

Re-structuring, Staffing and Equipping of the Indian Armed Forces

Major General RS Yadav, VSM (Retd)[@]

Abstract

India faces a Two and a Half Front active and ever increasing threat viz. China, Pakistan and Internal Terrorism & Insurgency, which definitely places the nation in a high threat category and, therefore, the Indian Armed Forces ought to be structured, manned and equipped on threat basis and not on short term considerations of revenue availability (though this may be an important guiding factor). The Indian soldier has always fought the wars more with personal valour and spirit, as state of the art equipment was mostly not available, so like it was on the icy hills of 1962, or while assaulting on the suicidal cliffs of Kargil or while facing the terrorist bullets in J&K with large deficiency of bullet proof jackets for quite a period. The fighter pilots too have never wavered to fly the ageing jets, and nor have the helicopter pilots ever held back from flying their machines much beyond their endurance and ceilings to support their comrades, and similarly the navy also has been making do with retro-fitted and kitted vessels. Lately, swayed by budget considerations, an impression has been created that the Armed Forces can make do with weapons and equipment of lower specifications. While this too is a subject for debate, one thing is clear that if the soldiers get a feeling that they might be equipped with comparatively inferior weapon systems than their adversaries, it could severely impact the morale. This article outlines

in brief the problems and the suggested solutions.

Introduction

The Indian Armed Forces are tasked with the solemn responsibility of defending the territorial integrity of the nation against external threats in order to provide a secure environment for the nation and its people to blossom within. In times of need, the Armed Forces also happen to be the last bastion of the government against any internal disturbance or crisis. With two major active challenges, Pakistan on the western front and China on the northern front, and both becoming more aggressive with each passing day, India is already faced with a serious and difficult situation on its land borders and sea front today. And, if militancy and terrorism linked to the proxy war by Pakistan, residual/latent insurgencies in the North East (NE) and Naxalism in the heartland are taken into account, then India possibly may figure at number one in the security threat matrix of the world. Despite these looming threats challenging our very territorial integrity, and consequently our dream of emerging as a reckonable power in the regional or world arena, there seems to be a big mismatch in the plans and preparations to face these challenges.

The Failings

In the view of the author, the following are the problems:

- (a) **Lack of Consistency and Continuity in Plans of Force Development.** In the absence of a National Security Strategy (NSS), the three Services have been growing independently in their respective domains. Each change in hierarchy through superannuation, promotion or rotation, changes their priorities as per individual perceptions, which upsets the complete chain of the plans of Force Development. Many times, there is re-invention of the wheel with attendant penalties on economy and synergy.

(b) Wavering Assessments of Enemy Capabilities.

Despite the continuing streak of machinations of Pakistan, we failed to anticipate Kargil. Similarly, despite emergence of China as a reckonable power with rising aspirations, its continuing border infrastructure development and heavy defence budgetary allocations, we have possibly again failed to anticipate its futuristic coercive designs like the ever-aggressive border transgressions since 2013. Rather, own plan slippages and failings viz. non-completion of strategic border roads and stalling of the raising of the Mountain Strike Corps, have been intriguing.

(c) Lack of Synergy of Forces. The much publicised 'Cold Start Doctrine', drafted post the missed opportunity of 2002¹, has not been implementable in letter and spirit with varying perception of it in the three Services.² While limited scope operations, viz. Surgical Strikes of 2016 and Balakot Airstrikes of 2019, have definitely exhibited our national resolve for aggressive action but without synergy amongst three services, these standalone actions cannot be presumed to deter the adversaries in all-out conventional war situations.

The Threat

India's security aspects are deeply inter-twined with Pakistan and China, as India has boundary issues with both, and the situation has become more complex as our territories are held by them, some has been ceded by Pakistan to China, and now China has built the BRI Super Highway Project on these illegally occupied territories, and has also signed an agreement to construct a Dam on Jhelum at Kohala in PoK³. Because of this tenuous situation, India has live and un-demarcated borders in the form of Line of Control (LoC) and Line of Actual Control (LAC) with Pakistan and China respectively, which are prone to continued hostilities. Also, the LoC and LAC pass through one of the most hostile weather and terrain conditions, where even the capability of modern technology fails or is drastically reduced, thereby making human backup essential. Moreover, the Indian shorelines, which were earlier threatened only by

Pakistan, are now equally threatened by China with the enhanced blue water capability of PLA Navy and numerous support bases which China has secured around India. The futuristic trends could be summarised as under:

- (a) **Pakistan.** With already diluted force parity ratios on the western front and acquisition of nuclear capability, Pakistan may continue to facilitate increasing Chinese presence in the occupied territories to indirectly make China a partner, and deter India from taking any precipitative action.
- (b) **China.** While China may have little reason to launch a full-scale war on India in the near future, but it's ever increasing aggressive transgressions could soon transform into 'nibbling actions' along the LAC to gradually take control of strategic locations of disputed territories. This may be to settle the boundary dispute later from a position of strength. At the same time, it may continue with attempts to wean away our neighbours.

Re-Structuring of the Armed Forces

Re-structuring of the Armed Forces has been a long felt operational need and the government has very thoughtfully paved the way by creating the post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). This will also result in good optimisations all across, resulting in savings of precious revenue. However, since changes are always resisted in any organisation, letting the implementation to be open-ended, spread over years, could spell disaster due to creation of flux in the whole system in this high threat period. As such, following need to be considered:

- (a) The overall macro plan of creation of all the Theatre Commands needs to be war-gamed at the apex levels with participation of all stakeholders for concurrent implementation. The following should be important considerations:
 - (i) Principle of 'Unity of Task' is essential, meaning 'One Job to One Outfit'. Therefore, the Theatre Commands, as envisaged, should be restricted to

only three, viz. Northern Command (for China), Western Command (for Pakistan) and Maritime Command (for Shoreline & Islands), duly supported by Strategic Command (Missiles, Cyber, Space, AI and Special Forces), Air Defence Command (Air & AD), Training Command and Maintenance and Logistics Command.

(ii) Retaining 'Operational Responsibility' with the respective Chiefs and giving charge of force structuring and acquisitions to the CDS has brought in an unwanted duality in the system. Before the proposed 'Theaterisation' is put into effect, the CDS will need to be empowered with overall control, with adequate staff to man the National War Centre, and the charter of the Service Chiefs may have to be modified to remove the internal schism in the system once for all.

(b) All Organisations, when generally left to themselves to plan their own growth and structure, will tend to favour themselves discreetly leading to creation of unwanted appendages or practices. And, the Controlling Ministries/HQs too generally tend to go by their recommendations and plans. It is, therefore, time that we give the Indian Think Tanks their due, and guide their efforts to desired topics, lest the Services continue favouring their own agendas without caring for creation of duplicities and the factor of synergy. This article recommends that a sub-committee be formed under the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), which should issue a Calendar of Topics / Issues to the experts, think tanks and concerned organisations for a monthly/quarterly debate so we can use an integrated national expertise to get unbiased best solutions in the field of national security — including in a major part — the armed forces.

(c) The strength of the Armed Forces is 13-14 lakhs and the strength of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) is much larger. Except for the conventional war, which is

the prime domain of the regular armed forces, both are trained for the generic security duties and logically both should be used in tandem, wherever feasible, to conserve national assets and revenue. But possibly based on the US concept (post 9/11) of a separate Homeland Security⁴, we too have tried to keep the CAPFs under the control of Home Ministry. However, this, over a period of time, has led to duality of effort not only along the borders (LoC & LAC), but also in terrorism affected areas. It needs to be understood that India has active borders where Armed Forces are operationally responsible and, therefore, placing the CAPFs under operational control in such areas will not only result in optimisation of effort but over a period of time improve upon the efficiency of the CAPFs. Same should hold good for CAPFs deployed in terror affected areas of J&K and other places. The CAPFs deployed in IB Sectors or in the hinterland could continue under the Home Ministry. Such an arrangement would result in reduction of overall force levels requirements, and lead to sizeable revenue savings, and overall improvement in security management at national level.

Staffing Aspects

The Decision Makers should be doubly careful against bringing in revenue driven changes in manning policies and procedures which could directly, and seriously, impact the efficiency levels. Certain proposals or ideas which have been/are possibly under consideration and debate are analysed below along with possible solutions (largely related to Indian Army):

(a) **Tour of Duty (TOD)**⁵. The TOD proposal has been mooted as a way to reduce military expenditure. Beyond the stringent selection process and rigorous training, follows a strong regimentation process. It normally takes 3 to 5 years to graduate a Young Soldier to a Trained Soldier category to facilitate gradual but strong bonding, blooding and excellence. And, it is for all such reasons that the performance of regular Armed Forces in proactive operations has always been better than the CAPFs. While

the capabilities of a 'civil volunteer' are not under doubt, no novice can ever attain the combat proficiency of a trained officer or soldier, or imbibe the organisational ethos in such proposed short tenures. Therefore, such inductees will either have to be protected during operations or kept in sheltered appointments, which not only will defeat the very purpose of this exercise, but will become an additional burden on regular soldiers. Moreover, any injury or death could result in larger expenses for the government. Such experimentation, if necessary, could initially be done with CAPFs, which would also adequately satisfy the feelings of national fervour and adrenaline gush of the youth. The avenue of Territorial Army is already available for those who wish to serve the nation in OG uniform for shorter/intermittent periods.

(b) **Enhancing Age of Superannuation⁶.** Another proposal for reducing defence expenditure is enhancing age of superannuation. The logic is that retaining trained manpower for a longer duration will automatically defer pension related revenue expenditures in the interim. Post Kargil, a considered decision was made to improve upon the age profile of the junior leaders so that they could shoulder the physical challenges of war, especially in forbidding terrain where all our disputed borders lie. Therefore, it would be prudent not to tinker with the physical and efficiency levels of the Armed Forces for reasons validated by battle.

(c) **Increase the Support Cadre of Officers, and reduce Permanent Cadre.** Earlier, the majority of Short Service Commission (SSC) officers used to remain fully motivated to get their Permanent Regular Commission (PRC), or they used to leave after 5 years, so one hardly came across a de-motivated officer. So if now it is being contemplated to have a larger Support Cadre of officers who will be eased off without pension benefits, it is likely that their risk-taking willingness will be much lesser. The time-tested system of SSC may be good to follow with no extensions beyond 5 years if not granted PRC. Retention

of SSC officers beyond five years to enable them to resettle is a humane approach but then the organisation is made to carry dead weight, and actually such officers find it much difficult to settle later as Corporates look for young entrants.

(d) Compulsory Armed Forces Service for those seeking Govt Employment in Officers Category.

Forcing candidates, already selected for other government services, to first serve a tenure in the Armed Forces will be fraught with danger, as except for a few adventurous ones, the balance will preserve themselves for safer and better days ahead, thus seriously impacting performance of the Armed Forces. If such a scheme is considered for implementation then it will be better to ask all aspirants for government jobs to first join the Armed Forces through existing UPSC Examination System. Then, towards completion of the tenure fixed (3 or 5 years), as decided by the government, desirous officers with unblemished records could appear for another modified UPSC exam to qualify for Civil Services. This would ensure that the best material comes to the Armed Forces, and a further selected lot joins the Civil Services.

Equipping Aspects

The hardware inventories have a service life of 20 to 30 years. Therefore, one wrong or delayed decision can seriously impact the profile of the Armed Forces for decades. In present day context, the following merit attention:

(a) The Defence Industry and its related R&D in India remains at a very nascent stage. There is little point in debating the reasons for this state of affairs but the following few examples will best illustrate the ground reality:

(i) The indigenous INSAS rifle was found to be far from satisfactory and despite years of efforts, the problems could not be rectified. Therefore, all the elite outfits viz. National Security Guard (NSG), Police Commandos, Special Forces have preferred imported

weapons and even the RR Units in J&K prefer the old but tested AK 47 rifles. And now, having failed even to produce basic personal weapons, a plant to manufacture AK 203 series of weapons has been set up, with Russian collaboration, to meet the urgent needs of the Armed Forces.

(ii) Despite the dire need and our problematic dependence on imported A Vehicles, we have now produced the Arjun tank which runs on an imported engine⁷. And, its heavy weight and large size seriously impinge upon its utility and strategic mobility.

(iii) As regards IAF, while the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) made indigenous Tejas Mark 1 has just started coming in to meet the initial requirements, the Mark 1A and Mark 2 versions are years away from the production stage. And again, the major points to note are that Tejas too uses an imported engine as the indigenous engine project is making no headway since 1990⁸, and Tejas variants would only meet a particular requirement of the IAF which would still require heavier Multi Role Combat Aircrafts akin to Rafael class, for which there is yet no indigenous plan or capability.

(b) In today's world no country wants to share technology, especially in the field of weapons and equipment. China, during the height of Cold War, went almost underground to silently build up its industry and Armed Forces. It is an open secret that it even resorted to stealing aircraft designs, and possibly poached a lot of weapon experts on the disintegration of the erstwhile USSR. Similarly, India, too, will have to possibly tread this path to self-reliance in defence technology on its own, and 10 to 15 years may be the minimum time frame.

(c) Globalisation is crumbling and nationalistic fervours are now gaining strength. Therefore, being, or seen to be being, part of any formal or informal alliance (like Quad venture of US, India, Japan and Australia against China) could create challenges to attainment of self-reliance as

even the seemingly friendly countries may cooperate only within limits of their own national interests.

So, while boost to self-reliance in defence sector is a much desired requirement, rather an imperative, the following aspects will need due attention:

(a) Since Indian Defence Industry is not prepared at the moment to meet the current requirements of its Armed Forces, a sudden stoppage of imports can be disastrous. Hence, a well deliberated fresh procurement plan for next 10 to 15 years should be drawn up, in consonance with our threat perceptions and capital availability, and the Forces need to be kept fully equipped to face any eventuality. This plan could be continuously modified as the indigenous products get fully developed and tested for induction.

(b) While certain current General Staff Qualitative Requirements (GSQRs) may seem to be inflated, and possibly need corrections, but the new GSQRs ought to be of a level sufficient to counter the weaponry and equipment to be held by our adversaries, and cannot be diluted to a level suiting the indigenous capability.

(c) While the government has recently announced that the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) and Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) will be corporatized to improve upon their accountability and efficiency but little improvement may be possible till these are placed in open competition with private industry, to ensure the distance to self-reliance is covered in a faster timeframe.

(d) The recent announcement to enhance the FDI in Defence Industry to 74% will possibly attract some foreign players. However, technically the aim of self-reliance will not be achieved by 'Make in India' (as in it, India will generate jobs and revenue, but will continue to remain dependent) but by 'Made by India' (where we get or develop the technology). Every deal would need to be well

negotiated for a complete transfer of technology, including all aspects for the complete life span of the equipment.

Conclusion

The decision makers ought to collectively deliberate and implement the re-structuring at the earliest and ensure that the current operational needs of the Armed Forces are met to maintain the operational preparedness at all times. The Chinese transgressions into Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso area may just be the beginning of a larger threat in the offing. Similarly, there appears to be no indication that our Western neighbours' belligerence will ever wear off. There is little doubt that any experimentation with the time tested staffing policies of the Armed Forces need a larger debate incorporating all stakeholders, think tanks and especially the serving soldiers to gauge their reactions and acceptability. Victory in war is the result of a collective endeavour of an integrated homogeneous team and not of a heterogeneous force put together for fiscal savings.

Endnotes

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⁸ Swarajya Team, "Kaveri Project: Lack Of Testing Facilities In India A Serious Hurdle In Development Of Indigenous Jet Engine", Swarajya, Feb 14, 2020. Accessed Jun 06, 2020 from <https://swarajyamag.com/news-brief/kaveri-project-lack-of-testing-facilities-in-india-a-serious-hurdle-in-development-of-indigenous-jet-engines>

Major General Rajendra Singh Yadav, VSM (Retd) has a rich experience of Perspective Planning, Military Operations and Intelligence, and Force Re-structuring. He has been a Defence Advisor of India in Saudi Arabia. Post retirement, he was the Vice Chancellor of a private University at Rohtak, India.

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