



INDIA'S GEOSTRATEGIC ASPECTS AND SECURITY SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT Geography is a key element in strategic thinking and is an important source to explain strategic culture. There are many misconceptions about India's strategic culture, perhaps because it has not been clearly articulated and its security environment is relatively unsettled. The country is both a continental and maritime nation. Its geography offers a number of explanations to its insular nature, sense of civilisation and destiny. As the country did not inherit clearly demarcated borders on Independence, its reliance on its frontiers being bastions for defence and security has proved delusive. A deeper understanding of the nature of terrain along its borders is necessary. India's maritime heritage and responsibilities are also based on its geographic location. While geography remains unchanging, it is the shape of human behaviour that has changed geo-political equations.

KEYWORDS : strategic culture, continental, maritime heritage, geo-political equations

INTRODUCTION

Power and national security are essentially based on geographic factors. The significance of geography, climate and resources is a key element in strategic thinking and remains an important source of strategic defence policies. Geographical circumstances are the key to understanding why some countries adopt particular strategic policies rather than others. Deeply embedded thoughts related to Indian geography have exerted a powerful influence in shaping its strategic thinking.

India's multiple borders are confronted by different environmental strategic factors at each point of contact with neighbouring states, raising multiple security dilemmas. Geography affects strategic and operational planning, tactics, logistics, operations, relations with civilian populations, and the military evaluations of areas. Geography is not itself an element of national power, which is normally described as having political, economic, and military elements.

Physical Component

India is a large triangular land mass jutting out of mainland Asia. In the north, it is bordered along its entire length by the Himalayan Mountains, which are the highest in the world. In the south, the large triangular peninsula is bordered by two great arms of the Indian Ocean—the Arabian Sea in the west and the Bay of Bengal in the east (See Map 1). India covers an area of 3,287,782 sq km (680,000 sq miles). It measures 3,214 km from the north to south and 2,933 km from east to west. It has a land frontier of 15,200 km. In the north, it is bordered by China, Nepal and Bhutan; in the east by Bangladesh and Burma and in the west, by Pakistan. Just south of India's southern tip lies Sri Lanka.

Strategic Location

The bulk of India's land mass lies between 70 degrees and 90 degrees longitudes and between 8 degrees and 35 degrees north latitude. The country is situated in the middle of the Northern Hemisphere in the north-central point of the Indian Ocean. In a way, it acts as a gateway to trade between West and East. Geographically, the surface regions of India can be divided into seven distinct regions: The Northern (Himalayan) Belt, and Eastern (jungle) region, the central plains, the Deccan plateau, the coastal belt, the western Thar Desert, and the western plains region. In addition to these seven regions, one may also consider the island territories of which India has two—the Lakshadweep Islands in the Arabian Sea and the Andaman-Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal.

Geostrategic Significance of Indian Location

India is a unique country as it is easily accessible to other parts of Asia, Africa, Europe and Americas. Its cultural influences have crossed its border from time immemorial and reached far offlands.

It acts as a bridge head between developed and developing countries of the World and between the East and the West.

India's strength lies in its geography as much as in its culture. Since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, distance between India and Europe has been reduced by 7000 km. India enjoys a favorable situation on the international highway of trade and commerce.

The ocean routes from East and South-East Asia and Australia to Africa and Europe pass through Indian Ocean. India is connected with Europe, North America and South America through both the routes—the Cape of Good Hope and the Suez Canal. India can also reach Canada and the U.S.A. through the Strait of Malacca after crossing the Pacific Ocean.

Requirement of Light Infantry Units for the Northern and Eastern Regions

India's 19 light infantry divisions and 11 mountain divisions more than adequately meet the requirement dictated by physical geography in the Himalayan region and the jungle terrain in the east.

Use of Light Armour for Jungle Terrain in the East.

While jungle terrain in the east necessitates light units, the employment of light armour will increase the combat effectiveness of units. This is noticed in India's military element as the divisions in the east have armoured cars integral to their organization.

Deployment of Heavy Force for the Western Region and Other Plain Regions

Deployment at Altitude in the Himalayan Region

Indian army units are deployed in place along the Himalayan region at all times. Quite obviously, military planners realize that the limited road network and the nature of terrain here preclude speedy deployment of troops from garrisons to battle locations. The permanent stationing of troops in their battle locations is necessary due to geographic compulsions.

Force Projection across the Himalayas

India's Air Borne element and its air lift capability can at best transport one light division by air and employ one airborne/air assault brigade at any given time. This is a limited capability to project power across the Himalayan mountain belt. However, its missile development program gives India the capability to project power into all of southern China and most of central China. The nuclear option, if exercised by India, gives it sufficient leverage to apply the strategy of nuclear deterrence.

Necessity of Ultra Modern Defence Equipment

The terrain and varying climate conditions dictate that India's weapons and equipment need to be sturdy enough to function effectively. The quality of the country's weapon systems and their acquisition policies suggest that they do indeed place emphasis on sturdy, combat-worthy equipment. The research and development programs also match the need to develop and produce equipment capable of effectively sustaining the rigors of nature.

Maritime Relations

India's maritime neighbours are not only those sharing common boundaries of our maritime zones – but also nations with whom we share the common maritime space of the high seas. Accordingly, India has a vast maritime neighbourhood, which extends across the IOR. Maritime relations with the nations in our wider neighbourhood and beyond are an important facet of our broader politico-economic

relations, in which the Indian Navy also plays an important role.

Requirement of Strong Navy System in IOR

As enumerated earlier in this study, India needs to protect its off shore drilling facilities, insular territories, SLOCs and its coast line. The size and quality of the Indian Navy suggest that it is capable of performing these roles. The establishment of a naval base in the Andaman Islands and the naval presence in the Lakshadweep Islands further suggests that India is indeed, aware of the importance of these islands to the overall defence of the mainland. The Indian Navy is one of five major naval powers which are capable of sustained long range deployment of seaborne strike aircraft. The recent establishment of an Indian coastguard similar to that of the United States frees most of its main naval force fleet elements for long-range, open ocean force projection activities. This expansion of naval capabilities perhaps stems from India's perceived concerns that the presence of stronger naval forces in the Indian Ocean is a threat to her maritime interests, and India must, therefore, be capable of meeting them on equal terms. Admiral Tellis (U.S. Navy) feels that despite the large naval expansion currently underway, the Indian Navy is nowhere near acquiring the power projection capabilities that its critics often ascribe to it.

Requirement of an Air Force to Support Operation over Wide Geographic Areas

The physical geography of India dictates the requirement for an air force capable of supporting operations on the ground and at sea, over a wide geographic area. It would be worth noting that today; the Indian Air Force has five times the number of front-line combat aircraft as Britain's Royal Air Force.⁵ Its latest contract with the U.S. to indigenously produce a light combat aircraft (LCA) promises to give its air force a further boost. The Indian air action in the Maldives in 1988 showed its willingness to assist smaller neighbours and thus maintain stability. The organization, equipment and deployment of the Indian Air Force suggest that it is structured to accept such a responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Geography has profoundly affected India's history, insular outlook, and its strategic culture. India's strategic location, size and large population have contributed to its importance, its preeminence in the Indian Ocean region and its global relevance. As the 13th most globalised nation on earth India's future is highly dependent on what happens in the outside world. Geography has made different parts of India progress differently and can partially explain why it has developed as it has and where it may go.

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