

Defence Reforms in India Need Strategic Direction

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Introduction

Is there a clarity about what exactly is required from the Armed

Forces in a changing regional and global security environment when national interests are spread across the continent? Big question is that, have we developed capabilities to secure India's interests that are so varied and dispersed strategically and geographically? If India has to break out of the claustrophobic confines of South Asia, it needs certain capabilities that can propel it to be a net security provider at least in Northern Indian Ocean Region.¹ However, the defence reforms or absence of these tells a different story; that India may desire to be there but the capabilities are not commensurate with the desired mandate. The Government of India has appointed the Defence Planning Committee (DPC) that would be a permanent body mandated to prepare a draft national security strategy, undertake a strategic defence review, and formulate an international defence engagement strategy.² It will be premature to pass the judgement on DPC but a doubt remains that is it duplication and add-on to the existing cumbersome national security structure? Appointment of DPC should not be confused with the defence reforms as these are two different aspects.

Is the current structure of national defence adequate to protect vital national interests of India? Is political leadership conceptually aware about their role and need to give new direction in line with the changing security paradigm? Political leadership is expected to have strategic awareness and tolerance for ambiguity so that there is no conceptual divergence between political and military viewpoint. Patrick Mileham cautions that moral considerations of future wars are much beyond the rules of engagement and the destruction may not be by nuclear exchange but by mass

destruction of communication technology.³ Thus, have we looked at the changing character of warfare, vulnerabilities and the existing structures to fight technologically enabled wars? These are larger questions that must force policy makers to take a holistic look and examine if we need defence reforms or Armed Forces reforms? Scales and trajectory of these reforms are different as one is top down and another is somewhere in the middle without touching top and lateral stakeholders. Before examining the reforms per se there is a need to look at why does India need defence/ Armed Forces reforms?

Defence reforms can only be executed in a holistic manner if the emerging contours of conflict are defined or identified. If the contours of conflict are ambiguous and there is no forecasting of scenarios, it is difficult to determine what capabilities are required to secure a nation. Defence reforms is a subject of conceptual vision and these issues require deep understanding of strategic defence and security review (SDSR), threat perception and military doctrines. A military must be prepared to fight a full spectrum conventional war, but it should also develop resilience and capabilities to fight sub-conventional and hybrid wars that have become a neo-normal. Future wars are likely to be multi-domain and threats could be to military and nonmilitary targets. Cyber, information, and space warfare would add another dimension to the way future wars will be fought. Probability of conventional war may be less but cannot be ruled out. Credible conventional deterrence, or dissuasion can only come by demonstration of military capabilities. Thus, preparation for war is imperative to avoid war. Will the DPC fill the vacuum and become a bridge between political leadership and military professionals on the issues of defence preparedness? At the same time to expect that DPC will bring deeper understanding of national security between the political leadership and bureaucracy may be farfetched. However, it is imperative for policy makers to understand that military commanders and soldiers will need to develop a new moral toughness and better intellectual grasp of the issues than in the past because information and knowledge revolution is increasing and soldiers are developing reliance on virtual reality exponentially that infact can cause divergence from reality.⁴

Understanding Military Culture

Defence reforms are principally to prevent explosion of violent conflict by deterrence and dissuasion. Capabilities and capacities can impede escalation of conflict and prevent wars. As a prognosis defence policies and military capabilities should always move in tandem. It can happen if the political and bureaucratic leadership is aware of the military culture and have understanding of strategic environment and defence planning process, so that there are no gaps between capabilities and vulnerabilities. Understanding of military culture is bedrock of military effectiveness and without the profound knowledge of this aspect among the political leadership no nation can bridge the gap between vulnerabilities and capabilities that are required to secure vital national interests. Unfortunately military leadership in India has no leverage to affect change in political behaviour, especially towards the development of military capabilities.

The question is what is military culture that political leadership ought to understand to bring in defence reforms so that Armed Forces of today are prepared and oriented to fight future wars for the nation? Understanding military culture is vital to bring ideological convergence among the policy makers and executioners of the policy (Armed Forces). Convergence is required on defence policy objectives, policy instruments (national security strategy (NSS), SDSR and capability determination), defence planning process and temporality of the capability building. The divergent views on process of capability building among the politicians and military occurs because of lack of understanding of the military culture and strategic awareness. Unfortunately, divide is further fuelled by the bureaucracy that is ill-equipped to understand the nuances of defence planning process. Such a situation is detrimental to the national security, if the political leadership at apex level fails to bridge the fracture between military and bureaucracy urgently. Similar fracture exists between the Defence Public Sector Undertaking (DPSU), Ordnance Factories Board (OFB) and Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) with the military. This fracture appears to be manufactured because Ministry of Defence (MoD) want these organisations to be accountable to them instead of

military, where as, these organisations should be accountable to military since the output and efficiency of these organisations directly impacts military capabilities. More often, the complaint from the military has been quality control, over pricing and unreliability factor of the systems supplied to the Armed Forces. Case in point is the failed experiment of INSAS rifle that has been proved unreliable in combat. Arjun tank is another story that has little or no strategic mobility and as a result these tanks are restricted to a theatre and during war it is near impossible to side step the Arjun tank formations for major offensive. Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) continues to remain a concern for the forces and missile in question is not yet ready to be introduced in service even after two decades of development process. Anti-tank Nag missiles and Tejas are being inducted into service, however, the operational effectiveness will be known once it is evaluated in service. Ajay Lele has argued that what is the responsibility of Indian Armed Forces towards ensuring Indian defence industry advances? Central role of the Armed Forces is to safeguard the security interests of the nation. Thus, Armed Forces should not be obliged to ensure success of Make in India⁵ because the role of Armed Forces is to defend and secure the nation. Unless the political leadership and bureaucracy understand the military culture, holistic defence reforms are unlikely to see the light of the day. The bottom line of understanding military culture by political leaders is to define and personify the moral responsibilities of actions and consequences⁶ that will determine the benchmark of capability building to deal with the emerging threats.

Defence and Armed Forces Reforms

Defence reforms are significant transformation that reflect the political ideology in a changing regional and global security environment. Defence reforms are called for when current structures are inadequate and ill prepared to secure vital national interests, technological revolution, change in character of warfare, conceptual changes in military doctrine, economic constraints and the emergence of new threats. It warrants restructuring of the higher defence organisation (HDO), MoD, Armed Forces, Defence and Research Organisations, Defence Intelligence Agencies, Cyber and Information Warfare Agencies and all other tools that

are associated with national defence (including border defence forces and communication infrastructure).

Armed Forces reforms are brought in when there are doctrinal changes, change in war fighting strategy of adversary, change in character of warfare, technological revolution, changes in enemy military capabilities and changes in national security strategy. Technology, doctrines and capabilities of adversaries warrant Armed Forces reforms because that would warrant changes in organisational structure, command and control and need for new organisations. India needs to examine the Russian model to determine what we really need for Armed Forces and how should we achieve symmetry with our northern neighbour. Russian Army is conscious of the fact that economic constraints will not allow Russia to match Western militaries in hardware and state of the art weapon systems to equip its Army. Russia is also aware that Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven autonomous warfare will increasingly put the Russian military at a disadvantage.⁷ Thus, it has embarked upon achieving excellence in areas that would have enduring impact in war fighting capabilities. The Russian Army is looking to future where the trend will be towards greater automation, including the use of autonomous weapon systems (AWS), asymmetric warfare and hybrid warfare.

Defence Reforms for What?

There are fundamental doctrinal and conceptual issues that need clarity to find a road map and a plausible answer to the question “Defence Reforms for what”? Arun Prakash, the former Naval Chief had said, “We have an energy crisis of serious proportions looming over us. If you, as a nation, invest such vast amounts of national resources in locations as far afield as Middle East, Africa, Central Asia and South East Asia, it is essential that we take adequate security measures to safeguard our assets and interests in those extended regions”.⁸ Later his successor, Sureesh Mehta, argued that, “to protect the country’s economic and energy interests - this task has extended our area of operations. This might necessitate our operating in distant waters.”⁹ Prime Minister Vajpayee on 01 Nov 2003, made some significant observations on record on India’s strategic priorities. While addressing Combined

Commanders Conference he said, “As we grow in international stature, our defence strategies should naturally reflect our political, economic and security concerns, extending well beyond the geographical confines of South Asia.” He further said, “Our security environment ranges from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca across the Indian Ocean, includes Central Asia and Afghanistan in the North West, China in the North East and South East Asia. Our strategic thinking has also to extend to these horizons.”¹⁰ If this is the political direction given by a Former Prime Minister, then why is it that MoD is still not able to define military capabilities and answer the big question, defence reforms for what? There is still ambiguity whether India wants to develop capabilities to deter Pakistan and to dissuade, deter or contain China; or are we satisfied with deferring and delaying capability building and prepared to play a subordinate power to China. India cannot afford to adopt ‘strategy of hope’ to deal with a hegemonic rising power with whom India has unresolved border dispute. Therefore, military capabilities must be credible and visible. In fact, preparation for war indeed is a step towards prevention of war. It needs no explanation that India’s military capabilities are on the decline and hollowness is increasing. Contrary to this decline in India’s capabilities, China has restructured and is in the process of modernisation of its military and the mandate is clear from the Chinese leadership that People’s Liberation Army (PLA) should be ready to fight and win wars with regional and extra-regional powers.

Thus, either India should continue to remain claustrophobic to South Asia or decide to break free and protect vital national interests even beyond the territorial boundaries. Unfortunate part is that a subcontinental mindset that had virtually confined India to a small portion of the Afro-Asian region, the so-called South Asia has denied India its rightful place in the extended neighbourhood beyond South Asia”.¹¹ If India has to secure its vital national interests, within and beyond territorial boundaries, then the next question is, where to start? Is restructuring of individual Service enough (Shekatkar Committee Report) without looking at HDO and MoD (allied departments including DPSU and DRDO)? There is a need to carry out reforms at all levels including HDO, MoD and Armed Forces.

Defence Reforms in Indian Context

Defence reforms are meaningless if they do not cover all levels i.e. HDO, MoD, Armed Forces and border management forces. Everyone today is talking about defence reforms but who would initiate it? Do we have Goldwater Nicholas in India that can look at holistic defence reforms that are acceptable to the government and will be implemented in totality? Kargil Review Committee Report is one of the most comprehensive reform studies carried out post-Independence but it continues to gather dust because some of the recommendations are either blocked by bureaucracy or deferred by political leadership because that will make them more accountable to the nation. Thus, the bureaucracy and political leadership is happy to let it remain ambiguous. In addition to the above, the problem is largely due to lack of understanding of conceptual and doctrinal issues of national security by the political leadership. MoD is predominately staffed by bureaucrats who lack basic understanding of strategic issues and defence planning process to prepare the Armed Forces for the future wars. DPC is now mandated to put up draft NSS or carry out SDSR to determine what capabilities are required to deal with the emerging threats and what is expected by the political leadership from the military. The political leadership that has to decide whether they want threat-cum-capability based force or are content with threat based force structure. However, the connotation of adopting either of the models is completely different. Threat based force structure is capable of dealing only with the threats that are already known and on the horizon but threat-cum-capability based force is structured to deal with the threat that is on the horizon and also the threat that could manifest in future whose contours are yet not defined or known. One is futuristic in nature and other contemporary. Given the spectrum of the threats from traditional to nontraditional, India ideally should adopt the model of threat-cum-capability based force.

Given the volatile nature of threats, HDO should be an apex body that is able to take quick decisions, create inter-ministerial coordination to build capabilities and leverage them during war or crisis. HDO is supposed to meet periodically to review national security and preparedness of all organs of the state to deal with

the threats. It assumes greater significance in the multi-domain threat scenario since all domains are not military in nature, however, other domains should ideally be developed around military organisations so that they dovetail seamlessly with the military operations during war. Adding layers on existing obsolete structure is not an ideal method to restructure and reform. Multi layered cumbersome advisory committees will only lead to delay in decision making process. The National Security Adviser (NSA), the Strategic Policy Group (SPG), the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) and the NSCS together constitute the NSC. Yet, in spite of such an elaborate system of committees and advisory bodies, the defence planning process is mostly left to the Services Headquarters.¹² HDO should be lean and must avoid adding additional layers of committees and advisers. In the current form, CCS and NSC is duplication and created by an executive order and CCS is formed by an act of Parliament. NSC can only advise and CCS is decision making body. Both are headed by the Prime Minister. The big question is who is advising whom? Happyman Jacob a Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, writes that, "Indian Administrative Service officers whose expertise in defence matters is questionable have a major say in the country's defence planning and decision-making."¹³ Unless such unprofessional add-ons are removed, Defence Reforms are unlikely to head in the right direction.

MoD, with current staffing pattern is unlikely to add value to the decision making process. It takes a lifetime to understand the defence planning process and relate it to the threat perception. Thus, only a professional can comprehend the process of capability building to secure vital national interests. DRDO and DPSUs have failed to meet the aspirations of the defence and have also failed to compete with the best in the business because there are no professionals who can question the DRDO and DPSUs for their repeated failure to deliver on time and with promised quality. Why is that a work force of 30000 employees are unable to produce what 240 scientists of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) of the United States Department of Defense are able to achieve and support the most advance military force in the world. Incidentally, the budget of DARPA and DRDO is almost same but what DARPA has

achieved is something that DRDO must introspect about. It is high time that recommendation of Kargil Review Committee Report to merge MoD with Service Headquarters be implemented. It will make DRDO, DPSU and OFB accountable to users rather than to bureaucrats. It will be resisted by bureaucrats but government can bring in this merger through an act of Parliament.

The US took decisive steps, especially during Bill Clinton and GW Bush period to use potential of RMA as a corner stone for military reforms. India needs to examine that if not the modernisation of conventional military capabilities then what must be developed to maintain the military balance? Though there is no alternative to capability building, India should look at niche technology to get an edge or a parity with the adversaries. India should attempt to build capability through artificial intelligence, cyber and space. Electronic warfare is vital, but ironically India continues to rely upon foreign equipment from Israel and erstwhile Soviet Union. No nation will part with the critical technology and India will get only the systems that are already in the second phase of service globally. However, India should take two steps to develop electronic warfare capabilities, first by domestic research and development and second, by joint venture with Japan and Israel.

There is no denying the fact that future wars are likely to be multi-domain and thus, theatrisation is the only way to build Armed Forces to fight and win future wars. This is the easiest part if HDO and MoD are reformed and restructured. However, theatrisation is not enough if Armed Forces are kept at low technological threshold.

The priority at this stage is creation of cyber and information command because war in this domain is already going on and targets will be the command and control networks, cyber space and even the cognitive domain. Lani Kass, a Special Assistant to the US Air Force Chief of Staff, four months after the digital assault on Estonia said, "The first battle in the wars of the future will be over the control of cyberspace, and if we don't dominate cyberspace, we won't be able to dominate air, space, land, or sea domains."¹⁴ State on state wars in cyber domain are already on

and Russia and Estonia are engaged in every day war. Tanel Sepp says, "Cyber has become a really serious tool in disrupting society for military purposes."¹⁵ The US Army is conducting Cyber operations under Cyber Command that functions under National Security Agency. Similarly in the UK, National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) functions under GCHQ, (the UK's signals intelligence and cyber security agency). Peculiarity of both the set up adopted by US and UK is that all critical appointments in NSA and GCHQ are held by uniformed personnel and Cyber Command is entirely staffed by military personnel. The reason is simple because it requires discipline, loyalty and integrity of a very high order. Civilian employees may be more professional but when it comes to discipline, secrecy and loyalty to the flag; it requires uniformed professionals. It is time that Indian security must cast aside police mentality and let the Combined Arms Cyber Command be raised at priority. Political leadership may not be aware that entire military hardware can be rendered unusable if cyber and information defensive and offensive capabilities do not exist.

Civil-military relationship in India has never been at its best including during crisis. Lacklustre political response and inhibition of political leadership to directly interact with the military to build capabilities has allowed bureaucracy to develop a master and servant relationship with military. Civilian leadership is risk averse because structural and cultural barriers persist between political leadership, bureaucracy and military professionals. Whereas, military and bureaucracy are co-equal and in fact bureaucracy is supposed to serve the Forces to ensure that they remain fit for war. During crisis Mrs Indira Gandhi ensured that she dealt directly with the military and she found it convenient and best way to handle 1971 war in most efficient manner. She ensured bureaucracy was kept out of the entire planning process. The advantage Mrs Gandhi had was that she was privy to what went wrong during 1962 and was shrewd enough not to commit same mistakes that Nehru had committed. It is high time political leadership took a call and merged Armed Forces Headquarters with MoD and set right once for all the turbulent relationship that Indian military has had with bureaucracy. In fact, there is no need to have such a large staff at MoD that has neither professional

expertise nor accountability and more often than not has been seen as stumbling block in capability building.

Defence Reforms and Central Armed Police Forces

Another issue that is normally not debated is militarisation of Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) at the cost of building military capabilities. CAPF militarisation indicates failure of law and order agencies which led to the armed revolt that requiring militarisation of CAPF. The fact is, that since the budget for security (external and internal) is finite and if CAPFs are being militarised, it is certainly at the cost of military capabilities. Militarisation of CAPF and deteriorating law and order situation will directly impact capability building. While making a road map for capability building, government needs to carry out introspection to ascertain the failure that has led to militarisation of CAPF? How can it be restricted so that same budget can be made available for modernisation of the Armed Forces?

Another related issue that needs to be debated is that a big dichotomy exists in border management. Police-led CAPF looks at borders from policing point of view and military looks at creating opportunities during hot war. The border wars will be lost if border defence forces are unable to take proactive measures and deliver secure launch pads to Army during the war. Half the battle will be lost if adversaries are allowed to take control of vital passes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) or Line of Control (LOC). To fight successful defensive and offensive battles, dominance of LOC, LAC and no man's land is vital. Whosoever controls the borders and critical passes will dominate the initial phase of operations and deny advantage to adversaries. As a result, the command of border guarding forces should be stable and directions should be unambiguous at the most critical period of war when there is transition from peace to war. It can't be in a state of turbulence and change of command at that juncture is suicidal. India needs to resolve this aspect because if border defence forces are unable to secure the tactically important geographical features, holding formations will not be able to bring balance in defensive posture to end the war with military gains.

Conclusion

The three pillars of national security the political leadership, military and bureaucracy have to be on the same page to carryout defence reforms. During peace time, when the focus is on capability building, all the three pillars are required to develop synergy. Political leadership is required to give directions and determine what capabilities a nation must possess to secure national interests and military is required to then formulate nitty gritty of capability building including the process of defence planning. Bureaucracy is required to ensure resources are made available and other agencies responsible for capability building deliver on time with desired quality. Though this process is conspicuous by absence in India, however, the reforms are required to reset this process and develop synergy among the three stakeholders for common purpose of securing vital national interests.

Endnotes

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