While East Asia has stood out in recent history for its exceptional 70-year period of peace, it would be wrong to assume that policymakers in the region aren’t worried about, or aren’t gearing up for, future conflict.

Numerous potential flash points exist, from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Seas, and South Asia. Those worries are fueling Asia’s push to modernize their military forces, thus risking an arms race.
India Equips Itself to Deal with a More Dangerous Neighborhood

By Dipankar Banerjee

Rapidly growing populations, strong economic growth, authoritarian regimes and China’s sudden rise are giving rise to security anxieties in Asia. ‘This has seen an incipient arms race in the region, led by China. Where is this headed and what motivates countries to acquire arms at the expense of development?’ asks retired Indian Army Major General Dipankar Banerjee. He explains India’s response to the pressure for military modernization.

INDIA PRESENTS an interesting study of why and how a nation modernizes its military and balances its strategic concerns and national interests against limited resources and the many financial demands on a democracy. This in a rapidly changing Asia and the world, where the region’s economic resurgence is likely to be in increasing conflict with China’s even faster rise.

To understand the challenges of modernizing India’s military, it is necessary to briefly examine recent history. With independence in 1947, the former British Indian Army split into two parts — a third going to Pakistan and the rest remaining with India. India’s political leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru among others, seriously considered whether to have an army at all. New Delhi had no territorial claims on others and they could not visualize why another country should be hostile toward a peaceful nation like India. The Pakistan-backed tribal attack in Kashmir in 1947 settled that question, but modernizing the military was still not on the agenda.

Nothing changed for more than a decade. Then in 1962, the Indian Army confronted China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the Himalayas with First World War weaponry, no clothing for the extreme winter and high-altitude conditions, limited doctrinal grounding and little special training. The powerful shock of defeat compelled the nation to seriously re-examine its defense policy. The will to modernize its armed forces has since not been in doubt, but the resources to do so have been scarce.

India under Nehru followed an independent foreign policy, often defined as “non-alignment.” This precluded joining any power bloc or military alliance and relied on India’s own resources and technology to defend the country and modernize its armed forces. Progress was slow and halting. But it was enough for India to successfully defend itself against a Western-equipped Pakistan Army in 1965 and liberate Bangladesh from a genocidal civil war in 1971. Simultaneously, India carved out a name for itself since 1948 by participating in the largest number of UN peacekeeping operations around the world. This was in addition to countering numerous insurgencies within India, demonstrating the use of minimum force and political accommodation to restore order.

Much of this changed in 2014, when the new government under the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gave a fresh direction to India’s foreign and security policy. This was possible only after economic growth for nearly two-and-a-half decades since 1991 lifted much of the nation from poverty. Sustaining and even increasing this rate of growth, as expected, will see India’s gross domestic product in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms become the third highest in the world behind China and the US within two decades. By 2050, according to some global projections, it could exceed that of the US.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has now called on the nation to no longer be content with a global role as an “emerging power” or a “strategic balancer,” hedging its bets and keeping its options open indefinitely. Instead, his ambition is for India to assume the role of a country that has already emerged as an independent player on the world stage with the following changes in policy:

• A commitment to partner with major countries to maintain a peaceful and democratic world order, help secure the global commons, protect the environment and keep open vital lines of communication at sea for free and open trade.

MODELS OF MILITARY MODERNIZATION

There are two distinct paths for an emerging nation to modernize its military. The more common way is through a military alliance or becoming part of a security coalition. Lead countries within the alliance then provide their allies the bulk of military equipment and technology and guide their doctrine, strategy and training.

The other way is for a nation to depend entirely on its own competence and capability. India’s independent foreign and security policy has precluded the possibility of joining an alliance. Instead, India has adopted the path of self-reliance. Simultaneously, it acquired weapons and technology on a case-by-case basis as opportunities arose. In the initial years, New Delhi depended on the Soviet Union, particularly for fighter aircraft, helicopters, missiles, medium artillery and tanks. Today, though, India reaches out much more widely, particularly to the US, France, Germany and Israel for technology and advanced weaponry.

MOTIVES FOR MILITARY MODERNIZATION

India’s defense planning is based on its assessment of threats to its territory and its core values and interests. These are essentially four.

First is China to the north. India shares with it a long border across the Himalayan mountain ranges that is disputed over its entire length and where the two countries fought a war in 1962. Though not an active border today in the sense of regular military engagements, it is still one where unarmored confrontations take place regularly. Forces remain deployed over much of its
Military modernization also includes updating doctrines, training and restructuring of the defense forces and a supporting military industry. All these are constantly under review and the Indian armed forces have a large number of modern training institutions and establishments focusing on these areas. Capable exists in the plains against Pakistan. India does not have this posture against China, even though one strike corps of two divisions has been raised recently for this purpose.

Considering China’s continued nuclear-weapons capability since 1964, India was left with no option but to acquire nuclear weapons for strategic deterrence entirely through its own efforts. A series of five tests of low- to medium-yield fission bombs were conducted in May 1998. It has also independently developed missiles, from the short range Prithvi (150-350km) to the intercontinental Agni (5,500km) and a few in between. One is the BRAHMos cruise missile developed in collaboration with Russia, all capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. India has adopted a nuclear doctrine of “No First Use” and “No Use” against a non-nuclear state, and a declared policy of “Minimum Credible Deterrence.” It ensures an assured and effective second-strike capability through aircraft, missiles and submarine delivery systems.

There were some discussions internationally regarding a possible “Cold Start” doctrine in India’s western sector against Pakistan. This was supposed to be a pre-emptive attack by India which might lead to early and possibly nuclear war-fighting. Indian authorities have strongly refuted this. India has not initiated hostile operations against any adversary in recent history and is committed not to do so. Besides, its nuclear doctrine is firmly one of “no first use,” where any change would not be supported by its force structures.

Military modernization also includes updating doctrines, training and restructuring of the defense forces and a supporting military industry. All these are constantly under review and the Indian armed forces have a large number of modern training institutions and establishments focusing on these areas. It provides training, support and, if required, weapons to all countries in South Asia (except Pakistan), some countries in Asia and selected countries in Africa. It has exchange programs and carries out joint military air, sea and land exercises with leading countries around the world, including the US, Russia and China.
There are efforts to equip individual soldiers for today’s battlefield, including personal combat gear. That this has to be done through external purchases after so many decades of indigenization in defense manufacture speaks poorly of India’s defense industry.

India has one of the largest navies in Asia, which is fairly modern and is manned by experienced, long-service sailors. But given the extent of its maritime responsibilities, the large spread of ports and high maintenance needs, there is little expeditionary capability.

The Indian Air Force is required to have a strength of 44 squadrons. However, all it can field today is around 32 squadrons. This shortfall reflects the extent to which obsolescence and the IAF’s inability to replace its aging aircraft in time has led to fleet attrition.

bat engineering. Weapons and equipment manufacturing is undertaken by the government’s ordnance factories, 41 in number, and nine large public-sector undertakings.

The 2018-19 defense budget is approximately US$45 billion, which is about 12 percent of central government annual spending and is a rise of 5.91 percent over the previous year. About one-third is meant for capital expenditure for modernization and related spending. Defense pensions are in addition to this and account for about 32 percent of the defense budget.

Limited funds are actually available for additional modernization, with existing contractual payments taking up most of the money. Personnel and training-related costs reflected in the revenue expenditure is increasing fast and takes up much of the defense budget.

The eight-year period of United Progressive Alliance rule (UPA) up to 2014 saw little effort at military modernization. A stickler for rules, the previous defense minister was tasked to ensure no corruption in military deals and he ensured as little acquisition as possible. Under the new BJP government since May 2014, the capital acquisition process received a major boost, as well as efforts to accelerate defense procurement.

India remains committed to maintaining a small arsenal of low- to medium-yield nuclear weapons for strategic deterrence. According to international estimates, it has about 140 weapons, which puts the number below that of both China and Pakistan. India launched the 6,000-ton Arihant nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN) in 2009, capable of nuclear-weapons delivery, which entered service in 2016. A second submarine was launched the next year. A total of three to six submarines may eventually be built. A wide array of options are available for land and aerial delivery of nuclear weapons to ensure strategic deterrence.

EQUIPPING GROUND FORCES
With a population of more than 1.2 billion, India has an infantry-heavy army, trained for conventional war under most terrain conditions.

A massive contract is likely to be awarded later this year for first acquiring and later manufacturing modern rifles, carbines and light machine guns. Simultaneously, there are also efforts to equip individual soldiers for today’s battlefield, including personal combat gear. That this has to be done through external purchases after so many decades of indigenization in defense manufacture speaks poorly of India’s defense industry.

Both India’s main battle tank and infantry combat vehicle are due to be replaced. The indigenous Arjun tank is finally likely to be accepted in large numbers after major modifications. The BMP 2 infantry combat vehicle, with a 30mm cannon firing Konkurs missiles with a range of 6km, will replace the BMP 1. Medium-range artillery has been an urgent requirement for a long time. A stopgap purchase of some US M-177 howitzers was made a few years ago. The Ordnance Factory has developed an indigenous 155mm (45 caliber) gun, the Dhanush, which is likely to later be the standard medium artillery for the army.

The army still has outstanding requirements for low-level air defense and its own attack helicopters, both essential in modern combat. These are likely to be early priorities for acquisition. Simultaneously, given the extensive number of terrorist infiltrations across the border, the army will need comprehensive electronic surveillance and detection systems as well as night-fighting combat capabilities, which are in advanced stages of research in India.

NAVAL EXPANSION
Despite more than 7,000km of coastline, a total of 1,197 islands and an extended economic zone equaling two-thirds of its land area at 2.54 million
sq km, 12 major ports, 21 intermediate ones and 164 minor ones, the Indian Navy has traditionally been neglected. Due to other pressing threats on land and in the air, which were more imminent, its budget allocation has been the lowest. Nevertheless, India has one of the largest navies in Asia, which is fairly modern and is manned by experienced, long-service sailors. Major ships in the inventory of the Indian Navy include:

- 1 aircraft carrier
- 1 amphibious transport dock
- 8 landing ships (tanks)
- 11 destroyers
- 14 frigates
- 1 nuclear attack submarine
- 1 ballistic missile submarine
- 4 mine countermeasure craft
- 14 conventional attack submarines
- 22 corvettes
- 4 fleet tankers and a number of auxiliary ships.

On the face of it, this may seem substantial. But given the extent of its maritime responsibilities, the large spread of ports and high maintenance needs, there is little expeditionary capability.

The navy’s long-term plan calls for 198 warships by 2027, of which 120 should be “capital warships.” The Indian Navy has 140 vessels today, of which barely half are capital warships. An effort is being made to catch up and as of 2015, 41 ships were under construction. The Indian navy has traditionally been given rise to an incipient arms race in Asia, led by China’s policies of expanding and securing the east and its nuclear capability; the second, China’s policies of expanding and securing the east and domination of the Indian Ocean. Beijing is seen as the first responders.

AIR FORCE UPGRADING
The Indian Air Force (IAF) is required to have a strength of 44 squadrons to fulfil its operational responsibilities. A reduced minimum is 39.5 squadrons. However, all it can field today is around 32 squadrons. This shortfall reflects the extent to which obsolescence and the IAF’s inability to replace its aging aircraft in time has led to fleet attrition. Today, the IAF has a wide range of fast jets, from the Russian MiG 21, 27 and 29 to the British-French Jaguar, French Mirage 2000, Russian Sukhoi Su-30 MKI and the indigenous Tejas; the introduction of the French-made Rafale fighter next year. Additional aircraft are expected to join the fleet. A light fighter aircraft, perhaps the Saab Gripen E/F or the Lockheed Martin F-16 Block 70/72 — and also a fifth-generation stealth aircraft from Russia later. The Tejas fighter is poised to replace the aging MiG 21, but its production rate is still very slow. Heavy-weight transport airlift is provided by the US-made C-130J Super Hercules and C-17 Globemaster III. These are deployed in two squadrons, one each in the eastern and western sector. Bids for additional transport aircraft are likely to be placed soon to replace India’s 1950s-vintage Hawker Siddeley HS 748 and Russian AN-32. Attack helicopters and medium-lift helicopters are also being acquired for direct combat-related roles. Meanwhile, in air defense, there is a possibility that the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system may be acquired. No deal has been signed yet. The acquisition of medium to light transport helicopters from Russia is also likely.

This ad hoc and piecemeal acquisition of aircraft has taken its toll on fleet maintenance, pilot training and logistics support. With several aircraft reaching their life-cycle limits, the squadron strength may go down even further to 26 squadrons unless drastic remedial actions are taken. The gap in defense acquisitions under the previous government has particularly affected the air force adversely. While the IAF faces no challenge from other air forces in the region, the PLA Air Force has been modernizing rapidly. More important, the IAF will urgently need airfields and logistics bases closer to the northern borders in order to deploy its assets meaningfully in that sector.

The above outline of major acquisitions by India’s three armed services reflects a catching up rather than a major enhancement of military capability. Besides, this level of modernization does not allow a meaningful force projection abroad. Other than the Indian Navy, the rest of the forces are essentially organized for the defense of national territory. Yet, in times of crisis elsewhere, such as in the Maldives in 1988, the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka in 1987-90, the post-tsunami aid in South-east Asia in 2004, or the earthquake in Nepal in 2015, it was the Indian Armed Forces that were the first responders.

IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC
Three principal conflict scenarios continue in the Indo-Pacific. One, centered around North Korea and its nuclear capability; the second, China’s policies of expanding and securing the East and South China Seas; and third, China’s presence and domination of the Indian Ocean. Beijing is central to all three and its military modernization and weapons acquisitions will play a crucial role in these regional hot spots. Military modernizations in other countries in Asia are driven primarily by these anxieties.

The US military presence had played a major stabilizing role in the past. Now, both its willingness and its capability are being increasingly questioned. The issue remains how quickly China develops a force capability to achieve its goals and whether regional powers individually and collectively can develop a capability to deter aggression. Co-operative arrangements between the US, Japan, Australia and India are likely to be crucial in this regard.

India remains committed to secure its territorial integrity and contribute to the security of its immediate neighborhood. It feels confident to be able to do so with minimal military modernization to enhance its deterrence prospects. Its land border, though disputed, is stable and neither India nor China wants a conflict there.

The Indo-Pacific region is poised for major change. Demographic transformations, economic growth, authoritarian regimes, China’s sudden rise and technological revolutions are leading to security anxieties that, in turn, have given rise to an incipient arms race in Asia, led by China. This essay has been an attempt to explain, in the case of India, where is this headed and what motivates countries to acquire arms at the expense of development. While India has a policy that is entirely defensive, it cannot be indifferent to happenings in its vicinity.