

Crunch Time: Narendra Modi's National Security

Crises (Sreeram Chaulia)

SHATAKSHI TYAGI¹

**Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi's National Security Crises*.
New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022.**

The term “crunch time,” which describes the decisive moment required in a pressing situation, is perhaps the best term to analyse the timeline in which India saw an overhaul of its security architecture. Hence, the name of Dr. Chaulia’s book is only fitting. “Crunch Time” serves as a handbook on the steady and consistent evolution of India’s security discourse vis-à-vis foreign policy under Prime Minister Modi’s administration. The author does so by analysing some of India’s most focal security crises in recent history on both the Eastern and Western borders while narrating the *decisive* moments wherein India took risks, cementing the rise of a “new” India that had shed its inhibitions about calculated crisis response.

Before delving into the nuances of the crises dealt with by the Modi government, the book starts with a comprehensive introduction that contextualises the premise of the book. This is a crucial aspect of the book, as the detailed view of India pre-Modi allows a more holistic understanding of the gravity of the change that India’s crisis management has undergone. The main point of comparison herein is the lack of quick response to the 26/11 terror attacks. The incessant sticking to protocol and bureaucratic precedence, even in cases of emergencies, was a big obstacle to the Manmohan Singh government’s approach to the attacks. The author succinctly describes the

¹The author is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Security Studies and an Undergraduate student at the Jindal School of International Affairs, JSIA.

impact of the attack as “India’s credibility as a secure and capable nation that was one among a few rising powers in the emerging world order was jolted by this jihadist carnage.”²

The inclusion of both internal and external repercussions of Indian crisis management allows for easier comprehension of the topics covered in the book and allows for a clear viewing of India’s evolution from a soft state to one that swiftly responds to any threats pertaining to national security. Furthermore, the introduction lists more grounds on which India had faltered, which included the fragmentation of the commanding of the armed services. With the creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff, the Modi government had found a solution that resulted in “joint theatre commands to become a functional reality.”³ Lastly, another interesting point that the introduction brings to light is the electoral relevance of Modi’s revamping of crisis management, something that has now become inherent to his campaign strategy.

Laying Foundations for a New India

The first chapter covers the Pathankot attack and the subsequent tailoring of India’s policy regarding Pakistan’s aggression. This is where the reader is first introduced to the “**Doval Doctrine**,”⁴ a term used to describe National Security Advisor Ajit Doval’s implementations into India’s crisis response decision-making apparatus. India’s approach became more malleable, with on-the-spot decisions being focused on allowing quicker gathering of relevant institutions to plan a response, which culminated in the surgical strikes of 2016. In this chapter, one can understand the foundation of India’s new security policies. One of the key takeaways is that India, with the way it responded to Pakistani aggression, had managed to “break the binary dilemma between war and appeasement.”⁵

This is an important note to consider since, for a long time many were under the impression that India did not have the willpower to hit back at border aggression. This *crunch time* period allowed India to test out how it should phase out its response, and strategic and succinct operations became the new norm. However, this did not give rise to rapid militarisation in the country; the author notes how India still maintained its idea of using other means (diplomatic, economic, and political) to reach goals first. Hence, India has shown the world that while it still exercises constraint in terms of never violating ceasefires, it will react strongly if provoked. This, as the author mentions, is described by many as India shifting from “the doctrine of strategic restraint (reticence in the use of force) towards strategic proactivism (a propensity for the use of force).”⁶

² Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi’s National Security Crises*. (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), xvii

³ Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi’s National Security Crises*. (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), li

⁴ Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi’s National Security Crises*. (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), 68

⁵ Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi’s National Security Crises*. (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), 18

⁶ Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi’s National Security Crises*. (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), 31

“New India” Heads East

Another highlight of the book is that it chooses to discuss the concocting and implementation of these new strategies equally on both the Western and Eastern commands. This showed that the working in-tandem of the Modi government and the military had allowed for innovation and the creation of crisis responses that could be used across commands, with the intention remaining the same but the approach changing according to demands. Consequently, the second chapter that focuses on the Doklam crisis adds another parameter to the aforementioned new recipe: the nexus of diplomatic and militaristic goals. This crisis posed a new challenge, wherein the conflict between India and China had to do with Bhutan. The chapter goes in depth about India and Bhutan’s long-standing strategic relationship and how China has tried its best to work around it. Therefore, while India still maintained a military presence in Doklam, thanks to its new way of approaching national security threats, it learned to combine that with diplomatic negotiations to exert more pressure on China. This included the roping in of Russia by PM Modi to convince China to stop “as to not ruin the BRICS summit.”⁷ Here, the book also sheds light on the fact that national security threats are not just propagated or mediated through traditional means. The use of media propaganda and psychological warfare, too, had resulted in drawbacks for India. However, as India learns to navigate that Chinese media propaganda is not fully reflective of the Chinese government’s stance, the reader comes to realise that the overhauling of Indian security architecture cannot solely be based on militaristic efforts but asks for all sectors of warfare to be engaged, from psychological to online.

India’s Efficient Securitisation

The next two chapters build up on the aforementioned learnings and show how India throughout the year has only bulked up its security strategy and made adaptability the core of its crisis response. The transaction of learnings from the conflicts from the Eastern Command to the Western Command is highlighted in Chapter Three, wherein India utilises multipolar mitigation (the isolation of Pakistan from other Islamic powers such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, who had volunteered to mediate) and non-traditional warfare (online propaganda to expose the Pakistani regime) to hit back at Pakistan post-the Pulwama Attack, something it had honed during the Doklam Conflict. While the Balakot Air Strikes were a fitting response, India had strengthened its response mechanism by adding more layers to it, making it difficult to penetrate. Dr. Chaulia

⁷ Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi’s National Security Crises*. (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), 63

succinctly puts it: “Modi had pierced the Pakistani national security state’s sense of invulnerability.”⁸

The last chapter on Ladakh adds yet another parameter: border incursions in the backdrop of a pandemic. Throughout the book, the reader gains a sense of how India has faced the base issue—national security threat—manifesting in many ways, and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash has allowed India to now face a formidable foe while grappling with a global health crisis. India, here, has mastered the quick, two-step response—short-term and long-term. The immediate response had resulted in the deaths of 20 bravehearts, but their valour had caused significant damage to China. India hereon embarked on a more long-term response, which resulted in it becoming even more prominent on the world stage. India’s subsequent defence purchases from France, the USA, etc. “showed China there are limits to the asymmetry it enjoyed”⁹. While China may possess economic and military strength, India’s rise as a global power meant that it now enjoyed transactions with strategic partners that would be of concern to the former. It also shows how India’s commanding strategy, now more unified than ever, allows India to bulk up maritime domain awareness in the Indo-Pacific, making India a pivotal power in an international system that is now looking at the aforementioned region in microscopic detail.

The author aptly describes Modi’s outlook, writing that his “crisis preference is to save national honour and sovereignty through a mix of kinetic and diplomatic options below the threshold of war.”¹⁰ Through its narrative style and constant comparisons with all the instances mentioned, the book easily teaches the idea of the new India to the reader. The epilogue serves as an apt summarisation of Modi’s policy while adding even more rich detail about the impact of his policy on civilians. The outlook of the average Indian has significantly become more positive and involved with the armed forces, as seen in the rise of Indian entertainment that focuses on retelling operations and stories of war. The three main foundations of Modi’s foreign security policy—defiant of old ways, conversion of “international constraints into international assets,” and reiterating India’s rich heritage of martial traditions throughout civilisations—leave the reader with a clear idea of all that has been achieved in the span of nine years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the book handholds the reader and guides them through Modi’s “renaissance” of how to grapple with national security crises. The book’s coverage of issues with Pakistan and China amplifies India’s balancing act in terms of mitigating crises and does so in a succinct yet

⁸ Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi’s National Security Crises*. (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), 92

⁹ Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi’s National Security Crises*. (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), 139

¹⁰ Sreeram Chaulia. *Crunch Time: Narendra Modi’s National Security Crises*. (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), 137

enthralting manner. The use of jargon to explain certain concepts of India's security policy provides the reader with an aptitude to delve further into the realm of foreign policy. Hence, the book would be of great value to those who are eager to learn about the new India, the security policy way.