

Self-Sufficiency in National Security

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Introduction

Donald Trump's election as the President of the USA has highlighted three major aspects currently trending across the globe. First and foremost is an attempt to shun globalisation and safeguard perceived national identity by decrying immigration and preserving employment for 'original inhabitants'. This phenomenon is increasingly mirrored in what is happening across Europe today. Starting with the Brexit referendum, Right Wing inspired opposition to European Union and immigration from the Middle East is manifesting itself in resurgence of support for parties which were nowhere on the scene till a couple of years back. Thus, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, AfD in Germany and Finns Party in Finland have gained prominence beyond expectations in a short time. Though others are gaining ground too but the possibility of forthcoming elections in other countries throwing up some surprising results cannot be ruled out.

Secondly, the possibility of a gradual withdrawal by the United States from its role of being the leading super power of the world and a bulwark of democratic values across the globe is creating substantial ripples in the international environment. The US decision to withdraw from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has, on one hand, resulted in serious apprehensions among nations opposing Chinese expansionism in South and East China Seas, and on the other, we are witnessing increasing Chinese efforts to fill the power vacuum created by the US move. Likewise, in Europe, US insistence on other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members to spend two per cent of their GDP and take on increased responsibility for the defence of Europe is causing considerable unease and worry among European nations. While the *quid pro quo* approach is seen as not befitting the stature of the US, it nevertheless underlines the basic premise that national security of a nation cannot be leased out.

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Thirdly, the Trump administration has announced a whopping 10 per cent increase in the US military budget. Thus, while on one hand, the US is signaling intent to withdraw from the global trouble spots; on the other it is enhancing its military capabilities to intervene effectively when and where required. On 06 April 2017, it rained 59 Tomahawk missiles on Syria in retaliation to use of chemical warfare. On 13 April, it dropped the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB *aka* Mother of All Bombs) against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The possibility of a conflict with North Korea in view of its threatening posture against the US is not ruled out in the short term. Obviously, these actions indicate a continued involvement in global affairs thus, underlining an apparent contradiction in words and deeds.

The resultant uncertainty in the security environment reinforces the conviction that nations need to be self sufficient in matters of their national security. Indeed, while it may be good to have alliances and linkages, a surer way of dealing with threats to national security is to develop own national capabilities rather than be dependent on others.

Importance of Self-sufficiency in National Security

We need to look at India's experience since Independence to understand the importance of self-sufficiency in national security requirements. Till the Chinese invaded India in 1962, the defence services were considered a drain on the country's resources. Post-independence, Mr Nehru's idealism led him to believe that India's thrust towards peace in global affairs and a policy of peaceful co-existence with all its neighbours would automatically propel India to a role of natural leadership internationally. Indian military was also viewed as a tool of British imperialism, despite its positive role in attaining Independence. Consequently, there was a concerted effort to clip its wings and assign it to a gradually diminishing role in nation building. Thus, by the time the Chinese invasion came, the Indian military had been reduced to an ill-equipped, poorly-led and ill-clothed force which was hardly capable of stopping the Chinese onslaught. Mr Nehru is on record, having desperately sought the US help to restore India's territorial integrity. To our good luck, while the US was still deliberating on the request, the Chinese declared a unilateral ceasefire and retreated back to their bases in a short span of time. The entire sordid episode left Mr Nehru a thoroughly disillusioned man and was perhaps one of the reasons for his early demise.

1962 acted as a wakeup call and the political leadership started devoting more time, resources and efforts in rebuilding the military. Thus, by 1965, when the Pakistanis thought that the Indian military was still in the same state as in 1962 and they could exploit this weakness to their advantage, they launched large scale operations to wrest Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). However, they were in for a shock and were given a befitting response. Behind our successes lay the efforts at rebuilding the military since 1962. Active Soviet assistance also had a role to play in this rapid transformation.

The process of rebuilding and allocating greater resources to the military continued and found full expression in our magnificent victory and creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Capture of more than 93,000 Pakistani military personnel as prisoners brought Pakistan to its knees, a humiliation they have been smarting under till date. The importance of suitably modernising the military to deliver on the national security front once again got highlighted in the process.

Again in 1999, when Pakistan attempted its misadventure in Kargil, Indian military's crushing response underlined the fact that conventionally, Pakistan is incapable of defeating India. Shifting its strategy and supporting the proxy war in J&K since then has also not borne the desired results for Pakistan.

Throughout this period, Russia provided invaluable support in terms of equipment, weaponry and munitions to the Indian military to acquit itself as it did. Last couple of years has seen India being the largest importer of military hardware globally. However, military hardware is exorbitantly expensive for a country like India to afford on a continuing basis for modernising the military. In an era of diminishing budgets and rising costs this trend cannot be sustained as we would get less and less for the megabucks we may be willing to spend. Most importantly, national security of the country cannot be held hostage to the policies and whims and fancies of the suppliers.

This leaves us with no choice but to develop a degree of self-sufficiency in manufacturing military hardware to meet our security needs. The current dispensation started the 'Make in India' campaign when it came to power in 2014. It indeed is a step in the right direction. However, the progress so far has been regrettably slow with little chance of major projects fructifying in less than 10-15 years.

Recommendations to Achieve Self-sufficiency in National Security

To move towards self sufficiency, the need is for large scale structural reforms to be undertaken on an emergent basis. The usual policy of doing too little too late is inherently faulty and is never likely to succeed in the long run. Some of the areas requiring major changes are enumerated below:-

(a) **Revamp of Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).** Rather than working on inventing cutting edge technologies which either the others are not prepared to share with us or would do it at exorbitant cost, DRDO is frittering away its resources on non-essential projects, in the process merely reinventing the wheel. The DRDO has been unable to provide state-of-the-art modern battle tank to the Indian Army despite decades of effort, time and cost overruns. Likewise, for even basic items like rifles and carbines, we still have to depend on costly imports. For the Air Force, it has taken the DRDO decades to provide *Tejas*, a Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) which is being finally inducted. Notwithstanding its induction, the deficiency of fighter squadrons in the Air Force has risen to alarming levels which should be a matter of worry for all of us. With the likely retirement of upgraded MIG 21 (BIS) and MIG 25 shortly, this deficiency will increase further. Similarly for the Indian Navy, the first nuclear submarine, *Arihant*, is likely to finally become operational in the near future after a considerable delay. Our shipyards are unable to provide appropriate conventional ships to replace the aging ships in an acceptable time frame. For maritime surveillance, we are once again dependent on costly imports. This state of affairs hardly does credit to the DRDO. The orientation of DRDO must change in concentrating on state-of-the-art equipment and weapon development for a military of the future. Space and cyber warfare are shining examples of the kind of areas they should be working on.

(b) **Private Sector.** For far too long, a thriving indigenous private sector has been kept away from defence production. The rationale given for this was that defence being national security related, only State-run enterprises should be involved with defence production, a reasoning which appears inherently

flawed. Subsequently, private sector was kept out under pressure from trade unions of the Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) and the protectionist policies that the government of the day was constrained to follow as a result. Belatedly, we are realising that PSUs have failed to deliver both in terms of quality and quantities required for the country's needs. Quality control being under the same department as production (Department of Defence Production) has not helped matters and has resulted in deterioration of the quality of equipment being produced and supplied to the military. Huge deficiencies in requisite stock levels for the military's needs, especially in ammunition, are indicative of how excessive reliance on PSUs is affecting our operational preparedness. The fact that investments in the defence sector are rather heavy and have a long gestation period without any certainty of specific supply orders also acts as a demotivating factor for potential entrants to the defence production sector. Defence Production Policy 2016 (DPP 2016), issued by the government, has tried to address some of the concerns but once again it is a case of too little too late. DPP 2016 has also left a number of grey areas and unanswered questions which are likely to lead to further confusion. Like the previous policy, it may have to be repeatedly revised to come up to the expectations. A related aspect is our offset policy and framework for its implementation. While conceptually it is a good step to encourage enhanced indigenisation and 'Make in India' concept, suitable structures for absorption of the offsets have not been created indigenously as part of our post-defence contracts action. As a result, billions of dollars worth of offsets are lying unutilised and perhaps would go waste in the long run. This, despite the fact that vendors invariably hike the prices of their equipment when they are asked to provide offsets.

(c) **Joint Venture Route.** Under the circumstances, the best way to encourage indigenous defence production with active involvement of the private sector and without trying to reinvent the wheel is to adopt the joint venture route. Expertise and knowhow of known foreign defence manufacturers need to be combined with prominent private sector players within the country for forming joint ventures and setting up production

bases in India. Of course, this would imply substantial initial outgo of funds as well as precious foreign exchange but this is the only way of achieving self-sufficiency in defence production in a short period of time. It also opens the doors for exporting defence hardware in the long run, thus recouping expenditure incurred.

(d) **Infrastructure Development.** For defending the country's borders, the military needs suitable infrastructure in the border areas to be able to acquit itself as per the nation's expectations. Lack of infrastructure hampers its operational capability and ability for sustained defence. Our vulnerability is greater especially along our northern borders as we have been unable to develop matching infrastructure on our side compared to what the Chinese have achieved in Tibet in a relatively shorter period. Unless we rapidly develop our road, rail and air infrastructure, we may be exposed to a 1962 like situation all over again.

(e) **Annual Defence Expenditure.** At a conservative estimate, the Chinese defence expenditure has been more than three times our expenditure annually for the last two decades. In fact, as a percentage of the GDP, our defence expenditure has been gradually declining for the last 10 years. Today it stands at a paltry 1.63 per cent of the GDP for the Financial Year 2017-18. This points to the ever increasing gap between the two militaries, putting us at a major disadvantage in case of a future conflict. A series of recommendations to the government to enhance annual defence expenditure to at least three per cent of the GDP have not elicited the desired response. With a likely exposure to a two front scenario, this situation does not bode well for national security.

(f) **Higher Defence Management.** At the time of Independence, we inherited the British system of defence management, a system which suited them as a colonial power to run India. Till date, we have continued with the same, having done some tinkering to it to suit our bureaucratic and political needs. Thus, while Britain as well as the rest of the world has moved way ahead in evolving a cohesive, relevant and responsive higher defence management system keeping

the current security environment in focus, we have continued to languish despite a number of our committees recommending requisite changes. Jointness and integration, buzzwords for comprehensive application of national power in the present day scenarios, have not received any more attention than lip service. The route to self sufficiency lies through appropriate and efficient higher defence management structures overseen by the political authority with sound professional advice.

Conclusion

The above are but a few of the areas of immediate concern. The list is exhaustive and we have a long way to go to reach a level of self-sufficiency that is desirable in the long run. A sizable portion of the national resources would have to be set aside which is not an easy option in view of the competing needs in a developing economy like India. The fact that defence is a non-productive white elephant is a universally recognised phenomenon. In the current era of nation states, it is however, a necessity for national security which cannot be overlooked if the country has to progress in a stable environment. A look at leading nations of the globe would clearly indicate that they have reached that level by achieving a degree of self-sufficiency in national security.

The current dispensation at the Centre has a massive mandate from the people. Unlike governments in the past, it cannot be held hostage to coalition dynamics. Further, as recent elections in some of the states have indicated, it continues to enjoy the popularity and support of the masses, notwithstanding the incumbency factor. Thus the present dispensation has the ability and the leadership to push through major reforms despite resistance from entrenched interests. It is a rare opportunity which needs to be exploited in national interest. A strong political will to achieve self -sufficiency in the crucial area of national security is the need of the hour.