

# India needs the anchor of a national security strategy

The new National Democratic Alliance government faces some thorny old problems in national security. It will have to make decisions – or else continue to defer them – on everything from whether to build another aircraft carrier, to the process of implementing theatreisation, to managing strategic relations with the United States and competition with China. How will the coalition government, with competing demands on its resources and attention, make those decisions?

Its best option is to step back and consider national security holistically, from first principles. It should not consider this reform or that relationship in a piecemeal, haphazard way; that would risk wasting scarce resources and undermining national goals. It should, instead, commit to a new rubric for making these decisions – it should commit to writing a National Security Strategy (NSS).

Most powerful states publish some form of national security strategy. India does not. Consequently, its capability investment decisions are made by haggling between the military services. Plans and priorities get stuck in well-worn grooves, and are never systematically re-evaluated. Grand strategic vision becomes concentrated in the hands of a few individuals at the apex of government, where it gets hidden behind closed doors, or crowded out by other political whims.

## Many strategic risks

India cannot afford to be so reactive. The world is throwing up a slew of strategic risks, from climate change to pandemics, which require decades of coordinated policy effort to address. China alone represents an unprecedented array of interconnected challenges, from an explosive naval build-up, to geoeconomic clout in South Asia, to leverage in global supply chains. And even distant conflicts, from Ukraine to Gaza, are revealing new technologies and tactics of war that will invariably spread to India's neighbourhood.



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India needs a regular process to make sense of this tumult and plan for it.

## A blueprint for expanding power

A regular and well-crafted NSS would give India five critical benefits that it currently lacks. First and logically foremost, it would force the government to undertake a comprehensive strategic assessment – a review of the country's threats and opportunities, and a stocktake of global security trends. Such a periodic review would force New Delhi to spotlight evolving challenges, such as the growth of the Chinese navy, even though it does not pose an urgent and lethal threat today. In the absence of an NSS, long-term threats will be neglected until they pose an immediate and grave threat – when they will be much harder to manage.

Second, an NSS would provide a coherent framework for long-term planning. Strategic competition requires intense work in peacetime, to conceptualise how best to secure India's expanding interests and deter its adversaries, and then to develop the requisite military capabilities and international partnerships. An NSS, done rigorously, would give the government an overarching strategic blueprint to adjudicate, for example, between the Indian Navy demanding a new aircraft carrier, or the Indian Army seeking to raise a new infantry division. In the absence of such a process, scarce resources may get wasted on vanity projects with comparatively little strategic value, and the military services left scrambling to fill capability gaps with emergency procurements.

Third, an NSS would provide an instrument for signalling to friend and foe alike. It would help to clarify India's strategic intent – declaring that, for example, India takes seriously its role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean, so that it will counter armed coercion against other, smaller countries.

Equally valuable, an NSS would also clarify India's policy for its partners, highlighting areas

of converging interests, or explaining the limits on cooperation – to help mitigate instances of mismatched expectations.

Fourth, an NSS would create a mechanism to force various arms of the government to synchronise their efforts. Within the military, an NSS would give the Integrated Defence Staff and future joint organisations a clearer top-down mandate to better align the work of the Indian Army, Indian Air Force, and Indian Navy. Beyond the military, an NSS would provide common goals and plans so that various national security agencies, including the Ministries of Defence, External Affairs, and Home Affairs, and the intelligence agencies, could better coordinate daily at the working level, rather than episodically at the Cabinet level.

## Issue of accountability

Finally, an NSS would introduce a novel accountability tool, to ensure that the bureaucracy adheres to the political leadership's intent, and that the government's policies are as transparent as possible to Parliament and the people. The citizens of India have a legitimate need to know how their government is planning to safeguard their national security, and how well it is performing.

Some national security strategies are better than others. A fully effective strategy should be a public document issued with the imprimatur of the Prime Minister, because its purpose is to synchronise efforts widely across government, and credibly signal the government's political intent throughout the country and the world. A strong NSS would not automatically resolve conflicts between various arms of the government, but it should at least identify trade-offs and opportunity costs, so that political leaders can make rational decisions for long-term growth. In that way, an NSS would offer the intellectual scaffolding that is absolutely necessary for India to become one of the world's leading powers.