
Transforming for Future Sub-conventional Conflict

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Terrorist strikes in the United States (US), European Union (EU) and India and the current situation in the Af-Pak (Afghanistan-Pakistan) region have reinvigorated the sub-conventional domain in the emerging geo-strategic matrix. Not only will the results of the prolonged conflict in the Af-Pak region determine the global contours of security, but the sub-conventional conflict parameters therein may emerge as the most visible and quantifiable measure of national power. In the Indian context, however, there remains an element of uncertainty in the envisioned politico-military end to conflicts in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and in other parts of the country. Consequently, India's sub-conventional capabilities appear inadequate in the face of unrelenting exertions by a multitude of insurgent/terrorist groups. The military's focus on its primary (conventional) role, inertial inadequacies in certain quarters of the central armed police forces and inadequate indulgence of a few other concerned organs of the state have also contributed to this apparent insufficiency. Accordingly, the sub-conventional domain in India has remained sub-optimal in import and reactive in scope.

India's Sub-conventional Domain

Propensity and Character of Conflicts

While most countries have invested heavily in the modernisation of their conventional capabilities, the propensity of such conflicts has reduced. On the other hand, the

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frequency of sub-conventional conflicts may continue to increase in concert with the rise in the people's aspirations and the ever increasing societal disparity. Also, the precipitous politico-financial costs of conventional conflicts may necessitate increased overtures in the sub-conventional/asymmetric domain. Sub-conventional conflicts, in turn, may emerge as the preferred form of conflict, not only between interest groups/quasi nations but also between nation-states and non-nation groups. The army needs to be cognisant of the enhanced propensity and the emergent character of sub-conventional conflicts.

Deterrence: Contrary to the above trend, the Indian security mechanism has traditionally been a function of the conventional threat matrix. The ongoing transformation process appears biased to conventional capabilities.

In consequence, the sub-conventional security dynamics is yet to attain the political, strategic, economic and operational impetus, to the extent that it deserves. Resultantly, while the Indian security mechanism has acquired the desired capabilities to deter adversaries in the conventional domain, the same may not be true in the sub-conventional domain. Proxy war in J&K, the Parliament attack, 26/11, etc are, perhaps, manifestations of such inadequacies in the sub-conventional internal security domain and the deterrence value of such capability. Significant conventional eminence may be of little relevance unless it can obviate/riposte the near daily terror threats/attacks in the hinterland.

Format of Force Application: Accordingly, India's inability to apply military power in a sub-conventional/sub-conflict/asymmetric format, in support of politico-diplomatic exigencies, has apparently constrained her visible national power and may have encouraged the overt intransigence by neighbours. China's inflexibility on issues like infrastructural development in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), the 'stapled visa' issue, upper riparian obligations (Tsangpo dam), exploration by the Oil and National Gas Corporation (ONGC) in the South China Sea, Pakistan's obstinacy on a plethora of issues, already in the public domain, Nepal's nonchalance to India's concerns on the trans-Himalayan gateway to

China, Sri Lanka facilitating China's 'foothold' in the Indian Ocean, etc, to name a few, are perhaps manifestations of the widely recognised Indian deterrence inadequacy in the sub-conventional domain, i.e. the inability to apply military power outside the traditional conflict template. There is, accordingly, a need for a more incisive assessment of the obligation and the application methodology of military power in concert with the national interest paradigm, both within and outside the traditional conflict matrix but within the internationally accepted norms for force application.

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Sub-conventional Concerns

Proxy War by Pakistan in J&K and Other Parts of India

Despite acute internal security concerns and the debilitating Af-Pak situation, Pakistan persists with politico-military transgressions into J&K and other parts of India. It is accordingly unrealistic to expect Pakistan to voluntarily renounce the only political leverage effective against an economically vibrant and politically emergent India.

Countering Pakistan's 'proxy war leverage' necessitates enlargement in the scope of own response to include enhanced force levels, with focus on Pakistan's sub-conventional sensitivities. In the absence of a more potent and implementable response capability in the sub-conventional domain, especially in the timeline of one decade, Pakistan's proxy exertions, in support of their politico-diplomatic objectives, may persist.

Internal Concerns in J&K: Over the years, the socio-political character of dissent in J&K, especially in the Kashmir Valley, has acquired a more complex and enlarged complexion, precluding satisfactory amelioration in the short term. Notwithstanding the effectiveness of military control over the militant dimension and improvement in the politico-administrative situation, the essential challenge of crafting a lasting and inclusive solution persists.

Left Wing Extremism: The state of acute societal disparity, abject poverty and sub-optimal deliverance of development benefits, further accentuated by the exertions of a small group of ideologues, appears to have precipitated the left wing extremism (LWE) in remote parts of central India. After some initial setbacks,

the police operations are progressing well with the other state components of counter-insurgency also harmonising their effort. The violent component of the movement may reduce significantly in the next decade with the socio-political component taking centre stage.

Northeast Insurgencies: The societies and tribes in the northeast have remained in a state of multi-dimensional flux since long owing to a multitude of perceptual reasons. Agitations and insurgencies with overt tribal overtones and realignment of the populace on ethnic-insurgent lines have significantly subverted the socio-economic developmental process. The resultant economic disparity, social inequality, inter-factional and inter-societal suspicion has precluded normalisation of the situation. While most insurgent groups, except the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) (anti-talk) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) (anti-talk) in Assam and the valley-based insurgent groups in Manipur, have been brought under the purview of a ceasefire or suspension of operations, peace and normalisation continue to remain elusive. Accordingly, despite a high level of control of the state, the involvement of the security forces may endure in the next decade, albeit in a declining paradigm.

Other Smaller Agitations: Despite impressive progress in the past 65 years, an element of socio-economic disparity persists and appears accentuated by perceived exploitation and sub-optimal deliverance of developmental benefits to all peoples and societies. Resultantly, therefore, competition for greater space in a finite socio-economic domain is a natural societal exertion in contemporary India. In consequence, agitations by peoples and societies/tribes, with some agitations acquiring a more strident and violent format, in an environment of perceived government apathy and social indifference, is inevitable and likely to persist through the next decade.

Essential Inadequacies in India's Sub-conventional Capabilities

Since sub-conventional tasks are considered secondary in nature, strategising, force structuring, planning and execution are all 'secondary' in scope and considered by some to be sub-optimal in performance. Despite the Indian Army's involvement in counter-insurgency (CI)/counter-terrorist (CT) operations since the early Fifties and the protracted cost in terms of lives, resources and most significantly, certain antagonism induced in the populace where these operations are undertaken, the army continues to use organisations, structures,

weapons and equipment and basic tactics meant essentially for the primary conventional role. While the current system of conventional bias affords greater flexibility for operational level planning and execution, the resultant limitations at the tactical/execution level constrains the sub-conventional capabilities to 'transitory' application and 'sub-potential' execution.

Reactive Complexion

Sub-conventional exertions in India are limited to reacting to situations and 'countering/defeating' proxy wars/insurgencies at the tactical level with limited operational/strategic proaction. Unlike most other armies and despite a rich CI/CT experience, examples of dissuading insurgent overtures/terrorist attacks or initiating situations, thereby forcing the terrorist/insurgents to react, are a few.

Identification of sub-conventional sensitivities and proaction therein did not commence with targeting of Osama at Abbotabad but has been a part of the US sub-conventional policies since long. In the case of the apprehension in 2010, of 'Baradar,' the Taliban second in command and 'Abdul Salam and Mullah Muhammed,' the 'shadow' governors of Kunduz and Baghian, with the support of the Inter-Services Intelligences (ISI) at Karachi, the US did not limit itself to a reactive role but expanded the scope by proactively pursuing insurgent leaders in Pakistan. Pakistan's apparent jettisoning of the Afghan Taliban, though symbolically, against their professed strategic goals in Afghanistan, is indicative of the US proactively leveraging Pakistan's sensitivities.

The credibility of deterrence is contingent on the capability to speedily leverage the adversary's sensitivity by application of a potent military force/enforceable diplomatic demarche.

Emergent Sub-conventional Environment: 2020-25

Conventional Threat, Sub-conventional Format: China's and Pakistan's obstinacy on a range of global and regional issues, the impunity of terrorist strikes in India, inflexibility on issues of mutual concern and general non-acceptance of India's acquired politico-diplomatic stature are indications of sub-optimal exertions by India in the asymmetric and sub-conventional domains outside the traditional diplomatic, political and military mandates. In a futuristic milieu, sub-conventional/asymmetric exertions by neighbours and extra-regional powers, in the regional context, are likely to further

increase, necessitating appropriate capability enhancement exertions by India.

Primacy of the Socio-Political Domain: Consequent to peace overtures and initiation of the dialogue process with selected stakeholders in J&K and other parts of India, the socio-political domain appears to have conspicuously enlarged in comparison to the security domain. The dominant trend of declining terrorism/insurgency in J&K and the northeast and the stagnating violence in central India has manifested in the form of terrorists'/insurgents' initiated violence and militant activities, gradually giving way to sub-violent overtures in the socio-political domain with pronounced economic/financial connotations. However, even though the violence levels may go down significantly in the next few years, the desired environment of 'assured security' leading to faster progress and visible development, may continue to be elusive. Accordingly, the need for enlargement in the scope and methodology of CI/CT operations, undertaken by all components of the state, so as to contribute positively to the emergent peace and progress milieu, merits consideration.

Internal Security Matrix: Internally originated and internally abetted situations require deft and empathetic handling. While the situation in all the insurgency/terrorism prone regions is likely to improve, the aspect meriting attention is the likely transformation in the complexion of conflict. Charting a course of progress and amity through a complex socio-political matrix requires a visionary, inclusive and comprehensive strategy with a high degree of synergy in the socio-political, economic and security domains.

Transformation: Recommended Conceptual Focus

Deterrence Content of Sub-conventional Capabilities: The conventional deterrence capabilities have been found ineffective in the contemporary asymmetric threat matrix, resulting in adversaries targeting India at will, in the political as also in the security domain. The credibility of deterrence is contingent on the capability to speedily leverage the adversary's sensitivity by application of potent military force/enforceable diplomatic demarche. Since the commencement of proxy war in J&K and insurgency in the northeast, India has had only 'reactive capabilities' available to its field commanders in sectors of concern, hence, the inadequacy of deterrence therein. Consequently, the insurgents/terrorists have been dictating/initiating actions necessitating responses/reactions from the state rather than the other way round. The transformed sub-conventional structure should cater for the following:

- *Sub-Conventional Deterrence for Impact in the Conventional Domain:* Revisualisation of the military leverages required for the level and scope of 'deterrence' desired against Pakistan and China, along with visionary and pragmatic assessment of the capabilities in the sub-conventional domain, within internationally acceptable norms, required for actualising the desired leverages.
- *Sub-Conventional Deterrence for Impact on the Internal Security Domain:* 'Military focus' for espousal of national interests in the present and future contexts in areas/sectors where it will have the maximum 'multiplier effect' – i.e. 'generate heat where it matters'. Attainment of such a capability will require apportioning additional forces and catering for appropriate 'sub-conventional reserves' in the sectors of concern/importance.

The mobilisation and time constraints are the result of inadequate mobilisation infrastructure and resources, rather than their employment dynamics.

Proactive Content of the Sub-conventional Capabilities

Externally Abetted Threats in Sub-Conventional Domain: In the Indian context, it seems implausible to continue on the defensive/reactive mode despite a vast range of sub-conventional sensitivities available for exploitation in Pakistan and China. Deep-rooted ethnic fault-lines in Pakistan and the Tibetan issue in China offer numerous options for sub-conventional overtures to 'blunt' Pakistan's intransigence in J&K and China's aggressiveness on a plethora of regional issues. India should accordingly transform from a defensive to an innately proactive sub-conventional strategy by reenvisioning the strategies required to leverage the security related sensitivities in Pakistan and China. This should be undertaken by reoriented and dedicated forces, suitably integrated in the intelligence matrix, to undertake proactive sub-conventional operations within the accepted norms of state behaviour.

Pro-initiative in Executing Sub-conventional Operations: The tactical level operations, conducted by the army have generally been proactive and offensive in nature, however, the operational and strategic level proaction has been conspicuously absent. Transformation should aim at an inherently proactive stance at the operational and strategic levels also.

The military sub-conventional strategy should aim at an inclusive vision of socio-political amity and economic prosperity in an environment of assured security.

Enhanced Military Assets for the Sub-conventional Domain

As a consequence to availability of modern weaponry with most insurgent groups, especially those supported by states, the deterrence value of an infantry predominant CI/CT force is limited. Accordingly, there appears to be a case for greater diligence in optimising the combat potential (and the deterrence accrued therein) in the sub-conventional domain by realistically apportioning resources from the conventional domain without compromising the capabilities therein. Contextually, it may be prudent to critically view a vast plethora of conventional

capabilities lying unused for decades. An entire generation of tanks (T-76) and ICVs (BMP1) has been rendered obsolete without participating in any conflict. The next generation of arms and equipment is already under induction and may follow the path of its predecessors.

One of the major operational issues inhibiting greater apportioning of conventional resources for sub-conventional tasks is the perceived adverse mobilisation differential on the western borders and the perceived time differential necessary for reorienting from sub-conventional to conventional focus. The mobilisation and time constraints are the result of inadequate mobilisation infrastructure and resources, rather than their employment dynamics. Improvement in early warning parameters, intelligence, infrastructure, etc should be attempted rather than constraining the sub-conventional capabilities.

Training at schools of instruction in the army is conventionally focussed. The performance parameters in the sub-conventional domain accordingly remain a measure of the conventional performance matrix (kinetic application of military power and 'neutralisation' of terrorists / insurgents) which may not be an appropriate format in the sub-conventional conflict matrix likely in the next decade. The army accordingly needs to balance its training requirements for conventional as well as sub-conventional operations in a more futuristic manner.

The Indian Army's protracted and enhanced involvement in the sub-conventional domain has contributed to its recognition as one of the most battle experienced and professional armies in the world. Accordingly, on the job training, albeit in the sub-conventional mode, may have a more pronounced impact on the

conventional capabilities as compared to training confined to schools of instruction and ranges. Therefore, the best training format for the primary role of the Indian Army is to complement the basic training in the schools of instruction with 'on the job' training in a sub-conventional environment. This step, *inter alia*, will make available enhanced resources for application in the sub-conventional domain.

Execution Level Issues

For the sub-conventional capabilities of the nation to be adequately proactive and effective against trans-border and proxy threats, it should have the capability of detection, deterrence and, finally, destruction/neutralisation of threats. In the internal origin insurgencies, while the operations planning needs to follow the above format, the execution need to be adequately empathetic to insurgents and their genuine grievances and afford opportunities for reconciliation/interlocution.

Conflict Management Strategy for Internal Origin Threats: The military sub-conventional strategy should aim at an inclusive vision of socio-political amity and economic prosperity in an environment of assured security. While the contours of the visualised conflict management strategy may assume varied forms with diverse methodologies of application, they essentially must encompass the socio-political, economic and security dimensions.

Intelligence Apparatus: At the execution level, intelligence requires major improvement, with emphasis on 'actionable' intelligence. For actionable intelligence at the execution level, 'human intelligence' will remain the most effective and reliable source and, to that extent, the capabilities of the existing intelligence agencies need to be further enhanced. Coordination and synergy in their exertions and assessments leading to real-time and actionable dissemination of inputs are the principal areas meriting attention. Another issue meriting cognisance is the issue of intelligence accountability. The sub-conventional domain continues to be beleaguered by a multitude of intelligence agencies with no real division of responsibility. On the lines of 'lead' security forces for various sectors/borders, there may be a case to earmark 'lead' intelligence agencies to collate, assimilate and disseminate intelligence to all concerned in a given sector/region.

Execution/Kinetic Issues

Nature of Operations: Internal Origin Conflicts: The emergent security paradigm may necessitate an appropriate transformation with actions aimed at 'management and enforcement of peace' assuming a more pronounced status than proactive

counter-insurgency operations aimed at neutralisation of insurgents. The military operations may accordingly acquire a more 'policing' type of role with the focus shifting from 'kinetic' to 'non-kinetic' type of operations.

Greater Local Police Involvement in Operations: The situation appears to have sufficiently improved in numerous regions in the northeast and certain portions of central India meriting greater indulgence of the state police. A more 'local' character (same tribe/same community) of state police will enhance empathy and improve deliverance of governance.

Governance/Political Issues

Involvement of the Entire Government Machinery: The ongoing conflict situations need to be addressed holistically in all their dimensions and necessitate the indulgence of the entire government machinery. While the military component of the counter-insurgency operations is important, equally important are the politico-administrative mitigating factors requiring the indulgence of other organs of the state. Factors responsible for the initial emergence of insurgents, the accentuating causes, their current vocation and the visualised actions to reamalgamate the cadres in the societal mainstream are some other important issues.

Parleys with Insurgent/Terrorist Groups: Prior to initiating improvement measures, the political dimension of the insurgencies needs to be addressed. In this respect, while parleys between the central/state government and the principle protagonists have commenced in numerous cases, they are yet to acquire the requisite impetus. Reinstatement of the authority of the state and recognition of the need for concurrent and complementary parleys with selected socio-political organisations, apart from the ensuing arrangements, are important for the success of such initiatives.

Insurgents' Graduation to Political/Authoritative Arena: In the above context, it may be mistakenly felt that insurgents/terrorists could be motivated to change course into the political domain for early resolution of the conflict. Recent experience in the northeast with groups under ceasefire and suspension of operations has not been encouraging. Political aspirations of the insurgents, while desirable in the long-term, appear to be having a dilapidating impact on the socio-political environment of the region.

Socio-Political-Economic Issues

Public Agitations/Rallies: While the insurgents' motivation includes numerous extraneous reasons, genuine public agitations bring to the fore the core issues

meriting amelioration. It is appreciated that public agitations/rallies may increase in number and scope and may gradually acquire a more pronounced form. Socio-emotive issues/impasses, if any, should be resolved expeditiously in a transparent manner.

The Economic Dimension: Economic disparity has been identified as one of the principle factors motivating and sustaining insurgency movements in central and northeast India. Economic destitution in the populace needs to be addressed through an inclusive process of economic development and guaranteed vision of prosperity. The 'compulsive pull' of the fruits of development and improved quality of life have the potential of overcoming a vast majority of socio-political hurdles and need encouragement.

Confidence-Building Measures: Latent suspicions, historical prejudices and current friction areas, etc, tend to enhance in scope in the absence of a dialogue between the stakeholders. The channel for constructive dialogue should accordingly be facilitated by stressing on the issues which have scope for early convergence, like economic progress, education, employment, etc. Confidence-building measures in the fields of sports, entertainment, women's empowerment, child welfare, etc are some of the other measures which have the potential of reducing friction and enhancing the possibility of dialogue/resolution.

Legal Issues

Limited Autonomy Issues: The provisions of the Constitution and the depth therein enable a solution to most demands advocated by interest groups and insurgent bodies in central and northeast India. The experience of autonomous councils granted in the recent past, however, has not been encouraging. Inadequate financial autonomy and employment generation have been identified as the essential inadequacies in the present system of dispensation precluding desired satisfaction.

Armed Forces Special Powers Act: As regards the statutory provisions mandated for deployment of the armed forces for enforcing peace, especially the provisions of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, there is a continued requirement of legal protection for the forces employed for combating insurgency/terrorism. The issue has been discussed adequately in the public domain and suffice it to state that the scope and nature of implementation of the legal provisions could be discussed without impinging on the operational capability of the armed forces deployed in such situations.

Modernisation Supplements: Advances in information technology (IT) need to be exploited for translating conflict zone transparency into enhanced situational awareness. Starting from integrating radars, sensors, navigation devices and direction finding capabilities to creation of electronic data banks/assessment centres, there is a need for real-time collection, collation and dissemination of inputs. Realisation of conflict zone transparency and situational awareness is contingent on the availability of modern, state-of-the-art communication with adequacy of bandwidth and requisite computation capabilities. While the existing radio and line communication needs to be further improved, there is an exigency of exploring new frontiers in the field, including the cellular mobile communication technology. The above need to be implemented in a synergistic mode to cater for all security agencies involved in operations to obviate interoperability problems at later stages.

Conclusion

In the absence of potent, credible and applicable military power in the sub-conventional domain, the relevancy quotient of a conventional force, in the present and futuristic timeline, may dwindle significantly and may not endure in any significant geo-strategic timeline. The ability to apply military power outside the traditional conventional conflict matrix, but within the internationally acceptable norms of force application, is the essential challenge facing the military strategists today. The issue needs to be taken up in real earnest to obviate obsolescence of large conventional forces in the future. Consequent to the high profile terrorist attacks in the recent past as also owing to the emergence of insurgency in central India, the public perception on the accountability for countering insurgencies/terrorism has improved. There is greater clarity on the issue of sub-conventional operations being a national obligation and not necessarily the preserve of the military. The clarity attained needs to be further developed to make the sub-conventional capabilities of the nation more inclusive, with optimal synergy between various organs of the state.

There are clear indicators of change in the complexion of sub-conventional conflicts. The traditionally high quotient associated with the counter-insurgency exertions of the state needs review and merits transformation in concert with the growing socio-political prominence at one end of the conflict spectrum to the state sponsored terrorism at the other. Contextually, the military also needs to jettison the exclusivity of its conventional role in concert with the nation's aspirations and emergent threat paradigm.