

## **Analysis of India's Ability to Fight a 2-front War**

**Ravi Rikhye**

**R**avi Rikhye, with almost half a century of experience in South

Asian military affairs, a writer and contributor to many forums, blogs and magazines/journals, is a distinguished author and his expertise in military matters is well known. His earlier books (*The War That Never Was: Story of India's Strategic Failures, Taking Back Kashmir - Operations Brasstacks, Chequerboard, Trident Replayed, Militarization of Mother India, Concise World Armies*) have been the subject of much discussion in military circles.

The book invites an eerie feeling of déjà vu. How is it that something which is obvious to all is not seen by the 'Blind men of Hindoostan'? As was to be expected from Ravi Rikhye, he has presented a well researched book that once again leaves the reader wondering whether he has a direct line to the Indian military establishment. Truth is sometimes terrifying, unpalatable and bitter. We are taken through a journey comprising eighteen chapters as the author builds up his case about India's ability to fight a two front war. His deductions are an open secret and require no study of rocket science. A two front war? With the present condition of the armed forces, their pitiful and outdated equipment profile combined with the myopic vision of the politician-bureaucrat nexus; the country will be lucky if we can hold our own in a one front war! As the author puts it so succinctly, spending barely '1.6% of GDP, we simply cannot meet our two front requirements'. Now to this add an ill equipped force, demoralised and systematically downgraded in the national pecking order, a military in the hands of politicians, bureaucrats and security 'experts' who treat it with suspicion and disdain. Forget about modernisation and strategic thought! Obviously, the national priorities are skewed.

Leaving aside a few inaccuracies in the equipment profile, force structure, orbat and existing deployment of the Chinese, Indian and Pakistani armies, the author has placed the chess pieces very sensibly on the chess board. But why would there be a war — or a two front war for that matter? Simple, all wars are for territory and domination. And as far as Pakistan is concerned, for this country it is make hay while the sun shines. Should there be a Sino-Indian confrontation, this country with 'magnificent delusions' will pounce at the opportunity.

As in the (great) game of chess, in all openings there is a struggle for key territory and an effort to deploy pieces and pawns in useful positions. He who plans, anticipates and plays his pieces before the opposing side moves, wins the game - the '*Kings Indian Defence*'. The author cleverly war games most of the moves and all likely scenarios of how a two front war can unfold given the existing and proposed force levels. Firstly, to hold our own if attacked, secondly to hold and then to win if attacked and thirdly to decisively win by starting a war or undertaking an offensive. And all these scenarios cater for a two front war and the force levels to achieve the military goals.

The crux of the authors' argument is the mathematical working out of what in military jargon is called 'troops to task'. For purposes of planning, this cannot be faulted. Keeping in mind the current force structure of the Indian Army (IA) (14 corps and 38 divisions), the author quite accurately calculates the force structure needed for a two front confrontation: (a) 43 Divisions for defence, no capability for even a limited offensive (b) 54 Divisions for guaranteed defensive and offensive capability (c) 72 Divisions to win solid victories and/or regain lost territories. Nothing drastically wrong in his calculations, something which is based on very simple planning figures of 1:3 for conventional attack and as high as 1:8 or even 1:10 for mountain warfare. To this, the author has factored in the requirements for a two front war in terms of modern equipment for the army, navy and the airforce vis-à-vis what the two opponents can bring to bear. As the book goes on to discuss the political, economic, military and industrial ramifications and lessons learnt from various wars, including the two world wars, what becomes clear is that mathematical superiority of the

force structure alone is not necessarily the formula for military success. Equipment, technology, educational standards of troops, belief in the cause, training, national character and will to carry on fighting in adversity are some of the imponderables which require factoring in. And this is more applicable where you have no territorial ambitions as such; but what you desire is simply to ensure you are not taken lightly by the street bully. You want to have the recognised ability to hold your own, thus forcing the enemy to exercise caution or instil in him the fear of a pyrrhic victory.

With a strong military also goes the requirement of national ethos of 'not giving up' and national mobilisation for the war effort. The book discusses as to how the British, the Russians, the Vietnamese, the Americans, the Germans had mobilised the entire nation for one purpose - to build up a military-industrial complex to win the war. Wars are never won or lost by the military. It is the nation and the citizens who win or lose, something which our leadership tends to forget. The book also lays bare the woefully inadequate military spending as compared to other countries and our main adversaries. Keeping in mind the revolution in military affairs and the tectonic shift towards technology in modern warfare (the soldier matters; but now the push button is an integral part of the battlefield), Rikhye dwells briefly on the reconfiguration and rehashing of formations down to brigade and unit level to make the forces leaner and meaner, which incidentally is an ongoing exercise in all progressive armies. Examples of Chinese, American and German models, past and present, have been critically examined. A word of caution, relevant here is to remember that most Asian armies consciously trade technology for manpower in their militaries. The reasons are obvious. Though the author has not openly stated that our threshold acceptance of body bags is higher than, say the US, the inference is there to see. Nonetheless, if we are ready to spend billions on free lunches and populist schemes, surely doubling of our defence spending need not necessarily raise the guns or butter debate. The book also focuses on the rather dismal appreciation of the Indian leaderships' resolve to modernise its military and to use it as a means of power projection. We have never fought a total war in which the entire nation is involved and

in which every citizen is either a combatant or directly involved in the war effort as the very existence of the country is threatened.

The imprescriptible requirements of a two front war are firstly, the availability of militarily acceptable force levels; secondly, the ability to hold one front while you tackle the other and; thirdly, sufficient residual power with the ability to disengage and shift troops/equipment rapidly to the other front. This switching of forces requires road, air and rail capability coupled with interoperability, secure lines of communication, good intelligence, sufficient reserves, leadership, national resilience and foresight. All this is to be planned much before and not once the balloon goes up. You cannot go for 'panicky' ammunition and equipment purchases once the front/fronts are activated. Kargil is a case in point discussed by the author. You also require support, backing of friendly and 'neutral' countries and a foreign policy which does not leave you isolated while you tackle the twin adversaries simultaneously.

Chapter 10 discusses naval assets and naval strategy not only of India, Pakistan and China but also of the major naval powers and the countries likely to fish in troubled waters. What Rikhye misses is that in the present day context, carrier battle groups are only for sabre rattling and for bullying smaller nations. Gone are the World War II days when mighty carrier groups clashed to dominate the seas. A large nuclear powered carrier will not last 48 hours in a hot war, more so against an enemy which has a measure of even moderate missile technology. Irrespective of the size of its escorts or its screen or the EW/ECM cover it enjoys, the carrier is a prime target and its loss will be catastrophic in terms of national prestige and morale. In a hot war scenario, China will never send a carrier fleet to the IOR and India will not send its fleet to the Straits of Malacca. By themselves, Australia, Japan, Indonesia, Philippines and New Zealand will not tangle with the Chinese unless the US Navy is there with its firepower. Even then, the carriers will be the most vulnerable high value targets.

Towards the end (Chapter 17), is discussed a very important facet of military and national strategy-'Intelligence: its collection,

its evaluation and misevaluation'. Again, what the author misses here is that for any meaningful operations in the 33 Corps/4 Corps zones, a massive amount of troops and war material are required to be inducted in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). For us, the trigger here is the moment the Chinese start movement by crossing the T'sang Po. And T'sang Po can easily be observed by satellite, aerial recce and UAV's. Whether we want to begin interdiction before the build-up is completed or wait for them to hit us (it will be too late then), is a political-military decision. It will also depend whether a shooting war has started in the Northern and Central sectors. Even if the Chinese want to address all the sectors simultaneously (as they did in 1962), crossing the T'sang Po is a dead giveaway.

Can we depend on other countries to come to our assistance? Perhaps not, there definitely will be no boots on the ground from anyone. Nonetheless, it needs to be added that if China decides to start a war, a lot of infrastructure along the border, and in TAR, will be destroyed. The Indians will use their air power and so will the Chinese. Dams, bridges, railway lines, tunnels will be targeted. Here the Chinese have more to lose. By virtue of our 'no escalation' mindset, we will wait for the Chinese to use tactical missiles first. Nuclear weapons will be a no-no. Of course, both nations may do missile and nuclear rattling, both will say 'we will not be the first to use nuclear weapons'. At some places the Chinese will capture some territory and in some places the Indians will capture some territory. The UN will go into overdrive. What further could have been highlighted in the book is that American, Australian, Japanese, Filipino and Vietnamese ships will finally have unrestricted access to the China Seas. Will Taiwan with the tacit approval of the Americans declare 'independence'? Chinese and Indian navies will clash in the Indian Ocean and the Indians will have the advantage of its 'unsinkable' aircraft carriers, viz peninsular India and our own land / island bases astride the Indian Ocean. Dominating the Straits of Hormuz will be India's best bet.

Irrespective of who gets a more bloodier nose, there will be mistrust between India and China for the next thirty years after the war. At every forum, the two countries will try and destroy each

other diplomatically and economically. The so called 'Belt' will finish once for all and so will the economic corridor. The reader can draw his own conclusions after reading the book. Two more things come to your mind after reading the book. Firstly, irrespective whether Bangladesh remains neutral or not in a Sino-Indian faceoff, the road/railway network of Bangladesh will be 'commandeered' by India, by force if necessary. At what stage? Obviously the 'request' will be based on the threat perception and the way the war is going. More so in the unlikely event that the Chinese have been able to advance through the Chumbi Valley and/or the Siliguri Corridor is threatened.

This is a book with a lot of facts, figures, orbats, force levels and data duly supported with appropriate citations. Though alright for an individual interested in further research or for purposes of authentication, it does become a bit heavy for the average reader. It would have been prudent to keep a lot of these comparisons, tables and data as appendices so that they could be referred on as required basis. Also, the average reader would appreciate reading the force levels (ie quantity/number of corps/divisions/brigades etc.) rather than the actual identification by tactical numbers. All the same, credit to the author for painstaking research and analysis.

Bobby Fischer, the iconoclastic genius who was one of the greatest chess players the world has ever seen, had once famously remarked, 'Tactics flow from a superior position'. War and foreign policy are akin to a game of chess. Ravi Rikhye's book says it all. It is axiomatic that if we are to exhibit our strength – our strategic and tactical prowess-then we must first reach good 'positions' where our future moves, long term planning and tactics will favour us whilst placing our opposition in totally untenable positions. Not much different from *'The Six Fold Policy of the Arthasastra'* enunciated by Kautilya as far back as 300 BC !! At the present point of time, the analysis of the author is indisputable. India does not have the capability to fight a successful two front war. We can defend ourselves, we can buy time. We may lose territory but there will be no rout, and this will not be because of our political/bureaucratic leadership: it will be in spite of

it, solely because of the ethos, leadership and professionalism of our military.

Can we mount an offensive against Pakistan and manage to hold the Chinese with the present force structure? No. But then you need a man like Stalin or Churchill at the helm of affairs to bear in the national effort and mobilise the entire financial, economic, industrial resources for a battle for survival. Your adversary having double or triple your resources does not necessarily mean the disintegration of your fighting capability. It is not the Army, it is the nation that has to fight for existence and for that you require a well equipped, well armed, well trained, fully motivated military proud of its standing with the assured knowledge that it holds a place of pride in every citizens' eye. That assured, the soldier will then face *'fearful odds and will be ready to die for the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods'*.

An engaging, honest and hard hitting book which does not spare any punches and lays bare the sloth, lack of strategic thought and the sickening mindset plaguing this country as far as our strategic thought is concerned. But does any Indian bureaucrat or politician really care? If we are to be really taken seriously as an 'emerging' power with the fastest growing economy, if we are to claim having the world's youngest work force, if we pride ourselves as the world's most populous nation and if we claim to have the third largest army, the fourth largest airforce and the seventh largest navy; then we also require to have muscles which can be flexed. Not just a hollow skeleton.

Ravi Rikhye, well brought out, you have said what George Santayana had alluded to a long time back, *'Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it'* ! This book should not only be read by the Indian military establishment, but by every Indian citizen.

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