
Restructuring the Indian Army: Need for a “Whole of the Government Approach”

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The British Indian Army that was fielded in World War II had reached peak strength of 2.5 million men and became the largest all volunteer army in the history of the world. It was rapidly demobilised after the war. Field Marshal Claude Auchinleck had envisaged a 10 division-sized army for the post-independence period. Thus, from being the largest all volunteer army in the world, the Indian Army was reduced to a tactical level force. All its early operations [for instance, 1947-48 Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), 1948 Hyderabad, 1961 Goa and 1962 War with China] were tactical level engagements because of this intrinsic capacity constraint. It was only post-1962 humiliation that the army was expanded to 25 divisions. The 1965 War caught this process half-way. Nevertheless, India was now able to field 12 divisions in combat against Pakistan—even as it held off the Chinese in the north. The Western Command of the Indian Air Force (IAF) was fully engaged in this war. Although a stalemate, it proved to be the most invaluable learning experience for our formation commanders and staff and the Indian Army regained the expertise at the level of operational art. A Soviet subsidised military build-up took India to its peak of conventional military power in 1971. In a classic joint, tri-Services campaign, it created a new nation-state with the force of arms. It was a decisive campaign characterised by a rapid march on the capital city of Dacca and an enforced regime change that freed the country of the colonial yoke of West Pakistan. The air force gained air supremacy and massed effects to create shock and awe. India had now graduated to the stage of waging a quasi-total war.

Cataclysmic paradigm shifts in the global and Asian security architecture, however, soon deprived India of the fruits of its decisive victory. The Soviet

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Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 made Pakistan a key frontline state and the primary base of the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA's) *jihad* against the Soviet Army. Pakistan had mid-wifed the US-China alliance. The Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989 and this freed two Pakistani corps for redeployment against India. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) meanwhile, had instigated terrorism in Punjab that sucked away the Indian Army reserves. They were further diverted towards Sri Lanka for two years and locked up in the wrong strategic direction from 1987-89. A clear need was then felt for a six division-sized internal security (IS) force for the army. The 1980s was also the era of the rapid mechanisation of the Indian Army. The Soviets continued to subsidise the Indian military build-up in a massive way. The MiG-23, MiG-27 and T-72 tanks and Soviet artillery were inducted in large numbers. The navy received Kashin class destroyers and Kilo class submarines. However, Pakistan achieved recessed deterrence by 1987 and Brass Tacks was perhaps the last chance to press home India's conventional edge. It was a wasted opportunity, spent largely in posturing through large scale military exercises. By 1990, the Soviet Union had collapsed economically and Pakistan was rife with triumphalism. The Soviet retreat from Afghanistan had freed it of its two-front situation and given it conventional military parity with India in deployable force levels. It now boasted of four strike corps (including 11 and 12 Corps) as compared to the three Indian corps.

The ISI had become the prime agency in Asia for asymmetric warfare. Zia-ul-Haq now methodically turned these resources around to wage a *jihad* in Kashmir. The Jamaat-e-Islami cadres in J&K were recruited extensively and trained in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) by the end 1980s. The Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) launched this struggle in 1989 itself. In 1990, the socialist Indian economy had come close to collapse as a result of the oil shock. India had to reinvent itself as a liberal, free market economy. It needed a peaceful periphery to consolidate its economic modernisation. It had little option but to react to Pakistan's proxy war in J&K in a very defensive and constrained manner. It strictly confined operations to its own side of the Line of Control (LoC) and eschewed the hot pursuit option entirely. Fortunately, at the end of the 1980s, it had bought peace with China, which also needed a peaceful periphery for its economic and military modernisations. India was thereby able to divert some three divisions plus from its Chinese borders to combat the proxy war in J&K. This proved to be inadequate. Once again, a need was felt for a six division-sized internal security force of the army. This was raised in two tranches of three divisions each of the Rashtriya Rifles.

The year 1998 marked yet another paradigm shift as South Asia went overtly nuclear. This generated hubris in Pakistan and it launched the Kargil intrusions, seemingly secure in the belief that due to nuclear parity, India now lacked any conventional response options. The Pakistani military brass was rudely disabused of this notion as India launched a two division-sized counter-attack and used its air force and artillery to mass effect in the restricted conflict area. However, India refrained from crossing the LoC or International Boundary (IB) and confined operations to its own side of the border, even as it employed the air force, deployed the navy and carried out a partial mobilisation of the army.

The Kargil operation led to a lot of soul searching. The economy was regaining some traction and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime spent some 30 billion dollars to buy state-of-the-art T-90 tanks as also Su-30 and MiG-29 fighters. Post-Kargil, the following restructuring was carried out as part of the recommendations of the Group of Ministers (GOM):

- The Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) was created; however, both the NDA and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regimes shied away from appointing a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and seeing this process to its logical conclusion.
- 14 Corps was raised for the defence of Ladakh and Kargil and the unwieldy span of 15 Corps was reduced.
- The massive 16 Corps was split into two and parcelled out between the hills and plains sectors.
- A new South-Western Command was created.
- The number of artillery divisions was raised to three.
- The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) was designated the lead counter-insurgency (CI) force of the country by the GOM. This was a disastrous decision for the force was neither equipped nor structured to conduct offensive CI/CT (counter-terrorism) operations. It was at best an add-on law and order force for aggravated law and order situations like communal riots, election duties or protective tasks. It was made to replace the Border Security Force (BSF) in the Valley and Srinagar, the key centre of gravity in J&K, where it proved highly unequal to the task and later virtually courted disaster in Chattisgarh against the Maoists. To be fair to its men, this force is simply not structured for such missions and its entire operational ethos and leadership pattern will have to be transformed. It could take up to 8-10 years to combatise this force. The point here is: do we have the luxury of waiting patiently for a decade while this force combatises and transforms itself?

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Need for a “Whole of the Government Approach”

National security is an all encompassing paradigm and needs a whole of the government approach that must go beyond turf battles and empire building by police organisations or other agencies. The country now faces a dire two-front threat from China and Pakistan, with the Maoists and *jihadis* opening virtually a third front in our rear. The Chinese threat in Tibet used to be just 6 divisions in a low-level threat scenario and up to 22 divisions for a high-level threat scenario. If

would have taken two full seasons to deploy such a force level in view of the primitive logistical infrastructure in Tibet. The Chinese have since transformed the infrastructure in Tibet: eight trains per day now come to Lhasa. The rail line is being extended to Shigatse and the Nepal border. The three main highways have been widened and black topped, and nine major airfields have been constructed in Tibet. China can now field up to 34 divisions in Tibet within one season. This is a massive accretion in the threat level of almost 12 divisions. What has been India's response so far? We have raised just two additional divisions for the northeastern theatre. The plans to raise a mountain strike corps of another two divisions have been put on ice by the Defence Ministry due to the latest gridlock in civil-military relations. The amazing aspect is the astounding inability of the ministry to acquire medium guns for the artillery and revamp the outdated equipment profile of the army aviation corps and air defence artillery. The entire Soviet subsidised inventory of the armed forces (which was largely of the 1960s and 1970s vintage) had become due for turnover in 1990. This had to be shelved for two decades due to our economic collapse. The painful fact is the intriguing inability of the ministry to speed up the acquisition process and graduate beyond the Bofors gridlock even now, when the Indian economy has gained the requisite traction.

Primary vs Secondary Roles

There is an equally strange attitude within the army that its sole job is conventional warfare. Our political elite seems to have concluded that post the nuclearisation of South Asia, conventional wars are no longer feasible. CI/CT operations are deemed a secondary task which the army is becoming increasingly reluctant

to perform. Yet, over 90 percent of the time, modern armies in the 21st century will have to deal with low-intensity conflict rather than conventional war. CI/CT operations are equally vital tasks of the army. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) just lists four tasks (which include internal security) and does not grade them into primary or secondary tasks, as it considers external/internal security as equally important roles. The Indian Army is painting itself into national irrelevance by its reluctance to participate in internal security conflicts.

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Its initial reluctance to intervene against the Maoists was understandable. The left-wing extremism is a heartland insurgency that will take the army far from the borders it is tasked to defend. All earlier insurgencies/terrorist movements were confined to our rim land or border provinces. That is why the army was keen not to get involved and let the police and central police organisations (CPOs) deal with the situation. Two years after the launch of Operation Green Hunt, it is becoming amply evident that this task is beyond the operational capacity of the police and CPOs. The CRPF has unfortunately suffered inordinate casualties and unrest has started in the reserve police battalions of West Bengal. In such a situation, the army would have no option but to step in. For this, a minimum of six-eight additional divisions would have to be raised to combat the Maoists in the dense jungle terrain of Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa and Maharashtra heartland without jeopardising the operational posture against China and Pakistan.

Raising Six New Divisions

Raising six divisions worth of CPOs for this task would now amount to a tragic waste of national resources for it would take 8-10 years to combatise this force. A radical transformation of operational ethos and organisational culture would be called for and large-scale induction of army officers, junior commissioned officers (JCOs) and men would be needed to enable them to perform this task in a reasonable manner. Nor would the CRPF formations so raised be of any use in a conflict with China or Pakistan or both. The whole of the government approach, however, would effect massive economies of scale by raising six more mountain divisions of the army instead. These could initially be bloodied against the Maoists and then form the nucleus of three mountain strike corps that would

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radically enhance India's striking power and deterrence ability in the mountains where most future conflicts will erupt (whether with China or Pakistan). The army's involvement would then be on the "on again off again model" of Operation Rhino and Operation Bajrang in Assam.

The claims that the Maoists are not a secessionist force and are, in fact, a highly patriotic organisation are infantile and betray a complete lack of understanding of the true nature of this movement. The seminal Maoist document, *Strategy and Tactics of the Indian Revolution*, should be made compulsory reading for all army officers. It clearly highlights the Maoist design to establish base areas in the densely wooded and low hills terrain of tribal India and create a People's Liberation Army to take

on and destroy the Indian Army and overthrow the democratic Indian state. It plans to strike when the Indian Army is tied down in conflicts with China and Pakistan and seeks to align itself with the so-called "nationality struggles" being waged in J&K and the northeast. It would, therefore, be a tragic mistake to underestimate the dangerous potential of this organisation. It cannot be permitted to consolidate its gains and establish secure base areas in the dense jungles of our tribal terrain in the Indian heartland. The Maoists have deliberately scaled down their attacks on the police and CPOs not so much because their operations have been effective but because further massacres and setbacks would have drawn in the Indian Army and the Maoists are not keen to see that happen. We do not have to necessarily conform to their strategic design and strategy. The state cannot allow them to dictate the pace of events and surrender the entire initiative at the strategic and tactical levels to the Maoists. It is essential that the dangerous Maoist momentum be broken and a military setback be inflicted so that time is gained for the police and CPOs to combatise themselves for this task in the long-term.

Restructuring Parameters

- There is an urgent need to raise six mountain divisions for three mountain strike corps (one each for J&K and Arunachal/Sikkim and one strategic reserve); these are urgently needed to counter the massive accretion in Chinese capabilities in Tibet.

- These divisions should be urgently raised and could initially be bloodied against the Maoists. The key question is: should we raise six Rashtriya Rifles (RR) or six mountain divisions? Three former Service chiefs are of the view that keeping the situation on our land borders in mind, it would be far more prudent to raise mountain divisions which can rapidly be reverted to a conventional role.
- There is a clear need to create an air assault division for over the hump, Chindit style operations in Tibet or POK. *The helicopter resources so created would be a tremendous boon for anti-Naxal operations.*
- There is a need for a marine division with amphibious tanks and infantry combat vehicles (ICVs) to carry out operational manoeuvres from the sea or out-of-area contingency tasks.
- The army aviation corps must have operational control of all helicopter assets – logistics/ attack helicopters. It must also have at least one squadron of close air support aircraft (A-10 Warthog/ Hawk trainer class) for dedicated close air support to our three mechanised strike corps for the plains/ semi-desert/ desert terrain.
- India's pivot corps must be restructured to hold ground with mobile firepower instead of manpower. This will release manpower for rapid offensive tasks. These must have fast attack/light-strike vehicles based battalions to hold larger frontages with fewer troops. These must have integral advanced light helicopter (ALH) squadrons to rapidly position reserves to block any enemy thrust/support operations in the enemy's rear.
- Above all, we must rapidly modernise our artillery and modernise and expand our army aviation corps as also the air defence corps.
- We must speedily overcome the night blindness of the tank fleet and enable the infantry to fight effectively by night with provision of night sight to every individual. The small arms need to be made more lethal, compact and light weight.

Manpower Approaches

India today has a population of 1.1 billion of whom 62.8 percent are young people of the working age. By 2026, our population will overtake that of China and cross 1.4 billion; 68.4 or nearly 70 percent of this would be in the working age group (the average age of Indians would be 29 years). This would translate into the need to create a billion jobs by 2026. All the jobs in the public, private, organised and unorganised sectors in India amount to approximately 350 million. Creating 700

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million jobs within a two-decade period is one of the greatest challenges for the Indian civilisation. Talking of ‘downsizing’ in such a milieu when the nation will desperately have to create avenues of employing almost a billion-strong work force needs to be questioned. It will only add to the ranks of the unemployed and the Naxals.

Future Indian wars will originate largely in the mountains of J&K and the Himalayan rim with Tibet. Indian insurgencies will be largely focussed in the jungles and terrorist movements

concentrated in the concrete urban jungles. All these are highly manpower intensive environments. After Iraq and Afghanistan, even the Americans have stopped all talk of downsizing. The need for putting boots on the ground has led to an expansion of the US Army and marine corps post Iraq. Indian scholars who ape the West must look closely at the Indian conditions first before they mouth American slogans like “downsizing” and creating a lean and mean army. We need to soak in India’s huge recruitable male population (RMP). Today, this is one of our biggest assets. India can demographically field the largest army in the world—larger than even that of China. Downsizing would be our biggest disaster.

Creating Reserves for Offensive Tasks: Changing Ground Holding Patterns

Since Field Marshal Ayub’s era, liberal US gifts in terms of military equipment have allowed Pakistan *to transit from its classical mode of holding ground with manpower to the American concept of holding ground with firepower. A much more liberal availability of automatic weapons (machine guns) and mobile fire power enabled Pakistan to hold the same frontages with much less force levels.* This freed proportionately much greater force levels for offensive tasks. Thus, amazingly, India permitted a much smaller Pakistan Army to generate a nearly matching offensive potential in terms of ground forces. The even more amazing aspect of the subcontinent’s military history is India’s abject failure to correct this distortion for over five decades. It stemmed from a defensive mindset which laid a ridiculous emphasis on physically holding every inch of terrain. It stemmed from a self-imposed constraint that no loss of territory was acceptable. The best form of defence, especially in a short duration conflict,

is offence. The lessons of the 1965 and 1971 Wars in the western theatre, however, had led to a fall back to the World War I era's endless lines of linear defences based upon ditch-cum-bunds and canals extending all the way from J&K to Rajasthan. There was an inexplicable failure to generate mobile firepower assets and hold the ground with firepower instead of manpower. This stemmed from a highly risk averse and over-insurance mindset that has turned out to be overtly wasteful in resources. It has locked up an inordinate level of manpower and resources in defensive tasks. With India's advantage in manpower, artillery, armour and ICVs, the best prescription for defence in a short war is to transfer the fighting rapidly to the enemy's territory. This would exploit Pakistan's own weaknesses in defensive resources and press home India's numerical advantage. More offensive outlooks have been talked of and discussed, but it is time for a major reorientation in outlook and the way India fights.

FAV-based Battalions?

The American gifted reconnaissance and support battalions enabled Pakistan to hold ground with firepower and release matching force levels for offensive operations. It is an amazing fact that the Indian Army has still not redressed this ground-holding differential that enables an army half its size to release a matching number of formations for offensive tasks. India's pivot corps must now hold ground with mobile firepower based upon fast attack vehicles (FAVs) or light strike vehicles (LSVs) and thereby release much more force levels for offensive tasks. Post-Operation Parakram, the mobilisation differential of the Pakistan Army was once more highlighted rather painfully. The Cold Start doctrine tried to redress the aspect of Pakistan's geographical advantage in mobilisation timings by using the defensive/pivot corps to launch rapid offensives into Pakistan virtually from the line of march. To generate this offensive potential, it is imperative that the defensive/holding corps hold the existing lengths of ground with far fewer troops and, thereby, generate greater force levels for offensive operations across the border. The way to achieve this would be to raise Pakistan style reconnaissance and support (R&Sp) battalions. These could be based on tracked BMP infantry combat vehicles. However, technology today offers a radical new solution which could be far cheaper yet generate a mini revolution in military affairs (RMA). India could base these new R&Sp units on FAVs or LSVs. These are very high mobility cross-country vehicles with roll over bars, which represent a quantum jump from the jeep technology of World War II. The jeep-class vehicles weigh some 4,000-5,000 kg whereas the FAVs weigh just 1,000 kg or less. With 400 or more horse power (HP)

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engines, these have a terrific power to weight ratio and pack a lethal punch in the form of an anti-tank guided missile, a machine gun and an automatic grenade launcher. These are low silhouette vehicles with very low levels of engine noise and, hence, low acoustic and infra-red signatures. As such, they depend on stealth and not armour protection for survival. The best part is their heli-portability: one Mi-17 class helicopter could carry two to three such FAVs to place in the path of any surprise enemy breakthrough. FAV-based R&Sp battalions or even infantry battalions equipped with

such vehicles could generate a revolution in the South Asian context and enable India to generate far greater force levels for offensive tasks. Today, there is a major need to look for innovative and out of the box solutions. The recent rise in India's economic power has now afforded it the chance to field over-matching conventional military forces in South Asia and generate a local RMA. India needs to invest heavily in air power and air assault and marine capabilities to carry out operational manoeuvres from the sea. It also needs to augment its special forces' capability and hold ground with firepower instead of manpower.

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