The US National Security Strategy Document 2017, the first to be issued by President Trump in his first year of office is a significant departure from United States existing accommodative policy formulations on China and Russia; places Indo Pacific as top foreign policy focus; notably elevating India to the stature of a global leading power; and critical of Pakistan.

The main thrust of President Trump in his National Security Strategy is in line with his strong conviction and policy emphasis on “America First” and the Strategy Document’s essential components revolve around this focus. While full details stand incorporated in the Document, this Paper attempts to encapsulate the main geopolitical saliences that the US Document enshrines. This Paper will also examine the saliences in the Indian context in terms of India’s policy directions.

The United States in this Strategy Document clubs together China and Russia together with a significant observation that “China and Russia challenge American power, influence and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.” One would not be wrong in pointing out that this is the first time that an unambiguous reference is being made of the China-Russia Strategic Nexus as a threat to the United States and a challenge to its power and influence.
China figures as the topmost and main comprehensive threat to United States global predominance and US national security interests. The China Threat in US perceptions was always existent especially from the turn of the Millennium but was muted and not asserted as the United States vainly hoped that China could be persuaded to integrate itself as a responsible stakeholder in the Asia Pacific.

The China Threat is highlighted in explicit terms as China working to “challenge American power, influence and interests to erode American security and prosperity”. This can be analysed as an explicit American assertion that China as revisionist power is intent on challenging the global status quo in power balance equations where the United States dominates global affairs as the unipolar Superpower. More specifically, it seems that the United States is now convinced finally that China is not content to have the United States embedded in Asia Pacific.

Analytically, a number of salient deductions emerge from the new US strategic policy formulations on China by the Trump Administration, namely

1. The United States can be seen as departing from its erstwhile ‘China Hedging Strategy’ to one of an active recognition of the comprehensive threat that China is now posing to the United States, its allies and strategic partners
2. China is no longer perceived as a responsible stakeholder in global and regional security
3. Asian powers should no longer perceive that United States would acquiesce to China’s advocacy for a US-China G-2 condominium for Asian security.

The emergence of ‘China Threat’ in United States security perceptions mainly arises from China’s military aggression against Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea, the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea islands, the Chinese construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea as sea denial/access and close-in military obstacles to any US intervention operations and the military brinkmanship in the Senkaku Islands against Japan are seen by United States as Chinese activities inimical to US national security interests.

China’s One Belt One Road project comes for severe criticism as “Bad Faith Investment in Developing World Infrastructure”. Implicit in the references is that China is trapping nations into long term debts, attempting to control global trade routes and seeking domination of various regions.

The emergence of the Indo Pacific as the top most policy focus in US National Security Strategy 2017 is contextually a natural consequence. Flowing naturally from this consequence was the elevation of India as a global leading power. Analytically, the enlargement of the geopolitical construct Asia Pacific to Indo Pacific by the United States had a dual strategic aim in that it recognised that India was now adequately powerful to act as an existential counterweight to China and that enlarging the Asia Pacific construct to a geopolitically wider Indo
Pacific construct brings India into sharper strategic focus as a ‘Leading Global Power’ and in contrast to China perceived as a benign stakeholder in Asian security.

The United States vision of the Indo Pacific is important to understand in terms of analysis which states “From West Coast of India to West Coast of the United States, a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world is taking place.” This giant geographical sweep is loaded with major strategic implications which the Indian policy establishment needs to study the implications minutely.

India therefore in global strategic calculus is being perceived now by the United States as a significant geopolitical asset providing strategic ballast to US embedment in the wider Indo Pacific wherein reside some of the most crucial US national security interests. In maritime terms, the United States designation Indo Pacific views now the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as a single strategic entity in which China is attempting sizeable intrusions and wherein United States expects India to assist.

Russia emerging as a threat in United States perceptions is surprising keeping in mind that during the presidential election campaign President Trump had given strong indications that he was serious in resetting US relations with Russia. Its inclusion as a threat in the US policy document may have more to do with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and muscling into the Middle East power equations at the expense of the United States. It also may have been prompted by a deep antipathy within US domestic politics of Russia trying to influence the election.

The Trump Administration’s recent dissatisfaction with Pakistan’s support of Islamic Jihadi terrorist affiliates of the Pakistan Army operating from Pakistani territory against Afghanistan and India finds reflection in the US National Security Document 2017. Reading between the lines one also comes to the conclusion that the United States views with disfavour the concretisation of the China-Pakistan Axis and China’s flagship project in Pakistan---the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. The CPEC is being viewed as a potential threat to United States presence in the Gulf Region.

With the above brief analytical backdrop above on the US National Security Document 2017 the saliences which have an impact on India and Indian national security interests confine them mainly to United States changed geopolitical perceptions in terms of open assertion of them as threat to US security interests. The next four years in terms of US policy formulations on China and Russia can be predicted as rocky road with attendant regional turbulences.

The unintended synchronisation of United States and India’s threat perceptions on China will lead China’s distrust of India’s growing close strategic proximity to the United States becoming even more pronounced. This will prompt China in two directions at least. First, an escalation of confrontation on India’s borders with China Occupied Tibet. Second, China can be tempted to make greater proxy use of Pakistan in its terrorism offensives against India. India has handled such twin threats in the past and should be capable of handling increase threats in the future too. An essential prerequisite for this would be for India to increase its defence budgets and fast-track its defence
modernisation.

Russia does not figure as a threat perception in Indian threat perceptions as it now surfaces in US threat perceptions. India however has moved away from Russia after Russia for its own reasons entered into a strategic nexus with China----India’s arch-enemy. For India it was a repudiation of decades of close strategic tilt and alignment with Russian interests. The new US policy formulations on Russia are likely to move it into a sharper bear-hug of China. The consequences of this will be a further challenge to India’s security.

Pakistan’s reference in highly critical terms in US National Security Strategy Document is a significant development. It marks a tipping point in US-Pak relations but it is not something to gloat about as far as India is concerned. Pakistani establishment has an uncanny capability of temporising with the United States pressures and can be expected to do so again. However, what India has to guard against greater proxy use of Pakistan by China as part of a wider geopolitical tussle.

Three references to Pakistan in the Document by the United States need highlighting in terms of US expectations of Pakistan and these are “US fears threats from transnational threats and terrorist movements operating from within Pakistan” and that Pakistan needs to curb such activities. Further asserted is that “United States sees a Pakistan that is not engaged in destabilising behaviour of a stable and self-reliant Afghanistan.” Lastly on Pakistan’s nuclear weapons the United States that “Pakistan should demonstrate that it is a responsible steward of its nuclear assets”

The above US assertions appear to be a virtual repetition of India’s complaints against Pakistan’s destabilising policies against India and Afghanistan. It is noteworthy that congruence of views between United States and India on South Asian security and stability are evolving as further validation of the US-India Strategic Partnership.

Indo Pacific’s elevation to United States topmost policy focus needs to be read in two mutually synchronous perspectives, namely, the rise of China with aggressive military brinkmanship contours both threatening Asian security and United States predominance in the Pacific and a simultaneous rise of India as a power to reckon with in global strategic calculus. So what we are seeing in 2017 in US policy directions is the imperative of US checkmating of China and the United States effort to propel India’s rise as a counterweight to China.

In terms of India’s elevation to a global leading power in US policy assessments a number of implications arise for the Indian policy establishment, and these are

1. Global power equations now place India as part of the Western world which is likely to checkmate China’s growing aggressive designs in Asia

2. India is propelled into the Western world’s strategic efforts to maintain the ‘freedom of the global commons’ which ow include both the
Indian and Pacific Oceans

3. India will be increasingly be called upon both by United States and Asian countries threatened by China to emerge as a provider of regional nett security.

The above security challenges so arising for India from the US National Security Strategy Document 2017 saliences should not force India into shirking from its new role and stature. The Indian Republic if aspiring for a global role would need to rise to the occasion and meet these challenges head-on. The United States, the global community and Asian nations have every right to have expectations from India for geopolitical and strategic assertion in an Asia threatened by China’s hegemonistic designs.

Concluding, my final analytical assertion on US National Security Strategy 2017 formulations in terms of US strategic directions is that it contextually caters for contemporary threats, both evolved and those in the making. Placing “America First” and planning to meet threats and challenges to United States sustenance of its global predominance is a natural and logical national aspiration of any global power. Being critical of it is illogical as with the exception of China and Russia no other nation views it otherwise. The 21st Century challenges as presently manifesting in Indo Pacific Asia are reminiscent of Hitlerian Germany’s militaristic rise during the pre-Second World War period. The United States, India, Japan and Australia assisted by Vietnam, Indonesia and South Korea need to align themselves to pre-empt a Third World War. The US National Security Strategy Document 2017 can be construed as a direction marker towards this end.

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