

India: Regional Security Challenges

Brahma Chellaney

The ongoing power shifts in the world are primarily linked to Asia's phenomenal economic rise. How far and rapidly Asia has come up can be gauged by reading the 1968 book *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, by Swedish economist and Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal, who bemoaned the manner impoverishment, population pressures, and resource constraints were weighing down Asia.¹ With the economic rise, the strategic landscape in Asia also is changing rapidly.

Accentuating Asia's strategic challenges is the fact that it has weak or non-existent security mechanisms and that attempts to design an institutional structure have been in limbo. There is not even agreement whether a new security architecture should extend across Asia or just be confined to East Asia, itself an ill-defined construct.² The United States, India and several other states have taken the position to treat the Asian region as a single entity so that the quest for a new security architecture does not become some kind of a zero-sum game.³ China, on the other hand, has sought to plug away on a separate "East Asian" order. A pan-Asian security vision thus seeks to counter Beijing's desire for a China-driven East Asian security order.

¹ Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry Into the Poverty of Nations* (New York: Pantheon, 1968).

² China, for example, has sought to define East Asia narrowly, while the East Asian Summit (EAS) includes India, Australia, and New Zealand in the concept of an East Asian Community (EAC).

³ At an address at Peking University on June 6, 2008, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee argued for "an open and inclusive architecture" in Asia, saying: "We will need to evolve a security architecture which takes into account the conditions prevailing in Asia." US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, for his part, in a May 31, 2008, address on "The Challenges to Stability in the Asia-Pacific", said: "The collaborative reality of Asia's security today is to the exclusion of no single country. It is instead a continuously developing enterprise undertaken with allies, friends, and partners. But it can only succeed if we treat the region as a single entity. There is little room for a separate 'East Asian' order."

With new economic powers in its fold, Asia faces new challenges. It has to cope with entrenched territorial disputes, competition over scarce resources, maritime security threats, improved national military capabilities, increasingly fervent nationalism, and the rise of religious extremism. At the same time, Asia is on the frontline of climate change. Diverse transborder trends—from terrorism and insurgencies, to illicit refugee flows and human trafficking—add to its security challenges. Asia, though, is also becoming interdependent through trade, investment, technology, and tourism.

Add to the picture the manner the qualitative reordering of power in Asia is beginning to challenge strategic stability. The emergence of China as a global player is transforming the Asian geopolitical landscape like no other development. China is not yet a great power in the true sense. It lacks a worldwide military reach, and its diplomatic reach, while growing steadily as underlined by the Chinese forays into Africa and Latin America, does not cover the entire globe thus far. However, the fact remains that China harbours global ambitions, with its military spending having grown for more than two decades at a double-digit clip annually.

It is against this complex background that one must examine the various security challenges in the region that India perceives and what its policies and options are.

INDIA'S VERY DIFFICULT NEIGHBOURHOOD

One of the most striking things about the larger Asian strategic landscape is the arc of failing or troubled states around India. This harsh geographical reality is India's most-glaring weaknesses—one that weighs it down regionally. Its neighbourhood is so chronically troubled that India confronts what can be called a tyranny of geography.⁴ As a result, it faces serious external threats from virtually all directions.

It is locked in an arc of failing or authoritarian states that seek, in different ways, to undermine its secular, multiethnic, pluralistic character. To India's west lies "an arc of crises stretching from Jordan to Pakistan"—to use the title of one of the workshops at

⁴ Stanley A. Weiss, "India, the Incredible and the Vulnerable", *International Herald Tribune*, April 23, 2008.

the 2008 World Policy Conference at Evian, France.⁵ A contiguous belt of political disorder stretches from Lebanon to Pakistan, with incalculable consequences for regional and international security. Rapid Talibanisation and spreading militancy threaten to devour next-door Pakistan, with a task force of the US-based Atlantic Council warning in a report that, “We are running out of time to help Pakistan change its present course toward increasing economic and political instability, and even ultimate failure.”⁶

There is continuing reluctance in the international policy discourse, however, to face up to a central reality: the political border between Afghanistan and Pakistan (or “Afpak” in Washingtonese) has now ceased to exist in practice. The so-called Durand Line, in any event, was an artificial, British-colonial invention that left the large Pashtun community divided into two.⁷ Today, that line exists only in maps. On the ground, it has little political, ethnic, and economic relevance, even as the Afpak region has become a magnet for the world’s jihadists. A de facto Pashtunistan, long sought by Pashtuns, now lurks just below the horizon, on the ruins of an ongoing Islamist militancy.

The disappearance of the Durand Line seems irreversible. While the writ of the Pakistani state no longer extends to nearly half of that country (much of Baluchistan, large parts of the North-West Frontier Province, and the whole of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas), even larger swaths of Afghanistan are outside the control of the government in Kabul. The Pakistani army has lost increasing ground to insurgents in the western regions not because it is weaker than the armed extremists and insurgents but because an ethnic, tribal, and militant backlash has resulted in the state withering away in the Pashtun and Baluch lands. Forced to cede control, the jihadist-infiltrated military establishment and its infamous Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency have chosen to support proxy militant groups, especially the Taliban. However, with its own unity unravelling, Pakistan is paying a heavy price

⁵ 2008 World Policy Conference at: <http://www.worldpolicyconference.com/>

⁶ Atlantic Council, *Needed: A Comprehensive U.S. Policy Toward Pakistan*, Report of Task Force co-chaired by former Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska and Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts (Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council, February 2009).

⁷ Set up in 1893 as the border between British-led India and Afghanistan, the Durand Line had been despised and rejected by Afghanistan for long as a colonial imposition.

for having fathered the Taliban. Indeed, an Islamist-ruled Pashtun state, even if a *de facto* one, would set in motion the unravelling of Pakistan and Afghanistan, two artificially created states that have searched endlessly for a national identity.

The international reluctance to come to terms with the disappearance of the Durand Line is because of the fundamental, far-reaching issues such acceptance would throw open. It is simpler to just keep up the pretence of wanting to stabilise Pakistan and Afghanistan within their existing political frontiers. Take US policy. As if determined to hide from this reality, the Obama administration is now pursuing, at least outwardly, a military approach toward Afghanistan through a troop “surge” and a political strategy toward Pakistan pivoted on dispensing billions of dollars in additional aid—or what Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi calls a “civilian surge”. The Obama policy rejects the Bush administration’s institution-building approach in Afghanistan as an attempt to create “some sort of Central Asian Valhalla”.⁸ Yet, the new administration has unveiled \$3.2 billion in annual civilian aid, a historic high, for an increasingly radicalised Pakistan to win hearts and minds there—a Valhalla even more distant.

India has little choice but to brace up to the greater threats to its internal security that are likely to come from the Afpak belt. The international community had agreed to focus on institution-building, demobilisation of existing militias, and reconstruction to help create a stable, moderate Afghanistan—goals that have prompted India to pour massive \$1.4 billion aid into that country and start constructing the new Afghan Parliament building. But that investment now is at stake as the Obama administration abandons the goal of institution-building in Afghanistan and seeks to strike a political accord with the “moderate” Taliban (as if there can be moderates in an Islamist militia that enforces medieval practices).

⁸ In his first appearance before the Senate Armed Services Committee on January 27, 2009, as President Barack Obama’s defense secretary, Robert M. Gates sought to scale back US goals in Afghanistan, saying, “If we set ourselves the objective of creating some sort of a Central Asian Valhalla over there, we will lose. Because nobody in the world has that much time, patience or money, to be honest.”

To India's east are the problem states of Burma and Bangladesh—the first facing a humanitarian catastrophe in the face of widening US-led sanctions and the ruthlessness of its military regime, and the second in danger of becoming another Pakistan in view of the rising Islamic fundamentalism there.

Bangladesh is not a Brunei or a Bhutan but the world's seventh most populous nation. It has a history of political turmoil almost since it was born in blood. There have been 22 coup attempts there thus far—some successful. The present prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, survived when gunmen assassinated her father—Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh and its first prime minister—and executed her extended family late one summer night in 1975. She survived again when assassins hurled 13 grenades at her political rally in 2004, killing two dozen people. The two-day February 2009 mutiny of Bangladesh border guards—which left dozens of senior Army officers massacred at the force's headquarters, their bodies hurriedly dumped into shallow graves and sewers—came as a reminder of the perennially unstable situation in that country and the fragile relationship that exists between Bangladesh's civilian leaders and the military, which has a proclivity to meddle in politics.

Today, the main threats Bangladesh faces are from Islamic radicalisation, a powerful military, and a rising frequency of natural disasters, which are set to grow in scale and intensity due to global warming. In addition to the millions of Bangladeshis that have already illegally settled in India, many Bangladeshis have moved from rural areas to the capital city, Dhaka, as “climate refugees”, driven out by floods, cyclones, and saltwater incursion from the Bay of Bengal.⁹

Like in Pakistan, the military intelligence agency in Bangladesh, called the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, or DGFI, and the National Security Intelligence agency have nurtured jihadist groups, employing them for political purposes at home and across the national frontiers. Domestically, the DGFI has a long record of carrying out operations against political parties and journalists, committing human-rights abuses against the tribal population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in southeastern

⁹ Emily Wax, “Food Costs Push Bangladesh to Brink of Unrest”, *Washington Post*, May 24, 2008.

Bangladesh, and spearheading the persecution of Ahmadiya Muslims—a heterodox sect of Islam. In addition, the DGFI has established close ties with Pakistan’s infamous Inter-Services Intelligence agency, allowing the latter to use Bangladesh as a staging ground for covert operations in India and to foment insurgencies in the restive northeastern Indian region.

In that light, the security challenges that India faces vis-à-vis Bangladesh are no mean matter. Besides the imperative to foil cross-border intelligence and terror operations from Bangladesh, India confronts a major humanitarian issue with serious long-term security implications. It is likely to get not only more economic refugees from Bangladesh, but also an influx of climate refugees. In an earlier study, this author had pointed out: “For India, the ethnic expansion of Bangladesh beyond its political borders not only sets up enduring trans-border links but it also makes New Delhi’s already-complex task of border management more onerous. As brought out by Indian census figures, Indian districts bordering Bangladesh have become Bangladeshi-majority areas. It is perhaps the first time in modern history that a country has expanded its ethnic frontiers without expanding its political borders. In contrast, Han China’s demographic onslaught on Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet was a consequence of the expansion of its political frontiers.”¹⁰

The troubled situation in Burma (which the ruling junta has renamed as “Myanmar”) has brought thousands of political and ethnic refugees to India, now an important hub of the pro-democracy movement by exiles. Even as the junta has scheduled national elections in autumn 2010, Burma remains one of the world’s most isolated and sanctioned nations.

Burma’s present problems and impoverishment can be traced back to the defining events of 1962, when General Ne Win deposed elected Prime Minister U Nu, an architect of nonalignment. Ne Win, a devotee of Marx and Stalin, sealed off Burma, banning most external trade and investment, nationalising companies, halting all foreign projects and tourism, and kicking out the large Indian business community. It was not until more than a quarter-century

¹⁰ Brahma Chellaney, *Asian Juggernaut: The Rise of China, India and Japan* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 117.

later that a new generation of military leaders attempted to ease Burma's international isolation through modest economic reforms. Such attempts, without loosening political controls, came after the military's brutal suppression of the 1988 student-led protests that left several thousands dead or injured.

Western penal actions against Burma began no sooner than the junta refused to honour the outcome of the 1990 elections, won by Aung San Suu Kyi's party. Nevertheless, Burma became a key target of US sanctions policy only in this decade, as underlined by the 2003 Burma Freedom and Democracy Act (which bans all imports from that country) and a series of punitive executive orders by President George W. Bush. The regime, in fact, invited a new wave of US-led sanctions by killing at least 31 people during the September 2007 mass protests. With Burma's 58 million people bearing the brunt of the sanctions, China—a friend to every pariah regime—has emerged the only winner.

Given Burma's potent mix of ethnicity, religion, and culture, democracy can serve as a unifying and integrating force, like in India. After all, Burma cannot be indefinitely held together through brute might. But the seeds of democracy will not take root in a stunted economy, battered by widening Western sanctions. The grim reality is that sanctions have put the Burmese society in a downward spiral of poverty and discontent while strengthening the military's political grip. Burma is proof that sanctions hurt those they are supposed to protect, especially when they are enforced for long and shut out engagement. As one analyst has observed, "Sanctioning Myanmar may make Americans feel good, but feeling good and doing good are not the same."¹¹ A calibrated approach is called for, with better-targeted sanctions and room for outside actors to influence developments within.

Burma is a natural land bridge between South and Southeast Asia, and thus critical to the economic advancement of India's northeast. Such is its vantage location that Burma forms the strategic nucleus between India, China, and Southeast Asia. That has prompted India to make modest investments in Burma's natural gas sector and launch a multi-nodal transportation corridor to

¹¹ Stanley A. Weiss, "Myanmar: Whom Do Sanctions Hurt?", *International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 2009.

link northeast India with Burma's Sittwe port. The \$135-million Kaladan Corridor was made imperative by Bangladesh's refusal to grant India transit access—a blinkered approach holding up the BIMSTEC free-trade area accord.

India, however, is concerned that the sanctions approach is pushing Burma into the strategic lap of China, which values that country as an entryway to the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. Having strategically penetrated resource-rich Burma, Beijing is busy completing the Irrawaddy Corridor involving road, river, rail, and energy-transport links between Burmese ports and Yunnan. For India, such links constitute strategic pressure on the eastern flank. China is already building another north-south strategic corridor to the west of India—the Trans-Karakoram Corridor stretching right up to Pakistan's Chinese-built Gwadar port, at the entrance to the Strait of Hormuz—as well as an east-west strategic corridor in Tibet across India's northern frontiers. In Burma, Beijing is also helping to construct a 1,500-kilometer highway leading to India's Arunachal Pradesh state, which China claims in full.

Such links hold grim security implications for India because they allow Beijing to strategically meddle in India's northeast and step up indirect military pressure. Operating through the plains of Burma in India's northeast is much easier than having to operate across the mighty Himalayas. In the 1962 Chinese invasion, Indian forces found themselves outflanked by the invading People's Liberation Army at certain points in Arunachal Pradesh (then known as the North-East Frontier Agency, or NEFA), spurring speculation that some Chinese units may have quietly entered via the Burmese plains, not by climbing the Himalayas. The potential for Chinese strategic mischief has to be viewed against the background that the original tribal insurgencies in the northeast were instigated by Mao's China, which trained and armed the rebels, be it Naga or Mizo guerrillas, partly by exploiting the Burma route. During World War II, the allied and axis powers had classified Burma as a "backdoor to India". Today, India shares a porous 1,378-kilometer border with Burma, with insurgents operating on both sides through shared ethnicity.

The military has run Burma for 47 years, while the communist party has ruled China for six decades. Neither model is sustainable. The longest any autocratic system has survived in modern history was 74 years in the Soviet Union. However, while Burma has faced

sanctions since the late 1980s, the post-1989 sanctions against China following the Tiananmen Square massacre did not last long on the argument that engagement was a better way to bring about political change—a principle not applied to impoverished Burma. To avert a humanitarian catastrophe, the same international standard ought to be applied to Burma.

To India's south is battle-scarred Sri Lanka. Despite the end of the twenty-six-year-old civil war in 2009 with the crushing defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Sri Lanka is yet to be at peace with itself. Not only is the government unable to define peace or outline a political solution to the minority Tamils' long-standing cultural and political grievances, the politics in Sri Lanka has taken an ugly turn with the president arresting a war hero, General Sarath Fonseka, who as army chief led the offensive against the Tamil Tigers. With an ever-larger military machine backed by village-level militias, civil society has been the main loser. Sweeping emergency regulations remain in place, arming the security forces with expansive powers of search, arrest and seizure of property. Individuals can still be held in unacknowledged detention for up to eighteen months. The humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka has direct implications for India in terms of refugee flows.

To India's north is a Maoist-ruled Nepal and an increasingly assertive China, which became India's neighbour not due to geography but due to guns—by gobbling up Tibet in 1950-51. Tibet's occupation gave China a common border with India, Nepal, and Bhutan and an entryway to Pakistan and Burma. The long-standing Sino-Pakistan strategic nexus—of which the Karakoram Highway¹² remains an important symbol—is rooted in the disappearance of Tibet as a neutral buffer. That nexus has led to internationally unparalleled nuclear and missile technological transfers from China to Pakistan and other covert exchanges.

Despite its annexation, Tibet, however, stays pivotal to Indian security. The centrality of the Tibet issue has been highlighted both by China's Tibet-linked territorial claim to Arunachal Pradesh and by its major inter-basin and inter-river water transfer projects in the Tibetan plateau, the source of all of Asia's major rivers except

¹² China has now concluded an accord with Pakistan to substantially widen the Karakoram Highway and upgrade it to an all-weather passageway.

the Ganges. By damming the Brahmaputra and Sutlej and toying with the idea of diverting the Brahmaputra waters to the parched Yellow River, Beijing is threatening to fashion water into a weapon against India. Further, given the clear link between Tibet's fragile ecosystem and the climatic stability of other parts of Asia, China's reckless exploitation of Tibet's vast mineral resources and its large engineering works there are already playing havoc with the ecology. Little surprise then that India remains the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile despite New Delhi doing business with Beijing.

Nepal is not just another neighbour for India but a symbiotically linked state with close cultural affinity and open borders that permit passport-free passage. The Indo-Nepal equation is deeper than between any two European Union members. Indeed, ever since the Chinese annexation of Tibet eliminated the outer buffer, Nepal has served as an inner buffer between India and China. Equally significant is that India now has to openly vie with China for influence in a country that had been its security preserve for more than half a century. One way Beijing is seeking to exert greater leverage is through new transportation links. After extending the railroad from Lhasa to Tibet's second largest city of Xigatse, China is taking the railway to three other points—to Nepal; the Sikkim-Bhutan-Tibet trijunction; and the Arunachal-Burma-Tibet trijunction. The railroad to Nepal, which Beijing is offering to construct, could help reduce Nepal's dependence on India by bolstering trade with China, although it would be difficult for the latter to meet all of the Nepalese needs—from gasoline to medicine. Nepal's topography, with the mountainous terrain sliding southward into plains, shapes its economic dependence on India.

As is evident from the foregoing discussion, India's neighbourhood is more combustible than ever. Given such a troubled neighbourhood and the ensuing spill-over effects, it is thus hardly a surprise that India's internal security is coming under growing pressure.

TERRORISM, FUNDAMENTALISM AND EXTREMISM

The spreading jihad culture and the growth of transnational terrorism represent a serious threat to the security and well-being

of the free world. This threat is particularly acute in Asia¹³ because the main terrorist sanctuaries are located there. Little surprise that Asia accounts for the majority of terrorism casualties worldwide, year after year.¹⁴

Indeed, the entire expanse from the Middle East to Southeast Asia is home to militant groups and troubled by terrorist violence, posing a serious challenge to regional and international security. The radicalisation of many Muslims in Southeast Asia¹⁵—an emerging phenomenon since the 1990s—underscores the spread of the jihad culture, as epitomised by Wahhabi Islam. Nevertheless, much of the terrorist violence now is concentrated in southern Asia, with the Pakistan-Afghanistan belt having displaced the Middle East as the international hub of terrorism. In the words of the then Indian foreign secretary, “Among global issues, international terrorism remains a major threat to peace and stability. We in India are next to the epicentre of international terrorism in Pakistan. We have directly suffered the consequences of linkages and relationships among terrorist organisations, their support structures, official sponsors and funding mechanisms, which transcend national borders but operate within them.”¹⁶

To be sure, fundamentalism and violent extremism are not restricted to the Muslim world, but extend to members of other faiths in some parts of the world. But the scourge of transnational terrorism is directly tied to the spread of the Wahhabi virus, with Sunni Muslim suicide attackers targeting innocent civilians in public places—from Indonesia to India to Iraq—yet being extolled by extremist leaders and groups as “martyrs”. The turning of suicide bombers into “martyrs” has helped recruit more indoctrinated youths to kill themselves and others. When jihadists turn themselves into live bombs, with the sole aim to murder and

¹³ Politically, Asia is seen to cover only the region from the Indian subcontinent to the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago. But geographically, Asia comprises forty-eight separate nations, including 72 percent of the Russian Federation and 97 percent of Turkey. In the discussion here, Asia is referred to in the broader context.

¹⁴ See, for example, the annual reports of the US State Department, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, published by the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism.

¹⁵ Thomas Fuller, “Stoking Southeast Asia Tensions”, *International Herald Tribune*, October 31, 2001, p. 1.

¹⁶ Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon, Address at IFRI, Paris, February 4, 2009.

main as many civilians as possible, it is not only difficult to deter them, but also their actions cumulatively threaten the principles of pluralism, inclusiveness, and freedom on which their target societies are founded.

It is obvious there is no quick answer to the existential threat the forces of terrorism pose to free societies. In addition, while there will be tension between near- and far-term objectives to contain this threat, combating terrorism demands both short-term and long-term components in a coordinated and concerted national strategy. Tellingly, states that legitimise, even if implicitly, the targeting of “enemies” across their frontiers fall prey to the very Frankenstein monsters they have created. This is precisely what is happening today in terrorism-procreating Pakistan and Afghanistan and terrorism-bankrolling Saudi Arabia.

The current international focus on the role of Pakistan and Afghanistan as a staging ground for transnational terrorist strikes has helped deflect attention from the way the Gulf sheikhdoms have used their overflowing coffers and growing heft to fatten extremist groups, including the Taliban and the Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistani Punjabi terrorist organisation targeting India.¹⁷ As what one commentator has called “The First Law of Petro-Politics”, there is an inverse correlation between the price of oil and the price of freedom.¹⁸ An oil-price spike not only spurs greater transfer of wealth to the oil-exporting nations, but also undercuts the spread of freedom by instilling or strengthening authoritarianism and arming the Gulf states with greater influence to fund fundamentalism and extremism elsewhere.

The scourge of jihadist transnational terrorism, of course, is rooted in the mistakes of US policy in the 1980s, when billions of dollars worth of arms and other assistance were funnelled to the anti-Soviet guerrillas in Afghanistan through Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency. The Afghan war veterans come to haunt the security of the free world as well as of several Muslim

¹⁷ Jonathan Figchel, “The Saudi Connection to the Mumbai Massacres: Strategic Implications for Israel”, *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, Vol. 8, no. 21, February 12, 2009, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Available at: http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=1&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=442&PID=0&IID=2854&TTL=The_Saudi_Connection_to_the_Mumbai_Massacres:_

¹⁸ Thomas L. Freidman, “The First Law of Petro-Politics”, *Foreign Policy*, May-June 2006.

states. Many returned to their homelands to wage terror campaigns against governments they viewed as tainted by Western influence. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's assassination, for example, was linked to such terror. Large portions of the aid, given to the so-called "mujahedeen" by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was siphoned off by the conduit¹⁹—the ISI—to ignite a bloody insurgency in Indian Kashmir²⁰ after the ISI failed to trigger an uprising in India's Punjab state despite arming Sikh dissidents beginning in the early 1980s.

Substantial quantities of US-supplied weapons, in what was the largest covert operation in the CIA's history, also found their way into the Pakistani black market, promoting a jihad culture within Pakistan²¹ and spreading illicit arms and militancy from Egypt to the Philippines. Afghan war veterans, or elements associated with them, were held responsible for terrorist attacks on several US targets—from the 1998 bombings outside the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar al-Salam to the September 11, 2001 terrorist strikes in the United States. However, the greatest impact of the cross-border movement of Afghan war veterans and illegal arms was felt in southern Asia, with India still bearing the brunt of the unintended consequences of the foreign interventions in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, and now from 2001 onward. US officials have acknowledged that Pakistan's "intelligence service even used Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan to train covert operatives for use in a war of terror against India."²² Narco-terrorism today is deeply entrenched in the Afpak belt.²³

¹⁹ According to one account, barely 30 percent of the military aid reached the Afghan guerrillas. Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume 3* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), p. 20.

²⁰ Olivier Roy, "Why War Is Going on in Afghanistan: The Afghan Crisis in Perspective", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. V, no. 4, December 2000-February 2001, p. 11; and Richard Ehrlick, "Outsiders Join Jihad in Kashmir", *Washington Times*, November 2, 1992.

²¹ Jessica Stern, "Pakistan's Jihad Culture", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 6, November-December 2000, pp. 115-126; and Warren P. Strobel, "A War in the Shadows", *U.S. News & World Report*, January 8, 2001, p. 22.

²² James Risen and Judith Miller, "Pakistani Intelligence Had Links to Al Qaeda, U.S. Officials Say", *New York Times*, October 29, 2001, p. A1.

²³ For a discussion of the link between narcotics and terrorism, see Rachel Ehrenfeld, *Narco-Terrorism: How Governments Around the World Have Used the Drug Trade to Finance and Further Terrorist Activities* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

The impact of escalating terrorism from the Afpak belt—the Jihadistan—will be principally borne by next-door India. In the words of ex-US official Ashley Tellis, “India has unfortunately become the ‘sponge’ that protects us all. India’s very proximity to Pakistan, which has developed into the epicentre of global terrorism during the last thirty years, has resulted in New Delhi absorbing most of the blows unleashed by those terrorist groups that treat it as a common enemy along with Israel, the United States, and the West more generally. To the chagrin of its citizens, India has also turned out to be a terribly soft state neither able to prevent many of the terrorist acts that have confronted it over the years nor capable of retaliating effectively against either its terrorist adversaries or their state sponsors in Pakistan. The existence of unresolved problems, such as the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, has also provided both Pakistani institutions and their terrorist clients with the excuses necessary to bleed India to ‘death by a thousand cuts’. But these unsettled disputes remain only excuses: not that they should not be addressed by New Delhi seriously and with alacrity, there is no assurance that a satisfactory resolution of these problems will conclusively eliminate the threat of terrorism facing India and the West more generally.”²⁴

The unparalleled Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008 was a grim reminder that India’s well-being is in mortal danger and that the country needs to effectively counter the asymmetric war that is being waged against it by terror. As one American think-tank has said in a report, “Since 2001, India has suffered a number of militant attacks that have involved in varying degrees Pakistan-based and indigenous militants. Indian officials believe that this terrorism is official Pakistani policy. Given India’s beliefs about the origins of the various attacks perpetrated on its soil, India exhibited exceeding restraint in the aftermath of the 2006 LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba] attack on Mumbai’s subway system. Pakistan has likely concluded from the events since the December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament complex and prior, that India is unable or unwilling to mount a serious effort to punish and deter Pakistan

²⁴ Ashley J. Tellis, Testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, January 28, 2009. Available at: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=22676&prog=zgp&proj=zsa>

for these attacks. Accordingly, from India's vantage point, to not respond would signal a lack of Indian resolve or capability."²⁵

More broadly, the future of the international campaign against terrorism hinges on success in two areas—(i) in rooting out terrorist networks in the Afpak region and deterring any regime there from encouraging or harbouring armed extremists; and (ii) in getting the oil sheikhdoms to stop funding extremist organisations. President Barack Obama, with the stroke of his pen, effectively terminated the “war” on terror²⁶ that his predecessor, George W. Bush, had launched to defeat terrorists. Nevertheless, the blunt truth is that the war on terror stood derailed long before Obama took office. The US occupation of Iraq proved so divisive in international relations that it fractured the post-9/11 global consensus to fight terror. Not calling it a war any longer but labelling it “an enduring struggle”, as Obama has done, does not change the realities on the ground.

Secular, pluralistic states, depending on their location, have come under varying pressures from the forces of terror. Vulnerability to terrorist attacks is critically linked to a state's external neighbourhood. A democracy geographically distant from the Muslim world tends to be less vulnerable to frequent terrorist strikes than a democracy proximate to Islamic states. The luxury of geography of the United States and Australia, for example, contrasts starkly with the tyranny of geography of India and Israel. It is such realities that no change of lexicon can address.

The international fight against terrorism will be a long, hard slog. After all, the problem and solution are linked: terrorism not only threatens the free, secular world, but also springs from the rejection of democratic and secular values. Worse still, terrorism is pursued as a sanctified tool of religion and a path to redemption. Because the concept of jihad is deeply embedded in religion, the line between an Islamic extremist and terrorist can be a thin one. Islamist ideology catalyses terrorism, and acts of terror in turn strengthen Muslim extremism. It is thus obvious that counterterrorism will have to be a long-haul exercise. In Asia, there is greater need than ever to bring the fight against terror back on track.

²⁵ Angel Rabasa, Robert D. Blackwill, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, C. Christine Fair, Brian A. Jackson, Brian Michael Jenkins, Seth G. Jones, Nathaniel Shestak and Ashley J. Tellis, *The Lessons of Mumbai*, Occasional Paper (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2009).

²⁶ Dana Priest, “Bush's ‘War on Terror’ Comes to a Sudden End”, *Washington Post*, January 23, 2009.

MARITIME SECURITY THREATS

Piracy and energy-security concerns have become important drivers of the ongoing profound and potentially far-reaching transformation of the security environment in Asia and the Indian Ocean rim region. At a time when the assertive pursuit of national interest has begun to replace ideology, idealism, and morality in international relations, there is a danger that interstate conflict in Asia in the coming years could be driven by competition not so much over political influence as over scarce resources. Energy has taken centre-stage in such considerations.

Growing piracy, for its part, has contributed to heightening maritime security concerns. After all, much of the global oil-export supply passes through two constricted passageways in the Indian Ocean rim region—the piracy-plagued Strait of Malacca, which is barely 2.5 kilometres wide at its narrowest point between Indonesia and Singapore, and the 89-kilometer-wide Strait of Hormuz between Iran and Oman. More than 50,000 ships pass through the Malacca Strait alone each year. The security of these main oil arteries is integral to the security of energy supplies for the oil-importing countries. In fact, the security of the two main oil arteries is also linked to the security of the Indian Ocean—the link between the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. Little surprise the rising attacks on oil tankers by pirates in the Gulf of Aden—the eastern rim of the Indian Ocean region—has brought Indian, Chinese, and Japanese naval patrols to the region, besides the US, European, and Russian navies.

The maritime security threats are centred on a narrower issue: the security of trade arteries and energy shipments. Mercantilist efforts to lock up long-term supplies act as a damper to efforts to build institutionalised Asian cooperation on energy. Energy thus is not only being intertwined with Asian geopolitics, but also influencing strategic thinking and military planning. For some states, a rising dependence on oil imports has served to rationalise both a growing emphasis on the seas as well as a desire to seek greater strategic space. Concerns over sea-lane safety and rising vulnerability to disruption of energy supplies and other imports are also prompting some countries to explore avenues for cooperation in maritime security.

For example, India's energy-security interests are spurring on

its navy to play a greater role in the Indian Ocean region, a crucial international passageway for trade and oil deliveries. In addition to safeguarding sea-lanes, the Indian navy has been tasked to protect the country's large energy infrastructure of onshore and offshore oil and gas wells, liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, refineries, pipeline grids, and oil-exploration work within India's vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Furthermore, India is attempting to build a web of strategic partnerships with key littoral states in the Indian Ocean rim as well as with outside players like the United States, Japan, Israel, and France.

The partnerships, principally aimed at safeguarding the various "gates" to the Indian Ocean, incorporate trade accords, military exercises, energy cooperation, and strategic dialogue. India's primary focus is on states adjacent to chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz (Iran), the Strait of Malacca (Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia), the Bab el Mandab (Djibouti and Eritrea) and the Cape of Good Hope, and the Mozambique Channel (South Africa and Mozambique). India has also encouraged the much-larger Japanese navy to play a role in the Indian Ocean, and signed an agreement with Tokyo in March 2005 to jointly explore for natural gas in the strategically sensitive Andaman Sea.

The growing link between energy and security was reflected in India's 2003 US-encouraged action in providing naval escort to commercial ships passing through the vulnerable, piracy-racked Strait of Malacca. The action followed rising concerns that international terrorists might target vessels using that strait. That six-month Indian undertaking, codenamed Operation Sagittarius, was primarily designed to safeguard high-value US cargo from Japan passing through the Strait of Malacca on its way to Afghanistan. It was much later, after the Lloyd's Market Association's Joint War Committee listed the passageway as a "war risk zone" in 2005, that Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore agreed—under intense US pressure—to start joint naval patrols in the Malacca Strait. India's efforts to build strategic ties with Iran—a sore point in its warming relationship with the United States—have also been influenced by its energy and security interests.

China, for its part, is working hard to position itself along the vital sea-lanes from the Persian Gulf to the South and East China Seas. It has helped Iran upgrade its Bandar-e-Abbas port. It is

building a deep-water naval base and port for Pakistan at Gwadar,²⁷ situated at the entrance to the Strait of Hormuz—the only exit for the Gulf oil. It has strategic assets inside Burma, a well-positioned country abundant in natural resources. The Irrawaddy Corridor between China's Yunnan province and the Burmese ports on the Bay of Bengal is designed as a key economic and strategic passageway involving road, river, rail, and harbour links.

Moreover, China has agreed to build a port at Hambantota in Sri Lanka and gives aid to the Bangladeshi port of Chittagong. Besides eyeing Pakistan's Chinese-built port of Gwadar as a naval anchor, Beijing has sought naval links with the Maldives, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Madagascar. Other moves by China include its stepped-up presence in the South and East China Seas through oil-drilling platforms and ocean-survey ships, and a proposal for a \$20-billion canal that would cross Thailand's Kra Isthmus, thereby allowing ships to bypass the Strait of Malacca and permitting Beijing to set up port facilities there.

Such projects epitomise how an ambitious China, brimming with hard cash from a blazing economic growth, is building new transportation, trade, energy, and naval links in Asia to advance its long-term strategic interests. It was an internal Pentagon study that first drew attention to the Chinese policy to fashion what it called a "string of pearls", centred on a chain of bases, naval facilities, and military ties between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Sponsored by the Pentagon's director for net assessment and prepared by defence contractor Booz Allen Hamilton, the report titled "Energy Futures in Asia" stated: "China is building strategic relationships along the sea-lanes from the Middle East to the South China Sea in ways that suggest defensive and offensive positioning [not only] to protect China's energy interests, but also to serve broad security

²⁷ The Gwadar port was inaugurated on March 20, 2007, by Pakistani military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, setting the stage for Gwadar's expansion into an energy-transport hub and naval base. Describing the occasion as "a historic day", General Musharraf announced, in the presence of Chinese Communications Minister Li Shenglin, that a modern airport also will be built at Gwadar by "our Chinese brothers". The Gwadar port's first phase was completed by China ahead of schedule, and during Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Islamabad in November 2006, one of the agreements unveiled was titled: "Transfer of Completion Certification of Gwadar Port (Phase I) between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan". That revealed that China built the port on a turnkey basis. It has pledged more than \$1 billion in grants and loan guarantees for the multiphase Gwadar project.

objectives.” It said China’s strategy to underpin its interests along vital sea-lanes was “creating a climate of uncertainty.”²⁸

In 2009, Communist China made its first-ever deployment of a naval task force beyond the Pacific by dispatching battle-ready warships to the Indian Ocean rim under the anti-piracy banner. This development, along with Beijing’s attempts to project the Western Pacific as its maritime sphere of influence, underlines the Chinese aim to build and project naval prowess. If China can assert naval power in the Indian Ocean to expand its influence over the regional waterways and states, it will emerge as the pre-eminent Asian power. As the state-run *China Daily* puts it, quoting a military analyst, a “key goal” in battling pirates in Indian Ocean waters off Somalia “is to register the presence of the Chinese navy.”²⁹

More significantly, rising naval power arms China with the heft to pursue mercantilist efforts to lock up long-term energy supplies, assert control over transport routes, and assemble a “string of pearls”. In fact, a 2003 article in the *Liberation Army Daily* by two navy officers had asserted that the contiguous corridor stretching from the Taiwan Straits to the Indian Ocean’s western rim (including the Anglo-American base of Diego Garcia) constitutes China’s legitimate offshore-defence perimeter.³⁰ Moreover, a May 2008 paper published by the military-run Chinese Institute for International Strategic Studies pointed to the inevitability of Beijing setting up naval bases overseas. It warned that without naval assets overseas, “China’s maritime fleet will face an extremely dangerous situation”, adding: “Most of the world’s major powers have overseas bases, and China can be no exception.”³¹

In the coming years, the voracious appetite for energy supplies in Asia, coupled with mounting maritime security concerns, is likely to make the geopolitics sharper. For India, the protection of its interests in the Indian Ocean region is assuming greater importance.

²⁸ Pentagon report cited in Bill Gertz, “China Builds Up Strategic Sea Lanes”, *Washington Times*, January 18, 2005, p. 1.

²⁹ “Chinese Navy Ships May Head to Somalia”, posted on the website of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Negara Brunei Darussalam. Available at: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cebn/eng/zgxw/t526563.htm>

³⁰ Jiang Hong and Wei Yuejiang, *Zhongguo Guofang Bao*, June 10, 2003.

³¹ “*Zhongguo Duochu Haiwai Junshi Jidi Yingsheng Erqi* [China Must Build Bases Overseas]”, *Zhongguo Zhanlue* [Strategic China CISS], May 30, 2008.

It was a mistake to believe that greater economic interdependence by itself would improve regional or global geopolitics. As Asia demonstrates, trade in today's market-driven world is not constrained by political differences. Booming trade is also not a guarantee of moderation and restraint between states. Better politics is as important as better economics. That in turn calls for greater transparency in strategic doctrines and military expenditures, and the building of cooperative approaches on shared concerns.

The imperative to improve Asian geopolitics by building cooperative political approaches is obvious. In an era of globalisation, the central challenge in Asia is to find ways to minimise mistrust and maximise avenues for reciprocally beneficial cooperation. This can be achieved not by shying away from the contentious issues but by seeking to tackle them in a practical, forward-looking way, even if solutions are not easy to arrive at.

Through forward thinking and a dynamic foreign policy, India—the world's most-assimilative civilisation—can truly play the role of a bridge between the East and the West, including as a link between the competing demands of the developed and developing worlds.

Dr. Brahma Chellaney is a Professor of Strategic Studies at the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi.