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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Thu, 09/20/2012 - 06:57

Paper no.884 06. 01. 2004

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Introductory observations: India begins 2004 with a feel-good factor of a buoyant economy with appreciable rates of economic growth recognized by international monetary institutions. Politically, the South Asian Security environment may change less confrontationist if the current rhetoric on peace initiatives by Pakistan are equally matched by translating them into concrete actions in the ground.

However, despite all these heartening developments, no reasons exist for complacency in the strategic and security fields. It must not be forgotten that India had been lulled into strategic complacency in the past with adverse consequences by rhetorical professions of peace, friendship and tranquility.

Despite all the media-hype on the current SAARC summit in Islamabad and despite all the pressures that the United states can bring to bear on Pakistan to normalize relations with India, the road to peace in South Asia is going to be very long, arduous and heart breaking one.

India's Security Environment 2004: India's security environment at the beginning of 2004 stands characterised by the following strategic elements:

* India's contiguous regions of West Asia and South East Asia are disturbed , volatile and in the throes of Islamic Jehadi terrorism.

* South Asia itself is in a conflictual state with Pak state sponsored terrorism in J&K, Nepal, Bangladesh as a haven for anti Indian insurgent groups sponsored by Pakistan's intelligence agencies. In Sri Lanka, there is a tentative cease fire in the LTTE armed movement against the Government.

* China's military deployment on India's borders has not decreased. On the contrary China consequent to NATO's east ward expansion and US military presence in Central Asian Republics, has deployed additional forces in her Western regions. These need to be counted as additional deployments against India due to their easy-relocation to the Indian border if found necessary.

* Pakistan despite all United States' political, military and economic resuscitation has not emerged from its 'failed-state' syndrome, and therefore prone to military adventurism.

India's strategic environment in 2004, therefore, continues to be disturbed and marked by strategic uncertainties. Some of the more significant Indian strategic and security imperatives for 2004 are enumerated below.

India's Missile Programme: The AGNI III missile (3000 km range) was due to tested in 2003, but it has not taken place. It is being speculated that this was put off under external pressure and also India's desire not to antagonize Pakistan before the SAARC Summit.

The Indian ICBM programme similarly seems to be in cold storage as no progress is visible. If this be so, then the Govt of the day is mortgaging India's security by not actively pursuing these programmes.

Both AGNI III (3000 km) and AGNI IV (ICBM: above 5000 km) programmes need to be put at top priority in 2004. India's acquisitions of ICBMs is a strategic requirement and not a status symbol.

India's strategic analysts have started talking about missile arsenal limitations and risk reduction measures by plagiarizing Western templates. They forget that the cold war was a two-way direct contest and CBMs came into play after nearly three decades of nuclear and missiles build ups when both sides wearied. South Asia is a three way contest and both India's adversaries are currently engaged in missile build up despite their peace rhetoric.

India can hardly afford nuclear or missile uncertain strategic value in the current strategic environment in South Asia.

India's Nuclear submarine and Sea Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) Projects: The credibility of India's nuclear deterrence rests more critically on the sea-leg of the triad. Of all India's nuclear and missile programme, the nuclear submarine and SLBM project is the slowest in terms of progress, when it should be the fastest.

India needs to put bounce in the prosecution of these programmes, even if it means putting them under direct monitoring of the Prime Minister.

India's Strength in Information Technology and Cyber-warfare Need to be Synergised for Defence Applications: India has emerged as the world's IT superpower by her tremendous brain-power assets in these fields, especially from the South. The United States used these assets as force multipliers in both Gulf Wars and in Serbia.

India needs to capitalise her assets in these fields by synergising all civilian and military research establishments towards a comprehensive package of both offensive and defensive warfare capabilities.

India's Military Logistics Airlift Capabilities: The United States has conquered geographical constraints by a superb and massive military logistics airlift capability. This needs to be a lesson for India where re-location of troops and supplies are frequently warranted by security considerations.

India's last modern input in this field was in the 1980s when IL 76s and AN-32s were purchased to provide the backbone for strategic airlift capabilities. These fleets stand worn out today and need urgent attention in terms of replacements.

India's Armed Forces Expansion: This aspect stands covered in my earlier papers and suffice it to say that the Indian Armed Forces need a significant expansion to meet their extended security commitments.

Indian needs in this direction are at a minimum:

*** Indian Army**

1. Infantry Divisions (additional) 8 -10
2. Special Forces Brigades (additional) 3
3. Air-cavalry Brigades 2
4. Territorial Army Battalion 7-8

*** Indian Navy:** India should aim at a minimum of three aircraft-carrier battle groups (operational) with one carrier in dry-dock. Minimum field strength should be around 300.

*** Indian Air Force:** India needs a minimum of 70 fighter squadrons, besides whatever assets are required for the nuclear force.

With \$100 billion in the kitty, there are no excuses for lack of funds for expansion of Indian armed forces.

India's Defence Acquisition set-up and Processes Need Accountability: India's ministry of defence (MOD) is sorely lacking in terms of defence acquisition and accountability. In the last three years, the armed forces have had to surrender RS 8,000- RS 9,0000 crores due to non-purchase of sanctioned items.

Even the Ministry of Finance needs to be blamed for not imposing fiscal discipline in MOD. These lapsed funds from the defence budget came in handy in off-setting budget deficits, but at whose cost? - the security of the Indian nation state.

Indian Military Hierarchy –Theatre Profiles: One of the biggest lessons from the Kargil war was the inadequacy of theatre profiles of the Indian Military hierarchy. At the time of the Kargil war, the two top jobs at headquarter Northern Command were held by officers who had neither commanded a brigade, division or corps in Northern Command.

Terrain knowledge at a very intimate level is required of higher military commanders especially in Northern command. This comes and accumulates only when officers have commanded brigades, divisions and corps in such command zones. Aerial survey in helicopters cannot compensate for intimate terrain knowledge.

This is an aspect which needs to be looked into by the Defence Minister and the COAS in terms of Army and Corps Commanders

in postings to important Commands, especially the Northern Command.

Concluding observations: India's security is indivisible. It cannot be given a go-by on grounds of political or financial expediency or on grounds of external pressure that India should not cross a certain threshold in terms of military build up.

India today is neither constrained by lack of financial resources or faced with the dilemma of defence versus development. Adequate financial resources today are available both for defence and development. Military preparedness involves long lead times and hence accountability of the bureaucracy is an essential ingredient of military preparedness. Synergy is needed between the military hierarchy, MOD and the acquisition organisations.

The year 2004 may presage peace but it also dictates that the imperatives for a strong, credible and vigilant military posture are not lost sight of in the pursuit of peace.

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