

Has Strategic Military Restraint during Most of the Last Six Decades Served India's National Interests?*

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Introduction

India's political, military and nuclear strategies can be spelt out in two words – “Strategic Restraint”. The policy has generally been followed by all the Indian governments when in crises and armed conflicts. Since the 1947-48 Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) War, India's unwise and hasty reference of the invasion to the United Nations (UN) resulted in prolonged confrontation with Pakistan which continues to remain unresolved until today. Thereafter, since 1989, India's failure to deal decisively with the ‘proxy war’ sponsored by Pakistan in J&K; and later, the terrorist attacks on Mumbai and the Indian Parliament, a case may be made that the policy of “Strategic Restraint” has not served India's national interest. Although this policy has served well on many occasions, it has also led to India falling short of achieving results commensurate to its size, resources, population, technological and military capabilities, and soft power. Logically, a strong and stable India should have deterred its enemies from covert actions within its borders due to its resilient economy, military prowess and nuclear power status.

Definition

While “strategic restraint” is an accepted term in the lexicon of international relations, few theorists bother to define it. Jeffrey W Meiser in his 2015 work, “Power and Restraint: The Rise of the United States, 1898-1894” defines strategic restraint in the light of his view of grand strategy as “the long-term pattern of behaviour of a nation-state”.¹ To Meiser, grand strategy represents the demonstrated outcome of events that have occurred and not as “a long-term plan political leaders and their advisers develop to guide foreign policy”. In his view, the consideration whether the strategy was intended or unplanned is inconsequential. He goes on to say “strategic restraint is restraint at the strategic level and not necessarily the result of a well-thought plan”.²

However, cases of “strategic restraint” need to be clearly differentiated from those of “strategic coercion” where an external agency causes a nation to follow a path not of its choosing by diplomatic, economic or military force, which may be explicit or implicit.³

The Indian Experience

Over the last 68 years, “strategic constraint”, with a few exceptions, has been the predominant theme of India's foreign policy. The first instance of its application manifested in the 1947- 48 conflict in J&K. By the end of 1948, the Indian Army offensive was on the ascendant : after eliminating the imminent threat to the Valley, liberating Ladakh and Kargil and relieving Poonch; the Indian Army stopped the Pakistani offensive on all the fronts. Had the momentum of the counter-offensive been permitted to continue, a conclusive end-state could have been obtained. It would have either ended in the liberation of the entire J&K state, including Gilgit and Baltistan (Northern Territories), and a defensible border, or to a more politically advantageous position. The operations were halted prematurely when an idealistic Pandit Nehru referred the dispute to the nascent United Nations for arbitration.⁴

Nehru's faith in Indo-Chinese friendship led to India surrendering its inherited rights and assets (from the British Indian Government on gaining Independence in August 1947) in Tibet to China; and then in October 1950, to unopposed Chinese invasion of de facto independent Tibet, resulting in the incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China. Later, the misreading of China's ‘dialectic of strategic overtures’ culminated in the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict.

Earlier, during the protracted freedom struggle against the British Rule, the Indian political leaders had developed a ‘feeling of antipathy’ towards the British Indian Armed Forces leading to a ‘sense of distrust’ on advice by the Independent India's military leaders.⁵ The lack of trust in military advice and Nehru's unwavering faith in Defence Minister Krishna Menon's handling of military affairs manifested in discord with the military in general and General Thimayya in particular (which contributed to the country's strategic establishment turning a ‘blind eye’ to ground realities and also ignoring ‘numerous warnings about Chinese intentions’).

The degradation of military needs after Independence, by Nehru and Krishna Menon, resulted in the weakening of the Indian Armed Forces and subsequent operational setbacks in the 1962 war with China.⁶ A militarily weak India was forced to accept China's unilateral ceasefire and technologically superior Indian Air Force which could have helped to foreclose China in Chinese hands. An atmosphere of fear amongst the political leadership and international pressure from the Americans led to the decision not to use the

The 1965 Indo-Pakistan War saw a new leadership at the helm. There was conflict in all sectors of the Western front, from Kutch to Kargil; while the Eastern front, which West Pakistan had left undefended, was not activated by India. Indian restraint from what would have been an easy military conquest of erstwhile East Pakistan is thought to have arisen from the Chinese threats to reactivate the disputed India-China border, in which case, if true, it would be a successful case of strategic coercion.⁸ The 1965 War concluded as a stalemate, with India carrying top honours.⁹ As per the Tashkent Agreement, which cost India in terms of realpolitik, in honour for giving up International arbitration for the Kashmir dispute, India had to give up key strategic posts that it had captured, notably Haji Pir. This is a notable example of strategic restraint where the Indian State agreed to give up tangible assets for an empty assurance which was not returned.¹⁰

Chinese factor as demonstrated in the 1965 War influenced Manekshaw's insistence on a winter war, when the snowbound Himalayan passes precluded any chance of Chinese interference in the 1971 War.¹¹ The excellent strategic planning and conduct of operations resulted in the surrender of Pakistan Army in East Pakistan in just 14 days. However, this military intervention was not a case of India's exercising strategic restraint; as much as, it was an outcome of economic compulsions with 10 million refugees bleeding India's economy.¹²

The signing of the 1972 Shimla Agreement by India and Pakistan was followed by the swapping of prisoners of war (PW). India repatriated over 90,000 Pakistani PW after the Agreement. The reason for India not extracting concessions on Kashmir was based on the reasoning that the fragile democracy in Pakistan would crumble if the accord was perceived as being overly harsh by Pakistanis; Bhutto would be accused of losing Kashmir in addition to East Pakistan.¹³ This move was opposed by some at that point of time,¹⁴ and is criticised even today.¹⁵ However, Pakistani agreement, that the issue of Kashmir would henceforth be resolved bilaterally without third-party intervention, has served India well, enabling it to prevent effective mobilisation of international intervention by Pakistan.

The Kargil War in 1999 was initiated by Pakistan, believing that an Indian conventional response to a coup-de-force could be deterred by nuclear posturing. While India was strategically deterred by nuclear considerations from resorting to full scale conventional war along its Western border,¹⁶ India had the option of limited war, limited in geographic scope to the Line of Control (LC) sector of J&K. However, India's decision to respond militarily within self-imposed bounds of restricting operations to Kargil and Ladakh sectors and on own side of the LC only, shaped international perception and enhanced India's status as a responsible nuclear power.¹⁷

In late 1986, an aggressive Indian strategic exercise meant to test Indian military mobilisation capabilities, Exercise ‘Brasstacks’, was interpreted by Pakistan as a credible conventional threat and resulted in the mobilisation of its armed forces in turn. While the Indians had no aggressive agenda, the international community feared that imminent hostilities could lead to a nuclear flare-up. This led to diplomatic activity and de-escalation of the crisis. Some international scholars have speculated that threat of nuclear escalation was a credible reason for Indian strategic restraint.¹⁸

A similar scenario emerged in 1989, when a proxy war was launched in J&K with the active support of Pakistan. India responded with a vigorous counter-insurgency campaign that into this day. The issue of whether India's decision was not to open cross-border hostilities was strategic restraint or whether it was deterred by Pakistani nuclear threats has been debated widely.¹⁹ Similar claims have been made about virtually every crisis situation involving India and Pakistan since exercise ‘Brasstacks’.²⁰

Restraint in Indian Nuclear Policy

India's nuclear programme began immediately after Independence under the stewardship of Homi Jehangir Bhabha. Nehru, a passionate advocate of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and nuclear disarmament, would not allow the development of nuclear weapons technology. Nevertheless, fearing the failure of nuclear disarmament, he refused to foreclose India's nuclear options.²¹

Pacifist views on nuclear energy were shared by influential Indian leaders and technocrats (a defensible Shastri, Rajiv Gandhi and Vikram Sarabhai, the head of the Atomic Energy Commission) leading to a long gap between the Chinese and Indian nuclear tests, and between India's first nuclear test and development of nuclear weapons.²²

Post-1962, India sought protection under a nuclear umbrella from the West and the USSR but was refused. Indian hopes in the establishment of a global disarmament regime were dashed with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty being negotiated that sought to perpetuate the primacy of the established nuclear weapon nations while denying the same to others.²³

In 1966, the decision to carry out a nuclear test was taken but it fell by the wayside due to the unfortunate deaths of both Shastri and Bhabha. Later, Indira Gandhi revived the project resulting in the 1974 “peaceful nuclear explosion”. However, due to its pacifist foreign policy India did not declare itself a nuclear weapons state. Eventually, 25 years passed before India broke its nuclear restraint in 1998.²⁴

In 1998, domestic compulsions of a weak coalition government, the growing asymmetric equation vis-à-vis China and an adverse international environment led to the nuclear tests by India. By going nuclear, India resolved its ambiguous status which saw it coming under pressure to sign restrictive agreements such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty amongst others. India, while remaining outside these regimes, agreed to a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing and non-proliferation.²⁵

The Indian Nuclear Doctrine. India's nuclear policy remained ambiguous until the release of the Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) by the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) in the aftermath of the Kargil conflict.²⁶ The core tenets of India's nuclear stance were spelt out in the draft doctrine as follows :-²⁷

“India shall pursue a doctrine of credible minimum nuclear deterrence. In this policy of “retaliation only”, the survivability of our arsenal is critical;

India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike, but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail;

India will not resort to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against States which do not possess nuclear weapons, or are not aligned with nuclear weapon powers.”

These tenets reflect the world-view of two of India's most influential thinkers on nuclear matters – General K Sundarji, principal author of DND and K Subrahmanyam, convener of NSAB – that nuclear weapons are primarily means for political and strategic deterrence, and not for use in military contexts.²⁸ Indian nuclear doctrine has been described by an American commentator as “fundamentally conservative ...”.²⁹

The language and tone of the doctrine – “no first use” (NFU), “no use against non-nuclear powers” and “minimal credible deterrence” – speak throughout of restraint. There are no threats against any specified adversary, only the policy about India's posture.

These tenets were reiterated in India's official Nuclear Doctrine released in 2003.³⁰ However, certain aspects have been diluted; namely, the threat of “punitive damage causing unacceptable damage” has been changed to “massive retaliation”, and whether a chemical or biological attack by a non-nuclear state would invite nuclear response.³¹

The concept of NFU has repeatedly been questioned by experts on strategic affairs.³² The principal objection being that it is axiomatic to NFU that India absorb an enemy first strike which could leave India without adequate retaliatory assets. India would then be forced to retaliate against counter-value targets, which again exposes India's population centres to retaliatory nuclear strikes. Numerous solutions have been proposed, which range from restoration of the “punitive damage” concept into the doctrine to changing India's stance from NFU to “strategic ambiguity”.³³

The Debate: Has Strategic Restraint Served India?

Strategic restraint has definitely given pay-offs to India from time to time. It has been an important reason why India has been perceived as a responsible and mature democracy. India flaunts its record of restraint in world affairs when making claims for permanent membership of the Security Council in the United Nations. India's impeccable non-proliferation record facilitated the coming about of the Indo-US nuclear deal.

India's moderate nuclear policy has led to the development of a credible nuclear deterrent force. The modest pile of warheads is now served by the classic triad of delivery weapons. India is now recognised as a nuclear power and a responsible one at that. However, in recent times, the Indian nuclear doctrine and the adequacy of India's deterrent has been questioned. India's development of nuclear weapons (1988) and testing came far too late; by that time India had fought four wars, with a fifth one to occur (1999) within a year's time. India's nuclearisation has led to that of Pakistan and has not deterred it from supporting insurgency, secessionism and terror in Indian territory.

Strategic restraint in Indian policy has arisen more from the default options of a non-assertive Indian state rather than as a conscious policy choice. Indian passiveness appears to be rooted in the non-violent nature of its struggle for Independence, and in the belief systems of its apex leaders, Nehru and Gandhi.³⁴ India has often been reluctant to pursue self-interest in its policy, preferring ideological lines of action instead. Other causes for strategic restraint have been India's weak economic status, domestic compulsions, international pressure and last but not least, a lack of a strategic culture in its decision making apparatus.³⁵

The answer to the question “Has Strategic restraint served us well?” is “Yes, most of the time”. This policy has been in consonance with India's cultural and spiritual identity. It has helped keep India's populace ‘fed’ during the fifties and sixties, as well as to create a conducive environment for economic progress and development of society. India's enviable position of strength in South Asia today could arguably be attributed to its restrained foreign policy. However, it has also led to missed opportunities.

Indian support to Tibet would have been a brake on Chinese expansionism and might have led to an equitable dialectic with the People's Republic of China. Timely development and testing of nuclear weapons would have led to India's inclusion in the Security Council where the primary qualification for its membership was being recognised as a nuclear power. Our Nation's position would have been at the helm of affairs on the international stage and not that of a supplicant as has been the case. It may be hypothesised that strategic restraint has been at the cost of India's chances of becoming a great power.

The Cure: A Robust and Integrated Strategic Apparatus

A major cause for India's choice of a prudent path has been the inability of the Indian State to develop instruments for integrating strategy with its policy apparatus. While numerous reasons have been advocated for the lack of strategic direction in the Indian policy-making, the lack of its existence is undisputed – so much so that Cohen and Dasgupta titled their scholarly thesis on Indian defence procurement for 2010 as Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernisation.³⁶

Even its most assertive actions; namely, the liberation of Bangladesh and the Shakti nuclear explosion of 1998, arose more as a reaction to the prevalent international environment and domestic compulsions than as an outcome of a bold and assertive strategy for national security.³⁷ In that sense, the question of whether India should continue on its path of strategic restraint is subsumed by a broader question: “Should India continue with this lack of strategic direction in Indian policy?”

Any path in foreign policy charted by a Government would have its pluses and minuses – including the path of strategic restraint. However, as times change, so must policies to suit the times. This change must come from reasoned and informed decision-making, not as a fait accompli, and most definitely not as the result of coercion.

The architects of past and present apparatus for strategic decision-making under the Government of India have gone overboard in emphasising civilian control of paramilitary decision-making to such an extent that it relegates military commanders to the third level and completely excludes a single point for military advice. This has led to military leaders becoming frustrated over their inability to draw the attention of civilian decision-makers on issues of strategic military concern, at times, even during conflicts.³⁸

The reforms after the 1962 War were ineffective due to their incomplete nature and lack of political will to implement the necessary reforms. Similarly, post-Kargil, the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) was established without a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS); however, the effect was negligible as the IDS was set up as ‘an attached office’; there is nothing integrated in Indian defence planning and policy making other than the terminology.³⁹

The single biggest measure for a successful strategic direction in India is predicated on the Government's ability to create such a consultative mechanism. Even if such a structure were created, there would be the need for a sea change in relations between the military establishment and the civilian bureaucracy. However, keeping the current political scenario in mind, it is not certain whether this will be forthcoming in the future.

In the absence of such a strategic decision-support mechanism and better coordination between the civil and military echelons of the Indian State, our strategic policy appears doomed to carry on as it has in the past – as a passive responder to events, rather than as a bold and confident assertion of a Nation in its prime.

Conclusion

Strategic Restraint has served India fairly well but the application of this policy option, for reasons other than as a result of a deliberate and well-planned strategy, has also led to its being the primary obstacle to India realising its full potential and taking its rightful place amongst the community of nations. To conclude, India's leaders would be wise to heed the opening sentence of Sun Tzu's “The Art of War”, which says :

“The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence, it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected.”

Endnotes

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Introduction

It is widely believed by sections of the strategic community and many informed as well as ordinary Indians that our political leaders are reluctant to use military force as an instrument of state policy.¹ The perception of our defensive mindset was reinforced by a seminal RAND study by George Tanham in 1992.² This cemented the conviction that we have a culture of Strategic Military Restraint; a culture considered passive, submissive, negative and hence against national interest. This essay has a 'directional hypothesis' which examines whether a conjectured point exists. The hypothesis of this essay is that what is perceived to be India's culture of strategic military restraint is a realist strategic culture which has served its interests. India has pursued an aggressive military policy when national exigencies have demanded the same.

The Concept of Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is a concept applied to draw actionable conclusions whenever competing. This may be on the sports field, in corporate affairs or in the competition between nations. A brief definition of Strategic Culture is that it is 'a world view of the strategic community of a particular country'.³ A more specific definition is that it is 'a distinctive body of beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the use of force, which are held by a collective and arise gradually over time, through a unique protracted historical process'.⁴

India's Strategic Culture of Military Restraint

An Analysis of Post-Independence Strategic Military Restraint

Restraint means to hold back from doing something. In the military field this means that while sabres may rattle at the tactical level, at the strategic level war would be initiated only after a detailed cost-benefit analysis.

The decision to go in for a UN supervised ceasefire in 1948 in J&K, the Tashkent Agreement in 1965 and the restraint displayed post the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament are among some of the examples quoted of our passivity. The current proliferation of all types of media, including social media, instantly brings criticism of policy decisions in every home for debate, and at times uninformed comments. In such an environment the media finds it beneficial to hype tactical actions to strategic heights to increase readership or Television Rating Points.

Real time publicity given to incidents without verification arouses passions. In a parliamentary democracy the hype, more often than not, provides grist to the mills of the opposition. This imposes severe pressure on a democratic government to either be restrained when it should not be restrained, or conversely whip up war hysteria. Examples are the Kandahar hijacking in Dec 1999,5 when weeping relatives on TV petitioning the Prime Minister, added to pressure on the Government to give-in to the demands of the hijackers.⁶ The other extreme was the reaction in Jan 2013, post the beheading of two Indian soldiers by Pakistanis at the Line of Control (LC). Reprehensive as that act was, an attack on armed soldiers deployed on the LC is not strictly a terrorist act as compared to an attack on unarmed civilians. While the media built up a war frenzy, the then Chief of Army Staff made a realist military statement that "[India] will retaliate against Pakistan's attack at a place and time of our choosing."⁷ India did retaliate in a less publicised manner, a militarily correct action. The publicised media or political warmongering and unpublicised military reaction, create an impression that we are 'soft' and shy away from 'hard' actions. This however, is disproved by the facts given below :-

- (a) In 1947-48 India embarked upon militarily consolidating the Country by taking proactive actions in Hyderabad and Junagarh even while it was engaged in a near total war with Pakistan in Kashmir and struggling with the challenges of Partition. The war in Kashmir was pursued as aggressively as possible by a fledgling Government whose strategic military choices were prone to interference by the Governor General Lord Mountbatten and British commanders on both sides.⁸
- (b) In 1961, India liberated Goa, Daman and Diu by military force in the face of strong condemnation from the complete western world and its prominent stand of not using military force to settle disputes.⁹
- (c) In 1962, India did not hesitate to assert McMahon Line as the border and followed the 'forward policy' in Ladakh and NEFA. Although, this was due to 'criminally faulty intelligence inputs' which led to an incorrect assessment that it would not be challenged by the Chinese People's Liberation Army;¹⁰ and is not relevant to the current argument.
- (d) In 1965, the subdued Indian reaction in the Rann of Kutch was more a result of the geographical difficulty for India to sustain operations there.¹¹ This was taken by Pakistan as a sign of Indian timidity which emboldened it to launch Operation Gibraltar in Kashmir. India's proactive strategy was evident in her readiness to strike back across the International Border (IB) towards Lahore and Sialkot.
- (e) The 1971 war was a classic case of display of military restraint to gain favourable world opinion and then launch an orchestrated counter offensive campaign. This led to India's first strategic victory.
- (f) The 1987 Sumdorong Chu incident was countered with aggressive posturing by India. The result was that India and China restarted their dialogue which led to the 1993 Agreement to ensure peace and tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- (g) The 1974 and 1998 Nuclear tests can in no way be labelled as a strategy of military restraint.
- (h) The decision in 1984 to preempt and occupy the Siachen Glacier and being prepared for a protracted conflict in an exceedingly difficult terrain was not strategic restraint.
- (i) The 1999 restraint in not striking across the LC in Kargil was a considered strategic decision which enabled India to use sizable military and air power to achieve its objectives without enlarging the conflict.

(j) The build-up and calibrated use of force to combat insurgencies in Nagaland, Mizoram, Punjab and Kashmir have been strong and adequate to restore the situation. Writing about the State's approach in combating insurgencies the prominent journalist Shekhar Gupta states

"[c]ontrary to what is sometimes suggested, India is by no means a soft state. In fact when it comes to self-preservation, it is amongst the most brutal anywhere, and that doesn't change particularly with the party in power".¹²

Operation Parakram – Restraint Exemplified

The course of the 2001 Operation Parakram in the aftermath of the attack on the Indian Parliament was widely commented upon as being 'effete' (emphasis added) by the hawks within our Country. Restraint means to hold back someone who wants to push forward. Restraint by definition at the strategic level can therefore be imposed only by the highest authority in any system of governance. Military analysis have written about at least two windows that were available during the period of the operation when we could have gone to war.¹³ However Mr Jaswant Singh, the then External Affairs Minister has stated that "our aims [were to] defeat cross border infiltration/terrorism without conflict; to contain the national mood of 'teach Pakistan a Lesson'; and in the event of war, to destroy and degrade Pakistan's war fighting capabilities".¹⁴ What is unsaid is that while the morale was high and commanders in the field were eager to go in!¹⁵, the political leadership felt that the costs and risks of going to war outweighed the gains accruing from it. Since Jaswant Singh had been Defence Minister, in addition to his own ministry for seven months prior to the Parliament attack, his counsel would have been sought and valued.

The Realism Construct

Para 1.2 of India's Draft Nuclear Doctrine released on 17 Aug, 1999 states that 'India's primary objective is to achieve economic, political, social, scientific and technological development within a peaceful and democratic framework'.¹⁶ The primacy of this view has been broadly subscribed to by all political parties. In practice, if not in theory, the philosophy is that "the balance of resource allocation between defence and development [has] to favour the latter....".¹⁷ If that be so then ostensibly our coercive diplomatic Operation Parakram was guided by a realist view that India should follow a policy of strategic restraint. War would have derailed the progress that India was making with liberalisation post 1991, and impacted our poverty alleviation efforts.

Factors Shaping Indian Strategic Culture

The Impact of History and Geography on Strategic Culture

History and geography are closely interwoven. The difference between them is the angle from which they view the world. History views it from the perspective of time and geography from the perspective of space.¹⁸ As would be true for any other country, the development of Indian strategic culture has its roots in its military geography and military history. Geography gave us an insular look and a perception of being protected. For ages the combination of the Hindu Kush, the five large rivers which merge to form the Indus, and the Thar Desert, created multiple obstacles to invaders coming to India from the North and North West. A combination of the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean created even more formidable bastions in the other cardinal directions. The Aryans were nomads who found space to come in over a prolonged period of almost 500 years from 1500 to 1000 BCE!¹⁹ as the largely agricultural Indus valley civilisation declined. Thus the first known invader to carry out a military crossing of the Western obstacle belt was Alexander around 326 BCE. He too could not proceed beyond the Jhelum (Hydaspes).

Consequently, a perception took root that the mountains and the rivers provide an impregnable shield; this created a strategic culture of complacency. Kings in the path of an invader preferred to pay tribute and negotiate if it served their interest. They could not be faulted as there was no concept of one nation, called India. One single sub-continental country only came about during the time of Chandragupta Maurya and his successors who expanded the kingdom of Magadha over most of the Indian Subcontinent.

Partition of India in 1947 took away the obstacles to the Indian heartland from the West. For decades thereafter the core trait of our strategic culture has been obsession with the Pakistani threat. The 1962 war, and unimaginable improvement in transport infrastructure in the Tibetan region in recent years, made possible by economic and military rise of China, has eroded the concept of a Himalayan shield. Because of such reasons the Indian-born American security studies expert Rodney Jones writes, 'it is foreseeable that some of the core traits of [India's strategic culture] may be subject to modification in the coming decades'.²⁰

Strategic Restraint and Form of Government

The perception of our restrained strategic decision-making is often compared to the speedier and bolder decision making of our two neighbouring opponents. China has always been a one-party totalitarian/authoritarian state. Pakistan has been either a military dictatorship or an ersatz multi-party democracy as real power resides with a single institution, the Pakistan Army. In a true democracy, "democratic leaders, compared to [dictators or authoritarian leaders], are more likely to lose political office if they fight a losing war".²¹ This makes their decision making cautious because after the war they have to answer to the people for the outcome. Strategic restraint is, therefore, a hallmark of a democracy wherein 'publicity' and 'majority decision making' have been alluded to as 'vices' by the acclaimed International Relations realist Hans Morgenthau.²²

Consequently, democracies will go to war only when they are confident that they could win.²³ The 1971 war was initiated only when India was fully and truly prepared to win. Democracies can be pragmatic and responsive in real time only when the risk factor is low and success factor is high. The military will have its contingency plans in place but in a democracy, strategic decisions are made by the political leadership. The swift response to attack the camps of the northeast rebels in Myanmar on 09 Jun 2015 was ultimately a political decision. This was confirmed by the Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, Colonel Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, who told the media "It was a much-needed decision that was taken by the Prime Minister".²⁴ Obviously, it must have been taken after weighing the military certainty of success and the domestic and international dividends.

Religion and Strategic Culture of Restraint

Many writers endorse the theory that our religion and culture makes us peace-loving and passive. They talk of distinctive elements of Hinduism which make Hindu psyche 'accommodating and not indulg[ing] in strong feelings of hatred, and incapable of barbarity in war'.²⁵ This essay opines that while all religions are pacifist, religions also support a 'just' war to serve the interests of its adherents. All religions have been pacifist and aggressive at various points of time. The current fundamentalist image of Islam responsible for the belief that Islam and pacifism are incompatible²⁶ emerged in the 1970's, though its roots are in the breakup of the Ottoman Empire post World War II.²⁷ The Christians have had the Crusades, the Inquisition and an ultimate pacifist in Christ who forgave his killers. The Buddhists traditionally believed to be pacifist have contributed to an explosive amalgam with Shintoism which led to the aggressive Samurai spirit of Japan.²⁸ The Sri Lankan Buddhists engaged in a war with the most dreaded terrorist organisation at a point of time, the LTTE, which was made up of the traditionally pacifist Tamil Hindu, and won it after what was one of the most vicious wars of all times. All these examples validate the point that a religious denomination does not determine the aggressiveness or pacifism of a nation. Aggression in religion is at any other body is in effect a competition for getting the best deal for your 'camp,' or a sacred duty for a just cause.²⁹ The latter is evident in a study of the epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which have had a great impact on our culture.

Strategic Restraint and Geopolitical Realities

It is a geopolitical reality that we are restrained by our disputed, un-demarcated and unresolved borders with two militarily strong and nuclear weapon armed colluding states – China and Pakistan. Internal threats and secessionist movements in our border states have also impacted on national cohesiveness. The financial burden of maintaining a large military and also large Central Armed Police Forces while we are developing nation is a restraint on our aspirations.

A landmark which defines the schism in the strategic culture debate was the Kargil war of 1999. Were we restrained or were we aggressive? Though much criticised at that time, the Indian decision to limit all physical move including the Air Force to the Indian side of the LC was an incisive insight into geopolitical reality. It helped in gaining diplomatic support worldwide and reinforced the international view about the importance of the principle of inviolability of the LC. What was viewed within India as unnecessary restraint became a strategic strength. It highlighted Pakistan's complicity and India's maturity. It led to Pakistan's closest ally and all weather friend, China, to repeatedly emphasise to the Pakistanis that Beijing would not support it to ensure the success of this audacious but unprincipled venture which could have much wider ramifications for the security of the world.³⁰

Strategic Aggressiveness and Secularism

India chose to be a secular country and not a Hindu Rashtira. Similarly, at inception Pakistan too believed it could be a secular country. However, the very basis of its being, i.e. a homeland for the Muslims of India was at cross purposes with this idea. It is, therefore, no surprise that Pakistan is a de facto Sunni theocratic state with repeated instances of intolerance of not only other religions but also other strains of Islam. When a secular and theocratic state are in conflict the secular state will be sensitive to its citizens who belong to the religion of the theocratic state. In such a case, decisions with restraint where minority sentiments are involved become a 'sine quo non'. Our decision to avoid the US requests to join the Coalition in Iraq in 2003 was supported by both the NDA and the UPA, though powerful players were inclined to join the Coalition to gain the US favour and other benefits.³¹ Amongst many other reasons for this, an important one could be the adverse fallout on our secular fabric.

If India has been able to maintain its secular and democratic complexion it is thanks to the vision of its founding fathers and their culture of strategic restraint. It is unlikely that a fundamentalist Hindu India would have been able to operate as a responsible and respected member of the world community without such a culture. Strategic restraint is the trait of a mature country which recognises its national priorities and acts in the interest of its people.

Nuclearisation and Strategic Restraint

The overt nuclearisation of India and Pakistan post 1998 has made Indian leaders wary of the escalatory risk of sending the Army across the borders. This was the case in Operation Parakram when the mobilisation of 500,000 troops on the Indo-Pak Border was used as coercive diplomacy which achieved questionable results rather than an all-out war. 'When confronted with a choice of all or nothing, [Vajpayee's Government] ... decided to exercise restraint'.³² Such restraint is the hallmark of a mature nuclear armed state.

Conclusion

Bridging the Politico-Military Divide in Strategic Thinking

It is a universal phenomenon that the military will always strive to remain as modern and large as possible to be confident of guaranteeing the security of the nation. The political establishment will have a different view of growth, especially in a developing democracy where priorities of nation building have primacy. The disconnect may lie in their respective logic. The military logic being that hard to strength keeps enemies at bay enabling peace and economic growth while the political logic is that peace and economic growth while the strength being a mix of hard and soft power. While the military elite argue that enemies respect visible strength, the political elite who deal with poverty more intimately have a more realist view of the policy of strategic restraint. The disconnect in the thinking of the politico-diplomatic and military elites while dealing with strategic issues can be synchronised only if the military leadership is included in the highest echelons of political decision making both in the defence and relevant external affairs realms. Often the military is kept in the dark about strategic issues; consequently, they see threats where the politicians do not.

As to the question : does India need to change its mindset and be unrestrained while dealing with strategic issues during the coming decades? The answer is that we still have a long way to go before we can realise the dream of being a developed as well as a fully integrated and consolidated Country. The United States which is an integrated country did not reach that stage until about 130 years after its Independence. We have just crossed the half way mark in a Country with a far greater diversity of population and a chequered history. Until we complete the development and integration of our Country, a policy of Strategic Restraint would serve us better.

The Reality of a Globalised World

To maintain world peace, the principles of just war have been codified in a number of treaties. As per the International Court of Justice, even self defence has been qualified to prevent war. A pre-emptive attack cannot be launched just on the basis of belligerent posturing or words. Attacks on one's nationals abroad do not justify retaliation; self defence does not allow reprisals against enemy territory and lastly any force that is used in self defence must be necessary and proportional to the armed attack.³³

In a globalised world a nuclear war will adversely impact others, not because of a direct threat but because of the high likelihood of collateral damage. India and its principal adversaries are all armed with nuclear weapons. This enforces a great restraint on war for a mature state like India because a nuclear war is obviously in the category of "thinking the unthinkable". As stated earlier, during the Kargil War, China refused to support its 'all weather friend', Pakistan. During Operation Parakram and post Mumbai terror attacks it despatched Prime Minister Zhu Rongji and the Vice Foreign Minister He Ya-fei to India and Pakistan to restrain the two nuclear weapon armed antagonists.³⁴ These are indicators that even China with which we have a seemingly intractable border dispute, values neighbourhood stability for its economic development. ³⁵ China too, in keeping with the Confucius philosophy, by and large, values restraint.

A Culture of Military Restraint has Served National Interests

We finally come back to the question asked – Has strategic military restraint during most of the last six decades served India's national interests? This essay concludes that it has. The security of a country is not weighed only in terms of ability to deter or defeat an external aggressor. It is also measured by the ability to fight enemies such as hunger, poverty and disease. The fatalities caused by these enemies far surpass those that occur in wars.³⁶ Whatever is the rhetoric while electioneering, all Indian governments once elected show a clear grasp of reality in regarding war as the option of last resort.³⁷ A political consensus appears to exist that unless there is an existential threat or occupation of sovereign Indian territory an all-out conventional war will not be commensurate to the cost. India too without stating it, in the manner Deng Xiaoping did, would "bide it's time". This is in consonance with the [...] traditionally realist affluence theory that wealth and military power go hand in hand'.³⁸ India is not an expansionist country with imperial ambitions. It would want to grow economically to be able to uplift its people. Economic growth is a more preferable route as compared to enhanced military capability and stunted growth. Our policy of strategic military restraint will serve our interests better and will need to be discarded only in the face of external existential threats. Presently, the threats that exist do not justify the abandonment of the policy of strategic military restraint.

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EThis essay competition is 'open to all across the globe'. Lieutenant General Menezes, PVSM, SC (1922-2012) was commissioned into the 4th Bombay Grenadiers on 30 May 1943 and retired as Vice Chief of Army Staff on 31 Jul 1980. He was the ex-officio Vice President of the USI Council and was also an elected Member of USI Council for many years.

*This is a slightly edited version of the essay which was the co-winner of the First Prize in Lieutenant General SL Menezes Memorial USI Essay Competition, instituted in 1943 on a subject related to the Armed Forces Historical Research.

@Lieutenant General GS Katoch PVSM, AVSM, VSM was commissioned into the 2nd Battalion the J&K Rifles (2 JAK RIF) on 11 Jun 1977 and later commited 9 JAK RIF on the Line of Control. He has the distinction of having attended the Special Operations and Irregular Warfare Programme at the Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey, the USA in 2005 where he was awarded Masters degree in Defence Analysis. Presently, he is the Director General, Directorate of Perspective Planning at IHQ of MoD (Army).

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Introduction

Though India has been vulnerable to a two front threat since the late nineteen fifties, it is only in the beginning of 21st century that the possibility of such an eventuality was taken seriously. Seen from a different perspective, freshly independent India’s political leadership propounded the philosophy of peaceful co-existence based on Gandhiji’s idealistic viewpoint of the world. Pandit Nehru, the first prime minister of free India, is reported to have expressed the view that since India had no enemies, it could do without having a standing army. While Pakistani incursions in the state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947-48 put paid to this line of thinking, the military was still viewed with disfavour and seen as a relic of the British imperialism.

Reality struck with force when in 1962, the Chinese inflicted a humiliating defeat both in Arunachal Pradesh and Eastern Ladakh. Sensing India’s weakened position and possibility of a victory, Pakistan started the 1965 war. However, the Indian military responded admirably and ended up with sizeable gains. This was followed by the Indo-Pak war of 1971, wherein India achieved a historic victory resulting in severance of East Pakistan and creation of a free Bangladesh. In addition, the Indian Army took approximately 94000 Pakistani soldiers as prisoners. Kargil war in 1999 was the last misadventure by the Pakistan Army for which it paid heavily in terms of casualties and loss of face.

Pakistani Mindset and Presumptions

From the above historical perspective, a few facts emerge clearly. Firstly, Pakistan’s military has always looked forward to inflicting a major defeat on India. This is obvious from the fact that on all these occasions, the hostilities were initiated by Pakistan. While not resulting in success, such a stance has enabled the Pakistani military to remain popular and occupy a dominant space within the Pakistan polity. It indeed is the sole arbiter of Pakistan’s foreign policy vis-à-vis India, despite there being a popularly elected civilian Government in place.

Secondly, defeat in successive wars with India has driven home the point that Pakistan cannot win a bilateral conflict between the two, anytime in the future as well. If anything, considering the size and economy of the two countries, the gap between the two is likely to keep increasing in India’s favour over time.

Thirdly, since the likelihood of it defeating India in a bilateral confrontation is diminishing rapidly, Pakistan would not hesitate to fish in troubled waters and attack India, should we be involved in a conflict with China. In fact, the growing closeness between China and Pakistan in both economic and military fields during the last decade clearly points to a synchronised approach vis-à-vis India by the two. Indications of this strategy are visible during interactions in various multilateral forums. Support for Pakistan’s attempts at getting waivers as granted to India by Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), development of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), upgradation of Gwadar port at a massive cost of US \$18 billion and a common anti-India stance in forums like ASEAN, SCO, ARF etc. are manifestations of this strategy.

China’s Growth and Emergence of Two Front Threat

China has grown rapidly in the last four decades. Simultaneously with the growth of its economic power, its military power too has grown. It has gradually moved away from Deng Hsiao Ping’s policy of the nineteen eighties of ‘hiding capabilities and biding time’ to assertiveness and thence on to ‘controlled aggression’ in dealing with its territorial claims in South China Sea, Tibet and East China Sea. As its military power grows and increases its ability to flex its muscles, its posture appears to be hardening.

China-India boundary dispute is nowhere near resolution. Despite seventeen rounds of Special Representative level talks having taken place, a mutually agreeable solution is not in sight. Going back on some of the agreed upon principles in the earlier rounds, is indicative of planned Chinese procrastination on the issue. Sun Tzu’s dictum of achieving victory without fighting seems to be at work as China hopes to be militarily so powerful as to deter India from standing up to it and giving in to its demands.

It is often argued that there is enough economic space for both China and India to grow simultaneously and, therefore, healthy competition between the two would benefit both countries. This line of thinking advocates strong bonds of friendship and cooperation between the two. However, it is also a fact that seeds of confrontation are inherent in any competition. The race for raw materials, domination of lines of communication and markets for finished products can turn ugly despite best intentions. Thus, the possibility of a two front threat to India is strong. The moot question that we need to address is whether India has the capability to defend itself in such a scenario, and if not, what steps it must undertake to prepare itself to face this eventuality.

While we do enjoy a conventional edge over Pakistan, against China we are certainly at a disadvantage. The Chinese annual defence budget is almost three times that of India. As time is passing, the gap between the two is increasing in China’s favour. To defend ourselves against a combined threat from China and Pakistan, we need to institute a series of measures immediately as the gestation period for achieving effective results could be 10-15 years. Some of these measures are discussed in the subsequent paras.

Enhancement of India’s Defence Budget

For the current financial year, the Defence Budget is 1.72 per cent of the GDP. In fact for the last 10 years, the average annual Defence Budget works out to less than 2 per cent of the GDP. From a national security perspective, this is grossly inadequate when we compare with our potential adversaries and with the other advanced countries of the world. The immediate need is to enhance it to at least three per cent of the GDP, lest the comparative gap keeps increasing. Coupled with this is the need to streamline our procedures so that the allocated budget is expended fully on projects which are crucial for national security. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has a definitive role to play in accomplishing this, fixing accountability and cracking the whip if necessary.

Involvement of Indigenous Private Sector

We have a thriving private sector which unfortunately has not been involved with defence equipment manufacture in an appropriate manner. Excessive dependence on Ordnance Factories Board (OFB) and eight Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) has resulted in just about 30 per cent of the Nation’s requirements being met indigenously. Policy of protectionism and pressure of trade unions has resulted in private sector being kept out of defence manufacturing. On one hand, this has led to monopoly by the OFB and the DPSUs with consequent time and cost overruns and on the other, heavy dependence on imports wherein costs are prohibitive.

Thus, today India has the dubious distinction of being the largest importer of arms in the world. Yet, because of high costs, we are able to import much less than the requirement within the limited budget. What is more worrisome is that excessive dependence on imports makes national security hostage to whims and fancies of the exporters who may stop supplies anytime based on their national policies.

It is, therefore, imperative that indigenous private sector is brought into defence equipment manufacture in a big way quickly. Recent emphasis on ‘Make in India’ has not come a day too soon. In fact, it should have happened 50 years ago.

Improvement of Infrastructure in Border Areas

Post Independence, a conscious decision was taken not to develop infrastructure in forward areas along the border on the premise that an attacking adversary would only be able to advance forward after building the requisite infrastructure, thus providing us with reasonable time to respond to his aggression. In hindsight, it is clear that it was a faulty strategy. On one hand, it accepted initial loss of territory as unavoidable and on the other, it placed constraints on our own forces in being able to fight the aggressor and defend our territory successfully.

This policy underwent a change in the end nineteen eighties when it was decided to defend every inch of territory aggressively. However, in the process, we lost 40 precious years to develop infrastructure in our forward areas. As a result, till date, we have a situation where most of our sensitive areas along the Indo-China border are dependent on one single, tenuous road axis which if blocked either due to natural causes or due to enemy action would jeopardise successful defence of those areas. In Arunachal Pradesh, the sensitive area of Tawang, in Sikkim the areas ahead of Gangtok, the state capital; and in Uttar Pradesh, areas up to Barahoti and beyond fall into this category. In Ladakh, the road connectivity to the vital area of Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) is yet to be achieved.

The Indian Army boasts of excellent soldier material that has proved its worth in many a battle that he has fought for his country since Independence. However, the best of soldiers can deliver only if the requisite operational and logistic support is provided to them.

There is need for expediting land acquisition, obtaining environmental clearances and hastening construction of road infrastructure in all forward areas. National security cannot be shackled and compromised due to laws enacted by our own Parliament and State legislatures to guard against indiscriminate degradation of forests by unscrupulous elements. Resources of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), the sole construction agency for development of infrastructure in forward areas need to be properly channelised and augmented in terms of funding, manpower and equipment.

Likewise, the rail connectivity to forward areas has to be achieved to ensure rapid movement of troops to threatened sectors. Over the last two decades, the Chinese have built excellent rail and road infrastructure as well as storage facilities in Tibet, thereby gaining a tremendous strategic advantage over India. In view of the long lead time involved in upgradation and construction of rail projects in mountainous areas, there can be no further delay in undertaking these projects. The time being taken to achieve rail connectivity to the state of Jammu and Kashmir is indicative of the delay and complexities of rail construction in such areas.

Force Accretions

There has been an ongoing debate in the media whether force accretion of additional four divisions, approved during the UPA 1 regime in 2008-09 and being implemented thereafter, was a step in the right direction. It has been suggested that the same funds could have been better utilised for developing capabilities in the Indian Ocean and in the air. Such an approach displays shallow understanding of a two front threat. For ensuring territorial integrity of the Country, the importance of ‘boots on ground’ can hardly be underestimated.

The flexibility of shifting troops from one front to face threats on the other is negated in case of a two front scenario. Inadequacy of troops on either front would be a sure recipe for disaster. In fact the best we can do even with increased force levels is to defend resolutely against the Chinese and avoid any loss of territory while dealing with the Pakistani aggression. Planned accretions would provide us that necessary defensive capability.

Jointness

None of the services can fight a war on its own. Optimisation of available resources and their timely utilisation would be a major factor in winning a war in the future. Most modern militaries have taken steps to ensure a high degree of integration of the three Services. Jointness is invariably accorded prime importance in all their promotional structures and operational planning.

Unfortunately, we in India have paid lip service to jointness so far. Turf protection and resistance to change have been constraining factors in achieving integration of the three Services. A service centric approach delays decision making at crucial times, results in duplication and does not make optimum use of scarce national resources. In case of a two front threat, such an approach would lead to catastrophic consequences.

Greater jointness requires a long gestation period. It is imperative that we commence the process of integration in a serious manner immediately. For the integration to succeed, all three services will have to give up a part of their turf. This is unavoidable and would be in the interest of national security in the long run.

Nuclear Dimension

A conventional conflict escalating to the nuclear dimension is a distinct possibility, especially if a threshold is crossed. However, the likelihood of such an eventuality in case of a two front threat to India is reduced in view of the nuclear policies of the countries involved. Let us examine this prognosis in greater detail.

Any country deciding to initiate use of nuclear weapons runs the risk of worldwide condemnation and perhaps retaliation since the effect of such use would be felt across the globe. India’s ‘No First Use’ (NFU) policy will remain in force till one of its adversaries decides to take recourse to nuclear weapons. The probability of China using nuclear weapons against India would be negligible since China enjoys a significant conventional advantage over India, thus enabling it to achieve its aims through conventional means.

Pakistan is conventionally inferior to India. Additionally, it has an ambiguous nuclear policy which seeks to address its conventional weakness concerns through the deterrence aspect. However, its nuclear weapons would come into play only if a certain threshold in its conventional confrontation with India is crossed. In the light of a two front threat to India, it is unlikely that India would be in a position to cross any major thresholds in Pakistan.

The nexus between China and Pakistan has been growing consistently for the last 50 years. Of late, their linkages have become much stronger. Their combined conventional superiority is more than adequate to preclude the necessity of using nuclear weapons for achieving their aims against India.

Conclusion

Till our boundary differences with both or one of our neighbours get resolved, the possibility of a two front threat to us would remain. With growth of stronger ties between China and Pakistan, this threat is likely to get accentuated. The challenge for us is to develop capabilities to enable us to defend ourselves against such a threat.

Alternately, we have the option of continuing to keep ignoring reality and glossing over the envisaged threat, hoping that it would go away with passage of time. This ostrich like approach would only make us more vulnerable in the long run. In fact, it can threaten India’s economic resurgence which is currently underway.

Some steps to meet the threat have been suggested above. The list is by no means exhaustive. A lot more needs to be done. However, time is of essence. We need to get on with development of capabilities on an urgent basis considering the lead times involved. National security must remain our primary concern.

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, especially since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) convened in 2012, China has reoriented its domestic and foreign policies. Most importantly, the recently published document on ‘Essentials of National Security, Defence and Military Strategies’ in January 2015, reveals that the shift in China’s policies and their activities are affecting regional defence and security. How this is impacting the global strategic balance is analysed in the succeeding paragraphs.

Adjustments in China’s Foreign Policy, National Security, Defence and Military Strategies

Renovation of China’s Foreign Policy. Some of the prominent features of China’s foreign policy changes, since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, are as follows:–

- (a) China is making considerable effort to develop its strategic capabilities to become a major power in the region and the world; enhancing its global reach; and step by step establishing new rules to change the current status quo. China’s “two centenaries.”¹ the realisation of the concept of “China’s Dream”² put forward for the first time by the CPC President, Xi Jinping in March 2013, and the transformation from “peaceful rise” to the “fostering of the new model of major-country relations,” first and foremost with the United States (US), have further clarified China’s ambition to become a superpower. Regarding new rules and the world order, China has accepted the current status quo temporarily but is beginning to seek and make changes in the existing international institutions and mechanisms from inside. China suggests that “Asian problems should be solved by Asian people,” and it is gradually pushing the US out of East Asia for establishing a new order in the region, led by China.
- (b) China is paying attention to the exploitation of opportunities by closely monitoring situations and proactively creating opportunities.
- (c) China has become more proactive and assertive than ever before with a view to claiming a larger strategic domain, displaying pragmatism and self-confidence.

Essentials of Current National Security Strategy. China adopted the current ‘Essentials of National Security Strategy’ on 23 Jan 2015 which focussed mainly on dealing with domestic and internal security issues; such as, corruption, interest groups, the gap between the rich and poor and separatist movements. In addition, it reaffirmed China’s viewpoint, set forth at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Shangri-La Dialogue and the 2015 Xiangshan Forum, etc.

At present, China’s foreign policy gives priority to enhancing relations with major powers and developed countries, especially China-US-Russia Axis; its neighbouring and developing countries. China has never brought forward urgent global security issues and emphasised that China is facing some unpredictable security threats.

China’s Defence and Military Strategies. Later, on 26 May 2015, China released its 2015 Defence White Paper whose contents focus mainly on China’s Military Strategy in the new era. The strategic guideline of “active defence” is set to enhance military modernisation and creating a firm foundation for realising “China’s Dream”. China’s military is concentrating on four essential components of global power: namely, development of military capability in maritime domain, outer space, cyberspace and upgradation of nuclear weapon systems.

The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is gradually shifting its focus from “offshore waters defence” to the combination of “offshore waters defence” with “open seas protection.” The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is shifting its focus from territorial air defence to both defence and offence, and building an air-space defence force. The PLA Strategic Rocket Force [the PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF)] is strengthening its capabilities for strategic deterrence and nuclear counterattack, medium and long-range precision strikes. China will also enhance international cooperation and actively participate in regional and international security issues³ and would foster the new model of “military relations” in line with the new model of “major-country relations” between China and the US.

This is the first time ever that China has publicly revealed its sovereign claims over the South China Sea (hereafter referred to as the East Sea); and the PLAN, for the first time, is playing a leading role in safeguarding China’s sovereignty over seas and islands. China’s “offensive” intent stands clearly exposed, indicating its preparation for resorting to threats or using force in order to gain step by step control of the whole of East Sea.

Impacts on the Region and the World

China is playing an increasingly important role in the world economy by making great contribution to global economic growth and trade. In recent years, China has contributed about 30 per cent to global GDP growth,⁴ increased its control over the world economy, and sought to globalise the Chinese Renminbi.⁵ These moves have helped to improve the world’s competitive strength, increased other economies’ dependence on China, and attracted the investment from most of the major multinational groups in the world.

At present, China is the world’s second-largest economy after the US. Some experts have projected that before 2049, China’s economy would surpass the US in terms of nominal GDP. However, the real living standards of the people in China remain well behind those in the US, Japan, Germany, and even Russia in terms of science and technology. China is still the world’s biggest production base with an export-oriented economy and heavy dependence on the world economy. China’s economy has witnessed slowdown recently. The need for institutional renovation and addressing social inequality has become more pressing than ever before. While developed nations’ economy develops depth, China’s economy develops width. The global financial crisis and economic recession in 2008 made China’s major export markets shrink. It exposed “four nos” in its economic structure; namely, instability, lack of solidity, coordination and sustainability.” Notably, not many countries are attracted by China’s economic model despite its emergence as the world’s biggest economy.⁶

Facilitating the Trend towards Multi-Polarisation

The development of China has contributed to maintaining a peaceful environment, enhancing the emergence of a multi-polar world order, creating a fairer and more equal “playground.” and strengthening the voice of developing countries. China is giving increasingly diversified and active support to developing countries through debt relief, loans, economic assistance and military aid by making effective use of multilateral forums, especially the United Nations (UN).⁷ In fact, China has gained the support of a number of developing countries, especially those in Africa. China is employing a flexible strategy to protect its economic and security interests at multilateral organisations, enhancing its prestige while reducing the US influence and; actively participating in the reformulation of the international laws and concluding many multilateral treaties.⁸ So far China has taken part in most of the international and regional organisations and mechanisms which have culminated in negotiating over 300 multilateral treaties. Presently, China is holding the initiative in settling global economic and political issues, including the proposal for using the Special Drawing Rights (SDR) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the proposal for replacement of the US dollar by a “new global currency.”

China’s economic diplomacy is based on enhancing and protecting its overseas investments with a view to serving its national interests. At the same time, China is gradually expanding its influence and strategic reach in other regions including Europe, Africa, Latin America and Australia. There will be fierce competition between China and other newly emerging countries for playing a lead role at the international fora and also in non-traditional security and financial issues, controlling the relationship among major powers and giving rise to interest groups.

China, however, is facing many challenges. China has not really succeeded in getting into a binding alliance with any country, not even with the US. In Asia, Chinese products are reputed to be of lower quality than the US items. America’s soft power still prevails. Although China’s soft power has recorded some notable achievements in recent years, China’s assertiveness is viewed with suspicion by some of its neighbouring countries.

Impact on International Security

China has made positive contribution in prevention of conflicts and their settlement. It has also actively participated and taken the initiative in addressing issues related to international peace and security. In particular, China has cooperated with major powers and other relevant countries while dealing with “volatile” issues such as the nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea, and international terrorism etc. China has also made positive contribution to development efforts, humanitarian assistance and provided more personnel than any other members of the UN Security Council for UN peacekeeping missions.

China’s rapid military build-up, however, has caused great concern amongst a number of countries in the world. The US seeks to rebalance forces in the region to contain China. China also pays attention to involving other countries in order to expand its spheres of influence and to break the US stronghold. The moves made by China and the US have resulted in tension, conflicting interests and mistrust. China’s recent assertiveness in neighbouring waters is of great concern to many countries – potentially leading to a new regional arms race.

The military build-up, procurement of weapons and equipment, and escalation of disputes, from between China and its neighbouring countries to between China and other major powers, especially the US, would gradually enable China to succeed in its plot to divide the world into two blocs. At the same time, China’s activities in the East China Sea and the East Sea have provided an opportunity to the US to set up an “anti-China front.”

Potential Impact on the Region

China’s moves have undermined trust amongst neighbouring countries, and increased suspicion which does more harm than good to China. As for the region; China’s development strategy not only creates favourable conditions for development but it also results in manifestation of new threats.

Potential Threats to Safety and Security in the East Sea

China’s military build-up and naval activities in the East Sea, including military manoeuvres; enlargement or construction of military bases in the Paracel Islands; renovation and construction of artificial islands in the Spratly Islands for turning these islands into military outposts in the East Sea, are posing serious threats to security and safety of maritime navigation and overflight in the region.

China’s release of its Defence White Paper in 2015 has implied that differences in international maritime domain tend to escalate conflicts of interest; and China is ready to resort to use of force to settle the disputes instead of using peaceful means.

Raising the Likelihood of Arms Race and Conflict

China’s development of military capabilities and modernisation of PLAN have caused concern amongst its neighbouring countries, and are likely to lead to arms race in the region. China’s Defence White Paper also signals a firm message on sovereignty related issues and warns regional countries to desist from enhancing their relations with the US and Japan.

Countries in the region must consider increasing their defence budgets and expedite acquisition of advanced weapon systems in order to defend their territorial sovereignty and national interests. These moves will, in turn, intensify the risk of arms race and regional conflict, if parties concerned do not abandon the rhetoric of military confrontation.

Creating Fierce Competition among Major Powers

The East China Sea and the East Sea are witnessing fierce competition between two great powers which would draw increasing attention of other powers. However, conflicts are not likely to occur in the short term. China and the US may, however, bring pressure to bear upon specific political issues.

Posing Threats to Countries in the Region

The modernisation of PLAN and China’s physical activities at sea, including the holding of military exercises in order to demonstrate China’s improving maritime prowess by securing the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), have worried China’s neighbouring countries and enhanced their apprehension that China might resort to using military force to gain control over natural resources and to settle their bilateral disputes.

Conclusion

At present, China has emerged as the most dynamic actor in the great-power politics. China’s domestic and foreign policies have never been more assertive and proactive than they are today. China’s desire to become a major power in the region and the world, when compared to their posture in earlier decades and the realisation of “China’s Dream”, would not be so easy because the world is foreseeing a new era full of difficulties for China.

Given its geostrategic position in close proximity to China, and the rivalry among great powers, East Asia has and would continue to suffer unpredictable and serious challenges due to China’s current assertive foreign policy and military strategy.

Endnotes

- 1 The “first centenary” is to complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2021 when the CPC celebrates its centenary. The second centenary is to complete the building of a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious by 2049 when the People’s Republic of China marks its centenary.
- 2 The concept of “the Chinese Dream” consists of four main aspects: Strong China (economically, politically, diplomatically, scientifically, and militarily); Civilized China (equity and fairness, rich culture, high morals); Harmonious China (amity among social classes); and Beautiful China (healthy environment, low pollution). “The Chinese Dream” is associated with the attainment of the above-mentioned ambitious “two centenaries.”
- 3 According to the Defence White Paper, China’s military needs to perform well on eight fundamental tasks: (i) to deal with a wide range of emergencies and military threats, and effectively safeguard the sovereignty and security of China’s territorial land, air, and sea; (ii) to resolutely safeguard the unification of the motherland; (iii) to safeguard China’s security and interests in new domains; (iv) to safeguard the security of China’s oversea interests; (v) to maintain strategic deterrence and carry out nuclear counterattack; (vi) to participate in regional and international security cooperation and maintain regional and world peace; (vii) to strengthen efforts in operations against infiltration, separatism and terrorism so as to maintain China’s political security and social stability; and (viii) to perform such tasks as emergency rescue and disaster relief, rights and interests protection, guard duties, and support for national economic and social development.
- 4 Sheard Paul, China’s contribution to the global GDP growth in 2012 is projected at 30%. <http://finance.eastmoney.com/news/1585,20100915962248493.html>.
- 5 Several research have projected that Chinese Reminbi would become an international currency by 2020.
- 6 People in the world still consider West as their “desired house.” In addition, many people regard China’s model as a transitory one which would finally enable them to achieve a democratic model with institutions similar to those of South Korea, etc.
- 7 The UN cooperated with China and Africa to establish China-Africa Enterprise Association, and China-Africa Business Council in 2005. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supported the establishment of the International Poverty Reduction Centre in 2006 in Beijing, which aims to enable China to share its development experience with other developing countries.
- 8 Thai Cao Cuong, The Rise of Major Powers and Development of International Law, Journal of Tianjin University, July 2009, page 64.

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Background

In People’s Republic of China (PRC), Communist Party and Military enjoy a unique relationship. The origin of this bonding can be traced back to the Ninth Meeting of the Communist Party of China (CPC) convened in December 1929 at Gutian, a town in South West Fujian Province, for building Party and the Army. Significantly, this was the first meeting post Nanchang Uprising of 01 Aug 1927, which formally marked the formation of People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

During the Gutian Conference, Mao Zedong addressed the men of Fourth Army to clarify the role of military. In the Congress Resolution, absolute leadership position of the CPC over the Red Army was entrenched; purpose of army “to chiefly serve the political ends”.¹ Thereon, PLA has remained the military of Communist Party and not of the Country. It played a key role during the Revolution, as an armed component of the Communist Party. Mao, Deng and other first and second Generation CCP leaders served as the top commanders in the PLA.

Even after eight and a half decades, the above policy has remained sacrosanct, evident from President Xi Jinping’s visit to Gutian on 30 Oct 2014, where he addressed ‘Military Political Work Conference’ of the PLA and reiterated the principle of ‘Party leading Military’.² The President stated, “PLA still remains Party’s Army and must uphold its revolutionary traditions and maintain absolute loyalty to the political masters”.³

Modernisation of the PLA was taken up in the right earnest, as a sequel to its poor performance during the 1979 Sino-Vietnam War. In fact, Defence was the last of the four modernisations enunciated by Deng Xiaoping to transform China. However, the approach lacked strategic direction. Critical reforms were long overdue; evident from the configuration of the military regions, which remained unaltered since 1950s.

Ever since President Xi Jinping assumed power as the fifth generation leader of PRC three years back, military reforms have been high on the agenda. The process commenced in 2013 during the Third Plenum of 18th Central Committee of CPC, with the establishment of National Security Commission. Primary reasons for the current phase of reforms are twofold : prepare the military to effectively safeguard China’s expanding strategic interests and establish firm control of the CPC over armed forces, through Central Military Commission (CMC), the apex defence body headed by President Xi as the Chairman. The ongoing reforms process is deep rooted and not just confined to structural changes. Its impact is expected to be far and wide, having internal and external ramifications. The paper undertakes a holistic overview of China’s current military reforms process, with specific focus on genesis, strategic cum doctrinal dimensions and structural architecture, to enable a balanced assessment of PLA’s emerging profile.

Genesis

Sense of urgency in implementing military reforms can be attributed to multiple factors, geopolitical considerations being the key drivers. President Obama’s Doctrine, ‘Pivot to Asia’ which aims to rebalance Asia-Pacific, by redeploying 60 per cent of US military assets in the region has lent impetus to China’s military modernisation.⁴ Defence planners in Beijing are well aware of the wide gap that exists between the military capabilities of China and the US, despite the former possessing credible nuclear deterrence and a formidable missile force. This fact was acknowledged recently by the ‘Global Times’, a state run Chinese daily, in its editorial.⁵

The Chinese are ardent protagonists of the concept of Comprehensive National Power (CNP), which includes both hard and soft power. Acquisition of hard power is seen as an imperative in enhancing China’s CNP. As per President Xi, for realising the ‘Chinese Dream”, military reforms is the key.⁶ This will also facilitate the implementation of ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative.

Core national objectives of the PRC are Stability, Sovereignty and Development. Stability implies unchallenged supremacy of the CPC and its continuation in power. PLA’s absolute loyalty to the Communist Party is an essential prerequisite. On 01 Feb 2016, during the inaugural ceremony of the newly constituted theatre commands, President Xi stated, “Centralisation of military architecture is vital; all the theatre commands and PLA should unswervingly follow the absolute leadership of the Communist Party and the CMC to the letter”.⁷ Sovereignty, besides external non-interference implies unification of Taiwan with the motherland, wherein use of force remains an option. It includes control over South China Sea alongside diminution of US influence and containing Japan in the Asia-Pacific. Emergence of Nationalist Government in Taiwan is yet another driver in speeding up reforms. Development remains an essential prerequisite for survival of the Communist regime. To this end, strong central authority and peaceful periphery are considered vital to sustain the pace of progress.

Strategic and Doctrinal Dimensions

China’s military strategic culture lays great emphasis on exploiting propensity of things – ‘strategic configuration of power’; shi to achieve one’s objectives.⁸ Aim is not annihilation, but relative positioning of own resources to gain position of advantage. Strategy thus aims not to fight an adversary but to create a disposition of forces so favourable that fighting is unnecessary. As Sun Tzu famously wrote “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill”. The ongoing military reforms are oriented towards capability building and force projection.

Chinese White Papers on National Defence issued periodically since 1998 define the general trend of strategic thinking. The theme of the Ninth White Paper published in May 2015 titled “China’s Military Strategy’ was ‘active defence’.⁹ Focused on winning ‘Local Wars under the conditions of modern technology’, its thrust was on expounding maritime interest, priority being accorded to navy and air force over the ground forces. It also marked a shift in naval strategy from ‘off shore waters defence’ to a combined strategy of ‘off shore waters defence and open sea protection’.

China’s military Doctrine of “Local Wars under Informationalised Conditions” envisions short swift military engagements, to achieve the political objectives by leveraging technology. Joint operations and integrated logistics are inherent components of the new doctrine. President Xi has laid emphasis on the need for military to adapt to the information based wars, as informatisation is the core of military development.¹⁰ Establishment of ‘Air Defence Identification Zone’ (ADIZ) in East China Sea is also part of the military reforms. It is significant both for geopolitical considerations and China’s domestic scene.

Military Reforms – Thrust Areas

Main thrust of the ongoing military reforms is on revamping of systems and structures at the political, strategic and operational levels. Some of the salient facets which merit attention are summarised in the succeeding paras.

The major changes being instituted at the macro level are in consonance with the guidelines issued by the CMC on deepening national defence and military reforms with Chinese characteristics; the focus is on civil-military integration, jointness and optimisation. The composition of the CMC itself has been balanced out, obviating the erstwhile ground forces bias. As a sequel to the military reforms, CMC will be responsible for the policy formulation, controlling all the military assets and higher direction of war. PLA, People’s Armed Police (PAP) and Theatre Commanders will directly report to the CMC.

The erstwhile PLA Headquarters had four key Departments – General Staff, General Political, General Logistics and General Armament. This structure was perceived to be cumbersome, army dominated, resistant to change and led to the creation of political fiefdom. These Departments have been reorganised and integrated into the enlarged CMC set up, to ensure centralised control at the highest level. In the new structure, there are 15 functional bodies. These include six departments and three commissions, besides, six affiliated institutions (Table 1 refers).¹¹ Integrated joint staff under the CMC will ensure streamlining of the decision making process.

Table 1

CENTRAL MILITARY COMMISSION

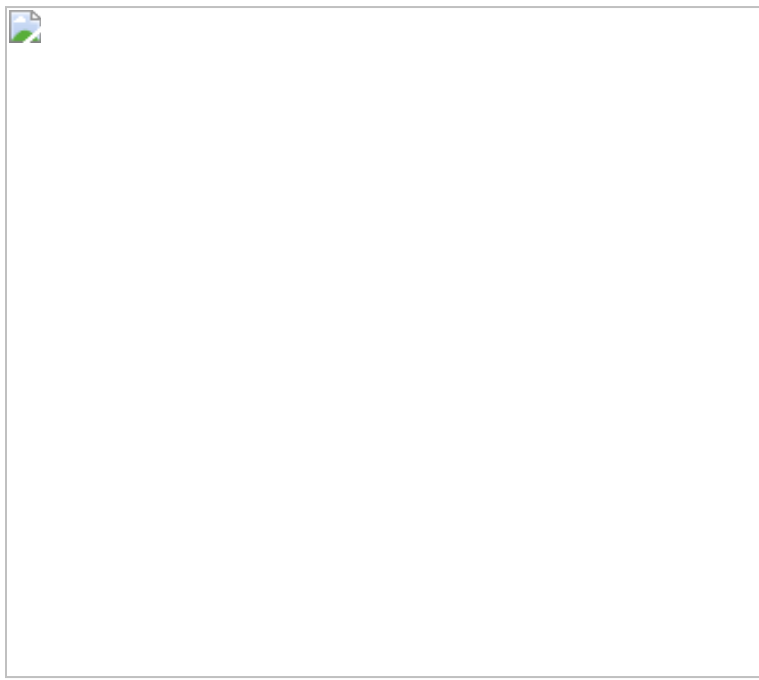
CMC General Office	CMC Joint General Staff	CMC Political Work Department	CMC Logistics Department
CMC Equipment Development Dept	CMC Training Management Dept	CMC Military Defense Mobilisation Dept	CMC Discipline Inspection Commission
CMC Political and Law Commission	CMC Science and Technology Commission	CMC Strategic Planning Office	CMC Reform and Establishment Office
CMC International Military Cooperation Office	CMC Auditing Administration Office	CMC Administration Affairs Management Office	

(Source - Stratfor 2016, www.stratfor.com)

Three new Service Headquarters have been created besides the existing PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) Headquarters. These are the ‘Ground Forces Command’ making it a separate service, ‘Rocket Force’ – an upgrade of erstwhile Second Artillery which operates strategic as well as conventional missile weapons, and ‘Strategic Support Force’ to control and secure the cyber and space assets; key elements to execute the doctrine of ‘Local Wars under Informationised Conditions’, as also to meet the challenges of new generation warfare.¹²

Formation of five theatre commands (Battle Zones) – Eastern, Western, Central, Northern and Southern by reorganising the earlier seven military regions is aimed to revamp the joint operations capability of the PLA (Map 1 refers). This will facilitate seamless synergy in deploying land, air, naval and strategic assets in a theatre. While presenting flags to the theatre commanders, President Xi exhorted “Each command must concentrate on studying modern warfare. proactively seize initiative, enhance joint command, joint action, joint logistics and ensure troops are combat ready to complete the mission”.¹³

Theatre Commands – Battle Zones



Source: Economist.com, South China Morning Post

Map 1

Planned reduction of 300,000 personnel, mostly from the ground forces and non combat positions is to make the PLA nimble; right sized to around two million. This will be the tenth time that the reduction exercise is being implemented since 1951, when the strength of the armed forces had peaked to 6.27 million.¹⁴

Ramifications

The military reforms are in consonance with PRC’s expanding role as an emerging global power. It is perhaps the biggest military shake-up in a generation. While the architecture does not follow any western model or template, yet is in sync with the mainstream developments in the modern warfare. Although the primary aim is to enhance national defence capability marked by Chinese characteristics, the process goes on to serve multiple objectives with wide ranging implications.

Internally, predominance of the Party over PLA stands further validated, with centralisation of power structure under the revamped CMC. By gaining absolute control over the Defence Forces, President Xi Jinping has emerged as an unquestionable leader. His enhanced stature as a ‘paramount leader’ puts him in the league with Deng Xiaoping and as ‘core’ – at par with former President Jiang Zemin.

Externally, PLA’s exponential accretion in the capability is a cause for concern, especially in China’s neighbourhood. Beijing is likely to be more assertive in pursuit of its national objectives, particularly with respect to its claims in South and East China Seas. Asia-Pacific region is set to be the scene of intense rivalry with the changing balance of power equations. The USA is expected to play greater role in protecting its interests and assuage the concerns of allies, given the emerging security dynamics in the region.

Specific to India, so far Lanzhou and Chengdu Military Regions were responsible for operations against India’s Northern and Eastern Theatres. With the newly reorganised structures, facing the PLA’s Western Battle Zone with integrated assets of the Army, Air Force and Rocket Force under a single commander will be own four Army Commands (Northern, Western, Central and Eastern) and three Air Force Commands (Eastern, Central and Western). Enormity of challenge by way of coordination and synergy in deployment of assets in a telescopic time frame merits serious attention. Even during the 1962 War, China had constituted a single Headquarters to control the operations in Ladakh and NEFA, while on the home side, battles were fought in isolation, even within the theatre. Lately, Arunachal Pradesh has been included in the list of issues which are of Beijing’s core national interests. Further, China’s forays into Indian Ocean have long term strategic implications for India (emphasis added).

In retrospect, the radical military reforms initiated under the stewardship of President Xi Jinping are indeed path breaking. The thrust of these reforms is on how best the PLA capabilities can be optimised to further China’s aspirations as a rising global power. While sticking to the vision of founding fathers: ‘Party rules the Gun’, Xi has been able to gain firm control of the PLA, eliminate resistance by pulling down top Generals like Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, and cultivate his own team. The central theme of the reforms process in essence, is indicative of both continuity and change. The Chinese strategic community has drawn richly from the historical, strategic and recent doctrinal documents, simultaneously infusing new thinking in tune with the futuristic trends. They seem to have also drawn heavily from the American experience in recent conflicts across the globe. Rise in China’s military capability will have serious ramifications, both in the regional and global perspective.

The ongoing military reforms are envisaged to be in place by 2020, well before the end of President Xi’s term in 2022.¹⁵ However, given the ambit and magnitude of the task, it may take decades before the PLA transforms into a modern force at par with the western counterparts. Above notwithstanding, PLA certainly is poised for a “Great Leap Forward”!

End Notes

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Introduction

Change has been a constant in the Chinese military for the past three decades. This article places the recent changes announced in January 2016 in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) organisation within the larger context of transformation that is happening in the Chinese Military and Security Apparatus. The series of radical changes in the PLA can be traced back to Deng Xiaoping era where along with sweeping economic reforms, he utilised the vacuum left by Mao, the fount of PLA's military wisdom to commence a series of transformations. These changes were tailored to alter the PLA from a People's Army created for revolutionary purposes to a professional Western style defence force in form and function. Therefore, modernisation has been a recurring theme in the PLA affecting most facets of the PLA including force structure, training, strategy and manpower. The modernisation progressed albeit incrementally during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periods.

The changes seem to be gathering a unique pace now in the Xi Jinping era. After Deng, it is the present President Xi Jinping who has re-initiated such radical transformations. President Xi also personally heads the 'Leading Group for National Defence and Military Reform of the Central Military Commission' - an elite committee that steers the reforms. Even though Xi had indicated revamp of military upon taking reins, its rough contours started emerging a few months prior to the official announcements. Earlier in Sep 2015 and later in Nov 2015 President Xi had declared deep reforms regarding organisational changes as well as troop cuts. 1 The reforms were reiterated in Xi's address at a meeting on reforming the armed forces in Beijing from 24 - 26 Nov 2015 aimed to establish a three-tier system where Central Military Commission (CMC) will serve as the first tier of structure, Battle Zone Commands/Troops Command system as the second functional tier and an Administrative System that runs from CMC through various services to the troops.2

January 2016 is certain to go down in history as a point of inflection in the transformation of PLA with the following changes:-

- (a) On 31 Dec 2015, China instituted a Ground Forces (Army) Chief with separate Headquarters (HQ) and a PLA Strategic Support Force (likely, a Cyber Command?).
- (b) The Second Artillery was renamed People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) and also upgraded from a 'branch' to a 'service' the same day.
- (c) This was followed by transforming the four departments in mid Jan 2016 into fifteen smaller departments under Central Military Commission.
- (d) On 01 Feb 2016, the formation of the Theatre Commands completed the major changes that had been announced.

Since the changes appeared in three different instalments through the January of 2016, they are commented upon in that order. The article focusses more on the organisational changes and has not included recent material developments such as the first SSBN patrol and plans to build a second aircraft carrier.

First Set of Changes Announced on 31 Dec 2015

The first set of changes appears to revolve around organisational reforms. In a ceremony attended by President Xi on 31 Dec 2015, three new military organisations took shape within the Chinese military establishment as under:-

- (a) Formation of a PLA Ground forces Headquarters with a separate Chief. Till now there was no Army Chief, since the Army was the basic organisation with other two services conceptually being a part of Army. Therefore, the Army's HQ function was dispersed in the 'four HQ' of a generic PLA, namely the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department and General Armaments Department.
- (b) Formation of PLARF: The erstwhile Second Artillery has been renamed and has been upgraded as a service from being just a branch. Till now it was not given a service status and was deemed less than Air Force/Navy as a 'branch'. This 'strategic' organisation will report to the CMC directly.
- (c) Formation of a new organisation, the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) which has been newly commissioned. Complete details regarding this organisation are not known yet. The South China Morning Post cites a source to state that the PLASSF would be responsible for hi-tech warfare in space and on the internet.3 If that be the case, it could be a C3I, Cyber Command. This formation was a surprise indeed.

Formation of Army Headquarters

The creation of HQ for the army shows two separate trends as under :-

- (a) Firstly it is to accommodate a long standing professional requirement of PLA ground forces. The Navy and Air force had separate HQ and their respective Chiefs for long, but the Army, despite being the premier service was left out in that professional progress. This change means that generic, diffused management of ground forces by the four departments could be replaced by an Army HQ with its own Chief.
- (b) Secondly in a way, portends the larger role played by other services in the PLA. Army instituting a HQ also means PLA is not the preserve of the ground forces alone! Since 2005, the Air Force and Naval Chiefs have been members of the CMC predominantly consisting of Army officers. The present Vice Chairman of CMC is an Air Force General Xu Qiliang. That he retains his Air Force uniform unlike Admiral Liu Huaqing who was also a Vice Chairman, albeit as an Army General indicates the improving trend of joint outlook to military affairs.4

Like the PLA Naval and Air Force Chiefs, Army Chief could be in protocol equal to the five Theatre Commanders (equivalent to C-in-Cs). All current theatre commanders are Army officers and at the Military Region (MR) level, Naval and Air Forces serve under an Army hierarchy. Air Force or Naval officers occasionally served as Deputy Chief of Staff at MR level. The Service Chiefs, though ranked alongside MR leaders in protocol, are slightly more privileged to be members of CMC which is the highest military decision making body. This change could also mean new members in the CMC, about which no information is presently available.

The erstwhile Chengdu MR Chief, General Li Zuocheng has now been made the Army Chief, which means that the new office could be equal or ranked higher than the MR Chief. General Li, one of the youngest to achieve Army Commander's rank commanded the 41st Group Army, was promoted in Jul 2015 to the rank of full General along with ten others. The Army HQ also gets a Political Commissar in General Liu Lei, previously, the Political Commissar of the Lanzhou MR.

Formation of the Rocket Force

The Second Artillery, now as the PLA Rocket Force continues to be the same organisation in function, albeit with a change of name and upgradation of status, becoming par with Navy and Air Force.5 This is a step to get the organisation at par with other four services, namely Army, Navy, Air Force and most likely the PLASSF directly under the control of CMC. Even though this organisation was under the CMC earlier, in the status conscious military, such an upgradation can elevate the significance of organisation and status of its leader. The composition of leadership remains same.

Formation of the Strategic Support Force

The newly created PLASSF is headed by General Gao Jin who was Director of the PLA Academy of Military Science (AMS), the apex research institute of the PLA and General Liu Fulian as the Political Commissar, previously the Political Commissar of the Beijing MR.6 From the nature of its Chief's previous appointment this organisation could have high technology role. C3I systems, Information and Cyberwarfare could be its areas of responsibility (?). Being a new organisation very limited information is presently available.

Second Set of Changes – Mid-January 2016

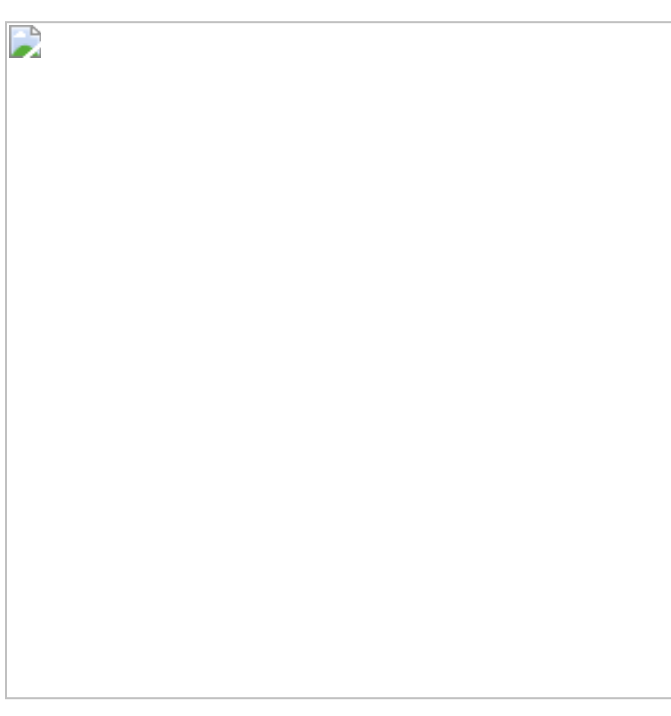
Reformation of the Four Departments. A significant overlay to the entire scheme is increasing party's grip over the military apparatus. This has been partly achieved by breaking the existing four HQ, the behemoths that controlled PLA into fifteen lean organisations under CMC as announced on 10 Jan 2016. The four giants will now metamorphose into following CMC organs:7

- (a) CMC's Six Departments. The Joint Staff, Political Work, Logistical Support, Equipment Development, Training and Administration Department, and National Defence Mobilisation Departments.
- (b) CMC's Three Commissions. Discipline Inspection, Politics and Law, Science and Technology Commissions
- (c) CMC's Six Offices. The General Office, Administration, Auditing, International Cooperation, Reform and Organisational Structure, and Strategic Planning Offices.

Third Set of Changes Declared on 01 Feb 2016

Theatre Commands. The reforms declared on 01 Feb 2016 were around the battle zones which replace the existing MR. This was a much anticipated change, in the air for the past several years. At a ceremony attended by CMC members, General Fan Changlong, Vice Chairman of the CMC, read out the CMC's order to establish the PLA's theatre commands.8 President Xi officially inaugurated the five theatre commands with cardinal orientations of North, South, East, West and Central Commands giving their Commanders the ceremonial flags. The Commanders and Political Commissars of the Theatre Commands were also announced in the ceremony. Other than nomenclature of Commands, which reveals its orientation and names of leaders, no other concrete information is presently available, although there are reports regarding locations of the command HQ and their subordinate organisations. Available information is appended in Table 1 below.9

Table 1 : Details of the new Commanders and Commissars



Earlier reports had indicated that the new commands, called Battle Zones, could have a cardinal/inter cardinal focus under a joint structure within five years. The present announcement on

01 Feb 2016 not only advances that date but also lays some of those speculations to rest. The reorganisation is indeed cardinal based which in Xi's words is for 'responding to security threats from their strategic directions, maintaining peace, deterring wars and winning battles'. However, no official maps have been released yet.

These battle zones or theatre commands have been under consideration for long and have been reported by Dennis Blasko in his seminal work 'Chinese Army Today' published in 2008. He articulated them as 'War Zones' which will be activated as a temporary measure during crisis. Those warzones are now being translated as 'Battle Zones' or permanent theatre commands by official PLA websites.10

The number of MRs has periodically varied in history stabilising at present seven, which will now effectively be these five Theatre Commands. There simply is no news of what happens to the old MRs, but in a significant move in end January 2016, the seven PLA MR Newspapers were shut down, which portended what lay ahead for the MRs.11

Given the enormous clout that the MR leaders possess, it will be also relevant to note that all erstwhile MR leaders, except General Xu Fenlin, Chief of the Guangzhou MR have been accommodated in this change. The Chengdu MR leader was earlier appointed the Chief of the Ground Forces. General Cai Yingting is reportedly a confidant of the President and has been appointed the Chief of the Academy of Military Sciences.12 The Beijing Deputy MR leader has been upgraded to a Theatre Commander, and is apparently the only Lieutenant General in this new structure indicating that the Central Command could have a slightly different role as a hinterland command. The reduction from seven to five definitely cuts some fat making PLA more nimble. It also gives a larger scope to deploy reserves. Most significant call is the consistent exhortation for 'jointness'. The Western Command will cover the largest area, absorbing both Chengdu and Lanzhou MRs, which cover almost half of China's land area and borders. The other four theatres occupy the other half of China, giving away some indications of the present threat perceptions as well as geographic compulsions of that country. The high density of commands in the Eastern half shows preoccupations in East Asia.

As suggested earlier the Theatre Command System for operations will run parallel to the service oriented administrative structure (Army, Navy, Air force, PLARF and now PLASSF) that ensures professional management of services. Xi stated whilst inaugurating the new Command Structure that this is 'a strategic decision made by the CPC Central Committee and the CMC with an eye to realising the Chinese Dream and the Dream of a Strong Military. The establishment of the five theatre commands and their joint operational institutions is of great and far-reaching significance in ensuring the PLA to be capable of fighting and winning battles and effectively safeguarding China's national security.'13

Certain other exhortations by President Xi reveal what is expected of theatre commands; he stated that the new commands must (emphasis by the author) :-

- (a) 'Focus on **combat readiness**, and the various military services pursue their own construction and development.
- (b) Unswervingly follow the **absolute leadership of the CPC** over the military and carry out the orders and instructions of the CPC Central Committee and the CMC to the letter.
- (c) Devote themselves to **studying how** to fight wars, research the principles of winning modern warfare, speed up the formulation of the theatre commands' strategies, perfect their combat plans, and focus on joint training, so as to obtain initiatives in future warfare.
- (d) Strengthen joint command, **joint operations** and **joint support** within the theatre commands, and organise troops to complete daily (at all times) combat-readiness and military operations.

Other Recent Changes

In the backdrop of latest developments, it is relevant to recall the recent significant changes carried out or announced thus far by China during President Xi's period which has military or security implications. These are as under:-

- (a) Intention of troop cuts to the tune of 40 per cent from the Army, 30 per cent from Air Force and only 10 per cent from the Navy. Such a change will eventually settle the overall PLA manpower including Peoples Armed Police (PAP) from 3 million to 2 million with a 30 per cent overall reduction.14 There are reports about reservations in the State Owned Enterprises to absorb the demobilised soldiers.
- (b) There is intra-army change of removing divisional structures to let brigades serve directly under Corps or Group Armies. This is expected to make the organisation more effective with optimal reserves. There are also unconfirmed reports on reduction in numbers of Group Armies.15
- (c) The PAP has been renamed as National Guard. This is a law enforcement body primarily for civilian policing which provides support to the PLA during wartime. 16
- (d) There was also a formation of National Security Commission earlier which works under the political leadership to combat terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.17
- (e) China appointed its first Counter Terrorism Chief, Liu Yuejin, a key figure in China's crackdown on illegal narcotics.18
- (f) China passed a new Terrorism law with wide ranging implications including power for the PAP/National Guard to operate abroad.19
- (g) The five separate entities termed five dragons that dealt with Maritime Security have been united into a single body under the State Oceanic Administration.20
- (h) Publication of new Defence White Paper that in essence makes the PLA far more mobile with high thrust on Navy providing PLA a global role.

Conclusion

Overall the recent changes lie on the long road to modernisation which commenced three decades ago. Considering the scale of this reform, they are by no means small. They appear aligned with domestic and global realities. This reform makes the Chinese armed forces leaner, improves command and constitution of CMC which remain dominated by the Army. The upgradation of the status of Second Artillery to PLARF, an independent service, could accentuate its status and control of strategic forces by the CMC. That it occurred around the time the first Ballistic Missile Submarine (SSBN) patrol was reported does not seem a coincidence. 21 The break-up of the 'four departments' into fifteen manageable organs under the CMC, including a discipline section could also increase the party's grip of all matters military.

As a nation, China is in the midst of deep changes today under a transformational leadership. Its economic model is being revamped, as a corollary it has rolled out the 'One Belt One Road' construct with economic and strategic implications to the region. Its internal political structures are being shaken up with anti-corruption campaign, the internal security organs and laws have been reformed, it has become more assertive in its maritime claims, and there are far more frequent forays into the Indian Ocean including acquisition of a base in Djibouti. The central theme, at the grand strategy level, appears to be Xi's 'China Dream', of overall, time bound national rejuvenation.

At national level, changes appear to tread on a tight rope between increasing professionalism as much as the party's grip over the military. Therefore, it is to be noted that changes do not alter the basic nature of the PLA as the party's army. Barring that core tenet, change, it appears remains a constant in the Chinese Armed Forces. Since this is the early stage of the change, several gaps remain in the information that is available. Therefore, it remains for military analysts to observe how PLA assimilates these rapid and drastic changes, probably the largest in scope and scale by any military in the world in recent history.

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Introduction

The growth of internet has been the biggest social and technological change of our lifetime. It is a great medium that allows people across the world to communicate and has become increasingly central to our economy and society. But the growing role of Cyberspace has also opened up new threats from Cyber criminals along with new opportunities. The high degree of anonymity, speed of communication, efficiency and reach to the masses has led to it being exploited by Cybercriminals. Therefore we should have a clear cut approach towards handling of Cybercrimes at national level both at organisational and individual levels. The Government should be in a position to ensure protection of the organisations and individuals from crime, fraud and identity theft etc.

Categories of Cybercrimes

Criminals from all corners of the globe are already exploiting the Internet to target individuals and organisations. Few main categories of Cybercrimes can be described as below :- 1

- Breaking into Communication Services.** Unauthorised access of information services compromises security.
- Promoting Criminal Activities.** Cyber domain is being used extensively to facilitate organised drug trafficking, gambling, money laundering and arms smuggling. The use of encryption technology places criminal communications beyond the reach of law enforcement.
- Cyber Piracy.** The temptation to reproduce copyrighted material for personal use, sale or free distribution violate anti-piracy laws and are treated as criminal offences.
- Cyber-Stalking.** Computer systems can also be used for harassing, threatening or intrusive communications, by means of "cyber-stalking".
- Financial Irregularities and Tax Frauds.** Hi-tech online transactions over secured channels cannot be tracked with traditional countermeasures.
- Electronic Vindictiveness and Extortion.** Dependence on complex data processing and telecommunications systems is prone to damage or interference by electronic intruders.
- Investment and Marketing Frauds.** The increasing use of internet marketing and investment allow fraudsters to enjoy direct access to millions of prospective victims around the world, instantaneously.
- Electronic Eavesdropping.** Remote monitoring of computer radiation and eavesdropping compromises information security.
- Electronic Funds Transfer Fraud.** Digital information stored in credit card can be counterfeited and misused.
- Identity Theft.** Identity theft is used by Cybercriminals for monetary gains and serves as a gateway to other Cybercrimes such as tax-refund fraud, credit-card fraud, loan fraud and other similar crimes.
- Theft of Sensitive Data.** Sensitive information related to government, organisations or individuals attract the attention of Cybercriminals.

Cybercrime – Impact on National Security

Use of Cyberspace in civil as well as military domains has today become an intricate component of national power. With defence forces adopting more complex Information and Communication systems and upgrading to network centric warfare, they are at higher risks of cyber-attacks. The “Make in India”, “Digital India” and “Smart Cities” are flagship programmes with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society, foster innovation, knowledge economy and infrastructure development in India by leveraging the use of information technology. It goes without saying that this accelerated capacity building has enormous implications for the Country’s cyber-security posture. At the same time, threats from both state and non-state actors are weakening the very foundations of these concepts. None of the existing international laws on cyberspace apply to the terrorist organisations who have adapted themselves in innovative ways to become one of the most ardent users of cyberspace for a variety of criminal activities - from communication, to finance, as well as for recruitment, networking and psychological operations (Psy Ops) as we are currently witnessing. As the visual and real worlds get increasingly integrated with the Internet of Things (IoT), it is only inevitable that use of cyberspace for destructive purposes will pose a serious threat to national security.

Challenges in Handling Cybercrimes

The human society around the world is racing ahead with innovative trends in information technologies. This has also given rise to well managed criminal activities where the commodity, personal information or data moves far too quickly for conventional law enforcement methods to keep pace. Detecting, quantifying and preventing Cybercrime is a difficult task. A few challenges are as under:-

- The Cyberspace is not limited by well-defined boundaries and hence the actions in the Cyber domain cannot be traced to the source of origin. These features are being exploited by non-state actors for perpetration of misdemeanors in the Cyber domain.²
- The reach and complexity of the offences committed in the Cyber domain are continually on the rise thereby affecting the Government as well as the institutions and individuals.
- As the volume and value of information hoisted in the electronic domain have increased, innovative methods are being adopted by Cyber criminals as more convenient and profitable ways of carrying out their activities anonymously are being evolved.
- The ability of adversaries to produce, distribute and utilise malicious code with ease maximises their gains and at the same time pose challenge to threat evaluation and traceability.
- Targeted attacks are growing faster, stealthier, multifaceted and extremely difficult to analyse and are causing risk to national security.

Current Scenario at National Level

With the increase in frequency of Cybercrimes in India and registration of Cybercrimes showing an annual quantum jump over the past years, an expert group set up by the Home Ministry has suggested setting up of a dedicated body which is proposed to be called Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C). This will facilitate online reporting of Cyber offences, apart from monitoring, analysing and countering these new-age crimes. This national body will have linkages with state police and will e-integrate around 15,000 police stations across the Country, and NatGrid. This dedicated body will have high-quality technical experts and R&D experts to develop cyber investigation tools to coordinate the aforesaid actions. Also, the body can take up long-term training programmes for the law enforcement agencies and even judiciary on investigation and prosecution of Cybercrimes.

The proposed I4C will have real-time analytics of Cybercrime along with their types. This will help strengthen India's case in seeking cooperation from global Internet firms having servers abroad, to tackle various types of Cybercrimes. Also the planned architecture should have routing of the Internet services through a single, common gateway rather than separate gateways now used by the Country’s Internet service providers. There is also need to have a relook at the legal framework, including the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 and Information Technology Act, 2008 against any existing loopholes or voids to deal with Cybercrime.

In view of emerging challenges in the Cyber world and spiralling Internet crime rate, State governments also need to take stern measures. There is a need to create nodal centre for effective policing of social networking sites and anti-terror activities in Cyberspace. All types of Internet related activities ranging from virtual policing, automated threat intelligence, Cyber forensics and tracking system need to be put in place.

There is a need for security compliance and a legal system for effective dealing with internal and external Cyber security threats. India needs good coordination between law and technology to come out with a mechanism of cooperation among states, agencies and countries to address these challenges. The strategy and roll-out plans are needed for addressing the challenges related to Cybercrime in the short-term and the mid-term, with a mechanism to review the same on a long-term basis. In addition to the existing mechanisms, a strategy needs to be promulgated which states the vision, objective and approach for Cybercrime prevention in India. For this purpose, the Indian Government has set up its own ‘Cyber Security Architecture’ comprising following bodies :-³

- National Cyber Coordination Centre (NCCC).
- National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC).
- Grid Security Expert System (GSES).
- National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC).
- Cyber Command for Armed Forces.
- Central Monitoring System (CMS).
- National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID).
- Network and Traffic Analysis System (NETRA).
- Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems (CCTNS).

Cybercrime Early Warning, Reporting and Response

Cybercrime, like any other crime, should be reported to appropriate law enforcement authorities depending on the scope of the crime. Quick access of such reporting system should be made available to victims. Law enforcement authorities should be made aware online about the suspected criminal or civil violations. Maintaining centralised database will provide a repository to law enforcement and regulatory agencies at the national, state and local levels. The activities needed to be pursued under this initiative include :-⁴

- Adopting and deploying state-of-art tools and techniques.
- Creating a structured knowledge repository.
- Strengthening partnership and cooperation with industry, international Computer Emergency Response Team (CERTs) and security forums.
- Acquisition of intelligence about vulnerabilities, threats, and security risks collated from a comprehensive list of sources.
- Establishing a collaboration platform for engaging with security community.

Legal Architecture

Cybercrime raises several challenges for traditional criminal law and the criminal justice system in general.⁵

- The first challenge is to define the types of Cybercrimes and include the same in its conceptual framework for influencing national legislation on Cybercrime and policies at international level.
- The second challenge is that the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is complex and dealing with crime involving these devices requires well-trained personnel in the investigation phase, during prosecution, and in courts.
- As a third challenge, many Cybercrimes occur in virtual environments like mobile phone channels or the Internet. This feature frequently clashes with the main operational criteria of the criminal justice systems, namely sovereignty and the territoriality principle, hence, it requires countries to establish clear rules on a legal system’s jurisdiction over these offences.
- The fourth challenge is that the world of ICT moves at a pace different from that of physical world. Crimes occur in a fraction of a second and may spread with astonishing speed.
- Lastly, the challenge due to virtual nature of Cybercrimes wherein a perpetrator may be in a different jurisdiction from the victim and the legal definitions of the criminal behaviour in the two legal systems may not match.

Law enforcement agencies must, therefore, take rapid action for collecting and preserving the digital evidence for use in criminal proceedings. If criminal justice systems are to deal effectively with these problems relating to the repression of Cybercrime, they must update their legislation and law enforcement systems where these are unable to cope with investigation and prosecution of the phenomenon. Successful policies undertaken by the foreign countries may be adopted for better utility against Cybercrimes.

Cybercrime Prevention (R&D, Training and Awareness)

There are huge gaps in the number of trained Cyber security professionals available in the Country as compared to the overall requirements. R&D in Cyber security is unsatisfactory. Non-availability of proficient Cyber experts within law enforcement agencies and inappropriate implementation of the strategy means that very few measures are in place to immobilise a larger set of Cyber sleuths to counter the menace of Cybercrime. Additionally, in order to identify the modus operandi of the criminals, it is essential to understand the psychology rather than just relying on tools and technology.

Spreading awareness on Cybercrime prevention is an essential requirement. The Cybercriminals are constantly seeking new ways to attack and identify potential victims. In recent times, critical infrastructure of a few countries was successfully penetrated due to the low awareness level of most users, through phishing and social engineering methods.

Citizen awareness programmes should be launched to prevent Cybercrimes, as proactive mitigation has to be achieved through multiple media channels. Mechanisms should be established for independent monitoring of awareness programmes at regular intervals to evaluate the number of people and regions covered through the awareness programmes. Awareness material should be updated regularly as well.

International Collaboration

Since the Cyber world transcends all physical barriers, and is also being transnational in nature, it is but obvious that nations across the globe need to strengthen their cooperation and form alliances as well as ensure that their legal, technical and institutional measures are put in place. Though the IT Act, 2008 categorises Cyber offence as a crime in India; it has its own limitations; thus, it lacks the necessary execution on ground. This includes investigation, prosecution and consecutive extradition of a foreign national as well.⁶

India remains a non-signatory to the Budapest Convention, which is the international treaty seeking to address Cybercrime by harmonising national laws, improving investigative techniques and increasing cooperation among nations. It will be beneficial to have collaboration with International Cyber Security Protection Alliance.

Summary of Action Plan

A summary of action plan which needs to be initiated at the national level is given as below :-⁷

- National Response.** Improve our detection and analyses capabilities to defeat high-end threats, with a focus on the critical national infrastructure.
- Governance.** Establish internationally agreed ‘rules of the road’ on the use of Cyberspace and ensure its implementation.
- Security.** Manage and ensure that the key critical infrastructure remains safe and resilient.
- Cooperation.** Share information of threats in Cyberspace, including from private sector, for creation of security database at national level.
- Execution.** Enable all law enforcement agencies to handle Cybercrimes and forensics.
- Reporting and Response.** Build an effective chain of reporting Cybercrime and improving the police response at local level for those who are victims of crime.
- International Synergy.** India should ratify all international forums so that Cybercrimes can be prosecuted across borders and offenders are denied safe havens and offshore help.
- Legal Framework.** Courts of Law should be empowered with enforcement capabilities to report, react, disrupt and prosecute Cybercrimes.
- Core Competence.** Promote development of a cadre of skilled Cyber security professionals to retain an edge in the area of crucial key skills and technologies.
- Awareness.** As prevention is a key, we need to work to raise awareness, educate and empower people and firms to protect themselves online.
- Role Model.** Model the best practices on Cyber security in the Government’s own systems thereby setting up strong standards for suppliers to the government agencies.

Conclusion

To positively impact the Cyber security ecosystem and to combat Cybercrime, it is imperative that efforts and resources are dedicated to operationalise the Nation’s Cyber security strategy. If such initiatives are driven from the highest level of the Government, it ensures that all stakeholders are interested and engaged in contributing to the success of initiatives or programmes. Such commitment alone, though it is an important enabler, is not sufficient to guarantee the success of an initiative or programme. Monitoring and review mechanisms are essential to analyse and assess progress as well as to consider measures for re-calibration and course correction as may be required. It is important to define milestones and operationalise the strategy as per the desired impact of the initiatives.

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Introduction

The Naresh Chandra Committee on national security had submitted its report in May 2012. Recommendations of the committee included creation of three new tri-service commands: Special Operations Command, Aerospace Command and Cyber Command.¹ The Committee was instituted in 2011 realising no worthwhile reforms had been undertaken during the past 10 years. The requirement for a Special Operations Command should have come up years ago since India has been subjected to proxy wars for past three decades. Ironically, the Naresh Chandra Committee ignored the recommendations of the K Subramanian headed Kargil Review Committee and the follow up Group of Minister’s report to appoint a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), instead recommending a permanent Chairman of Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC). A member of the committee later disclosed that MoD did not want CDS because they thought that the Defence Secretary and his IAS colleagues would be “somehow diminished”.² But this has been the irony of India – a MoD sans any military expertise and Defence Secretary, not Defence Minister, officially charged with defence of India. But the question here is will India have the political will to go for a Special Operations Command and what shape will it take?

Changed Conflict Environment

Conflicts have become hybrid with the sub-conventional occupying major battle-space. As far back as 2001, speaking at the Regional Conference on Security held in Bangladesh both Pakistani speakers Shirin Mazari, Director General, Institute of Strategic Studies and Lieutenant General Javed Hassan, Commandant, National Defence College openly advocated low intensity conflict, guerrilla warfare, indirect intervention, psychological warfare, terrorism and subversion as a manner of tactics short of direct all-out military confrontation.³ Over the years, because of the enormous costs of conventional wars both in terms of lives and finances, even big powers have switched to using irregular forces; typically changing from ‘boots on ground’ to ‘boots on ground by proxy’. That is why irregular forces have emerged with greater strategic value over conventional forces be it Middle East, West Asia, Ukraine or South Asia. Consequently, even the US and NATO have been battling irregular forces.

China-Pakistan Sub-conventional Construct

In the early 1960s, China advised Pakistan to create a militia to fight prolonged war in India’s backyard.⁴ These are the jihadis of today. By 1992-93, armed modules of Pakistani jihadis were identified in ten Indian states besides J&K.⁵ They were also undertaking joint training in terrorist camps inside Bangladesh. The list of Pakistan sponsored terrorist attacks, big and small, in India is long : attack on Parliament, 26/11, Tanda, Kaluchak, Akshardham, Samba, Dinanagar, Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Pampore and more. Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar has said that the attack on IAF base, Pathankot was by non-state actors who operate with Pakistani support.⁶ Considering that Pakistan’s ISI is hand in glove with some 14 terrorist organisations, they are actually all state-supported, not non-state actors. Pakistan’s state policy of terrorism is unlikely to change because of continued backing by the US and China. Pakistan’s military holds all cards including foreign and defence policies; why should it let go of the power and money when as far back as 2007 its private business-corporate-industrial complex was pegged at US\$ 20.7 billion?⁷ In November 2014, Sartaj Aziz, Nawaz Sharif’s Foreign Affairs Advisor and NSA publicly stated, “militants not dangerous to Pakistan should not be targeted”.⁸ So, organisations like LeT, JuD, Jem are nurtured by Pakistan.

China provides tacit support to Pakistan’s anti-India jihad and has been arming and supporting insurgencies within India.⁹ China supports Indian Maoists and has provided ULFA training and arms, in addition to sanctuary on Chinese soil. Arms and communication equipment are being pumped into India, particularly to Maoists and the PLA of Manipur.¹⁰ Chinese intelligence was behind the NSCN (K) abrogating its 13 year old ceasefire with India.¹¹ Last year in May, Chinese intelligence orchestrated establishment of the United Liberation Front of West, South, East Asia (ULFWSEA) in Myanmar, combining nine major militant groups of northeast including the NSCN (K) and ULFA.¹² With this, China has the handle to create instability in our northeast while claiming entire Arunachal Pradesh. The China-Pakistan collusive terrorist threat is also manifesting through Maldives getting rapidly radicalised by Pakistani proxies. Chinese support to Pakistan is becoming stronger with her strategic lodgment in Gilgit-Baltistan, China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar as a future Chinese naval base.

The US Factor

Michael Hayden, former CIA Director in his recent book ‘Playing to the Edge’ has expressed deep frustration at the “duplicity” of the Pakistani leadership when it comes to taking action / not taking action against terrorist groups, particularly against al-Qaida, Taliban, LeT and the Haqqani network.¹³ He also writes about Shuja Pasha, former ISI Chief admitting to ISI’s role in the 26/11 terror attacks. Now Musharraf admits Pakistani military training and supporting terrorist organisations. David Headley too reveals Pakistani complicity in terror attack. On 09 Feb 2016, James Clapper, Director of US National Intelligence presenting the ‘Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Committee’ to the US Senate Armed Services Committee had just four lines to say about Pakistan, that too hyphenating her with India, “Relations between Pakistan and India remain tense following a terrorist attack on Pathankot Air Force base in India, which New Delhi blames on a Pakistani-based group, and further dialogue hinges on Pakistan’s willingness to take action against those in Pakistan linked to the attack.”¹⁴ India would have shared with the US strong evidence of JeM’s terror activities and role in the Pathankot attack is obvious but there is no US pressure on Pakistan to bring the perpetrators of even the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks including Hafiz Saeed to book.

Ashley Tellis of Carnegie Endowment had said, “India being continuously subjected to terror actually suits many (read US included) ... India is a sponge that absorbs global terror.”¹⁵ More significantly, the Washington Times of 06 Jan, in an editorial titled ‘Islamic terrorists open a new front’, referring to the terrorist attack on Pathankot Air base said “Just what the civilised world needs, a new front in the war against radical Islamic terrorism.”¹⁶ That is why the US has given a free hand to Pakistan in Afghanistan – force of talks with Afghanistan notwithstanding. That is why the fresh sale of F-16s to Pakistan under pretext of fighting terrorism knowing fully well that these would be used against hapless Baluchis or against India and Afghanistan.¹⁷ That is why John Kerry’s lame excuse that these F-16s are because the US did not want to upset the balance?¹⁸ The bottom-line is that the US support to India against Pakistani terrorism would remain perfunctory.

India’s Strategic Culture

Despite being continuously subjected to terrorism and proxy wars by both China and Pakistan, India seems content with its archaic policy of using conventional force and dialogue to contend with belligerent neighbours. The advanced sub-conventional capabilities of China and Pakistan versus the absence of the same in India should be of serious concern to us, considering the strategic asymmetry this has created. Sub-conventional war is and will continue to be the order of the day, a fact that India has failed to acknowledge. As a result, we continue to bleed through Pakistan’s policy of ‘thousand cuts’.

Lack of strategic culture has been the bane of India albeit bright moments like the liberation of Bangladesh. Former Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal wrote in March 2013, “What would explain our unwillingness to recognise the depth of these threats even today and take appropriate action Pakistan uses the instrument of terrorism against us but we think that we can bring this to an end through dialogue. We let Kashmiri separatists meet Pakistani leaders in Delhi and Islamabad That we produced Chanakya almost 2400 years ago is not sufficient ground to claim that today’s India possesses a strategic culture.”¹⁹ We appear to have failed to see the consequences of increased Pakistani strategic depth in Afghanistan, as Robert Kaplan warned saying, “An Afghanistan that falls to Taliban sway threatens to create a succession of radicalised Islamic societies from the Indian-Pakistan border to Central Asia. This would, in effect, a greater Pakistan, giving Pakistan’s ISI the ability to create a clandestine empire able to confront India in the manner that Hezbollah and Hamas confront Israel”.²⁰

India’s Dilemma

India’s dilemma revolves around an incoherent Pakistan policy, faced with Pakistan’s sweet talk and stabbings, laced with American cajoling. As far back as 2011, Pakistani scholar Amir Mir wrote about resurgence of the JeM and Pakistani establishment remaining deeply embroiled with its jihadi proxies, treating them as the civilian face of Pakistan army.²¹ A recent article in New York Times too talks of the Pakistan army reviving JeM. So while India talks of the complicity of JeM, in particular its chief Azhar Masood in the Pathankot attack, Pakistan has gone ahead and filed an FIR against ‘unknown persons’. Obviously no one in the military supported JeM will be brought to book – same as the perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack – ISI and LeT.

In the absence of institutionalised strategic thinking, our response is to raise more and more police forces barricading ourselves like the proverbial ostrich, even as the China-Pakistan threat is expanding including at the sub-conventional level. There does appear to be some understanding that China-Pak would endeavour to win the end game against us without full-fledged conventional war; aside from limited conflict, war in the cyber and electro-magnetic domains and heightened asymmetric war, increasing their grip on our fault lines. But we appear to be at a loss how to deal with the situation aside from diplomacy and conventional power despite the fact that ‘Operation Parakram’ in the wake of attack on our Parliament having proved that such response was inadequate.

Without effective deterrence against irregular forces, we have not been able to dispel the ‘soft state’ label. Idealism should not be a stand-alone factor because the costs of always following an inward looking policy are that much higher.²² Therefore, the most effective foreign policy for any country, whatever its weight, is one that balances realism and idealism, which in effect makes idealism realistic. Our inward looking policy has also resulted in continuing voids of strategic intelligence since Independence, adversely affecting our national security. Only technical intelligence is not enough.

To bridge the strategic sub-conventional asymmetry vis-à-vis China-Pakistan, required deterrence can be affected by taking the irregular conflict to enemy soil. Such advice on how to deal with geopolitical bullies has been offered in the past, but ignored lacking political will.²³ But now is the opportune time with defence allocations being lowest since 1962, the government needs to adopt such low cost option through special operations and a Special Operations Command.

Special Operations

Special operations are operations that are “special” or unconventional and carried out by dedicated Special Forces units using unconventional methods and resources.²⁴ These may be performed independently of or in conjunction with conventional military operations, the primary being a political or military objective where a conventional force requirement does not exist or might adversely affect the overall strategic outcome. Such operations are usually conducted at operational and strategic levels in a low-profile manner that aims to achieve the advantages of speed, surprise, and violence of action against an unsuspecting target. Our special operations experiments with organisations like LTTE and EROS were dismal failures because our external intelligence agencies think that such operations are their exclusive domain whereas special operations must have adequate mix of Special Forces and external intelligence.

Special Operations Command (SOC)

Special Forces are meant to be employed at strategic and operational levels, not internally. Their strategic level employment is on politico-military missions under the highest political authority, of which the military may or may not be informed. Operational level employment of Special Forces is in support of military plans. In our case, the military at best would be interested to undertake special operations to the depth of Strike Corps operations. We have no Special Forces potential in asymmetric conflict to further national security objectives. Special Forces should actually be central to our asymmetric response, which does not imply operating in large numbers always since such responses do not automatically imply a physical attack. The key lies in achieving strategic objectives through application of modest resources with the essential psychological component. According to Stephen Cohen, “The task of Special Forces is the proxy application of force at low and precisely calculated levels, the objective being to achieve some political effect, not a battlefield victory.”²⁵

Putting all our Special Forces under a SOC akin to the US SOCOM cannot work as threats and higher defence set up of both countries differ largely. Besides, we may land up with a permanent chairman of COSC without operational powers instead of a CDS with full powers. Creating a Special Operations Command under the former would imply creating a mammoth organisation with limited difference from the present day output, especially when HQ IDS is not even integrated with the MoD, and the military are interested in employment of Special Forces at the operational level, not strategic.

The organisation of SOC should be based on about two-three battalion worth under the Prime Minister, with the nucleus taken from existing Special Forces. The word ‘Command’ should not create an impression akin to a mammoth Army Command. Strategic employment of Special Forces is not a game of numbers. Special Forces Teams (SFTs) of SOC individually could comprise 25-50 or more depending on the country/region and its relative importance in terms of national security objectives.²⁶ The PM would need a Special Forces Cell in the PMO comprising serving and veteran Special Forces and R&AW officers tasked with: evolving a national doctrine and strategy for employment of Special Forces, oversee their manning, equipping, training, consolidation, operational and intelligence inputs, inter-agency synergy, strategic tasking and monitoring of all missions.²⁷

The SFTs should have institutionalised access to integrated intelligence, varied insertion and extraction capability and adequate support elements. It is important to remember that special operations are typically carried out with limited numbers of highly trained personnel that are adaptable, self-reliant and able to operate in all environments, and able to use unconventional combat skills and equipment. The special operations are usually implemented through specific, tailored intelligence. Strategic level tasking of SFTs should include missions like: information support operations; surveillance and target designation in areas of strategic interest; shaping asymmetric and conventional battlefield to Indian advantage; deter opponents exploiting our fault lines; exploit fault lines of adversaries; undertake information/psychological operations and unconventional warfare; anti hijack; build partner capabilities with friendly countries; and above all, provide the cutting edge resource for strategic force projection.

Balance of our Special Forces should be reorganised into an Integrated Commando Command (ICC) directly under the CDS, integrating the Army Special Forces, MARCOS, Garuds, SAGs of NSG and SGs of SFF.²⁸ The Commander of ICC must have commanded SF. For internal security requirements, the police forces must raise their own specialists. Significantly, the CCS note on which the NSG was raised had required the Army to provide manpower on deputation “only” for 10 years, which has not been implemented. It is time that the police take on their own responsibilities for internal security more seriously.

Conclusion

While the sub-conventional forces are taking centre stage and asymmetric threats mount against us, high level of sophisticated coordination and synergy necessary between various political, military, intelligence agencies and other departments to pull off special operations at strategic level are missing. Establishment of a Special Operations Command is an imperative, enabling credible deterrence to proxy wars being waged on us.

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