



Book Review



10 FLASHPOINTS 20 YEARS NATIONAL SECURITY SITUATIONS THAT IMPACTED INDIA

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 **BY RISHI ATHREYA**

The book is written by a career politician from the Congress party, who has been a member of parliament representing the Anandpur Sahib constituency in the Indian state of Punjab, that borders Pakistan. It starts with a Prologue by Dr Happymon Jacob a well-known academic and strategic scholar. Dr Jacob mentions certain cross-cutting themes in the book.

There is a Preface by the author wherein he lays out certain underlying presuppositions that inform the book. The author mentions in the Preface that the book narrates facts and events designed to enable the reader to arrive at their conclusions. There is a specific indication that it is based on open-source data.

The author cites historical instances of invasions of India across millennia. He laments the absence of a strategic culture. The shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world over the past decade has been highlighted in the book.

The author mentions that India's key priority is internal consolidation. The two difficult neighbours namely China and Pakistan are highlighted. New and emerging forms of war have been noted. The author specifically voices the need for a National Security Doctrine. The author has mentioned cyber threats and autonomous weapon systems.

To analyse the aforementioned issues the author identifies ten crisis points in national security which created critical challenges for India, and the responses that were given. These are arranged chronologically and make for easy sequential reading. Given that this book is a collection of stand alone chapters there is not one standard to all of these.

Chapter One: 1998 Testing Times

The first chapter addresses India's nuclear programme culminating the test conducted in May 1998. He traces the growth of nuclear weapons starting in 1948. The first test named Smiling Buddha was conducted on 18 May 1974. The author credits then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi with implementing the tests.

The author mentions the Nuclear tests of May 1998. The author highlights the Bharatiya Janata Party's long-held hawkish position on the nuclear issues. The author also mentions the nuclear test by Pakistan soon after the Indian tests. He concludes that this saw the emergence of the nuclear overhang between the two countries. The author mentions that India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel have created the Second Nuclear Age (emphasis added).

The author mentions the policy pronouncements on the nuclear issue. The then government made a declaration that enunciated four clear principles, Civilian control, non-participation in inequitable nuclear regimes e.g. NPT, Minimum Credible Deterrence, and No First Use. This was followed by the Nuclear Doctrine of 2003 (Prime Minister's Office, 2003).

The author doubts the efficacy of the No First Use Doctrine and the level of provocation wherein retaliation will kick in. It is however acknowledged that NFU has given India global credibility. In The last section titled No Winners (emphasis added), the author concludes that the neighbourhood situation did not improve due to nuclear weapons and has conversely deteriorated. The author believes that India and the second nuclear age powers should work towards global disarmament.

Chapter Two: Kargil: An Eye-Opener, Sans Reckoning

In chapter two, the author discusses the Kargil War and links it to chapter one on nuclear tests. He mentions the bilateral political and diplomatic activity in the months leading up to the attack and gives a detailed account of the war in purely military terms.

The author alludes to Psyops by Pakistan during the war, and the use of media by the then government to stir up patriotism among the Indian population. The author candidly shares his inside knowledge of the views of the Congress party about this war and its use for electoral gains.

The author mentions the internal mechanisms of the Pakistani deep state in planning this attack. The author highlights India's enhanced global status and the fact that Pakistan emerged in a poor light.

The author goes on to discuss the Kargil Review Committee and its report. He highlights correctly the wide scope of its ambit and the range of individuals and documents it studied.

The author discusses the Group of Ministers report. The author mentions the Naresh Chandra Committee of 2012 and its observation about the lack of implementation of earlier recommendations. He considers many of these recommendations to be Dead Letters (emphasis added).

One issue that concerns the author is the supposed lack of legislative oversight of intelligence agencies. The author mentions his efforts to introduce a Private Member's Bill to regulate intelligence agencies.

The author laments the lack of Integration among the defence services. He suggests legislative oversight of the entire process of integrated defence.

Chapter Three: Operation Parakram: A Lost Opportunity

The third chapter is dedicated to Operation Parakram conducted in 2002. The author highlights three events that led India to undertake this operation. The first was the hijacking of IC 814 on 24 December 1999, thereafter the twin attacks—on the J&K legislative assembly on 1 October 2001 and on India's Parliament on 13 December 2001. The author quotes his personal experience of panic he faced since his spouse is a cabin crew member with Air India.

The author mentions that Op Parakram was launched on 19 December 2001, six days after the Parliament attack. On the political front, the BJP-led NDA government launched a coercive diplomatic offensive against Pakistan.

Action had to be taken on the military front for this threat of coercive diplomacy to be seen as both potent and credible by Pakistan. Operation Parakram was thus set in motion. The author claims that the US prevailed on India not to attack Pakistan at that juncture since it was an ally in the War to terror in Afghanistan.

The author believes that there are conflicting views on the efficacy of Op Parakram. He believes there were no clear goals on the Indian side in launching the operation. However, the author holds that there was some effect of drawing international attention to the Kashmir issue.

The author erroneously says that the Cold Start Doctrine is ambiguous and not officially accepted by the government. In conclusion, the author says that Operation Parakram unfortunately blunted the sword arm of India's coercive diplomacy template because of how it was implemented.

Chapter Four: India's Nuclear Shangri-La

The author does well in tracing the history of India-US relations. He starts with independence in 1947 and the years of the Cold War. The author holds that there is a bipartisan consensus between the BJP and Congress on India-US relations.

The author then turns to the India-US Civil Nuclear Deal 2008. He mentions that there had been domestic legislation in the USA to permit such a deal with India. The author claims the great political acumen of the Dr Manmohan Singh government in obtaining a majority vote in Parliament to support this deal.

The author then mentions the signing of the Civil Nuclear Deal by USA and India on 10 October 2008. He discusses in detail the global strategic and diplomatic fallout of this treaty. The author believes that India has become a de facto nuclear weapons state. Irrespective of any fears the deal has not compromised India's Strategic Autonomy.

The deal has been beneficial to India because its own nuclear material would be insufficient to develop nuclear energy, and at some point, it would need uranium imports. The deal has facilitated India engaging with several suppliers.

The nuclear deal made it clear that the global community finds India's nuclear status more reassuring than that of others players such as Iran, Pakistan and North Korea.

The Indo-US relationship remains a strategic planner's best bet to counter China's increasing influence in the Indo-Pacific. Although the development of nuclear weapons attracted strong censure from many western countries, including the nuclear powers, over the years, India has been accepted as a

responsible nuclear-armed state. The role of the US has been substantial in this gradual change of attitude towards a nuclear India and should be acknowledged unequivocally.

Chapter 5: 26/11 and the Lack of Overt Military Action

The next chapter addresses the events of 26 November 2008. The author starts by describing the graphic details of the 26/11 attack. He opines that it was meticulously planned and executed with an element of surprise. The author draws a parallel to say that this single incident in Mumbai is much less than the terrorism faced in Punjab in 1980-1985. He does mention anecdotal evidence of concern among the public in Punjab about a possible war with Pakistan.

The author mentions coverage of the incidents on television channels and attempts to increase Television Rating Points. The author then mentions being requested by the then ruling Congress Government to brief the media.

The author mentions that this being an attack on elite establishments may wealthy people from Mumbai were agitated. The author observes that there was public adulation of security forces but odium towards politicians and the government.

The author opines that the 26/11 events ended efforts at backchannel talks pursued by both the Congress and BJP governments. The author lists out bomb blasts across India that are attributable to Pakistan based terror outfits.

The author then turns to the defence preparedness for counter terrorism and laments poor capacity. The author then turns towards global response and efforts to prevent a war. He concludes that this incident did little to bring any systematic change in the way the international community deals with terrorism.

The last line of the chapter sums up the author's views:

It,, is my considered opinion that India should have actioned a kinetic response in the days following India's 9/11.

Chapter 6: Rising To The China Challenge: The UPA Years

The chapter starts with the Premiership of Rajiv Gandhi. He believes the 1988 visit to China was a watershed and commends pragmatism in opening talks. He however concedes that it did not lead to substantial gains in border issues.

The author makes insightful observations about the global approach to China after the Tiananmen Square events of 1989. He notes that the West's derive

economic benefits from China and thus not addressing issues of human rights and democracy.

The author mentions a visit by Narasimha Rao and the agreement to keep border tranquillity. He believes that while the 1993, 1996 and 2003 agreements were critical, they have never been seriously implemented. However, the border has been stable since both armies followed procedures laid down in Confidence Building Measures.

The author mentions the economic relations between India and China. He makes apposite observations on the trade deficit faced by India. There has been economic diplomacy that did not solve the issue for India.

The author mentions the rise of Xi Jinping and the hawkish positions of China. He mentions strengthening air power on the border and LAC. There is a mention of the Depsang incident of 2013 and the peaceful resolution of the issue by the Government of Dr Manmohan Singh. The author has extreme views on the scrapping of the Mountain Strike Corps in 2018. It may not be correct to attribute this decision to the BJP as a party. There are conflicting views on this proposal even in strategic circles , . This chapter takes a partisan view and considers the Modi government to have failed the China test.

Chapter 7: The Challenge Continues: Chumar-Doklam-Galwan

The author picks up from the previous chapter and mentions the rise of Xi Jinping and the increasingly aggressive internal and external positions of the Communist Party of China. The author does well to explore British India Colonial history and explain how and where the borders were drawn with China. He mentions the MacDonald Line in the northern sector and McMahon Line in the eastern sector.

The author mentions Modi taking power in 2014, and the outreach to Xi. The PLA entered the Chumar area during Xi's visit to Gujarat at Modi's invitation. The author explains the Doklam crisis of 2017. The author mentions that the impending BRICS summit forced both countries to come to a truce.

The author has concerns about the lack of military preparedness had this escalated into a full scale conflict.

The author then turns to the Wuhan and Mamallapuram summits of Xi and Modi. He concludes that these were at best palliative and did little to address genuine issues.

The author discusses the Galwan crisis and China's incursions. He also mentions military deployment by China. The author highlights that India gained the upper hand in this crisis.

The author once again expresses concerns about the poor military preparedness of India. The author mentions that China may have larger insecurities that drive it to be assertive on the land and maritime spheres. The author draws parallels with 1962, and 2020 in terms of China's aggression and India's response.

Chapter 8: CDS: Integrating Civil and Military Ecosystems

This chapter is unlike any other since it deals not with a defence incident but the creation of a new post, the Chief of Defence Staff. The author starts by listing important questions that need to be observed over the coming decade.

The author delves into the history of the British Indian Army and recruitment patterns. The predominance of the erstwhile undivided Punjab and NWFP in providing personnel is mentioned. Further, the consequences for the dominant role of the armed forces in Pakistan. The Westminster system of government in India and the harmonious civil military relations are highlighted.

The author however also highlights the 1962 war as a low point in CMR in India. He mentions that there was an improvement by the 1971 war. Glaringly he omits the interregnum and the 1965 war. The author dwells on the Admiral Bhagwat episode and the Indian Navy. The author discusses the controversy around the COAS Gen V.K. Singh's date of birth. Further, he mentions the troop movement in January 2012 and fears of a coup. He mentions that these were finally found to be baseless. The author highlights a briefing to the Parliamentary Defence Standing Committee.

Chapter 9: Surgical Strikes: Testing Pakistan's Redlines

This chapter discusses the much talked about surgical strikes of 14 February 2019. The author begins by recounting the chequered history with Pakistan since Modi assumed office in 2014. The author laments the role of state and semi state (emphasis added) actors, who are keen to see a stalemate between India and Pakistan. In a significant observation, the author opines that Western powers, Russia and China are indulging in Great Game 3.0 in Afghanistan.

The author considers policy unsuccessful and criticises strategic restraint (emphasis added). He states that the attacks on Gurdaspur, Pathankot and Uri all occurred within 15 months, and therefore definitely had a provocative trajectory to them. The author believes that the NDA government had to be seen to respond strongly.

The author then discusses the Uri Surgical strikes. The author commends the response by India wherein a land attack was launched on the Pakistan based terror facilities. The author mentions the Pulwama attacks by Pakistan. He then mentions the response by India, including the shooting down, capture and release of Wg Cdr Abhinandan.

At a global level, the surgical strikes were supported by the USA, Russia and South Asian countries specifically Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka. There was support from EU and East Asian countries.

The last section titled Towards a permanence in conflict opines that Pakistan is unkeen to end the border skirmishes.

Chapter 10: Kashmir: The Dormant Volcano

The last chapter reaches the present day and the abrogation of Art 370 and Art 35 A, which granted special status to the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir [and Ladakh]. Recollecting the events of 5 Aug 2019, the author mentions that the legislation to repeal Art 35 A and Art 370 took the entire Parliament by surprise. He doubts the Constitutional validity of the amendment that removed Art 370. He considers it as weakening federalism in India.

He mentioned the bifurcation of the erstwhile state into two Union Territories with no local legislature. The recent elections in the UT have disproven these concerns.

The author starts by giving a succinct overview of the origins of the Kashmir dispute. The author is critical of the government of India, including the Congress party for the events leading to the gradual erosion of state autonomy under Art 370.

The author believes that the abrogation increased unrest in the valley. Further, tourism has declined, and other economic consequences have resulted. He is also critical of reforms to regulations on domicile.

The author believes that this abrogation has diminished India's global standing. This has also given rise to concerns from China, which affects Ladakh too. Further, he laments the UNSC discussing Kashmir even if it did not go against India.

The author finally refers to the situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. He fears Kashmir going the same way and stresses the need for an inclusive approach by the Union Government.

COMMENT

The author mentions in the preface the need for a National Security Doctrine, quotes India's Nuclear Doctrine, and refers to the Cold Start Doctrine without official attribution to the Indian Army. However, the doctrines of the Indian Navy, Indian Air Force, and Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces are not mentioned. Moreover, the other doctrines available on the IDS website are ignored.

The book refers to online sources from the Indian government, think tanks, political parties, and media. However, there is limited citation of academic sources like books, reports or journal articles.

At one level the book is written in a popular journalistic style and is not intended to be an academic or official work. The assertions are more based on the author's viewpoints.

The book often cites political parties and politicians. Thus, it creates a political narrative for strategic decisions. This is in contradiction to other authors on the topic (Athreya, 2023).

Although a Congress politician, the author tries to be unbiased in discussing both the BJP and Congress, acting as the ruling party and opposition, as the case may have been. However, at places, there is a clear bias towards the Congress. The first five chapters, which address events before 2009, are more objective. However, from chapter six onwards, given that these address the BJP-led NDA government, there is more of a political partiality.

This author constantly concerns the need for legislative oversight of defence (Ch 2, 6). At a deeper level, his suggestions about the need for Parliamentary Select Committees like those in the UK, USA, and other mature democracies could be the subject of further analysis.

The author mentions Psychological Warfare and Information Warfare in Ch 2 and 6.

The book is also a useful source for scholars of Media Studies and Mass Communication to understand the workings of the media, both print and electronic.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rishi Athreya is Head of Research Strategic Studies at Indus International Research Foundation. Mr Athreya is an alumnus of Flinders University, Adelaide and University of Leeds, wherein he acquired advanced degrees in International Relations and Development Studies. He holds a Certificate in Consulting from the United Kingdom's Chartered Management Institute. He has worked in academic research within the public sector, as also international organisations, in the fields of consulting and risk analysis. He has served in the Governance Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, where he worked on Public Sector Reform, and Democracy. He has rendered yeoman service in the areas of development assistance and technical cooperation. Mr Athreya is a widely published author and has written on various topics related to governance, security and diplomacy. He has also been the editor of several publications published by international organisations, think-tanks, and legislatures. His co-authors have included, amongst others, civil servants, officers of the defence services, and diplomats. He is co editor of the books *Securing India's Maritime Neighbourhood: Challenges and Opportunities*, and of the *IIRF Strategic Yearbook 2022-23*.