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Introductory Observations: In a marked departure from the traditionally bland address to the Combined Commanders Conference (Conference of the military hierarchy of the Indian Army, Indian Navy and Indian Air Force, held annually), Prime Minister Vajpayee on November 1, 2003, made some significant observations on record on India's strategic priorities. The salient observations being:

* “ As we grow in international stature, our defence strategies should naturally reflect our political, economic and security concerns, extending well beyond the geographical confines of South Asia.”

* “ Our security environment ranges from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca across the Indian Ocean, includes Central Asia and Afghanistan in the North West, China in the North East and South East Asia. Our strategic thinking has also to extend to these horizons.”

Analytically, both these statements can be said to be a definition by the Prime Minister of India of India's strategic frontiers. However, it can be foreseen that terming it as such would invite a likely government reaction that the Prime Minister was only delineating the extent of India's security environment.

Whatever the post-facto spin that may be given to these significant observations, what is important to recognise is, that if for nothing else, these statements reflect India's strategic aspirations and of the areas of interest that have a bearing on India's security.

It is only a matter of degree when initial strategic aspirations evolve into more precise policy formulations of 'strategic frontiers' and the development of strategic assets, policy formulations and foreign policy initiatives to secure one's 'strategic frontiers'.

Strategic Frontiers- The Concept: Strategic frontiers as a concept stood reflected in the policies of the two superpowers-the United States and USSR. Lately, this concept has been under active discussion in relation to China. A noted American author on China's strategic affairs, David Shambaugh has analysed this concept as :

- * " Strategic frontiers concept delineates the territorial parameters of a nation's perceived national security interests-that is territories to which it would be willing to commit military forces in pursuit of goals that it defines to be in its national interests."
- * " These need not coincide with territorial boundaries: indeed they often involve the re-definition and extension of these boundaries.

While India has never defined its national interests in any official document, the present observations of the Indian Prime Minister come closest to defining them. In view of the above, this analysis attempts to focus on some connected issues which have a bearing on India's national interests and her conception of her strategic frontiers.

Convergent Interests With the United States: The strategic frontiers of the United States extend to the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf region, Central Asia and Afghanistan, South East Asia and China. The United States has over-riding national security interests in the political and strategic stability of these regions due to the existence of oil, location of strategic choke points and the sea lanes of commerce. Lately Islamic fundamentalism and its off-spring- Jihadi terrorism have emerged as strategic challenges for USA.

The Indian Prime Minister's statement of interest of November 1, 2003, in terms of de-lineation, has a coincident convergence with the United States strategic frontiers. If that be so the following questions arise:

- * USA-India strategic partnerships. How far both nations want to commit themselves to it?

* While the end may remain the same for USA and India, the means may differ. How far is India willing to bring itself in tune with USA means?

* Is India politically and militarily prepared to shoulder part of US commitments or burdens in these regions?

It is imperative that all shades of political opinion in India and the “Non-Aligned Delusionists” of India’s journalist and academic fraternity realise that:

* India’s national security interests demand that a US-India strategic partnership is an imperative.

* India’s aspirations to be a key global player cannot be facilitated by non-alignment or attempts to create a multi-polar world (the Chinese approach).

* India’s aspirations to be a key global player can be facilitated only by the United States.

Domestic opposition in India to India’s commitment of troops to Iraq was an illogical reaction of our “ Non-alignment Delusionists”. The Indian Prime Minister himself averred to this aspect in this Conference by asserting that: “ ...Many in our country are still caught in a Cold War time warp and strategic assumptions of an earlier era.”

Conflicting Interests With China: India’s definition of her strategic frontiers clash and will be in conflict with those of China. This is painfully so. While the Prime Minister at this Conference expressed that resolution of the border dispute with China is a “ strategic objective”, the process is likely to extend for a lengthy period of time and in the end may be inconclusive.

China cannot be India’s “natural ally” in any of the regions incorporated in India’s strategic frontiers, because of competing strategic interests. Nor is China inclined to accommodate others in such ventures, and India definitely not..

This is an important strategic factor which needs to be factored-in in any policy formulations designed to secure India’s strategic frontiers.

Preparing India’s Armed Forces For Securing India’s Strategic Frontiers: The most important component of the concept of strategic frontiers is the willingness “ to commit military forces in pursuit of goals that it defines to be in its national interests”. Three important considerations come into play here:

* Armed Forces upgradation and modernization so as to equip them with the military means to extend their reach.

* Strategic assets build-up both for deterrence and compellence/dissuasion.

* Political will to use power.

The discussion on the above aspects encompasses a vast expanse. De-linking it from military professional expertise, and in layman terms it very broadly would require creation/development of the following:

* **Indian Army:** Raising another 6-8 infantry divisions and at least 3-5 Special Forces Brigades.

* **Indian Navy:** Minimum requirement of 3 Aircraft Carrier-based Task Forces and at least 3-5 Marine Expeditionary Forces. Significant increase in land-based naval aviation assets for both surveillance and combat. Logistic lift capabilities for three marine expeditionary forces and logistic ships to support the Marines and the Carrier Groups..

* **Indian Air Force:** A minimum of 70 squadrons would have to become a permanent feature. The Air Force would also have to create an air-transportation and logistic lift capability for at least two Army divisions. PGMs will have to be given top priority.

* **Strategic Assets:**

- ICBMs testing and production needs to start forthwith.

- IRBM arsenal be expanded.

- Nuclear Submarine with SLBMs project be accelerated in a time bound manner

- Cruise missiles

India's military build-up on the lines above would take a number of years and needs to be implemented in a graduated but a time-bound programme for each stage.

Fortunately today, India is not short of financial resources, scientific R&D or technological means. India is short of political will to drive an atrophied civilian bureaucracy which has to implement these programmes.

Additionally, India's leadership needs to develop a political culture which is not apologetic about the acquisition of military power and more importantly, "THE POLITICAL WILL TO USE POWER". Operation PRAKRAM visibly demonstrated the lack of political will to use power, when all the military assets of India were poised to do so.

Concluding Observations:

India's strategic frontiers stand realistically de- lineated and spelt out. What needs to be implemented forcefully is a realistic and time bound military upgradation programme to create the assets and infrastructure which would underpin the security of these frontiers.

Conventional military build up is a long drawn process and in the interim to give shape and contours to the strategic frontiers concept, India needs to accelerate the build up of her "Strategic Forces Command" assets –ICBMs, IRBMs, SLBMs and cruise missile arsenal.

India's emergent military power build up to secure her strategic frontiers can only take place by USA accommodating and accepting the coincidental convergence of United States and India's "Strategic Frontiers", that is, by a complimentarity of USA-India strategic interests. A USA-India strategic partnership therefore is both a political and strategic imperative. *(The author is an International Relations and Strategic Affairs analyst. He is the Consultant, Strategic Affairs with South Asia Analysis Group. Email [drsubhashkapila @yahoo.com](mailto:drsubhashkapila@yahoo.com)^[1])*

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