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Abstract

In recent times, many analysts and commentators have ascribed a role to India as a “Net Security Provider” without specifying what this entails. This policy brief attempts to define the term and thereby provides a conceptual analysis of India as a Net Security Provider. There are four activities through which India can fulfil such a role—capacity building, military diplomacy, military assistance and direct deployment of forces. While giving an overview of all these activities undertaken by India the policy brief further argues that there are significant structural and institutional impediments. It concludes with a discussion of future prospects and policy changes—especially since the new incoming Prime Minister Narendra Modi has envisaged a role for India as a “net exporter of weapons.”

The term Net Security Provider in the Indian context was first used by the Americans. While speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2009, the US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, argued that “we look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.”¹ This phrase was subsequently repeated in the 2010 Quadrennial *Defense Review*, which predicted a benign vision of India’s rise when it argued that “as its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.”² This articulation was welcomed by Indian officials who, for long, had been speaking of their security interests precisely along these lines. Reflecting a meeting of minds, Indian officials thereafter have been frequently invoking the term ‘net security provider’. Accordingly, a number of references have been made by key officials over the last few years.³ Most recently former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asserted that India has “sought to assume our responsibility for stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are well positioned, therefore, to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond.”⁴ But is that really true? Is India “well-positioned”



“We are well positioned, therefore, to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond.” Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at a foundation stone laying ceremony of the Indian National Defence University (INDU), Gurgaon, May 23, 2013. (Photo courtesy: Prime Minister’s Office, <http://www.pmindia.nic.in>)

to become a net security provider? This brief argues that notwithstanding these stated objectives, India still faces important structural and institutional constraints. But before explaining these constraints, the brief begins with an overview of the concept of net security provider (a term invoked frequently but without definition), and situates India’s activities within. Finally, it describes some of the tension that maybe inherent between India’s self-perception as a benign power and the demands placed on a net security provider.

¹ See “America’s security role in the Asia–Pacific: Dr Robert Gates,” *Shangri La Dialogue*, May 30, 2009, <http://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2009-99ea/first-plenary-session-5080/dr-robert-gates-6609>

² See Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 2010, 60.

³ For an overview of this see IDSA Military Center, *Net Security Provider: India’s Out of Area Contingency Operations* (New Delhi: Magnum Books, 2012); also see “India stepping up role as net security provider in Indian Ocean,” *Business Standard*, September 19, 2013.

⁴ See “PM’s speech at the foundation stone laying ceremony for the Indian National Defence University at Gurgaon,” Prime Minister’s Office, May 23, 2013, <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=1316>

Net Security Provider: Concept Analysis

How best to describe the concept of net security provider and, to be more precise, whose security? The answer to this question is context dependent and one can approach this question from different perspectives. For instance, securing India's national interests, addressing security concerns of a foreign government or overall global security. For the most part, the term net security provider is usually meant as enhancing mutual security of more than one country by addressing common security concerns, including dealing with transnational piracy, or responding to disasters, etc.⁵ Specifically, it encompasses four different activities: (i) capacity building; (ii) military diplomacy; (iii) military assistance; and (iv) direct deployment of military forces to aid or stabilise a situation.

Capacity building refers to the training of foreign forces—both civilian and military, either at home or by deploying trainers abroad. Historically, India has a good track record at conducting this type of assistance as it allows personnel from various countries to avail of its training and educational institutes. In relative terms, this is not only cost effective, especially for developing countries, but also convenient as English is used as a medium of instruction. Most notably, as the NATO forces draw down in Afghanistan, India has been increasingly involved in training the Afghan National Army.⁶

Another type of activity which enhances security is military diplomacy, mainly through military visits and exercises.⁷ Such activities can bolster foreign militaries and signal strong bilateral relations and partnerships.

India has been very active in this regard, as it engages various militaries in exercises, port calls and visits.⁸ Towards this end the strategically located Andaman and Nicobar Command hosts a biennial gathering of navies of the Indian Ocean region as part of the Milan series of exercises.



Milan is a biennial gathering of navies of the Indian Ocean region. (Photo courtesy: Sainik Samachar, February 2012)

A third type of activity is that of military assistance, primarily by supplying equipment. India has displayed some ambivalence in undertaking these activities. On the one hand it has displayed a reticence in exporting lethal arms and ammunition and is currently ranked 41st among top arms exporting countries in the world.⁹ There are two explanations for this. The first is India's traditional aversion to exporting deadly weaponry perhaps because it conflicts with its self-perceived role as a land of peace. A less complimentary explanation is that India's domestic arms industry has not been able to produce marketable items.¹⁰ However, there are recent indications that India's new Prime Minister Narendra Modi

⁵ This is often referred to, in the academic discourse, as the global commons or maintaining "international order." The underlying assumption being that there is a liberal order that benefits from global public goods (secure lines of communication, easy flow of information, international norms, etc.)

⁶ See Rajat Pandit, "US exit: India steps up Afghan Army Training," *Times of India*, July 13, 2013.

⁷ For a recent account of India's extensive defence visits and staff talks see "Defence Cooperation with Foreign Countries," *Annual Report 2012-13 (New Delhi: Ministry of Defence, 2012)*, 194-202.

⁸ See David Scott, "India's Extended Neighborhood Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power," *India Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April-June 2009, 107-43.

⁹ See "TIV of arms exports from the top 50 largest exporters, 2000-2012," *SIPRI Database*, generated September 23, 2013.

¹⁰ See "Global Insider: Indian Defence Exports Constrained by Lack of Clear Policy," *World Politics Review*, September 05, 2013.

is challenging both these narratives and has “spelt out his vision of the nation as a net exporter of weapons.”¹¹ Taking a cue from the Prime Minister the chief of the Defence Research and Development Organisation, a prominent stakeholder in the state owned defence industry immediately claimed that it was ready to export price-competitive fighter aircrafts and missiles and was awaiting appropriate policy directives.¹² While it is too soon to tell whether this marks a significant shift in policy however this development is significant and needs to be closely followed. These limitations notwithstanding, India has gradually increased the assistance it provides to friendly foreign countries. For instance, besides increasing training slots, India has offered to build four Offshore Patrol Vehicles for Myanmar, and also offered a \$100 million credit line to Vietnam to purchase military equipment.¹³

A final type of activity is the direct deployment of military forces to stabilise a situation arising either out of an environmental disaster, trans-national threats, and evacuation of citizens from conflict areas or to protect self-defined national interests. Such deployment of troops has the potential to be the most controversial, both domestically and diplomatically. To be sure, there will be less protests if troops are deployed in Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations or evacuation of citizens from unstable areas. However, using military force for operations outside one’s territorial borders may attract negative attention.

A categorisation of being a net security provider along these lines is analytically useful as it now allows us to understand how different countries can fulfil this role. The first two activities—capacity building and military

diplomacy—will continue to be undertaken to a significant extent by India. However, there are some structural and institutional impediments to carrying out the other two missions, that of providing military assistance and direct deployment of the military.

Structural Impediments: It is what it is

There are three main structural impediments that inhibit India from emerging as a net security provider, in terms of military assistance and direct military deployment, in the region. The first is ideological. The circumstances surrounding Indian independence and the moral stature of Mahatma Gandhi gave a unique political salience to the idea of non-violence. This was later embraced by Prime Minister Nehru who, in propagating the vision of non-alignment, downplayed military power as an important constituent of global politics and “rejected its use for expeditionary operations.”¹⁴ As a result the Indian military, in relative terms, has a less-than-usual role in the conduct of foreign policy and in the overall formulation of strategy.¹⁵ Arguably, the reticence to deal in the currency of military power was displayed most recently when India turned down a request from Afghanistan for supply of lethal arms and ammunition.¹⁶

This does not mean that India has shied away from the use of force to defend its national interests. For instance, it has used the military in quelling internal insurgencies, incorporating states into the Indian union at the time of independence and has intervened in its immediate periphery—East Pakistan (creation of Bangladesh), Sri Lanka and Maldives. Perhaps more importantly, India

¹¹ See Manu Pubby “India needs to export arms, equip smaller nations,” *Indian Express*, June 15, 2014.

¹² See “India can export fighter planes, missiles: DRDO chief,” *Indian Express*, June 22, 2014.

¹³ For more on Indian military assistance to ASEAN countries see Nitin Gokhale, “India’s Growing Military Diplomacy,” *The Diplomat*, August 16, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/08/16/indias-growing-military-diplomacy/?all=true>

¹⁴ See C. Raja Mohan, “From Isolation to Partnership: The Evolution of India’s Military Diplomacy,” *ISAS Working Paper*, No. 144, 20 February, 2012, 3.

¹⁵ Of course there is no normative definition of the “proper” role of the military in the conduct of foreign policy, but most foreign diplomats observe the distance between the military and the diplomatic community. To be sure this could also be a result of civil-military relations, as discussed later.

¹⁶ See “India turns down Afghanistan’s arms plea,” *The Hindu*, July 06, 2013

has deployed its military extensively in UN peacekeeping operations and distinguishes itself as the country that has suffered the most casualties.¹⁷ Therefore, under certain conditions, India's ideological predilection for non-violence, and non-interference in the affairs of other countries, need not necessarily prevent it from deploying troops outside its borders. This ideological predisposition towards UN-approved operations has in turn been deeply internalised within the Indian military. As a result, Indian officers are quick to invoke "UN-rules" whenever contemplating deployments abroad. However, the irony that Indian troops are only deployed when the Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorise it is often lost on them.¹⁸



Two young boys salute members of the Indian battalion of MONUC en route to North Kivu.
(Photograph Courtesy: UN Photo/Marie Frechon.)

Another structural impediment to India's emergence as a net security provider is India's factious domestic politics. The conduct of India's foreign policy, like in other democracies, is significantly shaped by its domestic politics. In turn, there are three trends that characterise the domestic debate on overseas military deployment. First, there is a strong aversion to the appearance

of being a "junior partner" in any military operation/alliance. India has never been comfortable with the idea of military alliances or even multilateral groupings under some other dominant power. Working under a UN flag is acceptable but deploying troops to be commanded by a foreign commander, if not done on a reciprocal basis, is a difficult proposition to sell. Another trend, not completely unrelated, is that partnering exclusively with the United States is highly contentious and requires deft political handling. Opposition to partnering with the U.S. comes mainly, but not exclusively, from India's leftist parties. As a result partnering only with the U.S. or working under U.S.-created or dominated institutions will be problematic, if not impossible. This factor explains to a large extent Indian opposition to U.S.-led initiatives like the Proliferation Security Initiative, or even bilateral issues emphasising inter-operability including the Logistical Support Agreement. A third trend in domestic politics that inhibits India's ability to provide security is when the issue has political salience, or is contentious, back home. Most prominently, this was an important factor that prevented India from openly providing military assistance to the Sri Lankan armed forces during their campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The emotive resonance of this issue in Tamil Nadu forced the Indian government to give military aid in secret.¹⁹

While these trends vitiate against employing the Indian military overseas, or providing military assistance to other countries, under certain conditions domestic politics may favour it. This arises when there is a danger to the safety of Indian nationals or persons of Indian origin residing abroad. Indeed, in recent times, the Indian military has undertaken extensive evacuation operations from Lebanon and Libya. It is conceivable

¹⁷ India has lost 154 soldiers in all UN peacekeeping operations till date, see "Fatalities by Nationalities and Mission up to 31 August 2013," http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/fatalities/documents/stats_2.pdf

¹⁸ In a book release, C. Raja Mohan urged the Indian strategic community "to break the intellectual straight jacket that UNPKO [UN Peacekeeping Operations] has imposed." See "Net Security Provider: India's Out of Area Contingency Operations," *Event Report*, December 3, 2012 <http://www.idsa.in/event/NetSecurityProviderIndiasOutofAreaContingencyOperations>

¹⁹ See "How India secretly helped Lanka destroy the LTTE," *Rediff News*, August 21, 2009.

therefore that if lives of citizens are threatened then Indian politicians would be amenable to sending its military overseas.

A final structural problem that inhibits India's ability to strengthen the security of partner countries by providing military assistance is the performance and capacity of the Indian defence industry and, at a larger level, its economy. India's state owned defence industry has often been criticised for its products and its performance. According to one perspective, inefficient production rates hinder the export potential of Indian military equipment.²⁰ Hence, even while other nations approach India for military hardware, India has limited ability to deliver. For instance, according to one report, India may not be in a position to supply Myanmar with naval vessels as its shipyards "are chock-full with orders from the [Indian] navy."²¹ In addition a downturn in the Indian economy will necessarily decrease the amount of resources that India will be able to invest in building up its partner militaries. Therefore, economic resources will be a structural condition enabling or hindering India's capability to provide security assistance.

In sum, ideology and domestic politics are both impediments and can also be drivers for India's ability to provide security outside its shores. It is dependent to a significant extent to the circumstances and the context of the situation.

Institutional Impediments: Could do better

In addition to the structural problems, there are some institutional impediments to India's ability to emerge as a net security

provider. The first is the nature of inter-agency coordination and cooperation. Many have argued for urgent institutional reforms in India's national security agencies.²² However such initiatives are opposed on turf considerations by existing bureaucracies. Interagency coordination is difficult in any country, but on top of this, India also has to deal with problematic civil-military relations.²³ As a result of all these, there is a lack of clarity and ownership over issues like military assistance, out of area contingencies and overall political-military-diplomatic strategy.

Another institutional impediment is the focus and procedures within the Indian military. Unsurprisingly, due to its pending territorial disputes with China and Pakistan, the Indian military is still largely focused on its borders and, at the most, its immediate periphery. Such a focus, while understandable, results in less of an emphasis for dealing with situations outside its immediate neighbourhood. As a result there is no concept of area specialisation among officers or ideas like prepositioning of stores.

A final institutional impediment has been the experience of the deployment of the Indian Army as part of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka. This episode, over two decades old, has left a sharp imprint in the minds of India's strategic elite, both military and civilian, against military deployment in foreign lands. Like the reaction of the U.S. military post-Vietnam, the Indian military has turned away from dispassionately examining and studying this operation. As a result this experience, like Banquo's ghost, hovers over every discussion on possible deployment of troops overseas especially if they are expected to be in a combat situation.

²⁰ See Suman Sharma, "Flight Delay," *Open Magazine*, 19 September 2013, <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/nation/flight-delay>

²¹ See Sujan Dutta, "Dilemma over Myanmar Navy," *Calcutta Telegraph*, July 30, 2013. http://www.telegraphindia.com/1130730/jsp/nation/story_17173365.jsp#UkO2en_meW8

²² For the need for reforms in the External Affairs Ministry see Shashi Tharoor, "In the Ministry of External Affairs," *The Caravan*, July 01, 2012 and for defence reforms see Anit Mukherjee, "Facing Future Challenges: Defence Reforms in India," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 156, No. 5, October 2011, 30-37.

²³ See Shashank Joshi, "Indian civil-military distrust is nothing new," *India Realtime: Wall Street Journal*, April 04, 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2012/04/04/indian-civilian-military-distrust-is-nothing-new/>



India's former External Affairs Minister, Salman Khurshid, paying homage at the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) Memorial in Colombo during his visit to Sri Lanka on October 07, 2013 (Photo courtesy: Ministry of External Affairs Facebook page)

The Future: Security from What?

As discussed, a country can become a net security provider by conducting the following types of activities: capacity building (mainly training), military diplomacy, military assistance and direct deployment of military forces. It is assessed that India will vigorously pursue and even enlarge the first two kinds of activities. As these activities are largely uncontroversial and cost effective they can be easily undertaken. However, military assistance and direct deployment of the military will be contingent on a number of factors, including the performance of the domestic defence industry, continued economic growth and the politics surrounding the deployment. Hence, when the circumstances for employment of military power overseas are politically uncontroversial, maybe in response to an environmental disaster, or in UN approved operations or to safeguard Indian nationals, there is a greater likelihood that India will assist and deploy its military. This will be entirely in keeping with India's approach to cooperative and multi-lateral security arrangements.²⁴

Recent events indicate that increasingly India is growing comfortable at being

perceived as a net provider of security. In Afghanistan, for instance, India has agreed to provide monetary assistance to build up the capabilities of the Afghan National Army.²⁵ While it is too soon to tell, but newly sworn in Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears to be open to the idea of India exporting arms to assist developing countries. If this were to happen then it would be a significant shift in policy.



While visiting India's latest aircraft carrier, INS Vikramaditya, Prime Minister Modi said that "Indian-made arms and equipment should also serve as protectors for small nations across the world." (Prime Minister Narendra Modi aboard INS Vikramaditya Photo courtesy: Indian Navy)

There is, however, a larger tension intrinsic to the concept of net security provider. Simply put—security from whom and security of what? If security denotes security of the global commons against environmental threats or security operations against terrorists or pirates then India, like other countries which have the capacity to, will willingly join in. Indeed India has been actively involved in undertaking combat operations, both unilaterally and in cooperation with other navies, in combating pirates in the Indian Ocean region. It would also, in most cases, be a willing participant if it is a UN sanctioned operation. However, if security is perceived as protecting the interests of one country in a bilateral dispute with another then the Indian response would be more nuanced and context dependent.

²⁴ See Harsh Pant, "India in the Indian Ocean: Growing mismatch between ambitions and capabilities," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 2, 2009, 280.

²⁵ See Niharika Betkerur, "India Stepping Up to the Plate in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, May 07, 2014.

For the most part, India does not wish to interfere in bilateral territorial disputes and instead usually refers to adherence to UNCLOS and freedom of navigation. India is careful therefore to uphold its image as a non-threatening, benign power.²⁶ Former Chief of the Indian Navy, Admiral D. K. Joshi, best described this when he argued that “the Indian Navy is therefore viewed by some of the littorals as a suitable agency to facilitate regional maritime security in the IOR as a **net security provider**. India’s standing as a **benign power** provides credence to this perception, making us a preferred partner

for regional security.”²⁷ But indicative of the internal debate within India former National Security Adviser, Shiv Shankar Menon, argued that India is yet to take a call on whether it wants to be a ‘net security provider’ or not.²⁸ Such ambivalence and sentiments notwithstanding there may come a time when the self-professed benign power will face a threat to its national interests. The world would then be intensely focused on watching India’s reaction to secure its interests and the interests of its partners. The Indian strategic community would do well to prepare for that role.

²⁶ For a perspective on this see Dhruva Jaishankar, “Gentle Giant,” *Foreign Policy*, March 06, 2013.

²⁷ See “Role of Indian Navy in Maintaining Peace in Indian Ocean Region,” *IDSA Key Speeches*, March 05, 2013, emphasis in the original. http://www.idsa.in/keyspeeches/RoleofIndianNavyinMaintainingPeaceinIndianOceanRegion_CNS

²⁸ See “India needs to decide on net security provider role: NSA,” *Business Standard*, February 12, 2014, http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/india-needs-to-decide-on-net-security-provider-role-nsa-114021201648_1.html

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