape of this hostility, but not its existence. Likewise, in spite of some tactical flexibility on both sides, the geopolitical ambitions of India and China remain fundamentally at odds, and recent policies confirm that New Delhi’s goals in the Indian Ocean Region transcend the
domestic political divide between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (“Congress”).

Internally, India faces a number of secessionist and utopian movements, the most prominent of which are the Maoist Naxalites. A common theme underpins the insurgencies, as they are led by “true believers”, yet derive most of their support from those dissatisfied with poor governance and inferior socioeconomic conditions. So far, however, the responses of New Delhi and state governments alike indicate a misreading of the situation. Another key issue is a possible influx of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh. While this is predicated on the accuracy of current climate change projections, this scenario, if it unfolds, threatens to replicate historical intercommunal violence on an unprecedented scale, and will require close co-operation between the Indian and Bangladeshi Governments.

**Analysis**

**International Security Issues:**

**Pakistan and Kashmir**

The ongoing conflict in Kashmir is a mix of competing national interests, bitter memories and ideological preconceptions. It originated in the chaotic days of Partition, wherein Pakistani-backed tribal militias entered the then-independent princely state of Kashmir. Even though Kashmir was a Muslim-majority state, the Maharaja requested Indian protection. The Indian Government assented on the condition that Kashmir accede to India (albeit with a degree of autonomy), which the Maharaja accepted. The resulting conflict has claimed between **17,000 and 20,000 lives** since the late 1980s, including the 2008 massacre in Mumbai perpetrated by Lashkar-e-Taiba, a fundamentalist Islamic group with the explicit goal of integrating Kashmir into Pakistan. Islamabad sees Muslim-majority Kashmir as a natural part of its territory. Additionally, Kashmir provides Pakistan with a direct land route to China, making it a key element of the growing partnership between Islamabad and Beijing. India, on the other hand, perceives Kashmir as a legal part of its territory, and a proof of India’s success as a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse country. New Delhi, like Islamabad, desires to control all of Kashmir for geopolitical reasons. Kashmir, if controlled entirely by India, would deprive Pakistan and China of a strategically vital land border. As such, Islamabad stands to lose more from a Kashmir controlled entirely by New Delhi than vice versa.

It is debatable whether Kashmir was the cause of the India-Pakistan conflict, or just an enduring manifestation. Nonetheless, in spite of abortive attempts at reconciliation, the rivalry has developed its own momentum, and Kashmir must be seen as a particularly dangerous flashpoint in a broader conflict. Pakistan has been complicit, if only by inaction, in the activities of various terrorist outfits, including those with the explicit goal of separating Kashmir from India. On the other hand, former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi rendered military assistance to East Pakistani separatists, thus aiding in the establishment of Bangladesh at the expense of (West) Pakistan. Moreover, despite open denials, India has had a hand in aiding Baluchistan separatists, who aim to secede from Pakistan.
The exact level of hostility directed towards Islamabad will depend on who governs India, as the Congress party is broadly supportive of the peace process with Pakistan, whereas both factions of the Bharatiya Janata Party are in favour of what is portrayed as a more muscular, confrontationist foreign policy. Since the BJP is likely to remain in power for the foreseeable future, the conflict is likely to at least retain a certain level of intensity, the apparent personal rapport between Prime Ministers Modi and Sharif notwithstanding. Indo-Pakistani relations will thus continue to take place within the longstanding constraints of competing interests and bitter historical legacies. India retains control of its sector of Kashmir for a combination of ideological, sentimental and strategic reasons. Unilateral withdrawal from Kashmir would strike a fatal blow to the domestic credibility and electoral prospects of the administration that authorised it, and would inevitably lead to accusations of making India look weak in the geopolitical arena. Likewise, Pakistan has an equally real geostrategic interest in the area, and stands to lose both credibility and the only direct overland link to its budding ally, China. Pakistan aspires to be a major player in the Islamic world, and giving up on Kashmir would undermine its perceived fitness to lead. As such, short of a major shift in perceptions and policy on either side, a permanent reconciliation in the foreseeable future is extremely unlikely. This may be a dangerous flashpoint, as the Pakistani army still wields considerable sway in Islamabad and does not have a no-first use policy regarding nuclear weapons. As such, without a steady a hand, any future crisis over Kashmir has the potential to escalate dangerously close to the brink of an atomic exchange.

**China**

The relationship between China and India is marred by the legacy of a failed promise of post-colonial co-operation. Under leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India was the second non-Communist state to recognise the Mao Zedong government, and had acceptable relations with Beijing until the 1962 war over Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. That conflict is still remembered in India as a stab in the back and colours Indian strategic thinking and public perceptions alike. Beijing, on the other hand, sees New Delhi as a possible rising rival. China’s continued high rate of economic growth is unsustainable, especially due to the advent of robotics and automated manufacturing. India, on the other hand, is likely to continue its economic expansion into the future. Moreover, China’s expansion into the disputed shoals and islets of the South China Sea places it at loggerheads with the United States. With the status of the US as the centre of gravity of regional security arrangements, even allowing for the uncertainties surrounding the next administration in Washington, and the BJP’s broadly pro-American agenda, a closer relationship between India and the United States continues to be a distinct possibility. As such, despite a massive increase in trade volumes between the two countries – India is China’s largest trading partner at present – relations between them are characterised by a fundamental mistrust and outbreaks of tit-for-tat measures, a situation that is likely to continue into the future. Moreover, China also controls a small portion of Kashmir, making Beijing and Islamabad partners in crime from New Delhi’s perspective.

Regardless of official rhetoric, India’s policy of non-alignment in great power politics is dead and buried without ceremony, as evidenced by military and cultural expansion (epitomised by “Project Mausam”, a counterpart to China’s Maritime Silk Road policy), into the Indian...
Ocean Region and East Africa. It has so far remained constant under both the BJP and Congress. As a consequence, in spite of some room for economic and technological co-operation, the relationship between New Delhi and Beijing is, and will remain, rivalrous, as both countries aim to play great power roles and to secure the allegiance of minor states in the region. At the same time, since India maintains a permanent nuclear triad capacity, and possesses a standing army of some 1.3 million troops, a full-scale war would be exceedingly costly and ruinous to the prospective “victor”, making it extremely unlikely.

**Domestic Security Issues:**

**Insurgencies and Rebellions**

India has seen approximately 17,000 casualties of domestic and one-sided violence since 1989. The raw numbers conceal two major phenomena. First, many of the underlying causes of the conflicts remain unaddressed. Second, even though casualties have decreased substantially since the late 1980s, they have spiked periodically, suggesting lulls rather than any permanent resolution. The actual number of future casualties depends on too many contingent factors to accurately predict, but the following will be among the most likely causes.

The ongoing Naxalite insurgency, responsible for some 5,600 casualties since 1989, remains a gaping wound. The Naxalites, a CPI-Maoist coalition, have affected approximately half of India’s states and established parallel administrations in isolated parts of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. They exploit genuine grievances, such as landlessness and poverty, and the administrative inefficiencies which exacerbate those problems (especially among the so-called scheduled tribes). As such, the Naxalites’ activities are a symptom of a deeper set of problems.

The response of the Union and State Governments to the insurgents has so far been a combination of carrot and stick. On one hand, there have been some abortive attempts at political solutions, but the demands of both sides remain unacceptable to the other, with the authorities insisting on unilateral disarmament while the insurgents remain committed to their original demands and ideological dogmas. On the other hand, the State and Union Governments have, over the past few decades, tried to resolve the issue by force. Both solutions, however, indicate a perception of the insurgency as a “law and order” problem, which is a fundamental misreading of the situation. The problem is further compounded by the fact that each State is responsible for its own security policy, which makes co-ordination with New Delhi possible only in the Union Territories, which are governed directly from the capital. As a general rule, radical, utopian movements are driven by a hard-core cadre of “true believers”, who exploit poverty, ignorance and poor governance to secure the co-operation of the masses. The Naxalites are broadly consistent with this principle and the movement’s leaders have demonstrated conclusively that they cannot be reasoned with. Most important in framing a consistent and effective response to the Naxalites will be to improve the socioeconomic conditions for local populations in the affected areas, thus diminishing the attractiveness of the Naxalite movement by removing its raison d’être, making mass recruitment more difficult and discrediting the claims of the ideological hardliners behind it.
The same principles apply to a variety of secessionist and utopian rebel movements mostly active in the so-called “Seven Sisters” (the eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura), which have caused about 11,500 deaths since the late 1980s. The situation can develop in three major ways over the coming decades. If socioeconomic conditions in rural and tribal areas continue to improve, the insurgencies are likely to peter out in the long run, as most people care more about improving their lot in life than they do about the intricacies of dialectical materialism or the fulfilment of ideological imperatives. Conversely, if those areas remain impoverished and marginalised, the insurgencies are likely to remain a persistent problem, as hardliners will always find a viable recruitment pool in such conditions. Finally, history provides ample evidence that if socioeconomic conditions deteriorate below a certain level, even a small cadre of professional, ideologically-driven revolutionaries can force significant political change. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia is an example of that principle. The final outcome depends on a highly unpredictable interplay of environmental, political, economic, social and technological factors. The government of India has a degree of control over the political and economic factors and, if it can effectively co-ordinate its efforts with the State Governments, it can alleviate the worst aspects of this dynamic through good governance and the effective provision of public services. As identity politics play a significant role in secessionist movements, encouraging a more homogenised national Indian identity over the longer term will be another useful tool for eliminating secessionist tendencies. Still, this would require a consistent, long-term policy over many generations transcending immediate political needs. Since political parties generally focus only on the next electoral cycle, such consistency is highly unlikely.

Sectarian Tensions

The last significant source of instability will be Muslim-Hindu tensions. The majority of this inter-communal violence has so far occurred close to the borders with Bangladesh and Pakistan. The former was driven largely by large-scale migration from Bangladesh, which radically altered the cultural and ethnolinguistic composition of parts of the adjoining Indian states and generated a sense of marginalisation (especially among the Bodo people in Assam) from a perceived Muslim invasion. In the case of Pakistan, the violence was, at its core, an expansion of the perennial conflict between the two countries. As a consequence, a future influx of Muslim migrants on a comparable scale may produce a similar, violent reaction. If current assessments of climate change are accurate, many areas of Bangladesh may be submerged or subjected to extreme weather patterns, as two-thirds of the country lie less than five metres above the sea level. Overall, this scenario may generate twenty million climate refugees in the coming decades. If this scenario comes to pass, India’s easternmost states would be a viable migration route, thus recreating those events on a far greater scale. It must be borne in mind that the Bangladeshi Government is well aware of this possible danger, and has a number of policies in place to mitigate the consequences. As a result, even if the current assessments are accurate, the absolute worst case scenario of refugee chaos will likely be avoided. Nonetheless, the Indian Government will need to generate contingency planning and advance arrangements with the Bangladeshi Government if it is to avoid a destabilising migrant crisis.
India faces a number of dangerous flashpoints, the most explosive of which is Kashmir and, by extension, New Delhi’s vitriolic relationship with Islamabad. All those dangers can be successfully navigated and resolved, though it will require an unprecedented level of far-sightedness, political flexibility and intra-national co-ordination.

*****

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
80 Birdwood Parade, Dalkeith WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 9389 9831 Fax: +61 8 9389 8803
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au