The Invisible Dimension of Modernisation

Ali Ahmed

Whenever modernisation finds mention in relation to the military, invariably the discourse veers towards the very important facet of hardware upgradation. Seldom does it dwell on software issues such as the necessary changes in the military's social composition and mores to be able to absorb the technology. For instance, even though the Pakistan Army received Patton tanks from the US, the Pakistani military was not able adequately utilise the advantage gained. This owed to their inability to adapt to the upgrade in technology due to the sociological make-up falling behind. Where the technology received is well utilised, the military's internal make-up can yet continue to retard. The Egyptian military was able to get across the Suez and establish bridgeheads based on missile defences. However, its attritionist culture did not permit it to make the most of the advantage so gained. Instead, Israel was able to recover from the initial setback and launch a riposte that took it right across the Suez. The point that emerges is that while the significance of hardware acquisitions cannot be denied, modernisation of the internal social space is also required alongside. This article reflects on this less remarked upon dimension in the Indian context, making the case for changes towards a more manoeuvre oriented army.

An effort along this direction, internal to the army, is being dubbed 'transformation'. The term includes wider organisational changes resulting from the need to cope with the Chinese and the 'two-front' 'threats'. Heightened defence budgets resulting in acquisitions necessitate that this be proceeded with alongside for optimal dividend. What this entails in essence is moving to a social profile that enables better absorption of technology. That social changes are necessary is proven from differences in sociological dimensions of the military in

Colonel **Ali Ahmed** (Retd) is Research Fellow, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

differing eras in military history. For instance, the 'red shirts' who conquered India for the British were different from the khaki clad army that fought later colonial campaigns. Likewise, the army that fought the 1971 War was markedly different from the one that suffered a loss in 1962. If the current day Indian Army were to redeploy in a hypothetical Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) like scenario, it would be considerably more proficient in its low intensity conflict skills. Likewise, social mores in the technology heavy sister Services are considerably different from those in the army, and within the army, there are differences between those of the services, combat support and combat arms. This indicates that organisations are continually changing, depending on their experience, societal changes and technology thresholds. Since all three aspects are under shift, the army cannot afford to be static. A proactive approach is called for.

This is easier said than done. Changes are easier in the wake of acknowledged reverses. For instance, the initial surprise during the Kargil War resulted in several changes, to include doctrinal and organisational changes. As things currently stand, there is no existential threat. Therefore, there is no compulsion for change. At best, it can be incremental and, therefore, considerably slower. Secondly, organisational inertia is unknown to management theory. This factor would be more so in a million-strong organisation. A system-wide initiative would be required, akin in rigour to the mechanisation of the Eighties or the raising of the Rashtriya Rifles in the Nineties. Lastly, the direction of change is such that the upper rungs in the hierarchy stand to be affected more. Inevitably, social modernisation entails an egalitarian order. This translates as 'threat' to billets, positions and privileges. For instance, the army has gone in for implementing the AV Singh Committee recommendations. A critique has it that this makes for a 'top heavy' army. Change would impact this aspect, making it difficult for the organisation to contemplate and concede.

Despite the problems, there are bright prospects for the desired change. The changes in the US military on display since the early Nineties are a 'pull factor' for the rest of the world's militaries, including those of the competitors such as the Chinese, and consequently, for India. The manner in which the US has prosecuted not only conventional war, such as the second Iraq War, but also coped with the asymmetric challenges has many lessons that are not lost on those watching it professionally. Indeed, the term 'transformation' can be said to have been borrowed from the US, it having been introduced in the lexicon by Rumsfeld, otherwise better known for the debacle in Iraq. In order to remain abreast, not only does the technology require induction, but the social dimension also requires emulation.

Secondly, social changes in India have acquired a marked pace in keeping with the growth rate of the economy, its status as an information technology (IT) superpower and its growing managerial pool in the middle class. There are changes in the profile of the youth, of education and in corporate culture. There is a 'can do' attitude prevalent in society that will be replicated in the military to keep it contemporary. Internal change has the potential to acquire a momentum of its own. Lastly, there has been increasing exposure to foreign militaries through an expanded peacekeeping engagement and military diplomacy. The exchange of best practices from such interaction can easily be taken forward.

What are the possible elements of change? The writings of eminent military sociologist, the late Charles C Moskos, provide a clue. An issue he reflected on was on the differences between the three types of militaries typified by him based on the society as: war readiness, war deterrent and warless military. By this yardstick, the Indian Army is poised midway between being a war readiness and a war deterrent one. Moskos observes that the former implies a 'mass' army, while the latter a more technology savvy, leaner one. The army displays both characteristics. It needs moving towards being a war deterring one, more suitable for the nuclear age. This means reducing its 'mass'. Doing so would enable change. Incidentally, 'mass' is a product of its strategic environment, requiring it to have several capabilities while also maintaining suitable deployment postures along the disputed borders. These compulsions are beyond the military ken. However, there is a case for thinking about, for instance, changing the manner in which the Line of Control or Actual Control is held. Does it need to be physically held? Innovation in this would reduce the salience of 'mass', thereby heightening the feasibility of change. The desirability is inescapable, given that both technology and per capita personnel costs would continue to mount. Even an allocation of 3 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would not be able to bring about balance in case 'mass' is not alongside tackled. While other modern and modernising militaries take in 4-6 per cent of the GDP, this would not be possible in India's case since the 'guns versus butter' issue remains germane.

The second issue that Moskos dealt with was the relative balance between the institutional and occupational ethos in militaries. The advanced militaries were seen to be moving towards an occupational ethic, even as the combat related component of these retained institutional features. The management versus leadership debate is already being encountered in the army. Capsules on management are already part of the curriculum. The erstwhile Long Defence Management Course has been placed on par with the Higher Command Course and has a greater number of pupils from

all three Services. The managerial ethic pervades the technical and logistics services. The occupational ethic has made an appearance within the combat arms too, with the introduction of the quantification system for officer assessment and promotion. That officers now rotate earlier in the Rashtriya Rifles and remain away longer from regimental assignments, tenanting appointments on staff elsewhere, degrades the institutional ethos. This is especially so because of the promotion to colonel and exit from units happening as early as the fifteenth year of service. That the quantification system is under review indicates that the army remains sensitive to the institutional aspect. However, attempting to preserve the institutional aspect by practices such as overly active wives welfare associations or centralisation of welfare and recreational activities, resources and venues at the formation or station level may need review. The recommended rule of thumb is that what is best left to the unit, needs to be left to the unit. The logic is that primary group cohesion wins battles. The formation level is responsible for campaigns and needs to restrict it accordingly.

Lastly, to return to an aspect of import that found passing mention earlier, that of inflation in ranks. Professionalism of the officer cadre is the index of professionalism of the force. That officers will exit regimental service in about fourteen years and serve the remainder twenty on staff would make for a top heavy army. There has to be an 'up or out' system, preparing officers to exit by twenty years. As it is, there is a profusion of headquarters to include sub-areas, areas and station headquarters. This smacks of a 'cradle to grave' system reminiscent of the earlier socialist era. It is a misplaced belief that providing this makes the army more attractive. Instead, tenanting appointments of little import would diminish the self-worth of those not upwardly mobile. The increased burden that the system would have to bear in terms of accommodation, service amenities, privileges, etc makes this prohibitive. Increasingly, the need for downsizing, such as in demobilising the Rashtriya Rifles at some future juncture; and getting off non-core activities, such as the National Cadet Corps (NCC), would be stymied by the need to preserve 'turf'. This would make responding to future challenges a non-starter. The equivalence sought with the civil services makes the army mirror them in professionalism and ethos. This cannot but have an operational impact. Network-centricity and manoeuvre warfare require a leaner army, the Israeli Army being the foremost example. A return to combat effectiveness as the sole yardstick is the answer.

Increased receptivity to technology and organisational innovation is dependent on social change. As an illustration it may be said that the "Future Infantry Soldier as a System" (F-INSAS) concept can only work if the weight of garrison duty on an infantryman's time is reduced. Doing this may entail

outsourcing non-training functions such as running canteens, messes, etc to locals, as is the case, for instance, in European armies. This is not impossible to envisage in the light of socio-economic advances all over the country. Identifying how this change can be ushered in, in the face of difficulties, may in the event prove the easy task. Implementing it can be predicted to be very difficult. A war would smooth things, but one that exposes chinks would – ironically – be most useful for the purpose. It's best not to rely on war to energise things!

CLAWS MANEKSHAW PAPERS

No. 1, 2008 — **The Impact of Geo-Politics of Southwest Asia on Afghanistan: A Medium Term Perspective**
Rahul K Bhonsle

No. 2, 2008 — **Indo-US Strategic Convergence: An Overview of Defence and Military Cooperation**
Ashok Sharma

No. 3, 2008 — **The Al Qaeda in India**
Rahul K Bhonsle

No. 4, 2008 — **Armed Forces in Disaster Management: A Perspective on Functional Aspects of Role, Training and Equipment**
O S Dagur

No. 5, 2008 — **Trends in Pakistan's Defence Spending**
Shalini Chawla

No. 6, 2008 — **Insurgency in the FATA & NWFP: Challenges & Prospects for the Pakistan Army**
Samarjit Ghosh

No. 7, 2008 — **Iran's Nuclear Quagmire: Trends and Challenges**
Monika Chansoria

No. 8, 2009 — **The Rising Tide of Left Wing Extremism in India and Implications for National Security**
Amit Kumar Singh

No. 9, 2009 — **Left Wing Extremism in India: Context, Implications and Response Options**
G D Bakshi

No. 10, 2009 — **India's Strategic Culture: The Impact of Geography**
Harjeet Singh

No. 11, 2009 — **Why India, Why Not Pakistan? Reflections on South Asian Military Politics**
Zoltan Barany

No. 12, 2009 — **Principles of War: Time for Relook**
P K Mallick

No. 13, 2009 — **Sri Lanka: The Last Phase in the Eelam War IV From Chundikulam to Pudumattalan**
SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda

No. 14, 2009 — **Winning Hearts and Minds Lessons from Jammu and Kashmir**
Rahul K Bhonsle

No. 15, 2009 — **India's Missile Defence Programme: Threat Perceptions, Technological Evolution and Growing Indo-US Missile Defence Collaboration**
Ashok Sharma

No. 16, 2009 — **The Emerging Balance of Power in Asia: Conflict of Cooperation?**
Rajeswari Pillar Rajagopalam

No. 17, 2010 — **Militancy and the Pakistan Army**
Brain Cloughley

No. 18, 2010 — **Changing Nature of Conflict: Trends and Responses**
Proceeding of an International Seminar hosted jointly by Army HQ and CLAWS 23 & 24 November 2009

No. 19, 2010 — **Understanding the Indian Mujahideen**
Rohit Singh

No. 20, 2010 — **'Informationising' Warfare: China Unleashes the Cyber and Space Domain**
Monika Chansoria

No. 21, 2010 — **Jammu and Kashmir: The Emerging Contours and the Way Ahead**
Narender Kumar

No. 22, 2010 — **Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won**
Ashok Mehta

No. 23, 2010 — **National Strategy for Cyberspace Security**
S R R Aiyengar