REVIEW ARTICLE

George Tanham's Views of Indian Strategic Thought:

An Interpretation

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Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretative Essay, George K. Tanham, RAND National Defense Research Institute, Santa Monica , California, USA, 1992, pp. 92, ISBN 0-8330-1269-X, available on the Internet at www.rand.org/pubs/reports/2007/R4207.pdf

Indian Strategy in Flux, George K. Tanham, in *Securing India: Strategic Thought and Practice*, Kanti P. Bajpai and Amitabh Mattoo (eds), New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 1996, pp. 231, ISBN 81-7304-147-9, Rs. 350.

The late George Tanham, an American artillery officer in World War II, who later became a political scientist and strategic analyst, after deep study and numerous interviews in India with Indian thinkers, wrote a profound essay on Indian strategic thought. His monograph, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay*, the result of a US government research project, was published by the well-known US think-tank RAND in 1992. A remarkable document, it compares only with Nirad C. Chaudhuri's 1965 book, *The Continent of Circe: An Essay on the Peoples of India*[1], for an in-depth look at 'Indian' thought.

His second work on Indian strategic thought was his 1996 essay *'Indian Strategy in Flux'*, which formed part of a book titled *Securing India: Strategic Thought and Practice*, that put together the thoughts of Indian strategic thinkers from academia.

Since Tanham was one of the few who had till that time produced a deep study of Indian strategic thought and its historical roots, his essays were widely noted both in India and abroad. Both his essays have been commented upon recently by Michael Krepon[2] (July 2010). There were reviews of one or the other of his two works in various scholarly journals, and some of the Indian reviewers were uncomfortable with his main conclusion and with his observations on Indian culture and attitudes. Comments on his views by Kanti Bajpai, Amitabh Mattoo, and, Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, are included in

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[1] Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Continent of Circe: An Essay on the Peoples of India*, London, Chatto & Windus/Mumbai, Jaico Books, 1965.

[2] Michael Krepon, 21 July 2010, accessed on the Internet on August 08, 2010 at http://krepon.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/2820/indian-strategic-culture

the 1996 book itself. Fahmida Ashraf[3], Senior Research Fellow of Pakistan's Institute of Strategic Studies has also reviewed the 1996 book.

Tanham came to the conclusion that India has always suffered and continues to suffer from lack of strategic thinking. The four key elements identified by Tanham as influencing India's 'lack of strategic thinking', were:

- *Indian geography* – has created a feeling of security by a geographically isolated distinct space, the so-called 'strategic unity' of the subcontinent, because of which Indian strategic thinking is inherently defensive. However, the 1962 defeat against China from across the Himalayan mountains has resulted in a feeling of insecurity, heightening the defensive mindset. In addition to defensive strategies, this attitude makes India think primarily in terms of land forces, relatively neglecting its air and naval forces, in spite of its ambitions in the Indian Ocean.
- Indian history – its lack of political unity, and lack of resistance to, and eventual absorption of, foreign invasions.
- Indian culture – the Hindu view of re-birth that supposedly discourages strategic foresight and forward planning, through a lack of a sense of finite time. The *mandala* view of concentric circles of influence focuses Indian attention on the nearest 'others'. Also, economic power and military power existing side by side, but without coordination and synergy, is an outcome of Hindu cultural concepts. The assumed superiority of Indian culture produces an air of complacency, leading to a lack of strategic thought.
- British rule – the lack of indigenous strategic concepts led to unthinking assumptions from British Indian strategic thinking, which included a backup British Royal Navy presence in the Indian Ocean not actually available to independent India. On the other hand, there was the Nehruvian-period negation of the British view of the strategic utility of armed forces. (The push-pull effects of these contrary effects of British rule influenced India till 1962).

No matter how profound Tanham's interpretation, it suffers from one central fallacy that negates most of his conclusions. This fallacy consists of assuming 'India' to be a monolithic entity where strategic thought is concerned. India as a distinct geographic entity has been well-known to the ancient, medieval and modern worlds of history, but India as a modern political entity dates only from 15 August 1947, and the Republic of India only from 26 January 1950, just fifty years. The geographical India, or loosely speaking the 'Indian sub-continent', as it has been often described, was a region made up of various kingdoms at different times, and a few political empires. At times there was more than one empire in India, each ruling a different region. Therefore, in the

[3] Accessed on August 08, 2010, on the Internet at www.issi.org.pk/ss_Detail.php?datald=220

absence of any political India before August 1947, it is futile to talk of 'Indian strategic thought'.

Tanham's examination is not without its merits, however. The way geography has defined the mindsets of rulers or strategic thinkers in India, or for that matter in Europe, brings out certain truisms. Even a modern Indian strategic thinker such as Harjeet Singh, in his 2009 monograph, *India's Strategic Culture: The Impact of Geography*[4] examines this factor in detail. Tanham also correctly includes geography as one of the causal factors to his observation that Indian strategic thinking tends to be defensive. But distilling and crystallising an over-arching 'Indian strategic thought' requires an examination of Mughal strategic thought, Maratha strategic thought, Kalingan strategic thought, Chola strategic thought, Mauryan strategic thought, Assamese strategic thought, Punjabi strategic thought, Bengali strategic thought, Gujarati strategic thought, Kashmiri strategic thought among others.

For example, Cholan strategic thought included overseas military conquest into the Indian Ocean and colonisation of today's Indonesia. Punjabi strategic thought evidently did not include a continuous defence of the Indus river-line to prevent armed incursions from the Pathan-inhabited trans-Indus mountains beyond, unlike Chinese strategic thought with its 'Great Wall-to-keep-out-the barbarians' mentality. The Kalingan military thought encompassed overseas expeditions across the Bay of Bengal for conquest in today's Malaysia. Central Indian strategic thinking evidently allowed the southern Rajputs to concentrate and defeat an Arab invasion at the Battle of Navsari in 738 CE (AD) in today's Gujarat.

On the other hand Kerala's and Maratha strategic planners never thought of building up a modern blue-water navy to challenge the advent of the Portuguese in the Arabian Sea. Maratha strategic thought obviously did not realise the immense significance in 1803 of the Battle of Assaye, near Ajanta in the Jalna area of Maharashtra, thanks to which defeat, this is being written in the English language. This was Maj. Gen. Arthur Wellesley's (later the Duke of Wellington) most hard-fought battle by his own admission, though he defeated Napolean later at Waterloo. Had the Maratha kings possessed adequate strategic foresight, there may have been a properly Unified Command which, combined with their existing greater numbers, good organisation, arms and training, might have turned the British tide of land conquest. The Mauryan, Mughal and British Indian empires' strategic thinking made them create a buffer zone in today's Afghanistan.

George Tanham's own examinations, in both his well-known essays, can be assumed to be unconsciously proceeding from his own cultural background, his war experience

[4] Harjeet Singh, *India's Strategic Culture: The Impact of Geography*, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi, Maneckshaw Paper No. 10, 2009.

and strategic sense? They are thus unwittingly set against a contrasting backdrop of American strategic thought, which basically consists of using brute strength to maximum advantage, by 'lunging for the jugular and crushing the enemy with the USA's Gross Domestic Product', as characterised by Rick Atkinson[5], the 2010 winner of the Pritzker Prize for Military History, and a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. By this standard, India's apparent strategic culture of non-action may seem remarkably complacent. It could thus have led to his conclusion that India lacks a culture of strategic thinking, and thus no central coherent strategic thought. But, as has been noted, his notion of 'India' and modern political India are two different things altogether. He could have examined cultural predilections not derived from Indian history and ancient culture, and instead examined other socio-psychological determinants of strategic culture, rather than the military history of a bygone monarchical, feudal, and imperial past, of a geographical patchwork of political entities lumped together as one 'India'. Or he could have examined modern Indian culture as it is.

Unlike Nirad Chaudhuri, Tanham did not delve into cultural propensities for militarism in India or otherwise. Nor does he examine cultural components related to war bravery in Indian society. He did not examine the correlation of the value attached by society to wartime bravery, in comparison to the bravery of a society as a whole. (For example, a correlation of the kind exhibited by militarist Japanese society before World War II and the bravery of its citizens as soldiers, wherein everyone was expected to be so equally brave[6] that no gallantry awards were instituted. That the above factors affect strategic thought is certainly true, otherwise there would have been no Finno-Russian War of 1939-40). Nor does Tanham examine the sociological phenomenon in which cultures which extol individual heroism – as opposed to extolling collective military action and superior generalship – are often those in which the populace in general is least inclined to fight.

General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Pakistan's second-term Army Chief, was reportedly at pains to declare, at NATO headquarters recently, that Pakistan had nothing in common with India, culturally or historically. Entirely true; if one takes the base-line year for this

[5] In "10 Questions: Rick Atkinson" interview of 11 August 2010 with *Armchair General Magazine*, published in the12 August 2010 e-issue of *Armchair General Magazine*.

[6] And actually were, as per numerous Allied participants who fought the Japanese, including Field Marshal Sir William Slim of the Indian and later British Army. Slim famously characterised the Japanese soldier of World War II as ". . . the most formidable fighting insect in history". Also see, for example, his *Defeat into Victory*, London, Cassell & Co, 1956, p. 527, in which he states, " . . . If five hundred Japanese were ordered to hold a position, we had to kill four hundred and ninety-five before it was ours – and then the last five killed themselves."

assertion to be 1946. But since Pakistan cannot geographically escape from being a part of the Indian sub-continent, as its grouse over sharing of river waters attest, then the same base-year would apply equally to the Union of India as well. Tanham's distillations from ancient history and culture, therefore, become an academic compilation which is not of much value if taken by themselves.

Comparing Indian strategic thought historically with those of dissimilar countries could be misleading. Britain's island-nation strategic thought is perhaps comparable to Japanese strategic thought, which is also well-documented. Against Britain's drive to acquire empire and trade, Japan's conquest of Manchuria, then of the eastern half of China, and its 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' strategic initiative, provide parallels. But neither corresponds with India's geographical or cultural realities, past or present.

A more meaningful interpretation may perhaps be found by comparing with European, or other sub-continental or continental cultures, such as East Asia, or of the Chinese sub-continent (an almost single-ethnicity political sub-continent that is three times the size of India), or of North America. Would comparing Indian and Canadian strategic thought, or for that matter with American strategic thinking, provide significant insights? The USA is just as old as 1787, the only hiccup being the ferociously fought Civil War (1861-1865) which resulted in 620,000 overwhelmingly white soldiers killed on both sides. American strategic thought, in its various phases, is well-documented, but the predominantly English-speaking West European culture of the US probably does not provide a valid template against which to view Indian strategic thought.

Looking at both India and the rest of the world, it can be seen that the only political-cum-cultural equivalent is modern Europe. Europe is also similarly made up of different ethnic and linguistic communities or 'nations' which are geographically contiguous, speak different languages, and share many or a few elements of culture. Thus the only really relevant comparison that can be made is with European strategic thought, if such can be believed to exist. But going back into history and the cultural characteristics in Europe will require an examination of German strategic thought, French strategic thought, Spanish strategic thought, Portuguese strategic thought, Roman strategic thought, and Graeco-Macedonian thought, as well as Scandinavian (Viking) strategic thought. Similarly, distilling Indian strategic thought will require examination of the British Empire of India, the Maratha Confederacy, the Mughal Empire, the Bahmani Empire, the Vijayanagar Empire, the Chola Empire, the Kushan Empire and the Mauryan or Ashokan Empire, to name some. There is no doubt such an examination of common strategic features can be made for both the Indian sub-continent and for Europe, but will these distillations be of any practical value? Or, will an examination of Indian and European cultural concepts? Indian strategic thought, therefore, can only be

meaningfully compared to that of a similar socio-political grouping, such as today's European Union.

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 had put an end to the two-Europe (Eastern and Western) historical phenomenon. However, the European Union as it exists today, since its creation in 1993, is just 17 years old. Though it does not yet have an army of its own, its military arm can be considered to be NATO, since 21 out of 27 member-states are NATO members, and each is committed to providing at least a battalion-group from its national army, plus air and naval forces, to any possible NATO military operations. Thus the only practical examples of European strategic thought in action that can be studied are NATO's military operations in Bosnia and presently in Afghanistan. But Continental European strategic thought is evidently in stasis, primarily because of too short a history, compared to the USA's, or even to India's, and the lack of any significant military threat or pressure. The short-time frame, therefore, makes any generalisations of European strategy unrealistic. Though India's short history since August 1947 does include a number of military campaigns, only two are significant: the defeat to China in 1962; and the victory over Pakistan in 1971.

India has not yet faced an existentialist threat, nor is there an immediate military threat. Nevertheless, the ongoing strategic pressure has produced a number of Indian strategic thinkers who are actively contributing to a new Indian strategic thinking which is being written on a clean slate, one that was wiped clean in 1947. Indian strategic thought has just begun to evolve, George Tanham's ruminations notwithstanding.

Gautam Das is a student of military history. He has a Masters in Defence Studies from the University of Madras, and was in the Indian Army from 1968 to 1991. He served as an infantry officer at different regimental command levels, as well as on General Staff assignments at various formation headquarters.