



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

Developments in the Indian Military-2023

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Cover Photographs:

The Integrated Fire Power exercise conducted by Indian Army at Pokhran in Rajasthan on December 23, 2023. Source: X/@rashtrapatibhv

Indian Navy's fifth stealth Scorpene class Submarine INS Vagir was commissioned into the Indian Navy on January 23, 2023 at the Naval Dockyard Mumbai. Source: PIB

The Indian Armed Forces contingent participated in second edition of Joint Military Exercise with Australian armed forces, AUSTRALIND-23, held in Perth, Australia from November 22 to December 6, 2023. Source: PIB

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This is the third in a series of annual assessments by the DPG Senior Faculty of significant developments during the year 2023.

I. Operational Developments

China

The India-China border situation in 2023 remained fragile, marked by heightened military presence, infrastructure building, and diplomatic challenges. While there were no major clashes, the underlying tensions persisted, with concerns about the potential for escalation in the future.

Infrastructure and Military Build-up

China has been actively enhancing military infrastructure along the border, and has planned the construction of 624 border defence villages. In its 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), China allocated 190 billion yuan (approximately \$29.3 billion) for infrastructure development in border areas, including civil and military infrastructure, airports, railway lines, expressways, roadways, dams, and tourist spots.¹

China has completed the construction of the G216 highway linking Xinjiang with Tibet over the Kunlun Mountains.² This will provide an alternative to the existing G219 highway that runs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has been engaged in numerous infrastructure projects, including roads, tunnels, and bridges. Some significant projects include the Zoji La, Shinku La and Sela tunnels, which will provide all-weather connectivity to the LAC in Ladakh and Tawang areas. In the current year, 601 km of roads have been completed, with the budget expenditure of BRO reaching a record high of Rs 12,340 crore (\$1.54 billion) in the financial year 2022-23.³

Troop Deployment and Negotiations

Approximately 50,000 additional troops have remained deployed by both countries along the border following the Galwan clash in 2020. In 2023, there were three rounds of Corps Commander Level Meetings between India and China. The 18th round was held in April, the 19th in August, and the 20th round

took place in October. These meetings are part of ongoing efforts to address the continuing standoff at Depsang and Demchok in Eastern Ladakh.

The talks have not produced any breakthrough, although both sides agreed to maintain close contact and dialogue through military and diplomatic channels to reach a mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues along the LAC as soon as possible. The last disengagement occurred in the Gogra-Hotsprings area in September 2022.

Diplomatic Stance and Future Outlook

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping met on the sidelines of the BRICS meeting in Johannesburg on August 23. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) statement on the meeting stated that the two leaders agreed to direct their relevant officials to intensify efforts at expeditious disengagement and de-escalation at the LAC. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson's remarks struck a discordant note, because there was no mention of the agreement on expeditious disengagement at the LAC.⁴

There were a series of meetings between the two countries' foreign ministers on the sidelines of G20, SCO, and ASEAN events. In the words of External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar, the state of the border is a determinant of the India-China relationship, which he described as "abnormal."⁵

There is little likelihood of an early improvement in bilateral ties. While India has repeatedly stated that normalisation in ties directly depends on the situation at the LAC, China wishes to keep this issue on the back burner and is showing little flexibility on disengagement from Desang and Demchok. The current geopolitical dynamics, especially India's closer ties with the U.S., will also likely influence the future course of India-China relations.

Pakistan

Ceasefire Holding

The February 2021 ceasefire agreement between India and Pakistan along the Line of Control (LoC) is largely holding. In October and November, there were four incidents of ceasefire violations in which one Border Security Force soldier was killed, marking the first death due to Pakistani firing in 32 months.⁶

It is likely that the two sides will continue to respect the ceasefire agreement. However, this outlook could be under pressure if Pakistan persists in its cross-border activity. Pakistan continues to push terrorists across the LoC. Jammu and Kashmir Director General of Police R R Swain has revealed that out of a total of 76 terrorists killed in 2023, 55 were foreigners.⁷

The Jammu region has seen a surge in deadly terrorist attacks in the last two years. Of the 30 Indian Army soldiers killed in counterterrorist operations in Jammu and Kashmir in 2023, 21 deaths occurred in the Jammu region.⁸ These attacks are attributed to terrorists who have infiltrated from Pakistan. If such incidents continue, the ceasefire agreement could see a gradual erosion.

Drone intrusions are another cause of concern. The Border Security Force reported shooting down 100 Pakistani drones in the Punjab region along the India-Pakistan border in 2023. These drones were reportedly used by "anti-national elements" to smuggle narcotics, arms, and ammunition into Indian territory.⁹ Similar activity has been reported in Jammu and Kashmir.

Future Outlook

Pakistan is reeling under a severe economic, political, and internal security crisis. World Bank Country Director for Pakistan, Najy Benhassine, has noted that Pakistan's economic model has become ineffective and needs major policy changes.¹⁰ Inflation is soaring, foreign exchange reserves barely cover two months of imports, and there is an enormous external debt burden.

On May 9, supporters of ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan went on a rampage after he was detained, also targeting military establishments. Today, Imran and many of the senior leaders of his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), languish in jail. However, he still casts a long shadow over the forthcoming elections in February 2024.

Pakistan's internal security situation has deteriorated in 2023, with both the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch militants stepping up their attacks. The year saw 530 fatalities among security forces, the highest number since 2013.¹¹ Relations with the Taliban have frayed over TTP safe havens in Afghanistan. In October, the Government of Pakistan issued an order for all undocumented immigrants, including approximately 1.73 million Afghan nationals, to leave the country.

The instability in Pakistan, its continuing support of terrorist activities, and the constant harping on Kashmir as a core issue suggest that there is unlikely to be any thaw in the India-Pakistan ties.

India-Myanmar Border

The eruption of ethnic violence in Manipur in May brought into open the festering fault lines between the Kuki and Meitei communities. Historical grievances, resentment over land and resource distribution, and a sense of exclusion among tribal communities fueled long-standing tensions. Indian Home Minister Amit Shah told the Parliament on August 9 that problems started in Manipur after the military rulers in Myanmar began a crackdown

against militants in 2021. This led to an influx of Kuki refugees into Manipur, causing anxieties among the majority Meitei community.¹²

An estimated 40,000 refugees from Myanmar have crossed over into India, a majority of them in Mizoram. Official estimates are hard to get because of the porous nature of the Indo-Myanmar border. The 1643 km long border has a Free Movement Regime (FMR), which permits people living along the international border to travel up to 16 km into each other's territory without any official document or visa.

The border is poorly manned due to a lack of infrastructure and roads to set up a chain of border outposts. The responsibility for the border is currently with the Assam Rifles, but there has been an ongoing discussion since 2010 that the responsibility should be transferred to another force.

In September 2010, Assam Rifles chief Lt. Gen. K.S. Yadava had said that the central government plans to move in the Border Security Force (BSF) to guard the unfenced India-Myanmar border.¹³ In December 2013, BSF Additional Director General B.D. Sharma told media persons that the central government had already decided that the BSF would guard the India-Myanmar border.¹⁴ A decade later, the composition of the force to guard the border is still under discussion.¹⁵

The ongoing civil war in Myanmar and its effect on the stability of the Northeastern states must spur the Indian government to take a hard look at the management of the India-Myanmar border and the necessary infrastructure for border security.

II. Organisational Restructuring

Integrated Theatre Commands

The Indian Parliament passed the Inter-Services Organizations (Command, Control, and Discipline) Bill 2023 in August, indicating the government's seriousness in operationalising integrated theatre commands. The Bill authorises the government to constitute inter-service organisations (ISOs). It seeks to empower the Commander-in-Chief and Officers-in-Command of the ISOs with all disciplinary and administrative powers with respect to personnel serving in or attached to such organisations.

The enactment of the Bill will enable the maintenance of effective discipline in inter-services establishments as it will do away with the requirement of reverting personnel under disciplinary proceedings to their parent service units. The Bill would also pave the way for greater integration among the three services and lay a foundation for creating joint structures.¹⁶

At a conference in New Delhi on July 14, 2023, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan said that the theaterisation of the Indian military was on the anvil. Although there is no official word, there appears to be a plan to raise three theatre commands.¹⁷ The Western Theatre Command, to be located in Jaipur, would be responsible for operations along the India-Pakistan border (including the Line of Control). The Northern Theatre Command, to be located in Lucknow, would be responsible for operations along the Line of Actual Control. The Maritime Command, to be located in Karwar, would be responsible for safeguarding India's maritime security from external threats.

Although there was an expectation that the decision on theatre commands could be made soon, no announcement was made till the end of 2023. However, the reasons for this could have more to do with fine-tuning the structure and processes rather than any fundamental differences. It has been reported that the Army, Navy and Indian Air Force are "99 per cent" on board the broad contours of the theatre commands being given shape by the CDS. The remaining issues are more administrative than operational.¹⁸ 2024 could see the operationalisation of the three Integrated Theatre Commands.

Women in the Military

2023 saw a very significant push towards greater integration of women into the military. The command of units by women officers in the three services has commenced. The Indian Navy has opened up all its branches for the induction of women. The first batch of Agniveers, comprising 272 women candidates, have completed their basic training at INS Chilka. The Indian Air Force, for the first time, has inducted women in other ranks as Agniveervayu. At present, 154 women Agniveervayu are undergoing training at ATS Belagavi.

In the Indian Army, a study on the induction of women as JCOs/OR in arms and services is underway. The induction of women officers has been opened up in the artillery and the Remount and Veterinary Corps.

There are still some issues with regard to the promotion of women officers in higher ranks, and the Supreme Court has termed the army's attitude as "arbitrary."¹⁹ However, viewed holistically, 2023 marks a significant shift towards gender neutrality and inclusivity in the Indian armed forces, providing women with more opportunities and responsibilities across various roles and ranks.

III. Capability Development

Indian Army

2023 was named the Year of Transformation for the Indian Army. The process of transformation was based on the five pillars: force structuring and optimisation, modernisation and technology infusion, systems, processes, and functions, human resource management, and jointness and integration.

Capital contracts worth Rs 21,915 crore (\$2.74 billion) were concluded in 2023. These included High Mobility Recce and Support Vehicles, Anti-Tank Guided Missiles, All-Terrain Vehicles, Air Defence Missile Systems, Light Combat Helicopters, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles, and modular bridges. Contracts worth Rs 10,962 crore (\$1.37 billion) were concluded under emergency procurement for essential radio sets, ammunition, night vision systems, and drones requirements.

The army's ongoing projects include light tanks for the northern borders, AK-203 rifles, advanced artillery guns, short-range air defence missiles, and different types of helicopters.

Indian Navy

Four ships were commissioned by the Indian Navy in 2023:²⁰

- INS Vagir, the fifth Submarine of the Kalvari class, was commissioned on January 23, 2023.
- Maldivian Coast Guard ship Huravee, a Trinkat Class Fast Attack Craft, was returned to India by Maldives Maldives in May 2023. The ship, post refit, was re-commissioned into the Indian Navy as INS Tarmugli on December 14, 2023.
- INS Imphal, the third of four P-15B 'Visakhapatnam' class stealth guided missile destroyers, was commissioned on December 27, 2023.
- Sandhayak (Yard 3025), the first of the four Survey Vessel (Large) ships, was delivered to the Indian Navy by M/s GRSE on December 04, 2023. The ship will be commissioned in January 2024.

Reports have emerged that India's Defence Procurement Board has accepted a plan for the Indian Navy (IN) to acquire a second indigenous aircraft carrier. The proposal will now be placed before the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC). The new carrier will be modelled on the 40,000-tonne INS Vikrant, India's first indigenous aircraft carrier,²¹ and will add substantially to India's maritime capability²².

In July, the government approved the purchase of 26 Rafale Marine aircraft for the Indian Navy from the French Government based on an Inter-Governmental Agreement. These aircraft will augment the MiG-29s currently deployed on India's aircraft carriers.²³

Indian Air Force (IAF)

In 2021, the IAF had placed an order for 83 Tejas Mk-1A fighters. The delivery of these aircraft is likely to commence in February 2024 and will be completed by 2028. In November, the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) cleared the proposal to procure an additional batch of 97 Tejas Mk-1A and around 156 Prachand Light Combat Helicopter.²⁴

The Ministry of Defence approved the procurement of 70 HTT-40 Basic Trainer Aircraft for the IAF. The delivery of aircraft will commence in September 2025 and be completed by 2030. The first C-295 MW aircraft was inducted into the IAF on September 25. The ageing Avro aircraft would be replaced by C-295 MW aircraft. The induction of the C-295 fleet will boost IAF's airlift capability and increase the versatility of ground forces.²⁵

In December, media reports emerged that the IAF is likely to rename itself as the Indian Air and Space Force or IASF. In recent months, IAF chief Air Chief Marshal V. R. Chaudhari has repeatedly stressed the need for India to develop both offensive and defensive capabilities in the space domain.²⁶ The Indian Space Policy 2023 focused on increased private participation and a broader vision for utilising space for national and global benefit. There is now the need to address the strategic and national security aspects of space.

Indigenisation

2023 saw continued major focus on indigenisation. The fifth Positive Indigenisation List (PIL) of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA), comprising 98 items, was released in October. The official release states, "The list includes Highly complex systems, sensors, weapons and ammunition." The DMA had earlier promulgated four PILs comprising 411 military items. Seventy-five per cent of the defence capital procurement budget was earmarked for domestic industry in the financial year 2023-24, up from 68 per cent in 2022-23.

Currently, of the 66 ships under construction, 64 are being built in India. Approval has been accorded for 24 ships and submarines that are all planned to be constructed in Indian shipyards. The Indian Navy has achieved approximately 90% indigenisation in the Float segment, 60% in the Move segment, and 50% in the Fight segment.

Defence exports have reached an all-time high of approximately Rs 16,000 crore (\$2 billion) in 2022-23, almost Rs 3,000 crore (\$0.375 billion) more than the previous financial year. Major platforms being exported include Dornier-228, 155 mm Advanced Towed Artillery Guns, Brahmos Missiles, Akash Missile System, radars, simulators, and mine-protected vehicles.²⁷

IV. Looking Ahead

The situation at the LAC will continue to occupy the attention of the Indian Army in 2024. Even if there is some disengagement from the ongoing standoffs in Depsang and Demchok, the focus on infrastructure development and capability building along the Northern borders will continue. The Indian military will continue its efforts to strengthen deterrence against any future Chinese attempts at military coercion and unilateral actions to change the status quo at the LAC.

The ceasefire agreement with Pakistan could come under pressure if the Pak military continues to push terrorists into Jammu and Kashmir. Although the Jammu region has seen an increase in terrorist activities, overall violence in the Union Territory has declined. If Pakistan attempts to vitiate the security environment, the Indian government could be forced to respond militarily.

With ethnic violence and civil strife continuing in Manipur, the government could undertake a comprehensive review of the Indo-Myanmar border. In September 2023, Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh had urged the Centre to wind up the FMR to curb illegal immigration.

The creation of the Integrated Theatre Commands has now been under discussion since 2020. It appears that most of the inter-service differences have now been overcome. 2024 could see a major restructuring of the military to set up integrated structures that are essential for joint warfighting.

The capability development of the military will continue, but challenges remain. Some of these are as follows:

- There is unlikely to be a significant increase in the defence budget in 2024, and the share of the capital expenditure will remain around 30 per cent. Thus, the amount allocated for modernisation of the armed forces is limited. There is also an insufficient link between the capability development plans made by the services and the allocation of funds by the government to the services, leading to unpredictability and delays in modernisation.
- Indigenisation is essential, but it could impact the capability development and operational requirements of the military in the short term. A strict

insistence on indigenous products without an adequately mature defence industrial base could lead to delays in modernisation.

- The Ukraine war has resulted in a disruption of supplies from Russia. The delivery of the last two S-400 regiments has been delayed. The conflict has resulted in an inability to send major aggregates like the aero-engines, critical avionics and specialist weapons to Russia for repairs and overhaul. Alternatives and workarounds will have to be found for Russian supplies.
- The induction of cutting-edge technology is a priority area for the three services. However, the spending on defence research and development (R&D) is limited. In the 2023 defence budget, the capital outlay for R&D was Rs 12,850 crore (\$1.61 billion), which is approximately 2 per cent of the total defence spending.²⁸ Higher R&D spending would not only meet the military's future requirements, but also assist the civil defence industry.

The three services have been keenly studying the war in Ukraine. Some of the critical lessons that have emerged from the war should now find a place in the restructuring and modernisation proposals. Some important aspects are enumerated below.

- **Drone wars.** There has been extensive use of drones in the war, with a Royal United Services Institute report estimating that Ukraine is losing about 10,000 drones per month.²⁹ The three services have commenced the induction of drones in various roles. An extensive study must be done on the scale and scope of the employment of drones.
- **Cyber and Information Warfare.** Cyber operations were expected to play a major role in Russian war plans but did not have the desired effect. One reason for this was the resilience that Ukraine had built into its systems in partnership with international technology companies, such as Cloudflare and Microsoft. Social media companies like Meta, Twitter, Alphabet, and Reddit also took steps to counter Russian information warfare efforts. The Indian military needs to build such partnerships with indigenous companies to make their support available when required.
- **The Future of Large Conventional Platforms.** Large platforms, like tanks, aircraft, and naval ships, did not have the expected operational impact on the battlefield. Some experts attribute this to Russia's faulty planning and poor execution of tactics. Others stress the need to shift to smaller, more agile systems. The Indian military must discuss these issues objectively and not be tied down by traditional thinking.

- **Long wars.** For a very long time, the Indian military has planned on short, swift wars. This is also reflected in the limited war reserves maintained by the services. There will have to be a relook at stocking levels of equipment and ammunition required for war and the capacities of defence production agencies.
- **Technology induction.** Modernisation of the forces must continue, but a significant leap in capability enhancement will come with adopting disruptive technologies like Artificial Intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber, information manipulation technologies, hypersonics, etc. It is crucial that while the military works to acquire these technologies, it must also create appropriate organisational structures and develop operational concepts for the optimum utilisation of technologies.

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