

# Defence Deserves its Due

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**H**istory has time and again emphasised the umbilical linkage

between economy and defence of a nation. It is a balanced combination of the two that has determined the place of a nation in the world order. In the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Spartan military dominance could not be sustained in the face of rising economic and naval prowess of Athens. Resultantly, by the end of the prolonged Peloponnesian War, both Sparta and Athens emerged drastically weakened notwithstanding ultimate Spartan victory.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, Spanish dominance of the world was successfully challenged by the economic rise of Portugal resulting in division of the respective colonial empires across the globe. The economic effect of the Industrial Revolution made Britain, backed by its naval might, the pre-eminent global power of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The United States, having progressed economically throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century while following a policy of 'Splendid Isolation', came in to its own to dominate the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the foremost global power. It continues to do so till date. Germany's economic and military rise repeatedly in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was possible only because it concentrated on both these aspects equally. Its subsequent defeat in the famous two world wars by the stronger economic and military alliance highlights the importance of growing economically and militarily simultaneously.

Finally, we are currently witnessing the economic and military rise of China for the last three decades. It is only a matter of time when it would overtake the US as the most powerful nation of the globe. While that may happen when it does, it is important to recognise the crucial linkage between economic growth and military power. The strength of this linkage determines the role that a nation plays at the global level.

Indian economic growth has been noteworthy during the last decade, though nowhere near the Chinese. However, while currently we are witnessing a decline in the Chinese growth rate, there are signs of an improvement in India's, thus making it a

leading growing power. If this momentum can be sustained, we may be heading for better times.

The moot question that arises is that even if we perform well on the economic front, is that enough to claim a high place in the regional and global pecking order? While some of us believe so, this thought process may be premature in the absence of matching defence capabilities.

We do lay claim to possessing the third largest military in the world, and rightly so in terms of numbers. But in modern warfare, large number is just one factor that can influence a successful outcome. Battlefield transparency, lightening mobility, precision targeting, cyber warfare, enhanced lethality and effective use of space by a modernised and integrated military are factors which have equal if not greater say in determining the outcome. Unfortunately, in most of these areas, we are lagging far behind some of our potential adversaries. We also need to be clear that an odd surgical strike or a firm stand against an adversary a la Doklam is not necessarily a true indicator of our military prowess and capabilities.

The last skirmish that the Indian military was involved in was in the years 1999-2000 at Kargil. Since then, as a percentage of GDP, the defence budget has progressively gone down year after year. Today, it stands at a paltry 1.57 per cent of the GDP. Indeed, it is a far cry from 3 per cent which most defence analysts and well-wishers of the nation have been demanding over the years.

While in real terms, our budget for the current financial year stands at approximately USD42 billion, the official Chinese budget is USD160 billion. Pakistan spends close to 4.5 per cent of its GDP on defence annually. US military spending is of course equal to the combined spending of Russia, China, India and Japan. Even European nations, which are currently in a state of relative peace, are gradually increasing their defence expenditure to 2 per cent of the GDP.

Resultantly, while collusive threat from our potential adversaries has enhanced the possibility of a two front war for us,

our defence capabilities have not kept pace with the changing dynamics. Modernisation has suffered, obsolescence levels have gone up and fighting stocks have gone down even though we continue to maintain the dubious distinction of being the biggest importer of weaponry globally year after year. While successive governments, since 2000 may have had their own compulsions in allocating inadequate resources for defence, the damage that gets done to national security is tremendous and cannot be made up overnight. We need to analyse what structural reforms should be undertaken to make defence compatible with our growing economic footprint.

The first requirement is for our political class to grasp and understand the implications of national security fully. Both within the Parliament and the Government, the number of people somewhat conversant with national security and its role in nation building can be counted on finger tips. National aims, objectives and strategy are areas to which they have hardly been exposed during their career spans. Nor are these useful to earn them repeated victories at the polls. Resultantly, their total dependence on bureaucracy shifts the control to the latter, a situation wherein it enjoys total authority without accountability. Unfortunately, since the exposure of bureaucracy to matters of national security and strategy is limited and superficial, faulty decisions are frequently taken, in the process causing irreparable damage.

The best solution would be for our political class and the bureaucracy to be exposed to some formal training in national security studies. If that is not feasible, then the political class must base its decisions on sound professional advice rather than on the politically expedient advice of minimally informed bureaucracy. The procrastination in implementing the previous recommendations on providing single point advice on national security matters is causing incalculable damage.

The aspect of increase in defence budget is generally brushed aside with two specious arguments. Firstly, the oft used rhetoric that whatever is needed for defence would always be provided is conveniently trotted out. Secondly, the inability of the military to even spend the allotted budget annually is highlighted to deny any major increase. The truth, however, is that mandarins

of the Finance Ministry have the final word in any purchases above Rs 1000 crores. Thus, when the file reaches them for approval after its meandering and torturous journey, it is put in to a fresh loop by raising or repeating a couple of inconsequential enquiries, ensuring the financial year ends and the budget lapses! Unfortunately, such practices are chipping away at defence preparedness and making the military hollow with the danger of crumbling in the face of a crisis. Even at the expense of curtailed growth, it is essential to enhance defence spending annually to achieve matching military capabilities.

In appointing its custodians, successive governments have not done full justice to the Defence Ministry portfolio during the last 10 to 15 years. While conceptually recognising the cardinal principle that defence together with external affairs, home and finance forms the core of government functioning, successive Defence Ministers have either been totally dependent on bureaucracy or lightweights with limited say in crucial decision making.

The UPA government ensured continuity in the MOD but the propensity to play safe and retain the tag of righteousness ensured that most of the proposed foreign acquisitions were scuttled by the simple process of a losing competitor writing an anonymous letter hinting at corruption. During last four years of the present government, the MOD has had four Raksha Mantris with Mr Jetley occupying the chair twice besides simultaneously also being the Finance Minister. There have also been times when the chair has been lying vacant during this period! In the process, national security has been denied its due.

Higher defence management continues to be a pipe dream despite constructive suggestions by a number of committees constituted by the government in the past two decades. Recent announcement of formation of the Defence Planning Committee (DPC) headed by the NSA with Service Chiefs and Secretaries home, external affairs, defence and finance as members has inherent flaws and is unlikely to achieve the desired results. To begin with, it creates another layer between the political authority and the Service Chiefs. Secondly, it capitalises on the current personal equation between the PM and the NSA thus giving a go

bye to an institutional arrangement which would withstand the test of time and prove beneficial in the long term. Thirdly, indirectly it impinges on the authority of the Raksha Mantri, a major stakeholder in national security matters. Lastly, historically, almost all NSAs have been Foreign Service or police officers. Accordingly, their exposure to national defence matters is likely to be limited.

The aspects discussed above highlight the basic point that the defence of the country is not getting its due. This is gradually leading to increased hollowness which would not be able to withstand the array of threats that the country may be exposed to in the foreseeable future. Without sounding alarmist, we need to pragmatically assess our vulnerabilities and address them before it is too late. It would be right to assert that the greatness that we strive for would be achievable only if we build our military capabilities side by side with economic growth.

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*Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 612, April-June 2018.