



**RAMAIAH
UNIVERSITY**
OF APPLIED SCIENCES

**CENTRE FOR
NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES**

CNSS INSIGHTS

VOLUME 1 | ISSUE 3
SEPTEMBER 2024

ENSURING NATIONAL SECURITY IN AN AGE OF TURBULENCE

AMIT DASGUPTA, AM

CNSS INSIGHTS

VOLUME 1 | ISSUE 3

ENSURING NATIONAL SECURITY IN AN AGE OF TURBULENCE

AMIT DASGUPTA, AM



CENTRE FOR
NATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES

IPR: Centre for National Security Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from CNSS, MSRUAS. Written request for permission should be emailed to cnss@msruas.ac.in

Designed by **Ayush Bhattacharjee**, Centre for National Security Studies

These are troubling times and a question that is often asked is how we might craft a foreign policy in a world that is deeply divisive and combative, and yet ensure national security. Such questions are no longer the sole purview of South Blok but bother common citizens because of the implications global developments have on their everyday existence.

Consider, for instance, how unrest in Bangladesh can trigger an enormous refugee crisis imposing an unanticipated burden on the Indian economy and how this could sour India-Bangladesh relations, or how an unstable Pakistan can impact India, or how an unfriendly Maldives can threaten peace and tranquility in the Indian Ocean, or how the South China Seas dispute can disrupt sea lanes, supply chains, and raise the price of commodities, or how the war between Russia and Ukraine has raised the global price of oil and grain, or how the Gaza conflict and the likelihood of enhanced escalation can widen the conflict arena impacting global growth, or the manner in which the world economy is teetering on the brink of deep recession, to name a few. Foreign policy, in other words, is not an isolated relationship between individual countries but essentially an integrated and contextual one that is also deeply influenced by socio-economic factors and political developments in a country or region and spilling over. In such a scenario, the crafting of foreign policy becomes a daunting and continuous task because of the potential risks to national security.

The singular objective of foreign policy is ensuring security of its national interests. This is achieved through risk assessments driven by an early warning system and a rapid response, through a multi-step and multi-stakeholder process that identifies threats, challenges, and opportunities. Interplay between the three often occurs. For example, a threat can be downgraded to a challenge (as

has happened in the case of the pandemic), in as much as a challenge can become a threat (an impending storm can be a challenge and thereafter, rapidly transform into a threat, if it becomes an approaching cyclone). Interestingly, a challenge can also become an opportunity (the serious challenge of crimes against women, children, and the marginalized also offers the opportunity to take corrective measures, plug loopholes, make laws stricter, and enhance compliance and enforcement).

At the same time, threats, challenges, and opportunities can vary in scale and intensity. Some development can be a bigger or lesser threat, for instance. Risk management, consequently, is the timely identification and intervention in scenarios we are confronted with, failing which our security would be compromised with short, medium, or long-term consequences.

Accurate risk assessment is not easy. Often miscalculations take place that can have serious implications. The tendency to impose old assessments on new scenarios end up backfiring. Socio-psychological factors should never be ignored, since getting blind-sighted is a common failing. Ego and muscle power does not always win wars. Goliath, it may be recalled, is known to have been slayed. It is worth remembering that the US with all its military might and with the full backing of its western allies saw defeat in Vietnam and then again, in Afghanistan. Human nature refuses to learn from history. It was, once, wisely advised that we should never underestimate human stupidity.

Risk analysis is like solving jigsaw puzzles. Pieces need to be put in the right place or the puzzle would never get solved. Impatience drives us into forcing pieces into spaces where they don't fit. The consequences can be serious.

It is said, and rightly so, that a nation's security is impacted by how stable its neighbourhood is and more importantly, how robust its relationship is with its neighbours. For a country that is as big as India, in comparison to its immediate neighbours or periphery, this requires great sensitivity and a genuine approach towards fraternal relations. Missteps can have long-term consequences. Genuine and sustainable relationships are built on trust and take years to build, but only minutes to destroy. Winning back trust is never easy. Lingering doubts and suspicions stand in the way of going back to the happy days.

Recall, for instance, that in 2015, Nepal suffered an earthquake that resulted in the loss of around ten thousand people and enormous loss of property, including revered heritage structures. India was the first responder to the tragedy and launched its largest overseas disaster relief operation (Operation Maitri) through search and rescue, medical aid, and assistance programmes that won it many friends in Nepal and globally. This was public diplomacy at its best. But then, New Delhi frittered it all away by imposing a blockade, in the very same year, triggering a massive humanitarian crisis. This extraordinary misstep resulted in a loss of trust that India is yet to regain. New Delhi's action was driven by fears that Kathmandu was veering towards Beijing, which would be detrimental to its national interests. Even if this is true, the strategy adopted was deeply flawed. Risk assessments needed to be followed by strategic risk management that delivered the desired results, which, in this case, certainly did not because it was driven by the big country bullying syndrome. Arm-twisting has never been a viable management strategy.

It also needs to be recognized that what one country considers to be a threat may be perceived by another country as an opportunity.

The gainer of India's blockade was China. Kathmandu's distancing of New Delhi was the opportunity that Beijing benefited from. Often, missteps convert challenges into major threats.

It is, furthermore, important to be mindful that strategic partners can have differing views on threats, challenges, and opportunities. India-Australia relations, for instance, is among the fastest growing bilateral relations of the 21st century. Yet, perceptions and strategies vis-à-vis Beijing differ significantly. While Canberra certainly sees China as an adversarial rising power, it is locked into a strong trade relationship with Beijing that it would wish to strengthen for understandable reasons (India-Australia two-way trade is \$46 billion circa in comparison to Australia-China two-way trade of \$250 billion circa). Furthermore, because of Canberra's strategic policy alignment with Washington, Moscow is perceived as a bigger threat than Beijing. For India, on the other hand, China remains the most critical threat, primarily because of a long-pending border dispute and Beijing's view that New Delhi is an ally of its detractors, and because of attempts by western powers to project India as a counterbalance to China. Beijing's wooing of Islamabad, in this regard, is based on the 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' principle. Constant niggling to keep New Delhi preoccupied is its strategy, while giving the false impression that it is open to talks and seeks peace.

According to a strategic calculus, the global order is currently confronted by the credible likelihood of global relations sliding into chaos and global disorder, plunging the world into unprecedented confusion, turbulence, and uncertainty. Europe and most western powers have declined economically. The US, furthermore, is no longer as influential as it once was. Deep divisions, never seen before, characterize the American polity. The combative rise of

China has challenged US hegemony in global relations. In such a world, the crafting of a foreign policy that ensures national security requires vigilance, patience, caution, economic and military clout, and more importantly, constant risk management that enables India to maintain its strategic autonomy.

Amit Dasgupta, AM is a former Indian diplomat. This article is based on a talk 'Foreign and Security Policy Challenges of Navigating a Disorderly World' delivered on August 20th, 2024, at the Centre for National Security Studies. Views expressed are personal.

