

India's Defence Preparedness is impaired by Structural Dysfunction: An Analysis

by Arun Sahgal



Introduction

Despite seventy years of a fragile no peace no war neighbourhood scenario and a challenging security environment, India has failed to build a credible, self-sustaining defence industrial base and today remains one of the world's largest importers of weapons. Things have come to such a pass that the Vice Chief of the Army Staff reportedly lamented before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence that the repeated curtailment of the budgetary allocation has created a glaring imbalance between the cutting edge weaponry required and the aging equipment available with the armed forces.



Desert Exercise – Indian Defence

<http://indiandefence.com/threads/exercise-vijayee-bhava.6476/>

The resulting scenario of Indian military power getting incrementally denuded even as the Service Chiefs, in particular the Army Chief, are talking about the country facing a two-and-a-half front threat, should be a cause of serious concern. This is all the more so against the backdrop of our immediate adversaries systematically building up their military muscle and refurbishing their nuclear capabilities. India's security environment is increasingly vitiated by tensions along the borders, with daily cease-fire violations and infiltration along the Line of Control with Pakistan. Similarly, with China there has been a marked increase in border transgressions, with 426 intrusions along the LAC in 2017 against 273 the previous year. China has also built formidable

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In keeping with the growing dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise as a leading power. To support that goal, the DPG undertakes research and organizes policy interactions across a wide canvas, including strategic and geo-political issues, geo-economic issues and defence and security issues. DPG does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
Director General

defence infrastructure throughout its Western Theatre Command and has been undertaking intimidating exercises.

A similar situation prevails in the maritime domain, with a noticeable increase in Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean, marked by regular PLA deployments, including of nuclear and conventional submarines and port calls by naval ships. Hambantota and Gwadar have virtually been turned into Chinese forward naval outposts. Similar moves in the Maldives and the establishment of a major military base in Djibouti should leave little doubt that China is preparing to expand its footprint across the Indian Ocean and eventually to dominate the Eurasian – African – Indian Ocean maritime trade routes.

Why this Neglect?

“...even in the face of such growing military challenges, perceptible or adequate steps are not being taken to arrest the decline in India’s military capability”

The question that begs to be answered is why, even in the face of such growing military challenges, perceptible or adequate steps are not being taken to arrest the decline in India’s military capability? There is no doubt that the present government has undertaken reforms to

improve the existing acquisition procedures and to create conditions for a sustainable defence industrial base through programmes such as “Make in India”, an updated Defence Procurement Policy, the Strategic Partnership Programme and encouragement of greater participation of the private sector in defence capability development. Unfortunately, it is equally true that these measures have largely failed in their intended purpose of fast tracking procurements, enabling technology transfers or creating adequate incentives for private sector participation. Thus, the country faces critical shortages of equipment and ammunition as well as major platforms that include aircraft, capital ships, artillery and air defence etc.

The stark reality is that there are nearly Rupees five lakh crores (\$ 7.5 billion) of defence procurement programmes that are stuck in the pipeline at various stages, post clearance by the Defence Acquisitions Council. Surprisingly, there appears to be no urgency to address these delays, even in the issue of Requests for Information (RFIs). A glaring example is the recent policy flip-flop on procurement of fighter aircraft for the air force to make up for major deficiencies. The arbitrary cancellation of the two-year-old plan to build 114 aircraft in collaboration with a foreign partner and the issue of a fresh RFI

for purchase of 110 aircraft (unspecified whether single or twin engine) under the “Strategic Partnership” route best exemplifies the state of affairs. There are similar delays in procuring basic items, such as assault rifles or bulletproof vests for the Army (although a contract for bullet proof jackets appears to have been finally concluded).

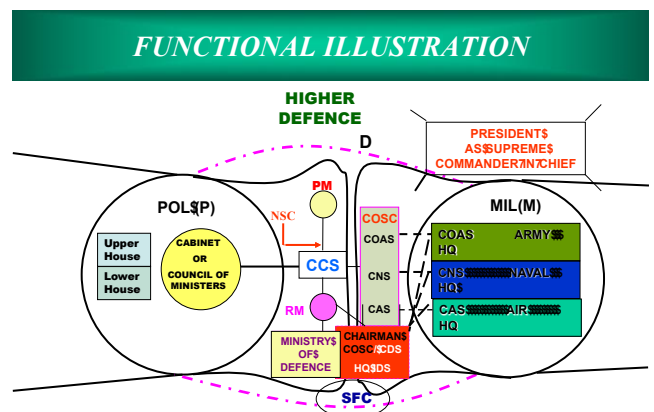
Perpetuating the saga of inadequate capability development is the perennial issue of budgetary allocations. The Services lament inadequate budgetary allocations to meet even the most critical modernisation needs, or even committed liabilities in cases where contracts have been signed, exacerbating procurement delays. The question again is why does the issue of inadequate defence preparedness fail to ring alarm bells at the highest levels of the political or the national security establishment? Why is it that policy reviews ordered by the government are either partially implemented or go entirely unimplemented?

Overall Perspective

There are three main causes for the current state of affairs. First is the structural drawback arising as a consequence of dysfunctionality between the generalist MoD and the Service Headquarters

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and the Service Headquarters. The present structure of defence management in the country is diagrammatically depicted below, clearly outlining separation between the political authority and the military establishment, both operating in a non-synchronous environment.



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The second factor is procedural, which essentially means that despite repeated tweaking of the DPP, procurement procedures remain moribund, and have largely failed to deliver on the country's defence needs in a timely manner. Similarly, despite tall claims, we have failed to create a defence industrial base that can meet our military needs seventy years after independence and after incurring huge expenditures on creating defence manufacturing and R&D capability. Resultantly, nearly 70 percent of military equipment, including major platforms and critical systems, continue to be imported.



Forest Exercise – News World India

http://www.newsworldindia.in/public/media_uploads/media13u4battalion.jpg

Third, and perhaps the most critical, is the mismatch between the nature of future wars and our capability development. Here, the issue of what capabilities and for which war becomes germane. The entire edifice of defence capability development is based on fighting attritional wars, with the focus essentially on a continental threat. Maritime threats are now being given some credibility, but the impact of this recognition on meeting India's critical security needs and concomitant capability development remains just an issue of discourse and debate. Similarly, the impact of nuclear weapons in future operational scenarios is largely discounted, both in the case of Pakistan which has the fastest growing nuclear arsenal as well as doctrines of nuclear war fighting and China, that is modernising its nuclear forces and reportedly deploying Rocket Forces opposite India.

Structural Factors

Structurally, the Ministry of Defence as the nodal ministry is responsible for national military capability development, budgetary allocation and outlining defence weapons and technology acquisitions to ensure a credible defence posture. The starting point for this is the articulation of the Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan (LTIPP) outlining requirements over

the next 15 years and setting in motion the preparation of five-yearly and annual budgetary plans. LTIPP has to be based on strategic guidance in the form of national security, defence and military strategies, backed by strategic defence reviews (SDRs) and the Raksha Mantri's planning guidelines. Unfortunately, such strategic guidance in the shape of a white paper or classified appraisal simply does not exist. HQs IDS undertake this exercise unilaterally, based on their perception of the geo-strategic environment and threat perception, with no inputs from either the RM or the NSC/CCS. This is the most glaring gap in the national defence management and is directly responsible for the current state of affairs.

The result is that neither the LTIPP nor the five-year defence plans produced by the Services or the Integrated Defence HQs have the ownership of the Ministry of Defence or the CCS. In the

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absence of a Chief of Defence Staff or equivalent, there is little or no operational review of these plans by the generalist bureaucracy, which in any case is lacking technical expertise on matters military. In fact, a senior MoD bureaucrat acknowledged recently that the Ministry itself is largely unaware of the threat assessments or the operational plans nor is it kept in the loop by the Service HQs. There is thus no focused correlation of capability enhancement with threat assessment, nor any capability audit. Capital acquisition approvals remain ad hoc, dictated solely by the availability of funds. A classic example is the Army's artillery modernisation plan, delayed now for over two decades. During the Kargil conflict, to overcome critical shortages of artillery, the Army was forced to mobilise additional artillery units from formations deployed in the plains or deserts creating serious operational gaps. Similar is the situation with the Air Force, which has been reduced to just 31 squadrons (against a sanctioned strength of 45) and what is even worse, has to maintain five different types of front line aircraft at huge maintenance cost. Similarly, the Navy is faced with a depleting submarine fleet, even in the face of China's incremental submarine deployment in the IOR.

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The reality is that defence planning and acquisitions have become procedural exercises and reduced to the apportioning of the available capital budget against the competing demands of the three Services. This does not address capability gaps or set time lines for capability enhancement, resulting in inadequate and lop-sided

modernisation.

This situation simply cannot continue. The overall budgetary allocation requires evaluation against the following national security outcomes:

- Defence capability should address threat mitigation and help in creating a more secure security environment.
- Capability outcomes must be evaluated against overall military/defence objectives, e.g. evaluation of capability to deal with the two-front challenge, through the analysis and determination of capability gaps.
- Overall military capabilities must over time be extended to India’s extended arc of security challenges, in synergy with the nation’s changing and expanding national interests.

Procedural Issues

The next issue relates to the procedures and policies on defence procurements. DPP 2016 outlines various procurement categories with an increasing focus on “buy and make” in India. Although there has been an attempt at progressive indigenisation in terms of defence production policy, defence export and import relationships and strategic partnerships, these efforts at best remain a work in progress, with little tangible results.

Procurement is based on demands of the Services, approved by the Defence Acquisitions Council and articulated in annual budgets. These are what can be termed “best-bet procurements”, based on the allotted capital budget, and bear only partial conformity with

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five year plans or the LTIPP. This results in incremental capability enhancement and that too mostly in terms of modernisation. Sadly, in the absence of strategic guidance, acquisition priorities are not based on overall national threat assessments. A classic case is the raising of the 17th Mountain Corps for the Army. This was to be a Rapid Reaction Force, complete with air assault formations, integral heli-lift capability and light mountain artillery, capable for rapid build-up and quick insertion. What we have got instead is a normal mountain formation with limited operational capability.



Mountain Exercise -

<https://i.ytimg.com/vi/z29G0lbFBmA/maxresdefault.jpg>

Apart from policy bottlenecks, bureaucratic attitudes make the acquisitions process long and tedious, creating scope for delay and indecision. As a senior retired defence ministry bureaucrat highlighted recently during a discourse on civil-military relations, one of the biggest constraints of the defence bureaucracy in decision making is the fear of the three “C’s”: the CVC, the CAG and the CBI. At the slightest hint of a scandal or a single vendor situation emerging, the MOD bureaucracy is quite willing to suspend the acquisition process, even if it means wasting years of effort. The politics of acquisitions, and the manner in which each major acquisition turns into a slugfest between political parties, is another major cause for delay. The recent political acrimony over the G2G purchase of 36 Rafale aircraft is a case in point. Allegations largely comprise speculative innuendos and are driven by vested interests. This is not to suggest that corruption in defence deals should be ignored, but to highlight that the impact of purely politically motivated mudslinging is delay in critical procurement decisions which impacts national defence capability and security.

“If this impasse persists, the nation will bear the costs in the future.”

Another important issue is the aspect of indigenous capability development and creating a defence ecosystem. To their credit, major private sector players have created adequate infrastructure and are in a position today to develop major weapons or important sub-systems. Nonetheless, it would be fair to underscore that none of them can be self-sustaining based on the uncertainty of Indian defence orders alone. On the other hand, a number of international manufacturers are willing to set up shop in India, e.g. Boeing and Lockheed Martin, that could kick start the creation of an indigenous defence industrial base. Unfortunately, neither our procedure driven and risk averse bureaucracy nor the political leadership seems capable of taking advantage. As a result, we are failing to leverage the enormous strategic and technological gains from these and other similar opportunities. If this impasse persists, the nation will bear the costs in the future.

Capability Enhancement

Perhaps the most critical issue impairing credible capability development is the mismatch between the likely nature of future wars and our current perceptions of capability development. Here the issue of “what capabilities” and for “which war” becomes critical. As mentioned earlier, the Indian military’s edifice of force development is based on fighting attritional wars, with the focus essentially on a continental threat. Maritime challenges are only now beginning to be appreciated and capability enhancement projected in terms of sea control, SLOC security and force projection in what is termed as “Out of Area Contingencies”.

It is important to note that success in war is partly a function of matching the tools of warfare to a specific task and employing those tools effectively in the conditions of battle. Getting the tools, objectives, competency and context right is the key.

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Measuring hard combat power in terms of adequacy in capability, capacity and readiness to defend our interests is not a simple factor of budgetary allocations, but requires a detailed assessment of threats at least in the medium term of 15-20 years. This in turn requires periodic “Strategic Defence Reviews” aimed at assessing the future geo-strategic environment. It is the nature of threats that must determine investments in the resources, hardware and technological capacities required.

Unfortunately, in all these years, despite a number of policy reviews, India has not institutionalised mechanisms to undertake such assessments. There has been no enunciation of overall defence or national security strategy, outlining of threats and challenges, nor doctrinal reviews that define integrated concepts of future operations. Such reviews as have taken place, e.g. the post-Kargil review, have been episodic and have not resulted in definitive structures to evaluate threats and challenges.

Conclusions

This paper is an attempt to highlight the weaknesses in our existing defence management structures, procedures, threat evaluation and capability development. The need of the hour is to institutionalise a national security and defence planning process to provide coherent strategic guidance that will in turn become the rationale for formulating acquisition plans. Similarly, the entire defence planning and acquisitions processes must conform to the mission needs and matching capabilities required by the armed forces. Synergising the functioning of the Ministry of Defence and the Services is a vital imperative.



Ships – SNM

<http://www.southreport.com/indian-navy-facts/>

India faces two military challengers who have the military at the core of their respective national establishments. Both are highly militarised states with “offensive defence” doctrines, ready to leverage military power for coercion and intimidation and adept at sub-conflict “grey zone” incursions. India can ill-afford to neglect its defence posture.

“It is only to be hoped that by establishing a Defence Planning Committee (DPC) under the chairmanship of the National Security Adviser (NSA), an institutional framework will finally be established that will define national security challenges and national defence strategy, which will provide the framework for defence planning and capability development aligned to mitigating threats.”

There is an imperative need to evaluate the changing nature of conflict and even more importantly doctrines for the synergised application of forces. Thus, developing credible dissuasive capabilities is not an issue of bureaucratic processes and budgetary allocations, but an imperative for national security. It is only to be hoped that by establishing a Defence Planning Committee (DPC) under the chairmanship of the National Security Adviser (NSA), an institutional framework will finally be established that will define national security challenges and national defence strategy, which will provide the framework for defence planning and capability development aligned to mitigating threats. Effectiveness of the DPC, however, will be a function of the nature of political oversight by the Cabinet Committee on Security, and the actual implementation of its recommendations by the Ministry of Defence. Pessimism in this expressed in certain quarters arises on account of past initiatives like the Committee on Defence Planning under the Cabinet Secretary in 1977,

or the performance of institutions like the National Security Advisory Board or the Defence Planning Staff under the Chiefs of Staff Committee. All of these bodies had failed to deliver as they were handicapped by absence of political oversight, or simply bureaucratic inertia, to bring about the desired changes. Hopefully, the DPC under the NSA, with the presence of all essential stakeholders, will provide the requisite direction for creating a viable defence capability for the country to meet India’s security challenges.

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