

Commentary

‘No Exception: The Decision to Open All Military Positions to Women’

Ash Carter, December 2018

Ash Carter, former Secretary of Defence of the United States (US) from 2015 to 2017, and currently the Director of the Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School, has made noteworthy contributions in the fields of national security, technology, human resource development and innovations in technology. As the Secretary of Defence, he had been instrumental in promoting conceptual thoughts and execution of the strategic pivot to the Asia—Pacific, ensuring the effectiveness of the military campaign to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Middle East, and launching the national cyber strategy and promoting innovations and development of new technological capabilities for the armed forces of the US. He remained committed to ‘building the force of the future,’ for the US military. In pursuance of his commitment and having been in the chair for a year, he had finally taken the decision, on December 3, 2015, to open all positions in the US military, with no exceptions, to women. This subject is of a great relevance to the Indian armed forces, as it has been under discussion at multiple fora.

In the essay “No Exception: The Decision to Open All Military Positions to Women,” he observes that while the integration of women into the armed forces has gone smoothly in the three years since the decision was taken, successful implementation of the order is far from over. Despite a few good performances of women in combat arms and successful completion of the Ranger’s course, a number of questions pertaining to recruitment, assignments and career management of women into new roles continue to be raised. Cases in point are whether women have to register for the draft or about the methodology to be adopted to reevaluate and readjust the standards required for all positions. A few Service members, both male and females, believed that integration would jeopardise combat effectiveness. Given the varied experiences and diverse backgrounds of Service members, it was correctly analysed that a “cultural shift in teams”, which were otherwise historically all male, would be required to ensure successful implementation. This would be even more true in the Indian context. On balance, it must be acknowledged that it was one of the difficult decisions by Secretary Carter, as it had to be accepted by all the stakeholders to ensure its smooth implementation. Consequent to demitting office, Carter has done well to write this essay, wherein he expresses his thought process, apprehensions, challenges and rationale to open all military positions to women. He has been forthright and objective in stating his views.

The Rationale

Integration of women in the armed forces had been a subject of great discussion in the US in the recent decades, just as it has been in India for about three decades. Giving the genesis, Carter recalls the contribution of women in various theatres of war. It was in 1975 that the Department of Defence (DoD) opened up the military Service academies for women to integrate them into the armed forces, and the Congress repealed laws prohibiting women from serving in air and naval combat units in the early 1990s. Resultantly, women could fly fighter jets and serve on combat ships at sea. This was apparently immediately after the First Gulf War (1991).

Around the same time, in 1993, the DoD issued the definition of “Direct Ground Combat and Assignment Rule,” which prohibited women from being posted to units engaged in direct ground combat. In January 2013, two decades later, the then Secretary of Defence, Mr Leon Panetta rescinded this rule and opened 110,000 positions to women, including serving on submarines out at sea. Despite this order, women remained debarred from 220,000 combat positions.

In fact, between 1993 and 2013, the US military was heavily committed in the Kosovo conflict in 1998-99, in Afghanistan from late 2001 onward, and the Second Gulf War from early 2003.

On January 24, 2013, Mr Leon Panetta issued a directive to all the stakeholders to review and validate the role of women and carry out an additional in-depth review of the remaining gender-based barriers to service. As three years time (2013-15) was given to complete the study, Carter, the then Secretary in 2015, knew of the enormous challenges that lay ahead to take the final decision on the subject. Besides deciding the fate of women for the future, he was acutely aware of the operational and political risks involved in integrating women into combat roles.

Since it was expected to be a historic policy change, he had laid down a benchmark to himself that “the fighting force of the US must remain the strongest in the world.” This remained as a binding guideline to take the all important decisions. It, therefore, required three deliberate logical stages to work on : one, immense homework to reach a decision; two, making the announcement; and three, effectively implementing the decision.

Secretary Carter’s experience of 35 years, in both the public and private sectors, suggested that logical reasoning is by far the most important factor to convince all stakeholders—the troops and their leaders, the training institutions, the media, the Congress, the public and other interest groups—of the policy decision. Since he had aimed to build the strongest possible force of the future for the US, he worked on two principal pillars of reasoning: one, to draw the most qualified persons from the entire pool of talent volunteering to join the armed forces; two, to recruit and retain high performing women in the military, regardless of the position they hold. He was aware that in the military, combat experience is often crucial to promotion in the senior ranks of the Services.

Carter has taken pains to examine the three stages for integration of women into the armed forces, as discussed, in a deliberate manner. ‘Doing homework thoroughly’ constituted the basic part, as it required all relevant information to be made available and analysed. The Secretaries and heads of the three Services, the Commandant Marine Corps and Commander of the Special Operations Command carried out independent analyses and made specific recommendations, along with the rationale for the same.

30 Primary Studies Over Three Years

During 2013-15, the Services conducted more than 30 primary studies and reviews to inform their implementation of the policy change. While deliberating,

they were required to consider cardinal issues like the effectiveness of the force, implementability, cost factor and anticipated objections. All the uniformed Services were supportive of opening all positions to women within their organisations, except the Marine Corps who had reservations for which 48,779 positions, especially in the infantry, artillery, armour (including mechanised infantry also) and reconnaissance. It is a fact that these are the basic arms that are in direct close combat with the hostile forces, and the basic decision revolved around them. It was amply clear that the decision had to be a consistent one across the force, and that measures had to be taken to ensure its execution. Everyone was acutely aware that the decision was not recommended by the Marine Corps.

Carter decided to make the announcement a month before the deadline, when no one expected it, so as to give little reaction time to the vested parties to oppose the decision. One thing that was certain was that Carter had a difficult job at hand, despite the fact that opening all positions to women was a professional decision based on a deliberate and logic-driven process. To take the decision, strength was drawn from the fact that several countries, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand and Norway, had opened all military positions to women, although the exact nature of the assignments in the close combat roles and the numbers who participated have not been specified. The Marine Corps was uneasy about integrating women into operational missions, as its patrols are sent out well in advance to the front and carry out small-unit operations. Therefore, Carter certainly realised that there were good reasons for certain stakeholders to raise objections to the decision. Exceptional pains were taken to ensure execution of the model by giving instructions such as: do not compromise combat effectiveness, maintain transparent and objective standards, no quotas to be maintained for participation, merit-based system to be ensured, and due consideration to be given to physical demands and physiological differences.

Comments

Though the genesis of earlier events has not been covered in sufficient detail in the essay, a critical examination of the sequence of events between 1980 and 2018 suggests that the DoD itself has flip-flopped on women's integration by applying the 'risk rule' and excluding women from direct combat units in 1988 and then repealing the said rule in the early 1990s. The essay does not offer any rationale for the 'frequent changes in the policy decisions'. Over 40,000 women served in

the US armed forces during the Gulf War in 1991, but they were not permitted to participate in any deliberate ground engagements. Again, the 'Direct Combat Exclusion Rule' was applied in 1994, which consisted of an overarching prohibition against the assignment of women to units below the brigade level, whose primary mission was to engage in direct combat on the ground.¹ This order was rescinded after two decades in 2013, and, finally, women were integrated, with all positions open, with no exception, in December 2015. However, the essay does not mention the DoD's rationale for reversing the landmark decision of 1994, which had prohibited positions to women for combat roles. Surprisingly, the decisions had to be changed even in a well informed society, with high educational standards and near equal status to women. Correctly stated, it required a 'cultural shift in teams' to implement the orders successfully. There was every reason to be apprehensive in taking a decision, especially when the DoD's position flip-flopped over the years, and that, finally, the Marine Corps had opposed it.

It is a well known fact that the US military has relied on an all-volunteer force for nearly four decades. However, questions have been raised about the all volunteer force model's viability, as it has been under stress.² During late 2017, the head of the Army's Recruiting Command had informed that meeting the recruiting goals with high quality soldiers, was a significant challenge due to reasons like medical conditions, physical fitness, drug use, poor conduct and aptitude. Shortfall in recruitment is also attributed to factors like improvement in the economy and low unemployment rates.³ These aspects pertaining to difficulty in getting high quality soldiers in the US has not been discussed in the essay. Under such conditions, it may have been one of the reasons why the DoD took a decision to draw eligible volunteer women for all roles, including combat positions, without compromising on the standards laid down. However, instructions were issued to give due consideration to physical demands and physiological differences.

Three years after the implementation of the decision, Andrew Swick and Emma More, in their article dated April 19, 2018, have analysed in detail the state of female combat integration across the military Services in the US.⁴ Each Service had approached the task of integrating women into combat roles differently, and achieved varied results. As the results are pretty interesting, they are covered briefly.

- Though there has been an increase in the number of women volunteers, the Army data shows that at the entry-level, female recruits have more often chosen the infantry, while female officers have chosen armour units.

- As the Navy and Air Force do not have close combat roles like the infantry, both Services have been more flexible in assigning various positions to women. Historically, while both Services have higher numbers of women in proportion to their overall strength, they also have very few combat jobs for them. The Air Force, for example, had allowed women to serve in nearly all roles, except special operations. In the Navy, due to the size and missions of the fleet, women have been able to serve in a variety of roles, including submarines, thus, allowing them to rise in rank to be appointed in command assignments on carriers.
- In 2015, the Marine Corps' commissioned a study to examine whether gender integration would affect its combat readiness. It said, "Overall combat readiness was broken down as compromised by: speed and tempo, lethality, unit and individual readiness, survivability, and cohesion. The results of the study were fairly damning, illustrating that in 93 out of 134 tasks tested, all-male groups outperformed gender-integrated groups. The report also found that women had an increased risk for serious injuries, often stress fractures sustained through heavy load-bearing exercise."
- Special Operations Forces (SOF) constitute an area where women have largely been unsuccessful in meeting the bar for entry. While female Service members have been effective in various support roles in units, they have not yet qualified for combat roles due to the extremely high physical standards required by these units.

While addressing the Virginia Military Institute students on September 25, 2018, Defence Secretary Jim Mattis (a former General of the Marine Corps) had offered a dim view of females serving in infantry jobs. He also said that the jury is out on whether women can succeed in combat.⁵ On the other hand, a month later, Britain's Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson announced the lifting of the ban on women serving in close combat ground roles in the UK military, thus, allowing them to serve in elite Special Forces units like the Special Air Service (SAS) and Royal Marines.⁶ It showed Britain's positive confidence in its women to perform in combat roles as well. Recently, Kate Nesbitt, a woman medical assistant, 21 years old, created history when she became the second woman of the UK to be awarded the Military Cross (MC) for an outstanding act of courage and valour in Afghanistan. A para-medical from the non-combat arm, she displayed exemplary courage to attend to a severely wounded soldier in an intense operational environment.

In Israel, while all Jewish Israeli citizens are required to complete national service at the age of 18, military conscription is compulsory for women between the ages of 18-20. In Israel, more than 92 percent defence forces' jobs are open to women, of whom just 3 percent serve in combat roles. However, surprisingly, the Israeli Army's Ground Forces Command Chief, Maj Gen Kobi Barak questions the operational effectiveness of women in close combat due to their physical strength.⁷ He implied that close combat roles may put women at a disadvantage. So, it is only reasonable to allocate their roles where the physical attributes are an advantage and not a disadvantage. In competitive sports, division by way of physical characteristics is carried out in most team and individual sports. The goal-keeper is typically the tallest team member, and fast bowlers, preferably, should be tall. Also, in individual sports events at various levels, women contest against women only. In close combat situations and for operations across international borders, there are no such rules. On balance, the reports about the operational performance of women in combat roles and the cohesiveness of their units have been mixed.

Indian Context

Historically, women from the Indian subcontinent too have proved to be great leaders-cum-warriors in protecting their kingdoms. These heroic warriors included Razia Sultan, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Chand Bibi, Kitturu Chennamma, Begum Hazrat Mahal and Onake Obbava. The role of women in combat roles has been under discussion in the Indian armed forces, the media and the public at large, for quite some time. It is also a fact that women have been serving in the medical, dental and nursing roles as officers for long. In the non-medical branches of the Army, women were commissioned about 27 years ago, where they have served well with professional elan. The Indian Army has continued to progressively increase women's role in various branches, including the recent approval of the government to induct 'women soldiers' in the military police, to begin with. Success in this endeavour may lead to more branches being opened to women. According to the recent announcement, women officers of all the ten branches, in which they were inducted for short service commissions, will be considered for grant of permanent commissions. However, they have not been considered for induction into combat arms like the infantry, armoured corps, mechanised infantry, artillery, army aviation (as helicopter pilots) so far, which has been a subject of much discussion.

We have to remember that before taking a decision, the DoD in the US had carried out more than 30 studies between 2013 and 2015.⁸ Yet, the

implementation has not been smooth so far, as the women soldiers and 'gender integrated groups' have a lot of ground to cover to be combat effective. Jim Mattis and a few other officials have also commented unfavourably on their performance in combat roles.

While we should not imitate any country, we may draw lessons from their experiences. Indian society, particularly the rural social order, and its culture are different when compared to the Western world. In the long term, we—at the national level commencing with our family norms—should initiate a cultural shift in our attitude toward genders to provide equal opportunities, in which the armed forces have already taken some steps. Issues pertaining to culture and emotional approach apart, the aim of the entire exercise at the national level should be based on the following guidelines:

- To ensure that the Indian Army maintains the highest operational preparedness to meet the threats and challenges of today and tomorrow.
- Correct balance needs to be maintained between **operational preparedness and individual aspirations**. Men and women must contribute to national security, each according to individual aptitude, skills, ability and qualifications.
- The endeavour should be to carry out military operations with minimum casualties to own troops to achieve optimum results—which means they must be drawn from the best available talent in the country for such missions.
- On the pretext of gender equality, we must not compromise our operational preparedness. They must share all responsibilities in the envisaged operational environments. This notwithstanding, higher ranks should be available to all, irrespective of gender, solely based on merit.

Therefore, for induction of women into the combat arms, we need to carry out a comprehensive examination of various facets like operational imperatives, standards to be achieved for combat arms, methodology to be adopted for recruitment of officers and soldiers candidates, likely impact of direct close combat on our borders and in Counter-Insurgency/Counter-Terrorism (CI/CT) environments, unit and individual combat readiness, physical and physiological demands of troops, cultural influence on unit cohesion and morale, Service conditions, living facilities available for women at places of their assignments, and employment of genders based on their competencies to achieve optimum results. A unit's combat readiness should include the ability of the leaders to lead from the front in operations, and the resultant impact on the combat unit's strength and cohesion also to be analysed.

To briefly state the operational imperatives in India's context: South Asia is one of the most violent and unstable regions of the world. India continues to face many complex threats and challenges to its national security. With unsettled borders and territorial disputes with Pakistan and China, the borders, including the Siachen Glacier, are manned in an active operational environment and in some of the most inhospitable terrains. A large portion of the Army is also committed to intense CI/CT operations, both on the Line of Control (LoC) and in the hinterland in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and in the northeast. Having commanded an Infantry Brigade in the Uri Sector, a Mountain Division in the Kargil sector and a corps in the Leh—Ladakh region, all in intense operational environments, I have seen our officers and men—the finest in the world—involved in intense firing and operations along the LoC, on long range patrols in high altitude areas, on deployments on posts in extreme high altitudes that are cut off during the winters, with difficulties in evacuation of casualties, as also involved in bloody fights with terrorists and insurgents. Women officers have also played their full part in providing excellent support as part of their combat support units. As regards the Navy and Air Force, they do not really have close combat operational tasks as the infantry, Special Forces (SF) and the other combat arms. Therefore, comparisons must be done with due care!

Comprehensive Central Study

The character of conflict has evolved from the historical to the modern times, and requires a different set of standards and operational readiness. The land operations in most of these environments would still be in the realm of small teams' operations and intense close combat, and nothing less. They would be required to operate into the enemy territory, across the International Borders (IB) LoC and Line of Actual Control (LAC), as also fight insurgents and terrorists in the hinterland. Considering the envisaged security environment in the next decade, we do not expect any significant reduction in the commitments of the Army.

Rather than being emotional and making it a gender discrimination issue, it requires a pragmatic approach and analysis of all factors, with special focus on two important facets: 'operational imperatives,' and 'operational preparedness and individual aspirations'. The earlier studies notwithstanding, either a comprehensive central study or each combat arm specific—including Special Forces—should carry out a study to address all the facets, including the system of competitive examinations

for entry, career opportunities and feasibility of command assignments for the induction of women into combat arms and also to analyse the kind of tasks to be assigned, and submit reports, along with a rationale for their recommendations. A comprehensive central study would be the preferred option.

It would also be good to take fair and objective views of serving and retired women officers who have served in difficult operational areas and have seen the threats and challenges faced by the combat arms. Besides, they may also consider the physical and physiological aspects, the impact of physical contact with hostile forces in close combat, the anxiety of misconduct and the availability of a segregated infrastructure in the areas of operational deployment. Although our operational environment, terrains, our troops, our culture and the current facilities available in operational areas are different from those of other countries, each combat arm must also mandatorily comment on:

- One, the appointments and roles that can be tenanted by women in the combat arms without compromising standards, with suggested preparatory arrangements required to facilitate their induction and the timelines. If recommended by the study, while this could be a good start point to tenant select appointments in a few combat arm(s), it must offer suitable alternative career options in the case women are not able to cope with combat roles.
- Two, additional roles which can be assigned, where female officers and soldiers are equally or better suited than their male counterparts.

Induction of women into the combat arms should in reality translate into a more cohesive, homogenous and battle ready force, to combat the envisaged threats and challenges to our national security. If the induction of women into the combat arms is done as a symbolic gesture, then it would defeat the very purpose of the exercise. Pending the recommendation of a comprehensive study, it would be prudent to give additional responsibilities to women in a number of roles where they can certainly make a significant contribution. In view of the non-contact, non-kinetic forms of conflicts, and support roles for operations, women have a huge potential to contribute in the information, cyber and space domains, operational planning, intelligence interpretation, human resource management, training, languages, logistics planning, inventory management, etc., where they should also be considered for tenanting higher ranks, based on merit.

The Indian Army should take calibrated incremental steps, borne out of a pragmatic and objective assessment of the operational requirements, expected roles based on skills, capabilities, qualifications and the merit of each gender, so that the Indian Army maintains the highest operational preparedness today and in the future.

Lt Gen **VK Ahluwalia**, PVSM, AVSM**, YSM,VSM (Retd) is former General Officer Commanding in Chief, Central Command. He is currently, Director, Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS).

Notes

1. Fact Sheet: Women in Service Review (WISR) Implementation, file:///C:/Users/DIR%20CLAWS/Desktop/Women%20docu%20FactSheet_WISR_FINAL.pdf
2. George M. Reynolds, Council on Foreign Affairs, “How Representative is the All Volunteer U.S. Military”, *Foreign Affairs*, April 25, 2018, com, accessed on December 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-representative-all-volunteer-us-military>
3. Richard Sisk, “Goal of 80,000 Recruits Wont be Met, Army Secretary Says”, *Military.com*. Accessed on December 17, 2018, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2018/04/21/goal-80000-recruits-year-won't-be-met-army-secretary-says.html>
4. Andrew Swick and Emma More, “The (Mostly) Good News on Women in Combat: What is the State of Female Combat Integration Across the Military Services?” April 19, 2018. Accessed on January 7, 2019, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/an-update-on-the-status-of-women-in-combat>.
5. Lolita C. Baldor, “Mattis: Jury is Out on Women Succeeding in Combat Jobs”, *The Associated Press*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/...military/.../mattis-jury-is-out-on-women-succeeding-i...>
6. Meghann Myers, “A Ban on Women Serving in Close Combat Ground Roles in the UK Military is to be Lifted, Opening the Way for Female Troops to Serve in Elite Special Forces Units like the SAS and Royal Marines — and Ending Inequality on the Front Line”, October 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/7cfc69b8-d86f-11e8-a854-33d6f82e62f8>
7. Lizi Hameiri, “Opinion : Women in the Israeli Military Just Aren't Cut Out for Combat Roles”. Accessed on January 11, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-women-just-aren-t-cut-out-for-combat-roles-1.5730157>.
8. n. 1.