
Book Review

Indian Army: Vision 2020

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Indian Armed Forces: In Need of a Revolution

The Indian Army over the past six decades has evolved from being an entity put together by the British from armies of various kingdoms in Indian history to a professional fighting force which has experienced conflict in all forms, terrains and temperatures. In fact, it has set new records of fighting at altitudes and weather conditions never experienced by other armies in military history, but with one common factor — of “making do” with whatever it has had, which was never enough or new enough, compared to most of its adversaries. Stark examples are the first two wars after India’s independence; the first India-Pakistan War of 1947 and the Chinese aggression of 1962, both of which were fought with an over half a century old rifle, with clothing far too inadequate for temperatures falling short of minus 50 degrees Celsius and redefined mountain warfare by battling at heights of up to at least 14,000 feet above sea level, because the Western concept of mountains is limited to 8,000 feet or so. Later, in the Siachen Glacier, it learnt how to survive at up to 22,000 feet and in the Thar Desert, how to move over fine sand with few roads and scant water as the mercury rises up to short of 50 degrees Celsius.

Thanks to a couple of hostile neighbours, the Indian Army has been in a state of some sort of conflict or the other, or long-term deployment, at least for all the six decades so far. In addition to the external, it has also been actively involved with internal disturbances owing to the inability of state and central police organisations to tackle insurgencies and major flare-ups or also because some of the internal problems have external roots. Besides these, every year there are floods and other disasters, which the armed forces are always involved in reacting to, not only within the country but in neighbouring ones, including, ironically, the hostile ones as well as distant countries. In the field of United Nations peace-keeping, India has been one of the most regular and substantial contributors. Since the early 1990s, when the

Indian Army was probably stretched to the maximum, the only commitments struck off were Sri Lanka, 'Khalistani' terrorism in Punjab and Nagaland, where a tenuous ceasefire has been on for over a decade. The peace process begun with Pakistan since early 2004 only reduced the daily border and Line of Control skirmishes, still often violated by Pakistan, but the terrorists trained or operating from there are still very active not only in Jammu and Kashmir but spread throughout the country.

Despite the vast infrastructure under the Defence Ministry, including the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), public sector undertakings and ordnance factories all over the country, all three Services have remained dependent, earlier on Soviet Russia for up to 70 per cent of their requirement of weapons and equipment, and now on other countries. The further irony is that lack of strategic consciousness of the political leadership coupled with bureaucratic apathy, tight-fisted and ever decreasing budgetary allocations, short command tenures of senior commanders along with a "play safe and no risk" attitude as well as the sheer inertia of decision-makers have led to a degradation of fighting potential of an otherwise professional army with the best of soldiery.

With scientific progress, particularly in information technology, on the one hand, fundamentalism and bigotry, on the other as well as a global arms race gone "mad" (mutually assured destruction) with nuclear options as "deterrents", "disarmament" remains only a fashionable term in the academic and international relations circuit, while new terminologies and forms of warfare have emerged with prefixes like cyber, psychological and asymmetric. Nuclear warfare (also often clubbed with biological and chemical warfare), in addition to those already mentioned requires for the armed forces of a country like India, facing two neighbours not only hostile as mentioned, but nuclear armed too, to adopt new tactics, techniques and procedures.

Chapter 2 of the book, "Threats, Challenges and Vulnerabilities," spells out what all these three aspects amount to externally and internally for India. With all three prevailing in ample measure and the kind of responses, or sheer lack of appropriate ones, recent events in Kashmir Valley and Jammu should not come as a surprise, particularly following major changes in Pakistan since early 2008. Such developments are all the more reason that the Indian armed forces should be properly and amply equipped as these are the kind of circumstances which increase the possibility of a war erupting. And God forbid, should that happen, no amount of blame-gaming or instituting of inquiry commissions is going to help.

The book comes as yet another timely reminder for decision-makers and the military leadership to wake up and vitalise the process which essentially involves changes of mindset and doctrine as well as updating or replacement of weapons and equipment. While at least two decades of fighting increasing asymmetric counter-insurgency/terrorism operations in Jammu and Kashmir and almost six decades in the northeast have honed the Indian Army personnel — never found wanting in blood and guts and valour — their capability as seen in mechanised and mobile operations, as in 1965 and 1971, has not been similarly tested again, except in limited forms during Exercise Brass Tacks and the unfought Operation Parakaram. The political leadership and bureaucracy should be quite clear about the fact that a nation of India's size and diversity not only aspiring to be a regional power, but one which is rising as an economic one also, needs a very sound, well-armed modern hi-tech war machine for sheer survival. If India is aiming for the big league, it better have the muscle to do so and with a mind to make good use of that muscle whenever and wherever necessary.

Gurmeet Kanwal has, over the next few chapters, enumerated and elaborated on the changes in various military operations, procedures and other aspects of warfare that have occurred in the past few decades and those which are expected to happen in the next decade or so at least. And having done so, he discusses options that India can and should go in for, provided, of course, that the necessary measures towards the revolution in military affairs have been implemented. The one major change from the mindset of the past six decades recommended for India is for it to adopt the offensive approach, rather than, almost always, the defensive. (Examples of political will to exercise the offensive option — and succeeding — in 1971 against Pakistan; in the case of China, forceful retaliation at Nathu La, Sikkim, in 1967 and in Sumdorong Chu, Arunachal Pradesh in 1984 have stood India in good stead. It was only after such a retaliation that India could consider annexation of Sikkim, eventually done in 1975). Kanwal's analyses and recommendations merit serious attention and, better late than never, early implementation.

By
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India and the United States — Breakthroughs, Prospects and Challenges Ahead

Dr. Harinder Sekhon

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At a time when writing on Indo-US relations is suffering the pitfalls of recycling, Dr Sekhon's book is a welcome reprieve, choosing to discuss assumptions about India's importance for American strategic planning for South Asia. This analysis is timely as the view of India as a preeminent and pivotal power is gaining currency in the subcontinent. India-observers have readily accepted that the ground from estrangement to engagement has been rapidly covered and that New Delhi's relationship with Washington DC will only prosper in the future. While this relationship is beset with possibility, it is certainly not limited to the Indo-US nuclear deal — the Americans are spelling out how they view India as an economic opportunity. Given the extent to which market forces drive foreign policy, India has reason to believe this is a good thing. But before Indian political and security analysts fall into the familiar trap of political determinism, the Indo-US relationship must be fine-combed. While one doesn't suggest an overly optimistic or fatalistic outlook, documenting instances of coherence or collision can be useful. To that end, Harinder Sekhon's book is a laudable attempt.

The key issues raised in the book are the contribution of the Indian diaspora in America and the role of think-tanks, lobbying firms and business groups towards the strengthening of Indo-US ties. The book begins with an assessment of Indian foreign policy through the decades. The findings in Dr Sekhon's first book *Five Decades of Indo-US Relations: Strategic and Intellectual* are used to provide the background to understand how Indian foreign policy now leans towards moves that are more "confident" and less "anti-Western". This is supplemented with an analysis of Pakistan's role as a crucial but decreasingly reliable ally in America's strategy for South Asia. There is the anxiety that the author might slip into anti-Pakistan rhetoric, concluding that India is a better bet (democracy, secularism, market economy – it is the "natural" partner). But the author follows this up by pointing out how the American establishment has swung in different directions on the kind of relations it should establish with India. The author rightly points out that the fear of India's hegemonic aspirations in the neighbourhood has worried the US in the past, which led to an alliance with Pakistan, viewed as a counterweight to India's influence.

However, a discernable shift in foreign policy was achieved through focussed efforts and the evolution of the India lobby in the US. This transition of the Indian community from an “invisible model minority” to an “organised visible group wielding political clout” led to the deepening of Indo-US relations. The Strobe Talbott-Jaswant Singh talks, for instance, defined “the crucial fundamentals that infused maturity into India-US relations”. Indeed, as Sekhon points out, Jimmy Carter’s January 1978 and Bill Clinton’s March 2000 visits to India were as distinct as chalk and cheese. Clearly, the US now views India as a “geo-strategic weight”, given its broader outlook on South Asia “as part of a broader Asia-Middle East continuum”. The shift has occurred at a fundamental level, where India is firmly a part of the Pentagon’s security calculus, not as a threat, but as an opportunity.

One wonders what the influence of the Indian lobby in Washington might have been on this movement of American foreign policy, which is why Sekhon’s study on the advancement of think-tanking makes for interesting reading. The US, says Sekhon, is a “a corporate state”, where “partisan and institutional politics pervade practically all aspects of foreign policy-making”. She emphasises the decentralisation of foreign policy making on Capitol Hill, discussing the history of American think-tanks and the use of lobbying firms by the Government of India and by other interest groups. It becomes clear towards the end of the book that ideologically derived political agendas do actually run parallel to legacy-based institutions in the United States.

The chapters on the business firms and on the Indian-American community overlap. Organisations such as the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans deal mainly with US-India relations, developments in India and Indian subcontinent, and issues of interest to the Indian-American community. Thus, they are not different from the Jewish lobby, a model for any lobby aspiring to American resources to further their mandates. However, Sekhon refrains from glorifying the Indian lobby, stressing that whilst it has made considerable progress, much more needs to be done before it is firmly impressed in the American political mind. Sekhon stresses on the need for a sustained programme that adapts itself to the American system, thus, establishing a network from New Delhi to Washington which doesn’t “treat Congressmen like a slot machine that you insert a coin and get a coke out” (quoting Lalit Mansingh, former Indian ambassador to the United States). Hopefully, the New Framework for the US-India Relationship that was announced on June 28, 2005, will go beyond the narrow confines of the Indo-US nuclear deal and address such issues.

The book also chronicles the achievements of pioneers such as Dalip Saundh, Bobby Jindal and Satveer Chaudhary. Implicit in this profiling are the exceptional and illustrious characteristics of these individuals, distinct from the common Indian American community whose contributions are more substantial and quantitative in nature – indeed, as Sekhon points out, “from lobbying for just immigration laws to raising funds for presidential elections”, the community has made a quantum jump with the support of the engineer in Silicon Valley as much as the diplomat on Capitol Hill. Sekhon points out that the “early pioneers steadily fought against prejudice, bigotry and open hostility that helped them to develop a heightened sense of ethnic self-awareness and political sagacity”.

Hopefully, this political sagacity will extend itself to the furthering of cooperation in a more inclusive manner, where across the political and social spectrums in India and in the US, alongwith business firms, lobbies and political players, stake-holding in India-US relations will include more benefactors and many more beneficiaries.

By

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