The Role of Militaries in International Relations

SHRI SHIV SHANKAR MENON

General V.K. Singh, Chief of Army Staff, General Pradeep Kapoor, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am deeply honoured to be asked to speak on this prestigious occasion, in memory of one of India's great soldiers. It was suggested to me that I should speak on the role of militaries in international relations. It is only appropriate that I do so in memory of independent India's first Indian Army Chief Field Marshal Cariappa. Less well remembered than his pioneering and brilliant career as a soldier is Field Marshal Cariappa's career as a diplomat. As High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand he laid the foundations of the relations that we enjoy with that continent today. While I never had the privilege of meeting him, I do know that he took a deep interest in international relations. The official files contain an extensive correspondence between him and Prime Minister Nehru after his retirement where he expressed his views on our relations with Pakistan and its Army's increasing political role. I do hope that this correspondence will be made public one day soon. It reveals Cariappa as a concerned and informed citizen sharing his views with his government, even while as a soldier he explicitly stays away from politics. It is therefore only fitting that we consider the role of militaries in international relations as we celebrate Field Marshal Cariappa's life and achievements.

We have all heard the statement that "war is diplomacy by other means" attributed to Clausewitz. The actual statement was more nuanced but this will serve for our present purpose. We are also familiar with the corollary that "diplomacy is war by other means". Each contains enough truth to justify the

cliché. That truth is that war and diplomacy, military force and international relations, are Siamese twins, joined together at birth for life.

Militaries have always provided states with an instrument for effective diplomacy, mainly through the threat of the use of force or, in the case of a militarily weaker state, the ability to withstand military attack or engage in attrition. The actual use of force in most, if not all cases demonstrate the failure of diplomacy. The issue is therefore not whether militaries and force are important in international relations but how important they are, and their role.

In the next half hour I would like to look at the role and utility of force in international relations, what the military can do, and our Indian experience.

The Role and Utility of Force in International Relations

Realists believe that in an anarchic international system power rules the day. They also assume that states, like individuals, are self-interested rational maximisers. Uncertainty is rampant, information is always incomplete, and opportunism is always possible in international society. As a result, states have little choice but to defend themselves.

Force is an inescapable factor in international relations, whether through its actual use or in the threat of its use. It is much more so in international society than within the nation states in which we have organized our societies. This is because alternative forms of legitimacy are much less developed in international society than in our domestic societies with their complex systems of laws and domestic political legitimacy. International society is only now beginning to arrive at commonly accepted definitions of laws for some activities. Where such laws exist, such as the laws of war or the law of the sea, they are underdeveloped, or not universally accepted, or not always respected in practice. The biggest difference between national societies and international society is that sanctions for not respecting laws within our societies are several and multilayered, ranging from social opprobrium to judicial punishment. There is no effective international equivalent of these sanctions for those who transgress international law, such as it is. The only effective sanction is force or the threat of its use, and the willingness of those who possess it to use it. In other words, while domestic societies have evolved or are evolving towards rule of law, international society is still much closer to primeval anarchy, where to a very great extent "the strong do as they will and the weak do as they must."

Force is today the ultimate sanction in international society, and while it may be one of several sanctions, it is clearly the most widely studied and used.

Its use is not getting any less frequent despite all the attempts to develop other means of suasion and persuasion. Military power remains central to great power competition which defines the global order.

The last sixty years have seen a dramatic increase in the frequency of conflict and its intensity, between and within societies. This is a result of new technologies of force and their widespread dissemination. In fact we seem to be entering a phase of increasing militarization of international relations. Look at recent developments in the Middle East, where conventional air power, covert and Special Forces, and internet social media have been used in new tactical combinations with old fashioned propaganda and international institutions to change regimes and create political outcomes.

Secondly, as technology has developed, newer forms of power also have increasing effect. For instance today cyber actions in virtual space have kinetic effects that were once only possible through the use of traditional military force. In other words the spectrum of conflict, and therefore of the use of force is widening. The state no longer has a monopoly of violence, and technology has empowered small groups and individuals to the point where they can pose credible threats to society, if not the state itself. We have only to think of the recent lethality of terrorist groups and their attacks.

Limits on the use of force

Paradoxically, though military force is the ultimate and preponderant sanction in international society, and it's use is more widespread than ever, it is less and less the preferred option. This is due to the paradox of conflict. The higher the effect of force, the less likely it is to be used. If the emergence of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction changed international relations fundamentally, they also highlighted the use of force for deterrence rather than as an actual sanction, as a means of influencing an adversary's behaviour through the threat of force rather than its application.

Today there are limits to the utility of force in international relations. Some are classical and were recognised in the ancient world as well. As Sun Tzu said two millennia ago: "To fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting". (Sun Tzu: Art of War III.2.).

The application of force has always been the blunt edge of politics and will probably continue to be so despite the promise of technology. Political outcomes that are sought by the use of force are often circumscribed by the degree of risk

which political leaders are willing to take, and that degree of risk will be weighed against the stakes at issue.

Order, justice and resolution are the normally desired outcomes of any conflict. Force has a pivotal role in restoring order. But it can do very little on its own in ensuring justice and a final resolution of the causes of conflict. Other limits come from recent factors such as technologies and their widespread dissemination. Taken as a whole, the experience of using military force against terrorism and extremism since September 11, 2001 reveals these limits under today's conditions. In many cases the strategic outcomes created by the post 9/11 use of force have been the opposite of those originally intended.

It would appear that the role of military force is circumscribed in producing outcomes even though it is the ultimate sanction in international society, and much more important there than within our states and societies. We can't do without it but don't want to use it. And in today's situation, in a world of weapons of mass destruction, it becomes essential that the basically anarchic practice of international relations with the powerful calling the shots be regulated or moderated. This could be achieved by evolving new norms of international behaviour, and by democratising international governance and its mechanisms. In fact such a process is now a compelling necessity. As experiences of 9/11, Iraq and Afghanistan show, a different approach to international relations is long overdue. As power is more and more diffused internationally, this different approach to international relations will become all the more necessary.

The Role of the Military

These developments make it necessary to re-examine the role and utility of the conventional military as traditionally configured and organized. What is the conventional military's relevance when the spectrum of conflict is wider than ever before and when force is widely held and used in international society outside the military?

It can be argued that as traditionally configured, the militaries of most powers are irrelevant to large portions of today's broader spectrum of conflict. The traditional military is no longer the sole or major instrument to deal with the wider spectrum of conflict, a spectrum that is wider than ever before in history, in new domains like cyberspace and outer space, and extending to the economy, society and social and political psychology.

Cyberspace as a domain is an example where rigid hierarchies and structures go against the nature of the domain and the technology itself, which is best handled by

small groups or individuals, often acting on their own. We have shown the capacity to adapt to such challenges before. For instance, every democracy that has a developed Special Forces capability has kept it outside the traditional military command structure and uses it to activate the sub-conventional spectrum of conflict.

The expanded spectrum requires that we seek jointness, that much used but less practiced word, not just between services but with the other instruments of state power. Today's spectrum requires a holistic integration of all the instruments of state power, the armed forces, the intelligence agencies, our scientific and technological resources, soft power instruments and others. In other words we need much closer coordination between civil and military power. In my experience even minor actions by the military have foreign policy consequences. The military is therefore both an important adjunct and component of diplomacy.

There is also a need to restructure militaries to learn the lessons of a decade or more of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism. While different doctrines and theories have been applied in the last decade, their results in practice can at best be described as mixed. In fact some of the best results are those that we have developed from our own experience in India in dealing with insurgency and cross-border infiltration and terrorism.

Militaries today are faced with a choice: they can stick to what they know and do best, at the risk of reduced relevance. Or else they can reorder themselves to deal with the new challenges that face us, rethinking doctrines and practices from the tactical to the operational to the strategic and even the grand strategic level.

At this stage, I can imagine some of you thinking that this is all very well in theory but what about the use of the military in diplomacy. Should India not be doing much more military diplomacy, particularly when armed forces play such an important role in the internal politics of countries in our neighbourhood? Of course we must, and we do so where we can. The Indian armed forces increasing contacts with the world have been a very useful adjunct to our diplomacy and have brought our armed forces, and by extension the country, respect for professionalism and competence.

But we must also remember that when the military is in power in a country, as it has been for an extended period in some of our neighbours, they behave as politicians do, with their primary purpose changing to staying in power. Secondly, if they respond to your diplomatic approaches it is because of what you represent, the strength and capacity of your country, not individual brilliance or attractiveness or professional fellow feeling. When you speak for a strong, prosperous and united India you will be listened to and are effective, in or out of uniform.

The Indian Experience

Is there an Indian doctrine for the use of force in statecraft? This is not a question that one normally expects to ask about a power that is a declared nuclear weapon state with the world's second largest standing army. But India achieved independence in a unique manner; through a freedom movement dedicated to truth and non-violence, and has displayed both ambiguity and opposition to classical power politics. In the circumstances posing the question is understandable and legitimate.

To answer the question let us look at traditional Indian attitudes to force and the lessons India draws from its own history, and at Indian practice since independence in 1947.

Attitudes to Force and Lessons from History

While India may have achieved independence after a non-violent struggle; it was a struggle that Gandhiji described as non-violence of the strong. As far back as 1928 Gandhiji wrote, "If there was a national government, whilst I should not take any direct part in any war, I can conceive of occasions when it would be my duty to vote for the military training of those who wish to take it.... It is not possible to make a person or society non-violent by compulsion."

During the Partition riots at his prayer meeting on 26 September 1947 Gandhiji said that he had always been an opponent of all warfare, but that if there was no other way of securing justice war would be the only alternative left to the government. Faced with the tribal raiders sent by Pakistan into Kashmir in October 1947, Gandhiji said that it was right for the Union Government to save the fair city by rushing troops to Srinagar. He added that he would rather that the defenders be wiped out to the last man in clearing Kashmir's soil of the raiders rather than submit. In saying so, Gandhiji was entirely in keeping with a long Indian tradition which has regarded the use of force as legitimate in certain circumstances, namely, if there is no alternative way of securing justice. This is in essence a doctrine for the defensive use of force, when all other avenues are exhausted.

The lesson that comes through very clearly in both the major Indian epics, which deal with wars of necessity, is also apparent in Kautilya, the original realist, and in Ashoka, the convert to idealism. Ashoka and Kautilya were both products of a highly evolved and intricate tradition of statecraft which must have preceded them for centuries. A simple reading of the Arthashastra suffices to prove how in Indian strategic culture, as early as the third century before Christ, the use of force was limited both by practical and moral considerations. This was not

a doctrine of "God on our side", (though that helped, as Krishna proved in the Mahabharata). Nor is it about just wars. In the Indian tradition the use of force is legitimate not just if it is in a good cause and its results will be good. Instead, this was a doctrine that saw force as necessary in certain circumstances, to obtain justice, when all other means are exhausted, and which also recognised that force was not always the most effective or efficient means to this end.

The other lesson that Indian thinkers have consistently drawn from history is of the perils of weakness. The colonial narrative of India's history, stressing "outside" invasions and rulers had as its corollary the conviction that India must avoid weakness at all costs lest that history be repeated. The Indian quest after 1947 for strategic autonomy and for autonomy in the decision to use or threaten force has a long tradition behind it.

The Indian Practice since 1947

Let us look at Indian strategic culture in action, at Indian practice and policy since independence.

- The defence budget has only exceeded 3% of GDP in one year of the last sixty-three.
- There have been clear limits on the use of military force internally. The use of military force for internal security functions has been severely circumscribed, limited to those cases where there is a strong correlation to inimical forces abroad such as Nagaland and J&K.
- The armed forces of the Union have only been used defensively against external aggression in the sixty-three years of the Republic.
- India has never sent troops abroad except for UNPKO or at the express request of the legitimate government of the country concerned. This was true in the Maldives in 1987, in Sri Lanka in 1987 and in Bangladesh in 1971.
- India has also never retained territory taken by force in the wars that she has fought. This is so even for some Indian territory taken back from Pakistan in the Indian state of J&K which was returned to Pakistani control after the 1965 and 1971 wars.
- India's overseas projection of power has been limited for several centuries.

India as a NWS

This strategic culture is also reflected in the Indian nuclear doctrine, with its emphasis on minimal deterrence, no first use, and its direct linkage to nuclear disarmament. We have made it clear that while we need nuclear weapons for our own security, it is our goal to work for a world free of nuclear weapons. We are ready to undertake the necessary obligations to achieve that goal in a time-bound programme agreed to

and implemented by all nuclear weapon and other states.In sum, there is an Indian way, an Indian view and an Indian practice in the use and role of force.

How do we apply this approach in today's complicated situation of multiple threats, rapid shifts in the balance of power and growing Indian interests abroad? We are now in a world where the geopolitical centre of gravity is shifting to Asia and its surrounding oceans. In Asia itself, several strategic rivalries contribute to uncertainty. We are in the midst of a global shift in the balance of power and in a time of great change, far from the certainties of the Cold War or other eras. And the global power shift has immediate consequences in our immediate vicinity.

If Asia is our theatre, South Asia is our home. And the situation in South Asia is still fraught. If our partners in our region so desire we would work with them to provide and enhance security in the subcontinent, the Asian landmass and the Indian Ocean littoral.

Despite the shifting international landscape India's situation and interests remain unique. Our situation and interests are not identical to those of any other country or group of countries. It is therefore for us to work out our own solutions to our unique security dilemmas, working within and developing our own strategic culture and doctrines for the utility of force in international relations.

In grand strategic terms the primary purpose of Indian military power remains the defence of India's territorial integrity (on land, sea, air and in space), and to prepare for the threats of war that exist. This task on the Asian landmass does not change.

We should now also be leveraging our geopolitical potential to develop our maritime capabilities, fulfilling our responsibilities and contributing to maritime security in the Indian Ocean littoral, critical as this is to our ability to transform India and ensure her security. In addition we should be shaping our military power in line with political objectives that are feasible under conditions of nuclear overhang which now apply in our immediate periphery. And we should see how military power can contribute to increasing our security in non-conventional security areas such as energy security.

As I said before, in today's age of technology and media small powers and groups can create effects disproportionate to their physical scale or ostensible material power. In other words we have to reckon with the changing nature of global power, as power itself is becoming much more diffused and fragmented. We need to develop the power to deal with weak states, terrorists and small groups and post-modern forms of power, a capability which is different from the conventional tasks that the military has been configured to achieve in the past.

At a time of rapid change it is essential that we continue to learn from our experience and re-evaluate it regularly. Government have recently established a Task Force to review and evaluate the effectiveness of our national security structures to see whether and how they could better serve our present needs. The Task Force will make its recommendations for the future soon, and I hope that it will enable us to move towards the holistic integration of the instruments of state power that is needed today to meet these challenges.

Conclusion

Let me try to sum up some of what I have said. The role of militaries in international relations will continue to be influenced by the changing character of the threats that we face, but the essential role of the military to protect and further a country's interests is likely to endure, even as the means adopted to apply or threaten force continue to evolve.

We live in a time where international law remains underdeveloped, international governance is non-existent or weak, and international society is fundamentally anarchic. As a result the role of force in international relations has been magnified. But the age of weapons of mass destruction and newer technologies make it essential that we consider new ways of regulating the use of force in international relations.

Now that technology has made the spectrum of conflict wider than ever before, it is more than ever a political call whether and how to use force. Societies that have not followed this simple rule have suffered as a consequence. Militaries will have to strive to close the gap between their military capabilities and desired political outcomes. This will require flexibility and agility.

India as a society and nation has by and large made wise choices in the past on matters relating to the use of force, showing strategic restraint and realism. We have contributed force to internationally legitimate uses such as UN peacekeeping, while limiting its domestic deployment. Today we are in a position to make a greater contribution to global public goods in areas such as maritime security. At the same time we are moving towards an Indian doctrine for the use of force, though this is a work in progress. But as I hope I have shown, the uses of force that we have envisaged so far are all in keeping with our strategic culture and do not conflict with our values. In today's complicated international situation we must keep it so.

Shri **Shivshankar Menon** is National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister, and former Foreign Secretary. (This address was presented at the Cariappa Memorial Lecture on October 05, 2011.)